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AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER FROM ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON TO VIOLET PAGET (VERNON LEE), 1885

Earlier this year a manuscript letter by Robert Louis Stevenson was found by Petersfield Bookshop between the pages of a volume of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Letters to his Family and Friends* (ed. Syndey Colvin). The bookshop posted photographs of the two-page letter to their Twitter account.¹ The letter does not appear in the eight-volume *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*² and is transcribed below for the first time.

Violet Paget (1856–1935) wrote under the pseudonym Vernon Lee. She was an essayist, travel writer, critic and author of supernatural and short fiction with a scholarly interest in eighteenth-century Italy. When this letter was written in 1885, having lived in various parts of Europe, she was dividing her time between her family home in Florence and extended visits to England. She and Stevenson shared many friends and acquaintances — Henry James, J. A. Symonds, Horatio Brown, John Singer Sargent, Anne Jenkin etc. — but they do not appear ever to have met in person. Two letters from Paget to Stevenson are held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, but have never been published in full.³ The earlier of these is dated 6th August 1885 and written on stationary marked 5 via Garibaldi, Florence. It is Paget's first contact with Stevenson and clearly prompted the reply published here. The second is dated August 10, 1886. Stevenson's

¹ Posted on July 23rd 2019: https://twitter.com/The_PBS/status/1153667768287485952

² *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1994-5).

³ GEN MSS 664 Series I, (5363-5364).

unfinished reply to this later letter appears in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Vol. 5, 306).

Stevenson's letter touches on three topics: a discussion of the necessary permissions for the translation of two of his works into Italian; acknowledgment of receipt of a work by Vernon Lee, and most interestingly a sympathetic discussion of the character of Prince Charles Edward Stuart and what Stevenson sees as Vernon Lee's unflattering and one-sided treatment of him as a repulsive drunk in her account of the life of his wife in *The Countess of Albany*.⁴ Stevenson mentioned the prince in *Kidnapped* the following year: 'the Prince was a gracious, spirited boy, like the son of a race of polite kings, but not so wise as Solomon. I gathered, too, that while he was in the Cage, he was often drunk; so the fault that has since, by all accounts, made such a wreck of him, had even then begun to show itself.'⁵ He was also to write about the Prince several years later in the novel fragment *The Young Chevalier* (1892)⁶ which paints a brief but psychologically nuanced portrait of "a boy at odds with life, a boy with a spark of the heroic, which he was now burning out and drowning down in futile reverie and solitary excess" (82-3); a portrait in line with the plea for indulgence expressed in this letter.

The bottom right hand corner of the first page of the letter is torn and the ends of four lines are consequently missing. In each case, our best guess as to the missing words or letters has been inserted between square brackets with a question mark.

⁴ Vernon Lee, *The Countess of Albany* (London, W.H. Allen, 1884), an account of the life of Princess Louise Maximilienne Caroline Emmanuele of Stolberg-Gedern (1752 – 1824), the wife of Charles Edward Stuart.

⁵ R. L. Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (London, Penguin, 1996, first published in 1886), p.162.

⁶ R. L. Stevenson, 'The Young Chevalier' in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson Vol. 26. Romances, Volume VII. Weir of Hermiston and other fragments*, ed. S. Colvin (Edinburgh: Constable, 1897), pp. 63-83. See Lesley Graham, "Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Young Chevalier': Unimagined Space", in Macinnes, German & Graham (eds), *Living with Jacobitism, 1690-1788: The Three Kingdoms and Beyond*, London : Pickering & Chatto, 2014.

Skerryvore
Bournemouth
Oct 14. 1885

Dear Madam,

I shall attend to the affair of Signora Santarelli⁷ with my best diligence, which is a relative diligence. It is right, however, that I should explain to you how I stand. If the permission be granted in the case of the first series it will be of the grace of Messrs Chatto & Windus; and if in the case of the second, Signora Santarelli will have to divide her thanks between the authors and Messrs Longman.⁸ So far as the authors are concerned, it is already done; neither my wife nor I would dream of denying any invalid what may possibly prove to be an entertainment: we have both unfortunately too much reason to sympathise with the sick.

Your Prince⁹ has arrived only this morning; and I have only read the introduction: if the rest be at all of a piece with it, you have sent me a great treat.

I believe we have two more common friends than you all[ude?] to¹⁰: Symonds¹¹ and Prince Charlie. I, who had mostly s[tolen?] the bright pages of Charle's [sic] Stuart's life, felt it as perhaps[s a?] defect in your very interesting "Countess of Albany", that yo[u had] failed to bring out the contrast. He was a bright boy; rather he was the bright boy of history, full of dash, full of endurance[,] full of a superficial¹² generosity, of blood more than of mind; he lived through great feats and dangers not unworthily. I should have liked perhaps, if you could not screw out a tear over so base a fall, that you had smiled a little sadly. We may all fall as low before we are done with it, and not have the picturesque and generous to look back upon. And indeed if you introduce your pretty countess to the bottle and keep her for months in Hebridean caves¹³ with no other consolation, I suspect she would sink as low.

I am a fault finder in grain¹⁴ and you must not wonder if I sieze [sic] on the occasion of your letter to pick this quarrel which I have long been musing.

(I am amused at the way in which I have bracketed the living lion and the dead dog¹⁵, but I meant no disrespect to either, surely not to Symonds),
With many thanks Believe me

Yours truly

⁷ Signora Sofia Fortini-Santarelli, translator, wife of Cavaliere Emilio Santarelli of Florence who owned relics of the Young Pretender. She translated various works of Herbert Spencer, Ouida, and Symonds's *The Renaissance in Italy*. In her letter, Paget describes her as "a lady who has taken to translating for the pastime which her recuperation affords her in a maiming & incurable malady".

⁸ The references are to *New Arabian Nights* (1882) and *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter* (1885). The latter was written in collaboration with Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson.

⁹ Vernon Lee, *The Prince of the Hundred Soups: A Puppet Show in Narrative* (1883), a harlequinade.

¹⁰ Paget had mentioned Henry James and John Sargent as friends they had in common.

¹¹ John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), essayist, poet, and biographer best known for his cultural history of the Italian Renaissance.

¹² Stevenson has deleted 'and not very wise'.

¹³ Charles hid out in some remote refuges in Benbecula and South Uist between April and June 1746.

¹⁴ In grain: short for dyed in grain i.e. ingrained (*OED*).

¹⁵ I.e. the two "acquaintances" they have in common: A. E. Symonds and Charles Edward Stuart.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Miss Paget.

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