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Introduction

Very much as Stevenson's narrator in *The Beach of Falesá* first 'saw that island when it was neither night nor morning', so I first saw the Pacific island of Western Samoa, from the air, when it was neither light nor dark and sea and sky were suddenly and dramatically caught between a clash of storm and sunshine.

One minute the vast Pacific lay below me in unbroken sunlight as languorously as a sheet of dove-blue silk; the next it was being darkly ripped to shreds by a storm as savage and dangerous as shark's teeth. Soon afterwards, on the island itself, the abrupt volcanic hills disappeared entirely behind dense grey vapours of tropical rain. Along the roads a dozen village greens, all of meticulously shaven emerald grass bordered by palm huts shaped like seaside bandstands and everywhere deliciously embroidered with blossoming trees and vines, swiftly became shallow lakes of steaming water.

Suddenly, in the middle of one of these greens, a young Samoan girl of seventeen or eighteen took off her saturated white blouse and held out her naked coffee-cream breasts to the teeming rain, letting her broad mouth expand into delighted laughter as she flung her thick black pigtails over her glistening shoulders. Seventy years or more had passed since Stevenson wrote *The Beach of Falesá*, but she might well have been Uma, the girl whose bust 'was of the colour of dark honey', the heroine of his tale.

That evening I sat in the drawing room at Valima,

the long white timber house that is now the residence of the High Commissioner, where Stevenson lived for the last four years of his life, the decaying centre of the strangest of *ménages*. Outside, on the hill where he lies buried,—*Tusitala*, the teller of tales—rain was still falling in heavy torrents and, as in the opening paragraph of his story, ‘the air smelt strong of wild lime and vanilla’. Inside, through the hot damp evening, the scene was dominated by a portrait of the brooding, sickly, Gauguin-like Stevenson himself, hypnotic, compelling, uncomfortable and by no means unsinister as it stared down from the wall.

My purpose in drawing this picture of Samoa as it is today is not to suggest that this enchanting island—reputedly the original garden of Eden—is the Falesá of Stevenson’s tale, but to indicate first that his scene, which he captures admirably, has not changed a great deal, and secondly to assure the reader who may be naturally sceptical of the truth of this taboo-ridden story that the piece is, for all its air of rather shoddy fantasy, a perfectly realistic one.

The Pacific is a vast, haunting, restless and dominating place; there are few areas on earth that give off such a powerful impression of being, in the strangest way, the surviving fragment of a mysterious and long lost world. Over it broods not only that peculiar fatalistic air of coiled-up violence that is an inevitable part of all tropical atmosphere, but a high-charged feeling that at any moment a vast electric spark may leap across it and set its slumbering dramas burning and quivering. Anything, one feels, may happen there.

Thus Stevenson’s story of a trader who comes to take up a post on a black-beached island and is given a bare-

breasted Polynesian girl in so-called marriage, together with the most cynical of marriage certificates to prove it, and then finds himself the centre of sinister and apparently supernatural dramas, is by no means as far-fetched as it might seem. It could well have happened in 1890, and probably did; and it could just as easily happen today.

There being no such island as Falesá, it is my own guess that the island Stevenson had in mind for his story was Tahiti itself or possibly another of the group of Friendly Islands that lie far out in the enormous eastern waste of the Pacific between Samoa and the south American mainland. In his tale he speaks of Falesá’s beaches being black. On Tahiti the beaches are also black—or more accurately a particular dark ashen grey that recalls more than anything the floor of an iron foundry. It would not be too much to say that they are among the least romantic-coloured beaches in the world. Moreover they exude an atmosphere both uncommonly distasteful and slightly sinister. And on at least one of them, over the past few years, the legendary curse of taboo has operated with such ugly effect that it is the easiest thing in the world to believe, as you walk about it, in the power of evil spirits to wreak supernatural catastrophe on human lives.

It is on just such a beach that Stevenson sets his tale.

It has often been said that the short story is the most difficult of all literary forms. I do not agree with this: for the simple reason that the path of all art, as has been well pointed out, is continually and endlessly difficult. In all the arts each form creates its own special problems from which the artist, if he loves his art and wishes to exalt it,

must not shrink. Indeed the short story, as I see it, creates no more difficulties than the novel or the drama and may possibly, indeed, create even less.

On the other hand if I were asked to say which of fiction's many forms was more difficult to execute successfully than all the rest I should unhesitatingly choose the very short story—not necessarily the sketch, but any story of, let us say, less than a thousand words—together with the tale of between fifteen and twenty-five thousand words, a length to which the French have given the word *conte* and the Italians the word *novella* but for which we in English have no really apt or accurate description.

