

Well Done

by Lydia Cooper

The great R. J. Stevenson, bestselling author of *St. Augustine, Florida*, began his day as he always did. He fixed a careless breakfast. He made a cup of tea. He sat down to finish the draft of his seventeenth historical fiction novel. He knew it was eagerly awaited by fans (of course it was) and he itched to hear the praise, the admiration, the applause of his readers. It was always praise, of course—no one ever *criticized* the great R. J. Stevenson. He was simply too great.

He was in a hurry today, though, because he was going to have company for dinner, company who was going to read his draft whether it was finished or not. That was simply how it was, when Calla came to stay.

But it turned out he had plenty of time to finish before evening; and if he dashed off an uncertain finale involving first his hero's spectacular escape into the forest and then a spontaneous duel with the villain...well, that was the great R. J. Stevenson's style. What was more, the great R. J. Stevenson's style made money.

So he waited comfortably for Calla to arrive, and soon he heard the familiar knock on the door. He jumped up.

"Hi, Uncle Bob," shouted Calla, before he had even pulled the door open. "Can I read your new book? Is it done yet? I want to see!" And she pushed past him, leaving her mother standing on the porch and looking a little sheepish.

"Thanks for watching her, Robert," she said. "Just for the night. It means a lot."

“Oh, sure, Sis,” said R. J. Stevenson. “See you later. Have a nice time on Anastasia Island.”

“Thanks,” replied his sister, and waved as he shut the door again.

Calla was already flopped on the rug, with her backpack flung on the floor beside her. The zipper couldn’t close because it was so jammed with books.

“You don’t need all those for one night, do you?” asked Robert, laughing a little at the stretching fabric.

“You never know,” said his niece seriously.

“Well, which ones did you bring?”

Calla rattled them off so fast he hardly understood. “*Narnia, King Arthur, Five Children and It...* But I’m going to read yours first. Did you put in any dragons?”

“No.”

“What? Even Bilbo the hobbit meets a dragon!” cried Calla.

“This is historical fiction, Calla. It’s set here in St. Augustine,” explained Robert.

“*Florida?*”

“Yes, when it was under Spanish rule.”

“Oh, well,” said Calla. “Anne of Green Gables lives on Prince Edward Island, and that’s *almost* like Florida, I guess. Can I read it?”

Robert handed her the printed sheaf he had gotten ready that morning. “I’m going to start making dinner,” he told her, and turned back to the kitchen, trying to ignore the small girl curled on the rug with his precious novel. He couldn’t understand it—he, the great R. J. Stevenson of St. Augustine, Florida, had nothing to be nervous about; hundreds of people had read his work,

and there was surely nothing to fear from his ten-year-old niece, who had, after all, read his other sixteen bestsellers too. He was being silly.

“So the hero is named Mateo?” called Calla suddenly, peering over the top of the paper.

“What sort of a name is that?”

“Spanish,” said Robert, clattering about in the kitchen.

“And the villain’s looking for Mateo because he’s a *thief*?”

“What?”

“Iago wants to catch Mateo because Mateo’s a thief? That doesn’t sound heroic at all!”

“Well—I was thinking of a Robin Hood effect,” said Robert, a little uncomfortably.

“So he’s stealing from Iago? Just because Iago’s in charge of the Castillo?”

“Partly,” said Robert. “Iago’s also an evil villain who oppresses the people. Mateo is just making trouble for him.”

“Well, I don’t see how stealing from him is going to help things,” returned Calla. She went back to reading.

Robert pulled his favorite saucepan roughly from the cabinet.

“I’m glad you put in the fort,” said Calla after a while. “The Castillo de San Marcos. Mom and Dad took me to see it yesterday.”

“I’m glad you like it,” said Robert. “Come and have dinner. You can finish reading after.”

Calla bounded up. “Thanks, Uncle Bob!”

She talked all through dinner. She always did.

“Is there going to be a wise old mentor character?” she wanted to know. “Usually there is. Like Gandalf. Or Dumbledore.”

“No, there won’t be. Who’s Gandalf?”

“Uncle Bob!” yelled Calla. “Have you *still* not read *The Hobbit*? Good writers have to be good readers!”

The great R. J. Stevenson said nothing.

“Well, I think Mateo needs a mentor,” said Calla bluntly. “I don’t like Mateo. He doesn’t seem very brave. *And* he’s a thief.” She seemed to take this as a personal insult.

“Well,” Robert said, nettled, “do you even like *anyone* in the story?”

