

“The Day of Louis’ Death” A Recording of Belle Strong’s Memories of that Day

Belle Strong (later Isobel Field, 1858-1953), was Robert Louis Stevenson’s stepdaughter.

Wire recording, June 1949

Copied to reel-to-reel tape, 15 April 1954

Copied to cassette, 4 April 1994

Courtesy of The Stevenson House Collection, Monterey, California State Parks

Female Narrator:

This is a recording made in June of 1949 by Mrs. Salisbury Field, the stepdaughter of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Belle Strong:

And that is a day in my life that I will never forget. It was December the 4th, 1894.

It was a pleasant morning. I went, I finished my work in the morning, and about 8 o'clock I was at the Stevensons' room where we wrote every morning, because I wrote to his dictation. I'd begun it by writing his letters when he'd had the writer's cramp, and we succeeded so well that I went on writing his books. I've told people more than once that I've written famous books, but they could hardly believe it—but I have! I wrote *St. Ives*, and *Weir of Hermiston*, and a good many of those volumes of letters that you read, signed by Stevenson. Well, we worked that morning so happily, and I can remember just a line that I saw afterwards, "and his heart sympathized with her in her sorrow," something like that.

Well, in the afternoon we had lunch, of course, and after lunch I was writing letters in the afternoon. And my son, then 10 years old, was playing, if you please, with Louis, as we called Mr. Stevenson. I heard them shouting, and laughing, and racing up and down stairs, and they were chasing each other, they were shrieking at each other. And little Austin burst into my room and said, "Louis says come and play." But oh, I'll regret it to my dying day, I said, "Oh, later when I've finished my letter I'll come." And I didn't go.

I went on with my letter, and I got interested in other things, and then we dressed for dinner, as we always did at Vailima, all of us. And I walked slowly downstairs. You know, it was a very beautiful house, the wide stairs turning at an angle and sweeping into the big hall. And to my surprise, there in the chair sat Mr. Stevenson, on one side his mother, Mrs. M. I. Stevenson, the other side his wife. Each one holding his hand, as he sat there, immersed in a bucket of hot water. And sitting around him in a semi-circle, three or four of the natives—I can't call them servants, because they're our friends—sitting on their heels in the Samoan respectful fashion, waiting for orders. I walked down surprised, when my mother called, motioned for me to come over. I went over there. She said, "Tell Lloyd to go for the doctor. Louis is dying."

I could hardly believe it. I went out the door, and my brother stopped at a little cottage over on the place, we called it the bachelor's cottage, because we put up many young men who visited us, stayed there, and he came over to dinner. We had early dinner, 6 o'clock. And he was dressed in evening dress, his black trousers, white coat, and red sash, looking very handsome. And swinging on his finger was a wreath that some native girl had made for Louis to wear at dinner, they all wore wreaths. And I told him, gave him that tragic message. He dashed off for his horse, and off down to Apia—is that enough now?—And strangely enough, on his way down, he met two doctors of the man-of-war *Katoomba* that was in port. Our own dear ship that we loved so much had left, and this was a strange ship, but the doctors were very good ones, and they came at once. Louis had had a stroke.

You know, his dread all his life, I think, was that at the end of his life he might have a long, tiresome, wearisome, invalid dying by slow degrees. He gave a description of that once that horrified us, so that we begged for mercy, begged him to stop. And if he had known that he simply fell asleep. He was standing by my mother, they told me afterwards, had been holding the oil bottle while she was making salad dressing. As he put the bottle down, this was on the back veranda, and said, "Do I look strange?" she looked at him with surprise when he fell over backwards. Fortunately, his man Sosimo, who was never very far from him, caught him and saved him from a bad fall. He was carried into the big room, and that's where I saw him.