

# 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 vertices; 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 Picardy 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 rag 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 squish nose and slobbering lips. He had become a thief just as he might have become the most decent of bourgeois 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 squalid 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 medlar the fewer on the three-legged medlar tree! I say, Dom Nicolas, it'll be cold tonight on the St. Denis road?" he asked.

Tabary laughed immoderately over the medlars. 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 gamster. 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 growl of the burden.

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 leap sigh, and a single stealthy glance at the dead Thevenin, who was beginning to sink 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 meddlesome 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 floated 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 feetness 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 forward with occasional leaps when he

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 raggedinery fluttered in the wind about her hair, and her cheeks had been heavily rouged that same afternoon. Her pockets were quite empty, but in her stocking underneath the garter Villon found two of the small coins that went by the name of whites. It was little enough, but it was always something, and the poet was moved with a deep sense of pathos that she should have died before she had spent her money.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind he was feeling half mechanically for his purse. Suddenly his heart stopped beating. A feeling of cold scales passed up the back of his legs and a cold blow seemed to fall upon his scalp. He stood petrified for a moment; then he felt again with one feverish movement; then his loss burst upon him. He cursed. He threw the two whites into the street. He shook his fist at heaven. He stamped and was not horrified to find himself trampling the poor corpse. Then he began rapidly to retrace his steps toward the house beside the cemetery. He had forgotten all fear of the patrol, which was long gone by at any rate, and had no idea but that of his lost purse. It was in vain that he looked right and left upon the snow. Nothing was to be seen. He had not dropped it in the streets. Had it fallen in the house? He would have liked dearly to go in and see, but the idea of the grisly occupant unmanned him, and he saw besides as he drew near that their efforts to put out the fire had been unsuccessful. On the contrary, it had broken into a blaze, and a changeful light played in the chinks of door and window and revived his terror for the authorities and Paris gibbet.

He returned to the hotel with the porch and groped about upon the snow for the money he had thrown away in his childish passion. But he could only find one white; the other had probably struck sideways and sunk deeply in. With a single white in his pocket all his projects for a roasting night in some wild tavern vanished utterly away. And it was not only pleasure that fled laughing from his grasp; positive discomfort, positive pain, attacked him as he stood ruefully before the porch. His perspiration had dried upon him, and although the wind had now fallen a binding frost was setting in stronger with every hour, and he felt benumbed and sick at heart. What was to be done? Late as was the hour, improbable as was success, he would try the house of his adopted father, the chaplain of St. Beno.

He ran there all the way and knocked timidly. There was no answer. He knocked again and again, taking heart with every stroke, and at last steps were heard approaching from within. A barred wicket fell open in the iron studded door and emitted a gush of yellow light.

"Hold up your face to the wicket," said the chaplain from within. "It's only me," whimpered Villon. "Oh, it's only you, is it?" returned the chaplain, and he cursed him with foul, unpriestly oaths for disturbing him at such an hour and bade him be off to hell where he came from.

"My hands are blue to the wrist," pleaded Villon; "my feet are dead and full of twinges; my nose aches with the sharp air; the cold lies at my heart. I may be dead before morning. Only this once, father, and before God, I will never ask again!"

"You should have come earlier," said the ecclesiastic coolly. "Young men require a lesson now and then." He shut the wicket and retired deliberately into the interior of the house.

Villon was beside himself. He beat upon the door with his hands and feet and shouted hoarsely after the chaplain.

A door shut in the interior, faintly audible to the poet down long passages. He passed his hand over his mouth with an oath. And then the humor of the situation struck him, and he laughed and looked lightly up to heaven, where the stars seemed to be winking over his discomfiture.

What was to be done? It looked very like a night in the frosty streets. The idea of the dead woman popped into his imagination and gave him a hearty fright; what had happened to her in the early night might very well happen to him before morning.

He passed all his chances under review, turning the white between his thumb and forefinger. Unfortunately he was on bad terms with some old friends who would once have taken pity on him in such a plight. He had lampooned them in verses; he had beaten and cheated them, and yet now, when he was in so close a pinch, he thought there was at least one who might perhaps relent. It was a chance. It was worth trying at least, and he would go and see.

He passed a corner where not so long before a woman and her child had been devoured by wolves. He remembered his mother telling him the story and pointing out the spot while he was yet a child. His mother! If he only knew where she lived he might make sure at least of shelter. He determined he would inquire upon the morrow—nay, he would go and see her, too, poor old girl! So thinking, he arrived at his destination—his last hope for the night.

