

STEVENSON EMERGES

By George S. Hellman

THE Stevenson myth is one of the most astounding episodes in the history of modern literature. It began toward the end of Stevenson's life when, in far away Samoa, he developed into, so to speak, an island chieftain, with various native retainers, and with Samoan children reciting the prayers that he himself had written. Mr. Balfour's biography, the *Life* authorized and supervised by Mrs. Stevenson, did much to confirm this myth of Stevenson as the type of man who should be held up for the emulation of youth. Of course the close students of Stevenson's letters, as well as many silent, very silent, friends and acquaintances in Edinburgh and London, have known better — have known that Stevenson was a sensuous, often weak, often wonderfully brave, generous fellow. Somewhat of a poseur, yes; reckless in youth, but honorable and hardworking in meeting the obligations of manhood; full of foibles, yet much of the hero. In a word, a very human being who, however he may have stumbled, rose to his feet again and, often with gayness that was a philosophical even more than a temperamental attribute, pressed forward on the ways of life.

It is this picture that Mr. Steuart presents with a candor that does him credit. Instead of dismissing Stevenson's early years of profligacy, of bitter rebellion against dogmatic religion, of almost an actor's posing in contravention to the customs of society,

with that brevity of comment which makes preceding biographies so partial and misleading, he goes with the scholar's courage into the youthful period of fermentation and revolt. He considers the mass of those poems belonging to the early Seventies which Mrs. Stevenson suppressed, and which but for what has been called a happy accident might have been lost forever to the world of letters. He is eminently interested in showing that Henley, whose lone voice was raised in protest — and who was so attacked for this protest — when the first Stevenson biography appeared, was essentially right. The "seraph in chocolate" figure has been definitely broken up and the man himself is, I shall not say wholly revealed, but clearer than ever before. Stevenson remains, for all of his faults, a fine man, an inspiring combatant in life's struggle. That he is no longer the kind of human being most logically the subject for Sunday morning sermons, or for boys' schools to be named after, is of little consequence. Far more important is it that Robert Louis Stevenson who hated hypocrisy, who wished to be depicted as he was, is now having real justice done to him, and that the curtain woven of suppressions, discolorations, unwarranted adulation, false lessons, is now more and more drawn aside.

In taking up the subject of the remarkable woman with whom Stevenson, eleven years her junior, became enamored at Grez, and whom he later

married, Mr. Steuart mingles frankness with discretion. How the latter quality comes to the fore is indicated by the omission of all reference, in the body of Mr. Steuart's work, to Clayton Hamilton's interesting and significant volume on Stevenson, although on the first page of the circular issued by Mr. Steuart's American publishers the deleted passages of Mr. Hamilton's book come in for the mention they well merit. On the other hand, Mr. Steuart is engagingly courageous in giving a fresh outline of the character of Stevenson's life, in many ways so different from that shown in the *Life of Mrs. Stevenson* written by her sister. The strength of her character remains apparent; her value to Stevenson as wife, companion, nurse, literary adviser, are excellently illustrated; but the biographer does not hesitate to touch upon some of her less attractive qualities that were a source of harassment to Stevenson, that alienated various of his friends, and that, particularly in the case of Henley, wrought such unhappiness in Stevenson's life. For almost half a century mystery, as far as the public is concerned, has surrounded the break in the friendship between Henley and Stevenson, and only now has the adequate story been told of the cause of this rift and of what may be regarded as its spiritual consequence to Stevenson. Henley had expressed to Stevenson, in a letter which was meant only for the eyes of its recipient, his decided amazement at what seemed to him an act of plagiarism on Mrs. Stevenson's part in using a story written by Stevenson's cousin and Henley's friend, Katherine de Mattos, and at having Mrs. Stevenson's story appear without any acknowledgment to Mrs. de Mattos. Stevenson was caught on the horns of a difficult dilemma. His

first violent reaction was in the direction of loyalty to his wife, but later he was in black despair at having lost his friend. Extenuating circumstances brought forward by Miss Masson in her volume on Stevenson, as well as by Mr. Steuart, lessen the gravity of the act that so disturbed Henley. Yet if it was warranted, why these many decades of silence concerning the circumstances? Stevenson, involved in this lamentable rupture of friendship, maintained the chivalrous attitude toward his wife which had led him to break with his parents and, bankrupt in money, almost bankrupt in health, to follow Mrs. Osbourne to California. His was the point of view of noblesse oblige, although such lifetime attitude of a man toward his wife does not imply the desire of centuries silence on the part of others if such a silence involves injustice to friends and kinsmen, and leads to a misunderstanding of a man's own character and philosophy. We may here dismiss the subject with the expression of the opinion that it was in some ways unfortunate, in other ways very fortunate indeed, that Robert Louis Stevenson met and wedded Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne.

Stevenson was first of all a man of courage. He considered courage the chief virtue; with a conscious cheerfulness as perhaps the second of the virtues. Although by reason of inherited traits he liked, at times, to play the preacher, the Ten Commandments really didn't much interest him. Courage and kindness, cheerfulness—in a dark and difficult world where the best man is still a sinner and where an ineluctable fate awaits even the strongest will—these were, thought Stevenson, the qualities that a man must fight for and fight with. It is his philosophy in a nutshell. Add to

this philosophy the charm of a delightful personality, the facility of a stylist to express the intimate and the general human message in winning phrases; add also the pleasure-giving quality of Stevenson's imaginative writings, and we arrive at the explanation of his large appeal to youth and to age, the world over.

All this Mr. Steuart's biography well brings out. His criticism of Stevenson as a man of letters does not, like Mr. Swinnerton's more serious study, relegate the popular author to a very secondary position in Victorian literature, nor does it echo the over-adulation of so many preceding writers. Of course Stevenson did not have the great creative imagination, and even his style must be looked upon as in part imitative. He remains, however, by virtue of magic of the personal

touch, and the injection of himself into his writings, an often delightful writer; and with the influx of new light that in the last few years — with Lady Colvin's letters, with Mr. Osbourne's belated but charming little book, with Miss Masson's and Mr. Steuart's biographies — is more truly showing the man himself, we may feel assured that ultimately the real Stevenson, with all his weaknesses and all his virtues, will, an unnecessary myth dispelled, permanently hold a place in the affection of mankind. And Mr. Steuart's volume, despite some lacunæ which must yet be supplied, is unquestionably the most significant piece of biography that has appeared in the Stevenson field.

Robert Louis Stevenson. By John A. Steuart. Two volumes. Little, Brown and Co.

EGO

By Charles Norman

IT is not good to die
While the earth is glowing,
And the tree-girt hills and the sky
Laugh at your going.

Lord, when my time has come
To cease all grieving,
Grant that the earth be dumb
Upon my leaving.

Let all the earth be dull,
And a lone gull crying:
Death should loom beautiful
To one who's dying.