

X.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

SOME men of letters, not necessarily the greatest, have an indescribable charm to which we give our hearts. Thackeray is the young man's first love. Of living authors, none perhaps bewitches the reader more than Mr. Stevenson, who plays upon words as if they were a musical instrument. To follow the music is less difficult than to place the musician. A friend of mine, who, like Mr. Grant Allen, reviews 365 books a year, and 366 in leap years, recently arranged the novelists of to-day in order of merit. Meredith, of course, he wrote first, and then there was a fall to Hardy. "Haggard," he explained, "I dropped from the Eiffel Tower; but what can I do with Stevenson? I can't put him before 'Lorna Doone.'" So Mr. Stevenson puzzles the critics, fascinating them until they are willing to judge him by the great

work he is to write by and by when the little books are finished. Over "Treasure Island" I let my fire die in winter without knowing that I was freezing. But the creator of Alan Breck has now published nearly twenty volumes. It is so much easier to finish the little works than to begin the great one, for which we are all taking notes.

Mr. Stevenson is not to be labelled novelist. He wanders the byways of literature without any fixed address. Too much of a truant to be classified with the other boys, he is only a writer of fiction in the sense that he was once an Edinburgh University student because now and again he looked in at his classes when he happened to be that way. A literary man without a fixed occupation amazes Mr. Henry James, a master in the school of fiction which tells, in three volumes, how Hiram K. Wilding trod on the skirt of Alice M. Sparkins without anything's coming of it. Mr. James analyzes Mr. Stevenson with immense cleverness, but without summing up. That "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" should be by the author of "Treasure

Island," "Virginibus Puerisque" by the author of "The New Arabian Nights," "A Child's Garden of Verses" by the author of "Prince Otto," are to him the three degrees of comparison of wonder, though for my own part I marvel more that the author of "Daisy Miller" should be Mr. Stevenson's eulogist. One conceives Mr. James a boy in velveteens looking fearfully at Stevenson playing at pirates.

There is nothing in Mr. Stevenson's sometimes writing essays, sometimes romances, and anon poems to mark him versatile beyond other authors. One dreads his continuing to do so, with so many books at his back, lest it means weakness rather than strength. He experiments too long; he is still a boy wondering what he is going to be. With Cowley's candor he tells us that he wants to write something by which he may be forever known. His attempts in this direction have been in the nature of trying different ways, and he always starts off whistling. Having gone so far without losing himself, he turns back to try another road. Does his heart fail him, despite his jaunty bear-

ing, or is it because there is no hurry? Though all his books are obviously by the same hand, no living writer has come so near fame from so many different sides. Where is the man among us who could write another "Virginibus Puerisque," the most delightful volume for the hammock ever sung in prose? The poems are as exquisite as they are artificial. "Jekyll and Hyde" is the greatest triumph extant in Christmas literature of the morbid kind. The donkey on the Cevennes (how Mr. Stevenson belabored him!) only stands second to the "Inland Voyage." "Kidnapped" is the outstanding boy's book of its generation. "The Black Arrow" alone, to my thinking, is second class. We shall all be doleful if a marksman who can pepper his target with inners does not reach the bull's-eye. But it is quite time the great work was begun. The sun sinks while the climber walks round his mountain, looking for the best way up.

Hard necessity has kept some great writers from doing their best work, but Mr. Stevenson is at last so firmly established that if he con-

tinues to be versatile it will only be from choice. He has attained a popularity such as is, as a rule, only accorded to classic authors or to charlatans. For this he has America to thank rather than Britain, for the Americans buy his books, the only honor a writer's admirers are slow to pay him. Mr. Stevenson's reputation in the United States is creditable to that country, which has given him a position here in which only a few saw him when he left. Unfortunately, with popularity has come publicity. All day the reporters sit on his garden wall.

No man has written in a finer spirit of the profession of letters than Mr. Stevenson, but this gossip vulgarizes it. The adulation of the American public and of a little band of clever literary dandies in London, great in criticism, of whom he has become the darling, has made Mr. Stevenson complacent, and he always tended perhaps to be a thought too fond of his velvet coat. There is danger in the delight with which his every scrap is now received. A few years ago, when he was his own severest and

sanest critic, he stopped the publication of a book after it was in proof—a brave act. He has lost this courage, or he would have rewritten “The Black Arrow.” There is deterioration in the essays he has been contributing to an American magazine, graceful and suggestive though they are. The most charming of living stylists, Mr. Stevenson is self-conscious in all his books now and again, but hitherto it has been the self-consciousness of an artist with severe critics at his shoulder. It has become self-satisfaction. The critics have put a giant’s robe on him, and he has not flung it off. He dismisses “Tom Jones” with a simper. Personally Thackeray “scarce appeals to us as the ideal gentleman; if there were nothing else [what else is there?], perpetual nosing after snobbery at least suggests the snob.” From Mr. Stevenson one would not have expected the revival of this silly charge, which makes a cabbage of every man who writes about cabbages. I shall say no more of these ill-considered papers, though the sneers at Fielding call for indignant remonstrance, beyond expressing a

hope that they lie buried between magazine covers. Mr. Stevenson has reached the critical point in his career, and one would like to see him back at Bournemouth, writing within high walls. We want that big book; we think he is capable of it, and so we cannot afford to let him drift into the seaweed. About the writer with whom his name is so often absurdly linked we feel differently. It is as foolish to rail at Mr. Rider Haggard's complacency as it would be to blame Christopher Sly for so quickly believing that he was born a lord.

