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"With arms like these!"

Gertrude Hills

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IT WAS evening, dark and sultry, and Robert Louis Stevenson lay unconscious in the great hall of Vailima. He was dying. On one side of him knelt his mother, on the other, his wife, rubbing his arms with brandy in an effort to revive him, not yet aware that he was passing to his rest.

No time had been lost after his seizure in summoning help. Among the number to respond and hurry to the stricken house, was Dr. Robert Anderson, of the man-of-war Wallaroo, riding at anchor in Apia harbor. He was a wind-burnt man of the sea, who had sailed with lusty sailors of animal sinew and strength.

He stood silently, watching the frantic women ply the pungent brandy, surmising the futility of their labor. Others were present also, standing about, not knowing what to do or say. Suddenly Dr. Anderson was moved to speak. His words echo to this day, sending shivers along the spine; it is as if the burdened, escaping soul of R. L. S. had entered them, making them an immortal reproach.

Had the doctor thought first, he might have disciplined the sounds behind his lips, but he was not thinking, he was feeling. Shocked by some suddenly uttered remark of the many books Louis had written, he blurted out:

"How can anybody write books with arms like these?"

Silence again, stained, perhaps, with remorseful and guilty thoughts of those who had used these arms to support themselves and theirs in comfort — arms no more than pitiful, sharp, skeleton bones that for twenty years parched and burning skin had tied together for Quixotic service and prodigious tasks.

The silence deepened, filling the room with wounding, challenging, incredible implications, until his mother strove to shatter it by crying aloud:

"He has written all his books with arms like these!"