

# *Treasure Island*



Robert Louis Stevenson

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Angus Fletcher*

*Illustrations by N. C. Wyeth*

George Stade  
Consulting Editorial Director



**BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS**  
NEW YORK

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## *From the Pages of Treasure Island*



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 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. (page 11 )

*“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest—*

*Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!*

*Drink and the devil had done for the rest—*

*Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!”* (page 16)

“Heard of him, you say! He was the bloodthirstiest buccaneer that sailed. Blackbeard was a child to him. Flint. The Spaniards were so prodigiously afraid of him that, I tell you, sir, I was sometimes proud to be an Englishman.” (page 45)

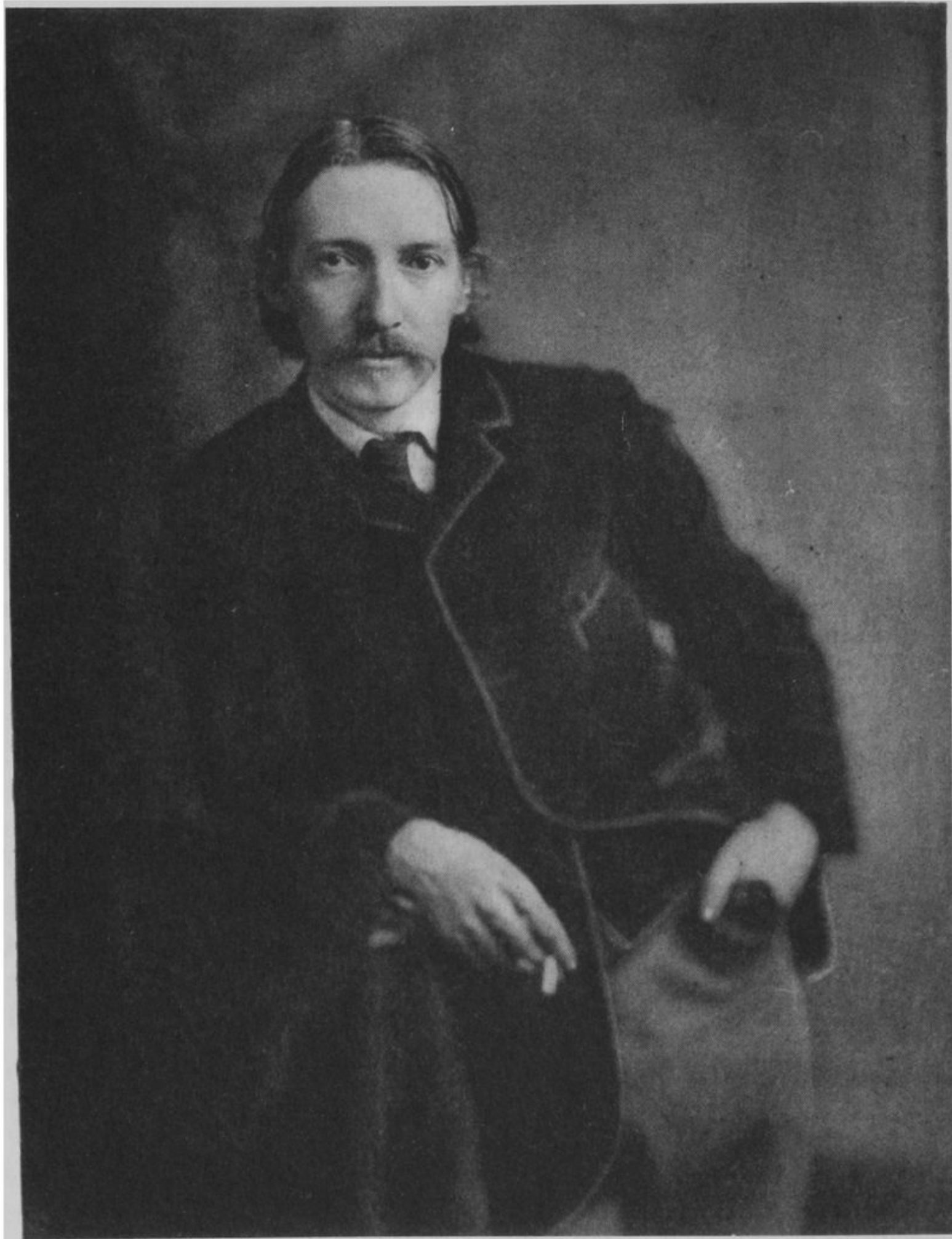
Long John Silver, he is called, and has lost a leg; but that I regarded as a recommendation, since he lost it in his country’s service, under the immortal Hawke. (page 53)

It was Silver’s voice, and before I had heard a dozen words, I would not have shown myself for all the world, but lay there, trembling and listening, in the extreme of fear and curiosity, for from these dozen words I understood that the lives of all the honest men aboard depended upon me alone. (page 75)

The cry he gave was echoed not only by his companions on board but by a great number of voices from the shore, and looking in that direction I saw the other pirates trooping out from among the trees and tumbling into their places in the boats. (page 118)

“A man who has been three years biting his nails on a desert island, Jim, can’t expect to appear as smart as you or me. It doesn’t lie in human nature.” (page 131)

Indeed, as we found when we also reached the spot, it was something very different. At the foot of a pretty big pine and involved in a green creeper, which had even partly lifted some of the small bones, a human skeleton lay, with a few shreds of clothing, on the ground. I believe a chill struck for a moment to every heart. (page 216)



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## Robert Louis Stevenson



The name Robert Louis Stevenson is synonymous with adventure, romance, and the exotic—qualities that characterized the author's life as well as his fiction. Born in Edinburgh on November 13, 1850, Stevenson contracted in his early years what was probably tuberculosis, a condition that would cause repeated bouts of illness throughout his life. But frequent confinement to the sickbed did not stifle the child's imagination. The young boy wrote tales based on biblical passages and Scottish history and soon gained a reputation as a storyteller.

