Robert Louis Stevenson

Treasure Island • Kidnapped
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
The Black Arrow • Weir of Hermiston
The Master of Ballantrae

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This edition published by Marboro Books Corp.,
a division of Barnes & Noble, Inc.

1992 Barnes & Noble Books

ISBN 0-88029-762-X

Printed and bound in the United States of America

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Barnes
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Books
New York

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Introduction

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON certainly ranks among the outstanding writers from the golden age of adventure fiction that occurred between the 1870s and World War I. Yet, like a few of his contemporaries—Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, and Jack London, among others—he transcended this easy categorization, and moved on into the realm of great literature. Initially considered a writer of children's stories, then a teller of adventure tales, it was only in the last decade of his life that Stevenson was recognized as one of the finest writers of his time.

Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson was born on November 13, 1850, at 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh, Scotland, the only child of Thomas and Isabella Balfour Stevenson. His background was solidly middle class; his father, grandfather, and two uncles were all successful civil engineers who specialized in harbor and lighthouse work, and they expected succeeding generations to follow them. A sickly child, Stevenson was plagued by lung ailments his whole life, and this made his early education sporadic and difficult. When he did begin formal education, however, he displayed only average aptitude in mathematics and the sciences—to the dismay of his father—but showed an exceptional brilliance in the humanities.

The Stevenson household was materially comfortable but spiritually strict and narrow-minded; he experienced what he would later term a "covenanting childhood." As a young boy of quick and curious mind he found it stifling. "Sabbath observance," he later recalled, "makes a series of grim and perhaps serviceable pauses in the tenor of Scottish boyhood—days of great stillness and solitude for the rebellious mind, when the dearth of books and play, and in the intervals of studying the Shorter Catechism, the intellect and senses prey upon and test each other." As an only child, as well as a sickly one, he could do no wrong by his doting mother, but rarely lived up to the demands of his stern, somewhat dour father. These conditions made him ripe for a rebellious adolescence.

As soon as his health permitted, at the age of sixteen, he entered Edinburgh University. Shy, slight of build and decidedly unathletic, Stevenson had some initial difficulty adjusting to college life, often cutting classes and participating in no university activities; he was a rebel and a loner. He described himself at the time as: "A certain lean, ugly, idle, unpopular student... of changing humours, fine occasional purposes of good, flinching acceptance of evil, infinite yawnings during lectures, and unquenchable gusto in the delights of truancy." To please his father he began studying engineering, but grew frustrated with both his limitations and lack of interest. As a compromise he switched to law. He eventually passed the bar, and became an "advocate," the Scottish equivalent of a barrister, but never practiced.

At some point in his undergraduate days he seems to have gone through a radical transformation; he became something of a dandy, and embraced Bohemianism as a

rebellion against what he saw as his parents' hypocritical bourgeois respectability. His popularity at school increased as he became a familiar figure at parties, debates, and other activities of his disaffected peers. He began acting with the university theater, and was accepted into the Speculative Society, where he delivered essays, his first writing attempts. Two of these, one on capital punishment and the other, "The Influence of the Covenanting Persecution on the Scottish Mind," caused minor controversy at the school; the latter was certainly a reaction to his own upbringing.

At the age of twenty-three Stevenson suffered a severe respiratory illness and was sent to the French Riviera, beginning a pattern that was to be repeated his whole life. As the weather in Scotland was decidedly unhealthy, illness forced him to travel frequently, and it was on these early trips that he began to write seriously. One of these journeys produced his first book, *An Inland Voyage* (1878), a record of a canoe trip through French rivers and canals. Most of his time between 1873–1879 was spent in France, and he easily fell in with its flowering Bohemian movement, making the acquaintance of many artists, writers, and poets.

In 1877, at an art colony in Grez, near Fountainebleau, he met Fanny Van de Grift Osborne, the estranged wife of a San Francisco businessman. Though she was ten years older, they quickly fell in love, but Stevenson's parents were scandalized that he was involved with a married woman. Fanny returned to California the next year to obtain a divorce. When Stevenson told his parents that he planned to follow her, they cut him off financially. He finally arrived in San Francisco in 1879, penniless and ill, describing the arduous journey in *The Amateur Emigrant* (1892). They were married in 1880, and their first years were marked by deep poverty and his increasing lung ailments, later diagnosed as tuberculosis. Eventually his parents relented, and the couple returned to Scotland with Fanny's children for a reconciliation.