The house was quite dark, like its neighbors, and yet after a few taps he heard a movement overhead, a door opened, and a cautious voice asking who he was. "I am your acquaintance," said Villon, and he stepped into the room.

Without some trepidation, the result. Nor had he to wait long. A window was suddenly opened and a painful of slops splashed down upon the doorstep. Villon had not been unprepared for something of the sort and had put himself as much in shelter as the nature of the porch admitted, but for all that he was deplorably drenched below the waist. His hose began to freeze almost at once. Death from cold and exposure stared him in the face. He remembered he was of phthisical tendency, and began coughing tentatively. But the gravity of the danger steadied his nerves. He stopped a few hundred yards from the door where he had been so rudely used and reflected with his finger to his nose. He could see only one way of getting a lodging and that was to take it. He had noticed a house not far away which looked as if it might be easily broken into, and thither he betook himself promptly, entertaining himself on the way with the idea of a room still hot, with a table still loaded with the remains of supper, where he might pass the rest of the black hours and whence he should issue on the morrow with an armful of valuable plate. He even considered on what viands and what wines he should prefer, and as he was calling the roll of his favorite dainties roast fish presented itself to his mind with an odd mixture of amusement and horror.

"I shall never finish that ballad," he thought to himself, and then, with another shudder at the recollection, "Oh, d—his fat head!" he repeated fervently and spat upon the snow.

PART II.

THE house in question looked dark at first sight, but as Villon made a preliminary inspection in search of the handiest point of attack a little twinkle of light caught his eye from behind a curtained window.

"The devil!" he thought. "People awake! Some student or some saint, confound the crew! Can't they get drunk and lie in bed snoring like their neighbors? What's the good of curfew and poor devils of bell ringers jumping at a rope's end in bell towers? What's the use of day if people sit up all night? The gripes to them!" He grinned as he saw where his logic was leading him. "Every man to his business after all," added he, "and if they're awake, by the Lord, I may come by a supper honestly for once and cheat the devil."

He went boldly to the door and knocked. The sound of his blows echoed through the house with thin, phantasmal reverberations, as though it were quite empty, but these had scarcely died away before a measured tread drew near, a couple of bolts were withdrawn, and one wing was opened broadly, as though no guile or fear of guile were known to those within. A tall figure of a man muscular and spare, but a little bent, confronted Villon. The head was massive, but finely sculptured; the nose blunt at the bottom, but refining upward to where it joined a pair of strong and honest eyebrows; the mouth and eyes surrounded with delicate markings, and the whole face based upon a thick white beard, boldly and squarely trimmed.

"You knock late, sir," said the old man in resonant, courteous tones. Villon cringed and brought up many servile words of apology. At a crisis of this sort the beggar was uppermost in him, and the man of genius hid his head with confusion.

"You are cold," repeated the old man, "and hungry? Well, step in." And he ordered him into the house with a noble enough gesture. "Some great seigneur," thought Villon, as his host, setting down the lamp on the flagged pavement of the entry, shot the bolts once more into their places. "You will pardon me if I go in front," he said when this was done, and he preceded the poet into a large apartment, warmed with a pan of charcoal and lit by a great lamp hanging from the roof. It was very bare of furniture; only some gold plate on a sideboard, some folios and a stand of armor between the windows. Some smart tapestry hung upon the walls representing the crucifixion of our Lord in one piece and in another a scene of shepherds and shepherdesses by a running stream. Over the chimney was a shield of arms.

"Will you seat yourself," said the old man, "and forgive me if I leave you? I am alone in my house tonight, and if you are to eat I must forage for you myself."

No sooner was his host gone than Villon leaped from the chair on which he had just seated himself and began examining the room with the stealth and passion of a cat. Then he stood in the middle of the room, drew a long breath, and retaining it with puffed cheeks, looked round and round him, turning on his heels, as if to impress every feature of the apartment on his memory.

"Seven pieces of plate," he said. "If there had been ten I would have risked it. A fine house and a fine old master, so help me all the saints!"

And just then, hearing the old man's tread returning along the corridor, he stole back to his chair and began humbly toasting his wet legs before the charcoal pan.

His entertainer had a plate of meat in one hand and a jug of wine in the other. He set down the plate upon the table, motioning Villon to draw in his chair and going to the sideboard, brought back two goblets, which he filled.

