



Robert Louis
Stevenson
TREASURE
ISLAND


GIUNTI CLASSICS


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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Treasure Island

Edited with an Introduction by
Luciana Pirè

 **GIUNTI**

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Introduction

Robert Louis Stevenson is one of the few writers whose works cannot be dissociated from the romance of his life. The Scottish novelist James Barrie left the following vivid portrayal of his fellow-student: “I saw a velvet coat, a lean figure with long hair (going grey) and stooping shoulders, the face young and rather pinched but extraordinarily mobile, the manner doggedly debonair”. His bohemian manner of dressing was due in part to a permanent lack of cash, but certainly also to a deliberate rejection of his bourgeois social class. It was undoubtedly the attractive power of this personal charm, added to the fact that he was an invalid, that R.L.S. exerted so strongly throughout his life.

The only child of Thomas Stevenson and Margaret Isabella Balfour, Louis was born in a Georgian terrace-house in Edinburgh, on 13 November 1850. Because his parents feared for his life when he was two, the ever-present threat of death intensified their indulgence towards the delicate child. It is true that he acquired from his mother a physical delicacy in the form of a lung weakness, but this was counterbalanced by her gift of humour and optimism. As for his father, a lighthouse engineer, Stevenson later portrayed him as a strict Presbyterian, a difficult and contradictory man of “blended sternness and softness, wise and prejudiced”. Towards the end of his own life Stevenson was saying something very similar about himself. But the person who most affected his early life was certainly Alison Cunningham (known as Cummy), his devoted nurse, whose gory tales of Scottish religious martyrs nourished Louis’s imagination. His fascination with his own family heritage (*Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, 1882, and *Memories and Portraits*, 1887) went hand in hand with his profound involvement with Scotland, past and present. In the projected ‘Four Great Scotsmen’, Stevenson paid tribute to the greatest Scottish figures: the poet Robert Burns, the philosopher David Hume, and John Knox, the father of the National Reformed Church; he also included his favourite novelist Walter Scott, whose fictional adventures had lent excitement to his long days in bed as a solitary boy.

Because of his chronic coughs and fevers, he continually had to

interrupt his schooling. Thomas Stevenson intended to bring up his son in accordance with the long family tradition of civil and marine engineering; but, in his rebellion against conventions, what mattered most to Louis was finding friends, smoking and drinking, spending long evenings in the disreputable taverns of the Old Town and consorting with prostitutes. Of course, Thomas could not see these entertainments as socially correct and the differences between them came to a head. At the age of twenty-one Louis confided to his father that he did not wish to become an engineer and wanted to become a writer instead. To soften the blow, he took up law studies instead and finished them in 1875. A brass plaque was put outside the front door of his house: 'R L Stevenson, Advocate'. The next day he was on his way to France to join his cousin Bob, who was a lively member of the famous 'Barbizon School', a colony of landscape painters in a village near Paris.

At Grez-sur-Loing the cousins spent the summer of 1875 together and this was the scene of Stevenson's first meeting with Fanny Osbourne in 1876. She appeared to be a fellow-painter, which made her unusual in that all-male company. She was thirty-six, an independent American 'new woman', separated from her husband and with two children, Lloyd and Isobel. She usually wore Indian dresses and liked to walk barefoot. He was twenty-five, and fell deeply in love with her. Two years later Louis set out for California to persuade Fanny to divorce her husband and marry him. Knowing that his parents would approve neither of the trip nor the marriage, he left without informing them and cut himself off from his father's financial help. *The Amateur Emigrant* (published posthumously in 1894), and its sequel *Across the Plains* (1879), are both accounts of Stevenson's first journey to America. His extended trip proved disastrous: he lost weight after a long fever, and those who saw him at that time described his gait as unsteady as that of a drunkard, and "his clothes hung about him, as the clothes of a convalescent".

Barely recovered from this near fatal illness, Stevenson moved into cheap lodgings in San Francisco where he and Fanny were married in 1880. His friends secretly raised two dollars a week to enable the *Californian* editor Bronson to hire the impoverished Stevenson as a part-time reporter. He never allowed himself to give in to self-pity and in fact he faced ill health with cheerful courage; but Fanny was worried because for several months they were unable to meet current bills. In the end Stevenson took the decisive step to return home, accept an annual allowance from his father and to agree to live in a house that his parents had bought for him and his extended family at Bournemouth. He and his wife lived in England until 1887 but during this time he achieved neither happiness nor wealth.

