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EDMUND GOSSE VISITS ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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WHEN ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON read his friend Edmund Gosse's *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe* (1879), he praised the book and told Gosse that "Your personal notes of those you saw struck me as perhaps most sharp and 'best held.' See as many people as you can, and make a book of them before you die. That will be a living book, upon my word. You have the touch required. I ask you to put hands to it in private already."¹ Stevenson's observation must have pleased Gosse, who had already embarked on his long odyssey among literary people, and whose list of friends included most of the literary men of his day. He entertained as many writers and artists in his own home as he could corral, and he delighted in visiting literary people in their homes, where he observed acutely and judged with an Olympian eye every idiosyncrasy, display of wit, and manifestation of temperament. No trip was too fatiguing, no weather too forbidding when he had an opportunity to visit a writer in his own lair. The impressions and attitudes he gathered in such visits usually appeared in his critical studies of his contemporaries' work. And his first-hand knowledge of many literary personalities gave him added insight in

¹ *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Sidney Colvin (New York, 1911), I, 268.



SCENE: THE BOARD OF TRADE. TIME: OFFICE HOURS IN THE EARLY 'EIGHTIES.
MR. JUSTIN DOBSON AND MR. EDMUND GOSSE, COMPOSING A BALLAD, ARE TAKEN UNAWARES BY THEIR
PRESIDENT, MR. J. CHAMBERLAIN.

Cartoon by Max Beerbohm from *The Poets' Corner*

his biographical studies of earlier writers. Eventually a letter or an invitation from Gosse signified success to a new and hopeful writer. Established writers valued Gosse for his clever wit and conversation as well as the distinction of having him as a guest.

Stevenson asked Gosse to spend a few days with him in August 1881. They had been friends since Sidney Colvin had introduced them to each other at the Savile Club, which Stevenson joined in 1874.² Gosse's home was always open to Stevenson when he was in London, but Gosse had never met the Stevenson family. The invitation to stay with the Stevensons in Scotland must have been particularly exciting to him, for he had never seen Louis' American wife, Fanny. The couple had been married in May 1880, shortly after she had been divorced from her first husband, Samuel Osbourne. For some years Stevenson had tried vainly to explain his conduct to his disapproving father, but when he sailed off to California in pursuit of Fanny Osbourne, the break seemed permanent. However, the elder Stevenson relented when he learned of his son's poverty, settled a small income on him and begged him to return to Scotland with his bride. When they met, the younger Mrs. Stevenson charmed the whole family and slipped without difficulty into the household of her parents-in-law. Then Louis and his wife had been forced to spend the winter of 1880-81 in Switzerland because of his health, and on their return in the summer, they had gone on to Scotland, where the elder Stevensons had taken a house in the country. Few of Louis' friends had met his wife, but they all knew that she was a divorcée, that she was ten years older than her husband, and that Louis' parents, strict Presbyterians, had once firmly opposed the match. Gosse, who enjoyed knowing the personal details of his friends' lives, must have been deeply curious to see how the arrangement had turned out.

Gosse arrived at the Stevenson home at Castleton of Braemar on August 26, 1881, and stayed there until September 5, when he set out on an expedition to the Orkney Islands with his friend William Hamo Thornycroft, the sculptor.³ Many years later Gosse remembered clearly his eleven-day holiday with Stevenson, who had read

² Amy Cruse, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York, 1916), p. 60.

³ In 1911, Gosse mistakenly thought the visit had taken place in 1880; in 1917, he placed the holiday in 1879 (*The Life and Letters of Edmund Gosse*, ed. by Evan Charteris, London, 1931), pp. 330, 418.

the opening chapters of *Treasure Island*, as soon as they were written, to the assembled company. Thirty years later Gosse could recall what Stevenson's voice sounded like as he read aloud to his guest and family. But Gosse never published whatever impressions he had preserved of Louis and his family at home, either in a critical study or as a familiar sketch. In a letter to G. K. Chesterton, Gosse wrote: "It is, and always since his death has been, impossible for me to write anything which went below the surface of R.L.S. I loved him, and still love him, too tenderly to analyse him."⁴

