CHAPTER EIGHT

The Simp

AS the steamer appeared off the coast, bringing the monthly mail and contact with the Western world, a shout went up at Vailima. Within five minutes, Lloyd had his horse saddled and was heading down the track to Apia, arriving soon after the steamer had anchored in the roadstead and before the tender with its cargo of mails had reached the quayside. The precious bundle for Vailima was soon heading back up the track to the house, where the white members of the household fell upon it like excited children, 41-year-old Louis as eager as the rest.

He riffled through the envelopes with strange handwriting, mostly from an adoring public, and discarded any that spelled his name 'Stephenson'. At last an Edinburgh postmark and the old, familiar hand alerted him to a communication from Charles Baxter, Writer to the Signet, 'Flower of Doers' and the best business manager, literary agent, errand boy and friend a homesick exile could wish for. Yet inside was one item of news that made Louis angry.

The previous month's letter from Baxter had brought tidings of a grand event that caused much merriment. A certain Lady Simpson of Ballabraes - 'magnificent train in rich cream brocade, arranged from left shoulder with plumes of feathers; cream duchess satin petticoat, trimmed in festoons of chiffon and feathers; diamond ornaments' - had been presented at Court to Queen Victoria, along with her 'niece', 17-year-old Miss Florence Fitzgerald 'who was much admired'.[1] The joke was that Etta Simpson, despite her title, was not the sort of woman Mrs Grundy would regard as respectable, while Flo Fitzgerald was no niece but her daughter born out of wedlock. Etta might now be 36 and the wife of a baronet, but Louis still remembered her as the wayward 16-year-old Ann Mackay, hotly pursued by his fellow law student Sir Walter Simpson.

At the time the amorous baronet, a mature student of 29 and old enough to know better, had ended up getting Etta pregnant. Before Flo's birth, he and Etta went through a Scotch marriage but the turbulent love affair would remain secret for six

years before Simpson made an honest woman of her with a proper wedding. To anyone who knew Etta and her scarlet history, the mental picture of her being presented to the po-faced Queen Empress was priceless. Yet Louis found nothing to laugh about in this month's letter from home.

'I told you Lady Simpson and Flo. Fitzgerald had been presented,' wrote Baxter. 'As I expected they were blown upon, but you will never guess by whom. There is one Mrs Clifton, a kind of cousin of the Simpsons' mother... Impelled by a sense of Duty to Her Queen, she denounced Lady Simpson as an ex-mistress of six years standing, an adventuress, and a liar, and Flo as her illegitimate child... adding that the brother and sister "at whose request she wrote" felt deeply pained at the insult offered to Her Majesty by one of their family... and it was put to Eve and Willie whether they adopted it, which they did! Can you conceive anything more vile?... One may say and truly that the step was a foolish one, but really my sympathies are all with Etta now... Here was the London Journal romance of years successfully crowned; she received at Court, and really well accepted in very good Society - such as you could hardly credit - and the whole castle tumbles to pieces in a night at the touch of the wicked fairy's wand.'[2]

For the six years before Etta's proper wedding in 1881, she could have no place at the baronet's Edinburgh residence where he lived with his brothers Willie and Magnus and sister Eve. Instead she lived apart in the twilight world of shame to which Victorian society consigned single mothers. Etta was a kept woman, visited by Simpson for a few hours of love whenever he could, but she was never mentioned to his family. It was easy to laugh at Etta's snobbish, social pretensions, but for a woman in her position it was vitally important to be accepted. Private jokes were one thing, but to make her the public laughing stock of Edinburgh society, as Simpson's vile relatives had done, was unforgivable.

'I think it is one of the most dastardly things I ever heard of,' raged Louis, half a world away. 'But what in God's name could have happened to Eve? The animosity of women is always an extraordinary study; but when I remember that I once seriously dreamed of marrying that underhand virago my heart wells over with gratitude.'[3]

EVELYN Blantyre Simpson had been scarcely 16, the same age as Etta, when Louis became friends with her brother. Sir Walter, or 'the Simp' as Louis and Baxter were soon calling him, started law classes with Louis in the autumn of 1871, and at the same time joined his circle of friends at the Spec. Seven years older than Louis, with an affable, easy-going disposition, Simpson took an indulgent view of his new friend's strange clothes and stranger ambitions in life which did not appear to be focussed, as the baronet's were, on a settled career as an advocate.

