

CHAPTER FIVE

A Gentleman From France

THE boom of naval gunnery rolled like thunder off the hills behind Vailima. Louis could feel each concussion as he sat writing in his study beside a locked stand of loaded rifles. With these the household was supposed to defend itself if attacked by natives during the civil war that had broken out in Samoa. It had been a gory business, with heads taken on both sides, but so far Louis's extended family had escaped harm. He knew and loved many of the Samoans taking part, and despised the Colonial governors whose incompetence had led to this fiasco, yet he felt curiously detached from it all.

The men on board HMS Curacoa, now engaged in shelling a small fort full of Samoan rebels, were his friends. Whenever any naval vessel put in at Apia, Louis liked to offer the men rest and recreation at Vailima, with a Samoan feast. In return he had been welcomed on board the Curacoa and taken out on naval manoeuvres to see how Victorian marine engineering and a well-drilled crew combined to create an invincible fighting machine, whose firepower was now directed at his other, Samoan friends cowering within the stockade, their small arms and war clubs useless against a British dreadnought. They, too, had been welcome guests at Vailima, where 'Tusitala' (the storyteller) was always willing to interrupt his writing to entertain native chiefs and their entourages. For them each Boom! now spelled pain and death, yet Louis could not wring his hands. He had done his best to avoid this small colonial tragedy, and destiny must take its course.

It was curious he felt none of the anguish he had done 24 years previously on the remote Scots island of Earraid, far from the fighting as France went to war with Prussia in 1870. Then the thought of young men slaughtering each other just a few hundred miles away, while Louis lazed in the sunshine, had darkened his day - 'I could *hear* the shots fired and I felt the pang in my breast of a man struck' - until he flung himself prostrate on the heather, ashamed that he was not out there, testing his courage on the field of battle.¹ But at length the reluctant apprentice engineer had

picked himself up and gone off to sunbathe on top of a large rock in the company of another apprentice, Alan Brebner, whose father was one of D. & T. Stevenson's most trusted employees. Years later the scene would re-emerge in *Kidnapped*, with the two atop the rock transformed into Alan Breck Stewart and David Balfour, hiding from the redcoat soldiers below.

Louis would learn about the real Alan Breck while on a Highland jaunt with his father in 1882, visiting the various places associated with the Appin Murder with a view to penning a *History of the Highlands*, a work of non-fiction like his ill-fated *Pentland Rising*. But the history never materialised and the eventual upshot would be *Kidnapped*, whose fictional Alan had his genesis in the Alans of the author's own life.

During Louis's sojourn on Earraid he took a boat trip out to view Skerryvore, the giant lighthouse whose creator had succumbed five years previously to general paralysis. Yet it was not the ghost of poor Uncle Alan but his living son who would breathe life into Alan Breck. When *Kidnapped* was begun in 1885 by an invalid Louis in the unlikely surroundings of a seaside villa in Bournemouth, named Skerryvore after Uncle Alan's engineering triumph, Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson had been left in charge of the sickroom while Fanny was away. She knew how much of a stimulus Bob could be for her husband's creativity, and would later acknowledge that 'whenever my husband wished to depict a romantic, erratic, engaging character, he delved into the rich mine of his cousin's personality'². As freebooting Bohemian Bob lounged around the aspidistra, talking endlessly while puffing at his evil cigarettes and draining the cellar of red wine, there was a whiff of adventure in the air as the cousins harked back to an earlier, youthful reunion.

IN 1870, as the summer sun set on Earraid and winter blew into Edinburgh, Bob returned to his home town from France, the country of Alan Breck's exile. Painting rather than Jacobite plotting had been his occupation since acquiring a Cambridge BA without Honours in the Natural Sciences, allegedly specialising in botany. Now, as Bob enrolled to sketch and paint at the School of Art in Edinburgh, he and Louis would be at their closest, like two facets of the same person, each containing

elements of both David Balfour and Alan Breck. At 20, Louis had much of David's gauche innocence, while in Bob, a man of the world at 23, the swashbuckling Alan had the upper hand.

David had grown from the pious child in the Heriot Row nursery into a fine young man of whom Cummie would be proud. Possessed of great moral courage, the hero of *Kidnapped* was as respectable as Uncle David Stevenson or Louis's grandfather, the Rev Dr Lewis Balfour, with whose names Louis endowed his fictional hero. Yet with women David Balfour remained painfully shy and fastidious, devoid of sexual magnetism.

