

CHAPTER NINE

Poor, White-faced, Drunken, Vicious Boy

ADVOCATE'S Close, Carrubber's Close, Toddrick's Wynd, and Hyndford's Close, I have been through them all, from house to house, and in all the scene is the same. Houses fearfully dirty - destitute of furniture - not a few having for beds nothing other than a foul sack filled with chaff, laid in one corner of the floor, and covered over with a bundle of rags, that are accepted as substitutes for blankets; and through all, the same haggard and wretched women, and the same dilapidated specimens of men - ragged, sallow, sunken wretches, to whom the blessings of civilisation are less known than they are to the South Sea Islander...

THE horrors of Edinburgh's Old Town slums, detailed here by a Victorian journalist, were well-known to Louis. Looking back from his island paradise to the days when the L.J.R. held its meetings among the whores and roughs of Advocate's Close, the contrast between the two cultures was evident. In terms of sunshine, cleanliness and nutrition, the South Sea Islander was far better off than the Edinburgh poor. But the curse of disease was everywhere. One fine Samoan morning in 1893, Louis set aside his literary labours to write to a newspaper editor regarding the need for a Contagious Diseases Act, then being opposed by white missionaries:

Sir, A certain number of ladies in Apia – not many, I am glad to know – have adopted a profession of which the least we can say is that it is not modest... they have spread – and they will continue to spread – over the islands, every species of disease and, in the end, sterility and barrenness. Either the future of the Samoan race is to be imperilled – or the delicacy of some forty loose women on the beach must suffer... If any one of them be too refined to undergo an examination, let her cease her trade... When we disarm a ruffian, we do not call it 'legalising vice'; and these women carry about with them something far more deadly than a revolver, with which they continually aim (I admit, unconsciously) at other and innocent women and at unborn and still more innocent babes. I am etc...¹

Perhaps a pang of male guilt prevented Louis making a plea for the men who also paid the price of sin when the invisible bullet of syphilis caught them in their

moment of lust. Lodging in heart or brain, the disease could lie dormant for decades before wreaking its foul destruction. It seems Louis lived half his life in the knowledge that a moment of youthful folly had curtailed his life expectancy, and one day such a bullet might burst within him.

To absorb the incurable seeds of destruction, all that was required was a little too much to drink in an Edinburgh public house, an ardent temperament and a brief encounter with Satan in petticoats. On rainy nights at the eastern end of Princes Street, the streetwalkers made brave attempts to appear coquettish beneath an umbrella, enticing shivering young men to accompany them the few yards to a dingy room with a ramshackle bed. Exactly when and where it happened is uncertain, but it would seem some 'unblushing daughter of Venus' did Louis a lasting injury one November night in 1872, a month after his return from Germany and around the time of his 22nd birthday. It could have happened anywhere, but there is a certain irony in the thought that perhaps he took a walk down from Queen Street to Cicelia Underwood's, opposite his Leith Street tobacconist. Years later, the love-scarred Scottish Heine would dedicate his first volume of poems to his doctors and call it Underwoods.

The first sign would have been a small, hard, painless swelling on an intimate part of his anatomy, unmentionable to his parents. Alone in his bedroom, he would have watched it grow daily until it was clear this was the chancre or primary sore of the great pox. It would seem Louis tried to doctor himself with a strong antiseptic. Tincture of iodine produced results so agonising that he was unable to walk to the university. His mother, in all innocence, noted in her diary for December 4: 'Lou has burned his leg with iodine and can only go to Hodgson's class in a cab.'²

On December 14, Louis was seen by a doctor. His mother noted simply that he was 'ordered to lay himself up'.³ If she knew more, she preferred to smile and pretend nothing unpleasant was happening. Who can tell what was said between doctor and patient in the privacy of the sick room, but that day Louis wrote to Baxter, marking the letter: 'Private - a few!' Despite taking a severe knock, he was trying to remain cheerful:

My dear Charles, The doctor has just told me that I have succeeded in playing the devil

with myself to a singular degree. That walk down from Queen Street has made a fine sore of my burning; and here I am. There is not much gibber about me, alas! Like bad soda-water, the cork has come out and my spirit does not pour forth in foolery, as I had wished...⁴

Louis had been ordered to drink potash water 'a new form of nightmare and very horrid'.⁵ The salts of potassium were among several ineffective remedies for syphilis, for which no medical cure would be found until the 20th century. The front pages of Edinburgh newspapers carried regular, coyly-phrased advertisements for similar quackery:

BLOOD! BLOOD!! BLOOD!!!

