

World's Greatest Short Stories

No. II.

A LODGING FOR THE NIGHT

By Robert Louis Stevenson



ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



BOOTH TARKINGTON

Twenty-four famous authors were asked recently to name the best short story in the English language. The choice of Booth Tarkington, Jack London, Alfred Henry Lewis and Richard Harding Davis was "A Lodging For the Night," by Robert Louis Stevenson.

PART I.

IT was late in November, 1456. The snow fell over Paris with rigorous, relentless persistence. Sometimes the wind made a sally and scattered it in flying vortices; sometimes there was a lull, and flake after flake descended out of the black night air, silent, circuitous, interminable.

The cemetery of St. John had taken its own share of the snow. The clock was hard on 10 when the patrol went by with halberds and a lantern, beating their hands, and they saw nothing suspicious about the cemetery of St. John.

Yet there was a small house, backed up against the cemetery wall, which was still awake, and awake to evil purpose, in that snoring district. There was not much to betray it from without, only a stream of warm vapor from the chimney top, a patch where the snow melted on the roof and a few half obliterated footprints at the door. But within, behind the shuttered windows, Master Francis Villon, the poet, and some of the thievish crew with whom he consorted, were keeping the night alive and passing round the bottle.

A great pile of living embers diffused a strong and ruddy glow from the arched chimney. Before this straddled Dom Nicolas, the Pearly monk, with his skirts picked up and his fat legs bared to the comfortable warmth. His face had the beery, bruised appearance of the continual drinker's.

On the right Villon and Guy Tabary were huddled together over a scrap of parchment, Villon making a ballad which he was to call the "Ballad of Roast Fish," and Tabary spluttering admiration at his shoulder. The poet was a ring of a man, dark, little and lean, with hollow cheeks and thin, black locks. He carried his four and twenty years with feverish animation. Greed had made folds about his eyes. Evil smiles had puckered his mouth. The wolf and pig struggled together in his face. It was an eloquent, sharp, ugly, earthly countenance. His hands were small and prehensile, with fingers knotted like a cord, and they were continually flickering in front of him in violent and expressive pantomime. As for Tabary, a broad, complacent, admiring imbecility breathed from his squash nose and slobbering lips. He had become a thief just as he might have become the most decent of burgesses by the imperious chance that rules the lives of human geese and human donkeys.

At the monk's other hand Montigny and Thevenin Pensete played a game of chance. About the first there clung some flavor of good birth and training, as about a fallen angel. Something long, lithe and courtly in the person; something aquiline and darkling in the

face. Thevenin, poor soul, was in great feather. He had done a good stroke of knavery that afternoon in the Faubourg St. Jacques, and all night he had been gaining from Montigny.

"Doubles or quits?" said Thevenin.

Montigny nodded grimly.

"Some may prefer to dine in state," wrote Villon, "on bread and cheese on silver plate. Or, or—help me out, Guido!"

Tabary giggled.

"Or parsley on a golden dish," scribbled the poet.

The wind was freshening without. It drove the snow before it. The cold was growing sharper.

"Can't you hear it rattle in the gibbet?" said Villon. "They are all dancing the devil's jig on nothing up there. You may dance, my gallants. You'll be none the warmer. Whew, what a gust! Down went somebody just now! A medal the fewer on the three-legged medal tree! I say, Dom Nicolas, it'll be cold tonight on the St. Denis road?" he asked.

Tabary laughed immoderately over the medals. He had never heard anything more lighthearted, and he held his sides and crowed. Villon fetched him a flip on the nose, which turned his mirth into an attack of coughing.

"Oh, stop that row," said Villon, "and think of rimes to 'fish!' Look at Montigny!"

All three peered covertly at the gamester. He did not seem to be enjoying his luck. His mouth was a little to a side, one nostril nearly shut and the other much inflated. The black dog was on his back, as people say, in terrifying nursery metaphor, and he breathed hard under the greasy burden.

