Solitude's Charms

Noted Authors Who Dislike the Crowded Cities. Prominent Among Them Is Robert Louie Stevenson, Who Has Made His Home Among the Semisavages of Samoa.

The Missoulian

August 31, 1892

Late in 1881 or early in 1882 a little book appeared on the newsstands in it few cities of the United States with the very unpromising title of "New Arabian Nights." If it had been "New Uncle Tom's Cabin" or "New Robinson Crusoe" it would have attracted quite as much attention—possibly more. Here and there an idler who could not get the book he wanted glanced at it, read a little, wondered, read on and then devoured the volume at a sitting, and in a few weeks the work had completely triumphed over its title. Everybody liked it—that is, everybody who likes that sort of thing, as Abraham Lincoln used to say.

It was Robert Louis Stevenson's first capture of the American fancy, though he had a local or merely British reputation. He came to the United States, wrote about Boston and California, went on to the south seas and has stuck fast in Samoa. He has illustrated anew the fact that, whether the author be reared in city or country, when he has achieved success anil acquired the means, he nearly always goes to the most retired place he can find that is at all habitable or in touch with civilization.

Whittier sticks to his secluded home. Donald G. Mitchell, though in sight of New Haven, is almost as much retired as if in Samoa. Joaquin Miller is practically a hermit in California. It was Hawthorne's habit literally to hide himself in a sort of tower and garret in one. Thoreau took to the woods in terrible earnest. And so of nearly all the rest. They are shy birds, these poets and semipoetical prose writers, and no wonder. The noisy city is awfully destructive of sentiment. In a whole day on Broadway one will scarcely hear a rhythmical sound. From the steam whistle to the rattling cart, every noise is a discord.

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in the vicinity of Edinburgh, and for fourteen years or so of boyhood and youth roamed over the Pentlands at his own sweet will. He was of delicate frame; for some years his health was bad and he was in consequence thoroughly "spoiled"—in the popular sense. In the true sense he was thoroughly restored and well made. His health and temper improved under indulgence, and though in the university he was very irregular in attendance on the classes, yet he learned enough. Of his favorite view from the high hill near his home he wrote thus from the Isle of Apemama:

> The tropics vanish, and meseems that I, From Halkerside, from topmost Allermuir Or steep Caerketton, dreaming, gaze again. Far set in fields and woods the town I see Spring gallant from the shadow of her smoke, dragged, spired and turreted, her virgin fort be flagged.

Writing from California in 1883 Mr. Stevenson said: "I task myself in vain to think what it is that makes up Scotland. Insurmountable differences of race divide us. Two languages, many dialects, many religions, many local patriotisms and prejudices split us among ourselves more widely than the extreme east and west of that great continent of America. When I am at home I feel a man from Glasgow to be a rival, a man from Barra to be more than half a foreigner. Yet let us meet in some far country, and some ready made affection joins us on the instant. It is not race. One is Norse, one is Celtic



Robert L. Stevenson.

and another Saxon. It is not community of tongue. We have it not among ourselves, and we have it with English or Irish or American. It is no tie of faith, for we hate each other's errors. Yet deep in the heart of each of us something yearns for the old land and the old, kindly people."

Despite the poetic vein and the rambling instinct the rugged Scotch nature shows plainly in Mr. Stevenson's writing, but with it there is a sort of delicate trifling that seems more French than Scotch. From Boston to Samoa his experiences were all transformed into prose poems. He went to the south seas, as he humorously says, in search of pirates and cannibals, but found a race of peaceable pleasure seekers. The Polynesians, he says, "spend their time in cricket matches, fishing, the daily bath, flirtation, courtship and public oratory." As this is what civilized man generally does when he can afford it, there seems no great call for missionaries.

In his school days Mr. Stevenson was called "a pattern of an idler," but insists that he was busily learning to write; so in Samoa he is not really an idler. In California he married Mrs. Osbourne, a widow with a grown son and daughter, and these with his own mother constitute the Stevenson family at Vailima, in Upolu, Samoa. His mother was a daughter of Dr. Balfour, a noted man in his time, and a hard hitter among Scotch controversialists. His grandson says that both he and Dr. Balfour were fond of making sermons, but quite averse to hearing them. It was taken for granted that little Robert Louis would become a minister, for he preached to his toys when a child, but he turned to literature instead, and right glad is the world that he did.

The Ted K Archive

The Missoulian
Solitude's Charms
Noted Authors Who Dislike the Crowded Cities.
Prominent Among Them Is Robert Louie Stevenson, Who Has Made His Home
Among the Semisavages of Samoa.
August 31, 1892

The Missoulian (Montana). <mthspublic.newspapers.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com