



New Arabian Nights

Robert Louis Stevenson

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Douglas Dalrymple says

Florizel, I think, would make a good name for a tomcat.

Robert Louis Stevenson's early stories collected under the title *The New Arabian Nights* were originally split into two volumes. The first, which is the better part, is further split into two series of interlinking tales titled "The Suicide Club" and "The Rajah's Diamonds." These stories are golden, full of surprises and ingenious twists. Jorge Luis Borges once wrote that all of G.K. Chesterton's fictional output was encapsulated in RLS's *New Arabian Nights*. This is a grand endorsement since Borges adored both authors. It's true, I think, that you will find echoes of Stevenson in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* and his *Father Brown* tales.

The second half of *New Arabian Nights* is comprised of several stand-alone stories. The best (and longest) of these, about a solitary wanderer who gets caught up in an international revenge plot, is "The Pavilion on the Links." The opening chapters are especially good (clearly influenced by Thoreau, whom RLS was reading about this time), though convention creeps in shortly afterward.

Kay says

Stevenson's earliest published short stories are included in this anthology. His eye for tragi-comic situations is evident. Having just finished a number of recently published books, it was a treat to step back into the opulence of Victorian language. Unfortunately, I found myself getting a little impatient with his plot devices. "The Suicide Club" seemed to end in a peculiarly short way, for example.

I couldn't help but reflect, though, that this sort of entertainment was the equivalent of our weekly TV shows. The Victorian readers waited for each installment (sans plot summary) much the way a modern viewer waits to see who's going to be the sole "Survivor"!

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Sabreen says

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Dayo Johnson says

The stories with the Prince of Bohemia were ok, the rest were rather dull.

Jeff Hobbs says

Read so far:

The Suicide Club:

The Story of the young man with the cream tarts--

The Story of the physician and the Saratoga trunk--

The adventure of the hansom cab--

The rajah's diamond:

The Story of the bandbox--

The Story of the young man in holy orders--

The Story of the house with the green blinds--

The Adventure of Prince Florizel and the detective--

The Pavilion on the Links --

A lodging for the night : a story of Francis Villon --

The Sire de Maletroit's door --3

Providence and the guitar--

Earl Grey Tea says

I am not exactly sure why the winter of 2011 ended up being the winter of Victorian Age Literature for me, but it was a new experience for me. The lesson I've learned from this season is that this type of writing is not for average reader looking for entertainment. I do love the archaic and obtuse forms of speech and writing found in these types of books. If you're taking a English Literature class or have a erudite friend to discuss all the finer points with, these types of books will definitely expand you mind.

Like most of the Victorian Age books I read, they were a collection of short stories. To me, this age's short stories seem to me to be not completely fleshed out, the plot peppered with holes and the endings always are abrupt and anticlimactic. Later on, after a good dive back into modern literature, I will try to a full length novel from this time period.

Stevenson does an interesting job with his collections of short stories. The first half of the books consists of stories about many different characters from different walks of life all tied together by the main story of Prince Forizel of Bohemia. It was a novel perspective to me, but has the typical downfalls as stated in the previous section.

The next quarter, the Pavilion on the Links, suffered from only, in my opinion, an anticlimactic ending. One interesting aspect that I loved is that throughout the story little lines a scattered about that slowly develop the

narrators relationship to some of the characters and the reader.

The last quarter consisted of short stories that took place throughout France over a time period of three hundred years. To me, these stories were just awkward. This fact is probably due to my modern western mentality and that the actions of the characters to me just utterly foolish.

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Iain says

Swithering between 4 and 5 stars for this. Objectively, it's probably a 4; but subjectively, *I found a new author I really love* and I'm going to start collecting in earnest, so this gets a 5.

This isn't a translation of Arabian Nights, but a new (in the 1870s) collection of linked short stories, taking thematic inspiration very loosely from the original. There's no Scheherazade framing story—a sad loss—but Stevenson replaces that formal trick with another: a sequence of self-contained short stories with different viewpoint characters that fit together into a larger plot. This is such a great device that it's surprising that it isn't used more today. Stevenson not only invented it for this collection, he practically invented the English short story itself. It's wonderful to see a new medium spring full-formed into life.

