

STOUT-HEARTED "R.L.S."—*Teller of Tales*

The Story of a Man Who Held High the Torch of Romance and Brave Adventure While He was Fighting a Constant Battle with Death

STEVENSON, ROBERT LOUIS (1850–94). The history of English literature records no braver story than the life and work of the blithe and gifted storyteller, essayist and poet, Robert Louis Stevenson. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, he spent much of his childhood in bed, with but the frailest hold on life. He died at the early age of 44. Within a period of 20 years, while waging one long fight with death, he produced an enormous amount of work of an enduring quality. Constant pain and overpowering weakness he did not permit to affect his gaiety of spirit, or to quench the flame of joy that burns in every line.

In few instances has there been such a consistent harmony between an author and his books. The man is revealed in all his writings, which for the most part touch the bracing things of life. His brave spirit and unconquerable cheerfulness are well expressed in the following little poem :

If I have faltered more or less
In my great task of happiness ;
If I have moved among my race
And shown no glorious morning face ;
If beams from happy human eyes
Have moved me not ; if morning skies,
Books, and my food, and summer rain
Knocked on my sullen heart in vain :—
Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take
And stab my spirit broad awake :
Or, Lord, if too obdurate I,
Choose thou, before that spirit die,
A piercing pain, a killing sin,
And to my dead heart run them in.

In the autobiographical poems entitled "A Child's Garden of Verses" Stevenson shows how, shut away from ordinary childish pleasures, he created a wonderful world of romance out of the simplest things. His bed was "the plea-

sant land of counterpane," not a weariness. His mother read to him the stories which he loved to hear, and his devoted nurse, Alison Cunningham, kept him alive by her tender care. Years later, according to Graham Balfour, his

biographer, he told this pious old lady that it was she who had given him a taste for the drama. She indignantly answered that she had "never put a foot inside a play-house" in her life. "Ay, woman," said he, "but it was the grand dramatic way ye had of reciting the hymns."

When he grew older, he was able to study engineering and law, but no regular study was possible in childhood. So he lived much of the time in a beautiful country home, or took journeys with his father, a civil engineer, inspecting the lighthouses about the wild coast. In this way his brain was filled with images of mountain, moor, and sea-girt isles. His frail health very early settled the question as

to whether he should carry on his father's business of engineering, practise at the bar, or devote himself to literature.

He spent several years in wanderings through France, Germany, and Scotland for the benefit of his health, and records of these journeys were given to the world in "An Inland Voyage" in 1878 and "Travels with a Donkey" in 1879.

How He Acquired His Style

Readers were charmed by the graceful and easy flow of his style, but they did not realize how hard a schooling he had given himself or how he continued to labour in order to achieve perfection. In 1887 he wrote in a letter, "I imagine nobody had ever such pains to learn a trade as I had ; but I slogged at it day in and day out ; and I frankly believe (thanks to

AT WORK IN HIS SAMOAN HOME



Here is Stevenson, in his romantic Samoan home, dictating a story to Mrs. Isobel Strong. It was Mrs. Strong and Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, who collaborated in writing "Memories of Vailima."