

*Robert Louis Stevenson, A Record, An
Estimate, A Memorial*

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Introduction And First Impressions

MY little effort to make Thoreau better known in England had one result that I am pleased to think of. It brought me into personal association with R. L. Stevenson, who had written and published in THE CORNHILL MAGAZINE an essay on Thoreau, in whom he had for some time taken an interest. He found in Thoreau not only a rare character for originality, courage, and indefatigable independence, but also a master of style, to whom, on this account, as much as any, he was inclined to play the part of the "sedulous ape," as he had acknowledged doing to many others - a later exercise, perhaps in some ways as fruitful as any that had gone before. A recent poet, having had some seeds of plants sent to him from Northern Scotland to the South, celebrated his setting of them beside those native to the Surrey slope on which he dwelt, with the lines -

"And when the Northern seeds are growing,
Another beauty then bestowing,
We shall be fine, and North to South
Be giving kisses, mouth to mouth."

So the Thoreau influence on Stevenson was as if a tart American wild-apple had been grafted on an English pippin, and produced a wholly new kind with the flavours of both; and here wild America and England kissed each other mouth to mouth.

The direct result was the essay in THE CORNHILL, but the indirect results were many and less easily assessed, as Stevenson himself, as we shall see, was ever ready to admit. The essay on Thoreau was written in America, which further, perhaps, bears out my point.

One of the authorities, quoted by Mr Hammerton, in STEVENSONIANA says of the circumstances in which he found our author, when he was busily engaged on that bit of work:

"I have visited him in a lonely lodging in California, it was previous to his happy marriage, and found him submerged in billows of bed-clothes; about him floated the scattered volumes of a complete set of Thoreau; he was preparing an essay on that worthy, and he looked at the moment like a half-drowned man, yet he was not cast down. His work, an endless task, was better than a straw to him. It was to become his life-preserver and to prolong his years. I feel convinced that without it he must have surrendered long since. I found Stevenson a man of the frailest physique, though most unaccountably tenacious of life; a man whose pen was indefatigable, whose brain was never at rest, who, as far as I am able to judge, looked upon everybody and everything from a supremely intellectual point of view." (1)

We remember the common belief in Yorkshire and other parts that a man could not die so long as he could stand up - a belief on which poor Branwell Bronte was fain to act and to illustrate, but R. L. Stevenson illustrated it, as this writer shows, in a better, calmer, and healthier way, despite his lack of health.

On some little points of fact, however, Stevenson was wrong; and I wrote to the Editor of THE SPECTATOR a letter, titled, I think, "Thoreau's Pity and Humour," which he inserted. This brought me a private letter from Stevenson, who expressed the wish to see me, and have some talk with me on that and other matters. To this letter I at once replied, directing to 17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, saying that, as I was soon to be in that City, it might be possible for me to see him there. In reply to this letter Mr Stevenson wrote:

"THE COTTAGE, CASTLETON OF BRAEMAR,
SUNDAY, AUGUST (? TH), 1881.

"MY DEAR SIR, - I should long ago have written to thank you for your kind and frank letter; but, in my state of health, papers are apt to get mislaid, and your letter has been vainly hunted for until this (Sunday) morning.

"I must first say a word as to not quoting your book by name. It was the consciousness that we disagreed which led me, I daresay, wrongly, to suppress ALL references throughout the paper. But you may be certain a proper reference will now be introduced.

"I regret I shall not be able to see you in Edinburgh: one visit to Edinburgh has already cost me too dear in that invaluable particular, health; but if it should be at all possible for you to pass by Braemar, I believe you would find an attentive listener, and I can offer you a bed, a drive, and necessary food.

"If, however, you should not be able to come thus far, I can promise two things. First, I shall religiously revise what I have written, and bring out more clearly the point of view from which I regarded Thoreau. Second, I shall in the preface record your objection.

"The point of view (and I must ask you not to forget that any such short paper is essentially only a SECTION THROUGH a man) was this: I desired to look at the man through his books. Thus, for instance, when I mentioned his return to the pencil-making, I did it only in passing (perhaps I was wrong), because it seemed to me not an illustration of his principles, but a brave departure from them. Thousands of such there were I do not doubt; still they might be hardly to my purpose; though, as you say so, I suppose some of them would be.

"Our difference as to 'pity,' I suspect, was a logomachy of my making. No pitiful acts, on his part, would surprise me: I know he would be more pitiful in practice than most of the whiners; but the spirit of that practice would still seem to me to be unjustly described by the word pity.

"When I try to be measured, I find myself usually suspected of a sneaking unkindness for my subject, but you may be sure, sir, I would give up most other things to be as good a man as Thoreau. Even my knowledge of him leads me thus far.

