Foreword

In the late nineteenth century the English short story crept out from under the shadow of the three-decker novel. The growth of a literate and reading public, the proliferation of periodicals and the demand for reading matter on trains are part of the background to the rise of the modern short story in the late nineteenth century. In Robert Louis Stevenson's case, his stories evolved out of his earlier essay writing. The stories that make up the core of the *New Arabian Nights* were originally published in 1878 in *London*, a short-lived periodical which was edited by his friend W.E. Henley. (A little later Henley was disguised and immortalised as Long John Silver.) Only subsequently were the stories of the *New Arabian Nights* published in book form in 1882.

The first thing to register is the sheer novelty of what Stevenson was doing. 'The change to the specifically modern short story in English writing was no doubt less sudden and dramatic than it appears now; but it can be dated fairly precisely. In October 1877 R.L. Stevenson . . . published his first short story, "A Lodging for the Night". ' (Walter Allen, *The Short Story in English*). Of course, writers had produced short narratives earlier – think of Chaucer, Addison and Dickens among many others – but, as Allen remarked of the *Arabian Nights* and other medieval story collections: 'We still read and enjoy these but we do not confuse them with Chekhov's stories or Maupassant's. There seems quite a fundamental difference between them . . .' The pre-modern romances were full of incident, but innocent of subtle implication. They avoided

realistic characterisation and detailed evocation of everyday surroundings. And, as Tzvetan Todorov wrote of the *Arabian Nights*, ‘All character traits are immediately causal; as soon as they appear they immediately provoke an action.’

In an essay, ‘A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured’, Stevenson, reflecting back on his childhood, compared the joys of playing with toy theatres to his discovery of the *Arabian Nights*: ‘out of all the years of my life, I can recall but one home-coming to compare with these, and that was on the night when I brought back with me “The Arabian Nights Entertainments” in a fat, old, double-columned volume with the prints. I was well into the story of the Hunchback, I remember, when my clergyman grandfather (a man we counted pretty stiff) came up behind me. I grew blind with terror. But instead of ordering the book away, he said he envied me. As well he might!’

Eighteenth-century writers, such as Addison, had discovered improving lessons in the *Arabian Nights*. Stevenson did not: ‘There is one book, for example, more generally loved than Shakespeare, that captivates childhood and still delights in age – I mean the “Arabian Nights” – where you shall look in vain for moral or intellectual interest. No human voice or face greets us among that wooden crowd of kings and genies, sorcerers and beggarmen. Adventure, on the most naked terms, furnishes forth the entertainment and is found enough!’ The author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* was to become a specialist in ‘adventure, on the most naked terms’.

In the *Arabian Nights*, in the story of the ‘Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad’, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid (who is in disguise and accompanied by his vizier Ja‘far, also in disguise) watches the porteress give a whipping to two dogs, grieving as she does so. What is going on? In the ‘Mock Caliph’, Harun and Ja‘far, standing one night beside the Tigris, watch a great barge pass which carries a young man dressed as the caliph and seated on a throne, attended by a man who resembles Ja‘far, as well as

a retinue of courtiers. The young man on the barge is said to be Harun. What can explain this mystery? In the 'Three Apples', Harun and Ja'far, again in disguise, reach the river just as a fisherman is drawing a trunk out of the water. In it there is the body of a savagely mutilated young woman. Harun demands to know the story behind this and so, of course, does the reader. Stevenson similarly became an expert in opening his narrative with the conjuration of mystery. In some cases, as with 'The Young Man with the Cream Tarts' the opening mystery is a frivolous one; in other cases, such as 'The Pavilion on the Links', the opening with its evocation of a bleak landscape and a mysteriously shuttered pavilion prepares the way for the menace and violence to come. Stevenson's conjurations of mystery were his most obvious legacy to two of his greatest admirers, Conan Doyle and G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton, in particular, had studied Stevenson very closely, as his *Robert Louis Stevenson* (1927) shows and in that study Chesterton described the *New Arabian Nights* as being among Stevenson's works 'probably the most unique; there was nothing like it before, and, I think, nothing to equal it since'.

He was also an expert in the explanation of mystery and often made use of deflation and anticlimax to do so. Thus, for example, the deep mystery of 'The Story of the Hansom Cabs', in which Lieutenant Brackenbury Rich hails a hansom cab at random and is delivered by it at a cracking pace to an unknown country house where all the other guests have been similarly collected by cabs and brought in this manner to a party whose occasion or purpose is unknown. But there turns out to be a perfectly simple explanation for all this. As the party winds down and the guests thin out, a select few remain and they will be told the reason for their assembly. Meanwhile, 'The flowering shrubs had disappeared from the staircase; three large furniture wagons stood before the garden gate; the servants were busy dismantling the house on all sides; and some

of them had already donned their great-coats and were preparing to depart'. It is as if Stevenson was advertising the fact that his whole fiction has been a charade and an insubstantial entertainment, yet, nevertheless certainly an entertainment.

