

## CHAPTER X

THE RIVIERA—1882-84

“Happy (said I), I was only happy once, that was at Hyères; it came to end from a variety of reasons, decline of health, change of place, increase of money, age with his stealing steps; since then, as before then, I know not what it means.”—*Vailima Letters*, p. 53.

ACCORDINGLY about the middle of September Stevenson started for the South of France, and since he was unfit to go alone, and his wife was too ill to undertake the journey, he started in the charge and company of his cousin, R. A. M. Stevenson. Their object was to discover some place suitable for both husband and wife, possessing more of the advantages of a town and fewer of the drawbacks of a health-resort than the Alpine valley from which they were now finally released. Paris was left without delay, and Montpellier was next tried and rejected, but not until Louis had a slight hemorrhage. He wrote to his wife: “I spent a very pleasant afternoon in the doctor’s consulting-room among the curious, meridional peasants, who quarrelled and told their complaints. I made myself very popular there, I don’t know how.”

His companion had to return home, and Louis made his way to Marseilles, where, a few days later, on October 11th, he was joined by his wife.

No time was wasted; within three days a house that seemed all they could desire was found and taken. It was a commodious *maison de campagne* with a large

garden, situated about five miles from Marseilles, with such facilities of communication with the city as a considerable suburb ensures. "In a lovely spot, among lovely wooded and clifty hills — most mountainous in line — far lovelier to my eyes than any Alps."

In another week they were installed in Campagne Defli, and had sent for such property as they needed. Here they proposed to make their home for several years. "The tragic folly of my summers is at an end for me," Louis wrote; "twice have I gone home and escaped with a flea in my ear; the third or fourth time I should leave my bones with a general verdict of 'sarve him right for a fool.'" "The white cliffs of Albion shall not see me," he wrote in January; "I am sick of relapsing; I want to get well." "As for my living in England, three years hence will be early enough to talk of it."

But whether the house or the neighbourhood or the season was unhealthy, St. Marcel proved a most unfortunate choice. Stevenson was never well there, and never for more than three or four days at a time capable of any work. He had several slight hemorrhages and mended very slowly. By Christmas he wrote: "I had to give up wood-engraving, chess, latterly even patience, and could read almost nothing but newspapers. It was dull but necessary. I seem hopelessly hidebound, as you see; nothing comes out of me but chips."

At the end of the year an epidemic of fever broke out in St. Marcel, and he found himself so unwell, that in desperation he went to Nice lest he should become too ill to move. They were unprepared for the move, and his wife stayed behind until they could obtain

further supplies. In the meantime telegrams and letters went astray, and at the end of a week Mrs. Stevenson arrived at Nice quite distraught. She had received no news whatever of her husband, having telegraphed in all directions for three days in vain, and had been assured by every one that he must have had a fresh hemorrhage, have left the train at some wayside station, and there died and been buried.

In the meantime all went well, but it was obviously impossible for Stevenson to think of returning to St. Marcel; by the middle of February, 1883, they got the Campagne Defli off their hands, and were at liberty to seek a fresh settlement. They thought of Geneva, but, after a short visit to Marseilles, they went to a hotel at Hyères, and there by the end of March were once more established in a house of their own—Châlet La Solitude. It was situated just above the town, on a slope of the hill on which the castle stands, commanding a view of Les Oiseaux and the Îles d'Or; a cottage scarce as large as the Davos châlet, "with a garden like a fairy-story and a view like a classical landscape."

Here for a year, or, to be strictly accurate, for a little more than nine months, Stevenson was to find happiness, a greater happiness than ever came to him again, except perhaps at moments in his exile. Hardly anything seemed wanting; his wife was always able to be with him, and he had besides the company of his stepson, in which he delighted. There was the affectionate intercourse with his parents, clouded only by the gradual failure in his father's spirits; there was the correspondence with his friends; already in March he had been able to welcome Mr. Colvin as the first of his visitors;

and, not least, he found a measure of health once more and a renewed capacity for employing his increased skill.