In 1867 Stevenson enrolled in Edinburgh University. His family expected that he would join the distinguished line of Stevenson engineers; instead he chose to study the law. But conventional study was, he later claimed, the farthest thing from his mind. "To play the fiddle, to know a good cigar, or to speak with ease and opportunity to all varieties of men"—these were Stevenson's youthful pursuits which he sought despite academic and familial consequences.

This self-professed idler was a devoted student of the curriculum he devised for himself. Sometimes on the verge of grave illness, Stevenson wandered through the wilder quarters of Edinburgh, and he worked at honing his writing skills by imitating his favorite authors, among them Defoe, Hazlitt, and Montaigne. In 1875 he passed the bar exam, but rather than take up legal practice, he set out for the European continent; his time there is recounted in early essays and travel narratives. While in France, Stevenson fell in love with Fanny Osbourne, a married American woman ten years his senior. He joined Fanny in the United States in 1879. Upon her divorce in 1880 she and Stevenson were married; they lived for a short time afterward in northern California.

Stevenson then returned to Edinburgh with Fanny and her son from her first marriage, Lloyd Osbourne. Stevenson's health was so fragile for the next several years that sometimes he was bedridden; at other times he and his family traveled to the south of France and Switzerland in hopes of restoring his well-being. As in his youth, sickness galvanized rather than diminished his imagination; during this period he composed such classics as *Treasure Island* (1883), *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped* (both 1886). From 1884 to 1887 the family lived in Bournemouth, a resort on England's south coast.

After his father's death in 1887, Stevenson and his mother, wife, and stepson moved to America. The author's vagabond spirit and quest for better health led the family on a South Seas voyage that would prove to be his greatest adventure; in 1888 they visited the islands of the Marquesas, Tahiti, and Hawaii. During the journey Stevenson suffered a lung hemorrhage, and the family settled in Samoa to attend to his failing health. Stevenson's works of the period, including *In the South Seas* (1890), which chronicle the clash between Eastern and Western cultures and champion the Samoan people, shocked his friends in Scotland, drew fire from local warring political factions, and nearly provoked his banishment from Samoa.

As Stevenson's health seriously worsened he felt nostalgia for his native country, although he knew he would not survive a voyage home to Scotland. He collapsed of a brain hemorrhage while at work on

his unfinished novel *Weir of Hermiston* and died on December 3, 1894, in Samoa.

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# *The World of Robert Louis Stevenson and Treasure Island*



- 1850** Robert Louis Stevenson is born on November 13 in Edinburgh, the only child of Thomas and Margaret (née Balfour) Stevenson. As a child, he suffers from an illness, probably tuberculosis, which will plague him throughout his life.
- 1858** Poor health keeps Stevenson bedridden, and he attends school infrequently; tutors educate him at home.
- 1859** Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* is published, as is Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.
- 1865** Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is published.
- 1867** Thomas Stevenson enrolls his son in Edinburgh University with the hope that he will join the family engineering firm. The romantic, often sickly young man delights his professors but takes his formal studies lightly. Instead he fraternizes with the citizens of Edinburgh and spends time imitating the writing style of Michel de Montaigne, William Hazlitt, and Daniel Defoe.
- 1871** To his father's dismay, Stevenson leaves his engineering studies to pursue a law degree. He continues to develop his true interest, writing. Royal Albert Hall opens in London.
- 1872** Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* are published.
- 1874** Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* appears.
- 1875** Stevenson passes the bar but decides not to practice law, choosing instead to write and to travel to Europe.
- 1876** A boat trip down the river Oise in France inspires Stevenson to write the travel narrative *An Inland Voyage*. In France he meets Fanny Osbourne, a married American woman ten years his senior; the two fall in love. *An Inland Voyage* is published. Fanny returns to the United States, leaving Stevenson depressed and melancholy. He sets out on a journey through the mountains of France's Massif Central and documents it in a narrative that becomes the book *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, published the following year.
- 1879** In August Stevenson sets out for California to see Fanny. A severe chest infection leaves him on the verge of death.

- ~~Having been granted a divorce, Fanny weds Stevenson and nurses him in northern~~  
**1880** California. The two then return to Edinburgh. During the next four years, between bouts of illness, the couple travels to southern France and Switzerland.
- 1881** Stevenson, inspired by a map he made with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, begins thinking about the plot for a story about a search for buried treasure.
- 1883** *Treasure Island* is published in book form and becomes a favorite among British readers.
- 1884** While traveling in southern France, Stevenson is struck by illness. He, Fanny, and Lloyd return to Britain and live from 1884 to 1887 in Bournemouth, a resort on the southern coast of England. Stevenson composes numerous works in the following two years. He also develops a friendship with Henry James.
- 1885** *A Child's Garden of Verses* is published.
- 1886** *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped* are published.
- 1887** Stevenson's father dies in May. The remaining family members—Stevenson's mother, wife, and stepson—journey to America. *Memories and Portraits* is published.
- 1888** Stevenson, Fanny, her son, and Stevenson's mother set sail for the South Seas on the *Casco*. The family visits many islands, including those of the Marquesas, Tahiti, and Hawaii.
- 1889** Stevenson visits a leper colony in Molokai to investigate—and exonerate—a missionary named Father Damien. *The Master of Ballantrae* is published.
- 1890** Stevenson sails throughout the Eastern Pacific until a lung hemorrhage leads him to settle in Samoa. *In the South Seas* and *Father Damien* are published.
- 1891** *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, is published.
- 1892** Stevenson begins to campaign for Samoan rights against the encroaching Western powers; he publishes *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa*.
- 1893** Stevenson is accused of sedition when he supports the position of a Samoan chief, nearly causing his banishment from Samoa. Knowing his health will not permit him to return to Scotland, Stevenson feels deep nostalgia for his native country.
- 1894** Samoa experiences peace, and Stevenson is hailed as a hero. While working on his novel *Weir of Hermiston*, Stevenson dies of a brain hemorrhage on December 3. He is buried atop Mount Vaea in Samoa.