"Should you find yourself able to push on so far - it may even lie on your way - believe me your visit will be very welcome. The weather is cruel, but the place is, as I daresay you know, the very WALE of Scotland - bar Tummelside. - Yours very sincerely,

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON."

Some delay took place in my leaving London for Scotland, and hence what seemed a hitch. I wrote mentioning the reason of my delay, and expressing the fear that I might have to forego the prospect of seeing him in Braemar, as his circumstances might have altered in the meantime. In answer came this note, like so many, if not most of his, indeed, without date:-

THE COTTAGE, CASTLETON OF BRAEMAR. (NO DATE.)

"MY DEAR SIR, - I am here as yet a fixture, and beg you to come our way. Would Tuesday or Wednesday suit you by any chance? We shall then, I believe, be empty: a thing favourable to talks. You get here in time for dinner. I stay till near the end of September, unless, as may very well be, the weather drive me forth. - Yours very sincerely, ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON."

I accordingly went to Braemar, where he and his wife and her son were staying with his father and mother.

These were red-letter days in my calendar alike on account of pleasant intercourse with his honoured father and himself. Here is my pen-and-ink portrait of R. L. Stevenson, thrown down at the time:

Mr Stevenson's is, indeed, a very picturesque and striking figure. Not so tall probably as he seems at first sight from his extreme thinness, but the pose and air could not be otherwise described than as distinguished. Head of fine type, carried well on the shoulders and in walking with the impression of being a little thrown back; long brown hair, falling from under a broadish-brimmed Spanish form of soft felt hat, Rembrandtesque; loose kind of Inverness cape when walking, and invariable velvet jacket inside the house. You would say at first sight, wherever you saw him, that he was a man of intellect, artistic and individual, wholly out of the common. His face is sensitive, full of expression, though it could not be called strictly beautiful. It is longish, especially seen in profile, and features a little irregular; the brow at once high and broad. A hint of vagary, and just a hint in the expression, is qualified by the eyes, which are set rather far apart from each other as seems, and with a most wistful, and at the same time possibly a merry impish expression arising over that, yet frank and clear, piercing, but at the same time steady, and fall on you with a gentle radiance and animation as he speaks. Romance, if with an indescribable SOUPCON of whimsicality, is marked upon him; sometimes he

has the look as of the Ancient Mariner, and could fix you with his glittering e'e, and he would, as he points his sentences with a movement of his thin white forefinger, when this is not monopolised with the almost incessant cigarette. There is a faint suggestion of a hair-brained sentimental trace on his countenance, but controlled, after all, by good Scotch sense and shrewdness. In conversation he is very animated, and likes to ask questions. A favourite and characteristic attitude with him was to put his foot on a chair or stool and rest his elbow on his knee, with his chin on his hand; or to sit, or rather to half sit, half lean, on the corner of a table or desk, one of his legs swinging freely, and when anything that tickled him was said he would laugh in the heartiest manner, even at the risk of bringing on his cough, which at that time was troublesome. Often when he got animated he rose and walked about as he spoke, as if movement aided thought and expression. Though he loved Edinburgh, which was full of associations for him, he had no good word for its east winds, which to him were as death. Yet he passed one winter as a "Silverado squatter," the story of which he has inimitably told in the volume titled THE SILVERADO SQUATTERS; and he afterwards spent several winters at Davos Platz, where, as he said to me, he not only breathed good air, but learned to know with closest intimacy John Addington Symonds, who "though his books were good, was far finer and more interesting than any of his books." He needed a good deal of nursery attentions, but his invalidism was never obtrusively brought before one in any sympathy-seeking way by himself; on the contrary, a very manly, self-sustaining spirit was evident; and the amount of work which he managed to turn out even when at his worst was truly surprising.

His wife, an American lady, is highly cultured, and is herself an author. In her speech there is just the slightest suggestion of the American accent, which only made it the more pleasing to my ear. She is heart and soul devoted to her husband, proud of his achievements, and her delight is the consciousness of substantially aiding him in his enterprises.

