

CHAPTER VIII

CALIFORNIA—1879—80

“What a man truly wants, that will he get, or he will be changed in trying.”—R. L. S., Aphorism.

“TO MY WIFE

“Trusty, dusky, vivid, true,
With eyes of gold and bramble-dew,
Steel-true and blade-straight,
The great artificer
Made my mate.

“Honour, anger, valour, fire;
A love that life could never tire,
Death quench or evil stir,
The mighty master
Gave to her.

“Teacher, tender, comrade, wife,
A fellow-farer true through life,
Heart-whole and soul-free,
The august father
Gave to me.”

Songs of Travel, No. xxvi.

FROM London he went north, and on August 7th, 1879, sailed from the Clyde in the steamship *Devonia*, bound for New York. She carried a number of emigrants, but Stevenson, though mixing freely with them, had, chiefly to obtain a table for his writing, taken his passage in the second cabin, which was almost indistinguishable from the steerage. His object in travelling

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in this fashion was, in the first instance, economy, and next to that, a desire to gain first-hand knowledge for himself of emigrants and emigration, which might be of immediate use for making a book and of ultimate service to him in a thousand ways. He suffered a good deal on the voyage, being already anxious and highly strung before he started, but he stuck manfully to his work and wrote, "in a slantindicular cabin, with the table playing bob-cherry with the ink-bottle," the greater part of *The Story of a Lie*. The rest of his time he devoted to making the acquaintance of his fellow-passengers, learning their histories, studying their characters, and—as any one may see between the lines of *The Amateur Emigrant*¹—rendering them endless unobtrusive services, and helping and cheering them in every way possible. He passed easily for one of themselves. "Among my fellow-passengers," he wrote elsewhere,² "I passed generally as a mason, for the excellent reason that there was a mason on board who *happened to know*; and this fortunate event enabled me to mix with these working people on a footing of equality. . . . It chanced there was a blacksmith on board who was not only well mannered himself and a judge of manners, but a fellow besides of an original mind. He had early diagnosed me for a masquerader and a person out of place; and as we had grown intimate upon the voyage, I carried him my troubles. How did I behave? Was I, upon this crucial test, at all a gentleman? I might have asked eight hundred thousand blacksmiths (if Wales or the world contain so many) and they would

¹ *The Amateur Emigrant*, Edinburgh Edition.

² *Scribner's Magazine*, May, 1888.

have held my question for a mockery; but Jones was a man of genuine perception, thought a long time before he answered, looking at me comically, and reviewing (I could see) the events of the voyage, and then told me that 'on the whole' I did 'pretty well.' Mr. Jones was a humane man, and very much my friend, and he could get no further than 'on the whole' and 'pretty well.' I was chagrined at the moment for myself; on a larger basis of experience, I am now only concerned for my class. My coequals would have done but little better, and many of them worse."

The voyage passed without event, and the steamer arrived at New York on the evening of the 18th of August. Stevenson passed the night in a shilling Irish boarding-house. "A little Irish girl," he writes, "is now reading my book¹ aloud to her sister at my elbow; they chuckle, and I feel flattered. P.S.—Now they yawn, and I am indifferent: such a wisely conceived thing is vanity." The following day he spent in making purchases, and also is said to have entered the offices of various magazines to establish, if possible, an American connection. Angels have been dismissed unawares at other places and at other times, and—if there be any truth in the story—Stevenson found that the moment of his welcome was not yet come.

Within four-and-twenty hours of his first arrival he was already on his way as an emigrant to the Far West, a chief part of his baggage being "Bancroft's *History of the United States* in six fat volumes."

The railway journey began in floods of rain and the maximum of discomfort. The record of it is in the

¹ *I. e.* the *Travels with a Donkey*, then recently published.

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hands of all to read, and I need say only that it occupied from a Monday evening to the Saturday morning of the following week, and that the tedium and stress of the last few days in the emigrant train proper were almost unbearable.