Simpson was a good friend but as head of the family, *in loco parentis* where young Eve was concerned, he may not have regarded Louis as a suitable husband. Simpson family tradition has it that at some stage Louis requested Eve's hand in marriage and Sir Walter, gently but firmly, refused. It is doubtful if matters reached that stage, but it may have given Eve a grudge against her brother that would prompt spiteful revenge two decades later. Louis certainly bore no grudge against Simpson - who may after all have saved him from marriage to an 'underhand virago' - and cheerfully accepted that the baronet's way was not to struggle with the straightjacket of Edinburgh society but quietly to pursue his own pleasures behind society's back.

I think his special character was a profound shyness, a shyness which was not so much exhibited in society as it ruled in his own dealings with himself. He was shy of his own virtues and talents, and above all of the former. He was even ashamed of his own sincere desire to do the right. More than half the man, as you first knew him, was a humbug; and that was utterly the worser part. But this very foible served to keep clean and wholesome the unusual intimacy which united him, Baxter, and myself; for he would permit no protestations and scarce any civility between us...[4]

Short, squat and athletic, with a glint of humour in his twinkling blue eyes, the Simp dressed like an English gentleman in well-tailored flannels and tweeds. He was the second son of Sir James Young Simpson, the eminent gynaecologist and pioneer of chloroform anaesthesia. For some reason, Sir James had packed off Walter to Egypt at the age of 22 to work for a merchant in Alexandria. Bearing in mind his later affairs, it may be young Walter had formed an unsuitable attachment with a young lady which his parents wished to discourage.

The Simpson home at 52 Queen Street had been the scene of many a tragedy, with Sir James and his wife Jessie losing their first two daughters as toddlers, and their handicapped son James at 15. Sir James's oldest son, David, followed his father into the medical profession and would have inherited the baronetcy with which Sir James was honoured in 1866. But David's untimely death occurred that same year, followed shortly by that of his 17-year-old sister Jessie.[5]

Eventually Walter, the black sheep of the family, was recalled from Egypt to take his place as the grieving baronet's oldest surviving son and heir. To prepare him for this unexpected elevation, Walter was sent to Cambridge where, as his sister Eve put it, 'he took his degree, as he took life, without much trouble', before being called home in 1870 to attend his dying father.[6]

Sir James, having helped to put the wayward Lady Harriett Mordaunt into a lunatic asylum where she could no longer compromise the Prince of Wales, had returned home ill and exhausted by the long train journey. Among the crowd of relations and well-wishers who attended him in his last illness, the unassuming Walter found himself sidelined by his cousin Robert Simpson, a young lawyer and Free Presbyterian zealot who monopolised the bedside, mouthing pious sentiments to the dying man and taking charge of his legal affairs. The same Robert Simpson, two decades later, would represent certain family members in their successful bid to have Etta's presentation at Court struck from the record.

Sir James and his wife died in the same year, leaving Walter as nominal head of the family. But the house in Queen Street was taken charge of by his unmarried cousin Alexander Simpson, Professor of Midwifery at Edinburgh University and eight years Walter's senior. The pious lawyer Robert Simpson decided to take up residence there also. Yet Walter, whatever the legal settlement engineered by his cousin, managed to hang on to a substantial inheritance and would be a wealthy man all his life.

On entering Edinburgh University to study law, he asserted his independence by setting up his own establishment at 2 St Colme Street, where the young baronet lived in style with servants and a butler to look after himself, Willie, Eve and Magnus. Yet 'the Simp' was a most relaxed and affable head of the family, and when his new

friend Louis Stevenson dropped by at St Colme Street he discovered a youthful, egalitarian household with no apparent ruler which he at once christened 'the Republic'.

The shenanigans at St Colme Street would have astonished Tom Stevenson, who believed Sir Walter Simpson was the steady, respectable friend his wayward son needed. This delusion provided Louis with a useful alibi for years - whenever he came home in the small hours, he would claim to have been 'at Simpson's'. Should his father ever seek confirmation from the baronet, 'the Simp' would provide it without batting an eyelid, while wondering with some amusement where Louis had been the previous night.

