

# PAINTED WINDOWS

by

ROBERT K. LARSON



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 7 December, 1992

COPYRIGHT 1992 BY ROBERT K. LARSON  
(All rights reserved)

## PAINTED WINDOWS

There is a fable about a monk. He was walking in the woods, when he heard a nightingale singing. The magic of its song was so enchanting, that he attempted to go nearer to the bird so that he could hear even better; but it flew from one thicket to another. He followed the music as the bird flew on ahead of him. He followed and followed. Ultimately, when he returned to his convent, it was fifty years later. Scarcely any of his brethren still survived to greet him.

The monk is not the only one over whom the song of the nightingale has cast its spell. Keats in his *Ode to a Nightingale* has expressed his yearning to hear the bird in this way:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,

. . . .

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

. . . .

Away! Away! for I would fly to thee

. . . .

. . . on the viewless wings of poesy,

. . . .

Adieu! Adieu!, thy plaintive anthem fades

. . . and now 'tis buried deep

In the next valley glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

## PAINTED WINDOWS

The image of the nightingale was one which Robert Louis Stevenson used in an essay entitled *The Lantern Bearers*. He related the fable of the monk and the bird, and, referring to the nightingale, he said, "It is not only in the woods that the enchanter carols, . . . He sings in the most doleful places."

Doleful indeed was the external reality of Stevenson's life. As a small boy he often suffered fits of coughing, fevers, earaches, and something called croup. The shadow of tuberculosis was his constant companion. From the time he was thirty years old he endured repeated hemorrhaging in his lungs and bronchial tubes. As an adult his five feet ten inches of height carried only one hundred twelve pounds. At one time he was so emaciated that one could encircle his thigh with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. The adverse winds of illness interrupted him and buffeted him all of his life. It is with good reason one biography of him is entitled *Voyage to Windward*.<sup>1</sup> Earnings from writing were meager in his early years. Later in life he once said, "I haven't had a fair chance, I've had to spend nearly all my life in the expectation of death."<sup>2</sup> When his doctor advised him to move or die, he became an exile from Scotland and a sailor in the South Seas, and he settled in Samoa, where he died in his forty-fifth year.

What a different world it is when we read him! We envision a pirate, with a cutlass, a silhouette against the blue sea. We see *Treasure Island*. Who can forget Jim Hawkins, sitting in the cross trees of the ship, his shoulder pinned to the mast by the pirate's knife? Who does not wince at the sting of that wound? Who can forget Jim firing both pistols, and the body of Israel Hands splashing in the water below?

Throughout his lifetime Stevenson roamed in the realm of his imagination. Despite a background of illness, loneliness, stern Calvinism, tensions between him and his father, self-doubt, and his sense of guilt, he produced a copious stream of romances, fantasies, and adventures. Thus when he was living at Bournemouth, in southern England, and his health confined him at home, this is how he dreamed of himself:

. . . the leader of a great horde of irregular cavalry . . . turning in the saddle to look back on my whole command (some five thousand strong) following me at the hand-gallop up the road out of the burning valley by moonlight.<sup>3</sup>

## PAINTED WINDOWS

Stevenson's essay entitled *The Lantern Bearers* is aptly named, for it does indeed illuminate the spirit in which he created much of his work. He played his theme against a grey backdrop of merely realistic writing, and in so doing, he is, in a sense, perhaps as realistic as any writer.

Stevenson began this essay by painting a picture of an activity of his youth, which involved devices known as bull's-eye lanterns. On occasion, he and his friends would gather at night, each with a bull's-eye lantern clipped on his belt, underneath his top-coat. The boys would meet on the shore near the village of North Berwick, on the Firth of Forth, where they huddled in the lee of a dune in the links, or climbed into the bilge of a fishing boat, down out of the wind. There they would reveal the lanterns, flickering in the dark. He tells us:

... in the checquering glimmer, under the huge windy hall of the night, and cheered by the rich steam of toasting tinware, these fortunate young gentlemen would crouch together in the cold sand of the links or on the scaly bilges of the fishing boat, and delight themselves with inappropriate talk. ... But ... The essence of this bliss was to walk by yourself in the black night; the slide shut, the top-coat buttoned; not a ray escaping, ... a mere pillar of darkness in the dark; and all the while, deep down in the privacy of your fool's heart, to know you had a bull's-eye at your belt, and to exult and sing over the knowledge.

