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*ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AS AN INTERPRETER
OF LIFE*

JAMES ALLEN GEISSINGER

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

It is difficult to think of Robert Louis Stevenson as other than the creator of delightful and weird romances. His name always calls up *Treasure Island*—not to mention the other progeny of his fruitful imagination—*Treasure Island* and the higher geography. Stevenson will always stand forth as master of the finest artistry and as a modern symbol of the imagination. And it seems nothing short of sheer prose to turn from the fairy world flung into space by the deftness and swiftness of this man's fancy to our gray world of every day.

Yet Dr. Japp and Mr. Zangwill both insist that he will finally be remembered as an essayist and not as a romancer. We must all of us agree, I think, that whatever comes of Stevenson the fictionist, Stevenson the essayist has enriched the world by his half-dozen slim volumes of comment on life and men. If we think of the essay as a bit of preachment, we may still think of Stevenson as an essayist. He seems to like the rôle of preacher; and whatever our own homiletical notions may be, we must admit that his preaching is always fresh, human, and in good spirit; his truths stay with us and his disclosures send us afield for more truth,—qualities all preaching does not possess. "To be honest, to be kind, to earn a little and to spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family the happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary and not be embittered, to keep a few friends, but these without capitulation—above all, on the same grim condition, to keep friends with himself—here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy." This is commonplace truth put with such finality and authority that, if it has not become scripture, it has at least served as a text for not a few preachers.

What could be more delightful than this from *An Inland Voyage*?

Stevenson and his companion are off in their canoes. The lads and lasses of Origny run along the banks of the Oise, cheering. The last of those to send their adieus after the gay voyagers are the three graces, and just as the canoes flash round a bend in the stream, one of the girls leaps upon a tree-stump and kisses her hand to the canoeists, crying gleefully, "Come back again, come back again." To which challenge, our preacher cannot refrain from replying from beneath his gypsy mask:—

Come back again? There is no coming back, young ladies, on the impetuous stream of life.

‘The merchant bows unto the seaman’s star,
The ploughman from the sun his season takes.’

And we must all set our pocket watches by the clock of fate. There is a headlong, forthright tide, that bears away man with his fancies like straw, and runs fast in time and space. It is full of curves like this, your winding river of Oise; and lingers and returns in pleasant pastorals; and yet, rightly thought upon, never returns at all. For though it should revisit the same acre of meadow in the same hour, it will have made an ample sweep between whiles; many little streams will have fallen in; many exhalations risen towards the sun; and even although it were the same acre, it will not be the same river Oise. And thus, O graces of Origny, although the wandering fortune of my life should carry me back again to where you await death’s whistle by the river, that will not be the old I who walks the street; and those wives and mothers, say will those be you?

Some one may think that this comes very near being, what any preaching may easily become, platitudinous; yet it is saved by the freshness of the treatment, by the blithe spirit of the preacher, and by the swish of the paddles that he manages to get into his out-of-doors discourse.

It is said that Coleridge once asked Charles Lamb if he had ever heard him preach. Lamb replied, "I never heard you do anything else." We may say the same for Stevenson. Let no one protest that he was rather an artist. I do not mean that he was a boor. I know that he never wears the prophet’s rage like Carlyle, and is never confessedly a teacher of men like Ruskin. He is also

unconventional, both as to subject and treatment. He affects "a light conscience." He assumes a care-free manner. He speaks very much as if he were a scarcely interested spectator of the splendid pageant of life. Still he cannot deceive us. It is easy to see where his heart is. The universe haunts him. He travels far and is always interested in new lands, yet deeper than that interest is his interest in life. He is always trying to get "back of beyond." He rides with a careless grace in his canoe, or astride Modestine, or in the steerage; yet he is always looking out of the tail of his eye at life. He will take the universe unawares and surprise it out of its secret. As he goes to and fro in the world "full of a number of things," he is ever singing the "beauty and terror of the world." I have always thought that that picture of him that shows him a gaunt invalid, propped up in pillows, the haunting face circled with unkempt hair, the eyes looking far away

To where the roads on either hand
Lead onward into fairy land.

gives us the soul of the man. He is ever doing one thing, in essay or romance—spelling out the meaning of life.

