

Another Molokai

From a series of letters to the New York Sun

By Robert Louis Stevenson

In 1890, when I was at Penrhyn [in the Cook Islands], Mr. Hird was supercargo on the *Janet Nicoll*; and knowing I had visited the Lazaretto on Molokai, he called me in consultation. "It is strange," said he. "When I was here there was no such thing as leprosy upon the island; and now there seems a great deal. Look at that man, and tell me what you think." The man was leprous as Naaman.

The story goes that a leper escaped from Molokai in an open boat and landed, some say in Penrhyn, some say first in Manihiki. There are many authentic boat voyages difficult to credit; but this of thirty degrees due north and south, and from the one trade to the other across the equatorial doldrums, ranks with the most extraordinary. We may suppose the westerly current to have been entirely intermitted, the easterly strong, and the fugitive well supplied with food. Or we may explain the tale to be a legend, framed to conceal the complaisance of some ill-judging skipper. One thing at least is sure: a Hawaiian leper, in an advanced stage of the disease, and admitting that he had escaped from Molokai, appeared suddenly in these distant islands, and was seen by Mr. H. J. Moors of Apia walking at large in Penrhyn. Mr. Moors is not quite certain of the date, for he visited the atoll in 1883 and again in 1884; but another of my neighbors, Mr. Harper, was trading in Penrhyn all the first year. He saw nothing of the Hawaiian, and this pins us to the later date. I am tediously particular on this point, because the result is amazing. Seven years is supposed to be the period of leprous incubation; and the whole of my tale, from the first introduction of the taint to the outbreak of a panic on the island, passes (at the outside) in a little more than six. At the time when we should have scarce looked for the appearance of the earliest case, the population was already steeped in leprosy.

The Polynesians assuredly derive from Asia; and Asia, since the dawn of history, has been a camping ground for this disease. Of two things, either the Polynesian left, ere the disease began, and is now for the first time exposed to the contagion, or he has been so long sequestered that Asiatic leprosy has had the time to vary, and finds in him a virgin soil. The facts are not clear; we are told, on one hand, that some indigenous form of the disease was known in Samoa within the memory of man; we are assured, on the other, that there is not a name for it in any island language. There is no doubt, at least, about the savage rapidity with which it spreads when introduced. And there is none that, when a leper is first seen, the islanders approach him without disaffection and are never backward to supply him with a wife. I find this singular; for few races are more sensitive to beauty, of which their own affords so high a standard; and I have observed that when the symptoms are described to him in words, the islander displays a high degree of horror and disgust. His stringent ideals of courtesy and hospitality and a certain debile kindness of disposition must explain his conduct. As for the marriage, the stranger once received, it follows as a thing of course. To refuse the male is still considered in most parts of Polynesia a rather unlovely rigor in the female; and if a man be disfigured, I believe it would be held a sort of charity to console his solitude. A kind island girl might thus go to a leper's bed in something of the same spirit as we visit the sick at home with tracts and pounds of tea.

The waif who landed on Penrhyn was much marred with the disease; his head deformed with growths; a thing for children to flee from screaming. Yet he was received with welcome,

entertained in families, and a girl was found to be his wife. It is hard to be just to this Hawaiian. Doubtless he was a man of a wild strain of blood, a lover of liberty and life; doubtless he had harbored in the high woods and the rains, a spectral Robin Hood, armed to defend his wretched freedom; perhaps he was captured fighting; and of one thing we may be sure, that he had escaped early from the Lazaretto, still untamed, still hot with resentment. His boat voyage was a discipline well fitted to inspire grave thoughts; in him it may have only sharpened the desire of pleasure; for to certain shallow natures the imminence of death is but a whet. In his own eyes he was an innocent prisoner escaped, the victim of a nameless and senseless tyranny. What did he ask? To taste the common lot of men, to sit with the house folk, to hear the evensong, to share in the day's gossip, to have a wife like others, and to see children round his knees. He landed in Penrhyn, enjoyed for a while simple pleasures, died, and bequeathed to his entertainers a legacy of doom.

They were early warned. Mr. Moors warned them in 1884, and they made light of his predictions, the long incubation of the malady deceiving them. The leper lived among them; no harm was seen. He died, and still there was no harm. It would be interesting, it is probably impossible, to learn how soon the plague appeared. By the midst of 1890, at least, the island was dotted with lepers, and the *Janet Nicoll* had not long gone before the islanders awoke to an apprehension of their peril. I have mentioned already traits which they share with their Paumotuan kindred; their conduct in this hour of awakening is another. There were certain families—twenty, I was told; we may imply a corrective and guess ten—entirely contaminated; the clean waited on these sick and bade them leave the settlement.

Some six years before they had opened their doors to a stranger; now they must close them on their next of kin.

It chanced that among the tainted families were some of chief importance, some that owned the land of the village. It was their first impulse to resent the measure of expulsion.

“The land is ours;” they argued. “If any are to leave, let it be you;” and they were thought to have answered well; “let them stay” was the reconsidered verdict; and the clean people began instead to prepare their own secession. The coming of the missionary ship decided otherwise; the lepers were persuaded; a *motu* [islet] of some size, hard by the south entrance, was now named Molokai, after its sad original; and thither, leaving their lands and the familiar village, self-doomed, self-sacrificed, the infected families went forth into perpetual exile.

The palms of their lost village are easily in view from Molokai. The sequestered may behold the smoke rise from their old home; they can see the company of boats skim forth with daylight to the place of diving. And they have yet nearer sights. A pier has been built in the lagoon; a boat comes at intervals, leaves food upon its seaward end, and goes again, the lepers not entering on the pier until it be gone. Those on the beach, those in the boat, old friends and kinfolk thus behold each other for a moment silently. The girl who bid Mr. Hird flee from the settlement opened her heart to him on his last visit. She would never again set eyes, she told him, on her loved ones, and when he reminded her that she might go with the boat and see them from a distance on the beach, “Never!” she cried. If she went, if she saw them, her heart would pluck her from the boat; she must leap on the pier, she must run to the beach, she must speak again with the lost; and with the act the doors of the prison isle would close upon herself. So sternly is the question of leprosy now viewed, under a native rule, in Penrhyn.

Long may it so continue! and I would I could infect with a like severity every isle of the Pacific. But self-indulgence and sentiment menace instead the mere existence of the island race; perhaps threaten our own with a new struggle against an enemy refreshed. Nothing is less proved

than this peril to ourselves; yet it is possible. To our own syphilis we are inured, but the syphilis of eastern Asia slays us; and a new variety of leprosy, cultivated in the virgin soil of Polynesian races, might prove more fatal than we dream.

So that ourselves, it may be, are no strangers to the case; it may be it was for us the men of Penrhyn resigned their acres, and when the defaced chimera sailed from Molokai, bringing sorrow and death to isles of singing, we also, and our babes may have been the target of his invisible arrows. But it needs not this. The thought of that hobgoblin boatman alone upon the sea, of the perils he escaped, of the evil he lavished on the world, may well strike terror in the minds even of the distant and the unconcerned. In mine, at the memory of my termagant minstrel, hatred glows.