The story of Stevenson's short life is a story as varied and romantic as any romantic novel. There have been many biographers, and they are all drawn to their subject as moths to a flame.

Stevenson's boyhood is the wellspring of many of his writings. It was at Edinburgh that Robert Louis Stevenson came into this world on November 13, 1850, mid-century in the Victorian age. His father, Thomas, was a prosperous civil engineer, with a deep and abiding faith in Calvinist Presbyterianism. His mother was the daughter of Lewis Balfour, a minister of the Church of Scotland at Colinton, a village about four miles from old Edinburgh. They were well acquainted in the polite society of the city.

Young Stevenson, who in his early years was often called Louis, became acquainted with ships, harbors, and the sea at an early age. The life work of both father and grandfather was the building and tending of lighthouses around the Scottish coast, and the maintenance of sup-

## PAINTED WINDOWS

port for the light keepers. As a lad of thirteen years Louis made the rounds with his father on the lighthouse yacht to visit the lighthouses and the light keepers. His grandfather had built twenty lighthouses. The best known of these was the Bell rock lighthouse, built in 1807, and truly a great engineering feat. Its one hundred foot tower rested upon shoals offshore about twelve miles eastward from the Scottish coast, where at high tide the rock was twelve feet beneath the waves. Louis's father, Thomas, built the Dhu Heartach Rock Lighthouse, also offshore, fifteen miles from the west coast of Scotland, off the islands of Erraid and Mull. Louis lived there, on Earraid, for three weeks one summer, watching his father's firm supervise the construction work.

When he was very young, his mother and his nurse read extensively to him. His nurse, Alison Cunningham, known as "Cummy," introduced him to the Bible, the Shorter Catechism, and the Covenanting writers, whose covenants bound them to uphold the Presbyterian faith. To her, such things as the theater and the novel were sinful. When Louis was eight years old he discovered that he enjoyed reading for himself. Thence as a young man he pursued his reading in the New Testament, Walt Whitman, Herbert Spencer, Shakespeare, Dumas, Montaigne, Bunyan, Horace, Pepys, Burns, Hazlitt, Heine, Keats, Fielding and others.

His youthful imagination was exercised with the melodrama of Skelt. Skelt was the name given to a toy theater called "Skelt's Juvenile Drama," the inventor of which was a man named Skelt. This toy involved a variety of cut-out figures and plays which were supplied for the juvenile would-be directors of melodrama. So intense was his involvement with ideas for plays that, in later years when writing of his youth, he referred to himself as a "Skelt-drunk" boy.

The Colinton manse was a gathering place for Louis and his cousins, who were his principal early playmates. Over them, we are told, "he cast the spell of his imagination in devising games, and they submitted to the force of his character in accepting the roles he saw fit to allot."<sup>4</sup>

Despite episodes of illness, his boyhood activities included fishing, bathing, wading, riding, and something called "crusoeing." As a boy of fourteen, he was a wild and reckless horseman.

When he was seventeen he entered the University at Edinburgh. During his three and one-half years there, he refined his skills in the art

## PAINTED WINDOWS

of truancy, but he did obtain certificates of attendance for his civil engineering studies.

He and his companions spent much time in the invention of whimsical and silly games. They invented something called JINK, which consisted in doing absurd things for the sake of the absurdity and for laughter.

Among their pranks was the development and deployment of the fictitious John Libbel. Louis's cousin Bob had invented this name on one desperate occasion when he had pawned his dress trousers. The boys invented silly stories about the fictitious man and printed business cards for him. A package with nothing in it would be delivered "with Mr. Libbel's compliments" to the victim of the prank. Inquiries would be made at lodging houses, "Has Mr. Libbel come yet?" and a message would be left for him. The height of the nonsense was the matter of the Libbel Succession. Louis and Bob would talk with each other about their search for the heir to the great Libbel fortune, doing this loudly enough to arouse the interest of people nearby. Their reputation for pranks traveled. One time they sought to spin some absurdity with the clerk in the jewelry shop owned by a man named Bargany, but after a moment the clerk was on to them, and said, "I know who you are," "you're the two Stevensons." "Oh," he said, "Bargany's been dying to see you." And he told them to return later and have tea with Bargany. But they never did.

