

The Art of Robert Louis Stevenson.

by

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CHAPTER ONE.

BIOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHERS.

In approaching a study of the art of Robert Louis Stevenson we shall start from the hypothesis that in order to understand his art, it is necessary to understand the author. Therefore, the first part of the chapter will deal with mere biographical facts; we shall learn something of his ancestry, his early environment, the various vicissitudes of his life and his ultimate destiny. Then with that background we shall pass on to consider the quality of his personality as revealed by his friends and biographers.

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh November 13th, 1850. His father, Thomas Stevenson, an engineer, belonged to a famous family of lighthouse architects. Two well-known lighthouses, "Bell Rock" and "Skerryvore" stand as enduring monuments to the Stevenson skill. Particularly in the eyes of Stevenson himself were these a source of pride. In his book, A Family of Engineers, he reveals his admiration for the daring exploits and hardy lives of his paternal ancestors, practical men of trained scientific mind and shrewd common sense.

But Stevenson was no less proud of his maternal ancestry, the Balfours of Pilrig, landed gentry, famous throughout Lowland Scotland for their culture and piety. His mother was the daughter of the Reverend Louis Balfour

of Colinton. Stevenson's mind loved to dwell on the theme of his ancestors. He believed that "Our conscious years are but a moment in the history of the elements that build us." In writing of his grandfather he said, "I often wonder what I inherited from this old minister. I must suppose that he was fond of preaching sermons and so am I."<sup>1</sup>. There is no doubt it was from the Balfours that Stevenson inherited the love of preaching and the teaching of morality which is revealed in his work.

The gloom of Calvinism clung about Stevenson in his infancy. He himself said that he had a Covenanting childhood. His nurse, Alison Cunningham, steeped his receptive mind in all the doctrines of her faith. His parents were deeply religious and very orthodox, but to his mother's faith was added a gayness of spirit, a blithesomeness that counteracted the gloom of Calvinism. Although at an early age he formed opinions which to the Presbyterians of the old school seemed very dangerous, yet the vivid memory of his childhood's faith remained with him to the end and always made an irresistible appeal for reverence.

As a child Stevenson was very delicate. He was educated at private schools but his real education was acquired from early wanderings in search of health. These excursions made a deep impression on his childish mind and

1. Memories and Portraits. "The Manse" Ch.6. P.106. Scribner's New York 1926. From now on the Publisher's name for Memories and Portraits will be omitted.

later provided valuable material for his writings, as for example in The Lantern Bearers, and in one of the most imaginative chapters of David Balfour which has its weird setting on the Bass Rock, near where he spent his youthful vacations.

From childhood Stevenson showed literary tendencies. All through his boyhood and youth he was pointed out as the pattern of an idler and yet he was always busy on his own private ends which was to learn to write. He knew he was misjudged at this time and, later, in the following poem, tried to justify his actions.

Say not of me that weakly I declined  
The labours of my sires, and fled the sea  
The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,  
To play at home with paper like a child.  
But rather say: In the afternoon of time  
A strenuous family dusted from its hands  
The sand of granite, and beholding far  
Along the sounding coast its pyramids  
And tall memorials catch the dying sun,  
Smiled well content, and to this childish task  
Around the fire addressed its evening hours.<sup>1</sup>

At the age of seventeen he entered Edinburgh University with a view to following his father's profession, but he soon realised that his interests were centred, not in engineering, but in literature. His father, averse to the adoption of literature as a profession, then suggested law. At first Stevenson complied with his father's request and in 1875 he was called to the Bar. According to the Scottish custom among briefless advocates he began pacing

1. Underwoods: "Say not of me." Tusitala Edition. V.22 P.95.  
William Heinemann Ltd. London.  
From now on the publisher's name will be  
omitted for the Tusitala edition.

Parliament House. In his account of Edinburgh he gives an amusing description of the "Salle des pas perdus" of the Scottish Bar "where idle youths by a ferocious custom parade, breathing dust and bombazine as they exhibit themselves in vain to potential patrons with briefs to bestow."<sup>1</sup>

But Stevenson was not interested in law except as it contributed to his knowledge of men and books. Finally he decided to follow his own bent - literature. He continued to pose as an idler with Bohemian ways, yet he was in reality practising the art of writing. While at college he had contributed to journals<sup>2</sup> but at that time his articles attracted little attention. Meanwhile he was enriching his life by friendship and travel. In London he became a member of the Savile Club, where he attracted the attention of men such as Leslie Stephen, Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse and later George Meredith, while in Edinburgh he counted among his intimate friends, W. E. Henley, Fleeming, Jenkin, and Sir Sidney Colvin.

