



Fanny Osbourne married Robert Louis Stevenson in 1880. She had been previously married—to Samuel Osbourne, with whom she had three children—but her husband was not faithful.

Deciding to give herself space from Osbourne, a Union Civil-War veteran, Fanny set sail for Europe in 1875, together with her three children. It was there, in a French village near Paris, that she met R.L.S.

The Robert Louis Stevenson Museum, in Napa Valley's St. Helena, provides some background on Fanny. The following is an excerpt from that biography:

*Born Frances Matilda Van de Grift on 10 March 1840 in Indianapolis, Indiana, Fanny was the oldest of six children. Her parents, Jacob and Esther, were both from Philadelphia and of Swedish and Dutch ancestry. Jacob was a carpenter and later owned a lumber mill in Indiana.*

*Fanny was an educated young woman of 17 when she married the dashing officer Samuel Osbourne. They had a daughter, Isobel, a year later. Their lives changed when Sam went off to fight for the Union in the Civil War. Afterwards, Sam headed off to the silver mines of Nevada to find his fortune and soon sent word that his family should join him.*

*Fanny, and five-year-old Belle, traveled by ship from New York to Panama, crossed the isthmus, and then by ship to San Francisco, California, in 1864. The Osbourne family then spent the next several years in mining camps until Sam took a job in San Francisco and purchased a house across the bay in Oakland.*

*By 1875, however, Fanny was unhappy. She had given birth to two sons, Samuel Lloyd (1868) and Hervey (1871), in California but long lacked the devotion of her husband. Sam had become a philanderer and was often not at home.*

*Against all advice, Fanny traveled to Europe with her three children in order to study art with Isobel. Arriving in Antwerp, Belgium, they learned that women were not taught in the local art schools.*

*The family moved on to Paris, France, where they enrolled in the Académie Julian. But Fanny had little time to devote to art. Her youngest child, Hervey, became ill and died in April 1876.*

*Distraught, Fanny moved to the French countryside in order to emotionally recover with her surviving son and daughter. Friends recommended the quiet town of Grez-sur-Loing, near Barbizon, which was known to only a few artists at the time.*

*One such artist was Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson. That summer, his cousin Robert Louis Stevenson was visiting. Fresh from university, Louis was looking for inspiration for his writing. What he found was true love.*

*Conflicted by her growing love for a man not her husband, Fanny eventually returned to California with her children in 1878.*

*A year later, Fanny knew her husband's ways had not changed and, flush with illness, she sent word to Stevenson. At the end of August, 1879, he arrived on her doorstep in Monterey—looking like a bag of bones.*

R.L.S. looked like a bag of bones because he had been really ill. Fanny helped to nurse him back to somewhat-better health.

Mrs. Osbourne knew that she had to choose between her husband Sam and Stevenson. She decided to divorce Sam and marry the writer who, at that time, was not-yet widely known.

The pair married on the 19th of May, in 1880, and spent the rest of Stevenson's life together.

People who knew the Stevensons credit Fanny with not only caring for her frequently ill husband but also for her profound influence in his life and work. Using words common at the time, S. S. McClure had these observations:

*The more I saw of the Stevensons the more I became convinced that Mrs. Stevenson was the unique woman in the world to be Stevenson's wife.... When he met her, her exotic beauty was at its height, and with this beauty she had a wealth of experience, a reach of imagination, a sense of humor, which he had never found in any other woman.*

*Mrs. Stevenson had many of the fine qualities that we usually attribute to men rather than to women; a fair-mindedness, a large judgment, a robust, inconsequential philosophy of life, without which she could not have borne, much less shared with a relish equal to his own, his wandering, unsettled life, his vagaries, his gipsy passion for freedom.*

*She had a really creative imagination, which she expressed in living. She always lived with great intensity, had come more into contact with the real world than Stevenson had done at the time when they met, had tried more kinds of life, known more kinds of people. When he married her, he married a woman rich in knowledge of life and the world.*

*She had the kind of pluck that Stevenson particularly admired. He was best when he was at sea, and although Mrs. Stevenson was a poor sailor and often suffered greatly from seasickness, she accompanied him on all his wanderings in the South Seas and on rougher waters, with the greatest spirit. A woman who was rigid in small matters of domestic economy, who insisted on a planned and ordered life, would have worried Stevenson terribly.*

...  
*A sick man of letters never married into a family so well fitted to help him make the most of his powers. Mrs. Stevenson and both of her children were gifted; the whole family could write. When Stevenson was ill, one of them could always lend a hand and help him out.*

*Without such an amanuensis [secretary] as Mrs. Strong [meaning Isobel, referencing the last name of her first husband], Mrs. Stevenson's daughter, he could not have got through anything like the amount of work he turned off [out].*

*Whenever he had a new idea for a story, it met, at his own fireside, with the immediate recognition, appreciation, and enthusiasm so necessary to an artist, and which he so seldom finds among his own blood or in his own family. (See *The Autobiography of S.S. McClure*, republished in 1997 by Bison Books, at pages 198-200; originally published in New York by Frederick A. Stokes, during 1914, as *My Autobiography*.)*



Always worried about her husband's health, even while they were living in Samoa, Fanny had a bad feeling right after Thanksgiving Day in 1894. It was a feeling she just couldn't shake:

*A day or two afterwards she was seized with a presentiment of impending evil—a formless shadow that seemed to settle down upon her spirit, and that no argument could relieve.*

*Her mother-in-law writes: "I must tell you a very strange thing that happened just before his death. For a day or two Fanny had been telling us that she knew—that she felt—something dreadful was going to happen to some one we cared for; as she put it, to one of our friends. On Monday she was very low and upset about it and dear Lou tried to cheer her. Strangely enough, both of them had agreed that it could not be to either of them that the dreadful thing was to happen." (See Sanchez, *The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson*, at [page 220](#).)*