On the 30th of August Stevenson reached San Francisco, but so much had the long journey shaken him that he looked like a man at death's door. The news so far was good; Mrs. Osbourne was better, but that was all. To recover from the effects of his hardships he forthwith went another hundred and fifty miles to the south, and camped out by himself in the Coast Range of mountains beyond Monterey. But he had overtaxed his strength, and broke down. Two nights he "lay out under a tree in a sort of stupor," and if two frontiersmen in charge of a goat-ranche had not taken him in and tended him, there would have been an end of his story. They took him back to the ranche, and amid romantic surroundings and in that enchanting climate, he made a recovery for the time.

"I am now lying in an upper chamber, with a clinking of goat bells in my ears, which proves to me that the goats are come home and it will soon be time to eat. The old bear-hunter is doubtless now infusing tea; and Tom the Indian will come in with his gun in a few minutes."

Here he spent a couple of weeks, passing the mornings in teaching the children to read, and then went down to Monterey, where he remained until the middle of December. In those days it still was a small Mexican town, altered but slightly by the extraordinary cosmopolitan character of the few strangers who visited

it. In his own words, it was "a place of two or three streets, economically paved with sea-sand, and two or three lanes, which were watercourses in the rainy season, and at all times were rent up by fissures four or five feet deep. There were no street lights. . . . The houses were for the most part built of unbaked adobe brick, many of them old for so new a country, some of very elegant proportions, with low, spacious, shapely rooms, and walls so thick that the heat of summer never dried them to the heart. . . . There was no activity but in and around the saloons, where people sat almost all day long playing cards. . . . The smallest excursion was made on horseback. You would scarcely ever see the main street without a horse or two tied to posts, and making a fine figure with their Mexican housings. . . . In a place so exclusively Mexican as Monterey, you saw not only Mexican saddles, but true Vaquero riding—men always at the hand-gallop, up hill and down dale, and round the sharpest corner, urging their horses with cries and gesticulations and cruel rotatory spurs, checking them dead with a touch, or wheeling them right-about-face in a square yard. . . . Spanish was the language of the streets. It was difficult to get along without a word or two of that language for an occasion. The only communications in which the population joined were with a view to amusement. A weekly public ball took place with great etiquette, in addition to the numerous fandangoes in private houses. There was a really fair amateur brass band. Night after night, serenaders would be going about the street, sometimes in a company and with several instruments and voices together, sometimes

severally, each guitar before a different window. It was a strange thing to lie awake in nineteenth-century America, and hear the guitar accompany, and one of these old, heart-breaking Spanish love-songs mount into the night air, perhaps in a deep baritone, perhaps in that high-pitched, pathetic, womanish alto which is so common among Mexican men, and which strikes on the unaccustomed ear as something not entirely human, but altogether sad."¹

Here Stevenson found quarters curiously to his taste, which was simple, though discriminating. He lodged with the doctor, and for his meals went to a restaurant.

"Of all my private collection of remembered inns and restaurants—and I believe it, other things being equal, to be unrivalled—one particular house of entertainment stands forth alone. I am grateful, indeed, to many a swinging signboard, to many a rusty wine-bush; but not with the same kind of gratitude. Some were beautifully situated, some had an admirable table, some were the gathering-places of excellent companions; but take them for all in all, not one can be compared with Simoneau's at Monterey.

"To the front, it was part barber's shop, part bar; to the back, there was a kitchen and a *salle à manger*. The intending diner found himself in a little, chill, bare, adobe room, furnished with chairs and tables, and adorned with some oil sketches roughly brushed upon the wall in the manner of Barbizon and Cernay. The table, at whatever hour you entered, was already laid with a not spotless napkin, and, by way of epergne, with a dish of green peppers and tomatoes, pleasing

¹ "The Old Pacific Capital," *Across the Plains*, p. 179.

alike to eye and palate. If you stayed there to meditate before a meal, you would hear Simoneau all about the kitchen, and rattling among the dishes."