Not so Alan Breck, the merry Jacobite whose swarthy, pitted face bore the scars of the small pox, if not the great one. Women were Alan's pretty playthings, to be charmed with fair speech, loved and then left when he fled to other delightful mademoiselles in France. Vain, boastful and brave as a lion, he was light on moral scruples but had the courage to experience life without fear of the consequences - the same adventurous urge that drove Louis as a child to do 'wicked' things for the hell of it, and to venture down dark closes as a callow youth to consort with whores and thieves. When the mature author in Bournemouth brought the two characters together, casting back the experiences of his youth from the Edinburgh of the early 1870s to the city just after the 1745 rebellion, he would give the story an aura of romance that had been sadly lacking in the original as strange demons fought within Robert Louis Stevenson for possession of his soul. His late teens had been wretched and lonely, as he found himself an outcast at the university and increasingly a stranger in his parents' home, where so much could not be spoken - until Bob returned as the confidante and co-conspirator he craved.

At the time of Bob's arrival in Edinburgh, Louis had been away at the wedding of his Balfour cousin Janey Wilson at Cockfield Rectory in Suffolk. The journey home was long and uncomfortable because Louis, short of money, had been forced to take the cheapest night train to Edinburgh for want of a shilling. But he was soon recounting his adventures to his cousin, who revealed he had once been in a similar predicament. Finding himself half a crown short at the railway booking office at Crewe, Bob took a pair of dress-trousers from his portmanteau, ran into town and

found a pawnbroker. There he plucked the name 'John Libbel' from thin air (nobody pawned under their own name) and, when asked to spell it, rapped out 'Two Bs' before dashing off with the cash to catch his train. From this ludicrous episode evolved the concept the cousins called Jink, based on doing the most absurd things simply for the fun of it.

Louis was so taken by Libbel's comic potential that neither he nor Bob could let the name die: 'It seemed to us, and it seems to me still, a mean, hungry, slinking sort of name; hence we thought that all of us should use it as a name to pawn under; and hence germinated the great idea of Libbelism. A large, growing, pushing society of men should go all over the world and continually pawn articles under the name of John Libbel; until at length when some great German statist took it into his blockhead to examine the books of pawnbrokers, it would gradually dawn upon him that, in all lands and for year after year, innumerable persons all answering to this one name of John Libbel were daily engaged in the act of pawning...'³

Louis and Bob bought a cheap set of type sold for marking pocket handkerchiefs and spent hours in a tavern printing off calling cards for Mr Libbel. These would be distributed to the unsuspecting citizens of Edinburgh, sometimes with 'manuscript additions which did not tend to improve the moral character of Mr Libbel'.⁴ Whole streets were flooded with the cards, and Louis would spend days knocking on doors and inquiring if 'Mr Libbel has come yet?' before leaving a cryptic message. Sometimes parcels containing nothing were delivered 'with Mr Libbel's compliments' to bemused householders. But the crowning glory was the Libbel Succession: 'Wherever we went, we had a notebook in our hand; we would put questions, look at each other, purse our lips, and gradually let it escape to our auditor, as if by accident, that we were agents looking for the heir to the great Libbel fortune.'⁵

To this end, Bob and Louis ventured into The Scotsman newspaper's Cockburn Street offices to place an advertisement. Sadly the clerk smelled a rat but, undeterred, the two cousins crossed the street to a small jeweller's shop run by one Bargany McCulloch. For a full 15 minutes McCulloch's shopman listened to an increasingly convoluted story about the late Mr Libbel, before the light of

recognition dawned in his eyes.

*'I know who you are,' he cried. 'You're the two Stevensons.' We were dumbfounded. 'Oh,' he went on, 'Bargany's been dying to see you. He'll be so vexed that he was out. Oh, he's heard of your ongoings.' And the man shouted with laughter again and again. He told us to come back later in the afternoon, and have tea in the backshop with Bargany and his sister, who had also heard of us, and desired to make our acquaintance. And I must say, if our reputation did us any justice, that sister was a liberal lady. Would you believe it? we never went back.'*⁶

Such nonsense relieved the tedium of student life. While Bob went off to sketch naked women, Louis returned to studiously avoiding lectures, but turned up without fail on Tuesday evenings at the Spec. Among its new members was a bulky but imposing young man called Charles Baxter. Two years older than Louis, he had all but completed his law studies and would soon be entering the profession of his father, Edmund Baxter, Auditor of the Court of Session. The Baxters lived in Rutland Square, off the Lothian Road, and had a nodding acquaintance with the Stevensons as both families attended St Stephen's church. But Louis's lifelong friendship with Baxter grew from evenings at the Spec when, after the first part of the business, the two would adjourn to 'buy pencils' - a euphemism for a jar at the Pump - before returning for the debate.