Sometimes Simpson would have been there with him. At the time the two started law classes, the affair with Etta had yet to begin and 'the Simp' was happy to join Louis in night roving as a release from the sometimes stifling atmosphere of Heriot Row, glimpsed in an autobiographical story he would write five years later. In it a thinly-disguised Louis returns to Heriot Row after a night's drinking with Baxter ('Butler') at the Caledonian station bar. There they have passed a 'true starry night of intellect and sherry', strolling out onto the dark, deserted platform to admire the heavens, then returning to the lights and coloured bottles and redheaded barmaids within. They imagine they are not in grey, respectable Edinburgh but in some glittering Parisian cafe 'making belief, in short, in all sorts of ways, that we had slipped the leash, and were gotten clean away out of our old life and out into the world as young men ought to be...'.[7] Yet for Louis there was no escaping the family back home:

I apply my stealthy pass key in the small hours and behold the dining room is lighted up like day, and there is a domestic group about the fireplace, waiting in rosy respectability for the prodigal. This is a sort of anti-climax that my soul cannot abide. I may have been out all night climbing the heavens of invention, drinking deep, thinking high; I go home, with my heart stirred in all its depths and my brain sparkling like wine and starlight; I open a door, and the whole of this gaudy and lighthearted life must pass away in a moment, and give place to a few words of course and a pair of formal kisses. The sky-raker must give some account of his evening, if you please; and the spirit which has just been reconstructing the universe and

debating the attributes of God, must bring down its proud stomach, and screw up its somewhat hazy eyes, to read a chapter from the authorised version of the Holy Bible! To be thus knocked off the apex of apotheosis, and sent to bed with a renewed sense of all one's troubles and sober after all, is, as Butler would say, a sheer waste of drink.[8]

Yet Tom Stevenson was happy to put his own cellar at the disposal of Louis's friends when they were entertained to dinner at Heriot Row - the handsome Ferrier with his impeccable social connections, charming but dandified with coral waistcoat studs and seeming always to be laughing internally at some private joke; the imposing Baxter, his feet planted firmly on the ladder of the legal profession, charming Louis's mother while breaking her furniture; and now the baronet, son of one of Edinburgh's most eminent medical men and resolved to make of a go of it as an advocate. To the Stevensons all three must have seemed more likely to make something of their lives than the drop-out engineering student who dressed like a scarecrow and, despite his brilliant conversation and alleged legal studies, still seemed incapable of sustained work in any profession as he approached his 21st birthday.

It was no longer possible to pretend Louis needed a nurse. Most young men had dispensed with one by the time they entered their teens, but Cummy had stayed on at Heriot Row as unofficial housekeeper, taking care of the domestic detail while Mrs Stevenson made and received social calls. Now Cummy was leaving the Stevensons' service to keep house for her brother, James Cunningham, who had a post with the city corporation at Swanston, keeping a check on Edinburgh's water supply as it ran off the Pentland Hills. His small dwelling was just across the garden from Swanston Cottage, and the Stevensons would always be able to call on Cummy to help with the domestic arrangements at their summer residence.

Yet her departure from Heriot Row prompted Louis to reflect. The brisk bundle of contradictions that was Cummy had been closer to him than a mother, yet never on an equal social footing. However much he had loved her as a child, it was hard to escape the feeling that now she was being paid off like a common servant. Alone in the bedroom where so often she had nursed him, Louis set down his thoughts on the fate of women like Cummy who were paid to be mothers to other women's children:

I knew one once, and the room where, lonely and old, she waited for death. It was pleasant enough, high up above the lane, and looking forth upon a hill-side... There were any number of cheap prints, and a drawing by one of 'her children,' and there were flowers in the window, and a sickly canary withered into consumption in an ornamental cage... She had spent her best and happiest years in tending, watching, and learning to love like a mother this child, with which she has no connection and to which she has no tie. Perhaps she refused some sweetheart (such things have been), or put him off and off, until he lost heart and turned to some one else, all for fear of leaving this creature that had wound itself about her heart. And the end of it all - her month's warning, and a present perhaps, and the rest of the life to vain regret... I believe in a better state of things, that there will be no more nurses, and that every mother will nurse her own offspring; for what can be more hardening and demoralising than to call forth the tenderest feelings of a woman's heart and cherish them yourself as long as you need them, as long as your children require a nurse to love them, and then to blight and thwart and destroy them, whenever your own use for them is at an end...[9]

A while after writing this, Louis put his feelings into a letter to Cummy herself:

You have been for a great deal in my life; you have made much that there is in me, just as surely as if you had conceived me; and there are sons who are more ungrateful to their own mothers than I am to you. For I am not ungrateful, my dear Cummy, and it is with a very sincere emotion that I write myself

Your little boy

Louis[10]

