

Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson

By

Robert Louis Stevenson

Freeeditorial 

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INTRODUCTION

I

LIFE OF STEVENSON

Robert Louis Stevenson was born at Edinburgh on the 13 November 1850. His father, Thomas, and his grandfather, Robert, were both distinguished lighthouse engineers; and the maternal grandfather, Balfour, was a Professor of Moral Philosophy, who lived to be ninety years old. There was, therefore, a combination of *Lux et Veritas* in the blood of young Louis Stevenson, which in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* took the form of a luminous portrayal of a great moral idea.

In the language of Pope, Stevenson's life was a long disease. Even as a child, his weak lungs caused great anxiety to all the family except himself; but although Death loves a shining mark, it took over forty years of continuous practice for the grim archer to send the black arrow home. It is perhaps fortunate for English literature that his health was no better; for the boy craved an active life, and would doubtless have become an engineer. He made a brave attempt to pursue this calling, but it was soon evident that his constitution made it impossible. After desultory schooling, and an immense amount of general reading, he entered the University of Edinburgh, and then tried the study of law. Although the thought of this profession became more and more repugnant, and finally intolerable, he passed his final examinations

satisfactorily. This was in 1875.

He had already begun a series of excursions to the south of France and other places, in search of a climate more favorable to his incipient malady; and every return to Edinburgh proved more and more conclusively that he could not live in Scotch mists. He had made the acquaintance of a number of literary men, and he was consumed with a burning ambition to become a writer. Like Ibsen's *Master-Builder*, there was a troll in his blood, which drew him away to the continent on inland voyages with a canoe and lonely tramps with a donkey; these gave him material for books full of brilliant pictures, shrewd observations, and irrepressible humour. He contributed various articles to magazines, which were immediately recognised by critics like Leslie Stephen as bearing the unmistakable mark of literary genius; but they attracted almost no attention from the general reading public, and their author had only the consciousness of good work for his reward. In 1880 he was married.

Stevenson's first successful work was *Treasure Island*, which was published in book form in 1883, and has already become a classic. This did not, however, bring him either a good income or general fame. His great reputation dates from the publication of the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which appeared in 1886. That work had an instant and unqualified success, especially in America, and made its author's name known to the whole English-speaking world. *Kidnapped* was published the same year, and another masterpiece, *The Master of Ballantrae*, in 1889.

After various experiments with different climates, including that of Switzerland, Stevenson sailed for America in August 1887. The winter of 1887-88 he spent at Saranac Lake, under the care of Dr. Trudeau, who became one of his best friends. In 1890 he settled at Samoa in the Pacific. Here he entered upon a career of intense literary activity, and yet found time to take an active part in the politics of the island, and to give valuable assistance in internal improvements.

The end came suddenly, exactly as he would have wished it, and precisely as he had unconsciously predicted in the last radiant, triumphant sentences of his great essay, *Aes Triplex*. He had been at work on a novel, *St. Ives*, one of his poorer efforts, and whose composition grew steadily more and more distasteful, until he found that he was actually writing against the grain. He threw this aside impatiently, and with extraordinary energy and enthusiasm began a new story, *Weir of Hermiston*, which would undoubtedly have been his masterpiece, had he lived to complete it. In luminosity of style, in nobleness of conception, in the almost infallible choice of words, this astonishing fragment easily takes first place in Stevenson's productions. At the end of a day spent in almost feverish dictation, the third of December 1894, he suddenly fainted, and died without regaining consciousness. "Death had not

been suffered to take so much as an illusion from his heart. In the hot-fit of life, a-tiptoe on the highest point of being, he passed at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel was scarcely quenched, the trumpets were hardly done blowing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shot into the spiritual land."

He was buried at the summit of a mountain, the body being carried on the shoulders of faithful Samoans, who might have sung Browning's noble hymn,

"Let us begin and carry up this corpse,
Singing together!
Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes
Each in its tether
Sleeping safe on the bosom of the plain...
That's the appropriate country; there, man's thought,
Rarer, intenser,
Self-gathered for an outbreak, as it ought,
Chafes in the censer.
Leave we the unlettered plain its herd and crop;
Seek we sepulture
On a tall mountain...
Thither our path lies; wind we up the heights:
Wait ye the warning!
Our low life was the level's and the night's;
He's for the morning.
Step to a tune, square chests, erect each head,
'Ware the beholders!
This is our master, famous, calm and dead,
Borne on our shoulders...
Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send!
Lofty designs must close in like effects
Loftily lying,
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying."