This is not to be wondered at, whether we think of the man's inheritance and experience, or whether we remind ourselves that we are all doing the same thing most of our time. An ancient worthy assures us that God hath given to the sons of men this sore travail to be exercised therewith. And long before his day men were searching out by wisdom all things done under the sun. At the present moment an especial interest is manifest in the interpretation of life, as can be seen from our periodical literature and the lecture platform. The pity is, not that this is so, but that so much of the discourse on life rests upon meagre data, small observation, and limited experience, and proceeds in a petulant mood to a disheartening conclusion. For the most part our latter-day prophets make us to feel the "devouring element in the universe" rather than the universe; while those truths revealed to babes and savages and "hid from political economists" are never set before us. The current reading of life is altogether partial, because so ill-informed. We need to get this point if we are to realize Stevenson's value to

his generation, and we may believe to all generations, as an interpreter of life.

In our childhood we have no suspicion of the universe. We never imagine that we could have made a better one. We are in "eternal brotherhood with it." Life then, whatever its outward seeming, always "has a golden chamber at the heart of it." Then we hear "the nightingale singing" and the "music of the runnel." Life is an opportunity for admiration and joy. Even to the end, for not a few men, life is fraught with hope. Until the autumn time, many a man commits himself to the sunshine on the hills, the laughter of children, gracious women, true men, bird-songs and apple-blossoms; believes in these things as much as he does in "old iron, cheap desires, and cheap fears," and thinks of them more. Some, indeed, like Paul the apostle, grow in capacity for faith, hope, and love, with the years, as every normal person should; but a pathetically large number lose their sight as they grow older. For many of us the bloom of the world gets rubbed off as we go forward across the continent of the years. Then it is that we grow conscious of the catastrophe and forget the myrtle vine. We see nature red in tooth and claw. We accept that miserable fable from the Orient that tells us that life is but the clinging to a wild vine upon which the mice remorselessly gnaw, while the dragon waits patiently below and the beast watches relentlessly above. Our only possibility is a lick at the honey accidentally caught on the wild bush at our side. A delirium-tremens view of life, one would say; yet a number of folk who would resent any insinuation of nervous disorder on their part hold this view of the universe and life. Indeed, they seem to get a kind of satisfaction in thinking of the mud and old iron, the poison-berries and pestilences, the ironies and hardships, that enter into the mixture of life. To every man with a reasonably good digestion and a normal perspective of life these fellows must seem to be the blue-devils philosophers, and by good rights ought to join the Suicide Club.

Stevenson had no sympathy with such representations of life. He does not belong in the company of such interpreters. From the first he believed in himself, his fellows, life, and God. He says somewhere, "There is manifestly a God if we want to find

him." Spite of the rampant materialism in the thought of his time, life was always to him more than "a Permanent Possibility of Sensation," and not even the capitalization of the theorem could make up for its other deficiencies. He believed in the "livableness of life." He saw that pessimism is not convincing. Some few men may believe in it. Many other men may believe that they believe in it; but when they draw their chairs in to dinner, it is evident that their philosophy of life sits lightly upon them. The multitude of men and women, Stevenson saw, live their lives with a relish, enjoy their dinners, make their jests with an unmistakable satisfaction, and sleep through the night. This fact weighed with Stevenson, as did the simple faith of the children. So he proclaims the world excellent, revels in the companionship of children, remembers the faces of women without desire, is pleased with the deeds of men without envy, and has an affection for his paddle. In his early manhood he had a dislike for what he calls the "Bastile of civilization." He had no lust for the glory and the wealth that come to him who "can sit squarest on a three-legged stool." He could not see that man's wash-bowl has a right to be considered a worthy competitor of God's river, if the imagination is to be cleansed. Yet as he grew older he came to love even civilization, to see registered in it an age-long and gigantic striving on the part of man, not wholly useless. So in the closing years our gypsily-inclined philosopher, carrying with him the fragrance of the out-of-doors, becomes something of a patriarch, with a numerous household about him and a personal interest in all the affairs of his island empire.

