

R.L. Stevenson's 'An Old Song.'



R.L. Stevenson

An Essay by Garry Victor Hill

Robert Lois Stevenson's 'An Old Song' (1877) was his first published story and the last to go into widespread publication. It first appeared in the magazine *London*, being serialized between February and March 1877 when Stevenson was twenty-six. It was finally published in book form in 1981 and then again in 1982, with later editions following, notably in a 2002 edition of *The Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* and in a 2007 Folio collection of Stevenson's short stories and novellas, *The Isle of Voices and Other Stories*.

Why would anything written by one of the world's most popular writers remain unpublished for over one hundred years? As the story is complete, of literary merit and is not a rehash or a juvenile prototype of a later, better work, this does become puzzling. Any explanation involves the way Stevenson was a beginning, little known writer in the later 1870s. *Treasure Island*, which would make him globally famous, only began to be serialized in 1881. The second reason is that the little known magazine *London* folded after only a few editions and this happened soon after Stevenson was published in it. Its editor William Ernest Henley (1849-1903) encouraged Stevenson to keep writing and would publish several of Stevenson's other works elsewhere. Unlike 'An Old Song' these were not lost in the transition. In the late 1970s a researcher, went through old and rare files of *London*, found the story, which was authenticated and soon published.

Studying Stevenson's first published story reveals a style, themes and ideas which would emerge in Stevenson's subsequent works. The idea that supposed goodness in character conceals the opposite and that well intentioned people cause havoc and sadness rapidly and obviously emerges. Rather than giving more portraits of Victorian villainy, where such characters are virtually cardboard cutouts embodying an evil to be vanquished, Stevenson provides them with cause, effect, motivations and complexity. Long before his *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1888) this novella shows that he could create characters torn between good and evil – and he does this while he puts both categories under question. Exposing dubious and flawed concepts of goodness had been done many times before 1877, but Stevenson also exposed the cynical attitudes towards goodness expressed by John, (one of his major

characters) who becomes a Bohemian. He shows his snide, loud and cynical questionings about duty, morality and also attacks on his duty-bound family to be a cover for both his failures and his vanity. Stevenson himself lived a life sometimes revealing aspects of Bohemianism combined with cynicism about concepts of duty and puritanism, yet even at twenty-six he was perceptive about where such a lifestyle could lead.

This story begins with a Lieutenant-Colonel John Falconer, who while not quite a bohemian, is a dissolute character, serving, or more apparently seeming to his regiment in India, while being on the verge of being asked to leave that force. His latest contained questionable behavior concerns his questionable uses of mess funds. When his evangelical Aunt sends him a tract from England he sends her contempt. Then aged thirty he attends a religious revival and becomes converted. He does not go halfway, becoming totally committed to Christian concepts of duty, which makes him a model officer, but when a family death means the family estates and orphans must be cared for "duty calls him home." That Victorian cliché (not used here by Stevenson) sums up his attitude and "he assumes command." This second cliché applies to his relationship with the estate, everyone else and religious belief, God alone gets an exemption. While not ordered about, God has his word interpreted for the others by the former colonel. Stevenson creates a portrait of a familiar type, the former officer who in civilian life "assumes command" indeed, not realizing that civilians are not instantaneously obedient soldiers and life is not war. As is usual with this type and the situations they shape his methods gain him initial success and eventual disaster. He assumes and gets instant obedience and thinks himself successful, as his muscular Christianity proves popular with his community. Ironically it proves less popular with his aunt, who dies of irrelevance as he gives her orders, takes over all her tasks and so diminishes her importance and status. Given the censorship codes of the time and the sacrosanct ways of belief, Stevenson does not develop this irony beyond mentioning the facts: the reader must get the message. The colonel's Christianity brings to mind the passage from Paul of Tarsus who lists all the possible successes and abilities a Christian can have, but if they do not have love they have nothing.

Colonel Falconer's love mixes too many self-delusions into his ubiquitous, loud Christianity to be true.

With the aunt dead the Colonel manages the family estate, finances and his nephews. John and Malcom are brought up by him in his pervasive, unquestioned and logical brand of muscular Christianity. John, by being three weeks older than Malcom, has appointed primogeniture and becomes the favourite, but does he want these appointed roles?

Here is their dilemma: both the colonel and John are loudly intense and intent on getting what they want, but they want very different things and want them in oppositional ways. Both expect the other to comply with their wishes. The colonel is totally logical, clear in his intentions and much concerned with practicalities. Despite his blindness about people being individuals, not obedient troops, he can be astute in his character assessments. Colonel Falconer correctly perceives that John has become muddled and unrealistic in his desires: he cannot act decisively in any way that gives him benefits. Both men misunderstand people and themselves.

Both the colonel and John suffer for their intransigent belief that they are right. Malcom, comparatively quiet and calm and diligent, expects less from life and gains more.

Stevenson tells his story without cluttering it with detail or one more character, observation or scene than he needs and he starts his literary career with themes which would emerge throughout it. These include the high cost of living by delusions and irony as a continual part of life. Frequently his plots develop the clash between repressive lifestyles based in puritanical, strict values held by the established and powerful and the unrestrained self-indulgent bohemianism of society's outcasts.

Acknowledgements

Frontspiece

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