“Leandro,” said Calla at once. “I like him. Though I’m not sure why he hangs out with Mateo. The *thief*.” And she made a face.

“Oh, Leandro,” said Robert. “Mateo’s loyal friend. He dies near the end.”

“*What?*” shouted Calla.

“Yes, rather tragic, I thought. Readers are going to love it.”

“Why?” asked Calla. “Why does he die? Is it for a good reason, like Aslan?” And her eyes lighted with a sudden hope.

“No reason, really,” said Robert. “He was a weak character, I thought. Wanted to kill him off. That kind of thing makes lots of money.”

“*Money!*” Calla exclaimed hotly. “Uncle Bob, you shouldn’t kill him, not if you don’t have a reason! He’s way better than that Mateo. That *thief*. I think Leandro should have been the hero instead!”

The great R. J. Stevenson’s authorial patience gave way. “Well, he isn’t the hero,” he snapped. “I made Mateo the hero. Leandro is just the sidekick.”

“*Sidekick!*” cried Calla in indignation.

And she didn't speak for the rest of dinner, but played thoughtfully with the tablecloth. Then she returned to reading Robert's manuscript.

Robert went to bed that night disgruntled. What did ten-year-old Calla know about it anyway? *He* was the one writing bestsellers, the one signing autographs, the one making money. He was the great R. J. Stevenson—and nobody criticized the great R. J. Stevenson.

He awoke with the sun blazing into his eyes, and wondered idly why the window was open; he was sure he had shut the blinds. Then he realized he wasn't in his room at all.

He was on a beach, a rocky, sandy sort of beach with tufts of rough grass spilling from cracks in the jumbled stones. Water lapped the shore in a wash of blue. And on his other side, looking very solid through the Florida trees, there stood a fortress.

Robert knew where he was, of course—the fort was the Castillo de San Marcos, fame of St. Augustine, built centuries ago when Florida belonged to Spain. So this must be the Matanzas River.

But how had he gotten here?

Perhaps he was sleepwalking. Yes, that would be it; his house wasn't far from the Matanzas at all. He could have walked here in his sleep—couldn't he?

Then Robert forgot all about the Castillo and the Matanzas and sleepwalking, because a boy was coming through the scrubby trees—a slim, curly-haired Spanish-looking boy, a strange boy that was somehow incredibly familiar.

The boy looked up, saw Robert, stopped. He said, "Who are you?"

Robert shook his head. It was impossible. There was no way this person could be who Robert thought he was. And yet—he looked exactly as Robert had written he did....

“I’m Leandro,” said the boy.

Robert blinked. Surely it was a joke. He decided to act normally. “I’m R. J. Stevenson,” he said. “The author. I expect you’ve heard of—”

“No, I haven’t,” said Leandro, and his white teeth flashed in a smile. “Are you also hiding from Don Iago? As we are? He is evil. He wishes to rule all of La Florida.”

And Robert knew he was right. That was typical Leandro, thoughtlessly honest, just the way Robert had written him. And Iago—he was the villain of Robert’s story, the man Robert had put in charge of the Castillo de San Marcos. Somehow, inexplicably, the great R. J. Stevenson had become a part of his own book.

“Where’s Mateo?” he said without thinking—what other author had ever *met* his own characters? “He just escaped Iago again, didn’t he? And you came with him because you’re his best friend. Are you guys planning to cross the river yet?”

Leandro’s forehead creased. “You know of Mateo?” he asked. “Crossing a river? Are you a prophet?” And his dark eyes widened.

“No,” said Robert hastily, but Leandro seemed to have seized on the idea.

“I have never met anyone with your power,” he confided.

“Where’s Mateo?” Robert repeated.

Leandro smiled again. “Yes. Come!”

And he turned and hurried through the trees, Robert panting to keep up with him, and soon they crashed into a clearing.

“Leandro! Who’s that?”

Another boy, older than Leandro, perhaps, and taller, too, rose from where he sat on the ground. Robert stared. This was Mateo, this was the hero of his seventeenth historical fiction novel—and he was perfect. Just as Robert had written him.

“Mateo,” announced Leandro, “this man is a prophet.”

“I’m not,” said Robert, but they paid this no attention. So he said, “Mateo! I—well, I can’t believe I’m meeting you!” And he beamed at Mateo as if he were a precocious toddler.

Mateo’s eyebrows lifted.

“You just got away from Iago’s men, of course,” said Robert, trying to figure out exactly what point in the story they were at.

Mateo nodded, stretching lazily. “Of course. I am the great Mateo of La Florida. I can steal anything.”