In other words, Stevenson is the prophet of good cheer. The world as he sees it is a heartening place. Suspicion of the nature of things is contemptible. To lack faith is to think that God is not a gentleman. Pessimism becomes an infinite insolence, a suspicion that does not speak well for the character of its holder.

Those of us who have been compelled to listen to the current mouthings of a cheap cynicism, much in vogue, who have been pelted and pestered with the ooze and slime of things in general, have no difficulty in understanding the welcome that was given

at once to Stevenson's protest. His life and his word came as a clean, heartening breath of air. This is generally recognized. No one questions but that he has added immensely to the good cheer of human-kind. We do well, however, to keep one other fact before our minds when we think of this service: his protest was not merely instinctive.

There are evidently not a few critics who tacitly assume that his view of life was largely temperamental. Well, it was temperamental. His life enters into his message, and was back of all his preaching. I think we should not try to question this point. His temperament must be taken into account, and also his training, and his inheritance, and his opportunity for seeing life, and his experience as a sufferer. His temperament was anything but morbid. All of his intimate friends remark the gaiety of the man. His coming into the room was always like the lighting of another candle. He was no juniper-bush fellow. On the contrary, he was a blithe pilgrim, and at the start struck a good stride as he took the road for the City. He loved the road and the morning and the valley. He knew Seigneur, and had found "him the best of acquaintances." He was a Scotchman. Yes, yet not a Shorter Catechist, nor a gypsy, nor a Bohemian; but a genial, brotherly traveller, who somewhere, sometime, must have been converted to the "religion of healthy-mindedness." And though for twelve long years the road ran for him along the Valley of the Shadow, he was all that way "a fellow with something pushing and spontaneous in his inside," and strode right on with unflagging courage, leaving behind him "a hopeful impulse that has immensely bettered the tradition of mankind."

Still, the man's temperament does not account for his view of life. That was reached by a rational process. It came as the result of his large knowledge of the facts of life, of his powers of divination, and of the penetration of his vision.

The interpreters to whom reference has been made lack both in powers of vision and generalization. They see life in spots. They abstract a section of the universe and look at it under their glasses. They literally yank facts out of their settings to study them. They have a capacity for single notes or for the simple themes of life, but not for the great symphony. Their conclusions

are worthless because so partial. Life, whole and living—this is beyond them. They have not the poet's vision, nor the poet's method, nor the poet's artistry. The forward movement of life, the universal lift, registered in the history of man and the cosmos, they have never divined. One gets up from the average book that treats of life, that essays to interpret life to us, and goes forth into the real world, bearing as it does upon its whole face the image of God, and is conscious of one great fact: our book-man has lost the bloom of the world in his reproduction of it—the bloom and the perspective and the liveness. Much of our philosophizing on life is as true as the average amateurish landscape sketch, and no truer. Its hard lines, crude drawing, and wooden surface may suggest to its author the loveliness of the earth, but it is no symbol of that subtle beauty to the general public.

Herein is the genius of Stevenson. He has both vision and the poet's synthetic power. He sees life whole. His picture sets reality before us with the charm and beauty of reality still upon it, satisfying the eyes and the imagination alike. And we may be sure that this kind comes only by patient brooding and quiet thinking, and then only to those to whom the Muses have been unusually generous.

I insist upon this point, as it makes his message all the more significant. And we have his own word for our insistence. We know that he was reared of Scotch parents, under the Scotch creed. We know that he very early began to make notes upon life for himself. We know that he early turned away from his father's Calvinism. The reaction was not violent; still it was important. We are told that various influences soon cured his soul and brought him the vision of God and the Moral Order. These facts help us to understand much of what he has said, and enable us to better appreciate his intellectual temper. Of this experience, or of these experiences, he says: "I came about like a well-handled ship. There stood at the wheel that unknown steersman, whom we call God." His word for it, then, his view of life was an achievement. In the light of his ancestral inheritance, his parental training, his course of life, his temperament, and his suffering, this is all the more important. It will not do for us to wave his word aside as

but the welling up of a happy, care-free heart. He speaks only after a large experience and when his imagination has made the whole circle of truth.

