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LECTURE.

PSYCHOLOGY OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

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At the commencement of a Lecture at the headquarters of the Royal British Nurses' Association, 194, Queen's Gate, S.W., the Secretary, Miss Isabel Macdonald, stated that it had originally been prepared for the Poetry Society, and for that reason the approach to its main aspect—the *Psychology* of Stevenson—was somewhat different from the point of view of nursing psychology; but a study of psychology from the Stevensonian point of view could not fail to be useful to any group of workers.

It is a subject which is studied to-day from most varied aspects, and too often such study tends to go round and round in a circle, or, indeed, in many circles, for every section of the community seems to evolve a teaching of psychology adaptable to its own particular point of view and requirements. The lecturer said that she had once attended a course of lectures given to nurses by a member of the teaching profession, but the psychology taught was far from being adaptable to the needs of the nurses. From all directions much analytical observation is brought to bear on the subject of psychology, but a great deal of it rests on very unsure observations and assumptions. An approach to the psychology of Robert Louis Stevenson could, with advantage, be made by much simpler and more old-fashioned methods than those used to-day in most cases. So old-fashioned indeed are such methods that it is necessary to go back to ancient times and find the origin of the word psychology. The word *psyche* stood in the Greek for the soul, and therefore psychology ought to mean a study of such things as the temperaments, personal characteristics and the way in which a man generally places himself towards life. But the word in olden times had a double meaning, for *psyche* in the Greek also means a butterfly, and a very interesting contact arises here between the Greeks of old and the Celts. We find that in Stevenson's native country there existed a belief that, during sleep, the soul would leave the body in the form of a butterfly and journey to "other parishes of the Infinite," as Stevenson would express it. Also there existed many legends also in Scotland that a butterfly might often be seen in a death chamber and this, by the way, was regarded as a good augury for the post-mortem existence of the dying person in the spiritual worlds. Again, there was the idea that the departing soul paid a last visit, again in the form of a butterfly, perhaps, to the haunts of its childhood, a belief illustrated in the song, "The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond," and perhaps by Stevenson in the lines where he prays that it be given to him to behold again in dying the scenes of his native land.

It was admitted that we cannot claim a high place for Stevenson among the poets, nor indeed among the greatest men of literature; but at the same time those in the audience who had read his works would probably endorse the opinion of such a high authority as the "Encyclopædia

Britannica," when it says that "He was the most attractive figure of a man of letters in his generation." Stevenson's faculties of clear perception and of intuition were referred to and it was held by the lecturer that his gifts might be said to lie rather in the realm of feeling than actually in the intellect. Balanced feeling was his, feeling allied to common sense and a most unusually rapid power of artistic analysis. Always too he kept wide open what one might describe as his psychological eyes, as distinguished from his physical sight, eyes which he himself has named desire and curiosity. His own fable of "The Touchstone" might be a picture of his mind and of how he turned it upon the large and the small things of life with a gaze which was crystal clear; he found thereby in the common-places "the great poetic truths."

In speaking of the thing which interested Stevenson most of all, the lecturer said that this was not literature, it was not writing either, this best beloved activity of his it was living. "The life I love," and phrases like it fell often from his lips and from his pen, and evidence was given of his opinion that people "do not really love life in the sense that they are greatly preoccupied with its preservation" that it is not life they love at all but "living." He admits, of course, that there are many "who swallow the universe like a pill," and travel through the world "like smiling images pushed from behind."

The curious attitude of detachment from his physical body which characterised the psychology of Robert Louis Stevenson was referred to, and his remark "we are all travellers with a donkey" was analysed in the light of other of his writings to illustrate this curious detachment. It was partly this that enabled him to follow up his theory that "Every bit of brisk living is but so much gained from that wholesale filcher, death." Without difficulty, he followed the counsel he gave to others when he bade them "tread down hypochondriasis," for to him "The medicine bottle on my mantelpiece and the blood on my handkerchief are accidents. They do not colour my view of life." His views about death are quite equally exhilarating.

Stevenson's gospel of happiness was referred to, and it was proved that this was no mere gospel, but a part of the psychological make-up of Robert Louis Stevenson that survived all the buffetings of ill-health. A short study of his poem, "The Celestial Surgeon," opened up many considerations on unhappiness as a psychological disease and one that called for the exercise of the will. Going beyond that, Stevenson refers to that "emotional shock," as it is sometimes called, and claims that it is the Celestial Surgeon and not a man's fellows, with their lack of understanding and sympathy, who is to administer the awakening "stab" to those miserable victims of—themselves.

Stevenson's masterpiece, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," was referred to, and it was stated that, suitably dramatised, this might rank with some of the best of the old mystery plays, for it demonstrates so clearly, in the mystery of man, the continual war which goes on between the higher

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