Cummy left the Stevensons' service on November 14, the day after Louis turned 21. Two days later, the Stevensons threw a dinner party to celebrate their son's coming of age. 'Thursday the 16th is the important day. 6.30 the eventful hour. Be early, be early!' Louis wrote to Baxter.[11] There were 19 to dinner at Heriot Row and 'a good deal of singing'.[12] That winter the Stevensons would hold several 'young people's dinner parties' for their son. Among the eligible young ladies invited was the daughter of Fleeming Jenkin's university colleague David Masson, Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature. Although Masson was regarded as a pompous ass by arrogant students such as Louis, his daughter Flora was much admired. In 1871, as Louis began his law studies, she became one of the first three young women to

gain admission to the university and at the same time made an entrance into Edinburgh society. Like Ann Jenkin, Flora Masson had grown up in a cultured household where friends who visited included the essayist Thomas Carlyle. But at 17 she was a far more compliant student than Louis and would never dream of skipping her father's English lectures. Certainly there was little likelihood of her encountering Louis in a lecture hall, but they would meet at the Jenkins' and also, when the winter cold descended on Edinburgh, their paths would cross on the ice at Duddingston.

This picturesque little village, both a part of and apart from Edinburgh, was set above a small loch on the edge of Holyrood Park which when frozen provided the perfect setting for the middle-class citizens of Edinburgh to disport themselves in winter finery. Some, like Sir Walter Simpson, were expert, athletic skaters. Others were less elegant - Louis admitted he skated best backwards. He would go to Duddingston with the Simpsons but would break away on his own, crossing paths with other groups. Flora Masson, who had come skating with her brother Orme, would never forget the scene:

Professor and Mrs Jenkin almost always skated together, on a little well-swept oval of ice, which semed to have become their special property. Mrs Jenkin, easily tired, used to kneel in the centre of this, looking, in her close-fitting winter garb, the outline of profile against the white banks and jagged frozen reeds, the hands held in front of her in the small muff, rather like an effigy against the wall of an old church. And the Professor described wonderful figures round about his kneeling wife, circling and pirouetting by himself till she seemed to be rested, when they took hands again. Louis Stevenson came and went about them, skating alone; a slender, dark figure with a muffler about his neck; darting in and out among the crowd, and disappearing and appearing like a melancholy minnow among the tall reeds that fringe the Loch.[13]

As he skated he must have been musing on another winter, when he had not been so solitary on the ice. Towards the end of 1871 Louis wrote 'Duddingstone', a poem about skating with his lady love across the frozen loch.

You leaned to me, I leaned to you,
Our course was smooth as flight –
We steered - a heel-touch to the left,
A heel-touch to the right...

I swear by yon swan-travelled lake,
By yon calm hill above,
I swear had we been drowned that day
We had been drowned in love.

Who had been Louis's skating partner? Was it his Jenny or Jeannie of two years before? His fey and secretive cousin Katharine, then living in Portobello with her widowed mother, two sisters and Bob? Or had Louis hired skates for Kate Drummond the tailor's daughter, in such straitened circumstances that she could barely afford stationery and postage stamps? As he left the ice that bitter-cold day in 1871, he seemed preoccupied - or perhaps too shy to associate too closely with yet another young lady, Flora Masson: 'I remember that we walked home, several of us together... Louis Stevenson came part of the way with us, walking a little separate from us... and then turned off, by himself, across the snow, somewhere about St Leonard's, towards the Old Town.'[14]

That winter, Louis continued to present papers at the Spec. His Conservative father would have been relieved to find him arguing one dark November evening in 1871 that communism was not a tenable theory. But they would cross swords frequently at Heriot Row, in deadly earnest behind closed doors or in more civilised fashion before dinner guests. In the spring of 1872, Flora Masson received her first invitation to Heriot Row. While Mrs Stevenson, vivacious and pretty, made small talk with a languidly attentive Sir Walter Simpson, Flora found Louis and his father 'taking diametrically opposite points of view on all things under the sun'.

Mr Stevenson seemed to me, on that evening, to be the type of the kindly, orthodox Edinburgh father. We chatted of nice, concrete, comfortable things, such as the Scottish Highlands in autumn; and in a moment of Scottish fervour he quoted - I believe sotto voce - a bit of a versified psalm. But Louis Stevenson, on my other side, was on that evening in one of

his most recklessly brilliant moods. His talk was almost incessant. I remember feeling quite dazed at the amount of intellection he expended on each subject... The father's face at certain moments was a study - an indescribable mixture of vexation, fatherly pride and admiration, and sheer bewilderment at the boy's brilliant flippancies, and the quick young thrusts of his wit and criticism. Our talk turned on realism as a duty of the novelist. Louis Stevenson had been reading Balzac. He was fascinated by Balzac; steeped in Balzac. It was as if he had left Balzac and all his books locked up in some room upstairs - had turned the key on him, with a 'Stay there, my dear fellow, and I'll come back as soon as I can get away from this dinner!'