In his student years, he struggled with religious and moral questions. He called himself an atheist. He questioned the strict dogma which characterized his father's faith. He rebelled at the idea that he had to feel guilty and sinful, but he was troubled with what to him seemed the injustices in life. Referring to himself in the third person in his book on *Lay Morals*, he described some of his problems:

... He began to perceive that life was a handicap upon strange, wrong sided principles; and not, as he had been told, a fair and equal race. He began to tremble that he himself had been unjustly favored, when he saw all the avenues of wealth, and power and comfort closed against so many of his competitors and equals, and held unwearingly open before so idle, desultory, and so dissolute a being as himself ...<sup>5</sup>

During his student days he was elected to membership in the Speculative Society, a debating and literary society of some antiquity, to which

## PAINTED WINDOWS

Sir Walter Scott had belonged. Its rooms were in the buildings of the University of Edinburgh which he describes in this way:

... a hall, Turkey carpeted, hung with pictures, looking, when lighted up with fire and candle, like some goodly dining room, a passage-like library, walled with books in wire cages, and a corridor with a fireplace, benches, a table, many prints of famous members, and a mural tablet to the virtues of a former secretary . . .

There were thirty ordinary members, who became honorary members after four years. Meetings were held once a week from November to March. An essay was read and criticized. Then a motion was debated. Unlike papers which are read before The Chicago Literary Club,—which get off without criticism,—scot free, so to speak,—these Speculative Society essays were criticized. This regimen kept both essayist and listeners on their toes, whereas, in Chicago, one needs a good opening and a respectable closing, and, as for the middle, well, sometimes at least, it is accompanied by gentle noises of eventide which often follow good food and drink.

Louis's first essay to be presented to the Speculative Society was entitled "The Influence of the Covenanting Persecution of the Scotch Mind," no doubt a reaction to his early immersion in Calvinism. One debate at the Spec presented the question: "Is the abolition of Capital Punishment desirable?" Louis opened the affirmative, but there was no second to the proposition. Louis's father had intended that his son receive an engineering education which would prepare him to carry on the work begun by his great grandfather. No doubt many a young man would have eagerly seized the opportunity for such an entrée into the business and professional world. But young Stevenson had this to say about his education as an engineer:

It takes a man into the open air; it keeps him hanging about harbour-sides, which is the richest form of idling; it carries him to wild islands; it gives him a taste of the genial dangers of the sea; . . . it makes demands upon his ingenuity; it will go far to cure him of any taste . . . for the miserable life of cities. And when it has done so, it carries him back and shuts him in an office. From the roaring skerry and the wet thwart of the tossing boat, he passes to the stool and desk; and with a memory full of ships



## PAINTED WINDOWS

and seas, and perilous headlands, and the shining pharos, he must apply his long sighted eyes to the pretty niceties of drawing . . .<sup>6</sup>

The engineering did not take root. In April, 1871 Louis told his father that he was not inclined to follow engineering and he asked to be allowed to follow literature. This was a major disappointment to Thomas Stevenson—he felt it as rejection of the proud family tradition.

As a compromise it was determined that Louis was to read law. This would enable him to carry on his literary training while acquiring a profession. But when he was twenty-two years old, he had diphtheria. His plan to be called to the English bar was set aside. His doctor diagnosed nervous exhaustion. The prescription was the Riviera. It was his good fortune that this remedy was one his father could provide. And so it was that he went to the spa at Mentone, where he slowly recovered.

In July, 1875, he passed his examination and was called to the Scottish Bar; and as far as he was concerned, this fulfilled his bargain with his father. While waiting for the few briefs he had, he devoted himself to the business of writing—essays, verses, tales and plays.

One of his companions was his cousin Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson, three years his senior,—the same cousin Bob who pawned his pants in the name of the fictitious John Libbel. Through the years their several paths cross and re-crossed in Scotland, in England, and on the continent. Louis was fascinated by his older friend, whose conversational ability he admired. Somewhat later, Stevenson made a comment which provides an insight to his nature. Referring to cousin Bob, he said:

We have perhaps only one moral quality in common: a desire to do justice to those with whom we are at enmity.