They then had with them a boy of eleven or twelve, Samuel Lloyd Osbourne, to be much referred to later (a son of Mrs Stevenson by a former marriage), whose delight was to draw the oddest, but perhaps half intentional or unintentional caricatures, funny, in some cases, beyond expression. His room was designated the picture-gallery, and on entering I could scarce refrain from bursting into laughter, even at the general effect, and, noticing this, and that I was putting some restraint on myself out of respect for the host's feelings, Stevenson said to me with a sly wink and a gentle dig in the ribs, "It's laugh and be thankful here." On Lloyd's account simple engraving materials, types, and a small printing-press had been procured; and it was Stevenson's delight to make funny poems, stories, and morals for the engravings executed, and all would be duly printed together. Stevenson's thorough enjoyment of the picture-gallery, and his goodness to Lloyd, becoming himself a very boy for the nonce, were delightful to witness and in degree to share. Wherever they were - at Braemar, in Edinburgh, at Davos Platz, or even at Silverado - the engraving and printing went on. The mention of the picture-gallery suggests that it was out of his interest in the colour-drawing and the picture-gallery that his first published story, TREASURE ISLAND, grew, as we shall see.

I have some copies of the rude printing-press productions, inexpressibly quaint, grotesque, a kind of literary horse-play, yet with a certain squint-eyed, sprawling genius in it, and innocent childish Rabelaisian mirth of a sort. At all events I cannot look at the slight memorials of that time, which I still possess, without laughing afresh till my eyes are dewy. Stevenson, as I understood, began TREASURE ISLAND more to entertain Lloyd Osbourne than anything else; the chapters being regularly read to the family circle as they were written, and with scarcely a purpose beyond. The lad became Stevenson's trusted companion and collaborator - clearly with a touch of genius.

I have before me as I write some of these funny mementoes of that time, carefully kept, often looked at. One of them is, "THE BLACK CANYON; OR, WILD ADVENTURES IN THE FAR WEST: a Tale of Instruction and Amusement for the Young, by Samuel L. Osbourne, printed by the author; Davos Platz," with the most remarkable cuts. It would not do some of the sensationalists anything but good to read it even at this day, since many points in their art are absurdly caricatured. Another is "MORAL EMBLEMS; A COLLECTION OF CUTS AND VERSES, by R. L. Stevenson, author of the BLUE SCALPER, etc., etc. Printers, S. L. Osbourne and Company, Davos Platz." Here are the lines to a rare piece of grotesque, titled A PEAK IN DARIEN -

'Broad-gazing on untrodden lands,
See where adventurous Cortez stands,
While in the heavens above his head,
The eagle seeks its daily bread.
How aptly fact to fact replies,
Heroes and eagles, hills and skies.
Ye, who condemn the fatted slave,
Look on this emblem and be brave."

Another, THE ELEPHANT, has these lines -

"See in the print how, moved by whim,
Trumpeting Jumbo, great and grim,
Adjusts his trunk, like a cravat,
To noose that individual's hat;
The Sacred Ibis in the distance,
Joys to observe his bold resistance."

R. L. Stevenson wrote from Davos Platz, in sending me THE BLACK CANYON:

"Sam sends as a present a work of his own. I hope you feel flattered, for THIS IS SIMPLY THE FIRST TIME HE HAS EVER GIVEN ONE AWAY. I have to buy my own works, I can tell you."

Later he said, in sending a second:

"I own I have delayed this letter till I could forward the enclosed. Remembering the night at Braemar, when we visited the picture-gallery, I hope it may amuse you: you see we do some publishing hereaway."

Delightfully suggestive and highly enjoyable, too, were the meetings in the little drawing-room after dinner, when the contrasted traits of father and son came into full play - when R. L. Stevenson would sometimes draw out a new view by bold, half-paradoxical assertion, or compel advance on the point from a new quarter by a searching question couched in the simplest language, or reveal his own latest conviction finally, by a few sentences as nicely rounded off as though they had been written, while he rose and gently moved about, as his habit was, in the course of those more extended remarks. Then a chapter or two of *THE SEA-COOK* would be read, with due pronouncement on the main points by one or other of the family audience.

The reading of the book is one thing. It was quite another thing to hear Stevenson as he stood reading it aloud, with his hand stretched out holding the manuscript, and his body gently swaying as a kind of rhythmical commentary on the story. His fine voice, clear and keen in some of its tones, had a wonderful power of inflection and variation, and when he came to stand in the place of Silver you could almost have imagined you saw the great one-legged John Silver, joyous-eyed, on the rolling sea. Yes, to read it in print was good, but better yet to hear Stevenson read it.

Treasure Island And Some Reminiscences

WHEN I left Braemar, I carried with me a considerable portion of the MS. of TREASURE ISLAND, with an outline of the rest of the story. It originally bore the odd title of THE SEA-COOK, and, as I have told before, I showed it to Mr Henderson, the proprietor of the YOUNG FOLKS' PAPER, who came to an arrangement with Mr Stevenson, and the story duly appeared in its pages, as well as the two which succeeded it.