CLARKE'S WORLD FAMOUS BLOOD MIXTURE

for Cleansing and Clearing the Blood from all impurities, whether arising from youthful indiscretion or any other cause, cannot be too highly recommended.

Cures Old Sores

Cures Ulcerated Sores in the Neck

Cures Blackheads or Pimples on the Face

Cures Scurvy Sores

Cures Cancerous Ulcers

Cures Blood and Skin Diseases

Cures Glandular Swellings

Clears the blood from all Impure matter, from whatever cause arising.

As this Mixture is pleasant to the taste, and warranted free from Mercury - which all pills and most medicines sold for the above diseases contain - the Proprietor solicits sufferers to give it a trial to test its value.⁶

It seems Louis was now paying the price for 'youthful indiscretion', though trying hard to make light of it, as he continued to Baxter: 'I feel as if I had taken hands with certain personified execrations and was dancing with them a sort of Bacchanalian jinga-ring, all about the vacant hot sensitive floor of my mind... But the life and soul of the party is my little immortal soul, who skips and leaps and cancanises and drags the whole ring hither and thither, and faster! faster! - step out, damn! - Evoe! round and round and round goes my immortal soul and all the personified oaths.

'The real truth is I was able to eat nothing at breakfast, and I am quite giddy and

light-headed with work and tea and want of food. My head rolls about on my shoulders like a great, big, peony on the end of a blade of spear-grass. And O! I am in a hell of a state - nerves, mind and body. Distractedly yours R.L. Stevenson.¹⁷

Four days later, the full implications had sunk in. In a letter to Baxter, Louis confided: 'As for me, I am a harmless, necessary fuckster. "If you want to see - a ruin come to me." Seriously, old man, I'm limed, and my lookout for life is a pretty bad one. I gave myself a good cross-examination this morning, and ever since I have been - I don't say indifferent, for I should like to live - but easy as to the result... I don't think much of my own chance, for I think I have a regular skinful, and I fancy the doctor thinks so too. I feel somehow as if I were in the roads already, and casting anchor; but eh good God! they may be a long way off, and there may be a nasty surf on the bar when I come to cross.'¹⁸

This is not the reaction of a young man who has merely burned his leg with iodine, a hardly life-threatening accident. Nor is there any suggestion of consumption, whose symptoms - if such they were - would not appear for another seven years. The most obvious reason for Louis's reluctance to give details of his condition, except in Baxter's private ear, is that he had a regular skinful of the pox. He would have interrogated the doctor as to the likely course of the disease, and the answers would not have been comforting. If he was lucky, and made a 'good recovery', he might suffer nothing worse in later life than deep-rooted ulcers or *gummae* in his legs and the odd headache or fever. His lifespan would not necessarily be curtailed. But if his syphilis was not benign, he could expect any amount of 'nasty surf' while crossing the bar. The options included early death from the effects of an enlarged heart and weakened blood vessels, loss of hair, teeth and vision, confinement to a bath chair with the disabling effects of *locomotor ataxia*, or the ultimate Victorian horror - general paralysis of the insane. The fate of poor Uncle Alan as he died a paralysed, raving, religious fanatic was now a real possibility for Louis.

