

A ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON COMPANION

A guide to the novels, essays
and short stories

J. R. HAMMOND

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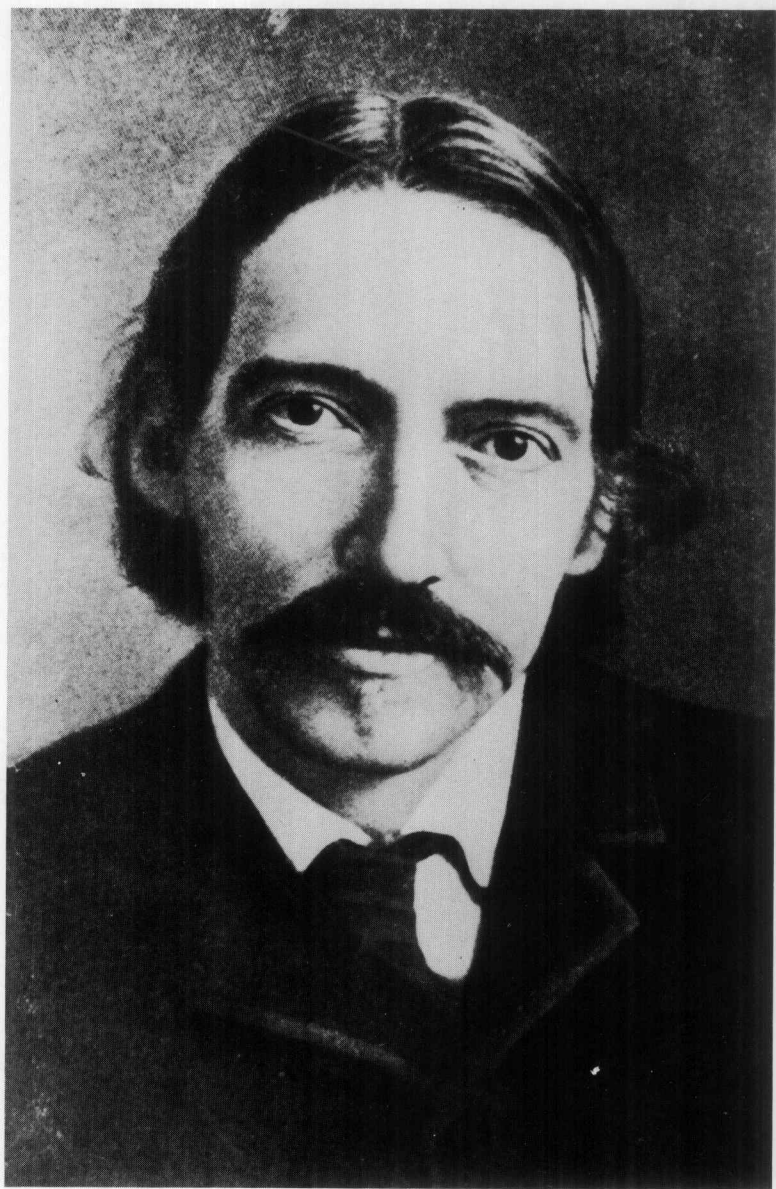
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Stevenson at the height of his fame

Most vain, most generous, sternly critical,
Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist;
A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck,
Much Antony, of Hamlet most of all,
And something of the Shorter Catechist.

W. E. HENLEY, 'RLS'

With all my romance, I am a realist and
a prosaist, and a most fanatical lover of
plain physical sensations plainly and
expressly rendered.

R. L. STEVENSON
(1 May 1892)

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Robert Louis Stevenson, *circa* 1893

- 1 Stevenson with his mother
- 2 Stevenson with his father
- 3 17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh
- 4 Stevenson as a young man
- 5 Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne
- 6 The cottage where *Treasure Island* was written
- 7 Vailima
- 8 Stevenson dictating at Vailima

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Preface

Stevenson, in common with H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, is today paying the price for having been so immensely popular during and immediately following his lifetime. For many years he has been regarded as the author of a number of stirring adventure stories for boys, of a handful of pleasing essays and one or two travel books written in a vein of antique charm. So well known have been these aspects of his work, and so constantly in demand, that his more solid achievement as a novelist and short story writer has tended to be overlooked.