The fragment breaks off, or we should have had a picture of M. Simoneau, the proprietor, with whom Stevenson "played chess and discussed the universe" daily. At his table there "sat down, day after day, a Frenchman, two Portuguese, an Italian, a Mexican, and a Scotsman; they had for common visitors an American from Illinois, a nearly pure-blood Indian woman, and a naturalised Chinese; and from time to time a Switzer and a German came down from country ranches for the night."

This society afforded Stevenson most of the diversion that he could now spare the time to enjoy. Of his adventures in the forest he has told us, and chiefly of that day when, setting fire to a tree in mere experiment and idleness of mind, he ran for his life in fear of being lynched. But during all these weeks he was working as he had hardly worked before. Half of a novel called *A Vendetta in the West* was written, and the whole of *The Pavilion on the Links*, which he had begun in London, was despatched to England. The scenery of the latter was, I believe, suggested by Dirleton in East Lothian, near North Berwick, and midway between Tantallon and Gillane, haunts of his boyhood, to which he returned in *Catriona*. At the same time he was writing up his emigrant experiences, about half of the original manuscript being completed at Monterey. There was a tiny local newspaper, *The Monterey Californian*, of which one of his friends was owner, editor, printer, and everything else, and to this Stevenson oc-

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asionally lent a hand. But he was still greatly agitated and worried, and though by this time word came from San Francisco that Mrs. Osbourne was well, and that matters were taking their course, the main object of his journey still seemed no nearer than before. The strain of exertion and anxiety was again too great, and "while leading a dull regular life in a mild climate," he developed pleurisy, and had for a few days to relax his exertions.

All this time he was the kindly and bright companion; his gaiety and courage never flagged. "There is something in me worth saying," he wrote to Mr. Henley, "though I can't find what it is just yet."

About the middle of December he came to San Francisco, and there hired the most economical lodging he could find, at all compatible with the conditions of his work—a single room in a poor house in Bush Street. All his meals he took outside at some of the cheap restaurants; in San Francisco it is probably easier to fare well at small expense than in any other city in America. He lived at seventy cents a day, and worked yet harder than before. He made inquiries about work on the San Francisco *Bulletin*, but the payment offered by that newspaper for literary articles, which were all he was ready to undertake, was too small to be of any use to a writer so painstaking and so deliberate. The *Bulletin* afterwards accepted at its own rates a couple of papers which he had not written specially for it, but considered unsuitable for any other purpose, but his connection with the San Francisco press was absolutely limited to this transaction.¹

¹ There is no ground for the statement that Stevenson ever acted as reporter for the *Chronicle* or any other San Francisco paper. It is

But the worst part of the change from Monterey was that he was thrown more upon himself. In place of the bright social life of the little Spanish town, a life such as is common on the Continent of Europe, but is hardly to be found in England, he was plunged into the terrible solitude of a large city. On the 26th December he writes: "For four days I have spoken to no one but my landlady or landlord, or to restaurant waiters. This is not a gay way to pass Christmas, is it?" And again: "After weeks in this city, I know only a few neighbouring streets; I seem to be cured of all my adventurous whims, and even of human curiosity, and am content to sit here by the fire and await the course of fortune."

It was in these days that he met that "bracing, Republican postman in the city of San Francisco. I lived in that city among working folk, and what my neighbours accepted at the postman's hands—nay, what I took from him myself—it is still distasteful to recall."¹

His friends were very few, and those of but a few weeks' standing. They hardly extended, indeed, beyond Mr. Virgil Williams and his wife, the artist couple to whom *The Silverado Squatters* was afterwards dedicated, and Mr. Charles Warren Stoddard, whose picturesque lodging is commemorated in *The Wrecker*.

expressly contradicted by Mr. John P. Young, then and now managing editor of that journal, and his denial is borne out by the records of the paper and by the recollections of all who knew Stevenson in California at the time. A legend that the San Francisco doctors refused advice to the sick man except for ready money is equally unfounded.