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## Introduction



*Treasure Island* is one of the great stories, and like most books of its kind it takes ideas and details from many other stories told before its time. Since the early 1880s, when it appeared in print, readers have asked how such enthralling narratives come into being. Where do they come from? What is the creative source? Is it the author's schooling to become a writer, facts in history books, what we traditionally call creative genius, or all three? Only a few writers have been able to combine the excitement of daydreaming with a tough knowledge of actual life, and hence only a few have created classics of adventure, stories of the soul's youthful dreams. Robert Louis Stevenson was one of those rare creators, a master storyteller.

Memorable storytelling is the voice of ancient beliefs and common tradition, their mythical voice. No single part of the tale belongs to any one particular property-owner, and grown-ups need not remember this. Stories are not like real estate, houses, office buildings, automobiles, and other such personal property. Yet Stevenson wanted to get paid for his writing and thus had to lay claim to his own work; like every other modern writer who needs copyright protection, he required official recognition that he was the owner of *Treasure Island*, in order to sell the book to the public. Otherwise he knew that such stories belong to all of us and are merely spoken by the author. His early stories and essays had brought him some fame, but not enough money to live on. He had a family to support. It was therefore ironic that when he adopted the ancient communal role of storyteller, he began to make money, for *Treasure Island* soon became a best-seller and stayed one for more than a hundred years.

The book is a classic partly because it has the economical design of an exciting heroic quest. Here we may get the wrong idea of heroism, which absolutely does not mean acquiring an unexpected material reward. Instead, this is the story of a young boy becoming a man, of his discovering his own character, his strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears, gallantry and uncertainty all rolled up together into one remarkable person. For Jim Hawkins this is the story of seeking independence by confronting outward threats to his physical and emotional balance. Jim finds himself teamed up with some truly devious and dangerous compatriots. He finds himself more than once torn by accident from his older guardians and friends, alone on a forbidding island, under attack. More than once he must join battle with ominous superstitions. Somehow he survives, no doubt because there is scarcely a trace of sentimental foolishness about him; he is physically strong, shrewd, and well equipped psychologically to enter upon a voyage of discovery. In the course of the thrill-packed twists and turns of his story he learns that the goal of his quest is self-knowledge. Such a quest defines heroism, and through this voyage he achieves the status of a young, but impressively mature person.

The tone of the story and the quality of its mythical voice are therefore realistic and tough-minded and will perhaps change a modern reader's ideas of what to expect from a Victorian adventure story written about a long-gone time of buccaneering exploits. Written at great speed, one chapter per day, the book was designed with one unexpected episode chasing another, as can be guessed from the chapter titles, such as those that begin the book: "The Old Sea-dog at the Admiral Benbow," "Black Dog Appears and Disappears," "The Black Spot," "The Sea-chest," "The Last of the Blind Man," and

“The Captain’s Papers.” The action moves rapidly from placid, uninterrupted daily life to danger and mutiny on the high seas, and that is only the beginning. Because Stevenson is a master of uncanny coincidences, the tone of the book builds mainly on its pragmatic treatment of chance, good and bad luck, and their effects on human destiny. There is nothing placid about this treatment. By taking action, often in a flash, Jim weakens the awesome grip of fear, changing his dangerous situation to allow space for new hopes.

### QUIET DESPERATION AND THE BOOK

In this manner, without preaching any sermons, Stevenson developed an important ethical idea in his book. As the apostle of adventure he was responding to a famous statement from a great American, Henry David Thoreau, one of his favorite authors. Thoreau once said: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Thoreau was looking at a deeply boring adult world of daily tasks, a world lacking in genuine excitement, despite survival or the benefit of profit, and he saw that “quiet desperation” required a cure. Stevenson found the cure in an American optimism, an almost religious attitude he found in another American favorite, Walt Whitman. The novelist had good reason to adopt this positive view of life, for it kept him alive through the ravages of a terrible illness. Though he died young, at the age of forty-four, a victim of tuberculosis, he always acted the optimist. He always insisted that children and adolescents, playing games of make-believe, are imagining freedom from the labor and pain of basic human survival. Admittedly, when childhood gives way to adulthood, the imaginative dreams of liberation almost necessarily wither away, in work, in school, in mere “growing up.” Maturity obstructs the visions of the young.