There is, however, a record of that single visit with Stevenson. While in Braemar, Gosse wrote several letters to his wife Nellie, who had remained in London with their children. Eight of these letters are now in the Symington Collection of the Rutgers University Library. Except for a post card mentioned in the first letter, this group contains all the correspondence from Gosse to his wife during the visit. The letters to Nellie are brief and domestic; they are the letters of a contented husband, who mildly regrets his wife's absence but solaces himself by writing to her. The few lines of personal advice that Gosse sends to his wife are slightly condescending in tone, and though he is interested in his family's welfare, he is also enjoying his holiday and eagerly anticipating the jaunt with his friend Thornycroft. His formal closing words—Your loving Husband / Edmund W. Gosse—ended his notes soberly enough so that his wife was gently reminded of her enviable status. Missing from these letters are the charming wit and graceful style of the letters written to his literary friends, but his skill in limning a personality in a few words is apparent. From a few sentences scattered throughout the letters we catch a glimpse of the Stevenson clan living zestfully and peacefully together in spite of miserable weather, different philosophies, and myriad choice diseases.

c/o R. L. Stevenson Esq.
The Cottage
Castleton of Braemar
[August 26, 1881]

My darling Nellie

I sent you off a post-card at 6.30 this morning from Aberdeen. Our passage was a miserable one. The first day, however, was beautiful: I have never known the sea more pleasant or more handsome, & I sat on deck until the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

bright line of Yarmouth Light was in view. At dinner I had made such a pleasant acquaintance, a Miss Kate Potter⁵ who works in the East End under Miss Octavia Hill,⁶ and who is a great friend of the Huxleys and other people we know. All the afternoon & evening we flirted together, or rather had a very interesting and sensible conversation. After Wednesday evening I saw her no more, for I could not leave my berth in the morning. For 17 hours I was desperately sea-sick; the gale freshened on Wednesday night & gained force all Thursday, till it became something terrific. We got in at 1.30 this morning, and the first thing I did was to soothe my poor stomach with some of your grapes. You cannot think how delightful they seemed, and the pear as well, which latter I ate in the train this morning. I got a little sleep on board, & then walked through the gray rain-beaten streets of Aberdeen to the station, took the 7.40 train to Ballater, through scenery evidently lovely, but quite invisible for storms of rain, got outside the coach, almost the only passenger, and was taken under the special friendly protection of the coachman. At Braemar, after a coach-ride of 2½ hours, I was found by Mr. Stevenson Senior, & brought here, apparently more dead than alive, but you know how easily I come round. A glass of whiskey and water, and a hot shave, made me myself again, but my face is of a light bright violet hue.

The family here consists of Mr. Stevenson père (who is something like Father), Mrs. Stevenson mère (who is brisk and practical & evangelical), the young couple & Sam.⁷ I like both the old couple very much already. Louis I think looks better than I thought he would.

I seem to have nothing more to tell you. I still feel very queer within, from having been so extremely sick, but I am coming round. Of course, I want a night's sleep.

Your loving Husband

Edmund W. Gosse

Castleton of Braemar
27.8.81.

My darling

After scribbling a note to you yesterday, I went out for a wild walk on the brae-side with Mr. Stevenson, & when I came back there was your inexpressibly sweet and loving letter waiting for me. How much I have been thinking of you today, & how dearly I love you! It seems too bad to have left you & the offspring behind, but I have at least the pleasure of writing to you.

This is a most entertaining household. All the persons in it are full of character & force: they use fearful language towards one another quite promiscuously, & no quarrel ensues. They are all hospitality itself, & make me

⁵ Unidentified. ⁶ English reformer (1838-1912).

⁷ Samuel Lloyd Osbourne, stepson of R.L.S.

as happy as the day. Old Mrs. Stevenson (she is *old* only by comparison, she looks about 50) is an excellent house-wife and ensures all creature-comforts, which might be not exactly neglected but misapplied by the other members.

Mr. Stevenson, who is a singularly charming & strange old man ("63, Sir, this year, and, deuce take it, am I to be called 'an old gentleman' by a car-driver in the streets of Aberdeen?"), went for a long walk with me this morning. Louis, you will understand, scarcely gets outside the door in this stormy chilly weather. We went along the Queen's Drive, overlooking the valley of the Dee, a noble walk, though the mist hid the environing hills which form the main beauty of this place. Before any one was up this morning, however, I went for a walk, and saw the mountains for a few minutes in their morning-glory, deep liquid blue against the rolling billowy light white clouds. The weather really is detestable: not dull, indeed, or heavy, but so petulantly changeable that you can scarcely get on your coat before the gleam of sunlight is gone & the rain comes down in a torrent.