I knew nothing about Balzac, and I believe I said so; I remember being sorry, and rather ashamed... It may have been Balzac's vocabulary that set us talking about the English language; the father and son debated, with some heat, the subject of word-coinage and the use of modern slang. Mr Stevenson upheld the orthodox doctrine of a 'well of English undefiled,' which of course made Louis Stevenson rattle off with extraordinary ingenuity whole sentences composed of words of foreign origin taken into our language from all parts of the world... It was a real feat in the handling of language, and I can see to this day his look of pale triumph...[15]

Louis's enthusiasm for Balzac led him to compose an entire letter to Baxter, who had just been made secretary of the Spec, in what he fondly imagined to be Balzacian French: 'Here I am before a pleasant fire, smoking to my heart's content and reading the Droll Stories of our late Master Balzac... and here they bring me a letter from my very dear and respected friend, Mr Baxter, which I expected would contain many witty remarks and kind words; and here I am, horrified to find therein nothing but dirty, filthy things which would please no decent person nor those who have high standards and know how to live and let live...'[16]

Louis had just come fifth in a ballot to elect the five vice-presidents who chaired Spec debates and it seems Baxter was demanding to know why his friend had missed a meeting. In fact Louis's weak chest would keep him from several that spring, as he was packed off to convalesce at a hotel in Dunblane. There his friend's letters pursued him, until he hit back: 'I am a 'Rural Voluptooary', at present. That is what is the matter with me. The Spec. may go whistle, may go be __. As for 'C. Baxter Secy', who is he? I know one Charles Baxter (or Bagster), Jinkster, Jokester,

___ster, ___ster; but I know nought of this 'Secy'. 'One Baxter, or Bagster, a secretary,' I say to mine acquaintance, 'is at present disquieting my leisure with certain illegal, uncharitable, unchristian and unconstitutional documents called Business letters: the affair is in the hands of the POLICE.' Do you hear that, you evil-doer? Sending business letters is surely a far more hateful and slimy degree of wickedness than sending threatening letters; the man who throws grenades and torpedoes is less malicious...'[17]

But Baxter's secretarial officiousness was all part of the gravitas in which he clothed his anarchic spirit. Since he was now a respectable Writer to the Signet, he could not openly indulge himself like Louis, who once lectured him: 'My dear Baxter, a word in your ear - DON'T YOU WISH YOU WERE A FOOL? God, how easy the world would go on with you - literally on castors. How much less you would fear, and how much less you would require to drink. The only reason a wise man can assign for getting drunk is that he wishes to enjoy for a while the blessed immunities and sunshiny weather of the land of fooldom. But a fool, who dwells ever there, has no excuse at all.'[18]

Baxter continued to drink hard, while delighting in the formation of secret societies. The Respectable Order of Habbakuk was a private joke with Louis but led to the more formal LJR Club whose initials stood for Liberty, Justice and, inexplicably to Louis, Reverence. It was Baxter who drew up the club's secret rituals and also its rules and constitution, which included support for the abolition of the House of Lords and rejection of the Established Church. The club's other members were Bob, Ferrier, the curiously unforgivable George Omond and another young man called Hayes, and ritualistic meetings complete with a ceremonial tankard were held in an old public house in Advocate's Close.

An early contribution from Louis was a competition for the best LJR sonnet, urging its members to pay homage to 'the twin Gods of mirthful wine and mirth'. He posted his off from Dunblane, telling Baxter to expect another from Bob and to 'consider yourself as Judge and lawgiver over us in this matter'.[19] Knowing Bob's aversion to writing, it is unlikely his sonnet was ever forthcoming.

Louis's illness in Dunblane may be taken with a pinch of salt, since he rose several

times and took the train to Edinburgh to rehearse for the amateur theatricals directed by Fleeming Jenkin. This year Ann Jenkin would be a winsome, witty Kate in The Taming of the Shrew. Louis, who may have been packed off to Dunblane to keep him away from another Kate, was given a stage role this time but no lines - as the 'inarticulate recipient of Petruchio's whip'. For a chronic invalid, the commuting 'Rural Voluptooary' entered into the spirit of things with remarkable vitality.