Between 1875 and 1878 he contributed to journals a series of essays later published as Virginibus Puerisque<sup>3</sup> and Familiar Studies of Men and Books<sup>4</sup> and such stories as

1. Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes. Ch.3. P.33.  
The Co-operative Publication Society, New York and London. This edition has been used throughout for Stevenson's novels and from now on the Publisher's name will be omitted.
2. The articles then written are now included in Memories and Portraits.
3. Published 1881.
4. Published 1882.

A Lodging for the Night and The Sire de Malétrait's Door.

For reasons of health and from a love of adventure he travelled in a canoe along the rivers of France and Belgium, and with a donkey, "The Immortal Modestine," in the mountains of Southern France. The fruits of such experiences were An Inland Voyage, published in 1878, and Travels with a Donkey, in the following year. While in France he met Mrs. Fanny Osbourne, with whom he fell in love. In the closing paragraph of An Inland Voyage there is the following indirect reference to their meeting:-

You may paddle all day long; but it is when you come back at nightfall and look in at the familiar room that you find love or death awaiting you beside the stove; and the most beautiful adventures are not those we go to seek.<sup>1</sup>

In 1879 Stevenson followed Mrs. Osbourne to California where a serious illness would have ended his life had it not been for her careful nursing. The following year they were married. Of her he writes -

Trusty, dusky, vivid true,  
With eyes of gold and bramble-dew,  
Steel-true and blade straight  
The great artificer  
Made my mate.<sup>2</sup>

On his way to California, Stevenson crossed the ocean as a steerage passenger and travelled across the

1. An Island Voyage - "Back to the World." Co-operative Edition. Vol.7. Page 148.
2. Songs of Travels - "My Wife." Tusitala Edition. No.25. P.147.

continent in an immigrant train. He made use of these experiences in his next publications, The Amateur Emigrant and Across the Plains, while the Silverado Squatters was written among the mountains near San Francisco where he spent his honeymoon.

After spending a year in America Stevenson returned to Scotland to begin once more a restless search for health, the pathetic mood of which is revealed in his essay Ordered South. There he says that -

It is not in such numbness of spirit only that the life of the invalid resembles a premature old age. Those excursions that he had promised himself to furnish prove too long or too arduous for his feeble body; and the barrier hills are as impassable as ever.<sup>1</sup>

For a time Stevenson lived at Davos in the Swiss Alps where he completed the tale that first brought him fame - Treasure Island, published in 1882. From then on Stevenson successively sought health and continued writing, until at last in 1888 he departed from California on his last quest. He went on a leisurely voyage among the Islands of the Pacific and finally settled at Samoa. There he enjoyed a temporary return to health, but it was only temporary. At the time of his death he was engaged in writing Weir of Hermiston and St. Ives. The setting in both is Scottish. Despite a long absence of nine years he wrote of his native land and the scenes of his youth with a vividness that is startling. It is to Swanston and the Pentlands

1. Virginibus Puerisque: Ordered South. Tusitala Edition No. 25. Page 68.

that his thoughts, towards the end of his life, turned with tragic yearning. His longing is revealed in the following lines -

Be it granted to me to behold you again in dying  
Hills of home! and to hear again the call;  
Hear above the graves of the martyrs the peewees  
And hear no more at all.<sub>1</sub> crying

His prayer remained unanswered save in dreams for he died at Samoa on December 3rd, 1894, at the age of forty-four. His philosophy of life and death revealed in Aes Triplex is strangely applicable to his own death. Of him too it might be said that -

In the hot-fit of life, a tip-toe on the highest point of being, he passes at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel is scarcely quenched, the trumpets are hardly done blowing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land.<sub>2</sub>

At his own request he was buried on Mount Vaea, overlooking the Pacific - a fitting resting place for the man who loved above all things, the freedom of the open air, the glory of the sea and sky, the wind among the trees and the silent companionship of the stars. And on his tomb is his Requiem:-

Under the wide and stary sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie  
Glad did I live and gladly die  
And I laid me down with a will.

1. Songs of Travel "To S. R. Crockett". Tusitala Edition. Vol.22. P.168.
2. Virginibus Puerisque: Ordered South. Tusitala Edition. No.25. Page 68.

This be the verse you grave for me  
Here he lies where he longed to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill.<sup>1</sup>

But in order to have a clear conception of Stevenson's art we must go deeper than mere biographical facts. They throw much light on his art but not enough. We have still to reckon with the elusive quality of the man's personality. Scott-James tells us that

Sainte-Beuve would have his critic set himself, not hurriedly, but as the final task following long study, to drag to the light of day that essential element in character, which may be clearly revealed or may lie hidden, but in any case determines the author in all his moods, in all his phases, in all aspects of his creative work.<sup>2</sup>

Stevenson's friends and biographers reveal him in many moods and phases so before proceeding to study his art we shall see what light they throw on his personality.

