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## Stevenson's "Celestial Idiots"

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March 1888. Both these "critical papers," as Stevenson called them, were collected by James in *Partial Portraits* (1888), the charm and urbanity of which are exquisitely suggested by Stevenson's reference to seeing James "toss his lace and flash his diamonds." The Colby Library can well be proud of owning the letter which glows with this tribute.



### STEVENSON'S "CELESTIAL IDIOTS"

**F**IVE years after Stevenson's death, his friend Sidney Colvin issued two volumes of his *Letters to his Family and Friends*. In the introduction Colvin remarked:

"In choosing from among [Stevenson's letters] I have used the best discretion that I could. Stevenson's feelings and relations throughout life were in almost all directions so warm and kindly that next to nothing had to be suppressed from fear of giving pain . . . Generally speaking, I have used the editorial privilege of omission without scruple where I thought it desirable."

By a curious chain of circumstances, the Stevenson exhibition in the Colby College Library brought to light one of Sidney Colvin's omissions. No matter what justification may have existed in 1899 for the suppression of an entire paragraph of a highly important letter, there is now, fifty years after Stevenson's death, no longer any reason for the suppression. The letter was written by Stevenson to James M. Barrie on November 1, 1892. Barrie died on June 19, 1937, and when his library was sold in London, the letter from Stevenson came into the possession of William T. H. Howe, of Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr. Howe (now also deceased) supplied a typescript of the letter for the Hardy collection in the Colby library—since there were several allusions to Hardy in the letter. Eight years passed, before his typescript was set beside the printed version (*Letters*,

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New York, 1911, II:319), and then the omission of an entire paragraph came to light. Sidney Colvin had replaced 131 words with four dots . . . .

Before reading the suppressed passage, the reader will perhaps find it helpful to have a few words of explanation. Barrie had evidently written to tell Stevenson about Thomas Hardy's experience at the hands of the editor of *The Graphic*, in which Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ran from July through December in 1891. In Chapter 23 of the novel four dairymaids set out for church one Sunday morning in July, only to discover that the lane had been flooded by summer rains. Just then, along came Angel Clare, our hero. "I'll carry you through the pool — every Jill of you," he said, and then proceeded to make good his word. At least so it was in Hardy's manuscript. The editor of *The Graphic* balked at this episode, and wrote to Hardy to suggest "that it would be more decorous and suitable for the pages of a periodical intended for family reading if the damsels were wheeled across the lane in a wheel-barrow." Hardy agreed to conform to this editorial exaction, and when *The Graphic* for August 29, 1891, appeared, the flooded-lane passage read: "I'll wheel you through the pool — all of you — with pleasure, if you'll wait till I get a barrow." A gloating account of this emendation had apparently been written to Stevenson by James M. Barrie. Stevenson replied:

"Yours was an exquisite story about the barrow, but I think I can beat it. In a little tale of mine, the slashed and gaping ruins of which appeared recently in the *Illustrated London News*, a perfect synod of appalled editors and apologetic friends had sat and wrangled over the thing in private with astonishing results. The flower of their cuts was this: Two little native children were described as wriggling out of their clothes and running away mother-naked. The celestial idiots cut it out. I wish we could afford to do without serial publication altogether. It is odd that Hardy's adventure with the barrow and mine of the little

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children should happen in the same year with the publication and success of *Tess*. Surely these editor people are wrong."

Stevenson's "little tale" was called *Uma*. It appeared in the *Illustrated London News* from July 2 to August 6, 1892. A copy of the *News*, opened to Stevenson's story, was shown in the December exhibition. Strange to say, the text does not bear out Stevenson's charge that "the celestial idiots . . . , these editor people" had cut out the little native children. The passage reads:

Three little boys sat beside my path. . . . One jumped up . . . and ran. . . . The other two, trying to follow suit, got foul, came to ground together bawling, wriggled right out of their sheets, and in a moment there were all three of them scampering for their lives.—*News*, July 9, 1892; p. 41.

When the story was collected in *Island Nights Entertainments* (Vol. IV of the Thistle Edition of *The Novels and Tales of R. L. S.*, New York, Scribners, 1898), *Uma* appeared as "The Beach of Falesá," with a picture of *Uma*, drawn by J. Alden Weir, serving as frontispiece. The three little boys "came to the [*sic*] ground" and "wriggled right out of their sheets" without change.

What *is* different, however, is *Uma's* marriage-certificate. After the account of the fake marriage, the text of the certificate appears at length in the book (p. 254), but not in the *News*. Perhaps it was this omission that gave Stevenson his impression of "a perfect synod of appalled editors." What "these editor people" admitted to the *News* on July 2, 1892 (p. 11) was a mere exclamation: "What a document it was!" The book-version reads: "This is to certify that *Uma* . . . is illegally married to Mr. John Wiltshire, and Mr. John Wiltshire is at liberty to send her packing when he pleases.—John Blackamoar, Chaplain to the Hulks."

One further illustration of the inaccuracy of Stevenson's memory. He writes: "It is odd that Hardy's adventure with the barrow and mine of the little children should happen in the same year with the publication of *Tess*." The wheel-

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barrow episode was printed in 1891, and *Tess* was published in three volumes in the same year. Stevenson's *Uma*, however, appeared in 1892. Perhaps the impression of simultaneousness lodged in Stevenson's memory because Hardy's "The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved" appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1892, following Stevenson's story after a gap of only a few weeks in September.

In any case, the four-dot gap in Sidney Colvin's version of the R. L. S. letter to Barrie is now filled.



### STEVENSON'S UNDAUNTED FAITH

BY ALICE BROWN \*

WHAT did Stevenson believe? . . . To him, life was evidently the heroic blazonry of the captain who stands unblenching on the bridge, knowing the fire smoulders below, and inwardly sworn to ward off panic till the hour of help. . . . *Pulvis et Umbra*, the one dark confession of his life, girds us anew for the fray. For through its very gloom, he proves himself a man like as we are, a man who shrank and then trod firmer yet. No such picture exists of world-making and destruction, of the things that breed and die, of hand to hand conflict doomed always to end in dissolution. The strangeness of it all, and stranger still that man should strive! That he should live even spasmodically for others, should struggle to be cleanly, make laws, forego delight! Seen in despairing mood, the whole scheme becomes a hideous, swarming phantasm of life, breaking every instant into rotting death. Then having made that most tragic avowal, he can add:

"Let it be enough for faith that the whole creation

\* Quoted by special permission of Miss Alice Brown, from *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Study* by A. B., with a Prelude and a Postlude by L.I.G.—Boston: Copeland & Day, 1895. . . . 250 copies printed, May 1895, by the Heintzemann Press, Boston.