In this collection of stories, Prince Florizel of Bohemia and his factotum Colonel Geraldine are latter-day incarnations of Harun and Ja'far, as by night they wander the streets of London in not particularly convincing disguises. 'The Prince had, as usual, travestied his appearance by the addition of false whiskers and a pair of large adhesive eyebrows'. The Prince gives his name as Theophilus Godall, but the ultimate anticlimax comes at the end of the tetralogy of stories comprising 'The Rajah's Diamond', when we learn that he has been deposed by his Bohemian subjects and now trades as a tobacconist in Rupert Street. Was he ever really a prince at all? Despite the apparently flippant tone of 'The Suicide Club', Stevenson had often considered committing suicide. Moreover, he was simultaneously attracted and repelled by the fin-de-siècle aestheticism that he attacked and parodied in that story. The aesthete and the adventurer coexisted within Stevenson and, like Jekyll and Hyde, competed for control over him.

Nineteenth-century London had replaced 'Abbasid Baghdad as the city of nocturnal mysteries. As Chesterton put it: 'It is partly the atmosphere of a dream; in which so many incongruous things cause no surprise. It is partly the real atmosphere of London at night; it is partly the unreal atmosphere of Baghdad'. 'The atmosphere of a dream' may owe something to the fact Stevenson was taking opium to counteract the effects of ill health. As with Sheherazade, as long as he was telling stories death could be postponed and, since he wrote for a weekly publication, he may have felt something of Sheherazade's day-to-day creative desperation. In the *Arabian Nights* one story frequently frames another which in turn may contain yet another. There is only the most perfunctory

pretence that there is an overall narrator whose commentaries frame the stories. What Stevenson did instead was to make one story segue into another and then another. Thus 'Story of the Young Man with the Cream Tarts' leads easily into 'Story of the Physician and the Saratoga Trunk' and the predicaments revealed in this story are resolved in 'The Adventure of the Hansom Cabs'.

'The web, then, or the pattern; a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture: that is style, that is the foundation of literature'. (Stevenson, *The Art of Writing*.) In his time, Stevenson was admired for his style, especially his choice of words and his prose rhythms. (Generalising very broadly, Victorian readers seem to have been much more sensitive to questions of style than modern readers are.) In his youth Stevenson had 'played the sedulous ape' to the polemicist and essayist, William Hazlitt, who had been noted for his relaxed style, which in turn had been modelled on that of the essayist Michel de Montaigne. It is also possible that Stevenson picked up a taste for paradox from Hazlitt. But Hazlitt was not the only model and, for example, Stevenson made a careful study of the highly-wrought, ornate prose of Sir Thomas Browne. Moreover, Stevenson, who had spent time in Paris as a student, was steeped in French literature (one result of which is 'Lodging for a Night', a story about the criminal and poet François Villon). Consequently Anglicisations of French expressions pepper the narratives of the *New Arabian Nights*.

One theme has not been previously noted, I think, and that is the encounter in extraordinary circumstances of a man with a woman who will become his bride. Thus in the 'Story of the Bandbox', Harry Hartley, on the run from his employer as an apparent diamond thief, encounters a maid, Prudence, whom he will eventually marry. In the 'Story of the House with the Green Blinds', Francis Scrymgeour begins by spying on the house in Paris belonging to a violent and dangerous criminal

and ends up by marrying his daughter. In 'The Pavilion on the Links' the narrator tries to defend a crooked financier from vengeful Italians and, after the siege is over, marries the financier's daughter. In 'The Sire de Malétroit's Door', Denis is threatened with death by hanging before he agrees to marry the beautiful Blanche. These marriages can be seen as symbolic resolutions or codas to the stories, but perhaps they also prefigure Stevenson's marriage to Fanny Osbourne in 1880 – a marriage that had been preceded by many difficulties, including his parents' hostility, her uncertainty about divorcing her first husband and their poverty.

In the preface to the first edition of Jorge Luis Borges's first collection of short stories, *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935), he paid tribute to the inspiration he had for those stories in his reading and rereading of Stevenson. Chesterton's discovery of a dreamlike London has already been remarked on. In his turn, Borges, when he came to comment on Chesterton's fantastic novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, wrote that 'I think the man who invented or who discovered, let us say, that fairy London, was Stevenson, because you get that same sense of London being a fairy city in the *New Arabian Nights* of Stevenson'. Although Stevenson's literary reputation among academic critics does not stand as high today as it did in his own lifetime, Borges, the great modernist and fabulist, had no doubt about Stevenson's greatness: 'Stevenson is one of the most lovable and heroic figures in English literature'.

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