Stevenson's wide circle of friends, most of them men of letters, pay tribute to the charm of his personality. The tributes are set forth in I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson,<sup>3</sup> a collection of personal reminiscences. Even Saintsbury, the most conservative of critics, came under his spell. They were introduced at the Savile Club and arranged to dine together. "So he came," writes Saintsbury, "and we were friends ever after." Sir Sydney Colvin, who edited Stevenson's letters says,

1. Underwoods "Requiem" Tusitala Edition. Vol. 21. Page 83.
2. Scott-James: The Making Of Literature. Ch. 22. Page 255.  
Henry Holt and Company, New York.
3. I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson: Edited by  
Rosaline Masson. Page 186.  
W. & R. Chambers, Edinburgh 1922.

Those whom his writings charm or impress, but who never knew him, can but imagine how doubly they would have been charmed and impressed by his presence. Few men probably, certainly none that I have ever seen or read of, have had about them such a richness and variety of human nature;<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Lang pays an equally glowing tribute -

I have known no man in whom the pre-eminently manly virtues of kindness, courage, sympathy, helpfulness were more beautifully conspicuous than in Robert Louis Stevenson. He was as unique in character as in literary genius.<sup>2</sup>

To judge from the eulogies of his friends it seems hard for anyone who knew him to hold the scales of judgment quite even. Few writers have, during their lifetime, commanded so much admiration and regard from their fellow craftsmen. Henley alone of all his intimate friends became a bitter critic. During Stevenson's last years in Samoa he conducted family worship for his household and wrote his Vailima Prayers. It was this that aroused the bitter wrath of Henley and produced from him after Stevenson's death the often quoted taunt "The Seraph in Chocolate." Henley knew and loved the gay Bohemian of Edinburgh days, but the moralist of later years he neither loved nor appreciated. What Henley failed to understand was that the Covenanting strain in Stevenson was there by inheritance. He, himself, tells us "I am bound in and in with my forbears."<sup>3</sup> The moralist of Samoa was no poseur but a man in whom the fever of his troubled youth had burnt itself out and in whom the results of ancestry, early training, and

1. Sir Sydney Colvin. Introduction to Letters. Page 29. Methuen and Company. London 1900. Unless when otherwise stated this edition has been used throughout for Stevenson's letters, and in future the publisher's name will be omitted.
2. North American Review. Vol. 160. P. 186.
3. Letters. Volume 2. Page 230.

environment were working out a logical development. To Henley, however, we are indebted for one of the most realistic pictures of Stevenson.

Thin-legged, thin chested, slight unspeakably,  
Neat-footed, and weak-fingered; in his face -  
Lean, large-boned, curved of beak, and touched  
with race,  
Bold-lipped, rich-tinted, mutable as the sea,  
The brown eyes radiant with vivacity -  
There shines a brilliant and romantic grace,  
Of passion and 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.<sup>1</sup>

In passing to a study of Stevenson's biographers we find that they fall into three classes. First there are those who knew and loved him and could not help infusing some of this love into their critical judgments. The most notable of these is Stevenson's cousin, Graham Balfour, whose biography is very sympathetic and reveals much personal love and admiration, but as it was written while several members of the Stevenson family were still alive, it is lacking in independent judgment. A later critic writes of this biography.

It is not Robert Louis Stevenson at all, but an imaginary figure of flawless, superhuman virtue, set up, draped and adorned for blind unquestioning worship.<sup>2</sup>

The celestial halo is much in evidence. It was this halo that disturbed the next generation, inclined to discount all contemporary eulogies of Stevenson's personality and work as highly excessive. The chief critic of this

1. Henley - An Apparition - Poetry of Victorian Period.  
Woods Page 784.
2. J. A. Steuart: The Man and Writer. Introduction Page 3.  
Sampson, Low and Marston & Co. Ltd. London 1924.  
Several references will be made to Steuart's biography but from now on the Publisher's name will be omitted.

reaction is Frank Swinnerton whose critical biography appeared in 1914. He describes Stevenson as a poseur who exploited his charm. "Well, if he were a poseur, he was a most ingenious one and if he exploited his charm, he must have had it."<sup>1</sup> Swinnerton's book is marked by a curious dislike. He is obviously antagonistic to Stevenson and is venting his spleen on him for the idolization of contemporary critics. From his biographical sketch it would appear that Stevenson's ill health was a luxury, part of the "man's irrepressible vanity."<sup>2</sup> Such a criticism is obviously unfair. Except in the single case of the essay Ordered South, Stevenson never in writing for the public adopted the invalid point of view, or invited any attention to his infirmities. Swinnerton prides himself on the candour of his criticism which in his case reveals a lack of understanding of Stevenson's background, early training and temperament.

