

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **A Stevenson Story**

"My First Book" by Robert Louis Stevenson was published in September, 1894, in McClure's Magazine, and was the expose, one might say, of the time and place for the writing of one of the author's best known stories, "Treasure Island." Now that the Stevenson copyright law has expired, his step-daughter has asked us to published Stevenson's own story of how this fascinating book happened to be written.

Stevenson was in Kinnaird, Scotland, with his parents, and he had made friends with a small boy who lived in the same cottage. It was to entertain this young man that Stevenson first began "Treasure Island."

"On a chill September morning, by the cheek of a brisk fire, and the rain drumming on the window, I began 'The Sea Cook,' for that was the original title...

"I had counted one boy; I found I had two in my audience. My father caught fire at once with all the romance and childishness of his original nature. His own stories, that every night of his life he put himself to sleep with, dealt perpetually with ships, roadside inns, robbers, old sailors, and commercial travelers before the era of steam. He never finished one of these romances; the lucky man did not require to! But in 'Treasure Island' he recognized something kindred to his own imagination; it was his kind of picturesque; and he not only heard with delight the daily chapter, but set himself actively to collaborate..."

The family doctor was evidently the valued person who also encouraged the author and who arranged for the first publication, for Stevenson wrote: "And now, who should come dropping in ex machina, but Doctor Japp, like the disguised prince who is to bring down the curtain upon peace and happiness in the last act, for he carried in his pocket not a horn or a talisman, but a publisher; had, in fact, been charged by my old friend, Mr. Henderson, to unearth new writers for 'Young Folks.' ...

"Here, then, was something to keep me up – sympathy, help and now a positive engagement. I had chosen besides a very easy style .... It seems as though a full-grown, experienced man of letters might engage to turn out "'Treasure Island' at so many pages a day, and keep his pipe alight. But alas! This was not my case. Fifteen

days I stuck to it, and turned out 15 chapters; and, then, in the early paragraphs of the 16<sup>th</sup>, ignominiously lost hold. My mouth was empty; there was not one more word more of Treasure Island in my bosom....

After this Stevenson tells of his lonely days, his despair and his journey to Switzerland ..." Living for the most part alone, walking on the heath at Weybridge in the dewy autumn mornings, a good deal pleased with what I had done, and more appalled than I can depict to you in words at what remained for me to do. ... I was indeed very close on despair; but I shut my mouth hard, and during the journey to Davos, (Switzerland) where I was to pass the winter, had the resolution to think of other things ...

"Arrived at my destination, down I sat one morning to the unfinished tale, and behold! It flowed from me like small talk; and in a second tide of delighted industry, and again at the rate of a chapter a day, I finished 'Treasure Island.' ... "Treasure Island" – it was Mr. Henderson who deleted the first title; The Sea Cook – appeared duly in the story paper (Young Folks).

In the fall of 1879, Robert Louis Stevenson came to Monterey, where he lived for a time in one of the two adobe and wooden houses known as the Stevenson House on Houston Street in Monterey. He lived here only about three months, but he became deeply attached to the little town, and in 1880, "The Old Pacific Capital" appeared in the London periodical "Fraser's Magazine." It was later reprinted in "Across the Plains," the first edition of which appeared in 1892 in England. The article is probably the best known of all the classic descriptions of Monterey.