MAY BYRON

A DAY WITH ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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"Took down the folds of her hair – shook it round her face and the pool repeated her thus veiled."
Prince Otto.

A DAY WITH STEVENSON

Supposing that in the month of April, 1886, you had arrived, a guest foreseen, at the pleasant ivy-muffled dwelling in Bournemouth, which had recently adopted the name of Skerryvore, and that you had been permitted to enter its doors – you might account yourself a somewhat favoured person. For the master of the house, "that rickety and cloistered spectre," as he termed himself, the "pallid brute who lived in Skerryvore like a weevil in a biscuit," might be invisible for the nonce – shut upstairs, forbidden even to speak for fear of inducing hemorrhage. Or again, you might yourself be afflicted with an obvious cold: in which case you would not be admitted into his presence, lest you left contagion of that cold.

But if fate befriended you, you would chance upon the most remarkable personality, it might be, that you had yet encountered. A lean, long flat-chested man, gracefully emphatic of gesture – pacing up and down the room as he talked – burning with hectic energy – a man of rich brown tints in hair and eyes and skin: mutable, mirthful, brilliant – above all "vital," as he had described himself, "wholly vital with a buoyance of life" which had upborne him hitherto over the crest of most tumultuous distresses.

Robert Louis Stevenson was now thirty-six years old: and ever since his sixth year, when, as his mother recorded in her diary, he

dreamed that he "heard the noise of pens writing," his aim had been set unswervingly toward the one goal. Born of a strong and strenuous family, the great lighthouse builders of the north, he was not, like them, intent upon the subjugation of obstinate stone, the ordering and ordaining of rocks and seas. Dhu Heartach and the Bell Rock and Skerryvore he could admire at a distance: but the material which cried aloud to him for mastery, was much more plastic, – yet, to him, no less stubborn. "I imagine," he declared, "nobody ever had such pains to learn a trade as I had; but I slogged at it day in and day out." His fastidious soul refused to be contented with a facile and slipshod utterance. A passionate quest: after *le mot propre*, which had led him, in his own phrase, to "play the sedulus ape" to all the great prose writers of the past – and a sense of style such as no man had ever so anxiously and assiduously developed in himself – these had achieved their own reward. "'Thanks to my dire industry," said Stevenson, "I have done more with smaller gifts than almost any man of letters in the world."

And this was a just pride: for there was no branch of literature in which he could not admirably acquit himself. So many years a struggler in obscurity, with small hopes, few successes, little encouragement – battling with continuous and crippling maladies, – this indomitable artist, by sheer dint of "dire industry," now suddenly stood forth in full blaze of public recognition. The author of *Virginibus Puerisque*, *Treasure Island*, *Prince Otto*, *The Child's Garden of Verse*, and *Dr. Jekyll*, was very

much a man to be reckoned with.

Probably few modern books have met with such instantaneous and triumphant success as *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jekyll*. The first, after running its course, unannounced and comparatively unrecognized, the serial of an obscure author, in *Young Folks' Paper*, was published in book form, – and Stevenson, like Byron, "awoke to find himself famous." The honours which he had failed to obtain with all the dainty humour, all the valiant fatalism, of *Virginibus Puerisque*, had been accorded without stint to *Treasure Island*. It was a tense and stimulating piece of pure adventure. The authentic air of the eighteenth century breathed through every sentence of it: and its fine flavour of dare-devil romance kindled even sober statesmen, such as Mr. Gladstone, to a very furore of avidity in devouring its breathless pages.

As for *Dr. Jekyll*, that gruesome work – literally the product of a nightmare – had been quoted in pulpits, discussed in newspapers, read by everybody, – it had taken the world by storm. Yet Stevenson's head was not turned by his tardily-won success: with his customary *sang froid*, he took things as they came, failures and triumphs, and met each alike with smiling gallantry.

The motives which had led him into authorship – or rather forced him, despite all stress and hindrance of froward circumstances, – were as curiously varied as his own nature; and it was these motives which still drove him hard and incessantly.

To fame he was perhaps not wholly indifferent. No author sits so austerely aloft as to disdain popular applause altogether. Yet a born stylist and a conscious artist, like Stevenson, knew that his most finished work was above and beyond the appreciation of the general public. For money, – though it was a necessity of life to him, and although, with all his recent triumphs, he was not at present earning more than £400 a year, – for money he did not care, except as a means to an end. "Wealth is only useful for two things," he said, "a yacht and a string quartet. Except for these, I hold that £700 a year is as much as a man can possibly want." Still, in declaring, "I do not write for the public," he added with engaging candour, "I do write for money, a nobler deity," and this, to a certain extent was true. It was for money only, no doubt, that he was now undertaking, against the grain, that "romance of tushery," *The Black Arrow*, a tale with a mediæval setting in which he felt himself ill at ease. But "most of all," he allowed, "I write for myself; not perhaps any more noble, but both more intelligent and nearer home."

And that a man in such difficulties of health and finance, and so precarious a position, should have the courage of his own determined artistry, was in itself sufficiently remarkable: but the result more than justified his choice.

All the morning, Stevenson had been upstairs writing: probably after a bad night; very likely in what any other man would term a totally unfit condition. Under any and all circumstances, he continued to write unflinchingly; racked by

coughing, reeling with weakness, with his right arm in a sling, and his left hand holding the pen, – sitting up in bed with a clinical thermometer in his mouth; and yet, as he declared, "I like my life all the same … I should bear false witness if I did not declare life happy." … He was, in his own words, "made for a contest, and the powers have so willed that my battlefield should be this dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the physic bottle."

"To declare life happy," became, in fact, his literary mission, – the condensed philosophy of his gay, inveterate courage. "I believe that literature should give joy," was his maxim, "one dank, dispirited word is harmful, – a crime of *lèse-humanité*." This brave and cheerful outlook is evident in all his essays, – it is, so to speak, a glorified and artistic Mark-Tapleyism, all-pervading, unimpugnable, ready to survive the most malevolent accidents of life, the crowning tragedy of death itself. And so you find the "chronic sickist," as he termed himself, still ready, in all but body, for great risks and inspiriting adventures, and – through a mist of pain – leading forlorn hopes with a waving sword of flame. You hear him proclaiming that:

"All who have meant good work with their whole hearts, have done good work, although they may die before they have the time to sign it. Every heart that has beat strong and cheerfully has left a hopeful impulse behind it in the world, and bettered the tradition of mankind. And even if death catch people, like an open pitfall, and in mid-career, laying out vast projects, and planning monstrous foundations, flushed with hope, and their

mouths full of boastful language, they should be at once tripped up and silenced; is there not something brave and spirited in such a termination? and does not life go down with a better grace, foaming in full body over a precipice, than miserable struggling to an end in sandy deltas?" (*Virginibus Puerisque*.)

And to him, above all, applied his own triumphant lines, those which he addressed to W. E. Henley, another writer, a man of like courageous outlook, who, like himself, "in the fell grip of circumstances, had not winced nor cried aloud:

> "… Small the pipe; but oh! do thou,
> Peak-faced and suffering piper, blow therein
> The dirge of heroes dead; and to these sick,
> These dying, sound the triumph over death.
> Behold! each greatly breathes; each tastes a joy
> Unknown before in dying; for each knows
> A hero dies with him – though unfulfilled,
> Yet conquering truly – and not dies in vain."

At present he was engaged upon *Kidnapped*, that admirable piece of fiction which he had begun, "partly as a lark and partly as a pot-boiler." It was a relief, after the concentrated horror of *Dr. Jekyll*

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