By this time he had written most of those works which were earned him his fame: two travel books, *Inland Voyage* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879); *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881), a collection of essays passing from vivid memories of childhood into the grim reflections of a moralist; some remarkable tales gathered under the title *New Arabian Nights* (1882); and a book of “semi-serious, semi-smiling” rhymes, *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885). Sidney Colvin, who was his closest friend and advisor in literary matters, encouraged him to try his talent in the field of the novel.

Treasure Island, his first full-length work of fiction, was published in November 1883, in time for the Christmas buying, and its success was immediate. Serious-minded people declared that they could not put the book aside once they had taken it up. As a result of its success Stevenson gained new self-confidence, along with a strong justification for devoting time to the writing of further stories about pirates and brigands, the sort he himself had loved as a child (*Kidnapped*, 1886, and its continuation *Catriona*, 1893; *Prince Otto*, 1885; and *The Black Arrow*, 1888). Although they have been regarded as classics of juvenile literature, they are not exactly nursery tales. Even in *Treasure Island* an air of suspense and treachery is maintained throughout, and the adolescent Jim Hawkins is linked to the equivocal Long John Silver, like Jekyll to Hyde. The moralist in him had been always preoccupied with sin, personal guilt and the composite nature of man, as was immediately evident when a work emerged which was the very antithesis of an innocent adventure: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). For the first time Stevenson gained the attention of the man in the street, as well as that of the readers of literary journals and hard-back books. On his second triumphant arrival in New York, the *New York World Magazine* offered the author of *Dr Jekyll* \$10,000 a year for a weekly contribution. Although gratified, Stevenson was nervous about accepting such a vast sum, accustomed by this time to years of poverty.

The death of his father brought about a general change. At last, Louis felt that the ties which had bound him to Britain could now be severed. On 22 August 1887, he left Britain for the last time, sailing for the United States in order to seek a friendlier climate. Fanny, Lloyd and Stevenson’s old mother (who had left the sheltered comfort of a large house to go into voluntary exile with her only son) accompanied him. He soon found himself in a sanatorium near Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks, where the life about him offered only depressing dullness. It was not a place to tarry in for long. A yachting cruise was quickly planned, and for nearly three years he “wandered up and down the face of the Pacific” aboard one ship or another.

He visited the Marquesas, the Hawaiian Islands and the Gilberts.

In Papeete, Tahiti, Louis fell seriously ill and, thanks to Fanny's determination and insistence, a long stay was decided on. The local aristocracy welcomed them, and Princess Moë insisted on caring for him personally. His health miraculously improved; therefore, he continued his journey finally reaching Samoa. This was a place to remain in and in which to build a proper home. He purchased an estate of 300 acres in the hills and, while the site for his house (which was to be called "Vailima" meaning "the five streams") was being cleared of jungle, he sailed for Sydney. In November 1890, Stevenson made his way back to Samoa. No one who has read *In the South Seas* (1896) will ever forget the emotional enchantment with which the first sight of the island "which touched a virginity of sense", touched him. Later he gratefully remembered the prophetic visit of a certain Mr Seed, a New Zealand governor, who kept young Stevenson up until dawn with wondrous tales of the South Seas, an ideal place for sufferers from respiratory diseases. Europe never saw him again.

This vagabond from birth had at last found a way of life with which he could identify. He wished from the start to make friends among the Samoans and, as he got to know them better, he became interested in their political problems and fascinated by their history and culture, songs and tattoos, legends and traditions. He fought hard with words, sending off letters to *The Times* in London to defend the rights of the native people against imperial exploitation by Britain and Germany, so that attempts were made by the governments of both countries to have him deported as a political menace. In the middle of nowhere he became a keen reporter; and among primitives he tried to reproduce on his flageolet the scores of Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, and Chopin. Considering the physical disabilities that denied him the normal activities of a healthy man, the extent to which he attempted to lead the life of a fit, sound human being is quite amazing. The vitality which he achieved during this period was like a rebirth for Stevenson.