There are signs, however, that a dispassionate critical reassessment of his work is under way and it is hoped that this *Companion* will contribute towards that process. In recent years a number of new biographies have appeared – notably James Pope Hennessy's *Robert Louis Stevenson* and Jenni Calder's *RLS: A Life Study* – which have demonstrated for the first time the full extent of his creative achievement and the odds against which he fought throughout his life. The American scholar Roger G. Swearingen has in preparation a full-scale critical biography, the first attempt to write a definitive *Life* since that of Graham Balfour in 1901. A complete edition of Stevenson's letters is also in preparation, edited by Bradford Booth.

The present *Companion* aims to be a guide to the whole range of his prose – novels, romances, essays and short stories – and to enable the reader to follow his writings with a keener appreciation. It is my hope that it will be a 'companion' in the fullest sense, a book to have at one's elbow and on the reference shelf, a source of information, ideas and stimulus. Though Stevenson was only

forty-four when he died he wrote an immense amount, far more than is generally realised; a guide to his work has been long overdue.

I am indebted in particular to two reference works. First, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide*, by Roger G. Swearingen – an excellent bibliography of Stevenson's writings. Second, *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Paul Maixner – a compendium of critical responses to the novels and essays, fully and helpfully annotated. Full details of these and other scholarly works will be found in the Select Bibliography.

For the texts of Stevenson's works I have consulted the best extant critical editions, though in some cases a variorum edition is not available. For the letters I have relied on the edition prepared by Sidney Colvin, particularly the revised and enlarged arrangement published in four volumes. I have also consulted a wide selection of critical, biographical and bibliographical works and reread the whole of Stevenson's fiction in the order in which it was written: I commend the latter experience to all who would seek a closer understanding of his art.

I wish to express my thanks to the National Library of Scotland, the City of Edinburgh District Council and Lady Stair's House Museum, Edinburgh, for their helpfulness and courtesy at all times. My appreciation is due to Mrs Carol Staves for typing the manuscript with such care, to Mrs Julia Steward for her encouragement and guidance on behalf of the publishers, and to my wife for her constant interest.

J. R. HAMMOND

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Part I

The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson

The forces which mould the life and character of an imaginative writer are many and complex. It is a fascinating process to disentangle the combination of factors – hereditary, temperamental and psychological – which contribute towards the making of a novelist and shape the attitude of mind that permeates his writings. In the case of Stevenson the process is unusually interesting for in his life, his philosophy and his work he represents a fusion of emotions and attitudes which are at once peculiarly Scottish and highly relevant to the literature of our age. At the same time he marks a significant departure from the nineteenth century literary tradition whose work anticipates the didactic fiction of Conrad and Wells.

Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson was born on 13 November 1850 at 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh, the only son of respectable middle-class parents. His father, Thomas Stevenson, was a lighthouse engineer, the heir of a long family tradition of civil and marine engineering. Thomas was a strict Presbyterian but a kindly man, not without imagination or a sense of humour, who intended to bring up his son in accordance with the orthodox principles of mid-Victorian Edinburgh. His mother, Margaret, was the daughter of a minister, Lewis Balfour, whose manse at Colinton became one of Louis's favourite childhood haunts. Margaret shared her husband's strict religious views but tempered this with a more optimistic attitude to life and a refusal to dwell on unpleasant realities. During much of Louis's childhood she suffered from persistent ill-health and he inherited from her a susceptibility to tuberculosis.