Because of his precarious medical condition, the Stevensons spent most of the 1880s in various health resorts—Davos in the Swiss Alps, Hyeres on the French Riviera, Bournemouth, England, and Saranac Lake, New York. It was in Davos that, as a way to entertain his stepson, Lloyd, he wrote *Treasure Island* (originally titled *The Sea Cook*). Intended as a story for boys, the book was first serialized in the magazine *Young Folks*, and it was not treated seriously by adults until his later works gained acceptance. *Treasure Island*, however, marked Stevenson's artistic coming-of-age, and continues to be considered a classic of both children's literature and adventure fiction.

The latter part of the decade was spent primarily in Bournemouth, and it was there, despite a rapid decline in his health, that his finest and most popular works were written. The poems in *A Child's Garden of Verse* (1885) show a rare playfulness and sensitivity, and the volume is still fresh and unique in juvenile literature. His lifelong fascination with Scottish history, landscape, local atmosphere, and character bore fruit in his first fully mature work, *Kidnapped* (1886).

Up to this point Stevenson had been steadily gaining a literary reputation, particularly as a writer of adventure and children's stories. He began to develop theories on the art of fiction which were published as a series of essays in *A Humble Remonstrance* (1884), provoked by Henry James' *The Art of Fiction*. Stevenson was equally repelled by the vapid domestic novels of the later Victorians such as James and the extraneous detail of naturalistic Continental writers like Zola. He believed that Jane Austen's clean realism could be combined with Sir Walter Scott's energy to produce a work that could both be meticulously crafted and possess a largesse of theme.

It was *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) that ultimately proved

Stevenson's mastery of the art of fiction. A moral allegory as well as a first class thriller, the book immediately propelled the author to unimagined heights of popularity, and forced critics and readers to reevaluate his earlier works. It is still considered one of those rare works that, both in story and subtext, clearly and cleanly defines a society in its character and nightmares—any survey of Victorian England would be incomplete without it.

In August, 1887, Stevenson set out for America with his family to improve his health. Arriving in New York, he was surprised to find himself quite famous, with publishers offering him lucrative contracts for whatever he chose to write. Settling temporarily in the Adirondack mountains, he began *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). But continued ill health once again made further travel necessary. He chartered a yacht and sailed with his family to the South Pacific, where he would spend the rest of his life.

Making stops in Australia, Tahiti, Hawaii, and other exotic locales, Stevenson and his family finally settled in Samoa. His fascination with this "primitive" way of life inspired several nonfiction books on the subject, the most prominent A *Footnote to History* (1892). He bought a tropical estate, and became a champion of natives' rights, angering the British Colonial authorities and nearly getting himself expelled as a subversive. The locals, however loved and worshiped him, giving him the name Tusitala, "giver of tales."

Stevenson seemed to have finally found a home on Samoa; his health improved, and he led an active and industrious life there. It is both tragic and ironic that when he died after only four years, on December 3, 1894, at the age of forty-four, it was of a cerebral hemorrhage, and not from the long-feared tuberculosis. His funeral was attended by the entire native population, and he was buried on a mountaintop, as befitting a chief.

Extravagantly praised during the last decade of his life and the first twenty years or so after his death, Stevenson's reputation ebbed somewhat during the 1920s and 1930s, when he was once again considered merely a teller of adventure stories and children's tales. Yet recent decades have confirmed his place as both a meticulous craftsman and a keen social observer. It is useless to speculate what he might have produced had he not died so young; if nothing else, Robert Louis Stevenson will always be considered one of the greatest storytellers of all time.

—Steven J. Kasdin
1992

TREASURE ISLAND

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The Old Sea Dog at the 'Admiral Benbow'

SQUIRE TRELAWNEY, DR. LIVESEY, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen in the year of grace 17—, and go back to the time when my father kept the 'Admiral Benbow' inn, and the brown old seaman, with the sabre cut, first took up his lodging under our roof.