For the first time the novelist's imagination played upon scenes and characters of a world with which he had direct contact. Before his first year at Vailima was half over, he had written two of his most admirable fables, *The Bottle Imp* and *The Beach of Falesá*, both stories of South Sea natives seen in relation to white men; and two novels written in collaboration with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb Tide* (1894) and *The Wrecker* (1892), the second of which tells of Loudon Dodd's adventures in Paris art circles, his shady finances in California, and his transformation into a trader among the South Sea Islands.

Stevenson was highly praised by a number of his contemporaries, including Henry James and Arthur Conan Doyle; they thought of him as a writer moving towards the accomplishment of great things; but he

was only forty-four when he died, struck down suddenly by a cerebral haemorrhage on 3 December 1894. At this time he was still dictating to his stepdaughter another novel he was busy writing, *Weir of Hermiston* (1896). Many think that this might have been his masterpiece, if only he had finished it.

“One little army after another marching up with their chiefs” (his stepson Lloyd Osbourne has recorded) came to fulfil Stevenson’s wish to be buried upon the summit of Mount Vaea and to cut a path for the coffin through the dense jungle. The following day his affectionate Samoan friends and servants carried up Stevenson’s body on their shoulders. They had given him the native title of *Tusitala* (narrator of stories) and credited him with supernatural powers, in the knowledge that he who lived through the telling of tales was capable of the greatest magic of all.

Treasure Island

Treasure Island was originally entitled *The Sea Cook*, and was written with extraordinary speed in the summer of 1881. Stevenson’s purpose was simple: he was to amuse his twelve-year-old stepson, Lloyd, kept indoors during a wet and dreary holiday in Braemar, Scotland. Stevenson drew an imaginary map of an island, wrote in some piratical-sounding names, and painted in the sea and the main features using a shilling box of watercolours. One evening, he started planning the first chapter: “It was to be a story for boys; no need of psychology or fine writing; and I had a boy at hand to be the touchstone”. Next morning he began to write a story and each day, after dinner, he read out to the family his work in progress. They were greatly taken by the story, and Stevenson’s father in particular was attracted by it. As his son later remembered, “He caught fire at once with all the romance and childishness of his original nature”. He entered so fully into the enterprise that he was eager to help; unfortunately, he also offered some suggestions that were inappropriate to the spirit of the work: namely, that “a kind of a religious tract” should be introduced when the old buccaneer tells of his past.

Stevenson had just finished the first fifteen chapters, when a chance visitor named Alexander Japp heard some of the work and suggested it should be sent off to a boys’ magazine, *Young Folk*. As his literary earnings were exceedingly lean at the time, Stevenson accepted and the first episode appeared under the pseudonym of Captain George North in October 1881. The novel was left unfinished for some time, despite its regular appearance in serial form, but Stevenson managed

to finish it in the winter. The final episode of *Treasure Island* appeared on 28 January 1882. The first reactions were not good. To get a better price for it, Stevenson proposed to publish the story in book form under his own name. After at least two publishers had refused it, his wife and many of his London friends thought he was wasting his time. But Stevenson was perfectly right. The book was published on 14 November 1883 and its pre-Christmas success was immediate. A month later Stevenson wrote to his parents that "*Treasure Island* generally goes on in a triumphal manner". The first edition sold out very quickly and, as rumours reported, even the Prime Minister, Gladstone, talked about it all the time. Ironically, Stevenson replied that he "would do better to attend to the imperial affairs of England". *Treasure Island* marked the beginning of his career as a profitable writer, and Fanny could finally afford expensive things as the royalties poured in.