The key-note of all Mr. Stevenson's writings is his indifference, so far as his books are concerned, to the affairs of life and death on which their minds are chiefly set. Whether man has an immortal soul interests him as an artist not a whit: what is to come of man troubles him as little as where man came from. He is a warm, genial writer, yet this is so strange as to seem inhuman. His philosophy is that we are but as the light-hearted birds. This is our moment of being; let us play the intoxicating game of life beautifully, artistically, before we fall dead

from the tree. We all know it is only in his books that Mr. Stevenson can live this life. The cry is to arms; spears glisten in the sun; see the brave bark riding joyously on the waves, the black flag, the dash of red color twisting round a mountain-side. Alas! the drummer lies on a couch beating his drum. It is a pathetic picture, less true to fact now, one rejoices to know, than it was recently. A common theory is that Mr. Stevenson dreams an ideal life to escape from his own sufferings. This sentimental plea suits very well. The noticeable thing, however, is that the grotesque, the uncanny, holds his soul; his brain will only follow a colored clew. The result is that he is chiefly picturesque, and, to those who want more than art for art's sake, never satisfying. Fascinating as his verses are, artless in the perfection of art, they take no reader a step forward. The children of whom he sings so sweetly are cherubs without souls. It is not in poetry that Mr. Stevenson will give the great book to the world, nor will it, I think, be in the form of essays. Of late he has done nothing quite so

fine as "*Virginibus Puerisque*," though most of his essays are gardens in which grow few weeds. Quaint in matter as in treatment, they are the best strictly literary essays of the day, and their mixture of tenderness with humor suggests Charles Lamb. Some think Mr. Stevenson's essays equal to Lamb's, or greater. To that I say, no. The name of Lamb will for many a year bring proud tears to English eyes. Here was a man, weak like the rest of us, who kept his sorrows to himself. Life to him was not among the trees. He had loved and lost. Grief laid a heavy hand on his brave brow. Dark were his nights; horrid shadows in the house; sudden terrors; the heart stops beating waiting for a footstep. At that door comes Tragedy, knocking at all hours. Was Lamb dismayed? The tragedy of his life was not drear to him. It was wound round those who were dearest to him; it let him know that life has a glory even at its saddest, that humor and pathos clasp hands, that loved ones are drawn nearer, and the soul strengthened in the presence of anguish, pain, and death. When Lamb

sat down to write, he did not pull down his blind on all that is greatest, if most awful, in human life. He was gentle, kindly; but he did not play at pretending that there is no cemetery round the corner. In Mr. Stevenson's exquisite essays one looks in vain for the great heart that palpitates through the pages of Charles Lamb.

The great work, if we are not to be disappointed, will be fiction. Mr. Stevenson is said to feel this himself, and, as I understand, "Harry Shovel" will be his biggest bid for fame. It is to be, broadly speaking, a nineteenth-century "Peregrine Pickle," dashed with Meredith, and this in the teeth of many admirers who maintain that the best of the author is Scottish. Mr. Stevenson, however, knows what he is about. Critics have said enthusiastically—for it is difficult to write of Mr. Stevenson without enthusiasm—that Alan Breck is as good as anything in Scott. Alan Breck is certainly a masterpiece, quite worthy of the greatest of all story-tellers, who, nevertheless, it should be remembered, created these rich side

characters by the score, another before dinner-time. English critics have taken Alan to their hearts, and appreciate him thoroughly; the reason, no doubt, being that he is the character whom England acknowledges as the Scottish type. The Highlands, which are Scotland to the same extent as Northumberland is England, present such a character to this day, but no deep knowledge of Mr. Stevenson's native country was required to reproduce him. An artistic Englishman or American could have done it. Scottish religion, I think, Mr. Stevenson has never understood, except as the outsider misunderstands it. He thinks it hard because there are no colored windows. "The color of Scotland has entered into him altogether," says Mr. James, who, we gather, conceives in Edinburgh Castle a place where tartans glisten in the sun, while rocks re-echo bagpipes. Mr. James is right in a way. It is the tartan, the claymore, the cry that the heather is on fire, that are Scotland to Mr. Stevenson. But the Scotland of our day is not a country rich in color; a sombre gray prevails. Thus, though

Mr. Stevenson's best romance is Scottish, that is only, I think, because of his extraordinary aptitude for the picturesque. Give him any period in any country that is romantic, and he will soon steep himself in the kind of knowledge he can best turn to account. Adventures suit him best, the ladies being left behind; and so long as he is in fettle it matters little whether the scene be Scotland or Spain. The great thing is that he should now give to one ambitious book the time in which he has hitherto written half a dozen small ones. He will have to take existence a little more seriously—to weave broad-cloth instead of lace.