

MEMORIES OF STEVENSON

—And Some Original Verses

(Written for "The Listener" by TOM L. MILLS)

ON a recent Sunday Station 3YA broadcast a tribute by C. R. Allen to the memory of Robert Louis Stevenson. It was, of course, the fiftieth anniversary of Stevenson's death. Here is a more personal reminder written for us by Tom L. Mills, of Feilding, who as a typesetter in a Wellington newspaper office, set "Letters from Vailima" as they appeared in the early 'nineties.

* * *

R. L.S. has just had his deathday jubilee. I have two memories associated with him. During the period half-a-century ago when I was a comp. (typesetter) on the New Zealand Times (Wellington's morning paper of those days) and its weekly edition (the New Zealand Mail), Stevenson's Letters from Vailima, written from his health-retreat in Samoa, ran serially through the two papers, and I set quite a quantity of them.

My second association was through the late Signor Nerli, an artist (member of an impoverished Italian family) who became a nomad, and set out to paint the world. He had spent much time wandering among the South Sea Islands, and eventually became the guest of Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Stevenson at their home at Vailima.

During his stay, the Italian expressed a wish to paint Stevenson's portrait. The story, as told me by the Signor, was that he had been greatly impressed by the genial personality of his host, but that the host objected to a portrait. He said he was difficult to please in portraiture: he did not think he was a good sitter or the makings of an acceptable painting. Indeed (he added) even Sargent did not please him with the portrait which the most popular and expensive of America's portrait painters of the period painted shortly before R.L.S. left Europe.

"Too Ugly a Tyke"

However, the Italian, who was a genial soul with a charm of his own, persuaded his host, who then gave him several sittings, during which he repeatedly lamented that he was "too ugly a tyke" for a painter to make presentable. But in the end, to the artist's delight, the creator of Long John Silver was pleased enough to say: "You have not painted me as ugly as a tyke nor as bonny as a girlie. It is far more faithful than that of John Sargent, of New York and Paris."

(continued from previous page)

She began to pick out the cherry stones, one by one.

"Tinker," said the new young woman with the big blue eyes.

"Tinker! Tinker! Tinker!" shouted Michael excitedly.

"Tailor . . . soldier . . . sailor," said the new young woman with the big blue eyes, "rich man . . . poor man . . . beggar man . . . thief. Tinker . . . tailor . . . soldier. There. That's the lot, Michael boy."

It was then the old man turned aside and wept.

As a further tribute of his approval, the poet presented to the artist some merry lines he had written during the spells of sittings he had just completed. A copy of the verses was given to me by Signor Nerli, who also permitted me to take a photograph of the painting, which he had offered for sale in Wellington during his stay in that city. As the verses have not gone into any collection of Stevensoniana that I know of, I reproduce them herewith from my scrapbook. (The author dated his manuscript "Vailima, Samoa, September, 1892"):

DID ever mortal man hear tell o' sae singular a ferlie
As the coming to Apla here of the painter,
Mr. Nerli?

HE came, and O, for a' human friends o' a'
he was the perlie—
The pearl o' a' the painter folk was surely
Mr. Nerli!

HE took a throw to paint mysel'; he painted
late an' early;
O woe! the many a yawn I've yawned in the
beard of Mr. Nerli!

WHILES I would sleep an' whiles would
wake an' whiles was mair than aurlly,
I wondered sair as I sat there pernent the
eyes o' Nerli:

"O will he paint me the way I want, as
bonny as a girlie?
Or will he paint me an ugly tyke?—an' be
damned to Mr. Nerli!"

BUT still an' all whichever it be, he is a
canty kerlie.
The Lord protect the back an' neck o' honest
Mr. Nerli!

When I first saw the picture and read the lines, I said to the painter: "It was that touch of red in the tie that won R.L.S.'s approval."

He agreed.

The portrait was exhibited for some time in the gallery of McGregor Wright on Lambton Quay. Ultimately, it was purchased by a Scottish tourist, who said she thought it was a good investment; as it certainly proved, for she sold it to the directors of Edinburgh National Gallery at considerable profit to herself.

I sent the photographs of the portrait and the verses, with an explanatory article, to the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, New York, which had just reduced its price to the very popular dime (10 cents—5d). The first issue of the new *Cosmopolitan* (July, 1895) carried R.L.S.'s portrait as its frontispiece, and the verses occupied the whole of the first page.

It remained for Colonel McClure, owner of the rival dime magazine, *McClure's*, to inform me of the score against him made by the *Cosmopolitan*. With his first issue of his cheaper magazine in that same July, the Colonel had made it a Robert Louis Stevenson memorial number, following on the death of the great Scot. For the issue England's foremost literary critic, Edmund Gosse, had compiled something like 50 pages. In his letter of lament to me, Colonel McClure wrote: "If only you had sent that photograph and those verses to *McClure's* instead of to the *Cosmopolitan*, I would have had a complete Stevensonian scoop—and I would have paid you your own price for the privilege."

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