

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Madonna

THE Vicar who had bothered her for so long was dead at last. On receiving the news from half a world away, Louis in Samoa felt empty. Had the Rev Albert Sitwell done the decent thing and died two decades earlier, life might have been different. Louis might even have managed, after a decent interval, to marry the Vicar's 34-year-old ungrieving widow. Yet he had always known this was fantasy, and that Fanny Sitwell already had an unspoken agreement with another man, who would soon become Louis's friend and mentor. From being the object of an aspiring young writer's passionate adoration, Mrs Sitwell had slipped gracefully into the role of a successful author's old friend, and when Louis now picked up his pen to reply to her letter it was with a sense of sadness: 'To you, I have little to say about the Vicar's death; it was something late, is all my comment...'<sup>1</sup>

Yet in 1873 the 22-year-old 'Horrible Atheist' had been tormented by the thought of that drunken, pious brute laying his hands on the perfect woman, in violent rage or furtive craving for conjugal rights. Unlike the girls Louis had known until then, Mrs Sitwell was neither virgin nor whore but the Madonna he longed to possess completely while knowing his desire was hopeless. She in turn found the adoration of a gifted young man flattering, and would never forget the summer's day he walked into her life at Cockfield Rectory:

*That afternoon I was lying on a sofa near an open window when I saw a slim youth in a black velvet jacket and straw hat, with a knapsack on his back walking up the avenue. 'Here is your cousin,' I said to Mrs Babington; and she went out through the open French window to meet him and bring him in. For a few minutes he talked rather shyly to us about his long walk out from Bury St Edmunds in the heat; and then my little boy, who was with me and had been staring with solemn eyes at Louis, suddenly went up to him and said, "If you will come with me, I'll show you the moat; we fish there sometimes." Louis rather jumped at this, and the two boys (for RLS did not look anything like his twenty-three years) went out together hand in hand...<sup>2</sup>*

That summer, Louis helped Mrs Sitwell recover from tragedy. It was less than three months since her elder son Frederick had died in her arms, aged 11. Yet his death had not brought her any closer to the clergyman she had fallen for as a girl of 17 after a footloose childhood in Ireland and Germany, before her family emigrated to Australia. There young Fanny Featherstonhaugh's teenage love for the 22-year-old theology graduate had to wait until, at the age of 20, she was allowed to return alone and marry.

Her clergyman husband took her off to India to take up a chaplaincy in Calcutta, but an outbreak of cholera drove them back to London and Sitwell's missionary zeal was directed instead at the poor of Stepney, where he became a curate. His beautiful young wife was 22 when Frederick was born, with Bertie arriving the following year, and a year after that Sitwell was made Vicar of Stepney. Yet he was a difficult man 'of unfortunate temperament and uncongenial habits'<sup>3</sup>. Reading between the lines of Victorian euphemism, it would appear he was a drinker who abused his wife. Certainly Louis learned enough to make him angry. Although Mrs Sitwell had separated from her husband shortly after their son's death, she still had to live with him, and Louis's letters would be full of concern about the Vicar 'bothering her'.

There had been no such complications at their first meeting in the relaxed surroundings of Cockfield Rectory, where Louis's frayed nerves could heal after six months of Calvinistic torment in Heriot Row. He was no longer interrogated as to his religious beliefs and the most Christian task he was called on to perform was slicing up enough bread and butter to feed 110 hungry children at the annual Sunday school treat on the rectory lawn: 'After the eating was done, and some singing to let their digestions go "*festina lente*", we all went into the meadow and gave a ten shilling box of penny toys among them, under the pretence of giving prizes for racing. I did the infant classes first, and stupider children it would be hard to imagine...'<sup>4</sup>

Professor Babington was a charming host but Louis found his sermons poor, although more soothing to doze through than Tom Stevenson's religious harangues. More soothing still were the hands of Mrs Sitwell, stroking Louis's hair as he lay beneath the trees with his head on her knee and confided his troubles and dreams of

becoming a writer. Here she could be of practical help. As relations with the Vicar deteriorated, she had formed a growing attachment to Sidney Colvin, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge. Born into a family of East India merchants, Colvin had enjoyed a cultured upbringing and was friends with John Ruskin, Edward Coley Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As a fine art critic, Colvin wrote for the Pall Mall Gazette, Portfolio and Fortnightly Review, in which his work had been admired by Louis.