In the third class we have the recent biographers, more balanced in judgment and not influenced by personal friendship. J. A. Steuart's biography Man and Writer was published in 1924. It is written with insight into the character and personality of Stevenson. Stevenson himself said that

There are two duties incumbent upon any man who enters upon the business of writing: truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment."<sup>3</sup> and these injunctions his biographer tried to obey. He accepts in its entirety The Stevenson Myth, an article published in the Century Magazine, December 1922, where George Hellman, the American scholar,

1. Cunliffe: English Literature During the Last Half Century. P.83
2. Swinnerton: Biographical Sketch. Page 29. Doran Co. New York.
3. Stevenson's Essays Literary and Critical. Tusitala Edition. Vol.28. P.55

reveals how two volumes of hitherto unpublished poems came into his hands. Some of the poems deal with Stevenson's Bohemian escapades while at college and around these Hellman weaves a romantic love story. These poems had been carefully suppressed by Mrs. Stevenson who had decided it would be unwise to give such matter to the public. Steuart thinks that

Mrs. Stevenson's motives for concealing so much valuable biographical matter are not beyond conjecture. Mr. Hellman believes that she was engaged in "the gentle art of myth-making." In other words she was protecting and preserving a reputation. Those intimate and all-too-suggestive effusions might shock the good people who, with all the implicit faith of trusting innocence, had accepted the cherub ideal in all its beautiful and blameless integrity. Especially might it be offended by the evidence of amatory adventures, worthier surely of a Burns or a Byron in his hours of licence, than of the Covenanted Louis Stevenson.<sup>1</sup>

In Steuart's work the celestial halo of the earlier biographers has disappeared, the harsh judgments of Swinnerton have been tempered with sympathy and justice. Stevenson, the man, is portrayed, intensely alive, most fascinating, and often most pathetically human.

It is interesting to note that the other outstanding biographer of this period, Rosaline Masson, does not take Mr. Hellman's article so seriously. She thinks that he reads far too much into the romantic ebullitions of Stevenson's college days. "The romantic story told in Mr. Hellman's article is an altogether incorrect deduction from the fragments of manuscript material at his disposal."<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, both biographers are agreed that Stevenson during his early manhood passed through a period of storm and stress which throws much light on his personality.

1. J. A. Steuart: Man and Writer, Ch. 5. Page 115.

2. Rosaline Masson: Life of Robert Louis Stevenson. Ch. 3 P. 80.  
W. R. Chambers Ltd. Edinburgh 1924.

His parents, people of intellect, were trying to fit him into a wrong mould, and he could not make himself fit, not even to save them heartache. They were conventional. He was a free lance, a child of nature, a spirit that could not be fettered by convention or dogma, a strolling minstrel in a world for the most part alien to him. For at this time not only did he revolt from religion but he broke away from many accepted social standards. He affected to disdain society, and found his boon companions among the social outcasts. His picturesque attire - the velvet coat and long hair - revealed an unusual and Bohemian personality that puzzled and shocked conventional Edinburgh.

But whilst Calvinistic doctrines were first responsible for sending Louis to the opposite extremes in faith and conduct the Calvinism in which he had been born and nurtured made him take himself in deadly earnest and rock himself on the wheel of conscience. Louis Stevenson was already, in his twenty-fourth year, one of those who by nature are impelled to look beyond the limitations of human experience and knowledge, and strain their eyes to discover what lies beyond, to penetrate the inscrutable mystery that fascinates or baffles our finite minds.<sup>1</sup>

Through this penetration Stevenson created a religion of his own, revealing his adaptability to the Hellenic faith - the joyousness of life, which he wove into his various activities. But throughout his life he retained the indelible impression of that Calvinism of his early surroundings against which he had rebelled. As we study his art we shall see reflected a combination of the Bohemian and the Covenanter. Stevenson had all the graces of the one and the moral earnestness of the other, "A Hebrew conscience and a Greek imagination, a Scottish sense of sin and a French delight in beauty."<sup>2</sup>

1. Rosaline Masson: Life of R.L.S. Ch.3 Page 95.

2. Kelman: The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson. Ch.12 P.230.  
Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier. Edinburgh and London.