But it was, in fact, to one "of them that the dreadful thing was to happen." On the 3rd of December, R.L.S. shared his most-recent work with his wife, whom he considered his most-helpful critic. She was thrilled with his latest effort:

*On the afternoon of December 3, 1894, according to their custom he took his morning's work for her criticism. She quickly perceived that in this, which neither dreamed was to be the last work of his pen, his genius had risen to its highest level, and she poured out her praise in a way that was unusual with her.*

*It was almost with her words of commendation still ringing in his ears that he passed to the great beyond. (Sanchez, *The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson*, at [pages 220-221](#).)*

Lloyd Osbourne, Stevenson's much-loved stepson, tells us what happened when Lou and Fanny were working on dinner together as the evening of December 3rd approached:

*At sunset he came downstairs, rallied his wife about the forebodings she could not shake off; talked of a lecturing tour to America that he was eager to make, "as he was now so well," and played a game of cards with her to drive away her melancholy.*

*He said he was hungry; begged her assistance to help him make a salad for the evening meal; and to enhance the little feast he brought up a bottle of old Burgundy from the cellar. He was helping his wife on the veranda, and gaily talking, when suddenly he put both hands to his head and cried out: "What's that?"*

*Then he asked quickly: "Do I look strange?" Even as he did so, he fell on his knees beside her. (Quoted by Sanchez, at [page 221](#).)*

The great writer, then aged 44, did not have long to live after he was likely struck by a cerebral hemorrhage:

*Just as he had leaned upon her for help, comfort, and advice for so many years of his life, so it was at her feet that he sank in death when the last swift summons came. He was helped into the great hall between his wife and his body servant, Sosimo, and at ten minutes past eight the same evening, Monday, December 3, 1894, he passed away. (Sanchez, [page 221](#).)*

Mrs. Stevenson outlived her second husband by twenty years. She, like he, died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage at home. At the time, she was living in Santa Barbara, where her home was known as Stonehedge.



Agnes Crowley, Fanny's maid, describes the death of Stevenson's wife in her letter to Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, the author of *The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson*:

*We are a very sad little household—we are all heart-broken, to think our dear little Madam has gone away never to return. It seems too awful, and just when she was enjoying everything.*

*We were home from Palm Springs just one week when she was taken away from us—but you can console yourself by thinking that she was surrounded by love and devotion. She was not sick and did not suffer.*

*Tuesday evening, February 17, she felt well and read her magazines until nine o'clock, and Mr. Field [her son-in-law, Isobel's husband] played cards with her till 10.30. Then she retired. The next morning I went in to attend to her as usual, and there was my dear little Madam lying unconscious.*

*I thought at first she was in a faint, and I quickly ran for Mr. Field; he jumped up and put on his bathrobe and went to her while I called Dr. Hurst. It took the doctor about seven minutes to get here, and as soon as he saw her he said it was a stroke, but he seemed to be hopeful and thought he could pull her through.*

*He put an ice pack on her head and gave her an injection in the arm and oxygen to inhale, and she seemed to begin to breathe natural, and we all hoped, but it was in vain. She never regained consciousness, and at two o'clock she just stopped breathing, so you see she did not suffer.*

*But oh Mrs. Sanchez, we all seemed so helpless—we all loved her so and yet could do nothing. Dr. Hurst worked hard from 8.30 till two o'clock, and when the end came he cried like a little child, for he loved Mrs. Stevenson very much.*

*It was an awful blow to us all—it was so sudden. This place will never seem the same to William and me, for we loved our little Madam dearly, and it was a pleasure to do anything for her—for she was always so gentle and sweet. I adored her from the first time I ever saw her, and will always consider it the greatest pleasure of my life to have had the privilege of waiting upon her. (Quoted, by Sanchez, in *The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson*, pages 309-10.)*

Before he met Fanny Osbourne, R.L.S. was not widely known. All of his major books such as *Treasure Island*, which has never been out of print, were written during his marriage to her. As Lord Guthrie said:

*Without her, Louis's best work neither could nor would have existed.* (See Sanchez, *The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson*, at page 313.)

As Fanny wished, her body was cremated. Thereafter, her daughter transported her ashes to Samoa where they are buried next to her husband's remains.

## Credits:

Image of Fanny Osborne, as she appeared at about the time she met Robert Louis Stevenson. Included in "[The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson](#)," by Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, published in London, during 1920, by Chatto & Windus. Online via Google Books.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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## Media Stream

### Vailima - Samoan Home of Robert Louis Stevenson

Seeking a better climate to help him stay healthy, Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife, Fanny Osbourne, settled on the [Samoan island of Opolu](#).



Joining them were members of their extended family, including Stevenson's mother.

Together, R.L.S. and Fanny enjoyed their South Pacific home—depicted in this image—for four years. It was here that R.L.S. died on December 3, 1894.

Vailima, as they called their home, is [now a museum](#).

Click on the image for a better view.

Image of Vailima included in "The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson," by Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, [following page 194](#).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Vailima-Samoan-Home-of-Robert-Louis-Stevenson>

### Stonehedge - Home of Fanny Osbourne Stevenson

This image depicts Fanny Osbourne Stevenson's home in Santa Barbara, California. She called it Stonehedge.



She lived a simple, quiet life in this house after the death of her husband, Robert Louis Stevenson. Surrounded by beautiful flowers which she grew in her garden, and a small staff who helped her maintain the place, Fanny had one constant companion - a Siamese cat named Kitson.

Mrs. Stevenson died in this house on February 18, 1914.

Image of Stonehedge included in "The Life of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson," by Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, [following page 298](#).

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