He goes on to say:

I am now in my thirtieth year, and I have found sufficient excuses for all whom I think to have injured me but two; and for one of these I still have hope to do the like . . . But in this particular, Bob so far outstrips or (may I say) outshines me, that I have sometimes been put to the blush by the largeness and freedom of his allowance for others.<sup>7</sup>

## PAINTED WINDOWS

Another friend was William E. Henley, the poet, whom we know as author of the poem *Invictus*. With Henley, Louis worked unsuccessfully in the writing of plays for the English stage. He wanted to escape the conventional standards of play writing to which Henley adhered. The two worked at cross purposes. When Stevenson married, his wife, herself a critical person, drove a wedge between Louis and Henley; but to Henley is owed this characterization of Stevenson:

Most vain, most generous, sternly critical  
Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist;  
A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck  
Much Antony, of Hamlet most of all,  
And something of the Shorter Catechist.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Stevenson was aware of his son's liberality with money, and he purposely restricted his spending money, giving him only a small allowance until the time he was 23 years old. The result was that Louis made his headquarters at the tobacconist's shop and public houses with such names as "The Green Elephant," "The Twinkling Eye" and "The Gay Japanese." He spent his monthly allowance of a pound on the day he received it, and for the rest of the time rarely had five shillings at once. He said:

... Hence my acquaintance was what would be called a very low order . . .  
I was the companion of seamen, chimney sweeps, and thieves; my circle  
was being continually changed by the action of the police magistrate."

He pursued what may be called a Bohemian lifestyle,—sloppy in dress and behavior, keeping the company of prostitutes and transitional denizens of Lothian Road, the rougher neighborhood of Edinburgh.

Louis, Bob, and others formed a secret society, which they named the L.J.R., which signified Liberty, Justice and Reverence. The constitution opened with the words "Disregard everything our parents have taught us." Among its tenets were liberty of thought, freedom from prejudice, and the abolition of the House of Lords. Louis's father came across a draft of the constitution for this secret society, and unfortunately took it seriously.

## PAINTED WINDOWS

Louis's urge to make his own life apart from the traditions of his parents resulted in family tensions. His abandonment of engineering, his Bohemian affectations, and the flexibility of his views about religion, all deeply disappointed and embarrassed them, and he, in turn, felt burdened with a sense of guilt.

In 1874—he was now 24 years old—he was frequently in London. In June of that year he was elected to the Savile Club, proposed and supported by friends. Here he became acquainted with men of many tastes and abilities, desirable friends for an aspiring writer. Among them were the editor of *The Academy*, Dr. Appleton, and the editor of the *Saturday Review*, Walter Pollack. It was at the Savile Club that he met Edmund Gosse in 1877. He and Gosse became fast friends. Gosse later wrote this about Louis:

A childlike mirth leaped and danced in him; he seemed to skip upon the hills of life. He was simply bubbling with quips and jests; his inherent earnestness or passion about abstract things was incessantly relieved by jocosity; and when he built one of his intellectual castles in the sand, a wave of humour was certain to sweep in and destroy it.<sup>10</sup>

Louis began writing at an early age. When he was fourteen years old he composed doggerel rhymes and the libretto for an opera. At school he repeatedly started magazines. He started writing novels before he was 15 years old. Scottish history was a favorite subject. His first published work was *The Pentland Rising: A Page of History*, 1666. He made this piece of Scottish history into a story, which his father felt spoiled it. His father bought up all the copies of it as far as possible. The Union of Scotland and England in the year 1707, and the subsequent Jacobite risings, the defeat of the House of Stuart, and the continuing friction with the English are recurrent themes later appearing in his books *Kidnapped* and *Catriona*.

Louis tells us how he learned to write:

... I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; ...

... Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which

## PAINTED WINDOWS

there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful, and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts.

I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baude-  
laire, and to Obermann . . .