¹ *Later Essays*, Edinburgh Edition, p. 291.

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In Mr. Williams he found a man of great culture and refinement, a scholar as well as a painter, who was always ready to respond to his verses, and, together with his wife, able and eager to discuss the literatures of Europe. Their house was always open to Stevenson, and their only regret was that he could not come more frequently. To Mr. Stoddard also he was no less welcome a companion; from him he borrowed the delightful books of Herman Melville, *Typee* and *Omoo*, and the *South Sea Idylls*,¹ which charmed Stevenson alike with their subject and their style. So here in his darkest hour he received the second impulse, which in the end was to "cast him out as by a freshet" upon those "ultimate islands."

San Francisco itself was still far from a prosaic place; its early history and its large foreign population rendered it not less dangerous than picturesque. Kearney, the Irish demagogue, had only just "been snuffed out by Mr. Coleman, backed by his San Francisco Vigilantes and three Gatling guns." Stevenson himself was not without experiences, perhaps less uncommon there at that time than in other large cities. "There are rough quarters where it is dangerous o' nights; cellars of public entertainment which the wary pleasure-seeker chooses to avoid. Concealed weapons are unlawful, but the law is continually broken. One editor was shot dead while I was there; another walked the streets accompanied by a bravo, his guardian angel. I have been quietly eating a dish of oysters in a restaurant, where, not more than ten minutes after I had left, shots were

¹ Published in England by Messrs. Chatto & Windus in 1874 as *Summer Cruising in the South Seas*, by Charles Warren Stoddard.

exchanged and took effect; and one night, about ten o'clock, I saw a man standing watchfully at a street corner with a long Smith-and-Wesson glittering in his hand behind his back. Somebody had done something he should not, and was being looked for with a vengeance." ¹

But his private needs now pressed upon him; money was growing scarce; the funds he had brought with him were exhausted, and those transmitted from England, being partly his own money and partly the payment for his recent work, very frequently failed to reach him. In the end of January he had to drop from a fifty-cent to a twenty-five-cent dinner, and already had directed his friend Mr. Charles Baxter to dispose of his books in Edinburgh and to send him the proceeds.

His diligence had not been without results. *The Amateur Emigrant* had been finished and sent home; likewise two *Cornhill* articles on "Thoreau" and "Yoshida Torajiro." His interest in Japan was chiefly derived from his acquaintance with sundry Japanese who came to Edinburgh to study lighthouse engineering, with some of whom he afterwards for a while carried on correspondence.

The influence of America in literature during the nineteenth century has perhaps been most deeply exercised upon English authors through Hawthorne, Whitman, and Poe. Other names have been more widely celebrated, but these three have the most intimately affected their fellow-writers, and the influence of the two latter at any rate has been out of proportion to their achievement. With Stevenson Thoreau came after his country-

¹ *Pacific Capitals*, Edinburgh Edition, p. 198.

men in point of time, but the effect was even more considerable: "I have scarce written ten sentences, since I was introduced to Thoreau, but his influence might be somewhere detected by a close observer." Had Stevenson not now been on the threshold of marriage, he might yet more strongly have been affected by these ascetic and self-sufficing doctrines.

At this time *Prince Otto* began to suffer a resurrection out of one of his old plays, *Semiramis, a Tragedy*, but as yet it was known as *The Greenwood State, a Romance*. An article on Benjamin Franklin and the Art of Virtue was projected, and another upon William Penn, whose *Fruits of Solitude* now became a very favourite book with Stevenson. "A Dialogue between Two Puppets"¹ was also written, and about the half of an autobiography in five books.²

His prospects were gloomy; for although the manuscripts he had sent home were accepted by editors, yet the judgment of his friends upon some of them was justly unfavourable, and at this crisis he could not afford rejection or even delay in payment.