“I know you can,” said the great R. J. Stevenson proudly.

But Leandro frowned. “That is why they hunt you, Mateo,” he said. “Because you steal. There are better ways of standing up to evil men.”

So maybe *that* was why Calla liked Leandro so much.

“Well, I haven’t been caught yet,” yawned Mateo. “I can take those soldiers on any time. And they’re far away in the Castillo right now.”

“Actually, Iago’s sent them all through the forest to look for you,” said Robert, in all the certainty of his authorial knowledge.

“Has he?” asked Mateo, jumping up, and a shadow of fear swept his face. “I should leave. We should run. Let’s go, quick, before we’re found!”

“No, no,” said Robert, surprised. “You can’t leave the forest yet! That isn’t how the story goes.”

“The story?” Mateo said.

“Yes, *your* story. You’re the hero. You can’t just run away. That isn’t what I wrote. You have to stay and confront Iago.”

“I told you he was a prophet,” said Leandro admiringly.

“Oh, whatever,” said Robert. “Listen, there’s a neat bit where you keep evading the soldiers in the forest. *Then* you start to cross the Matanzas River to get away from them.”

“Let’s cross it *now*,” suggested Mateo, “and get away quicker.”

Robert simply couldn’t believe what he heard. This was all wrong!

“Not yet,” he insisted. “You have to be at the river at *nightfall*. Otherwise the plot is ruined.”

“Heed the words of the mighty prophet,” Leandro intoned sepulchrally.

Mateo scowled. Then he said, “Ah, it doesn’t matter. I’m more than a match for those guys. I’m not afraid.” And he slouched back against the nearest tree.

“So you say, prophet,” began Leandro hesitantly, “that we must cross the river?” He bit his lip, and Robert knew why—Leandro had a deep fear of water. It was a part of him, just like his curly hair.

“Yes,” he said. “Because you’ll be harder to track through water.”

Mateo said, “Harder to track? Are you sure?”

“Of course I am!”

“Let’s go,” said Mateo, glancing around nervously.

“I will go wherever you do, Mateo,” said Leandro in a low voice, and Mateo looked at him and nodded. “Will you join us, prophet?” Leandro added.

“Of course I will!” said Robert.

And they started off.

Traveling in books was all very well, Robert thought—it was usually a bold, thrilling sort of journey, with plenty of daring battles and escapes—but now he was *in* one he found it was simply a walking trip through northeast Florida. There were plants, scrubby and spiny, that scraped Robert’s arms as he pushed through them after Mateo, and there were mosquitos, buzzing in sticky swarms around his face. And mostly it was hot.

“Shh,” said Leandro suddenly. “Listen.”

They listened.

Robert could hear them, too, voices not far off. “Those are Iago’s soldiers,” he told them. “They’re searching for you. Don’t worry, though,” he added hastily, seeing Mateo’s stricken face. “You’ll be fine.”

“I am glad,” said Leandro thoughtfully, “that you know these things.”

And Robert suddenly remembered that Leandro wouldn’t be fine, and he felt a stab of guilt.

The voices faded. Daylight faded too, and they stopped walking as darkness crept overhead. Mateo wanted to keep on, but Robert’s tired feet rebelled (and besides, they were supposed to stop and rest a moment—he had written that).

“We’re almost to the river,” he assured Mateo. “There’s plenty of time for a short rest.”

“Won’t they find me if I stop?” demanded Mateo, eyes widening. “We heard them just back there, after all.”

“Oh,” said Robert. “No, no one notices you.”

“All right, then, prophet,” said Mateo doubtfully. He shrugged. “It’s not like I’m scared or anything. I just think stopping might be a bad idea.”

“Surely we can just travel *along* the Matanzas,” suggested Leandro hopefully. “We don’t have to cross it—do we?”

“We must,” said Mateo. “They will find me if we don’t.”

To his great surprise, Robert was annoyed by this reply (even though he had written it himself). Surely Mateo could tell Leandro didn’t want to go near the river. Didn’t Mateo care about his friend at all?

“Then I will go with you,” said Leandro.

Robert thought back to Calla, and how she liked Leandro alone of his characters.

“Well, I’ve escaped hundreds of soldiers, after all,” Mateo added, as if they might be in doubt. “I’m the great Mateo. I can steal anything.” He drummed his fingers on a tree trunk. “Can we go now? I just *hate* sitting.”

They went on, the trees dwindling, and then they were on the bank of the Matanzas River. The water glistened smooth and black and glassy in the starlight. Leandro shivered.