As he brooded alone in his room, he developed a strange sense of kinship with another young Edinburgh poet who had the same experiences in his early twenties. Born in the city in 1750, exactly a century before Louis, Robert Fergusson shared

more than a first name with his Victorian brother in verse. Full of life, exuding charm and delighting in fun, Fergusson had felt constrained by the outwardly pious Calvinist city of his birth and had been forced to work as a clerk in the Commissary office, despite having no taste for the law. Like Louis, he sought release in poetry and the Bohemian society that thrived at night behind the Kirk's back, drinking in oyster taverns and whoring in Old Town closes. The inevitable upshot, as Louis learned from Alexander Peterkin's brief 1807 biography of Fergusson, was syphilis. The highly-strung poet was given large doses of mercury, but did not follow doctor's orders to rest. Instead he was 'enticed to accompany some gentlemen who were interested in an election business, to one of the eastern counties of Scotland. On this expedition he was much exposed to the riotous enjoyments incident to such occasions; and these, in conjunction with his disordered health, produced a feverishness and decrepitude of mind amounting nearly to insanity.'⁹

The final act of the young poet's life was played out on a bed of straw in the Edinburgh Bedlam. After begging his mother not to leave him as the guards locked up the lunatics for the night, he was left in solitary confinement and died alone in the small hours. Fergusson had just turned 24. As 22-year-old Louis brooded over this sad story, he must have wondered how many years he had left, and what hope there was of retaining his own sanity. Yet fate proved kind and two decades later he would look back from Samoa and write poignantly of the 'poor, white-faced, drunken, vicious boy that raved himself to death in the Edinburgh madhouse'.

*Ah! What bonds we have - born in the same city, both sickly, both vicious, both pestered, one nearly to madness, one to the madhouse, with a damnatory creed; both seeing the stars and the dawn, and wearing shoe-leather on the same ancient stones, under the same pends, down the same closes, where our common ancestors clashed in their armour, rusty or bright... You will never know, nor will any man, how deep this feeling is; I believe Fergusson lives in me.*¹⁰

By a further curious literary coincidence, unknown to Louis, his exact contemporary Guy de Maupassant contracted syphilis around the same age but did not realise it until, at 27, 'because my body hair had all fallen out and not grown back, because my father was fussing over me, and because my mother's

lamentations could be heard all the way from Etretat, I took my doctor by the collar and said to him "Find out what's wrong with me, you blighter, or you'll get what for." ... "The pox," he replied. I hadn't been expecting that, I can tell you; I was very upset, but at length I said "What's the remedy?" "Mercury and potassium iodide," he replied.'¹¹

Louis's friend Walter Ferrier was also heading down the road to Fergussonian ruin. Having abruptly concluded his academic studies, he had been taking the cure, for maladies unspecified, at Malvern before heading on to the Isle of Wight. There the once-beautiful young man who had strolled the lamplit streets of Edinburgh with the strains of Don Giovanni's 'La ci darem la mano' on his lips would resort to treating himself with quantities of drink, leaving Louis to tie up some loose ends in Scotland.

Three weeks before learning the worst from the doctor, Louis had written to Ferrier at Bonchurch in the Isle of Wight: 'You are already so clouded over with myths and legends, that we rationalists in Edinburgh have begun to question your existence. By common repute, there is scarcely a crime that you have not committed. Simony, arson, fraud, adultery,

"Wi' mair o' horrible and awful'

Which e'en to name wad be unlawfu',

are already identified with your memory... I have served myself universal heir to you; but the assets consist of five Speculative keys, sent to me in an envelope by your mother, and one eighteen-penny book on Spiritualism; while the liabilities, as far as yet disclosed, are a very fair, good, honest, downright pound or two and half a hundred weight of library books. I shall probably abscond.'¹²

Ferrier's departure had depleted the LJR's meetings in Advocate's Close and left Louis short of an intellectual ally at the Spec, where too much free-thinking did not go down well. Louis wrote to Ferrier: 'I am reading Herbert Spencer just now very hard. I got [it] over the fingers at the Spec the other night. I proposed "Have we any authority for the inspiration of the New Testament?" as a subject of debate; when I was not seconded and Colin Macrae [a future Edinburgh School Board chairman] protested. The liberty of free speech is the greatest boon of this happy and glorious -

happy and glorious - ever victorious - country of Pharisees and whiskey.'¹³

The ideas of Herbert Spencer, whose theory of evolution preceded Darwin's, were at odds with orthodox Christianity and an anathema to Tom Stevenson, who already suspected his son of departing from the straight and narrow. He would have regarded Spencer as more dangerous than any Edinburgh whore in posing a threat to his son's immortal soul. Yet the damage was done already and Louis had lost more than his innocence in the 'moral quagmire' he entered in November 1872. He was losing his religion, too.