On this topic there is much in common between Stevenson and Mark Twain. Like most young people, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are sworn enemies to chores around the house; chores are like practicing the piano—fun only when you no longer need it. Chores interfere with the pursuit of happiness, Thomas Jefferson’s noble political vision. The serious interrogation of socially restricted happiness, treated so lightly, mostly as escape, transforms Mark Twain’s books for young people into books to be read by skeptical adults. Huck’s final words express a philosophy: “But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally [yet another dangerous aunt] she’s going to adopt me and civilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.” Inevitably Tom and Huck see domestic life as a kind of prison from which they must escape. Into the jail of middle-class life, however, there may descend a gift of temporary escape, when labor and tedium lose their iron grip on mind and heart. During this period of grace stories enter to save the soul, stories designed to thrill the imagination, bearing myths of boundless quest and heroic achievement, adventures that seem the most natural thing in the world. Adolescence, for good or ill, is the springtime of the dream. Exploiting this unstable period of life, feeding upon its yearning atmosphere, the storyteller virtually commands a young person’s imagination, by creating magic carpets of freedom from being stuck in the house, even if that house is the Admiral Benbow inn.

Dreams of magic freedom (especially from illness) were never far from the young Stevenson. He was born to unusually talented Scottish parents in the year 1850. Their world was quite different from our own, and yet everywhere social changes were anticipating the strains and stresses of our present condition. His early years were mostly spent in the cold, dark, wet and windy, smoke-filled, ominous and romantic city of Edinburgh, the ancient capital of a northern kingdom. Stevenson represents all the conflicts—the imperial freedom and the cultural constraint—of the late Victorian era. He also shared in the Victorian fascination with facts and material accomplishment. Around him, as we shall see, there was an atmosphere of great engineering endeavor, for the Stevensons had long been famous



lighthouse builders; they were known for meeting the most hazardous and complex construction demands. Meanwhile, as civil engineering developed rapidly during this period, a new technology arose in the parallel field of communication and recording. In Stevenson's lifetime, authors went from using quill pens and early fountain pens to banging on typewriters.

Photography could now record human faces and natural landscapes, for peaceful scenes or war in the Crimea. Matthew Brady recorded the horrors of the American Civil War, and also the witless religiosity of slaughter. But there was still no radio, there were no movies, there was no television, there were no video games, and there were no special effects resembling the techniques of the present time. There were only the beginnings of widespread electronic communication, though it rapidly spread—London's first telephone exchange dates from 1879, following the world's first exchange in Hartford, Connecticut in 1877. Letters were written by hand, carried over the seas by "mailboat" steamers, while soon a massive undersea cable would carry telegraph messages linking Europe and North America, the ship *Great Eastern* having successfully laid the transatlantic cable in 1866. Telegraphy and its electronic siblings were soon to change the world by accelerating the exchange of information, if not of artistic instruction. These innovations in media were about to transform the very basis of literature.

On the edge of this revolution (much of it passing unnoticed by the mass of people) stood authors like Robert Louis Stevenson. For him, as we have said, literature had a strong connection to mythology coming out of inherited memory, folktales, and legends, as well as the hard facts of history. Such sources of literature had been spoken aloud and listened to mostly by those who could not read and whose ancient oral customs would seem destined to disappear within Victoria's reign.

There were still books, of course, books of all sizes, shapes, and subjects, from which families and individuals still read aloud to each other or read alone with silent wonder. This world could only stimulate imagination in its most active form, and onto the stage of its theater of the mind stepped *Treasure Island*, a sailor's yarn if there ever was one. The novel was published first as a serial in a boy's magazine called *Young Folks* in 1881 and 1882, and then in book form in 1883. Instantly, the desire to read the book caught on with readers of all ages, including among other notables the prime minister of England, William Ewart Gladstone; at the other end of the critical scale, Henry James, then the most refined of all living novelists, reviewed the book in the most glowing terms. Meanwhile, up to the present day the appeal of this tale persists unabated and undefeated by rivals, despite changes in fashion and immense competition from the new media. These new media, such as newspapers published everywhere readers could be found, tend to emphasize whatever is new and whatever therefore will instantly vanish as an object of interest the moment tomorrow's paper arrives on the street.

In this newly engineered culture, the question remains, how could Stevenson preserve the mystery of the older spoken literature? The story is his mainstay, of course: Jim Hawkins encounters a slew of devious and cruel confederates in a mutiny whose sole purpose is to gain uncounted treasure while meanwhile taking revenge on their masters. But there is also a dreamlike mythical method at work. Jim is waging a double war, first against the "bad guys," as we say, but second and far more important, he struggles against his own fears, against uncanny threats and overwhelming odds. In one sense the story lasts because it is an extremely efficient dream machine.

The fast-moving plot of *Treasure Island* is amazingly detailed in its precision. The narrative wastes not a word as it moves along, encountering the vagaries of chance. The story is designed to show Jim

powers of survival, especially by pitting him against a man he secretly admires, the devious pirate surgeon and cook Long John Silver. The narrative tests Jim's conscience, much in the old religious Calvinist manner, and also in a new way. We discover a psychological depth not unconnected to Calvinism. For example, Jim admits openly that he hated a man he was about to kill; this realism reflects the fact that Stevenson was tough and modern enough to create Dr. Jekyll and his ferocious double, Mr. Hyde. There is more inwardness in the story than one might have anticipated; human good and evil are constantly intermixed. The struggle is not only against malignant material power; the battle Jim really wages is against fear itself, against dark, uncanny threats, the frightening turns of a fearsome dream. Early in the book Jim leaves the safety of a picturesque home—his father dies at the outset of the story, and Jim must leave his mother and her comforting common sense, to be suddenly thrown among the most redneck of all men, common sailors who may or may not be pirates. Almost the first thing we find him confronting is “captain” Billy Bones, an old pirate with a deep scar across his face. The door over the scene he now enters is marked: Danger! At every turn his motto must be Stevenson's own: “The great affair is to move,” for his creator was always on the move, walking, climbing, canoeing, sailing, trying for a better climate to bolster his frail tubercular health, writing essays and memoirs of these travels. As Mark Twain would have said, here was an author who knew about “roughing it.”