Of the first of these elements in his happiness he wrote to his mother in 1884: "My wife is in pretty good feather; I love her better than ever and admire her more; and I cannot think what I have done to deserve so good a gift. This sudden remark came out of my pen; it is not like me; but in case you did not know, I may as well tell you, that my marriage has been the most successful in the world. I say so, and being the child of my parents, I can speak with knowledge. She is everything to me: wife, brother, sister, daughter and dear companion; and I would not change to get a goddess or a saint. So far, after four years of matrimony." And of his delight in his surroundings he said in 1883: "This house and garden of ours still seem to go between us and our wits." Their material comfort was further increased in May when Valentine Roch entered their service, an extremely clever and capable French girl, who remained with them for six years, and even accompanied them on their first cruise in the Pacific.

For a period of nearly eight months he had been unable to earn any money or to carry any work to a conclusion, and it was therefore with the greatest delight that in the beginning of May he received an offer from Messrs. Cassell for the book-rights of *Treasure Island*. "How much do you suppose? I believe it would be an excellent jest to keep the answer till my next letter. For two cents I would do so. Shall I? Anyway I'll turn the page first. No — well, a hundred pounds, all alive, O! A hundred jingling, tingling, golden, minted quid. Is

not this wonderful? . . . It is dreadful to be a great, big man, and not to be able to buy bread." <sup>1</sup>

Already, before he reached La Solitude, his enforced leisure had come to an end. Verse-writing with him was almost always a resource of illness or of convalescence, and he now took advantage of his recovery to increase the poems of childhood (for which his first name was *Penny Whistles*), until they amounted to some eight-and-forty numbers. Now also in answer to an application from Mr. Gilder, the editor of the *Century Magazine*, *The Silverado Squatters* was finished and despatched to New York, and so began his first important connection with any of the American publishers who were afterwards to prove so lucrative to him. Of course, like others, he had suffered at the hands of persons who had not only appropriated his books without licence, but even, a less usual outrage, had wantonly misspelt his name. "I saw my name advertised in a number of the *Critic* as the work of one R. L. Stephenson; and, I own, I boiled. It is so easy to know the name of the man whose book you have stolen; for there it is, at full length, on the title-page of your booty. But no, damn him, not he! He calls me Stephenson." <sup>2</sup>

The ground was now clear before him, and on April 10th he set to work once more from the beginning upon *Prince Otto*, which he had left untouched for three years. Ten days later he wrote: "I am up to the waist in a story; a kind of one-volume novel; how do they ever puff them out into three? Lots of things happen in this thing of mine, and one volume will

<sup>1</sup> This was only payment in advance. The book in England has since brought the author and his representatives about two thousand pounds.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, i. 293.

swallow it without a strain." At first all went swimmingly. By May 5th—in five-and-twenty days—he had drafted fifteen chapters. But there was a stumbling-block in his path—he had yet to reckon with his women characters. When he came to the scenes where the intervention of the Countess von Rosen is described, his resources were taxed to their utmost, and when the battle went against him, he renewed his attack again and again. Seven times was the fifteenth chapter now rewritten, and it was only the eighth version which finally was suffered to pass.

On May 26th, in answer to Mr. Henderson's application for another story, he began *The Black Arrow*, and the first six chapters seem to have been finished in as many days. Eight years before, in studying the fifteenth century, he had read the Paston Letters, and mainly from this material he now constructed a style and story which he thought would please the public for whom he was writing, though to his friends he announced it with cynicism and described the work as "Tushery." On June 10th the first number of the tale appeared in *Young Folks*; for the next four months it continued with perfect regularity, and it was probably the one of its author's works which suffered most from the demands of periodical publication. In June he went for a week to Marseilles, and on July 1st left for Royat, and by these moves being separated from the instalments of his proof-sheets, he had at one time, according to his own account in later days, actually forgotten what had last happened to several of his principal characters. This, however, did not affect the popularity of the story, which, published like

*Treasure Island* under the signature of "Captain George North," had a vogue far beyond that of its predecessor, even raising the circulation of its paper by many hundreds of copies a week during its appearance.<sup>1</sup>