II

PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER

Stevenson had a motley personality, which is sufficiently evident in his

portraits. There was in him the Puritan, the man of the world, and the vagabond. There was something too of the obsolete soldier of fortune, with the cocked and feathered hat, worn audaciously on one side. There was also a touch of the elfin, the uncanny—the mysterious charm that belongs to the borderland between the real and the unreal world—the element so conspicuous and so indefinable in the art of Hawthorne. Writers so different as Defoe, Cooper, Poe, and Sir Thomas Browne, are seen with varying degrees of emphasis in his literary temperament. He was whimsical as an imaginative child; and everyone has noticed that he never grew old. His buoyant optimism was based on a chronic experience of physical pain, for pessimists like Schopenhauer are usually men in comfortable circumstances, and of excellent bodily health. His courage and cheerfulness under depressing circumstances are so splendid to contemplate that some critics believe that in time his *Letters* may be regarded as his greatest literary work, for they are priceless in their unconscious revelation of a beautiful soul.

Great as Stevenson was as a writer, he was still greater as a Man. So many admirable books have been written by men whose character will not bear examination, that it is refreshing to find one Master-Artist whose daily life was so full of the fruits of the spirit. As his romances have brought pleasure to thousands of readers, so the spectacle of his cheerful march through the Valley of the Shadow of Death is a constant source of comfort and inspiration. One feels ashamed of cowardice and petty irritation after witnessing the steady courage of this man. His philosophy of life is totally different from that of Stoicism; for the Stoic says, "Grin and bear it," and usually succeeds in doing neither. Stevenson seems to say, "Laugh and forget it," and he showed us how to do both.

Stevenson had the rather unusual combination of the Artist and the Moralist, both elements being marked in his writings to a very high degree. The famous and oft-quoted sonnet by his friend, the late Mr. Henley, gives a vivid picture:

"Thin-legged, thin-chested, slight unspeakably,
Neat-footed and weak-fingered: in his face—
Lean, large-honed, curved of beak, and touched with race,
Bold-lipped, rich-tinted, mutable as the sea,
The brown eyes radiant with vivacity—
There shown a brilliant and romantic grace,
A spirit intense and rare, with trace on trace
Of passion, impudence, and energy.
Valiant in velvet, light in ragged luck,
Most vain, most generous, sternly critical,
Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist;

A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck,
Much Antony, of Hamlet most of all,
And something of the Shorter Catechist."

He was not primarily a moral teacher, like Socrates or Thomas Carlyle; nor did he feel within him the voice of a prophetic mission. The virtue of his writings consists in their wholesome ethical quality, in their solid health. Fresh air is often better for the soul than the swinging of the priest's censer. At a time when the school of Zola was at its climax, Stevenson opened the windows and let in the pleasant breeze. For the morbid and unhealthy period of adolescence, his books are more healthful than many serious moral works. He purges the mind of uncleanness, just as he purged contemporary fiction.

As Stevenson's correspondence with his friends like Sidney Colvin and William Archer reveals the social side of his nature, so his correspondence with the Unseen Power in which he believed shows that his character was essentially religious. A man's letters are often a truer picture of his mind than a photograph; and when these epistles are directed not to men and women, but to the Supreme Intelligence, they form a real revelation of their writer's heart. Nothing betrays the personality of a man more clearly than his prayers, and the following petition that Stevenson composed for the use of his household at Vailima, bears the stamp of its author.

"At Morning. The day returns and brings us the petty round of irritating concerns and duties. Help us to play the man, help us to perform them with laughter and kind faces, let cheerfulness abound with industry. Give us to go blithely on our business all this day, bring us to our resting beds weary and content and undishonoured, and grant us in the end the gift of sleep."

III

STEVENSON'S VERSATILITY

Stevenson was a poet, a dramatist, an essayist, and a novelist, besides writing many political, geographical, and biographical sketches. As a poet, his fame is steadily waning. The tendency at first was to rank him too high, owing to the undeniable charm of many of the poems in the *Child's Garden of Verses*. The child's view of the world, as set forth in these songs, is often originally and gracefully expressed; but there is little in Stevenson's poetry that is of permanent value, and it is probable that most of it will be forgotten. This fact is in a way a tribute to his genius; for his greatness as a prose writer has simply eclipsed his reputation as a poet.

His plays were failures. They illustrate the familiar truth that a man may have positive genius as a dramatic writer, and yet fail as a dramatist. There are laws that govern the stage which must be obeyed; play-writing is a great art in itself, entirely distinct from literary composition. Even Browning, the most intensely dramatic poet of the nineteenth century, was not nearly so successful in his dramas as in his dramatic lyrics and romances.