There is an old-fashioned side to the way the story reaches back to simpler, more adventurous times. In *Treasure Island* the narrative transports us from an isolated seacoast inn to the bustle of Bristol, a thriving seaport with an ancient maritime history. We get vivid sketches and character types, such as the country squire, the country doctor, the experienced sea captain, and a whole crew of very tough sailors. Later in the novel we meet a believably disturbed castaway, Ben Gunn, who recalls Robinson Crusoe, after Odysseus the best known of all outcasts. Exotic associations provide a subtle meaning to the story, whose narrator, for example, is aptly named Jim Hawkins; he is evidently named after the notorious Elizabethan privateer Sir John Hawkins. Harassing the Spanish at sea, out-maneuvering them in victorious battle against the Spanish Armada (1588), Sir John Hawkins may today be known chiefly as a slave trader, but in his day he was a hero, and Queen Elizabeth knighted him for his valor—a model of greed, skill, courage, and military foresight. The social sweep is not entirely full, however. In the interests of raw adventure and Victorian literary convention, as almost always in Stevenson's early tales, women and what the author called “psychology” are excluded from the story. The vivid role of the boy's mother ends almost the moment it begins. She seems the origin of his unflinching practical sense, she is courageous in the midst of mayhem, but then she disappears from the plot.

The society whose story the book recounts is therefore entirely constructed around a narrow quest. The narrative is not intended to rival the complicated three-volume novels of its day. Instead, as virtue, villainy, and courage are consigned to a tight-knit band of adventurers whose common bond is simply the search for treasure. No matter how cleverly Stevenson deploys touches of realistic class distinctions, he abandons the wider social interests of the classic novel, preferring instead to create a male-dominated form of romance, and yet the idea of men venturing upon the Spanish Main, sailing a ship aptly named the *Hispaniola* with little or no guarantee of loyalty, brings unexpected depth to Stevenson's book. If he has a higher philosophic aim, it is to shine a light on the meaning of action in a real and dangerous world. As the author insists more than once in his critical writings and his letters when he downplays “psychology” he substitutes a cinematic realism of specific gesture and scene, providing imaginative depth by observing external facts with a rare finesse of sensory perception.

Like Joseph Conrad, he can describe precisely how a body falls to the ground, having been cut by a saber. Psychology is confined to the briefest and most simply telling moments.

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Nevertheless, while *Treasure Island* centers on discovering buried treasure, it pins its deep revelation on an encounter between a young boy and an older man from which something like a relationship gradually develops. Jim Hawkins discovers that his object of admiration, Long John Silver, is devious, greedy, and dangerous, an unforeseen truth Jim discovers through the course of the novel's twists and turns. Finally the sea cook is a fallen idol to the boy, and the ironic fall is what makes the novel a serious work of art. Jim himself perceives the irony, because he has matured. Henry James called Silver "picturesque" and added that in all the traditional literature of romance, Stevenson had created one of the most remarkable characters in Long John. Perhaps this ironic revelation is the story Stevenson had in mind all along, since he had originally titled the novel *The Sea Cook*. For Jim the ethical test is to read through the mask of a villain, a man who nonetheless is deeply appealing to him. Again, as Henry James observed in *The House of Fiction*, Long John adds weight to an otherwise overactive narrative full of "murders, mysteries, islands of dreadful renown, hairbreadth escapes, miraculous coincidences and buried doubloons." Modern readers would call Long John Silver an anti-hero, and by reacting against this devious but delightful person, Jim escapes from a belief in simple-minded, clear-cut relationships that adorns the works of authors like Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848), who among other favorites wrote *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, or Stevenson's Scottish predecessor J.M. Ballantyne (1825-1894), whose highly successful tale of three shipwrecked boys, *The Coral Island* (1858), was so humorous and optimistic that in our time Nobel laureate William Golding read it turned it on its head, monstrously, as *The Lord of the Flies*. Long John Silver forced the boy's adventure story to grow up, even as its maturing readers could remain adolescents at heart.

## THE AUTHOR IN A CROSSWIND

Here we need a digression from our own story, to insist on Stevenson's unusual complexity, which contributed to the way he wrote. Without constructing large webs of social ambience, he introduced into his fiction the inward moral and emotional conflicts of his Calvinist upbringing, while his later fiction, such as the novella "The Beach of Falesá" (1892), reveals a vigorous and bold rejection of Victorian piety, the era's so-called "morality," which is not surprising since in his early twenties Stevenson had told his parents he was an atheist.