There was a brief and fatal movement among the gamesters. The round was completed and Thevenin was just opening his mouth to claim another victory when Montigny leaped up swift as an adder and stabbed him to the heart. The blow took effect before he had time to utter a cry, before he had time to move. A tremor or two convulsed his frame. His hands opened and shut, his heels rattled on the floor, then his head rolled backward over one shoulder, with eyes wide open, and Thevenin Pensete's spirit had returned to him who made it.

Every one sprang to his feet, but the business was over in two twos. "My God!" said Tabary, and he began to pray in Latin.

Villon broke out into hysterical laughter. He came a step forward and ducked a ridiculous bow at Thevenin and laughed still louder. Then he sat down suddenly all of a heap upon a stool and continued laughing bitterly as though he would shake himself to pieces.

Montigny recovered his composure first.

"Let's see what he has about him," he remarked, and he picked the dead man's pockets with a practiced hand and divided the money into four equal portions on the table. "There's for you," he said.

The monk received his share with a deep sigh, and a single stealthy glance at the dead Thevenin, who was beginning to slink into himself and topple sideways off the chair.

"We're all in for it," cried Villon, swallowing his mirth. "It's a hanging job for every man Jack of us that's here—not to speak of those who aren't." Then he pocketed his share of the spoil and executed a shuffle with his feet as if to restore the circulation.

Tabary was the last to help himself. He made a dash at the money and retired to the other end of the room.

Montigny stuck Thevenin upright in the chair and drew out the dagger, which was followed by a jet of blood.

"You fellows had better be moving," he said as he wiped the blade on his victim's doublet.

"I think we had," returned Villon, with a gulp. "D—his fat head!" he broke out. "It sticks in my throat like phlegm. What right has a man to have red hair when he is dead?" And he fell all of a heap again upon the stool and fairly covered his face with his hands.

Montigny and Dom Nicolas laughed aloud, even Tabary feebly chiming in.

"Cry baby!" said the monk.

"I always said he was a woman," added Montigny with a sneer. "Sit up, can't you?" he went on, giving another shake to the murdered body. "Tread out that fire, Nick!"

But Nick was better employed. He was quietly taking Villon's purse as the poet sat limp and trembling on the stool where he had been making a ballad not three minutes before. Montigny and Tabary dumbly demanded a share of the booty, which the monk silently promised as he passed the little bag into the bosom of his gown. In many ways an artistic nature unfits a man for practical existence.

No sooner had the theft been accomplished than Villon shook himself, jumped to his feet and began helping to scatter and extinguish the embers. Meanwhile Montigny opened the door and cautiously peered into the street. The coast was clear. There was no unwholesome patrol in sight. Still it was judged wiser to slip out severally, and Villon was the first by general consent to issue forth.

The wind had triumphed and swept all the clouds from heaven. Only a few vapors as thin as moonlight fleeted rapidly across the stars. It was bitter cold, and by a common optical effect, things seemed almost more definite than in the broadest daylight. Villon cursed his fortune. Would it were still snowing! Now, wherever he went he left an indelible trail.

Two things preoccupied him as he went, the aspect of the gallows at Montfaucon in this bright, windy phase of the night's existence, for one, and for another, the look of the dead man with his bald head and garland of red curls. Both struck cold upon his heart, and he kept quickening his pace as if he could escape from unpleasant thoughts by mere fleetness of foot.

Suddenly he saw a long way before him a black clump and a couple of lanterns. The clump was in motion, and the lanterns swung as though carried by men walking. It was a patrol. Just on his left hand there stood a great hotel, with some turrets and a large porch before the door. It was dark inside after the glimmer of the snowy streets, and he was groping for ward with outspread hands when he stumbled over some substance which offered an indescribable mixture of resistances, hard and soft, firm and loose. His heart gave a leap, and he sprang two steps back and stared dreadfully at the obstacle. Then he gave a little laugh of relief. It was only a woman, and she dead. He knelt beside her to make sure upon this latter point. She was freezing cold and rigid like a stick. A little ragged finery fluttered in the wind about her hair.

To be continued

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