As Louis had no brothers or sisters his boyhood was a lonely one, but it must not be assumed that it was necessarily unhappy. It is true that he was dogged by illnesses – for years he suffered from coughs and fevers and a variety of chest complaints which continually interrupted his schooling – but he was lovingly cared for by his mother and by his devoted nurse, Alison Cunningham, to whom he later dedicated *A Child's Garden of Verses*. 'Cummy', as she was called, joined the family when he was eighteen months old and throughout his childhood was his constant companion, nurse and teacher. From her, even more than from his father, he derived an atmosphere of intense Calvinism with its emphasis on evil, sin and the works of the devil. The formative literary influences on his childhood were the Old Testament and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* – both of which were read aloud to him by his nurse – and the pious verses, recited by 'Cummy', which told the story of Scotland's religious and historical feuds.

Louis attended a number of schools but was never able to remain long at one establishment because of his chronic ill-health. He enjoyed playing at imaginary countries with his cousin Bob, at the normal games of boyhood (especially hide and seek) and with a toy theatre given to him when he was six. At seven he learned to read for himself and was soon browsing in his father's library. The latter consisted mainly of learned theological and scientific works, of little interest to an imaginative boy – he wrote later that 'My father's library was a spot of some austerity . . . it was only in holes and corners that anything really legible existed as by accident'¹ – but he did discover some novels and travel books which whetted his appetite for tales of adventure. Among these were *Rob Roy*, *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *The Voyages of Captain Woodes Rogers*, George Sand's *La Mare au Diable* and Ainsworth's *Tower of London*. There were also four old volumes of *Punch* in which he read abundantly. Other cherished discoveries during these years were the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* and the stories of Mayne Reid.

When he entered Edinburgh University as a science student in 1867 it was tacitly assumed that he would follow in his father's footsteps and become a civil engineer. Though he spent most of his vacations accompanying his father on visits to harbours and lighthouses it soon became apparent that he was not cut out for a career in engineering; temperamentally he was imaginative and romantic rather than practical, and his interests were already revealing a decidedly literary turn of mind. Moreover, he could

not bring himself to take his studies seriously. Whilst ostensibly he was working for a science degree, in practice he was reading widely outside his course of study: French literature (particularly Dumas), Scottish history, and the works of Darwin and Spencer. When at the age of twenty-one he confided to his father that he did not wish to become an engineer and wanted to become a writer instead, Thomas was naturally disappointed. As a compromise it was settled that Louis would read for the Bar; if his literary ambitions came to nothing then he would still have a respectable profession to fall back upon.

To understand Stevenson fully it is essential to understand that there were two Edinburghs, both of which played their part in moulding his personality and outlook. On the one hand was the New Town, as exemplified by the prim, solid, elegant exterior of Heriot Row, to which the family moved in 1857. This was the respectable, conventional, formal Edinburgh: deeply religious, polite, and socially correct. Alongside this was a much more bohemian Edinburgh, symbolised by the shebeens and brothels of Leith Walk and the Lothian Road. The juxtaposition of the two aspects in the sharpest contrast to one another made a deep impression on his mind and strengthened his fascination with the duality of human nature.² This realisation that outward probity could exist side by side with inward laxity was a powerful revelation to one who had been brought up in a sheltered religious environment. Later it provided the theme for one of his most celebrated tales, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

During his student years as a young man in his late teens and early twenties he frequently sampled the louche, bohemian drinking-houses of the Old Town (a glimpse of these is given in his short story "The Misadventures of John Nicholson") and seems to have embarked on a number of illicit affairs. There is some speculation that he experienced at least one powerful sexual relationship at this time, but critical opinion is deeply divided on this point.³ What is not in doubt is that for some years he frequented the low haunts of the Old Town and that he found interest and happiness in these sojourns. For him the Old Town represented a freer, more honest, less hypocritical way of life than the conventional Edinburgh of his home surroundings. To the end of his life he remained unconventional in his dress, his mannerisms, and his indifference towards material possessions.