The fact that the style in this novel is less calculatedly artful than it had been in his earlier fiction places this work in a classical category along with *Robison Crusoe* (1719). The action is set on the South coast of England in the 18th century; the narrator is young Jim Hawkins, who discovers a packet of papers in the chest of an old sailor who had stayed at the Admiral Benbow Inn, run by Jim's mother. The packet contains a map of an island and the location of a treasure buried there by a pirate named Captain Flint. Jim delivers the map to his friends Dr Livesey and Squire Trelawney, who together decide to outfit a schooner, the *Hispaniola*, to look for the treasure. Jim shall go as cabin boy and a certain Long John Silver is hired as cook. All goes well till the voyage is almost completed; it is then that Jim overhears the talk of John Silver and a couple of other men. They are plotting to seize the ship and kill the faithful members of the crew. After a series of thrilling fights and adventures, the plan is completely thwarted. Finally the ship returns to England and the treasure is divided. And, as Jim concludes, each man's share will be used wisely or foolishly, according to his nature.

George Meredith, a widely recognized novelist, called *Treasure Island* "the best of boys' books and a book to make one a boy again". Beyond doubt, it is a boys' book, but Stevenson so compounded his story that the lawless mutineers should be seen as complementary to the civilized and honourable men. All his characters, in fact, are drawn with that same ambiguity which so fascinated the author of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. But if the reviewers praised Stevenson's vivid delineation of characters, the character they felt to be most interesting was the pirate leader Long John Silver, the real hero of the book and surely one of Stevenson's most powerful creations. Many years later, he still retained a kind of affection for him: "I was not a little proud of John Silver; and to this day rather admire that

smooth and formidable adventurer". The combination of a sharp personality and a crippled body held for him, as for his readers, a durable emotional appeal.

That John Silver was intended from the outset to play an important part in the narrative is clear from the title originally selected by its author, *The Sea Cook* (it was the editor who later changed it). The equivocal "sea-cook" is a mixture of cunning and audacity, of treachery and loyalty. When Jim is captured by the pirates, for instance, he is instrumental in saving the boy's life, after acknowledgement of the mutual respect existing between them: "If I saved your life, you saved mine; and I'll not forget it", Silver promises Jim in a kind of friendly reconciliation.

It is significant that at the conclusion he is not punished for his crimes but escapes when the ship stops in at a South American port to replenish stores. "I daresay he met his old Negress," Jim comments, "and perhaps still lives in comfort with her and Captain Flint". In its odd way, the relationship between Jim, the innocent boy, and John Silver, the calculated villain, forms one of the dominant strands of the story. This one-legged intelligent rogue was based on Stevenson's friend William Ernest Henley, a poet and writer, who had suffered amputation for tuberculosis, and whose ambivalence of character made him a good model for John Silver. Stevenson had first met Henley in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and decided to immortalise him, though "deprived of all his finer qualities".

Treasure Island is also notable for its acute understanding of a child's perspective on the adult world. Eager as a boy would be to see an unexplored island and enjoy extraordinary adventures there, Jim relates his limited experience of life to forces beyond his understanding – cruelty, duplicity and hatred. In the course of the story, his role is transformed from that of passive onlooker to active participant. The things that Jim does are carried out on a boyish impulse, though always courageously. But at the end, the boy will learn, knowingly or not, a good deal about the moral ambiguity of human behaviour. Thus, the story is not simply a record of the quest for the treasure but of Jim's progress towards maturity.

TO
S.L.O.,
AN AMERICAN GENTLEMAN,
IN ACCORDANCE WITH WHOSE CLASSIC TASTE
THE FOLLOWING NARRATIVE HAS BEEN DESIGNED,
IT IS NOW, IN RETURN FOR NUMEROUS DELIGHTFUL HOURS,
AND WITH THE KINDEST WISHES,
DEDICATED BY HIS AFFECTIONATE FRIEND,
THE AUTHOR.

TO THE
HESITATING PURCHASER

If sailor tales to sailor tunes,
 Storm and adventure, heat and cold,
If schooners, islands, and maroons
 And Buccaneers and buried Gold,
And all the old romance, retold
 Exactly in the ancient way,
Can please, as me they pleased of old,
 The wiser youngsters of today:

– So be it, and fall on! If not,
 If studious youth no longer crave,
His ancient appetites forgot,
 Kingston, or Ballantyne the brave,
Or Cooper of the wood and wave:
 So be it, also! And may I
And all my pirates share the grave
 Where these and their creations lie!

Part One

The Old Buccaneer

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 sittyyated 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 to him 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 over-riding 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 anyone to leave the inn till he had drunk himself sleepy and reeled off to bed.