He had less enthusiasm for his new job as a clerk in the conveyancing department of Skene, Edwards and Bilton, Writers to the Signet, where for most of May and June he was incarcerated as part of his legal training. Like David Balfour in Catriona, he was required to copy long legal documents. In the novel, David is kept tethered to a desk in Glasgow while Catriona is spirited away from her imprisonment in Edinburgh Castle and 'privately got rid of'[20] by the underhand dealings of Lord Advocate Prestongrange.

Was Louis's father likewise responsible for spiriting Kate Drummond away? According to Steuart's novel, the affair continued while Louis was working at Skene's. Yet father and son seemed on amicable terms and on May 12 the lighthouse engineer and his supposedly sickly son took a long and bracing Sunday hike across the Pentland Hills from Swanston to attend morning service at Glencorse Kirk, the little church that would feature in the love affair of Archie Weir and Christina Elliott in Weir of Hermiston. As Mr Torrance, the ancient minister, got into his stride, Tom Stevenson's thoughts were focussed on the state of his soul, but Louis’s had a tendency to wander - as they had a year before, when he wrote:

You looked so tempting in the pew,
You looked so sly and calm –
My trembling fingers played with yours
As both looked out the Psalm.

Your heart beat hard against my arm,
My foot to yours was set,
Your loosened ringlet burned my cheek
Whenever they two met...[21]

From Swanston Louis would get a lift each morning with his father into town, but would often make his own way back at night. The day after the walk to Glencorse, he completed his labours at Skene's before dining with Bob in Edinburgh. The night was fine and the two brilliant young talkers had the whole world to discuss, so together they walked and talked and danced their way out of the city, under the bright May moon to Swanston.

Twa o' them walkin' an' crackin' their lane,
The mornin' licht cam gray an' plain,
An' the birds they yammert on stick an' stane,
An' the mune was shinin' clearly![22]

On July 5, Louis's half-hearted labours at Skene's were over. There had been a plan back in May for him to go to Germany with Simpson, but his mother was convinced she might never see her sickly son again and threw a fit of hysterics. Time and reason had since prevailed and on July 20 the two young law students boarded the train in search of Continental diversions. Officially, Louis was cultivating his German. Effectively, he was looking forward to his first time off the leash in Europe's Bohemian cafe society, where he could indulge in the pleasures of 'sunshine, idleness and amourettes'[23] far from the prying eyes of parents.

The sunshine Louis had craved for so long in Edinburgh was in evidence as soon as they crossed the Channel to Ostend. Europe was basking in a heatwave and they had a 'smoking hot' train journey to Brussels. There, after dinner, they strolled in the Parc and sat drinking iced drinks and smoking penny cigars under the great, old trees: 'You can't fancy how beautiful was the contrast of the great masses of lamplit foliage and the dark sapphire night sky with just one blue star set overhead in the middle of the largest patch. In the dark walks, too, there are crowds of people whose faces you cannot see and here and there a colossal white statue... There was a good deal of summer lightning blinking overhead and the black avenues and white statues leapt out every minute into short-lived distinctness.'[24]

Next day Louis found a barber to cut his long hair, grown to protect him from the chilly Edinburgh climate, before swimming at a Bassin de Natation 'where we natated among many moustachio'd and facetious Belgians'. The following day,

temperatures rose to 93F in the shade, according to Simpson's rather rocky conversions from Centigrade. While Simpson went off for a day in Antwerp, Louis swam and lounged around cafes, consuming coffee and iced drinks, before the two caught the night train to Cologne. In their carriage was a handsome Greek with his tiny but beautiful young wife who reminded Louis of the feather-brained Dora in David Copperfield, yet turned out to have read every novel he cared to mention, plus the complete works of Shakespeare. Louis left the train next morning after a long conversation with 'one of the most charming people that I have ever seen', declaring later in a letter to his mother: 'That night journey will surely hold a place until the hour I die, among the most beautiful of my remembrances.'[25]

At Cologne they viewed the cathedral, drank sharp, red, German wine, and swam in the Rhine. Simpson, who seemed to have various friends in Germany, wished to take a Rhine steamer to Frankfurt but Louis preferred the cooler night journey by train. They met up again at Frankfurt's Hotel Landsberg, where they ran through their money at a great rate. The Simp spent 15 minutes pondering the intricacies of the German currency, before informing Louis that 'while one Groschen equalled twopence, two Groschen only equalled twopence farthing. "What??" "Yes," he replied, with the greatest *serieuse*. "It's very disheartening; but so it is." '[26]