“Come on!” called Mateo, dashing toward the water, and Robert started to cry, “Wait!” But he stopped himself. He couldn’t *tell* them Iago and his soldiers were sailing up the river right now. That would be ruining the story, and there had certainly been enough of that going on already.

And as he thought this, the villain's ship swept into view.

It had been a thrilling moment when he'd written it, back in his comfortable house when he'd described Iago's cry of "Halt!" to Mateo and how the hordes of soldiers emerged from the woods to surround them, but now he was *here*, standing beside Leandro on the dark riverbank, Robert found the whole scene foolish, melodramatic. The villainous Iago was posing on the ship's prow in a self-delighted way—and Mateo, his heroic Mateo, cowered before the mass of soldiers around him. Robert felt intensely annoyed.

"I have found you, thief," cried Iago. "You can't hide this time. I will take you to my dungeons—that's what you deserve, after all, for stealing from Don Iago, ruler of La Florida, the land of flowers."

Robert sighed. The speech seemed unconvincing now he was here, in reality. Maybe Calla was right.

Mateo's eyes darted, terrified, around the ring of soldiers.

Leandro turned to Mateo, and for a brief moment Robert saw their eyes meet. Then Leandro ran forward. "You're a tyrant!" he shouted. "You have enslaved the people of La Florida! You—"

"Seize him!" cried Iago, and the soldiers hurried to obey, ignoring Mateo in the scuffle.

And Mateo ran. Robert was the only one who saw him, and he felt a strange sinking in his stomach. He had written that too—he had thought Mateo clever, even wise, to escape when he had a chance, while Leandro distracted the crowd. But now he saw Mateo was cowardly.

"You will pay!" shrieked Iago. "Find the thief, soldiers! Find the *thief!*"

But Mateo was gone. There was a lot of shouting and running and splashing, while Leandro was dragged onto the ship and Iago howled into the night. “Your friend will die for this, thief!” he shouted after Mateo as his men scattered from the beach.

And Robert was left standing alone on the shore, watching Iago’s ship sail away.

He went to find Mateo. He knew his hero was hiding in a cluster of trees not far from the river.

“Mateo!” he said. The other jumped.

“Quiet,” he gasped. “They’ll find me.”

And the great R. J. Stevenson found he was angry. “So?” he cried. “Calla’s right. You’re just a coward. *Leandro* is the brave one! He distracted them all for you to escape!”

Mateo stared at him.

“Leandro is captive on Iago’s ship *right now!*” shouted Robert. “And he’s going to die if we don’t do something!”

“How do you know?” demanded Mateo.

“Because that’s what I wrote!” said Robert, forgetting Mateo couldn’t possibly understand that the “prophet” was really the author of his story. “Iago’s going to kill him. He ties him to a rock at low tide, and the tide rises and he drowns. But we can save him if we go now! There’s still time! Come on!”

But Mateo shook his head. “I can’t,” he said. “It’s too late, prophet. They’ll kill us too.”

Robert stared at his character, disgusted. “You’re no hero,” he said finally. And he turned on his heel, left Mateo, and ran along the Matanzas River.

He could see high tide beginning to surge slowly through the river—for the Matanzas wasn't really a proper river, but an inlet of the ocean that was still swayed by the tides. Leandro was around here, somewhere.... He was sure he could get there in time. He had to get there in time.

He remembered the way he had written the scene, *so* dramatically—how Iago, jumping from his ship, lashed Leandro to the rock, saying, “I will leave you in the Matanzas River, river of slaughter...it's a fitting name, isn't it?”

Robert had been proud of it then.

How strange it was to be running past this familiar river, in this city he'd lived in all his life, and yet know it wasn't the modern St. Augustine he knew, but the old Spanish-founded St. Augustine he portrayed in his book.

Then he dashed around a bend in the river, and saw the dark outline of Leandro's curly head in the middle of the water, the rising water. Iago's ship was long gone.

“Wait!” he shouted (what a stupid thing to say, he thought afterward), and he jumped into the river, splashing wildly. He had never been a great swimmer. He wondered briefly why book heroes were always good at this kind of thing.

He felt his fingers touch the rock underwater, scabbled for a moment on its surface, then felt Leandro grasp his hand as the water closed over both their heads.

Fortunately, Robert was *not* one of those swift-swimming book heroes, who would have all disdained to carry the modern yet useful pocketknife (preferring to use some more heroic, literary method of salvation). But for Robert it was the work of a moment to cut the ropes around Leandro, and they both bobbed to the surface in a cage of bubbles.

Leandro and Robert looked into each other's eyes. Then Leandro said simply, "Thank you."