The visit to Royat was most successful, as his parents joined the party and there spent several weeks, but early in September Louis and his wife were back at La Solitude. *Treasure Island* had been prepared for press, and was already in the hands of the printers with the sole exception of the chart out of which the story had grown. This, having been accidentally mislaid, had now to be reconstructed from the text, and was being drawn in the Stevensons' office in Edinburgh. In spite of what had been said about rewriting and improving the story, only a few paragraphs were altered, chiefly in the sixteenth and two following chapters, and none of the modifications were of any importance.<sup>2</sup>

On September 19th Stevenson heard of the death of his old friend Walter Ferrier, who had long been in bad health, but was not supposed to be in any immediate danger. The record of their friendship is contained in the essay called "Old Mortality," which was written this winter; part of the letter has already been quoted<sup>3</sup> which Stevenson wrote to Mr. Henley at this time upon hearing of their common loss, a letter which is, moreover, given at length in Mr. Colvin's collection. Hence there is no occasion to say more than that

<sup>1</sup> The *Academy*, 3rd March, 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the *Academy*, 3rd March, 1900.

<sup>3</sup> P. 106.

this was the first breach death had made in the inner circle of Stevenson's friends.

That very spring he had written in a letter of consolation, "I am like a blind man in speaking of these things, for I have never known what mourning is, and the state of my health permits me to hope that I shall carry this good fortune unbroken to the grave." The hope was not to be fulfilled, but never again, with the exception of his father and of Fleeming Jenkin, did any loss throughout his life so nearly affect him as the death of Walter Ferrier.

At once his thoughts turned to the past, the past that was, and that which might have been; and he again took up the fragment which he had written upon "Lay Morals" in the spring of 1879. On October 2nd he wrote to his father:--

"This curious affair of Ferrier's death has sent me back on our relation and my past with much unavailing wonder and regret. Truly, we are led by strange paths. A feeling of that which lacked with Ferrier and me when we were lads together has put me upon a task which I hope will not be disliked by you: a sketch of some of the more obvious provinces and truths of life for the use of young men. The difficulty and delicacy of the task cannot be exaggerated. Here is a fine opportunity to pray for me: that I may lead none into evil. I am shy of it; yet remembering how easy it would have been to help my dear Walter and me, had any one gone the right way about, spurs me to attempt it. I will try to be honest, and then there can be no harm, I am assured; but I say again: a fine opportunity to pray for me. Lord, defend me from all idle conformity



to please the face of man; from all display, to catch applause; from all bias of my own evil; in the name of Christ. Amen."

Nevertheless he made but little more progress with his Ethics. After a new preface addressed "to any young man, conscious of his youth, conscious of vague powers and qualities, and fretting at the bars of life," he reverted to his earlier manuscript, which still remains the more effective of the two drafts.

In October he received an offer from America for a book upon the islands of the Grecian Archipelago; but in consideration of the risk involved, and of the expenses of the journey, he fortunately decided not to accept the proposal.

All through the autumn his house continued to afford him fresh satisfaction. "My address is still the same," he writes to Mr. Low,<sup>1</sup> "and I live in a most sweet corner of the universe, sea and fine hills before me, and a rich variegated plain; and at my back a craggy hill, loaded with vast feudal ruins. I am very quiet; a person passing by my door half startles me; but I enjoy the most aromatic airs, and at night the most wonderful view into a moonlit garden. By day this garden fades into nothing, overpowered by its surroundings and the luminous distance; but at night, and when the moon is out, that garden, the arbour, the flight of stairs that mount the artificial hillock, the plumed blue gum-trees that hang trembling, become the very skirts of Paradise. Angels I know frequent it; and it thrills all night with the flutes of silence."

This enchanting abode and the excellence of the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, i. 287.

climate were to Stevenson the chief recommendations of Hyères, for of the residents and of the outside country he saw little or nothing, restricting himself to his own house and almost entirely to the circle of his own household. It was in the days of Fontainebleau and of the journeys that he acquired his knowledge of France and its inhabitants, to whatever use he may afterwards have turned them; but his immediate surroundings for the time seldom affected his work. And few foreigners have shown such understanding as is to be found in the stories of *The Treasure of Franchard* and *Providence and the Guitar*.

