

"CONJECTURAL, ON SORRY MATTERS BEST UNSOLVED"

By Will H. Low

"OF making many books" — concerning Robert Louis Stevenson — "there is no end!" Only a few months have passed since the two large volumes of Steuart's "critical" biography were printed, and now George S. Hellman appears with a self styled True Stevenson.

A generation, thirty one years, have passed since this simple unassuming artist died; endowed in life, as perhaps no other since Montaigne lived, with an insatiable curiosity concerning the why and the wherefore, the whence and the whither of humanity; beginning with himself as the model most nearly at hand, eagerly questioning and as eagerly suggesting an answer to the human riddle. As a result we have a quantity of self revelatory prose and verse which gives us, almost more clearly than a definite autobiography could have done, a true portrait of the man and artist that was Robert Louis Stevenson.

Hence it seems a strange undertaking for these gentlemen, for their name is legion, who at this late date presume to paint for us a truthful portrait of Stevenson.

The present writer who, as is well known, enjoyed a long intimacy with him, had no such pretension in the modest pages of "A Chronicle of Friendships", where however he could truly state that his "recital is one where events, if not more prominent than opinions and beliefs, have nevertheless the weight of actualities as ballast". "Few men have left more of themselves to the world than R. L. S. has written into his works", was the conclusion, still unchanged, of the writer then; though the partial portrait which resulted has received the tribute of Lloyd Osbourne who, as his stepson from 1879 to the day of Stevenson's death in 1894, enjoyed the opportunities that daily intimacy and sympathetic association afforded him as no one else. "It is a pleasure", Mr. Osbourne has written, "to praise Will Low's 'Chronicle of Friendships', in which, in my opinion, Stevenson is more illuminatingly revealed than in anything ever written of him."

This laudatory paragraph finds its excuse here, for on his first page, in acknowledgment of those who have helped him in his task, Mr. Hellman mentions the writer as having given him "valuable" information, "largely unused because the information was for the most part given confidentially by Mr. Low, who I fear will not quite approve of this study".

Mr. Hellman's fear is quite justified, but it is the purpose rather than the manner of his well written pages which meets the writer's disapproval. As to the "confidential" character of any disclosures to Mr. Hellman, he desires to say he would greatly regret if any-

thing was told that would serve to confirm the assumptions and the suppositions on which this book is based.

In fact, as recollected by the writer, the only positive statement which might be considered confidential, and which in effect was accompanied by a request that it be not used, was that Stevenson in an intimate conversation had volunteered the statement that his relations with his future wife had been purely conventional until the marriage.

Now it must be remembered that Stevenson was of the prewar epoch, which the younger generation loves to describe as Victorian, and that certain unwritten laws prevailed in that day by which every honest man was governed. The hazard of survival makes the writer one who still subscribes to what he may suppose the enlightened, at least unburdened, generation of today considers as hypocritical evasions. But, harking back to those days long gone, he recalls that it was considered a virtue to assume as truth something that, by circumstantial evidence, seemed palpably false; and that on a notable occasion a very great gentleman in the witness box, under oath, "perjured himself like — a gentleman"!

Upon a theme which is really nobody's business, except to two interested persons, Mr. Hellman permits himself, for many pages, to make an unavailing effort to prove that the prenuptial relations of this great writer and the woman for whom he dared so much were not quite correct. The pity of it! Supposing even that the suppositions advanced by Mr. Hellman are true, they relate to a woman thirty six years old, married but separated from a husband notoriously unfaithful — from whom her withdrawal was as complete as when the divorce some

years later was decreed — and a man much older in every human experience than his years denoted. We at this late day, if indeed it at all regards us, can conclude that, whatever happened, the sanctification of the church or the legalizations of the law which ensued added nothing to a relation between two beings so eminently fitted to decide this question for themselves and themselves alone. The pity of it, the uselessness of splitting hairs, of sedulously seeking evidence pro and con, when the part of Stevenson's work and life which he chose to give to the world is so full and so complete; his "warts" clearly painted but not insisted upon to the detriment of his more comely features, the whole constituting a complete and definite picture. In like manner we are permitted to peruse a bundle of letters of one who has her private griefs, caused by a son whose mother may weakly, though somewhat naturally, have defended; letters which those possibly more authorized in all that pertains to the affairs of Stevenson have long had at their disposal but have not thought well to publish.

They prove little save to expose a family dissension, except to suggest that Mrs. R. L. S. had a temper and that, although she could love loyally, nurse tenderly, and defend with vigor those upon whom her affections centred, she could also dislike cordially, could perhaps hate and be unjust to others for whom she cared less. But we have the elder Stevenson, Louis's father, who judged his daughter-in-law indulgently, "I doot ye are a besom", and we have also read Louis's letter to Barrie warning him of the dire results should the lady of the family not care for him in the case of a proposed visit to Vailima.

A further gratuitous suggestion of Mr. Hellman is that Thomas Steven-

son was moved by a guilty conscience to bequeath five hundred pounds to a Magdalene asylum in Edinburgh. Possible, in our weak humanity, but quite gratuitous; and appealing to a sense of humor, if one thinks how Louis would have taken such a suggestion, or how Edinburgh is likely to take it.

It is with matter like this that Mr. Hellman has encumbered his pages, through which shine a just appreciation of the importance of Stevenson's work, and considerable evidence of research in the restoration of neglected, if not discarded, early poems and the like. In appreciation of course he is not alone, for few writers have such a mass of loyalties to their credit as the much loved R. L. S.

To the few who, in his much cloistered life, were admitted to his intimacy he remains, with all the mutability of his many moods, the most simple of mortals. A good son, faithful husband, and loyal citizen, he was all of these, with only such lapses as may come to any of us, lapses which his puritan inheritance made him apt to overemphasize. As an artist astonishingly versatile, no phase of his craft existed that did not tempt him to an effort; and in the exercise of his gift, and its systematic and thorough training, he showed the many facets of his nature. Legitimate interest and curiosity may delight in all of these and find, in measured prose and verse that sings, the charm that has so long moved us and that seems destined to live. To the constantly diminishing number of those who knew him casually, this very mutability, this complete possession of the man for the time being by the phase uppermost in his mind of the many-sidedness of his nature, constituted a danger, lest that temporary phase remain the sole impression retained. Even here it may be said that, fortu-

nately, few who met him thus were disagreeably impressed.

It has remained for a later date and for those who never knew him personally to erect a man of straw, the Stevenson myth, for the pleasure of its destruction. It seems at best a sorry game. If in his letters, if in the pages which his intimates have consecrated to him — and one and all they have found a pleasure and a duty to write of him — if in the many self revelatory passages of his essays, if even in the documented and amiable biographies of Graham Balfour and Miss Masson Stevenson does not live, mere suppositions, more indiscreet than charitable, are not likely to bring him back to us, to create a "true" Stevenson — which one lonely surviving friend refuses to recognize.

The True Stevenson. By George S. Hellman. Little, Brown and Company.