That autumn he had written to Bob: 'A damned lot of waves and counter-waves have been beating upon me of late, and as this new creed of mine is not ballasted as yet with many Articles, it has tossed terribly about and made my heart sick within me... It is all very well to talk about flesh and lusts and such like; but the real hot sweat must come out in this business, or we go alone to the end of life. I want an object, a mission, a belief, a hope to be my wife; and, please God, have it I shall. I will not be put aside and beaten down with such assaults as I have just now all about me... O I am so tired of this attempt to be honest and strike the bed rock, more weary than I could have fancied; and, kind and even sympathetic as my father has shown himself, the limits of his tolerance are so near to me, that I am always lingering about the landmark to pass which is to sour his half-hearted patience into petty persecution.'¹⁴

While Edinburgh had little objection to hypocrisy as a cloak for vice, it did not always appreciate honesty, as Louis lamented: 'What a failure must not this Christian country be, when I who found it easy to be a vicious good companion, find nothing but black faces and black prospects when once I try honestly to inquire into the words this very Christ of theirs spent all his life in speaking and repeating.'¹⁵

At the same time Louis was aware his religious scruples were a luxury for which the poor had no time: 'And yet, my God, here am I, well suppered, well clothed, with the white bed at my elbow, warm and soft, for me to lie down in when once I am so minded - educated - having little thought for tomorrow - and a whole lot of poor devils outside, whoreson paupers, empty bellies, sleepers in common stairs, that are just turning in just now pleasantly dazed with whiskey or pleasantly lying

down with contentment - and ten times easier with ten times more to bother them.'¹⁶

It was impossible for anyone not to notice the poverty and vice in the Old Town. A man would find it hard to get up the Royal Mile without being accosted by drunken, greasy-haired sluts in short woollen petticoats and grubby white stockings, offering their bodies for sixpence. The brothels of the Canongate, High Street, Advocate's Close or Toddrick's Wynd came straight out of Hogarth's Gin Lane. Here was no plump Victorian benevolence of the kind practised by Louis's father but a rank cauldron of vice where the life of a whore was nasty, brutish and short. A girl who went on the game at twelve might be on her death bed by her early twenties and, if she drank enough, would remember little of the intervening years. The ability to drink hard, and entice punters to do likewise, was much prized. One Old Town brothel-keeper boasted of her star performer: 'There's ane worth any twa i' the hoose. She can drink a company blin'; and, after a guid spew, begin again as fresh as at the first.'

Only a tiny proportion of these debauched creatures reached the Edinburgh Magdalene Asylum, and of these many found the pious discipline hard to take. After a few days of stitching and scrubbing while middle-class maiden ladies read them improving tracts, the more hardened daughters of Venus would abscond through a window at night with whatever valuables they could lay their hands on.¹⁷ Yet God-fearing citizens such as Tom Stevenson felt it their duty to liberate such girls from their life of sin and bring them to know the Lord Jesus Christ before finding them a respectable if poorly-paid situation.

Louis, as an occasional customer, had more complex feelings about prostitutes. On an intellectual level, he would argue mischievously that Edinburgh's ladies of the night might even be beneficial in producing the kind of society Mrs Grundy approved of: 'Prostitution tends by a certain negative selection to reduce the tendency of the race to propagate; the men of most violent sexual passions are, by prostitution, prevented to a large extent from having children, and so the race is left to be continued by the more sober and continent, among whom chastity is the precursor of matrimony.'¹⁸

Louis might be expected to feel bitterness towards the girls who had done

permanent damage to his health, yet his reaction was in marked contrast to that of Maupassant, who exclaimed: 'I've got the pox! at last! the real thing!... and I am proud of it, by thunder, and to hell with the bourgeoisie. Allelujah, I've got the pox, so I don't have to worry about catching it any more, and I screw the street whores and trollops, and afterwards I say to them "I've got the pox". They are afraid and I just laugh...'¹⁹