It is to this period that the reminiscence belongs, recorded in his letter to Mr. W. B. Yeats, of the spell cast upon him by Meredith's *Love in a Valley*; "the stanzas beginning 'When her mother tends her' haunted me and made me drunk like wine; and I remember waking with them all the echoes of the hills about Hyères."<sup>1</sup>

He began a story called *The Travelling Companion*, afterwards refused by a publisher as "a work of genius but indecent," and two years later condemned by Stevenson as having "no urbanity and glee, and no true tragedy"; later still it was burned on the ground that "it was not a work of genius, and *Jekyll* had supplanted it." The *Note on Realism* was written for the *Magazine of Art*, and *Prince Otto*, by the beginning of December, was wanting only the last two chapters. And at the end of this year or the beginning of next the copyright of his first three books was bought back from the publishers by his father. The *Donkey* had

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, ii 134

gone into a third edition, the *Voyage* into a second; of the essays only nine hundred copies had been sold, and so badly were all three selling that the price was no more than a hundred pounds.

*Treasure Island* was published as a book in the end of November, when Stevenson obtained his first popular success. Its reception reads like a fairy-tale. Statesmen and judges and all sorts of staid and sober men became boys once more, sitting up long after bedtime to read their new book. The story goes that Mr. Gladstone got a glimpse of it at a colleague's house, and spent the next day hunting over London for a second-hand copy. The editor of the *Saturday Review*, the superior, cynical "Saturday" of old days, wrote excitedly to say that he thought *Treasure Island* was the best book that had appeared since *Robinson Crusoe*; and James Payn, who, if not a great novelist himself, yet held an undisputed position among novelists and critics, sent a note hardly less enthusiastic. Mr. Andrew Lang spent over it "several hours of unmingled bliss." "This is the kind of stuff a fellow wants. I don't know, except *Tom Sawyer* and the *Odyssey*, that I ever liked any romance so well." It was translated and pirated in all directions, appearing within a couple of years as a *feuilleton* even in Greek and Spanish papers. For all this, it brought no very great emolument, for during its first twelve months no more than five thousand six hundred copies were sold in Great Britain.

Its author, at all events, did not lose his head or overestimate his merits. Writing to his parents, he says: "This gives one strange thoughts of how very bad the common run of books must be; and generally all the

books that the wiseacres think too bad to print are the very ones that bring me praise and pudding."

One link with the past had snapped, one friendship had vanished, and Stevenson was looking forward all the more eagerly to seeing two of his oldest friends, Mr. Henley and Mr. Baxter, who were coming out to spend a long-promised holiday with him. Before it could begin, *Prince Otto* ought to be finished, and to this end he devoted all his powers. The New Year came, his friends arrived at Hyères, and for about a week he enjoyed the delights to which he had looked forward. But the house was too small for their reception, and Stevenson proposed that they should all go away together to some other place, that he might share with them the benefit of a change. Accordingly the party of four went to Nice, and there almost at once Stevenson took cold. At first it seemed slight, and his friends, who were due to return home, went away without thought of anxiety. The cold, however, resulted in congestion of the lungs, and suddenly the situation became grave. "At a consultation of doctors," Mrs. Stevenson says, "I was told there was no hope, and I had better send for some member of the family to be with me at the end. Bob Stevenson came, and I can never be grateful enough for what he did for me then. He helped me to nurse Louis, and he kept me from despair as I believe no one else could have done; he inspired me with hope when there seemed no hope."

Very slowly he grew better; it was some time before he was out of danger, and a month before he was able to set foot outside the house; but at last they returned to La Solitude. Before his return he wrote in

answer to his mother's inquiries: "I survived where a stronger man would not. There were never two opinions as to my immediate danger; of course it was chuck-farthing for my life. That is over, and I have only weakness to contend against. . . . Z—— told me to leave off wine, to regard myself as 'an old man,' and to 'sit by my fire.' None of which I wish to do. . . . As for my general health, as for my consumption, we can learn nothing till Vidal<sup>1</sup> sees me, but I believe the harm is little, my lungs are so tough."

This illness, however, marked the beginning of a new and protracted period of ill-health, which lasted with but little intermission until he had left Europe.