In some ways mother and son shared a dark understanding of life, for Mrs. Stevenson—born Balfour, like the young hero of *Kidnapped* (1886)—was a semi-invalid. In the fashion of many Victorian ladies, she suffered from what was called "uncertain health." Her son's early troubles with breathing, his bronchial sensitivity, and what finally became a complex combination of bronchial and tubercular illness led him to "take the cure" in a sanatorium high in the Swiss Alps, at Davos. Thomas Mann's 1924 novel about disease and genius, *The Magic Mountain*, provides an intensely vivid picture of this medical scene; through all its layers of meaning it raises a question that similarly concerned Stevenson: What indeed is health? Pharmacology could not alter the course of tuberculosis, and it was thought that bracing cold air in a clear mountain climate would remedy the disease. Stevenson spent the winters of 1880 and 1881 at Davos, was erroneously pronounced cured, and left for a life

continued wandering in search of a salubrious climate. Not surprisingly for those who have read *The Magic Mountain* or the life story of the poet John Keats (1795-1821), TB is a disease of fevers and feverish existence. With Stevenson this hectic rhythm animated his virtually desperate travels; he became more of an explorer than a tourist, a restless voyager who knew he would never return home to his beloved country. Scotland always remained an ominous land, however, not least for him because as a child he had been lovingly instructed by his governess, Alice Cunningham, a dedicated soul who filled the child with the darkest tales and scariest bogies to be conjured by Calvinist fears of hell and damnation. Given such a beginning, one is surprised, or relieved, to find that Stevenson was destined to write one of the great parables of the eternal battle between good and evil, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Even here his agnosticism played a part, for *The Strange Case* is made into a highly controlled detective story, as if in clear imitation of a similarly secular author Stevenson much admired, Edgar Allan Poe.

Despite many competing influences, it is clear that Stevenson sought paganism as a natural part of being an artist. A master of perfect poetical forms, he became famous for the delicate and loving verses in *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). Yet his schooling also cut the other way, since he studied the law, was admitted to the bar, and, quite differently, studied the principles of civil engineering. His last novel, *Weir of Hermiston*, left unfinished at his death in 1894, is an acute and troubling study of the violent abuse of judicial power. Having lived in France and effectively bilingual, Stevenson was yet to travel a much wider world. Again cutting crossways, it is said that during his college years in Edinburgh he was a notable bohemian, drinking, carousing, and frequenting the company of prostitutes. His bohemian, literary life in Edinburgh and later in London brought him many friends among them brilliant writers. Meanwhile, as we have seen, the imminent threat of death hung always over him, as he endured a lifelong battle against tuberculosis and frightening bronchial infections. In print he almost never mentioned these afflictions. Even when he was hemorrhaging blood from his lungs, at no point did he avoid the most arduous physical efforts, traveling more widely than most humans ever travel and simultaneously driving himself as an author. For someone so often compelled by the need for movement, it is remarkable that his complete works comprise about twenty-five volumes.

Stevenson died young in a home he built, called Vailima, the "House of the Five Streams," on Western Samoa. Finally this frail man, so thin he looked like a friendly, rather tired ghost, marooned on a remote island of the South Pacific, seems to have seen the dark and the light of life, remaining like many a good Calvinist, obsessed with the question of spiritual and artistic honesty. His religious and cultural background led him to prefer fictions that are subtler than they seem, always gaining their strength from a mixture of atmosphere, action, and expectation.

## THE ARCHETYPE OF LIGHT

In spite of the contraries we have seen, there was one constant in the Stevenson family. His father enjoyed a measure of wealth and prestige as one of Europe's finest civil engineers, specializing in the commercially important profession of lighthouse design and construction. This line of expertise went back from father to grandfather, with an uncle sharing in the honors. At twenty-one, Robert Lou-

Stevenson, the youngest member of the line, read his first and only scientific paper to the Royal Scottish Society of Arts; it was titled “A New Form of Intermittent Light for Lighthouses.” When he was eighteen years old, he had journeyed to the remote coastline of northern Scotland to study conditions for building lighthouses, and there he acquired firsthand knowledge of hostile shores, the sailor’s greatest fear. Later the author’s brief training as an engineer colored his writing, which displays an engineer’s care for precision, all the parts of a story fitted together like carefully cut stones, the whole structure producing masterworks of economy, never a wasted word, never a phrase or description overburdening the arc of the narrative.

Success in following the family profession was expected and would surely have been rewarded, though the fledgling writer would most likely have discerned unusual meanings in the profession. Edgar Allan Poe’s unfinished story, probably his last tale, “The Light-house,” tells the dark side of the lighthouse—namely, isolation from all mankind. The connection to Poe could not be more intriguing for lighthouses are among man’s most direct interventions against the forces of nature, and when they emit intermittent light, they resemble stories symbolically building on their own luminous varieties of their “various light,” as the great poet John Milton once phrased it.

The young man’s family, it happens, were famous and financially secure in their chosen field of casting light over the waters. Creative engineering skill, careful and imaginative control over the details of construction, was a major family aim. Stevenson’s uncle built one of the most remarkable of all lighthouses, Skerryvore, an engineering triumph. Thomas Stevenson, the author’s father, would happily have called the technology of “intermittent light” a picturesque effect as much as a practical necessity.

When *Treasure Island* was composed, Thomas Stevenson called it “my kind of picturesque.” The invention of the story was intended specifically to please, first, an eleven-year-old stepson, Lloyd Osbourne; second, Thomas Stevenson; and third, Stevenson’s new wife, Fanny Osbourne. Fanny was artistically talented, with strong literary tastes, and in later years herself became a writer. Thomas Stevenson had liked her almost at once, in part because he saw that she supported her husband’s literary endeavors. As a wedding present Thomas gave Fanny and Robert a house in England. An American, she had married a high-flying prospector whom she divorced, partly out of a desire to marry Stevenson. In all respects Thomas appreciated her for her strength and intelligence. She nursed her husband when he was ill, had no hesitations about roughing it, and was not afraid to take risks, and she understood the principles of a life of *suspense-atmosphere, action, and expectation*. She was an ideal partner in the enterprise.