The two of them first met when Colvin was summoned to Cockfield by an enthusiastic letter from Mrs Sitwell 'to meet a brilliant and to my mind unmistakable genius called Robert Louis Stevenson'. Colvin stepped off the train to be 'met on the platform by a stripling in a velvet jacket and straw hat, who walked up with me to the country rectory... He sped those summer nights and days for us all as I have scarce known any sped before or since. He seemed, this youngster, already to have lived and seen and felt and dreamed and laughed and longed more than others do in a lifetime... Over wide ranges of life and letters his mind and speech ran like the fingers of a musician over the keyboard of an instrument. Pure poetic eloquence (coloured always, be it remembered, by a strong Scottish accent), grave argument and criticism, riotous freaks of fancy, flashes of nonsense more illuminating than wisdom, streamed from him inexhaustibly...'<sup>5</sup>

For Louis, their meeting had profound significance: 'That I should meet with the flesh-and-blood Colvin of the Fortnightly Review was a thing beyond the bound of my extremest hopes... A great shrewdness, a great simplicity of character, were conjoined in him... Certainly in Colvin the two were to be found in extreme, there is no man whose trenchant insight I more fear, none at whose childishness I have more often smiled.'<sup>6</sup>

At 28 the 'great man' was only five years older than Louis, and six younger than Mrs Sitwell. His sage demeanour, cavalier moustache, trim, Van Dyck beard and large, world-weary spaniel eyes gave him a look of Charles I. Despite the Stuart resemblance, Colvin was no roistering Jacobite like Bob or Ferrier and had a fastidious, puritan streak which would lead him in later life to censor and bowdlerise Louis's writings.

Before meeting Colvin, Louis had written only to please himself, a hotch-potch of poetry, failed novels and abandoned plays, stuffed into a large box in his bedroom. He had no idea how to get work published and no clear vision of what he wanted to say. His natural bent was for storytelling, but Rathillet had been sat upon by his father and his talents pushed into the more factual Pentland Rising. Under Colvin's influence, Louis would continue in this dry vein for upmarket publications that paid handsomely, penning essays in which he took great pains with style, rewriting endlessly but often saying little of substance.

The first of these was *Roads*, inspired by walks in the Suffolk countryside around Cockfield. For weeks Louis laboured over it with much help from Colvin, who sent him a six-page letter of advice. By then Louis was back in Edinburgh after a short visit to the Sitwells' home in Chepstow Place, steering clear of the Vicar while spending 'the two happiest days of my life'<sup>7</sup> with Mrs Sitwell. This set the stage for a three-year romance conducted almost entirely through a correspondence in which Louis would pour out his heart in his most beautiful letters, addressing his idealised lover first as Claire, then Consuelo and ultimately Madonna.

From the first he was in love: 'O God, I feel very hollow and strange just now. I had to go out to get supper and the streets were wonderfully cool and dark, with all sorts of curious illuminations at odd corners from the lamps; and I could not help fancying as I went along all sorts of foolish things - chansons - about showing all these places to you, Claire, some other night; which is not to be. Dear, I would not have missed last month for eternity.'<sup>8</sup>

At Heriot Row, an uneasy truce prevailed. While Louis was away, his cousin Noona had died. Before breathing his last, Degenerate Douglas had warned Tom Stevenson of the viper in the bosom of his family - his nephew Bob, whose atheistic arguments had seduced Louis from the straight and narrow. This knowledge had festered inside Louis's father for a month, yet he did not confront his son with it. Louis's mother did warn him, however, that Bob and his father must not be allowed to meet.

But the inevitable collision of devout Calvinist and quick-witted Bohemian soon occurred in the street and rapidly reached critical mass. Louis felt the fallout at

Heriot Row as he struggled over another essay, and was still shaking that evening when he wrote to Mrs Sitwell just before:

'I was sitting up here, working away at John Knox, when the door opened and Bob came in. At first I thought he was drunk; he came in with his hands over his face and sank down on a chair and began to sob... There is now, at least, one person in the world who knows what I have had to face... and what a tempest of emotions my father can raise when he is really excited. It seems that this poor cousin of mine has hated Bob and me all through his life... he was too weak it seemed to show what he disliked and what shocked him, and he led us on, unconsciously I daresay, to play with him cards-down, and keep nothing secret. A little before death, he relieved his feelings to my father; Bob, he said, was a "blight", a "mildew" ... My father's interview with Bob has been long coming... They shook hands; my father said that he wished him all happiness, but prayed him as the one favour that could be done him, that he should never see him between the eyes again.