Baxter was a drinker but could hold his liquor. The more he drank, the more imposing he became, spouting the utmost nonsense with such decorum and relentless internal logic that it was often the more sober listener who appeared befuddled. To Louis, Baxter in his cups was a thing of beauty and a joy forever who could cut and thrust in conversation with all the insolent wit and polish of a character in one of Congreve's Restoration comedies.⁷

By day, Baxter accompanied Louis on his wanderings around Edinburgh. Like a couple of young dogs, a bulldog and a spaniel,⁸ they would sniff their way around the less salubrious parts of the city in search of adventures, some of which could be quite silly. Once, on spotting some workmen carrying a large and heavy pane of glass along George Street, they fell in behind with the utmost solemnity, like mourners in a funeral procession.⁹ And when all else failed to lift the *ennui*, they

might even attend a university lecture, entering noisily after the professor, making a great fuss about getting settled - then, a few minutes later, getting up with a clatter and leaving as if nothing could be more worthless than the pearls of wisdom dispensed to the more conscientious students.¹⁰

By night the bulldog Baxter drank and indulged in the pleasures of the flesh, a doughty protector of his new, slightly-built friend in the dark dives of the city. By day, sans hangover, he was a picture of respectability, trusted implicitly by clients at Mitchell and Baxter, the respected law firm he would shortly be joining as a fully-fledged Writer to the Signet. And in the early evening Baxter could be almost impeccably house-trained, charming the Stevensons at Heriot Row, despite breaking a small chair with his impressive bulk and then handing a fragment to Louis's mother with the words: 'My dear Mrs Stevenson, this is what comes of having cheap furniture!'¹¹

Soon another friend from the Spec would be gracing Heriot Row with his presence. At 20, James Walter Ferrier appeared like a young god to Louis: 'Power seemed to reside in him exhaustless; we saw him stoop to play with us, but held him marked for higher destinies; we loved his notice; and I have rarely had my pride more gratified than when he sat at my father's table, my acknowledged friend.'¹² While the mirror at Heriot Row would give the brooding Louis frequent cause to fear for his own inner deformity, Ferrier had a beauty that was not just physical but seemed to shine out from within.

Highly intelligent and delightfully witty, Ferrier enveloped all in his charm, right down to the poorest Highland student whose muddy boots would never be allowed to darken the Spec's Turkish carpets. In those early days, Ferrier's wit and intellect burned so bright that the aching void within was not visible to his circle of young friends. Yet the gifts that had been showered upon him would become a crushing weight on his shoulders. A year before Ferrier entered Edinburgh University after a public-school education at Glenalmond and Rugby, his brother-in-law, Sir Alexander Grant, had become the university's principal. Lady Grant - Ferrier's sister Susan - had high hopes for her little brother and doubtless asked her eminent husband to keep an eye on his progress. Any backsliding by Walter, as his friends

called him, would quickly become the talk of Edinburgh and reflect badly on the family's good name.

In fact Ferrier had famous names on both sides of his family. His great-aunt had been the author Susan Ferrier, whose three novels, *Marriage*, *Inheritance* and *Destiny*, had secured her a place in Scotland's literary pantheon. The achievements of Walter's father, Professor James Ferrier, poet, historian and philosopher, ranged from penning literary items for *Blackwood's Magazine* to translating Goethe and getting to grips with German thought in a way no British intellectual had attempted before. For 19 years, James Ferrier had been Professor of Moral Philosophy and Political Economy at St Andrews, until his untimely death in 1864 - the result of not-so-youthful indiscretion. In April 1853, the 44-year-old Professor took a trip to London to lobby Parliament on university matters. Left of an evening to his own devices, he went out on the town to explore attractions such as the Cremorne pleasure gardens, where men with money could encounter the most beautiful, high-class prostitutes. From one such woman, Walter's father caught the syphilis that would kill him a decade later, having paralysed his body and addled his once-bright intellect.¹³ One of the professor's few consolations during his last weeks was listening to 14-year-old Walter, a son to whom he had never been close, reading to him from the classics.

Thereafter this beautiful young man would have no father to guide him - but a great deal to live up to. Walter's mother was Margaret Anne Wilson, his father's cousin. She was the daughter of Professor John Wilson, friend of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, De Quincey and Hogg and famous in his own right as 'Christopher North', novelist and prolific literary contributor to *Blackwood's Magazine*. To cap it all, Walter Ferrier could trace his lineage back through John Wilson to James Graham, Marquis of Montrose, the brilliant 17th-century general and poet known modestly as 'Scotland's glory, Britain's pride'. With such illustrious forbears, anything short of demonstrable genius on Walter Ferrier's part was bound to look like abject failure.