We all talk incessantly, with peals of laughter & much mutual criticism, in high-pitched voices. I am feeling wonderfully well: my sea sickness was a blessed thing for me, & before I have lived long in this land of cream, grouse and salmon I shall require another dose of it, I fear.

Goodbye my darling. God bless you. Kiss the sweet offspring for me, particularly Tessa.⁸

Your loving

Send me the "Athenaeum" please, &
get a Saturday Review for *last*
Saturday (the 20th.)

E.W.G.

Braemar
28.8.81.

My darling Nellie

We are in a rather lamentable way this morning. The temperature went down (as if it was not low enough already) considerably in the night, and in consequence Louis has been spitting blood, and both the ladies are confined to their beds. Mr. Stevenson senior & I are preparing to wrap ourselves up and go off to church. The weather is mid-winterly, and I am heartily glad you made me take so much warm clothing.

Last night your very interesting budget of news arrived with enclosures. You omitted, however, H.Z.'s post-card.⁹ We can think really of nothing but the weather: it is so extremely ugly. The Queen came down here yesterday, & as you say both she & I have completely lost our magic. I am however

⁸ Tessa (b. 1877); Philip (b. 1879); Sylvia (b. 1881). ⁹ Unidentified.

extremely well, & as cheerful as this stricken household & the howling storms will let me be. We sit close up round large fires, exactly as in December.

Take great care of yourself and the chicks. I congratulate Sylvia on her tooth. Did you not think Roswell Smith's letter a very nice one?¹⁰

Goodbye: my sweet darling. God bless you.

Your loving Husband

Edmund W. Gosse

Braemar

30.8.81.

My darling Nellie

I have had no letter from you for two days, but shall very likely hear this afternoon, & yesterday I received a token of your kind thoughtfulness in the shape of my compass. The weather is still cold & harsh, but yesterday we had what sailors call a "pet day," a fine day thrown in just to keep up our spirits. We drove to the Line o'Dee, a very singular passage in the rocks about 7 miles up from here, where the river Dee is contracted between a narrow split in the rock & surges through in a violent rage with strange bubblings and hissings. I wish you could see the incomparable colours of the mountains, liquid indigos and violets and regal purples, I never saw such tones. The family is much better again. Louis picks up after his relapses very nicely, but he is sadly weak, incapable of exertion, easily tired, excitable and feeble, but charming to a degree. His father is only a less delightful companion than himself—generally rather silent when Louis is present, but an almost ceaseless talker—or rather conversationalist—when one is alone with him. He & I take constant long walks. I have not had so much excellent sound talk for a long time. Mrs. Louis is very sweet and quiet: I like her very much. The arrangement is undoubtedly a success, and is accepted charmingly by the father & mother. I suppose I leave this on Monday next, and meet Hamo at Aberdeen, but he writes quite vaguely. He has been quite close to us here in Aberdeenshire, but is now gone back to Dunblane.

Goodbye, my sweet wife. I hope to have good news of you soon.

Your loving Husband

Edmund W. Gosse

¹⁰ American publisher (1829-1892). In 1881 he bought out *Scribner's Monthly*, which he continued under the name of *Century Magazine*.

Castleton of Braemar
Sept. 2. 81.

My darling Nellie

I am getting seriously alarmed at your continued silence, although I am sure it is owing to no neglect of yours. But I fear lest you have fallen into the error of going to Sandhurst a week before you were expected, and that you have found your mistake very embarrassing [sic]. I have not telegraphed to you, for I thought that would only increase your trouble, but I await a letter from you with great impatience.

The weather has improved in every respect except temperature: it is still very bitterly cold. Yesterday we were present at a very picturesque scene, the gathering of the Clans for the annual Highland Games. It took place in front of the old white castle of Mar, and the pine-covered braes around were lighted up for the occasion with one of the rare intervals of sunlight which we get up here. A sofa was arranged for the Queen, but at the last moment she did not come which we thought unkind of her, and we had to content ourselves with Herbert Spencer and the Bishop of Winchester. The clans were all in full Highland costume, and looked very spirited and highly-coloured. But it was not as animated a scene as I had expected, except as a theatrical show or tinted tableau.