Early in 1873 the differences between Louis and his father on

matters of belief came to a head. For some time he had been increasingly sceptical of the framework of religion and dogma accepted so firmly by his parents. Thomas, unaware of his son's fervid reading, seems not to have realised the extent of his scepticism until one day when he questioned him on religion and theology. Horrified by Louis's agnosticism (which from Thomas's point of view was tantamount to blatant atheism) he spent many weeks in prayer and argument; it seemed to him that Louis had rejected the principles and beliefs on which his own life had been based. The atmosphere at home became extremely unpleasant. 'O Lord,' wrote Louis to a friend, 'what a pleasant thing it is to have just *damned* the happiness of (probably) the only two people who care a damn about you in the world.'⁴

During these years Louis made a number of friendships which were destined to influence his life and stimulate his literary ambitions. Charles Baxter, his closest friend at the University, was a young lawyer who became a lifelong confidant and ally and in later years handled many of his dealings with publishers. Fleeming Jenkin, by far the most understanding of the older generation in Louis's circle, was Professor of Engineering at the University and a regular contributor to the *Saturday Review*. He and his wife entertained Louis in their home, encouraged him to talk of his literary aspirations and drew him out by involving him in critical and philosophical discussions. Frances Sitwell, whom he met while staying with relatives in England in 1873, was a beautiful and intelligent woman, ten years older than Louis and separated from her husband. Louis quickly became deeply infatuated with her and embarked on a correspondence which lasted some years, a correspondence in which he poured out his views on life and his determination to make a name for himself in the world of letters. She introduced Louis to her friend Sidney Colvin (later her husband), Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge. Colvin was then twenty-eight but already firmly established in literary circles. He was soon charmed by Louis and gave him introductions to a number of influential editors, including Leslie Stephen of the *Cornhill* and George Grove of Macmillan. From this point onwards Colvin became a firm friend and adviser, offering encouragement and counsel at each stage of his career and helping to pave his way in the world of literature. It was Colvin who, when Stevenson was at the height of his fame, conceived the idea of a uniform edition of his works and it was he who edited Steven-

son's letters after his death. These four – Baxter, Jenkin, Mrs Sitwell and Colvin – remained his closest circle for many years. Together with W. E. Henley, whom he met for the first time in 1874, they were of immeasurable importance in giving him encouragement and advice at a crucial phase of his career. Together they assisted him in making the transition from a gauche, unformed young man to a self-confident writer with a style and mission of his own.

In the autumn of 1873 he was taken ill with nervous exhaustion and a severe chest condition, and his doctor ordered him to take a prolonged rest abroad. For the next six months he convalesced at Mentone in the South of France, working at the essays 'Ordered South' and 'Victor Hugo's Romances' and making notes for a projected volume on *Four Great Scotsmen* (Knox, Hume, Burns and Scott). The latter was abandoned, though in later years he did publish essays on Knox and Burns. On his return to Edinburgh he spent most of his time for the next year at Heriot Row – the relationship with his parents had by this time eased somewhat – writing book reviews and articles and trying his hand at short stories. To this period belong his perceptive essay on the works of Edgar Allan Poe (*The Academy*, 2 January 1875), a number of the *Fables* including the striking 'The House of Eld', and the short story 'When the Devil was Well'. Slowly but surely he was earning a name for himself in journalism and his pieces were beginning to appear in distinguished journals such as the *Cornhill Magazine* and the *Fortnightly Review*. Many of the stories and articles written at this period were abandoned or destroyed. He did not grudge the time spent on them since he felt he was gradually evolving a style and technique that would stand him in good stead; he recognised that any worthwhile literary apprenticeship was bound to be a long and arduous process.

During 1875 and 1876 he spent much of his time at Fontainebleau, where his cousin Bob was a member of an informal colony of artists and writers. In this congenial fellowship he was completely at home, writing, talking, bathing and canoeing. Something of the atmosphere of his life at this time can be derived from his essay 'Fontainebleau' in which he describes with affection and nostalgia the pleasant landscape and friendly company in which he found so much happiness. In the summer of 1876 occurred an encounter which altered the whole tenor of his life. Returning to the inn at Grez one day (Grez-sur-Loing is a village in the Fontaine-