But as yet he bore all this lightly, and appeared always witty and gay. At first Louis was shy in his presence, but Ferrier soon responded to the charm and warm

intelligence of the lighthouse engineer's son and welcomed him into his glittering circle of friends. But the glitter was not all it seemed and some of Ferrier's ill-advised companions would do him no favours. Among them were George Omond and Robert Glasgow Brown. Brown was a swell, a wealthy High Tory who lived well on no visible means of support and had ambitions to enter politics. Tall and slender, with a low, sweet voice, 'the brutal and licentious Brown' appeared to Louis like a character out of Balzac. Omond, a son of the Manse whose father was the minister at Monzie, near the Perthshire town of Crieff, had distinguished himself in Classics and was now studying for a degree in Law. While Louis was prepared to like or at least tolerate most of the human race, he would come to dislike and despise Omond intensely for reasons unspecified, using him as the model for the odious Frank Innes in *Weir of Hermiston*.¹⁴

But in the December of 1870, 20-year-old Louis was delighted when Ferrier, Omond and Glasgow Brown approached him as he sat quietly puffing at his meerschaum in the rooms of the Spec, and invited him to join them in launching a new Edinburgh University Magazine. 'I went home that morning walking on air. To have been chosen by these three distinguished students was to me the most unspeakable advance... it reconciled me to myself and to my fellow-men; and as I steered round the railings at the Tron, I could not withhold my lips from smiling publicly...'¹⁵

Omond would claim to have been the prime mover in this literary venture, recounting how, on December 15, 1870, he met with the printer Livingstone to decide on the paper for the magazine, 'palish yellow', and the typeface, Longprimer No. 23. Meanwhile Louis had his first contribution, *Edinburgh Students In 1824*, ready for the printer and had just completed his second, *The Modern Student Considered Generally*. This he now read proudly to Omond, Brown and Walter Ferrier over a pie and a pint at Rutherford's.¹⁶

It expressed his disenchantment with his fellow students, lamenting their lack of vitality and deploring their narrow interest in studying only to acquire a good position in life. Even the 'fast men', he complained, seemed to take little joy in their hedonistic pursuits: 'Solemnity, even in dissipation, is the order of the day, and they

go to the devil with a perverse seriousness, a systematic rationalism of wickedness that would have surprised the simpler sinners of old...'¹⁷

One wonders if the 'brutal and licentious' Brown was self-aware enough to catch a glimpse of himself here, or if Omond, when penning his reminiscences half a century later, would notice Louis's remarkable prescience in observing how, among his fellow academics, 'A, who cut B whilst he was a shabby student, curries sedulously up to him and cudgels his memory for anecdotes about him when he becomes the great so-and-so'.¹⁸

But the cosy gathering in Rutherford's was pleased to pronounce Louis's work 'first rate'. Other contributions were solicited from university staff, including the genial Professor Blackie - 'Tell me what you want. I am ready' - and Dr Joseph Bell, the original for Sherlock Holmes who had yet to make the acquaintance of a young medical student called Arthur Conan Doyle. The first issue of the Edinburgh University Magazine appeared at the start of 1871 and, on January 5, Omond noted in his diary: 'Hostile criticism of Magazine in the Daily Review: evidently written by that ass Kingsley.' At the Spec that day, on reading the snub to his literary genius, Louis fulminated: 'This man is a damned fool.'¹⁹

The Scotsman and the Edinburgh Courant took a more kindly view of the new magazine, but the critic Louis cared for most made no comment at all. Years later he would reveal: 'I had sent a copy to the lady with whom my heart was at that time somewhat engaged, and who did all that in her lay to break it; and she, with some tact, passed over the gift and my cherished contributions in silence.'²⁰ Was she one of the nice girls at the young people's dinner parties at Heriot Row? Was Louis still smitten with Jeannie, the girl he had met at Buckstane farmhouse the previous summer? Or was this a new love, encountered in his wanderings around Edinburgh?

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¹ RLS to James Payn, Vailima, Samoa, August 11, 1894. Yale 2770, MS Yale.

² Fanny Stevenson, Prefatory Note to *New Arabian Nights*.

³ RLS, autobiographical fragment quoted by Graham Balfour in *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ RLS Talk and Talkers, Memories and Portraits.
- ⁸ John Geddie, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ⁹ RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, December 5, 1881.
- ¹⁰ John Geddie, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ¹¹ Flora Masson, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ¹² RLS, Old Mortality, Memories and Portraits.
- ¹³ Arthur Thomson, Ferrier of St Andrews: An Academic Tragedy.
- ¹⁴ Charles Baxter, The Outlook, February 19, 1898.
- ¹⁵ RLS, A College Magazine, Memories and Portraits.
- ¹⁶ George WT Omond, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ¹⁷ RLS, College Papers, The Modern Student Considered Generally.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ George WT Omond, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ²⁰ RLS, A College Magazine, Memories and Portraits.