His correspondence with his parents since his departure had been brief and unsatisfactory. His father, being imperfectly informed as to his motives and plans, naturally took that dark view of his son's conduct to which his temperament predisposed him. But even so, hearing of Louis' earlier illness, he sent him a twenty-pound note, though, as fate would have it, this was one of the letters that miscarried.

Lonely, ill, and poor; estranged from his people, unsuccessful in his work, and discouraged in his attempt

¹ *Miscellanea*, p. 28.

² See pp. 99, 102.

to maintain himself, Stevenson yet did not lose heart or go back for one moment from his resolution. He wrote to Mr. Baxter: "20th Jan.—I lead a pretty happy life, though you might not think it. I have great fun trying to be economical, which I find as good a game of play as any other. I have no want of occupation, and though I rarely see any one to speak to, have little time to weary."

"However ill he might be," says Mrs. Williams, "or however anxious had been his vigils, he was always gay, eloquent, and boyish, with the peculiar youthfulness of spirit that was destined to last him to the end."

He stuck to his work; even, a harder feat, he had the determination to give himself a week's holiday. But though his spirit was indomitable, his physical powers were exhausted; his landlady's small child was very ill, and he sat up nursing it. The child recovered, but Stevenson a short while afterwards broke down, and could go on no more.

He was, as he afterwards wrote to Mr. Gosse, on the verge of a galloping consumption, subject to cold sweats, prostrating attacks of cough, sinking fits in which he lost the power of speech, fever, and all the ugliest circumstances of the disease.¹

Fortunately by this date his future wife had obtained her divorce, and was at liberty to give him as nurse those services for which there was unfortunately only too frequent occasion during the next few years. It was a very anxious time, and he was nearer "the grey ferry" than he had been since childhood. Slowly he mended, and his recovery was helped by his letters and

¹ *Letters*, i. 169.

telegrams from home. Already by the middle of February he must have heard that his father admitted that the case was not what he supposed, and that if there were as long a delay as possible, he was prepared to do his best in the matter. At that very date Mr. Stevenson was writing again that it was preposterous of Louis to scrimp himself, and that if he would inform him what money he wanted, it would be sent by telegram, if required. And early in April a telegram came, announcing to Louis that in future he might count upon two hundred and fifty pounds a year. His gratitude was unbounded; he realised very clearly what his extremity had been and the fate from which he had been rescued.

To Mr. Baxter again he wrote:—

“It was a considerable shock to my pride to break down; but there—it’s done, and cannot be helped. Had my health held out another month, I should have made a year’s income; but breaking down when I did, I am surrounded by unfinished works. It is a good thing my father was on the spot, or I should have had to work and die.”

All obstacles were at last removed, and on May 19th, 1880, Robert Louis Stevenson was married to Fanny Van de Grift at San Francisco, in the house of the Rev. Dr. Scott, no one else but Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Williams being present.

Of the marriage it need only be said that from the beginning to the end husband and wife were all in all to one another. His friends rejoiced to find in her, as Mr. Colvin says, “a character as strong, interesting, and romantic almost as his own; an inseparable sharer of all his thoughts, and staunch companion of all his ad-

ventures; the most open-hearted of friends to all who loved him; the most shrewd and stimulating critic of his work; and in sickness, despite her own precarious health, the most devoted and most efficient of nurses.”¹

Two years before his death Stevenson wrote, in reference to another love-match: “To be sure it is always annoying when people choose their own wives; and I know only one form of consolation—they know best what they want. As I look back, I think my marriage was the best move I ever made in my life. Not only would I do it again; I cannot conceive the idea of doing otherwise.”

Of his devotion to his wife he was even more reticent than of his affection to his parents. “I love my wife,” he once wrote, “I do not know how much, nor can, nor shall, unless I lost her.” And once or twice in letters to those who knew and loved them best, he almost unconsciously revealed his affection, which, for the rest, is embodied in the lyric written a year or two before his death, and printed at the head of this chapter. As he lived, so he died, and the last moments of his consciousness were occupied with the attempt to lift the burden of foreboding which was weighing so heavily upon his wife.