The first set of stories ("The Suicide Club") borrows another trick from Arabian Nights—the caliph and his vizier who explore their city in disguise are here translated into the Prince of Bohemia and his trusted horse-master, and their secret adventures in Victorian London and Paris. This also strikes me as an early appearance of the "Magical London" that has become such a common trope in modern fantasy; there's no literal magic here, but the delicate atmosphere of mystery and romance hints at unlimited possibilities just out of sight.

I'm not hugely well-read in Victorian literature, but I've suddenly hit a point where I can see connections between different works, and the whole cultural texture of the time is starting to become tangible. Which is exciting! Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, one of my very favourite books, clearly made a big impression on Stevenson too, as the second set of stories ("The Rajah's Diamond") similarly revolves around a diamond that passes from hand to hand, corrupting all who come in contact with it. Under the thin veneer of a story of crime and detection, Stevenson (like Collins) is more interested in drawing a series of colourful character portraits. Later in the book, "A Lodging for the Night" is practically historical fanfic about rogue-poet François Villon—also a favourite subject of Don Marquis in *archy and mehitabel*.

Above all else, it's Stevenson's way with language that draws me in—the dry ironic tone, the pleasure he clearly takes in picking tasty words and gluing them into a phrase that quietly sings. Some sentences remind me amazingly of Jack Vance, one of my favourite SF authors, such as the first description of the Prince's disguise: "the Prince had, as usual, travestied his appearance by the addition of false whiskers and a pair of large adhesive eyebrows. These lent him a shaggy and weather-beaten air, which, for one of his urbanity, formed the most impenetrable disguise. Thus equipped, the commander and his satellite sipped their brandy and soda in security." Isn't that wonderful? If the placing of "travestied", "adhesive", "urbanity", the mock-formality of "thus equipped"—if none of that tickles you in the slightest, well, you might as well ignore this

review.

More favourites: a character introduced as "an elderly young man"; or the priest consulting his books on what to do with the Rajah's Diamond:

"These old gentlemen," thought he, "are no doubt very valuable writers, but they seem to me conspicuously ignorant of life. Here am I, with learning enough to be a Bishop, and I positively do not know how to dispose of a stolen diamond. I glean a hint from a common policeman, and, with all my folios, I cannot so much as put it into execution. This inspires me with very low ideas of University training."

Or a debate in the final story on the value of art:

"The art of Monsieur, however," said Elvira, breaking the silence, "is not wanting in distinction."

"It has this distinction," said the wife, "that nobody will buy it."

Okay, okay, enough quoting. This is either up your street or it isn't. Worth a try, I'd say, if you think of Victorian writing as stuffy and heavy, and haven't learned that it can be not only funny but *light*, airy, witty, fantastical.

Perry Whitford says

Erroneously titled first collection of short stories from Stevenson, though Scheherazade would have approved.

'The Suicide Club', three separate tales which follow the same larger story, was conceived a full decade before Sherlock Holmes was introduced to the world and you can be sure that Conan Doyle was paying attention.

Prince Florizel, a debonair and dangerously curious aristocrat, becomes intrigued by a curious young man distributing custard tarts with liberal aplomb, leading to his introduction to the eponymous club, where broken men stake their lives on a game of cards.

The good prince survives that caper to play a supporting role in a deadly game of pass the parcel as a precious jewel goes walkabouts in 'The Rajah's Diamond', which features an impressive cast of rogues and weaklings.

'The Pavilion on the Links' is a suspenseful extended short story of rivalry and implacable revenge, well worth reading on its own even if you don't fancy trawling through the entire collection.

The next two stories offered a change in scenery and indeed in century, strange scenes from 15th century France.

The first of these, 'A Lodging for the Night - A Story of Francis Villon' was my favourite of the lot, following the fortunes of the villainous poet during a particularly shameful evening. This tale had the same kind of celebratory approach to vice that Poe was so good at.

'The Sire De Malétroits Door' also used some genuinely historical characters to tell a singular tale of a medieval take on a shotgun wedding.