Louis's attitude to prostitutes could be boastful - 'I have been all my days a dead hand at a harridan, I never saw one yet that could resist me'²⁰ - but never vindictive, nor did he blame them for the consequences of his own desire. He liked women, and saw no reason to separate whores from the rest of womankind, as Victorian society did. To him, the evil of prostitution lay not in itself but in the hypocrisy of a society run by Mr Grundys who made widespread use of prostitutes in secret while branding them in public with a badge of shame: 'You may make a prostitute cry by merely naming her trade to her. If you think seriously of all the depressing, demoralising, decivilising influences brought to bear upon her, I think you will find it matter for wonder not that she is so fallen, but that she is still (and that in so many instances) as honest, kind and decent as she is.'²¹

Instead of hating whores, Louis turned his anger on a society that had created the need for brothels and shebeens but could only condemn a genuine love affair with a girl such as Kate Drummond. That winter he poured his rage against the Edinburgh bourgeoisie into verse:

*Hail! Childish slaves of social rules
You had yourselves a hand in making!
How I could shake your faith, ye fools,
If but I thought it worth the shaking.
I see, and pity you; and then
Go, casting off the idle pity,
In search of better, braver men,
My own way freely through the city.*

*My own way freely, and not yours;
And, careless of a town's abusing,
Seek real friendship that endures
Among the friends of my own choosing.
I'll choose my friends myself, do you hear?
And won't let Mrs. Grundy do it,
Tho' all I honour and hold dear
And all I hope should move me to it.*

*Gladly I trudge the footpath way,
While you and yours roll by in coaches
In all the pride of fine array,
Through all the city's thronged approaches.
O fine religious, decent folk,
In Virtue's flaunting gold and scarlet,
I sneer between two puffs of smoke, -
Give me the publican and harlot.*

*Ye dainty-spoken, stiff, severe
Seed of the migrated Philistian,
One whispered question in your ear -
Pray, what was Christ, if you be Christian?
If Christ were only here just now,
Among the city's wynds and gables
Teaching the life he taught us, how
Would he be welcome to your tables?²²*

Christmas came, but Louis did not spend it at home. It might have been embarrassing for his mother to introduce social callers to a son with syphilitic sores. Whatever the case, on Christmas Eve Louis was packed off to a hotel in Bridge of Allan with Bob for company. The following day Bob returned to spend Christmas with his family, leaving Louis to while away Christmas Day alone. Lunch was

enlived by an encounter with a hotel customer 'in a highly seasonable condition' who tried to drink Louis's sherry. After dinner, Louis wrote to his mother: 'It was very nice in the forenoon to see people making their markets, old women and young, smartly-dressed and meanly, and think of a whole lot of Christmas dinners all about Bridge of Allan that these were catering for.' But he did not wish to make her feel too guilty, so he added: 'I doubt tho' if any of them had so comfortable a dinner as I.'²³

Bob returned to Bridge of Allan and the two cousins amused themselves with a spin in a carriage to Blair Logie and the Ochil hills - otherwise they just sat outside the hotel, Louis in serge coat, jersey, straw hat and slippers, while Bob affected a ragged coat and a hat green with age. Towards the end of New Year's Day, the festivities over, Louis returned to Heriot Row.

A week later he went off to Malvern, accompanied by his mother. Throughout January he could expect to be suffering the symptoms of secondary syphilis – mild fever, malaise, headache, anorexia, a non-itchy skin rash or roseola, patchy loss of hair, hoarseness, swollen lymph nodes and bone pain. Great Malvern offered privacy, discreet physicians and supposedly beneficial spa water. Louis and his mother took up residence at the Imperial Hotel for two and a half weeks of tedium while Louis continued to take mercury and potassium iodide.