'The war began with my father accusing Bob of having ruined his house and his son. Bob answered that he didn't know where I had found out that the Christian religion was not true, but that he hadn't told me. And, I think from that point, the conversation went off into emotion and never touched shore again... it had no practical issue except the ludicrous one that Bob has promised never to talk to me about Religion any more. It was awfully rough on him, you know; he had no idea that there was that sort of thing in the world, although I had told him often enough - my father on his knees, and that kind of thing. O dear, dear, I just hold on to your hand very tight, and shut my eyes. I wonder why God made me to be this curse to my father and mother... I learn that my mother had hysterics privately last night, over it all... I really think I should go mad under this wretched state of matters...

'Farewell, my dearest friend

R.L.S. commonly called the "viper"; friend of the "mildew" and the "demon". O dear, I don't feel like a viper to you, do I?'<sup>9</sup>

More seismic shocks ran through Heriot Row as Tom Stevenson wrestled with his conscience about sheltering a Horrible Atheist, Careless Infidel, etc under his roof. He was trying to work himself up to casting Louis out into the street, agonising that

he 'feared to do what he knew he ought'<sup>10</sup>. Not to be outdone in histrionics, Louis told his father every man should do what he thought best, and was mentally packing his bags when his mother threw another fit of hysterics. By the time she had been scraped off the ceiling with the aid of smelling salts, the crisis was past and the following day Louis and his father took a long walk beside the Firth of Forth: 'We lay together a long time on the beach; the sea just babbled among the stones; and at one time we heard the hollow, sturdy beat of the paddles of an unseen steamer, somewhere round the cape. I am glad to say that the peace of the day and scenery was not marred by unpleasantness...'<sup>11</sup>

Blaming Bob for the religious crisis seemed to calm Tom Stevenson, and Louis, conscious that family life remained 'a picnic on a volcano', tried not to provoke a further conflagration. At times his mother seemed her normal, blithe self, enjoying lunch with her son in a Glasgow restaurant - then a few days later she would be cold and unresponsive. His father no longer whistled merrily as he left the house each morning: 'It has been a terrible blow to him. He said tonight, "He wished he had never married", and I could only echo what he said. "A poor end," he said, "for all my tenderness... I have worked for you and gone out of my way for you - and the end of it is that I find you in opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ - I find everything gone - I would ten times sooner have seen you lying in your grave than that you should be shaking the faith of other young men and bringing such ruin on other houses...'<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, Mrs Sitwell was going through her own hell with the Vicar. The letters Louis poured out to her daily were mainly about himself, but on September 24 he sympathised: 'I do hope, dear, you have had no more scenes. We both know well enough from bitter, hopeless experience how little is to be said in such matters.'<sup>13</sup>

Only Louis knew what she confided in her letters because he complied with her insistence that he should burn all but the first and her most recent, which he carried around with him. Her letters were addressed to him at the Speculative Society rooms, which he visited daily. If there was a letter, he would dash out to read it in Princes Street Gardens. If there was none, he would trudge home to add a

despondent footnote to the current missive. Sometimes he was able to meet up secretly with Bob and pour out his soul with a bottle of Burgundy and an omelette in a Princes Street restaurant. At times Bob could be 'very violent', urging Louis quite impracticably to leave home, but without Bob's inspired flights of fancy life would have been unbearable. As Louis told Mrs Sitwell: 'Bob has been, the few times I have been able to see him, a perfect God for me, all through my troubles.'<sup>14</sup>

The Horrible Atheist could never be down for long and on September 24 wrote to Walter Ferrier in high spirits: 'Call me all the beasts in the Apocalypse, Gog and Magog, the three frogs, the mill-stone that it would have been better for that man to have had about his neck, the scarlet prostitute, or the nondescript animile with crowns and other deformities upon his bloated person; void yourself in injurious language; lay on, and spare not; wade in; behold me, with raised drapery, crouched dutifully over the bench of torment. I have deserved all, I have been a beast. However, old man, what comes late, comes not I hope unwelcomely. . .

'Bob begs to be remembered tenderly to you... He finds Edinburgh but a barren promontory without your company; and to say truth, there are others who do now and then hunger after the racy flesh-pots of your conversation... Is that dissoloot Writer to the Signet, C. Baxter about there still? Bless him for me, if he is, and tell him that I pray for him day and night so vigorously as to be a scandal to the neighbourhood. I wish he would repent. Hoop la! Another religious somersault! Gentlemen, there is no deception. This sinful brand merely leaps through the small trap-window labelled 'Grace', and you see him at the other side a spangled and sanctified harlequin, with the two edged lath of the scriptures in his hand, the mask of hypocrisy (or self-deception) upon his ugly mug, and shod with the hob-nailed shoes of the preparation to tramp upon his erring neighbours.

