

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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RLS' Life in Samoa

In an old edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's "An Inland Voyage" or "Travels With a Donkey in the Cerennes," we came across a clipping of an interview with Mrs. Stevenson, published in San Francisco Oct 22, 1897, the day after she arrived from Samoa.

Accompanying the story was a sketch of Mrs. Stevenson made soon after she arrived on the steamship Australia as the widow of the celebrated author who wrote some of the best English of modern times. Less than a week before San Francisco had erected a memorial to Stevenson in historic Portsmouth Square in the heart of the picturesque quarter where he was wont to dwell, and where he obtained many of the inspirations for his stories.

The story states that it is a melancholy fact that Vailima, the Samoan home of the gifted writer, was to be sold. The house and estate were, in fact, already on the market and anyone who wished to acquire a famous residence for himself could do so for the paltry sum of \$20,000, according to Mrs. Stevenson's statement. For this sum the buyer could get not only the house, which was really a fine specimen of inland architecture, but also more than 600 acres of land, most of it cleared and planted, not to mention several rivers and waterfalls which would be thrown in without extra charge.

Then, Mrs. Stevenson stated, there was the historical reputation of the place to consider. Stevenson had made it famous to modern readers, not so much by his descriptions, but rather through the fact that there he lived and worked the latter part of his life, and there he died in the midst of his native adherents, who loved him with the fidelity of Scottish clansmen for their leader.

The interview goes on to quote Mrs. Stevenson: "But the natives knew the site long before Stevenson's days. For hundreds of years it had been a famous meeting place, often, indeed, a battleground. Stevenson himself has told how, in one of his rambles, he came across a bleached skeleton half hidden among the rank undergrowth of weeds; and by the side of the victor's bones was a single skull - the skull of the vanquished. The warrior, carrying home in triumph the head of his enemy, had himself been overtaken by death, and the

relics had lain unnoticed in the silence of the bush until my husband had stumbled upon them."

The very name itself, Vailima, means the meeting place of five rivers, mountain streams, tearing down from the rocky ranges behind Apia, and just behind the Stevenson house, spreading themselves out into the broad and fertile valley of the Vaisipango. Mrs. Stevenson said "If Samoan legend be true, the shadowy legends often meet and renew their old battles. There are spots where the angangas, or spirits of the dead, assemble, and there a beautiful green-bowered pool not far up the river, where a dusky Lorelei dwells and entices all who listen to her voice to their destruction."

These things may be but the imaginative firelight talk of a superstitious people, but, sitting in a prosaic 19th Century parlor of the Occidental, away from the glamour of angangas and ghostly armies, Mrs. Stevenson in all seriousness told the reporter of an occurrence which led him to think and note this story, as she told it.

"It was only about six weeks ago," she remarked, "during the middle of the night. Everyone else about the house was asleep, when suddenly, without noise of footstep or sound of any kind, I was lifted violently from my bed and thrown across the room. This was repeated, until in my despair, I thought I had fallen into the hands of a midnight assassin. Fortunately, I took no harm, and then, when I had calmed down, I came to the conclusion that there had been a violent earthquake."

"Was the house much damaged?"

"That is a curious feature of the whole affair." Mrs. Stevenson replied. "The doors were fastened, the locks were intact and no one had entered during the night. Burglars were out of the question, and as to the earthquake, nothing about the house was damaged, not even a piece of crockery broken, nor a picture thrown down. And no one else had been disturbed during the night!"

It proved futile to the reporter to ask Mrs. Stevenson for an explanation of this strange occurrence. The facts were there, and he could draw his own conclusions. And so can our readers.