"I drink your better fortune," he said gravely, touching Villon's cup with his own. "I am your acquaintance," said Villon, and he stepped into the room.

Villon was hardened in that matter; he had made mirth for great lords before now and found them as black rascals as himself. And so he devoted himself to the viands with a ravenous gusto, while the old man, leaning backward, watched him with steady, curious eyes.

"You have blood on your shoulder, my man," he said. Montigny must have laid his wet right hand upon him as he left the house. He cursed Montigny in his heart.

"It was none of my shedding," he stammered. "I had not supposed so," returned his host quietly. "A brawl?" "Well, something of that sort," Villon admitted with a quaver. "Perhaps a fellow murdered?" "Oh, no, not murdered," said the poet, more and more confused. "It was all fair play—murdered by accident. I had no hand in it. God strike me dead!" he added fervently.

"One rogue the fewer, I dare say," observed the master of the house. "You may dare to say that," agreed Villon, infinitely relieved. "As big a rogue as there is between here and Jerusalem. He turned up his toes like a lamb. But it was a nasty thing to look at. I dare say you've seen dead men in your time, my lord?" he added, glancing at the armor.

"Many," said the old man. "I have followed the wars, as you imagine. Have you any money?" "I have one white," returned the poet, laughing. "I got it out of a dead jade's stocking in a porch. She was as dead as Caesar, poor wench, and as cold as a church, with bits of ribbon sticking in her hair. This is a hard world in winter for wolves and wench and poor rogues like me."

"I," said the old man, "am Enguerand de la Feuillie, signor de Brisetout, baillie du Patratrac. Who and what may you be?" Villon rose and made a suitable reverence. "I am called Francis Villon," he said, "a poor master of arts of this university. I know some Latin and a deal of vice. I can make chansons, ballads, lays, virelais and roundels, and I am very fond of wine. I was born in a garret, and I shall not improbably die upon the gallows. I may add, my lord, that from this night forward I am your lordship's very obsequious servant to command."

"No servant of mine," said the knight. "My guest for this evening, and no more."

"A very grateful guest," said Villon politely, and he drank in dumb show to his entertainer.

"You are shrewd," began the old man, tapping his forehead. "Very shrewd. You have learning. You are a clerk, and yet you take a small piece of money off a dead woman in the street. Is it not a kind of theft?" "It is a kind of theft much practiced in the wars, my lord."

"The wars are the field of honor," returned the old man proudly. "There a man plays his life upon the cast. He fights in the name of his lord the king, his Lord God, and all their lordships the holy saints and angels."

"Put it," said Villon, "that I were really a thief, should I not play my life also and against heavier odds?" "For gain, but not for honor."

"Gain?" repeated Villon, with a shrug. "Gain! The poor fellow wants supper and takes it. So does the soldier in a campaign. Why, what are all these requisitions we hear so much about?"

"These things are a necessity of war which the lowborn must endure with constancy. Look at us two," said his lordship. "I am old, strong and honored. If I were turned from my house tomorrow hundreds would be proud to shelter me. Poor people would go out and pass the night in the streets with their children if I merely hinted that I wished to be alone. And I find you, wandering homeless and picking farthings off dead women by the wayside! I fear no man and nothing. I have seen you tremble and lose countenance at a word. I wait God's summons contentedly in my own house, or if it please the king to call me out again, upon the field of battle. You look for the gallows—a rough, swift death, without hope or honor. Is there no difference between these two?"

"As far as to the moon," Villon acquiesced. "But if I had been born Lord of Brisetout and you had been the poor scholar Francis, should not I have been the soldier and you the thief?"

"A thief?" cried the old man. "I a thief! If you understood your words you would repent them."

Villon turned out his hands with a gesture of immitable impudence. "If your lordship had done me the honor to follow my argument!" he said.

"I do you too much honor in submitting to your presence," said the knight. "Learn to curb your tongue when you speak with old and honorable men, or some one hastier than I may reprove you in a sharper fashion." And he rose and paced the lower end of the apartment, straggling with anger and antipathy. Villon surreptitiously refilled his cup and settled himself more comfortably in the chair, crossing his knees and leaning his head upon one hand and the elbow against the back of the chair. He was now replete and warm, and he was in nowise frightened for his host, having gauged him as justly as was possible between two such different characters. The night was far spent, and in a very comfortable fashion after all, and he felt morally certain of a safe departure on the morrow.

"Tell me one thing," said the old man, "as you go in your walk, 'Are you acquainted with the gallows?'"