## TREASURE AND THE ADVENTUROUS QUEST

If we go back to the origins of adventure story fiction, we discover that the heroic quest remains its principal myth. Quest-romances take many different forms, whether it be the search for the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend, for the Golden Fleece (as in the *Argonautica*, the ancient epic of Jason and the Argonauts), for the safe return home after perilous Homeric wanderings, as in the *Odyssey*, or for a wide range of ends both material and spiritual. What is important is that, once established in classic form, the great adventure stories render all readers, of any age, essentially children at heart. The quest gives us our dream of success, and when we tire of daily labor in making a living, it returns us to the time of the dream. Thus for *Treasure Island* the questing dream comes out of a long preceding history. Besides two early travel books based on journeys in France, Stevenson told stories in homage to the Near Eastern tradition of loosely woven adventures: his *New Arabian Nights* (1882), in which the

exotic nature of travel to distant lands is imagined as occurring in stories set in Europe. This art of romance thrives on the incredible voyage, the sailor's yarn (in his day perhaps more fashionable than any other type), the tall frontier tale, including exotic or utopian settings that could never actually exist, because romance demands almost complete power to overcome all human obstacles. The mode of romance therefore demands freedom to imagine. Yet the tradition seems to mix realism on some level with such unreal situations for the hero. In *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) Daniel Defoe mingles fact and fiction liberally. The same mixture appears in Arthurian lore, while with the rise of the modern middle classes a new kind of romance arises around the quest for material success.

By Stevenson's time Protestant beliefs and secular technology had long since fueled the rise of capitalism. *Robinson Crusoe*, while it inaugurated the realistic tradition of the novel in England, makes a continuous critical commentary on mercantile capitalism and its value system, especially as they derive aid and comfort from Protestant Christianity. Crusoe, whose name plays on the name of Christ, is in effect a marooned capitalist, who must rebuild his fortune, by returning his commercial skills to their most primitive beginnings. In this process Crusoe learns who he actually is. Such a quest is tied to the science of counting up supplies, enemies, distances, and even dreams, all of which become the very stuff of realistic modern fiction. Typically the castaway begins his lonely sojourn by surveying what is left to him from the ruins of shipwreck—that is, making the inventory of tools available beyond mere life itself. To be sure, virtually all the major novelists comment, directly or allusively, on the nature and sources of wealth, often indicating how these derive from imperial expansion. Scholars have found these middle-class indicators in what might seem the strangest places—for example, the novels of Jane Austen. Character and commerce seem not so secretly linked. Yet how could it be otherwise, since the bourgeois novel attempts an accounting of life? At the end of the nineteenth century, Henry James claimed for the novel that its function was to provide genuine “criticism” of the way we live, to provide a kind of narrative philosophy, storytelling endowed with serious levels of meaning, suggesting profound and often obscure themes. Stevenson's essay “Humble Remonstrance” (1884; *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays*, see “For Further Reading”) countered James's critical principle by favoring romance. There is no way, the essay claimed, for the novel to “compete with life.” Instead the novel should maintain its exhilarating imaginative independence from the crude facts of existence, drawing upon those facts solely as a resource for delineating passion. (The same article faults the distinguished American novelist and editor William Dean Howells for a similar dependency upon the new naturalistic style.) Stevenson wanted to keep the idea of treasure somehow pure. With Henry James, whom Stevenson so much admired and who became his valued correspondent, the idea of a treasure sought by adventurous quest took on an iron aspect. James's critical gaze, enhanced by his own obsession with wealth, led him to analyze the typical methods of acquiring it, such as real estate speculation in the value of houses or New Englanders piling up industrial wealth or European princes marrying American money. In these late novels and stories James's critical conceptions collide with material obsessions, and the results are often obscure, even uncanny, as in *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*.

By the author's own account “the seed” of his novel came from the idea of a treasure chest he found in another adventure story, Charles Kingsley's *At Last* (1871). As a goal of acquisitive good luck and daring, treasure in general provides the motive, indirectly or directly (consider Rider Haggard's immensely popular novel *King Solomon's Mines*) for all sorts of adventures. The nineteenth century saw a new world of yearning popular literature, much like Hollywood movies and television shows today. Sentimental romances, “penny dreadfuls,” and “shilling shockers” enthralled large masses of

readers. The fossilized popular novels of this earlier date now sit moldering on the storage shelves of pre-electronic libraries, their desiccated pages exuding a dismal smell. Once great in number and in acclaim among the young, they saved many a tedious day from misery. The adventure novels of G. A. Henty (1832-1902) appeared in more than 150 volumes. In twentieth-century Britain, Henty was displaced by the more up-to-date Percy Westerman (1876-1959; at school youngsters called him “Percy Piffler,” to show they knew their author), who wrote more than 100 such books. In the United States, to match such prolific output one would look to the 135 “dime novels” of Horatio Alger (1832-1899), again showing how the market of books for the young continued and still continues to put a premium on production. This literature multiplies mainly because it lacks any serious, thought-provoking realism about the hazards of either romance or adventure. The book cannot be read fast enough! Sentimental romances and the adventure stories are of course the same commodity, masked by gender difference. If the novel is to work, it must on some level achieve an illusion of escape, and also of achieving a goal at the same time.