Rounding things out in a more jovial tone was 'Providence and the Guitar', where a husband and wife team of traveling entertainers suffer an impecunious night in small town but still manage to spread some light.

Stevenson shot to fame on the strength of these stories and you can tell why.

Just don't expect any genies or flying carpets.

Manuel Alfonseca says

This collection contains several sets of stories:

- a) The Suicide Club, 3 stories about Prince Florizel.
- b) The Rajah's Diamond, 4 stories involving Prince Florizel.
- c) The Pavilion on the Links, a novella whose structure and style reminded me of "The strange case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde." The subject matter, of course, is totally different, a dangerous intrigue in the Scottish links (an area of coastal sand dunes).
- d) Two short stories in a French medieval atmosphere (XV century), one of them with François Villon as the main character. The other one ("The Sire de Maletroit's door") is an interesting, thrilling, original love story.
- e) A slightly longer story called "Providence & the guitar" about an eccentric couple of artists.

The only relationship with the Arabian Nights is because the narrator is supposed to have got some of his stories (those about Prince Florizel) from an Arabian source, a trick used by many other authors, notably Cervantes in Don Quixote.

Dave Holcomb says

When I was a child, one of my great delights was a collection of stories adapted for children from Burton's great compilation of the "Arabian Nights". This book is Stevenson's take on those stories, updating the characters and settings to his own nineteenth-century London, but preserving the feel and the intent of the original stories. Entertaining in and of themselves, a discerning reader will also be amazed at Stevenson's skill at accurately recreating the flavor of Burton's stories while bringing them completely into his own era: Caliph Haroun al-Rashid becomes Prince Florizel of Bohemia, but loses nothing along the way. Good and evil, justice and redemption, and the wise use of power and wealth to help those less fortunate ... it's all there, with nothing preachy, just great adventure.

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Eldonfoil TH*E Whatever Champion says

3 and a half stars. Another master of language, luxurious words dripping off of the man's tongue. I found myself loving the beginnings to these stories: the dark alleys, the faces, the character descriptions. But as I moved further within each story I seemed to somehow lose interest, probably because the stories are mostly light hearted and start to feel kitschy. All in good fun, I understand, but kind of ruined the tension I liked and felt in several of the beginnings. Make no doubt, these are beloved tales, I was just after some more meat and almost feel betrayed that such a pen didn't deliver more. Maybe Conrad had a point?

Mikey says

It's a fun read! R.L.S. excels at these short story forms, though he's better-known for novels. He uses a clever

device here of the "Arabian Author" relating stories in the style of the original Arabian Nights. One gets the sense the author had good fun spinning these tales, and where certain plot twists or descriptions might seem indulgent for modern tastes, they are charming nonetheless. Since the stories are bite-sized and feature some exotic, worldly references, this is a great read for travel.

Mohamed Foly says

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Vaclav says

I picked this book driven by the recently developed interest in the Scottish literature and lasting memory of some excellent movies portraying the daring character of Prince Florizel. The characters are somewhat sketchy, and the narrative is rather inconsistent. At the same time, it gratifies the reader by conveying the feeling of suspense and Florizel's conquering noble demeanor.

Volume 2 of New Arabian Nights includes four very good dark stories.

Overall, it is a piece worth reading.

Martyn says

These six stories were never written to go together. It's a bit of a mixed bag of locations and dates and atmospheres. Originally published separately in magazines, they were later combined as 'New Arabian Nights'. If the book had stopped after the first two stories (The Suicide Club and The Rajah's Diamond) I would have given it five stars. I loved these two, which together formed half the book. They were gripping and intriguing adventures.

The remaining four stories just didn't feel in keeping with the first two - maybe it was just because they were too short to really draw the reader in. Two of the stories were still enjoyable. The Pavilion on the Links, in spite of an uninspiring title, was another engaging adventure. The Sire de Maletroit's Door was good but too brief. It reminded me of the sort of plot Victor Hugo or Alexandre Dumas would have written. A Lodging for the Night had a similar feel to it, and was okay, but nothing outstanding. Providence and the Guitar didn't do much for me either. Maybe I just didn't understand it fully.