The money problem should have been easy to solve. Simpson had substantial funds, while Tom Stevenson's wealth was just a wire away for Louis - the stern paterfamilias of Heriot Row had no objection to releasing money for respectable purposes. Yet the son who rejected his father's tailor and insisted on dressing like a scarecrow had come to Germany for adventure, not a civilised hotel. The two law students bought a paper and scanned the 'To Let' section for cheap lodgings - at the heart of Frankfurt's red light district. At last Louis was able to get his own back on the father who kept him in pound-a-month penury back in Edinburgh. Tom Stevenson must have bellowed over the breakfast table when he read his son's letter, in which the goads were sprinkled with wide-eyed relish: 'The Rosengasse (Rose street) is about twenty feet wide, I guess: at least if two drunk men were each to set a head against the houses their feet would overlap in the middle.'[27]

Nothing could provoke more alarm in the breast of a parent so primed as to the

ways of evil by the Scottish National Association for the Suppression of Licentiousness. Rose Street was Victorian Edinburgh's Soddom and Gomorrah, where in broad daylight girls would sit at brothel windows in their chemises to entice passing students inside. Not even the most appalling danger of disease could dissuade girls or punters. That year one Nellie White, known as 'The Star Gazer' because of the amount of time she spent on her back, had been arrested for obstructing the entrance to a Rose Street close where the one-time gorgeously attired 'nymph of the pave' now lay half-dead through drink and disease. Rose Street's reputation was evil, and Tom Stevenson had no reason to believe Frankfurt's equivalent was any different.

Just in case his father had failed to grasp the point, Louis continued helpfully: 'If I were to call this street anything but shady, I should be boasting; it is shady, powerful shady. The people sit at their doors in shirt sleeves smoking as they do in Seven Dials of a Sunday.' He then recounted how the whole street had been woken in the middle of the night by 'such a trumpeting, shouting, pealing of bells and scurrying hither and thither of feet as woke every person in Frankfurt'. The cause was a major fire on the other side of the river. On going back to bed, however, he had been tormented by fleas 'who were strolling leisurely about my person and everywhere and there'.

Having sowed the seeds of consternation, Louis signed off cheerfully: 'Simpson and I seem to get on very well together. We suit each other capitally; and it is an awful joke to be living [two would-be advocates and one a Baronet] in this supremely mean abode...'[28] When writing to his mother, he was less mischievous, but could not resist describing the doorkeeper of the brothel across the street, in terms so innocent that, while they would never alarm her, they could not fail to put up Tom Stevenson's blood pressure. The madam's husband would sit idly at the door, dandling a baby on his knee: 'All day long you can hear him singing over the brat, when he is not eating; or see him eating when he is not keeping baby. Besides which, there comes into his house a continual round of visitors that put me in mind of the luncheon hour at home. As he has no ostensible avocation, we have named him "the W.S."[Writer to the Signet], to give a flavour of respectability to the Street.'[29]

Prostitution in German cities was less blatant and far better regulated than in Edinburgh. The prohibition of soliciting was efficiently enforced by the Frankfurt police, hence the Rosengasse's outward appearance of innocent domesticity. Prostitutes were not allowed to take customers under the age of 20, and medical regulations were more stringent. We do not know if Louis and the Simp joined the round of visitors to the establishment over the road, but they both chuckled over Tom Stevenson's ensuing epistle, to which Louis replied: 'We have both been much amused by your precautionary note.'[30]

The Bohemian adventure in the Rosengasse was cut short when they returned from the theatre one night to find a telegram boy waiting at their lodgings with an urgent wire for Simpson. His artist brother Willie lay seriously ill in Edinburgh, and the Baronet set off for Scotland the following day. It proved a false alarm, but the Simp's departure meant Louis was left to his own devices for 12 days before joining his parents on holiday at Baden Baden. The intervening period was spent in Leipzig and Dresden, diversions unspecified. His father had sent him £20 - twice what he had asked for, to ensure respectable accommodation - so there was no shortage of funds. A cryptic account he wrote two months later suggests Louis quite enjoyed Dresden, 'for to me it was a place of refuge out of horrible Leipzig, and many concomitant disagreeables. I was only a few days in Dresden... but (as far as I could see) it was a place where you could get eatables, where you might amuse yourself and where I was free from certain burthensome companionship...'[31]