That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way . . .<sup>11</sup>

In the introduction to *Treasure Island*, Stevenson tells us how it was that he happened to write the book. It was at a time when he was attempting to paint with water colors. "And," he says, "now admire the finger of predestination." One of his water color works of art was a map of an island which he named *Treasure Island*. As he looked at the map he says:

. . . the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure . . . then I had an idea for John Silver . . . to take an admired friend of mine, . . . to deprive him of all his finer qualities . . . to leave him with nothing but his strength, his courage, his quickness, and his magnificent geniality, and to try to express these in terms of the culture of a raw tarpaulin.

The "admired friend" we are told was William Henley, the poet.

Circumstance is the key to romance, he tells us. "Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck," he says.<sup>12</sup> To emphasize his point that romantic circumstances will even rise above bad writing, he points us to a scene from *Guy Mannering*, the second of Sir Walter Scott's series of *Waverley Novels*. The story presents these circumstances: Years ago, a gypsy named Meg kidnapped a small boy. Now young Bertram is a man. Close by the ruins of Darnclough castle, searching for his birthplace and his inheritance, he plays a tune of his boyhood on his

## PAINTED WINDOWS

flageolet, trying to remember the words. To a damsel nearby the music awakens certain associations, and she breaks into song. Bertram exclaims that he must learn the words from her. The romance intensifies because he is getting closer to his goal. Bertram is later recognized by an old family retainer, one Dominie.

Stevenson criticizes Scott for bad writing in the original text, in which Scott made the following clumsy transition in an effort to introduce the damsel to the scene:

... a damsel, who, close behind a fine spring about half way down the descent, and which had once supplied the castle with water, was engaged in bleaching linen.

Stevenson says, "A man who gave in such copy would be discharged from the staff of a daily paper." He points out that Scott forgot to prepare the reader for the presence of the damsel, he forgot to mention the spring and its importance to the ruined castle, and, instead of doing it right, he "crams it all, tail foremost, into a single shambling sentence."

Stevenson then explains how this must have happened. He says that Scott, "... a man of the finest creative instinct" "... conjured up the romantic with delight, but he had hardly the patience to describe it." To the meticulous craftsman that Stevenson was, this was awful. But, he says, the romantic circumstances of the story will remain in the reader's mind long after the book is put away.

He worked continuously, even when he was ill. His regime in later years, was to work in the morning, every morning, making notes, correcting copy, rewriting. He suffered writer's cramps and sometimes had to write with his left hand. When working on *A Child's Garden of Verses* his hand was so disabled that he could only print in large letters. When he could not write at all, he would dictate to his step daughter. At times he was too sick to speak, and was compelled to use a code of hand signals to communicate with his wife. His biographer, J.C. Furnas, reports this:

Here he was huddled into a shawl even at meals—or flat on his back, bronchi oozing blood, arm strapped to his side to discourage further hemorrhage, forbidden to speak . . . The Code of hand signals that he de-

## PAINTED WINDOWS

veloped is eloquent of the strains to which Fanny as well as her patient was subjected:

1. The crooked forefinger begs explanation, criticism, elucidation, opinion.
2. Violent pantomime is to be answered not by remarks on the dumb person's impatience but by a statement of what you understand him to wish.
3. The case of the dumb is one of great inconvenience and suppressed wrath. When he has made a sign you have failed to follow and he shrugs his shoulders, drop it *forever* . . .<sup>13</sup>

Stevenson wrote a piece entitled *Letter to a Young Gentleman who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art*, which appeared in Scribner's Magazine in September, 1888. A few of his precepts were these:

[the writer must] . . . think the smallest improvement worth accomplishing at any expense of time and industry.

Another was:

The direct return, the wages of the trade, are small, but the indirect, the wages of the life, are incalculably great. No other business offers a man his daily bread upon such joyful terms.

Stevenson's essay *The Lantern Bearers* was the second of a series of twelve monthly works written for Scribner's magazine. It was published in the February, 1888 issue. He labored for eight days in the preparation of ten short pages.

One of Stevenson's prominent traits was his ready acceptance of the individual personality of each person he encountered. In *The Lantern Bearers*, he says that it is hard to value life; and that the delight which each person finds in life is difficult to communicate. Whether it was this particular trait, or not, something moved him to visit the leper colony in Hawaii.