Immediately after the marriage Stevenson and his wife and stepson went to the country fifty miles north of San Francisco, there to seek health in the mountains. How they took possession of all that was left of a mining-town, and lived in isolation and independence among the ruins, is told once for all in *The Silverado*

¹ *Letters*, i. 179.

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Squatters; but it is not mentioned that Mrs. Stevenson and her son there sickened of diphtheria, and that the anxiety and danger of a serious illness were added to their lot.

By this time Stevenson knew that his father and mother were longing for nothing in the world so much as to see his face again, to make the acquaintance of his wife, and to welcome her for his sake.

It was not, however, until July was well advanced that the party could leave Calistoga, but on the 7th of August they sailed from New York, and ten days later they found Thomas Stevenson and his wife and Sidney Colvin waiting for them at Liverpool.

In California the year before, Louis had written of his father: "Since I have gone away, I have found out for the first time how I love that man; he is dearer to me than all, except Fanny." And now his joy at seeing his parents was heightened, if possible, by the share which his wife had in their reception. Any doubts that had existed as to the wisdom of his choice were soon driven from their minds, and the new-comer was received into their affection with as much readiness and cordiality as if it were they and not Louis who had made the match. Old Mr. Stevenson in particular discovered in his daughter-in-law so many points which she possessed in common with himself, that his natural liking passed rapidly into an appreciation and affection such as are usually the result only of years of intimacy. In his own wife's notes I find that before his death he made his son promise that he would "never publish anything without Fanny's approval."

In consequence of the new order of things, Swanston

Cottage had finally been given up early in the summer, and the family party, passing hastily through Edinburgh, went on first to Blair Athol and then to Strathpeffer, returning to Heriot Row in the middle of September. Never before, Stevenson declared, had he appreciated the beauty of the Highlands, but now he was all enthusiasm. Except an article at Calistoga, he had done no work for months, but these new influences suffered him to rest no longer: he wrote "The Scotsman's Return from Abroad,"¹ and was planning for himself no less a book on Scotland than a *History of the Union*. At Strathpeffer he met Principal Tulloch, already a friend of his parents and the editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, with whom he had much talk, and by whom he was confirmed in the purpose of his book. Moreover, "The Scotsman's Return" and the paper on Monterey were accepted for *Fraser*.

On the other hand, both Stevenson and his father now considered it undesirable to publish the account of his recent experiences as an emigrant in its existing form. It was necessarily somewhat personal, and the circumstances under which it was written had told against its success. It had been sold, but it was the work which his friends had criticised most severely, and there no longer existed the dire need for making money by any possible means. The sum paid by the publishers was refunded by Mr. Stevenson, and for the time being the book was withdrawn.

The exile's return to his native country was of short duration, for the hardships he had endured and his consequent illness had rendered him quite unable to face a

¹ *Underwoods*, xii.: In Scots.

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Scottish winter. On consulting his uncle, Dr. George Balfour, the well-known Edinburgh doctor, he was informed of his condition, and advised to try the climate of the High Alps, which had lately come into favour as a resort for patients suffering from phthisis.

Accordingly, on October 7th Stevenson left Edinburgh with his wife and stepson and a new member of the family, who held a high place in their affections, and was an important element in all their arrangements for the next half-dozen years. This was a black Skye terrier, a present from Sir Walter Simpson, after whom he was called, until "Wattie" had passed into "Woggs," and finally became unrecognisable as "Bogue." In Heriot Row every dog worshipped Thomas Stevenson (with the sole exception of "Jura," who was alienated by jealousy), and so Louis never had a dog until now who really regarded him as owner. But Woggs was a person of great character, with views and a temper of his own, entirely devoted to his master and mistress, and at odds with the world at large.

In London, Dr. Andrew Clark confirmed both the opinion and the advice which had been given, and a few days only were spent in seeing Stevenson's friends, who now found their first opportunity to welcome him back and to make the acquaintance of his wife.