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STEVENSON'S PERFECT
VIRTUES

Luther Brewer

Stevenson's Perfect Virtues

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STEVENSON'S PERFECT VIRTUES

Gentleness and cheerfulness are the perfect virtues.
– Robert Louis Stevenson

Stevenson was right. There is not a more admirable trait in one's character than that of cheerfulness. Combined with that other virtue named by Stevenson, gentleness, and what more is needed to make a companionable and a beloved man.

These two attributes were possessed in an emphatic way both by Stevenson and by Leigh Hunt. That's why some of us are so fond of Hunt. That's why he is growing in esteem as he is becoming better known to lovers and students of the literature produced in England during the first half of the nineteenth century.

For it is certain that Hunt is coming into his own. First editions of his writings year by year are advancing in price. They are becoming scarce and in some instances exceedingly difficult to obtain. Catalogues of rare book dealers are listing fewer of his works, and when quotations are made they invariably are in advance of those of a year or two ago.

The cultivation of cheerfulness frequently is enjoined throughout his writings. He had many visitors in his home, attracted there by his personal qualities and by his gentleness of heart. He was fond of music, which formed a staple in the entertainment and the conversation.

Barry Cornwall (B. W. Procter), a long time intimate friend, in his *Recollections of Men of Letters*, mentions the evenings at Hunt's house: "Hunt never gave dinners, but his suppers of cold meat and salad were cheerful and pleasant; sometimes the cheerfulness (after a 'wassail bowl') soared into noisy merriment. I remember one Christmas or New Year's evening, when we sat there till two or three o'clock in the morning, and when the jokes and stories and imitations so overcame me that I was nearly falling off my chair with laughter. This was mainly owing to the comic imitations of Coulson, who was usually so grave a man. We used to refer to him as an encyclopedia, so perpetually, indeed, that Hunt always spoke of him as 'The Admirable Coulson!' This *vis comica* left him for the most part in later life, when he became a distinguished lawyer."

It was this same Barry Cornwall who introduced Hawthorne to Hunt, a charming account of Hawthorne's visit being recorded in *Our Old Home*. "I rejoiced to hear him say," he writes, "that he was favored with most confident and cheering anticipations in respect to a future life; and there were abundant proofs, throughout our interview, of an unrepining spirit, resignation, quiet relinquishment of the worldly benefits that were denied him, thankful enjoyment of whatever he had to enjoy, and piety, and hope shining onward into the dusk – all of which gave a reverential cast to the feeling with which we parted from him. I wish he could have had one draught of prosperity before he died."

There are many of us ready to give expression to the same wish.

Speaking of Hunt's *Autobiography*, a book second only in interest to Boswell's *Johnson* said Carlyle, this caustic writer had the grace to say that the reader might find in that book "the image of a gifted, gentle, patient, and valiant human soul, as it buffets its way through the billows of time, and will not drown though often in danger; cannot be drowned, but conquers and leaves a track of radiance behind it."

The *Spectator*, London, said this autobiography was one of the most graceful and genial chronicles of the incidents of a human life in the English language. “The sweetness of temper, the indomitable love and forgiveness, the pious hilarity, and the faith in the ultimate triumph of good revealed in its pages show the humane and noble qualities of the writer.”

This appreciation of Hunt is in contrast with the portrait drawn by Dickens in *Bleak House*, where the character of Harold Skimpole was so patent a caricature of Hunt that mutual friends promptly remonstrated with the author, and this influenced Dickens, in the later numbers of the monthly parts in which the book was issued, to modify his picture.

In writing of his father after his death, Thornton evidently had in mind this ungenerous act of Dickens when he penned these sentences: “His consideration, his sympathy with what was gay and pleasurable, his avowed doctrine of cultivating cheerfulness were manifest on the surface, and could only be appreciated by those who knew him in society, most probably even exaggerated as salient traits, on which he himself insisted with a sort of gay and ostentatious wilfulness. In the spirit which made him disposed to enjoy ‘anything that was going forward’ he would even assume for the evening a convivial aspect, and urge a liberal measure of the wine with the gusto of a bon vivant. Few who knew him so could be aware, not only of the simple and uncostly sources from which he habitually drew his enjoyments, but of his singularly plain life, extended even to a rule of self denial. Excepting at intervals when wine was recommended to him, or came to him as a gift of friendship, his customary drink was water, which he would drink with the almost daily repetition of Dr. Armstrong’s line, ‘Nought like the simple element dilutes.’... His dress was always plain and studiously economical. He would excuse the plainness of his diet, by ascribing it to a delicacy of health, which he overrated. His food was often nothing but bread and meat at dinner, bread and tea for two meals of the day, bread alone for luncheon or for supper. His liberal constructions were shown to others, his strictness to himself. If he heard that a friend was in trouble, his house was offered as a ‘home’; and it was literally so, many times in his life.”

Apropos of this, it is of interest to note that his house was an asylum for Keats for weeks, at a time when the young poet was sick in body and mind. It was Leigh Hunt who gave Keats, in the *Examiner*, the first favorable review he received.

It is but fair to note that Dickens later disclaimed any intent to portray in Harold Skimpole the foibles of Leigh Hunt. I have several letters from Dickens to Hunt making delicate reference to the subject. As late as June 28, 1855, four years prior to Hunt’s death, Dickens wrote: “I hope you will not now think it necessary to renew that painful subject with me. There is nothing to remove from my mind – I hope, nothing to remove from yours. I thought of the little notice which has given you (I rejoice most heartily to find) so much pleasure – as the best means that could possibly present themselves of enabling me to express myself publicly about you as you would desire. In that better and unmistakable association with you by name, let all end.”

Shortly after the death of Hunt Dickens made it a point to say in his *All the Year Round* that it was the graces and charms of manner of Hunt, “which had many a time delighted him, and impressed him as being unspeakably whimsical and attractive,” that were recalled when the character in question was drawn, and that he had no thought “that the admired original would ever be charged with the imaginary vices of the fictitious creature” – an explanation that does not clear the great novelist.

Dickens also bears tribute to Hunt’s cheerfulness despite the reasons he had for sadness. “His life was, in several respects, a life of trouble, though his cheerfulness was such that he was, upon the whole, happier than some men who have had fewer griefs to wrestle with.” In Hunt’s correspondence, Dickens saw evidence that he was “sometimes over-clouded with the shadow of affliction, but more often bright and hopeful, and at all times sympathetic: taking a keen delight in all beautiful things – in the exhaustless world of books and art, in the rising genius of young authors, in the immortal language of music, in trees and flowers, and old memorial nooks of London and its suburbs; in the sunlight which came, as he used to say, like a visitor out of heaven, glorifying humble places.”

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