This may seem like making too serious a claim. I know his books are not heavy, lengthy treatises. He deals in no scientific or philosophic jargon. Yet we should not be misled by the gaiety of his manner nor by the lightness of his touch. He is following most closely Nature's method: a delicate line, a filmy hint, an elusive signal. Nature, whenever we go to her, refuses to give us truth in broadsides. She never puts her word into the form of a systematic theology. Still, her suggestions are worthy of our attention. They mark the path to all the truth we shall ever know. Stevenson discloses the greatness of his art in the delicacy of his portraiture. We are stupid indeed if we think that such work indicates a lack of largeness and sincerity and earnestness in the intellectual processes of the man. So when Stevenson insists that life is good and livable and that he knows Seigneur, we are to take him seriously.

Here is an example of what is meant. He had slept the night in God's great hostelry. Setting out anew on his journey, he registers his gratitude: "The room was airy, the water excellent, and the dawn had called me to a moment. I say nothing of the tapestries or the inimitable ceiling, nor yet of the view which I commanded from the windows; but I felt that I was in some one's debt for all this liberal entertainment. And so it pleased me, in a half-laughing way, to leave pieces of money on the turf as I went along, until I had left enough for my night's lodging. I trust they did not fall to some rich and churlish drover." We mistake if we think of this as a mere youthful, whimsical doing, or as a dramatic turn. It is the outgoing of a reverent, grateful, and gentle spirit.

One cannot but think of "Sweet Saint Francis" and his preaching to the birds that gather "from moor and mere and darkest wood" around Assisi's convent gate—a practice on the part of the mystic saint that admits of most severe criticism if we are only prosaic enough; but the poet Longfellow points the deeper meaning. The feathered throng departs—

Deep peace was in Saint Francis' heart.
He knew not if the brotherhood
His homily understood;
He only knew that to one Ear
The meaning of his words was clear.

Stevenson's "settling" for his liberal entertainment is of a piece with the preaching to the birds.

It is said that Stevenson was once in a boat which was bearing several Sisters of Charity to a lepers' island. As the boat neared the shore and the women caught sight of their future of suffering and isolation, they were very much moved and sat quietly weeping. What finer or more tender or truer word could have been spoken to them under the circumstances than that spoken by Stevenson? "Ladies, God himself is here to give you welcome." Only one who really knows Seigneur can ever speak like that, and we must let such words mean all they can.

So of the Vailima prayers. They have become justly famed. Yet it is a mistake to think of them as simply artistic products, though that they are. They ought to speak to us of a profound and beautiful faith in God, however gaily they seem to trip forth.

If any one still believes that Stevenson's interpretation of life is largely temperamental rather than rational, let him read this: "If I from my spy-hole, looking with purblind eyes upon the least part of a fraction of the universe, yet perceive in my own destiny some broken evidences of a plan, and some signals of an overruling goodness, shall I then be so mad as to complain that all cannot be explained? Shall I not rather wonder with infinite and grateful surprise, that in so vast a scheme I seem to have been able to read, however little, and that little encouraging to faith?" Here in his own words he tells us that his life-view is an achievement.

We all set forth with an instinctive faith in the world. The problem of life, as it presents itself to the intellect, seems to be to adjust this faith to our enlarging and often disconcerting experience. Not a few are utterly unable to do this, and journey most of the way with the "mists of darkness" upon their eyes. A larger number cling to their childhood faith, whether or not they

can rationalize it. Stevenson was gifted above his fellows, was poet and mystic; yet he, too, had to wait. But he was one who could wait. He had it in him to cling to his paddle. And he clung instinctively to his faith until the mists burned off and the whole valley of the earth lay before him in the glory of the sunlight. His victory was facilitated by temperament and a long experience of suffering, yet possible, after all, because of an unusual gift of vision and imagination.

And this Robert Louis Stevenson, who sets forth life whole and with the glory of God upon it, so that a love for it arises in our hearts, belongs of good right, not simply because of his romances, but because of his preaching, among the immortals.