The north coast of the island of Molokai is separated from the rest of the island with a high cliff. On the shore at the foot of this cliff a large triangular point of land juts out into the ocean. Here the Hawaii Board

#### PAINTED WINDOWS

of Health established a colony for lepers. Here Louis visited for a week, mingling with the lepers, playing croquet with the children, and learning of their wretched situation. Only six weeks earlier, a Catholic priest, one Father Damien, had died there after sixteen years of ministry to the lepers. He was hailed as a saint and a wave of adulation swept through the islands.

Not everyone joined in the hero worship of Father Damien. There was competition in the missionary business. One Rev. Hyde, a Presbyterian cleric, wrote a letter to an Australian clergyman, debunking the departed priest, and saying among other things that Damien was a coarse, dirty man. The letter also repeated a slanderous rumor to the effect that Damien was not pure in his relations with women. Unfortunately, the Australian clergyman, one Rev. Gage, published the letter in the Presbyterian press.

When Stevenson learned of the letter, his fury knew no bounds. He had heard of Father Damien's faults. He had also personally witnessed the pitiable condition of the lepers, and he stood in awe of the sacrifice the priest had made. He at once conceived an open letter addressed to the Rev. Hyde, in defense of Father Damien.

Now, Stevenson might well have said, with Mark Antony, "the good that men do is oft interred with their bones." With Mark Antony, he might have made a conciliatory bow such as, "the Reverend Hyde is an honorable man." No such thing. Stevenson not only defended the priest, he set out to skewer the Rev. Hyde. He said, "... I rejoice to feel the button off the foil, and to plunge home."

Louis advised his family that what he had written could very well bring suit for libel. He said that, if he should proceed, they could be financially ruined. Unanimously they responded, "publish." In March, 1890 Louis's letter was published in Australia. It was republished in Edinburgh in the *Scots Observer*, and later distributed as a handbill in the islands. Stevenson's letter pointed out the luxury in which Rev. Hyde lived. He pointed out that when leprosy befell people in the islands, God had sent the missionaries an opportunity,—one which the Rev. Hyde had let pass, without ever visiting the leper colony, but one which Father Damien had seized by his selfless act. Stevenson said, "Damien shut, with his own hand, the doors of his own sepulchre." These are a few barbs from the sixteen page letter:<sup>14</sup>

## PAINTED WINDOWS

**Damien was coarse.**

It is very possible. You make us sorry for the lepers, who had only a coarse old peasant for their friend and Father. But you, who were so refined, why were you not there to cheer them with the lights of culture? . . .

**Damien was dirty.**

He was. Think of the poor lepers annoyed with this dirty comrade! But the clean Dr. Hyde was at his food in a fine house.

. . .

. . . This scandal . . . was not new to me. I heard it once before; and I must tell you how. There came to Samoa a man from Honolulu; he, in a public house on the beach, volunteered the statement that Damien had 'contracted the disease from having connection with the female lepers'; . . . A man sprang to his feet . . . 'You miserable little —,' (here is a word I dare not print, it would so shock your ears) he cried, 'if the story were a thousand times true, can't you see that you are a million times a lower—for daring to repeat it?

And again addressing the Rev. Hyde, Stevenson says:

. . . But you have deliberately chosen the part of the man from Honolulu . . . the man from Honolulu . . . had been drinking—drinking, we may charitably fancy, to excess. It was to your 'Dear Brother, the Reverend H.B. Gage' that you chose to communicate the sickening story; and the blue ribbon which adorns your portly bosom forbids me to allow the extenuating plea that you were drunk when it was done.

This is not the genial, witty, charming, the unfailingly courteous Stevenson. This is not the characteristic inventor of fantasies and dreams of treasure hunting. Stevenson's depth of feeling, his courage in risking his estate, and his unusual venture into public life all evince his feeling of the need to defend the man who gave his life to minister to the human beings in the Lazaretto on "mournful Molokai." As he said, it is so hard to value life.

In 1878, at the Village of Grez, in the woods at Fontainebleau, he met the woman who ultimately became his wife. He first saw her



#### PAINTED WINDOWS

through an open door, a female invader in the all male group of artists and writers who collected at the Cheillon Hotel in the Village of Grez. She was an American named Fannie Osbourne, then estranged from her husband. A short while later, in his book *Travels With a Donkey*, he wrote: "to love is the great amulet which makes the world a garden."