"You are very young," the knight continued. "I should never have been so old," replied Villon, showing his fingers. "If I had not helped myself with these ten talents. They have been my nursing mothers and my nursing fathers."

"You may still repent and change," "I repent daily," said the poet. "There are few people more given to repentance than poor Francis. As for change, let somebody change my circumstances. A man must continue to eat, if it were only that he may continue to repent."

"The change must begin in the heart," returned the old man solemnly. "My dear lord," answered Villon, "do you really fancy that I steal for pleasure? I hate stealing like any other piece of work or of danger. My teeth chatter when I see a gallows. But I must eat. I must drink. I must mix in society of some sort. What the devil! Man is not a solitary animal—cui Deus faeminam tradit. Make me king's pantler, make me abbot of St. Denis, make me baillie of the Patratrac, and then I shall be changed indeed. But as long as you leave me the poor scholar Francis Villon, without a farthing, why, of course, I remain the same."

"The grace of God is all powerful." "I should be a heretic to question it," said Francis. "It has made you lord of Brisetout and baillie of the Patratrac. It has given me nothing but the quick wits under my hat and these ten toes upon my hands. May I help myself to wine? I thank you respectfully. By God's grace, you have a very superior vintage."

The lord of Brisetout walked to and fro with his hands behind his back. Somehow he yearned to convert the young man to a better way of thinking and could not make up his mind to drive him forth again into the street. "There is something more than I can understand in this," he said at length. "Your mouth is full of subtleties, and the devil has led you very far astray, but the devil is only a very weak spirit before God's truth, and all his subtleties vanish at a word of true honor, like darkness at morning. Listen to me once more. I learned long ago that a gentleman should live chivalrously and lovingly to God and the king and his lady, and, though I have seen many strange things done, I have still striven to command my ways upon that rule. It is not only written in all noble histories, but in every man's heart, if he will take care to read. You speak of food and wine, and I know very well that hunger is a difficult trial to endure, but you do not speak of other wants. You have totally forgotten the great and only real ones, like a man who should be doctoring toothache on the judgment day, for such things as honor and love and faith are not only nobler than food and drink, but indeed I think we desire them more and suffer more sharply for their absence. I speak to you as I think you will most easily understand me. Are you not, while careful to fill your belly, disregarding another appetite in your heart, which spoils the pleasure of your life and keeps you continually wretched?"

Villon was sensibly nettled under all this sermonizing. "You think I have no sense of honor?" he cried. "I'm poor enough, God knows! It's hard to see rich people with their gloves and you blowing in your hands. An empty belly is a bitter thing, although you speak so lightly of it. If you had had as many as I, perhaps you would change your tune. Anyway, I'm a thief—make the most of that—but I'm not a devil from hell. God strike me dead! I would have you to know I've an honor of my own as good as yours, though I don't prate about it all day long as if it was a God's miracle to have any. It seems quite natural to me. I keep it in its box till it's wanted. Why, now, look you here, how long have I been in this room with you? Did you not tell me you were alone in the house? Look at your gold plate! You're strong, if you like, but you're old and unarmed, and I have my knife. What did I want but a jerk of the elbow and here would have been you with the cold steel in your bowels, and there would have been me, linking in the streets, with an armful of golden cups! Did you suppose I hadn't wit enough to see that? And I scorned the action. There are your d—d goblets, as safe as in a church; there are you, with your heart ticking as good as new, and here am I, ready to go out again as poor as I came in, with my one white that you threw in my teeth! And you think I have no sense of honor—God strike me dead!"

The old man stretched out his right arm. "I will tell you what you are," he said. "You are a rogue, my man, an impudent and black hearted rogue and vagabond. I have passed an hour with you. Oh, believe me, I feel myself disgraced! And you have eaten and drunk at my table. But now I am sick at your presence. The day has come and the night bird should be off to his roost. Will you go before or after?"

"Which you please," returned the poet rising. "I believe you to be strictly honorable." He thoughtfully emptied his cup. "I wish I could add you were intelligent," he went on, knocking on his head with his knuckles. "Age, age; the brains stiff and rheumatic!"

"God pity you," said the lord of Brisetout at the door. "Goodbye, papa," returned Villon, with a yawn. "Many thanks for the cold mutton."

The door closed behind him. The dawn was breaking over the white roofs. A chill, uncomfortable morning ushered in the day. Villon stood and

heartily