To Baxter he wrote: 'Without, it rains - within, muddle o' the brains... The fact is, I have a hidden grief and am letting concealment like a worm i' the bud, prey on my damask cheek. But - chut! - not even in the privacy of this epistle can I be base enough to breathe - I really ought to be very glad and shall be by tomorrow or perhaps earlier; but in the meantime this blessing wears about as offensive a disguise as he could well have laid his hands upon - I should say, figuratively speaking, that he wore a white hat - and the double knocker of not being able to work coming on the back of it has played the devil with me altogether.'²⁴

In a letter to Bob, Louis elaborated on his offensive symptoms: 'I have another sloughing sore, and a bad sore throat and something damnably like incipient roseola... The throat is very likely mercury poisoning; and so, like enough, with the roseola. It is wonderful how I keep my general health through it all and still

continue to eat, drink, smoke and sleep like a gamecock.¹²⁵

There was nothing else to do, except converse briefly with his mother at meal times or play billiards with the waiter 'but he has such good manners and talks so point-device that I have to be on my ps and qs with him. He is too good society for me...'²⁶

Although trying to maintain a brave face, Louis confided in his letter to Baxter: 'I am demoralised. There is no use attempting to deny it. I am unstrung, undone, mind and body. O Writer to the Signet, that thou wert here and this black hour consoling... O Lord, old man, I am getting tired of this whole life business. If I could find any other investment, I should take out my capital. When I think of how much country lies behind me since November, country that I had never thought to travel in at all, when I think of how deep a quagmire I have been puddling in this whole winter through - well you don't suppose the retrospect *egayant*, do you? O fie, fie upon the whole foolish, violent, and wearisome game, say I. Let me get into a corner with a brandy bottle; or down on the hearthrug, full of laudanum grog; or as easily as may be, into the nice, wormy grave...'²⁷

Demoralised and depressed, Louis boarded the train with his mother and arrived back in Edinburgh on January 29, 1873 – quite unprepared for the wrath that was to come.

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¹ RLS to the Editor of an Unidentified Journal (Draft), Vailima, Samoa, late 1893. Yale 2679, MS Yale.

² MIS Diary, December 4, 1872.

³ MIS Diary, December 14, 1872.

⁴ RLS to Charles Baxter, Edinburgh, Saturday December 7 or 14, 1872. Yale 115, MS Yale.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Edinburgh Courant

⁷ RLS to Charles Baxter, Edinburgh, Saturday December 7 or 14, 1872. Yale 115, MS Yale.

⁸ RLS to Charles Baxter, Edinburgh, December 18?, 1872. Yale 116, MS Yale.

⁹ The Works of Robert Fergusson, to Which Is Prefixed a Sketch of the Author's Life, By A. Peterkin, London, Oddy, 1807.

¹⁰ RLS to W Craibe Angus, Vailima, Samoa, April 1891. Yale 2315, text from Colvin edition of Letters.

¹¹ Maupassant to Robert Pinchon, March 2, 1877.

¹² RLS to James Walter Ferrier, Heriot Row, November 23, 1872. Yale 114, MS Yale.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ RLS to Bob Stevenson, Edinburgh, October, 1872. Yale 112, MS Yale.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Edinburgh Magdalene Asylum records, the Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library.

¹⁸ RLS, Selections From His Note Book, Memories and Portraits & Other Fragments.

¹⁹ Maupassant to Robert Pinchon, March 2, 1877.

²⁰ RLS to Sidney Colvin, 608 Bush Street, San Francisco, late February, 1880. Yale 690, MS Yale.

²¹ RLS, Selections From His Note Book, Memories and Portraits & Other Fragments.

²² RLS Hail! Childish slaves of social rules...

²³ RLS to his Mother, Bridge of Allan, 'Xmas Day', 1872. Yale 118, MS Yale.

²⁴ RLS to Charles Baxter, Imperial Hotel, Great Malvern, January 16, 1873. Yale 121, MS Yale.

²⁵ RLS to Bob Stevenson, Malvern, January, 1873. Yale 122, MS Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

²⁶ RLS to Charles Baxter, Imperial Hotel, Great Malvern, January 16, 1873. Yale 121, MS Yale.

²⁷ Ibid.