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The Ebb-Tide (Annotated): A Trio And Quartette

Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne

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The Ebb-Tide. A Trio and a Quartette (1894) is a short novel written by Robert Louis Stevenson and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne. It was published the year Stevenson died. Three beggars operate in the port of Papeete on Tahiti. They are Herrick, a failed English businessman; Davis, an American sea captain disgraced by the loss of his last ship; and Huish, a dishonest Cockney of various employments. One day an off-course schooner carrying a cargo of champagne from San Francisco to Sydney arrives in port, its officers having been killed by smallpox. With no-one else willing to risk infection, the U.S. consul employs Davis to take over the ship for the remainder of its voyage. Davis brings the other two men, along with a plan to steal the ship and navigate it to Peru, where they will sell the cargo and vessel and disappear with the money. Once at sea, Davis and Huish start drinking the cargo and spend almost all of their time intoxicated. Herrick, whose conscience is severely troubled by the plan but feels he has no other way to escape poverty, is left alone to manage the ship and three native crew members, despite having no seafaring experience. Several days later the would-be thieves discover they have been victims of a fraud: most of the cargo is not champagne but merely bottles of water. Evidently the shipper and the previous captain had intended to sink the ship deliberately and claim the full value of the "champagne" on insurance. Now sober, Davis discovers that his rushed preparations and drunkenness leave the ship with insufficient food to reach Peru. The only port they can reach without starving is Papeete, where they would surely be imprisoned for their actions. They sight an unknown island, where they discover an upper-class Englishman named Attwater. Attwater, a devout Christian, has been harvesting pearls here for many years with the help of several dozen native workers, all except four of whom have recently also died of smallpox.

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