On the way home with his parents, Louis wrote to Baxter from Boulogne, looking forward to 'a cigar or two and a liquor' down the Lothian road together and the chance to give his friend an uncensored account of the trip: 'I have just been long enough away to be satisfied and even anxious to get home again and talk the matter over with my friends. I shall have plenty to tell you; and principally plenty that I do not care to write...'[32]

Louis was anxious to keep the L.J.R. Club going, despite the absence now of the beautiful Walter Ferrier who had left the university after three years for an indeterminate future, location unknown. 'Is the L.J.R. think you to go naked and unashamed this winter?' Louis asked Baxter. 'He [Ferrier] with his charming

idosyncracy was in my eyes the vine-leaf that preserved our self-respect.'[33]

Louis had learned a lasting truth about his love-hate relationship with the city of his birth. The longer he was away from Edinburgh, the more he yearned to be back: 'After all, new countries, sun, music, and all the rest can never take down our gusty, rainy, smoky, grim old city out of the first place that it has been making for itself in the bottom of my soul... My heart is buried there - say, in Advocate's Close!'[34] Yet the summer interlude in Germany would furnish pleasant memories when the grim reality of life in Auld Reekie weighed Louis down once more. It marked the end of his age of innocence, the end of his old loves, be their name Kate Drummond or lost in the mists of time. The letter to Baxter was accompanied by a poem:

Blame me not if this epistle
Is the first you have from me.
Idleness has held me fettered;
But at last the times are bettered
And once more I wet my whistle
Here, in France beside the sea...

He that all the winter grapples
Difficulties - thrust and ward –
Needs to cheer him thro' his duty
Memories of sun and beauty
Orchards with the russet apples
Lying scattered on the sward...

Most, those love-fruits withered greenly;
Those frail, sickly amourettes,
How they brighten with the distance
Take new strength and new existence
Till we see them sitting queenly
Crowned and courted by regrets!

...Not the old love but another,

Bright she comes at Memory's call,

Our forgotten vows reviving

To a newer, livelier living,

As the dead child to the mother

seems the fairest child of all...'

© Jeremy Hodges 2010

---

[1] Report in The Gentlewoman, June 4, 1892.
[2] Charles Baxter to RLS, Signet Library, Edinburgh, July 1, 1892. Yale 2444, MS Yale.
[3] RLS to Charles Baxter, Vailima, August 11, 1892. Yale 2445, MS Yale.
[4] Autobiographical Fragment quoted by Graham Balfour, The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson.
[5] GROS Register of Deaths
[6] Evelyn Blantyre Simpson, The Robert Louis Stevenson Originals.
[7] RLS, Edifying Letters of the Rutherford Family.
[8] Ibid.
[9] RLS, Sketches, Nurses.
[10] RLS to Alison Cunningham, Edinburgh, 1873. Yale 129, MS Edinburgh.
[11] RLS to Charles Baxter, Heriot Row, October 31, 1871. Yale 91, MS Yale.
[12] MIS Diary.
[13] Flora Masson, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] RLS to Charles Baxter, translated, Edinburgh, March 28, 1872. Yale 96, MS Yale.
[17] RLS to Charles Baxter, Dunblane, April 9, 1872. Yale 98, MS Yale.
[18] RLS to Charles Baxter, Heriot Row, April 17, 1872. Yale 99, MS NLS.
[19] RLS to Charles Baxter, Dunblane, April 9, 1872. Yale 98, MS Yale.
[20] RLS, Catriona, Chapter XVIII.
[21] RLS, You Looked So Tempting In The Pew.
[22] RLS, A Mile An' A Bittock, Underwoods Book Two, IV.
[23] RLS to James Walter Ferrier, Heriot Row, November 23, 1872. Yale 114, MS Yale
[24] RLS to his Mother, Brussels, July 25, 1872. Yale 102, MS Yale.
[25] RLS to his Mother, Hotel Landsberg, Frankfurt, July 28, 1872. Yale 103, MS Buffalo.
[26] Ibid.
[27] RLS to his Father, Rosen Gasse 13, Frankfurt, August 4, 1872. Yale 106, MS Virginia.
[28] Ibid.
[29] RLS to his Mother, 13 Rosen Gasse, Frankfurt, August 5, 1872. Yale 107, MS Texas.
[30] RLS to his Father, Rosen Gasse, Frankfurt, August 11, 1872. Yale 110, MS Yale.
[31] RLS to Elizabeth Crosby, Heriot Row, December 22, 1872.
[32] RLS to Charles Baxter, Boulogne sur Mer, September 4, 1872. Yale 111, MS British Library.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.