Stevenson himself in his article in THE IDLER for August 1894 (reprinted in MY FIRST BOOK volume and in a late volume of the EDINBURGH EDITION) has recalled some of the circumstances connected with this visit of mine to Braemar, as it bore on the destination of TREASURE ISLAND:

"And now, who should come dropping in, EX MACHINA, but Dr Japp, like the disguised prince, who is to bring down the curtain upon peace and happiness in the last act; for he carried in his pocket, not a horn or a talisman, but a publisher, in fact, ready to unearth new writers for my old friend Mr Henderson's YOUNG FOLKS. Even the ruthlessness of a united family recoiled before the extreme measure of inflicting on our guest the mutilated members of THE SEA-COOK; at the same time, we would by no means stop our readings, and accordingly the tale was begun again at the beginning, and solemnly redelivered for the benefit of Dr Japp. From that moment on, I have thought highly of his critical faculty; for when he left us, he carried away the manuscript in his portmanteau.

"TREASURE ISLAND - it was Mr Henderson who deleted the first title, THE SEA-COOK - appeared duly in YOUNG FOLKS, where it figured in the ignoble midst without woodcuts, and attracted not the least attention. I did not care. I liked the tale myself, for much the same reason as my father liked the beginning: it was my kind of picturesque. I was not a little proud of John Silver also; and to this day rather admire that smooth and formidable adventurer. What was infinitely more exhilarating, I had passed a landmark. I had finished a tale and written The End upon my manuscript, as I had not done since THE PENTLAND RISING, when I was a boy of sixteen, not yet at college. In truth, it was so by a lucky set of accidents: had not Dr Japp come on his visit, had not the tale flowed from me with singular ease, it must have been laid aside, like its predecessors, and found a circuitous and unlamented way to the fire. Purists may suggest it would have been better so. I am not of that mind. The tale seems to have given much pleasure, and it brought (or was the means of bringing) fire, food, and wine to a deserving family in which I took an interest. I need scarcely say I mean my own."

He himself gives a goodly list of the predecessors which had found a circuitous and unlamented way to the fire

"As soon as I was able to write, I became a good friend to the paper-makers. Reams upon reams must have gone to the making of RATHILLET, THE PENTLAND RISING, THE

KING'S PARDON (otherwise PARK WHITEHEAD), EDWARD DAVEN, A COUNTRY DANCE, and A VENDETTA IN THE WEST. RATHILLET was attempted before fifteen, THE VENDETTA at twenty-nine, and the succession of defeats lasted unbroken till I was thirty-one."

Another thing I carried from Braemar with me which I greatly prize - this was a copy of CHRISTIANITY CONFIRMED BY JEWISH AND HEATHEN TESTIMONY, by Mr Stevenson's father, with his autograph signature and many of his own marginal notes. He had thought deeply on many subjects - theological, scientific, and social - and had recorded, I am afraid, but the smaller half of his thoughts and speculations. Several days in the mornings, before R. L. Stevenson was able to face the somewhat "snell" air of the hills, I had long walks with the old gentleman, when we also had long talks on many subjects - the liberalising of the Scottish Church, educational reform, etc.; and, on one occasion, a statement of his reason, because of the subscription, for never having become an elder. That he had in some small measure enjoyed my society, as I certainly had much enjoyed his, was borne out by a letter which I received from the son in reply to one I had written, saying that surely his father had never meant to present me at the last moment on my leaving by coach with that volume, with his name on it, and with pencilled notes here and there, but had merely given it me to read and return. In the circumstances I may perhaps be excused quoting from a letter dated Castleton of Braemar, September 1881, in illustration of what I have said -

"MY DEAR DR JAPP, - My father has gone, but I think I may take it upon me to ask you to keep the book. Of all things you could do to endear yourself to me you have done the best, for, from your letter, you have taken a fancy to my father.

"I do not know how to thank you for your kind trouble in the matter of THE SEA-COOK, but I am not unmindful. My health is still poorly, and I have added intercostal rheumatism - a new attraction, which sewed me up nearly double for two days, and still gives me 'a list to starboard' - let us be ever nautical. . . . I do not think with the start I have, there will be any difficulty in letting Mr Henderson go ahead whenever he likes. I will write my story up to its legitimate conclusion, and then we shall be in a position to judge whether a sequel would be desirable, and I myself would then know better about its practicability from the story-telling point of view. - Yours very sincerely, ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON."

A little later came the following:-

"THE COTTAGE, CASTLETON OF BRAEMAR. (NO DATE.)

"MY DEAR DR JAPP, - Herewith go nine chapters. I have been a little seedy; and the two last that I have written seem to me on a false venue; hence the smallness of the batch. I have now, I hope, in the three last sent, turned the corner, with no great amount of dulness.

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