The model for all such escapes, for males or females, for children or grown-ups, is quickly to gain a treasure someone else acquired slowly or systemically, a treasure one takes from the accumulator by a single stroke of violent daring. Treasure hunting is basic adventure, a child’s version of using venture capital. The freebooting sailors of the Elizabethan period, such as Sir John Hawkins or Sir Francis Drake, who circumnavigated the globe in a three-year period, were always called “gentlemen adventurers,” no matter how ugly their greedy manners and predatory customs may have been. The Hudson’s Bay Company was manned and governed by “gentlemen adventurers.” So, later, was the East India Company. The adventuring name was used across the board. Meanwhile, the location and the precise kind of treasure sought was immaterial: The quest might involve discovering a northwest passage to the fabled Orient. For the tragic hero, Sir Walter Raleigh, it might be to find gold at the Orinoco River in South America. After Marco Polo it might be to carry rare commodities overland from India and farther east, along the routes of the spice trade and silk trade. Furthermore, if the acquisition of wealth underlay this new mode of venturing forth, religion and missionary zeal could underwrite any such enterprise, as with the medieval Crusades.

For Bible readers treasure might recall the gold and frankincense and myrrh brought to Bethlehem by the three wise men of the East, sage kings who followed a guiding providential star. In romantic terms treasure meant what John Keats, reading the Elizabethan translation of Homer, once called “the realms of gold.” Realistically we could say that the quest for treasure—the grown-up version of the child’s treasure hunt, amounted finally to a falsely legalized grab for loot; this is how Joseph Conrad viewed unrestrained imperialism. The buccaneer, the pirate, and later the mercenary “privateer” went off on their adventures solely to seize wealth laboriously or murderously accumulated by others. Armed expeditions were sent out from European harbors, to dispossess other nations who had already sent their own predatory engines of conquest to the New World. And of course these representatives of other nations were themselves virtual pirates, the agents of new empires in the making.

In fact, the gentleman adventurer was a licensed pirate—licensed because piracy was otherwise a crime on the high seas, punishable by death. Some notorious pirates made sure they had enough money back home to buy off any possible prosecution. The famed Captain Kidd was a kind of maritime mafioso, using and abusing the law at will. The career of pirate, we might say, was almost officially sanctioned, since commonly sea captains of the sixteenth century were given letters of marque from king and country, authorizing them to prey upon the fleets of other nations. English sailors were especially prone to this dangerous occupation. Royal authority tended to make theft an

violence legal, in the eyes of the home country, so it may be more accurate to say that pirates were mercenaries who paid their expenses by keeping a major share of the booty they took from unsuspecting traders. We are not surprised, in the present account of Stevenson's literary context, that besides *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe wrote a large *General History of the Pyrates* (1724), a book whose title page carries the name Captain Charles Johnson as author. The book was often later known as "Johnson's History of Pirates," and under that name Stevenson would have studied it.

The striking and significant thing about such histories is at once apparent from Defoe's title page where thirteen different pirate captains are listed by name, the first of them mentioned as "the famous Captain Avery and his Companions," implying that pirates and piracy enjoyed glamour then, as they still do. Theft, mayhem, and murder are by no means unpopular subjects, and the father of all such stars is the pirate on the Spanish Main. The pirate is in some important sense the natural hero of romance, for he is allowed to do what no ordinary person may do. He can be violent in pursuit of his ends. He can enslave the crews of ships he boards. He can rob and kill owners at will. He is the romantic highwayman of the oceans. He is, in a word, a hero, the man of action. In adventure stories he may be treated as cruel and sinister, like J. M. Barrie's Captain Hook, but he slides away in many stories, having earned our sneaking admiration for his daring. He is the bad man Huck Finn never wanted to be. He is the one who refuses to live a life "of quiet desperation."

There is a kind of wild poetic justice, then, in the link Stevenson himself draws between his method as the author of *Treasure Island* and the piracy that is required in principle if any treasure is truly to be sought and won. His novel seems to be not only about piracy but itself actually practices piracy and he admits this, almost as if he can hardly believe it. The author calls himself a pirate of a most unusual kind, which in fact carries us back to our first question: How can a mythical story like *Treasure Island* come from our modern print culture? The question arises from the thought: Who owns the stories inherited from ancient tradition? Close to the end of his life Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a short essay on this subject, "My First Book—*Treasure Island*," in which he confessed that his novel had taken many small bits and pieces from various sources, including *Robinson Crusoe*, at least one novel by his English predecessor Captain Marryat, Poe's famous short stories, and works by two other pioneering American authors, James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving.

More than one author in the past has proudly announced he was stealing, not borrowing, such materials. Piracy in literature, admired by some, enraging to others, would include "taking prizes" like the fort Stevenson had discovered in Captain Marryat's *Masterman Ready* (1841-1842). There is a powerful rule about myth-making, however, and it forgives the writer. When Stevenson uses Marryat's stockade in chapter XIX, it becomes our author's own possession (lawyers would call it his intellectual property), because Stevenson transforms the stockade scene for his own uses, according to an ancient literary law of the rights of genius. In his essay he cheerfully admits that "stolen waters are proverbially sweet." This confession tells a lot about Stevenson, for like Shakespeare he understood the mythological power of proverbs, but more personally he would know about the sweetness of stolen waters, for he had climbed many a mountainside and drunk the clear, free mountain streams ("burns" as they are called in Scotland) tumbling down hills that legally belonged to someone else. Stevenson understood that all seriously inspired art requires a good deal of trespassing. Thus he cheerfully admitted his purloined letters and captured images: "It seemed to me original as sin; it seemed to belong to me like my right eye." This imaginative piracy was a kind of authorized disobedience, a justified trespass requiring no legal permission.

One catches a glimpse of this dream in the way Stevenson and his wife, Fanny, chose to spend the



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