After a year Fannie returned to San Francisco, and Louis, after much indecision and, with little money and no explanation to his parents, shipped out of Glasgow for America and his beloved. He went to Monterey to await her divorce. He purchased a horse with plans to camp out in the hinterland. Health was his objective, but he collapsed and lay in a stupor for two nights until he was discovered by ranchers. They nursed him for two weeks until he was strong enough to ride his horse back to Monterey. Poverty compounded his troubles. He almost died. But the doleful shadows of Stevenson's life were once again dispelled by the joy he found in writing, and by the sunshine of success. Sick with pleurisy, living on pennies a day, he worked as never before. He completed and dispatched a novel entitled *A Vendetta in the West*, on which he had been working, and also a short story entitled *The Pavilion on the Links*.

When his parents learned that he had almost died in Monterey, they forgave him, and by wire advised him that they would assist him with the sum of two hundred fifty pounds a year. He could get by on this. He moved to San Francisco where he earned a few dollars with his writing, and Fanny nursed him back to health. Her divorce was ultimately granted. She and Louis were married in a simple wedding. They honeymooned near Mt. St. Helena during the summer. Unable to afford to continue in their cottage at the Hot Springs hotel at Calistoga (\$10.00 a week!), they acted upon the suggestion of an innkeeper that they should find an abandoned mining camp on Mt. St. Helena which could be had rent free. Louis tells us this about what they discovered:

The footpath . . . had been well trodden by thirsty miners. . . . I came on . . . a mound of gravel, some wreck of wooden aqueduct, and the mouth of a tunnel like a treasure grotto in a fairy story. A stream of water . . . ran trippingly forth out of the bowels of the cave; and looking far under the arch, I could see something like an iron lantern fastened on the rocky wall. It was a promising spot for the imagination.<sup>15</sup>

## PAINTED WINDOWS

They occupied the camp, which is now the site of the Silverado Museum in Stevenson's memory. They called it their private kingdom.

Here they spent their honeymoon in the summer of 1880. Louis took his marriage seriously. He had never been self supporting, and now a wife and her two children were a burden, especially for a man with broken health. His writing was now for the purpose of earning a living, and he had at his side an able and determined critic. One of his biographers says, "As a writer, this summer at Silverado he left behind him his fumbling youth."<sup>16</sup> The great part of his time was spent in voluminous notes for the new book, the *Silverado Squatters*. He wrote to Sidney Colvin, his friend in England:

... as my strength returns, you may expect the work of genius ... and when is it more likely to come off, than just after I have paid a visit to the Styx and go thence to the eternal mountains?<sup>17</sup>

His photographic memory retained many of these scenes at Silverado which later appeared in *Treasure Island*.

Ultimately Stevenson spent the last seven years of his short life in South Seas. He and Fanny roamed from Hawaii to the Marquesas, to Tahiti, to the Gilbert Islands, and finally to Samoa where he built a home and lived the last three years of his life. He devoted himself to learning about the people who lived there and their ways. He grew to love his new life. He said:

This climate; these voyagings; these landfalls at dawn; new islands peaking from the morning bank; new forested harbours; new passing alarms of squalls and surf; new interests of gentle natives—the whole tale of my life is better to me than any poem.<sup>18</sup>

His home in Samoa was called Vailima, Samoan for Five Waters, after the streams on the property. Here he was supporting a household comprising not only himself and his wife, but also her two adult children, his cousin and biographer, his mother, and a retinue of as many as nineteen other souls. He was considered wealthy, yet so widely did he distribute his earnings, and such was his generosity that he often felt the pressure of financial stress.