Sometimes I really enjoy Stevenson, sometimes he disappoints. This book was one of the more pleasurable ones to read. Good trivial reading for a winter's evening.

Lloyd Osborne's introduction was very interesting and engaging, and useful for shedding light on Stevenson's religious beliefs.

D.M. says

(I've read this as part of a collected works volume, so this review is not specific to any individual edition of New Arabian Nights.)

New Arabian Nights may be a bit of a misnomer (there's none of the fantasy and magic associated with the original Arabian Nights/1001 Nights, nor is any of it set in an 'Arab' country...or even outside of Europe), but this collection of six tales from Stevenson is still a pleasing set of small adventures told with a light voice and humorous tone.

First up was 'The Suicide Club,' which comes closest in its telling to any of the Arabian Nights stories: it tells of a misadventure of a king-in-disguise (a la Haroun al Rashid) and his faithful companion (a la any of the handful of compatriots Rashid tended to run with). Though the subject of the tale is a dark one (as one might suspect, it's a club one joins to commit suicide via homicide by another member), the presence of Prince Florizel keeps the tone light and it never feels as though there's any real threat of danger.

Next, we get a bit of a peripheral story called 'The Rajah's Diamond,' wherein we eventually meet again with Florizel but the majority of the tale is concerned with the loss and pursuit of a fabulous gem.

The Prince is left behind for possibly the strongest story in the book, 'The Pavilion on the Links.' This piece of mystery, murder, theft and espionage sits comfortably alongside Stevenson's later, longer works like Treasure Island or Master of Ballantrae. It is (as were those) a fairly English story in locale, characters and sensibility. It sets and maintains a dark mood of fear and paranoia for most of its duration, and nicely bundles the tale into a perfect short-story package.

'A Lodging for the Night' is a peculiar story, dealing early on as it does with a vicious murder and a callous theft on a frigid night in a den of thieves. We follow the victim of the latter (a poor poet and balladeer called Villon) as he leaves in fear and nervousness of detection and association with the former, until he eventually finds sanctuary and shelter with a remonstrative old knight. It ends suddenly and with little satisfaction, so may be the weakest link in this chain.

In 'The Sire de Maletroit's Door,' we are given what seems to be a 'tiger or lady' sort of situation, when a young Frenchman finds himself locked inside a mysterious home and confronted by a strange situation which has nothing to do with him but will drastically alter his future. It is a fun little tale which does a fine job transmitting its feelings of claustrophobia, paranoia, mild panic, fear and finally romance.

The last story, 'Providence and the Guitar,' is a very pretty, atmospheric tale of a roaming performer and his beloved wife falling afoul of an unpleasant town. These two characters are offered in such fashion as to make them loveable and pitiable, so the reader roots for them in their seemingly hopeless situation. It comes to a droll conclusion, if not an entirely satisfactory one.

The introduction to my volume claims all these tales were written by Stevenson before he'd had any real success, and they do feel very like a writer who is working toward finding his true voice. They're not bad stories at all, and it's understandable that they worked a good deal toward his eventual recognition, but I can't imagine any one of them could be considered essential.

Stas says

I am beginning a Stevenson kick. Hopefully, it will last.

Appropriately, I started with the first volume of the set published by Scribner in 1903. Suicide Club, starring prince Florizel of Bohemia. (At the end, as a result of revolution in his native land, he becomes a tobacconist.)The Russian film version starred Oleg Dal', a great Soviet actor, and Donatas Banionis (Kris in Tarkovsky's Solaris). The middle story, Pavillion of the Links, a lighter remake of Doppelganger motif, foreshadows something in Kaverin's Two Captains.

The final three stories are a neat revelation: a tale of Francois Villon, another - of a medieval romance, something in the manner of Oscar Wilde, and lastly, a naturalistic romance, set in contemporary France - misadventures of traveling actors and a future banker, a young Englishman on a Tour of France.

I've read most of these as a kid, without however noticing a pervasive theme - difficulties of social mobility in a class society unhinged by monetary greed.

Next on - Treasure Island.