I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow; a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man; his tarry pigtail falling over the shoulders of his soiled blue coat; his hands ragged and scarred, with black, broken nails; and the sabre cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white. I remember him looking round the cove and whistling to himself as he did so, and then breaking out in that old sea-song that he sang so often afterwards:

'Fifteen men on the dead man's chest –
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!'

in the high old tottering voice that seemed to have been tuned and broken at the capstan bars. Then he rapped on the door with a bit of stick like a handspike that he carried, and when my father appeared, called roughly for a glass of rum. This, when it was brought to him, he drank slowly, like a connoisseur, lingering on the taste, and still looking about him at the cliffs and up at our signboard.

'This is a handy cove,' says he, at length; 'and a pleasant sittyated grog-shop. Much company, mate?'

My father told him no, very little company, the more was the pity.

'Well, then,' said he, 'this is the berth for me. Here you, matey,' he cried to the man who trundled the barrow; 'bring up alongside and help up my chest. I'll stay here a bit,' he continued. 'I'm a plain man; rum and bacon and eggs is what I want, and that head up there for to watch ships off. What you mought call me? You mought call me captain. Oh, I see what you're at – there'; and he threw down three or four gold pieces on the threshold. 'You can tell me when I've worked through that,' says he, looking as fierce as a commander.

And, indeed, bad as his clothes were, and coarsely as he spoke, he had none of the appearance of a man who sailed before the mast; but seemed like a mate or skipper, accustomed to be obeyed or to strike. The man who came with the barrow told us the mail had set him down the morning before at the 'Royal George'; that he had inquired what inns there were along the coast, and hearing

ours well spoken of, I suppose, and described as lonely, had chosen it from the others for his place of residence. And that was all we could learn of our guest.

He was a very silent man by custom. All day he hung round the cove, or upon the cliffs, with a brass telescope; all evening he sat in a corner of the parlour next the fire, and drank rum and water very strong. Mostly he would not speak when spoken to; only look up sudden and fierce, and blow through his nose like a fog-horn; and we and the people who came about our house soon learned to let him be. Every day, when he came back from his stroll, he would ask if any seafaring men had gone by along the road. At first we thought it was the want of company of his own kind that made him ask this question; but at last we began to see he was desirous to avoid them. When a seaman put up at the 'Admiral Benbow' (as now and then some did, making by the coast road for Bristol), he would look in at him through the curtained door before he entered the parlour; and he was always sure to be as silent as a mouse when any such was present. For me, at least, there was no secret about the matter; for I was, in a way, a sharer in his alarms. He had taken me aside one day, and promised me a silver fourpenny on the first of every month if I would only keep my 'weather-eye open for a seafaring man with one leg,' and let him know the moment he appeared. Often enough, when the first of the month came round, and I applied for my wage, he would only blow through his nose at me, and stare me down; but before the week was out he was sure to think better of it, bring me my fourpenny piece, and repeat his orders to look out for 'the seafaring man with one leg.'

How that personage haunted my dreams, I need scarcely tell you. On stormy nights, when the wind shook the four corners of the house, and the surf roared along the cove and up the cliffs, I would see him in a thousand forms, and with a thousand diabolical expressions. Now the leg would be cut off at the knee, now at the hip; now he was a monstrous kind of a creature who had never had but the one leg, and that in the middle of his body. To see him leap and run and pursue me over hedge and ditch was the worst of nightmares. And altogether I paid pretty dear for my monthly fourpenny piece, in the shape of these abominable fancies.

But though I was so terrified by the idea of the seafaring man with one leg, I was far less afraid of the captain himself than anybody else who knew him. There were nights when he took a deal more rum and water than his head would carry; and then he would sometimes sit and sing his wicked, old, wild sea-songs, minding nobody; but sometimes he would call for glasses round, and force all the trembling company to listen to his stories or bear a chorus to his singing. Often I have heard the house shaking with 'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum'; all the neighbours joining in for dear life, with the fear of death upon them, and each singing louder than the other, to avoid remark. For in these fits he was the most overriding companion ever known; he would slap his hand on the table for silence all round; he would fly up in a passion of anger at a question, or sometimes because none was put, and so he judged the company was not following his story. Nor would he allow any one to leave the inn till he had drunk himself sleepy and reeled off to bed.

His stories were what frightened people worst of all. Dreadful stories they were; about hanging, and walking the plank, and storms at sea, and the Dry Tortugas, and wild deeds and places on the Spanish Main. By his own account