## PAINTED WINDOWS

Louis missed Scotland, which he would never see again. His course was charted between two points: ancestry and destiny. In December, 1894, he quickly left this world, cut down by a cerebral hemorrhage, mid-passage in composition. His unfinished last work was what some consider his greatest, the novel entitled *Weir of Hermiston*. It is a novel of Scotland and Scottish characters, of incompatibility between father and son, and of ancestral forces that he said, "sleep in all of us till the fit circumstance shall call it into action." Following is a passage from this novel, in which he speaks of the strength of the Scottish clan. In this passage, one may perceive a rhythm reminiscent of waves on the shore. Whether it is Stevenson's own amalgam of styles, or whether to some it may recall the King James version of the Bible, or Homer, or one of those writers he aped, matters not. This is that passage wherein Louis speaks of the Scottish clan spirit:

... that is the mark of the Scot of all classes; that he stands in an attitude towards the past unthinkable to Englishmen, and remembers and cherishes the memory of his forbears, good or bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation.<sup>19</sup>

And looking back upon his own personal history, to which he refers in the dedication to his book *Catriona*, he says:

The sights and thoughts of my youth pursue me; and I see like a vision the youth of my father, and of his father, and the whole stream of lives flowing down there far in the north, with the sound of laughter and tears, to cast me out in the end, as by a sudden freshet, on these ultimate islands. And I admire and bow my head before the romance of destiny.

It is said that the boy in Louis remained throughout manhood. His whimsy, his instinct for the romantic circumstance captures the reader with unforgettable images.

In the essay *The Lantern Bearers*, Stevenson speaks thus of the nightingale:

He sings in the most doleful places . . . With no more apparatus than an evil smelling lantern, I have evoked him on the naked links. All life that is not merely mechanical is spun out of two strands—seeking for that bird

## PAINTED WINDOWS

and hearing him. And it is just this that makes life so hard to value, and the delight of each so incommunicable. And it is just a knowledge of this, and a remembrance of those fortunate hours in which the bird has sung to us, that fills us with such wonder when we turn to the pages of the realist.

... For to look at the man is but to court deception. We shall see the trunk from which he draws his nourishment; but he himself is above and abroad in the green dome of foliage, hummed through by winds and nested in by nightingales ... And the true realism, always and everywhere, is that of the poets: to find out where joy resides, and give it a voice beyond singing.

Stevenson found a business that offered him his daily bread on joyful terms. As the romantic, the anti-realist, and the ultimate realist, he spent his life seeking for the bird and hearing him sing. And he tells us this:

... no man lives in the external truth among salts and acids, but in the warm phantasmagoric chamber of his brain, with the painted windows and the storied wall.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>J.C. Furnas, *Voyage to Windward* (New York: Wm. Sloane Associates, 1951) (hereinafter referred to as Furnas).

<sup>2</sup>Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, 4th ed., (London: Methuen & Co.), 420 (hereinafter referred to as Balfour).

<sup>3</sup>*Letters*, i. 311 (quoted in Balfour, 226-227).

<sup>4</sup>Balfour, 49.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Balfour, 81, 82.

<sup>6</sup>*Additional Memories and Portraits*, 313 (quoted in Balfour, 72-73).

<sup>7</sup>Balfour, 87.

<sup>8</sup>W. E. Henley, *A Book of Verses* (D. Nutt, 1888), 41 (quoted in Daiches, *Robert Louis Stevenson and His World* [London: Thomas and Hudson, 1973], 111).

<sup>9</sup>Balfour, 83, 84.

<sup>10</sup>Gosse, *Critical Kitcats*, (London: William Heinemann, 1896), 278 (quoted in Balfour, 146).

<sup>11</sup>"A College Magazine," in *Memories and Portraits*, Biographical Edition, IV, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 55-59.

PAINTED WINDOWS

<sup>12</sup>"A Gossip on Romance," in *Memories and Portraits*, XV, Biographical Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 234.

<sup>13</sup>From the Beinecke Collection (Yale University) (quoted in Furnas, 215-216).

<sup>14</sup>*Father Damien* (Long Prairie, Minn.: Neumann Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup>As quoted in Issler, *Our Mountain Heritage* (Stanford University Press, 1950), 67 (hereinafter referred to as Issler).

<sup>16</sup>As quoted in Issler, 67.

<sup>17</sup>As quoted in Issler, 97.

<sup>18</sup>*Letters*, ii. 160, as quoted in Balfour, 257.

<sup>19</sup>*Weir of Hermiston*, reprinted in *Novels and Stories by Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Pilot Press and Dull, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 570.

This paper was written for The Chicago Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday evening, the Seventh of December, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Two. This edition of two hundred and seventy five copies was printed by the Club for its members in the month of July, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Four.

PRINTED  
IN U.S.A.