'This letter is one wild gambado. The fun in my head becomes fast and furious. I write faster and faster and have less and less idea what I am writing about. I wish the dinner bell would ring me down from my wild flight...'<sup>15</sup>

That day Louis had been for a long walk by the Forth from Granton to Queensferry with the Simp's younger brother Magnus, returning on the outside of an old coach and four. Magnus, he discovered, was 'very nice and nowise

philistine'<sup>16</sup> and five days later Louis decided he must be converted to the Gospel according to Walt Whitman. The American bard of bodily freedom and unashamed sensuality had first been drawn to Louis's attention when as a 17-year-old he read a review of *Leaves of Grass* in the *Broadway* magazine. It was Whitman's injunction to 're-examine all you have been told at school or church, or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul'<sup>17</sup> that lay behind the constitution of the LJR, and Whitman's open rebellion against Victorian social mores that inspired Louis to write 'Hail childish slaves of social rules'. Now he was attempting to write about Whitman himself, in another essay for *Colvin*. For it to be publishable, he would have to avoid quoting from the more frank poems in *Leaves Of Grass*, of which the *Saturday Review* had declared: 'The general verdict of those who had an opportunity of examining the book was that much of it was indescribably filthy.'<sup>18</sup>

It was certainly a dangerous book to leave lying about at Heriot Row, so Louis usually kept his copy at Wilson's the tobacconist in Leith Street. But he sneaked the poems into his upstairs study while writing the essay, and became so enthused one Monday night that he had to dash off to 'the Republic' in St Colme Street and read his favourite poems aloud to a bemused Magnus Simpson. Central to *Leaves of Grass* was Whitman's Messianic hymn on himself:

*Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, No more modest  
than immodest.*

*Unscrew the locks from the doors!  
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!  
Whoever degrades another degrades me,  
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me...  
Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.  
I do not press my fingers across my mouth,  
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,*



*Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.*

*I believe in the flesh and the appetites...*<sup>19</sup>

Poems such as this could not be read aloud in Edinburgh society without giving Mrs Grundy hysterics and Mr Grundy an apoplexy. Yet for Louis, caught in this claustrophobic city of hypocrites and whores, Whitman was a breath of fresh air, and the essay over which he laboured was a plea for the poet to be accepted as a positive influence on young people and the perfect cure for 'green sickness'.

*It seems hardly possible that any being should get evil from so healthy a book as Leaves of Grass, which is simply comical wherever it falls short of nobility; but if there be any such, who cannot both take and leave, who cannot let a single opportunity pass by without some unworthy and unmanly thought, I should have as great difficulty, and neither more nor less, in recommending the works of Whitman as in lending them Shakespeare, or letting them go abroad outside of the grounds of a private asylum.*<sup>20</sup>

At home, Louis shut himself up at the top of the house, where he was now allowed a separate study with a large, L-shaped bookcase, low enough to perch on when not pacing the room. Meals left by the maid outside his study door would often lie untouched. To escape the claustrophobia he would go out and lounge on tramcars or walk for miles through the city, noting its strange sights in letters to Mrs Sitwell. At the station, he watched a brute of a working man board a train, roughly demanding money from the poor, one-eyed woman he was leaving on the platform, until she pressed two shillings tearfully into his ungrateful hand. In the rain at Portobello, a desperate, once-respectable woman tried to accost Louis with her faded charms - he walked away but dropped money for her in the mud without looking back: 'You see, she was so ugly; and you know there is something terribly, miserably pathetic in a certain smile, a certain sudden aspect of invitation on such faces.'<sup>21</sup>

Louis made weekly trips to Portobello to visit Bob and envied the normal domestic life he had. They would talk until late and, when Louis missed the last train, he had to walk home along the wide, wet road into Edinburgh, passing on his way a man serenading a house with a cornet. 'There was something uncanny about the whole walk; I was glad enough when I came near the outskirts and saw the double line of lamps come running out of the town to meet me, as it were servants

with flambeaux.'<sup>22</sup>

Louis had been left alone with the servants while his father took his mother to Ireland to recover from another shock. In Ceylon, her brother Mackintosh Balfour had married their dead brother's wife Caroline. The scandal had been made public by a notice in *The Scotsman*, and the thought of 'Mac' having carnal knowledge of poor dead Lewis's wife in flagrant breach of God's law threw Maggie Stevenson into more hysterics. The need to regain her composure in Ireland gave Louis much-needed breathing space, but the tension returned to Heriot Row with his parents, and he was soon complaining to Mrs Sitwell of a nervous facial tic and an aching, swimming sensation in his head. He could not take much more of this, and laid plans to get away and study law in England, making secret arrangements to travel south with Bob, who was through at last with Edinburgh and off to art school in Antwerp. While Mrs Sitwell and Colvin were a party to Louis's plans, his parents were not. When he left home on October 24, he told them he was going for a short break in Carlisle. Instead, he stayed on the train for London.