His essays attracted at first very little attention; they were too fine and too subtle to awaken popular enthusiasm. It was the success of his novels that drew readers back to the essays, just as it was the vogue of Sudermann's plays that made his earlier novels popular. One has only to read such essays, however, as those printed in this volume to realise not only their spirit and charm, but to feel instinctively that one is reading English Literature. They are exquisite works of art, written in an almost impeccable style. By many judicious readers, they are placed above his works of fiction. They certainly constitute the most original portion of his entire literary output. It is astonishing that this young Scotchman should have been able to make so many actually new observations on a game so old as Life. There is a shrewd insight into the motives of human conduct that makes some of these graceful sketches belong to the literature of philosophy, using the word philosophy in its deepest and broadest sense. The essays are filled with whimsical paradoxes, keen and witty as those of Bernard Shaw, without having any of the latter's cynicism, iconoclasm, and sinister attitude toward morality. For the real foundation of even the lightest of Stevenson's works is invariably ethical.

His fame as a writer of prose romances grows brighter every year. His supreme achievement was to show that a book might be crammed with the most wildly exciting incidents, and yet reveal profound and acute analysis of character, and be written with consummate art. His tales have all the fertility of invention and breathless suspense of Scott and Cooper, while in literary style they immeasurably surpass the finest work of these two great masters.

His best complete story, is, I think, *Treasure Island*. There is a peculiar brightness about this book which even the most notable of the later works failed to equal. Nor was it a trifling feat to make a blind man and a one-legged man so formidable that even the reader is afraid of them. Those who complain that this is merely a pirate story forget that in art the subject is of comparatively little importance, whereas the treatment is everything. To say, as some do, that there is no difference between *Treasure Island* and a cheap tale of blood and thunder, is equivalent to saying that there is no difference between the Sistine Madonna and a chromo Virgin.

THE PERSONAL ESSAY

The Personal Essay is a peculiar form of literature, entirely different from critical essays like those of Matthew Arnold and from purely reflective essays, like those of Bacon. It is a species of writing somewhat akin to autobiography or firelight conversation; where the writer takes the reader entirely into his confidence, and chats pleasantly with him on topics that may be as widely apart as the immortality of the soul and the proper colour of a necktie. The first and supreme master of this manner of writing was Montaigne, who belongs in the front rank of the world's greatest writers of prose. Montaigne talks endlessly on the most trivial subjects without ever becoming trivial. To those who really love reading and have some sympathy with humanity, Montaigne's *Essays* are a "perpetual refuge and delight," and it is interesting to reflect how far in literary fame this man, who talked about his meals, his horse, and his cat, outshines thousands of scholarly and talented writers, who discussed only the most serious themes in politics and religion. The great English prose writers in the field of the personal essay during the seventeenth century were Sir Thomas Browne, Thomas Fuller, and Abraham Cowley, though Walton's *Compleat Angler* is a kindred work. Browne's *Religio Medici*, and his delightful *Garden of Cyrus*, old Tom Fuller's quaint *Good Thoughts in Bad Times* and Cowley's charming *Essays* are admirable examples of this school of composition. Burton's wonderful *Anatomy of Melancholy* is a colossal personal essay. Some of the papers of Steele and Addison in the *Tatler*, *Guardian*, and the *Spectator* are of course notable; but it was not until the appearance of Charles Lamb that the personal essay reached its climax in English literature. Over the pages of the *Essays of Elia* hovers an immortal charm—the charm of a nature inexhaustible in its humour and kindly sympathy for humanity. Thackeray was another great master of the literary easy-chair, and is to some readers more attractive in this attitude than as a novelist. In America we have had a few writers who have reached eminence in this form, beginning with Washington Irving, and including Donald G. Mitchell, whose *Reveries of a Bachelor* has been read by thousands of people for over fifty years.

As a personal essayist Stevenson seems already to belong to the first rank. He is both eclectic and individual. He brought to his pen the reminiscences of varied reading, and a wholly original touch of fantasy. He was literally steeped in the gorgeous Gothic diction of the seventeenth century, but he realised that such a prose style as illumines the pages of William Drummond's *Cypress Grove* and Browne's *Urn Burial* was a lost art. He attempted to imitate such writing only in his youthful exercises, for his own genius was forced to express itself in an original way. All of his personal essays have that air of distinction which attracts and holds one's attention as powerfully in a book as

it does in social intercourse. Everything that he has to say seems immediately worth saying, and worth hearing, for he was one of those rare men who had an interesting mind. There are some literary artists who have style and nothing else, just as there are some great singers who have nothing but a voice. The true test of a book, like that of an individual, is whether or not it improves upon acquaintance. Stevenson's essays reflect a personality that becomes brighter as we draw nearer. This fact makes his essays not merely entertaining reading, but worthy of serious and prolonged study.



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