I have taken one long walk since I came, at least one decent walk, up to Loch Callater a dark and solitary lake high up the valley, about 6 miles off. I walked all around it, fording the burn, and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Louis is very poorly. He just creeps out into the sun, & then creeps to bed. I go & play chess with him, for that prevents us from talking, which seems very bad for him.

I should willingly stay on here, the family are pressing me to do so, & it is just possible that I may. But in all probability I leave for Aberdeen on Monday, to meet Hamo there. But he changes his plans hideously, and the last news is that Mrs. Wallace has asked him to take the Twins up to London.¹¹ This was just more than I could bear, so I wrote a very polite letter of remonstrance to Mrs. W., which she can hardly have the decency [sic] to overrule.

So do not write till you hear again from

Your loving Husband

E.W.G.

¹¹ Unidentified.

Braemar
3. 9. 81.

Darling Nellie

It was most cheering to me to get so good an account of you yesterday. Your letter took exactly 48 hours in reaching me. The posts hither are very awkward.

Yesterday we had a drive of 15 miles each way, to the Spittal of Glen Shee, in Perthshire. As soon as we crossed the range of the Grampians it was quite curious to feel the altered and improved temperature. It seemed quite snug in Perthshire. The scenery about the Spittal is not so large as this, but its forms are more singular and sublime.

Hamo has at last communicated to me his views and we leave Aberdeen together for Orkney on Monday night. I cannot give you any indication of our route, nor do I want any letters whatever sent on. I cannot possibly attend to my American business till I get back to town.¹²

Robert Louis is so much better today as to seem quite a new creature. He has been writing—all the time I have been here—a novel of pirates and hidden treasure, of which he reads us chapter after chapter. It is all in the highest degree exciting. He is in first-rate trim intellectually.

I shall be quite sad to leave this household, in which there is not one jarring chord. I have not met with so interesting and pleasing a family for years. I shall have much to tell you. Love to all six of you, but most to yourself,

from your loving husband

E.W.G.

Braemar
4.9.81.

My darling Nellie

I hope you will not overdo it in the way of meetings. You must really be firm about declining every now and then. And if you feel your conscience oppressed and dejected, remember that the nerves are easily upset by appeals of that kind, and that the reason has nothing to do with it. Your effort should be gradually to divide your life from theirs as much as possible, for their sake no less than your own: the children give you an opportunity of achieving this.

I had a very kind letter from Father yesterday. He sent his "kind Xtian love" to the Stevensons, please tell him that they thank him and send theirs in return.

¹² Probably refers to the letter from Roswell Smith.

My visit here comes to an end today. Unhappily the weather seems to have completely broken up. It is in fact rather late to be starting north. But we must hope for the best. Hamo meets me at Aberdeen, and we start together for the Orkneys.

Your drawing of yourself and the children is delightful. I shall sadly miss not hearing from you. You might write to me at once to

Post Office
Kirkwall

but do not put in any inclosures.

Your loving Husband

Edmund W. Gosse

P.S. Mrs. Stevenson senior sends a message to you to say that you must come with me and stay at a larger house they meet [sic] to take one summer soon at the Spittal of Glen Shee, among the mountains.

Mrs. Louis sends her very kind regards to you, & she will very likely spend a day or two with us alone in the autumn, of which more later.

Braemar
5.9.81.

My darling Sposa

Just starting for Aberdeen under none the best of circumstances. The weather did something most extraordinary yesterday afternoon & upset us all. I was taken suddenly so bilious that I could eat no dinner; Louis, who was much better, has taken to dismal spittings of blood, and Mrs. Louis has taken her bed with an attack of her complaint, which I learn is acute ovarian neuralgia.

Braemar has not suited me very well: I am glad to get away, although sorry to leave this delightful and most hospitable household.

I daresay I shall be able to send you a post-card tomorrow, but you must recollect that I shall be one day further from you, and posts may be long delayed.

Your loving Husband
E.W.G.

P.S. Mr. Stevenson senior goes with me as far as Aberdeen on business of his own; Hamo is to meet me there, & we are to start at 11 p.m. for Orkney