His father's reaction was to disinherit him, making no provision for him a new will drawn up on October 29. Among minor beneficiaries, however, Tom Stevenson did include the Magdalene Branch of the Edinburgh Parochial Scripture Readers Association. In other words, he was leaving the substantial sum of £500 to be spent on bringing the word of God to fallen women. Was this to atone for his son's sinful conduct - or did Tom Stevenson feel guilty about treating one of their number harshly?

It was shortly before leaving Edinburgh that Louis told Mrs Sitwell about the girl who had sent him the flower arabesque letter, and whose correspondence he had not answered. According to John Steuart, Tom Stevenson had put a stop to the Kate Drummond affair by the April of 1873, three months before Louis went to Cockfield. Steuart claimed that 'to those at I7 Heriot Row the revelation of those illicit associations came as a stunning, shattering disaster. The religious apostasy had seemed a grave enough scandal, had caused, in fact, excruciating anguish, but this unequivocal piece of loose living was the last straw in a burden too grievous to be borne.

‘Probably nothing but the peculiar circumstances of the case saved the offender. He was an only son, an only child; he was in feeble health; he was the apple of his mother’s eye... there was the very potent fear that if thrust out of doors he would go headlong to Avernus... Stevenson’s absences from home about that time are not to be explained by religious differences or ill health.’<sup>23</sup>

It is debatable how ill Louis actually was. Shortly after his arrival at the Chepstow Place home of Mrs Sitwell, she and Colvin took him to see Dr Andrew Clark, who said Louis must take a complete rest and could not sit the exam for the English bar. When Louis’s parents arrived in London a few days later, Clark confirmed his diagnosis. Louis’s mother, who suspected a put-up job, would recall 20 years later that Clark had told her ‘Lou’s nervous system has quite broken down, that his lungs are delicate and just in the state where disease might easily set in’.<sup>24</sup> This curious diagnosis of potential rather than actual lung disease was a ploy. Louis had not complained of chest trouble and Clark was shrewd enough to see the real problem was his parents, driving him towards nervous collapse. He prescribed a long recuperation on the Riviera - alone.

On November 5, Louis boarded the boat train for Dover, having sent a note to Baxter: ‘Please redeem my Democratic Vistas by W. Whitman from Wilson, Tobacconist, in Leith Street... my health it is all ruined and I’m a-going south. In a little while I think you will receive my Leaves of Grass also, when you will be decent and cheery enough to do them both up discreetly into a parcel and forward them... My parents utterly puzzle me. I have sometimes a notion that the atheist son is almost in the way. My head is about done for so good-bye old man. Poste Restante, Mentone, is my next address. R.L.S.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Vailima, April 24 or 25, 1894. Yale 2727, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Colvin (Fanny Sitwell), *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.

<sup>3</sup> EV Lucas, *The Colvins and Their Friends*.

<sup>4</sup> RLS to Lewis Charles Balfour, Cockfield, August 9, 1873. Yale 133, MS Yale.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places*.

<sup>6</sup> RLS, *Autobiographical Fragment, Memoirs of Himself*.

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<sup>7</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, September 1, 1873. Yale 135, MS Yale.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, September 9 & 10, 1873. Yale 138, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>10</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, September 12, 1873. Yale 139, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>11</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, September 13, 1873. Yale 139, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>12</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Edinburgh, September 22, 1873. Yale 143, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>13</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, September 24, 1873. Yale 145, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>14</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 5, 1873. Yale 147, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>15</sup> RLS to James Walter Ferrier, Heriot Row, September 24, 1873. Yale 146, MS Yale.

<sup>16</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, September 24, 1873. Yale 145, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>17</sup> Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

<sup>18</sup> Walt Whitman's Poems, *The Saturday Review*, May 2, 1868.

<sup>19</sup> Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*.

<sup>20</sup> RLS, Walt Whitman, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*.

<sup>21</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 6, 1873. Yale 149, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>22</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 10. Yale 149, Ms National Library of Scotland.

<sup>23</sup> JA Steuart, Robert Louis Stevenson, *Man and Writer*

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Stevenson, *Diary Notes*.

<sup>25</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, London, November 4, 1873. Yale 162, MS Yale.