Miss Ferrier, his friend's sister, came out at this time and stayed with them until their return to England, proving an unfailing support to them in their increasing troubles. For in the first week in May Stevenson was attacked with the most violent and dangerous hemorrhage he ever experienced. It occurred late at night, but in a moment his wife was by his side. Being choked with the flow of blood and unable to speak, he made signs to her for a paper and pencil, and wrote in a neat firm hand, "Don't be frightened; if this is death, it is an easy one." Mrs. Stevenson had always a small bottle of ergotin and a minim-glass in readiness; these she brought in order to administer the prescribed quantity. Seeing her alarm, he took bottle and glass away from her, measured the dose correctly with a perfectly steady hand, and gave the things back to her with a reassuring smile.

Recovery was very slow and attended by numerous

<sup>1</sup> His own extremely clever doctor at Hyères.

complications, less dangerous, but even more painful than the original malady. The dust of street refuse gave him Egyptian ophthalmia, and sciatica descending upon him caused him the more pain, as he was suffering already from restlessness. The hemorrhage was not yet healed, and we now hear for the first time of the injunctions to absolute silence, orders patiently obeyed, distasteful as they were. In silence and the dark, and in acute suffering, he was still cheery and undaunted. When the ophthalmia began and the doctor first announced his diagnosis, Mrs. Stevenson felt that it was more than any one could be expected to bear, and went into another room, and there, in her own phrase, "sat and gloomed." Louis rang his bell and she went to him, saying, in the bitterness of her spirit, as she entered the room, "Well, I suppose that this is the very best thing that could have happened!" "Why, how odd!" wrote Louis on a piece of paper, "I was just going to say those very words." When darkness fell upon him and silence was imposed, and his right arm was in a sling on account of the hemorrhage, his wife used to amuse him for part of the day by making up tales, some of which they afterwards used in the *Dynamiter*; when these were at an end, he continued the *Child's Garden*, writing down the new verses for himself in the dim light with his left hand. And at this time he wrote the best of all his poems, the "Requiem" beginning "Under the wide and starry sky," which ten years later was to mark his grave upon the lonely hill-top in Samoa.

When he got a little better he wrote to his mother, "I do nothing but play patience and write verse, the

true sign of my decadence. With careful nursing he began to mend. Here, as everywhere, he excited the utmost sympathy, which manifested itself sometimes in embarrassing and unexpected ways. "The washer-woman's little boy brought, of all things in the world, a canary to amuse the sick gentleman! Fortunately it does n't sing, or it would drive the sick gentleman mad."

Thomas Stevenson was in too precarious health even to be told of his son's illness, but the two friends who had visited Louis at Nice in January took counsel and on their own responsibility sent their doctor from London to see what could be done, and at any rate to learn the exact condition of the patient. In a few days Mrs. Stevenson was able to write to her mother-in-law:—

"[18th May, 1884.]— . . . The doctor says, 'Keep him alive till he is forty, and then although a winged bird, he may live to ninety.' But between now and forty he must live as though he were walking on eggs, and for the next two years, no matter how well he feels, he must live the life of an invalid. He must be perfectly tranquil, trouble about nothing, have no shocks or surprises, not even pleasant ones; must not eat too much, drink too much, laugh too much; may write a little, but not too much; talk *very* little, and walk no more than can be helped."

His recovery was steady and satisfactory; with great caution and by the aid of a courier the party made their way to Royat without mishap early in June. For a moment Stevenson turned his thoughts reluctantly towards Davos, and then wrote to his mother announcing his return to England in order to obtain a final medical opinion upon his health and prospects. The only

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course before him apparently was to "live the life of a delicate girl" until he was forty. But uncongenial as this seemed, his spirits were as high as ever, and he signed the letter with a string of names worthy of Bunyan's own invention—"I am, yours,

Mr. Muddler.

Mr. Addlehead.

Mr. Wandering Butterwits.

Mr. Shiftless Inconsistency.

Sir Indecision Contentment."

The journey was safely accomplished, and Stevenson and his wife reached England on the 1st of July, the day before the first representation on the London stage of *Deacon Brodie*.