Of these two forms I am not at all sure that the very short story, seen at its most perfect in Ernest Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*, Stephen Crane's *An Ominous Babe* and in many of the shorter pieces of Tchekhov, is not the more difficult. Its demands are so exacting that it is with an astonishment amounting almost to awe that one recalls that the Authorised Version offers innumerable examples of short stories written with such skinned economy that even Hemingway's mercilessly pared-down piece of four pages seems long by comparison. *The Prodigal Son*, for example, contains less than two hundred words and in a matchless opening sentence of only seven words manages to introduce us to its three main characters.

Nevertheless for all ordinary mortals a limit of a thousand words offers problems enough. The story of this length is not at all unlike an equation for which the solution must be found within severely prescribed limits and yet at the same time avoid all appearance of mechanically imposed constriction and the aridities of set formula. It must be tight yet free; severely cut yet without trace of

scissor marks. Each word must be made to do the work not merely of two but of three at least and if possible more. The sentences must tick out with the precision of a meter and yet give the impression of spontaneity in growth, of being as natural as the feathers on a bird or as unfolding petals.

The chief essential of so short a story is in fact not merely economy but balance. Its beginning should leap into life with millimetrical accuracy; its end should leave the reader in that breathless state of pause where he feels that the dropping of a single hair on the final syllable would endanger the structure as totally as the crashing of a ball of lead. Such remarks constitute a council of perfection; yet the demands of the very short story are of such severity that they can hardly be exaggerated. They offer such a test not merely of technical skill but also of imaginative distillation that it is not at all surprising that few writers care to display their talents within such a narrow and revealing compass. They not unnaturally prefer to exercise them in more spacious fields, where risk of exposure through sheer clumsiness or mere inaccuracy of line is never quite so great.

If however the writer oppressed by such difficulties hopes to find a much easier passage along the twenty-thousand-word path of the *novella* he will find himself considerably mistaken. Here, he fondly imagines, is ample room to move; here he can relax and step with relief from the crippling strait-jacket imposed by the shorter form; here at last he has words to play with and to spare. Now his sentences will be able to breathe and expand again, his ideas to evolve and even luxuriate, his characters to grow, develop and go through their symphonic point-counter-point of conversation, reflection

and emotion. Now he will be able to permit himself the luxury of double adjectives, the flowing, descriptive line, even a purple passage or two.

It is perfectly true that as he looks over the literary fields he will find far more encouragement from his predecessors and masters in the *novella* form than in that of the shorter story. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilytch* and *Family Happiness*, Bunin's *The Gentleman from San Francisco*, Turgenev's *First Love*, Joyce's *The Dead*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, all shine there to inspire him. Poe, Wells, Maupassant, Tchekhov, Bret Harte and Stevenson himself all provide him with encouraging and even great examples of the form. Thank heaven, he will say to himself, that I am no longer under the exhausting obligation of having to work with minute stitches, as in lace. Now I can knit on big needles, boldly, and no one will mind or notice if I drop a stitch or two.

It is in fact precisely in this apparent roominess that all his dangers lie. In the very short story the writer's task is to achieve, within the strictest limits, an effect of life that is far larger than the mere narrow physical structure of his tale. To succeed in this he will find that mere simplicity, mere brevity in words, is not enough: in exactly the same way as a composer knows that a five-finger exercise, however admirable in its brevity, is not necessarily a sonata. Episodic the very short story may be; it may do no more, physically, than deal with an incident, a conversation, a moment of time. But it must, if it is to succeed as art, go much farther than this. It must, by implication, say things it does not state, create pictures it does not draw, inspire effects while giving only the most delicate of clues to them.

To suppose that all this can be happily dispensed with in the *novella* would be to make a mistake far greater than that of supposing that because a work of art is small in compass it is necessarily quicker and easier to create than one which is of larger size. Implication, suggestion, impressionism, economy and balance are no less essential to the story of twenty thousand words than to *The Prodigal Son*. Moreover they are just as difficult to achieve when space is large—but, let it be noted, still limited—as when it is most confined. The writer who moves out of the double-lock of the very short story into the apparent freedom of the *novella* has not loosened himself from any limitations; he has merely accepted others, and these, he will find, are no less exacting than the first.