It wasn't the pledge of eternal gratitude and how-can-I-ever-repay-you that the great R. J. Stevenson would have written, but he was starting to realize that what he had written was perhaps not as great as he'd once thought.

He said, "No problem."

And they swam to the shore.

"Now," said Robert, rubbing his face with a dripping hand. "Mateo is being chased by Iago's soldiers, right now—they've found him again, you see," he added. "They'll chase him all the way to the Castillo de San Marcos—in fact, he might be there already. And he and Iago are going to duel." Robert sighed in fondness of this particular scene. "It'll be so epic. Mateo will win, of course. Because—because he's the *hero*...." And he broke off, remembering.

"We should join him, prophet," said Leandro, his wet hair clinging to his forehead and his dark eyes wide and serious from being underwater. "He may need help."

"That isn't what *happens*," said Robert slowly, but he knew he had already changed the story, changed it drastically—Leandro wasn't supposed to be here now, and, for that matter, neither was Robert. He nodded. "Let's go."

It wasn't long before they approached the Castillo, looking like a great sea turtle with its four diamond-shaped bastions for flippers and the triangular ravelin protecting the only entrance for the turtle's head. And the dry moat around it swarmed with soldiers, and, standing before the drawbridge, looking helpless and cornered, was Mateo.

Iago loomed on the drawbridge. “You have two options, thief,” he cried. “Surrender, or fight. Either way, you will end up in my dungeon, and nothing will hinder my rule in La Florida.”

Mateo just stood there.

He was *supposed* to duel Iago, conquer him and liberate the oppressed people, but Robert suddenly realized he wouldn't. And it struck him that it was rather a foolish ending anyway—perhaps the great R. J. Stevenson still had some things to learn, too. He could write something better than this. He would ask Calla.

He and Mateo looked at each other, author and character, in bewilderment...because if Mateo wasn't the hero, who was?

And Leandro stepped forward.

“Don Iago!” he shouted. “What can you say for yourself? What kind of leader are you, controlling the people of La Florida so you can have more power?”

Robert suddenly smiled, as Mateo looked up, amazed. That was typical Leandro, thoughtlessly honest, just the way Robert had written him.

“You tax our people hard, Iago!” cried Leandro. “You force them to your will. You command every man, and no one can do anything you don't allow! How is that leadership?”

“And all you soldiers!” he called, turning to the men around him. “Why do you serve this tyrant, who only wants power and riches for himself? He will only kill those who stand in his way!” He brushed his wet curls out of his eyes and looked around at them all, panting a little.

There was a great murmuring among the soldiers. “Why *do* we serve him?” cried somebody. “Put him in his own dungeon!” yelled someone else, and then, with a crash like the tidal surf, they were swelling all around the Castillo’s drawbridge, all around Iago.

“Wait!” cried Iago. “Men, listen! I can explain—”

But it was too late. The host of soldiers swept shouting into the Castillo, and Iago was gone.

Robert turned, smiling, to Leandro. “Well done, hero,” he said.

And Robert awoke in his room with the sun glinting mildly through the window blinds. He blinked. What—what had just happened? Had it all been a dream? Surely not—but it *must* have been! He was being silly. How else could he have entered his own book?

He trudged down the stairs. Dream or not, he was ready for breakfast, and at the least, he had a few ideas for a revised draft. Probably Calla was still asleep, though it was surprisingly late in the morning—perhaps she was reading. He made his usual cup of tea.

“*Uncle Bob!*” Calla came thundering downstairs, her whole face alight. “You fixed it! You fixed it!”

“Fixed what?” said Robert, thoroughly confused.

Calla waved the manuscript he had given her last night. “You made Leandro the hero! I *told* you he was!”

“What do you mean?”

“You rewrote it! Did you do it last night, when I was asleep? It’s so wonderful! And I’m so glad Leandro didn’t die,” she added happily.

“He didn’t?”

“And you even put in a wise old mentor character!” Calla rushed on. “I think he was my favorite, actually. I *told* you there should be one!”

“I did?” said Robert. “Who?”

“The prophet, obviously!”

“Let me see that,” said Robert, taking his draft from his breathless niece, and he scanned it quickly. It was all changed, changed from the moment he, Robert, had gone into the story. The book read just as it had happened while he was there.

“How?” he said to himself.

“It all got better when you brought in the prophet character,” Calla said. “He was great!” She beamed. “*You* were great, Uncle Bob! It’s *so* much better now you’ve rewritten it. Well done!”

Robert looked at her and smiled.