His excursion may be likened to that of a schoolboy released from the bondage of the desk, with all its narrow discipline, into the free, wide air of the playground. He bounds forth with the notion that he can now run wild. In fact this is precisely what he cannot do. He has in his mind a series of ideas, of incidents and of character which excite him enough to demand more space in which to resolve themselves. The great temptation, the great risk, is to allow them to expand too widely and too loosely and thus become a novel. If this happens his attempt at a *novella* is, of course, a failure. Yet at the same time he can be sure of one fact: that though a novel may accomplish in four or five times the number of words as much as the *novella* attempts, the *novella* can, in the right hands, accomplish far more than the novel attempts and in far fewer words. Its greatest virtue, in other words, lies in the high significance of what it leaves unsaid.

What to leave out, in fact, not what to put in; where

precisely to begin and where to end: these are the questions. 'We were in mourning for my mother, who had died in the autumn, and we spent the whole winter in the country—Katya, Sonia and I.' In twenty-six simple, exquisitely dignified words Tolstoy begins his *Family Happiness*, his method not at all unlike that of the author of *The Prodigal Son*. Here also three characters are introduced in the first sentence; here too the impression is instantly created that the reader has not merely been set down in the middle of an interesting family but set down there at a moment when drama or change, or both, are about to break on them. In the hands of a lesser writer it is tolerably certain that the story would have begun much earlier. The death of the mother, the funeral, 'the gloomy and sorrowful winter in our old house': the novelist limbering up for elbow room would no doubt have made the most of these things and at considerable length. Not so Tolstoy, for whom a few spare, apparently slight paragraphs are enough to convey what has gone before. It is in fact what Tolstoy leaves unsaid that helps so much to give his story its strange atmosphere of sadness and tension: the sense that the heart of a young girl of seventeen is stretched to its limits and is about to break.

It is not too much to say, I think, that one of the short story writer's more important attributes is that of being able to give to his readers the impression of knowing far more about his characters than he cares to say. Tolstoy gives this impression to perfection in *Family Happiness*; he introduces us to characters we feel he has known with great intimacy for a long time but not all of whose secrets he necessarily means us to share. Yet without rushing forward with unrestrained jubilation to cry 'I know *all* about these people, I'll tell you *everything* about them!'

he manages, like a true artist, to tell us all. His art, like a skilfully concealed and manipulated mirror, manages to reflect lights we never suspected were there.

Selection, compression, restraint, economy, impressionism; the oblique ray of light, the sudden cut, the inch or two of canvas left unpainted: these are some of the devices no less indispensable to the creation of the *novella* than to any shorter work of fiction. Stevenson, in *The Beach of Falesá*, uses one or two others. Like Conrad, he is swift to build, in a few sentences, an atmosphere: in this case mostly one of tropical languor and the supernatural. He is clever, if not indeed masterly, at the impudent, thrown-in sentence—'the captain blew out the binnacle lamp'—that jolts the reader sharply to attention. And since his tale is one of the sea and the tropics, far removed from sophistication and the civilised world as we know it, he adopts a style that rips along breezily, colloquially, in conversational bursts, almost uncouthly. He never lets his story drag. The device of the semi-illiterate hero telling his own tale is a suspect one with many technical drawbacks and more pitfalls and it may slightly jar on readers of today. It is not to be denied too that *The Beach of Falesá* has much in it that echoes the unadult world of Long John Silver. It would however be churlish to complain of this, since its author is neither Tolstoy nor Maupassant, but merely Stevenson, who in many ways, like Barrie's little hero, perhaps never quite grew up.

But whatever else we may say of Stevenson, much of whose work gives the impression of being contrived rather than spontaneous, we can award him the fullest marks on yet another indispensable part of the storyteller's art and without which he cannot succeed, whether

in the *novella*, the shorter story or the novel itself. He is a master of compulsion, of foxing the reader, of luring him on, of forcing him to turn the page. He is content to be a pure narrator. He is not much concerned, in stories like *The Beach of Falesá*, with the messages and mysteries of higher truth. At the end of a story such as *Family Happiness* the reader's belief in the eternal verity of Tolstoy's picture does not evaporate—in fact it grows. In Stevenson it does evaporate. We are left with thin air.

This is not to say that his tale does not divert or entertain, which is clearly all he intended it to do, or as I pointed out earlier that it is necessarily an unrealistic one. Stranger things than the events in this story have happened in the South Pacific and no doubt will do so again. Stevenson's picture of them has about it a lively, creepy beauty and it remains surprisingly fresh, an excellent if not matchless example of a difficult art. It aspires to be nothing more than what is sometimes known as a rattling good yarn—and what is wrong with that?

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