

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Pious Child

AS he reeled and fell, his Samoan boy Sosimo caught him and carried the featherweight body into the big room at Vailima, the plantation house paid for by Louis's wealth as a best-selling author. There he lay unconscious in the green leather chair as they chafed his feet and put them in hot water in vain hope of reviving him. But his body now seemed beyond sensation. If hearing, the last sense to go, detected his step-daughter Belle's anxious comments on the strength of his pulse, he could no longer respond. Nor could he detect the scent of the gardenias, born in across the verandah on the night air when the doctor ordered the windows to be flung open.

The Samoan servants, creeping in silently, one by one as the big lamps were lit, had gathered in a half-circle around the dying man who had now been lifted onto a little brass bed<sup>1</sup>. Beside him sat his wife, who had shared all his great adventures but could not accompany him on this last voyage. Nearby, supported by the Christian presence of Mr Clarke the missionary, his widowed mother bowed her head in prayer. After 44 years of worry about his health, Maggie Stevenson now knew it was all over for her Lou. Alone at 65, she would be the last of the loving family that once lived in Heriot Row. Her anguish now recalled her suffering when on November 13th, 1850, Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson was born.

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IT had been a bad birth for the slender daughter of the Manse. The sound of her cries from the bedroom in Howard Place had nearly driven Tom Stevenson mad. His carnal desires were to blame. When the doctor later advised him another pregnancy could kill his wife, he accepted the necessary mortification of the flesh with relief. It was a small price to pay for knowing the woman he loved and the child she had born him were out of the shadow of death.

The Stevensons handed the baby over to a nurse, Mrs Sayers. Almost a month had passed before they saw him having a bath, at which his father declared solemnly: 'I

trust it may never fall to my lot to wash a baby.' But the nurse was called away that night, leaving Louis's still-convalescent mother in despair until the great lighthouse engineer exclaimed: 'Toots, such nonsense, I'll wash the child myself.'<sup>2</sup>

Too delicate to breast feed, Maggie Stevenson was content to have Louis fed from a bottle by his next nurse, a Mrs Thomson. But the nurse's own love of the bottle led to her charge being discovered in a public house, on a shelf behind the bar. Mrs Thomson was dismissed and replaced by Janet Mackenzie, a brisk, energetic woman from Falkirk,<sup>3</sup> but already Louis had a mind of his own. A new feeding bottle had been purchased, and the old one thrown onto the ash-pile, when the young Stevenson refused the replacement. This late-night crisis again brought out the best in Louis's father as, candle in hand, he groped among the ashes until the old bottle was found. It was Tom Stevenson, too, who 'with a very proud face' followed his nine-month-old son as he climbed his first set of stairs. Maggie Stevenson, still in delicate health, was bemused to find her son calling the stern patriarch 'Mama'.<sup>4</sup>

Louis grew into a plump and healthy child, 'running about famously' in the elaborate dresses then worn by small children of both sexes. At a year old he could name familiar faces and objects, and from then on the words poured out. One of the most important was 'Cummy', the new nurse who took charge when he was 18 months old. Alison Cunningham came from a devout, Free Presbyterian family in the Fife fishing community of Torryburn. Her religious views were stricter than those of her new employers, whose Church of Scotland beliefs did not preclude dinner parties, drinking wine, playing cards and occasional trips to the theatre - all deeply sinful in Cummy's Good Book. But she was a mass of contradictions, God-fearing yet prone to superstition, devout but delighting in gossip, truthful but reserving a woman's right to lie about her age, which was 29 when she entered the Stevensons' service. Despite her horror of the theatre, she had a dramatic way of speaking and to cut off her expressive hands would have rendered her dumb. With illness confining Maggie Stevenson to her bed until noon, Cummy became Louis's role model. Soon his small hands were constantly in flight as he prattled away, gesticulating like a little Frenchman, to the woman who stayed with him all day and lay nearby to reassure him in the night.

His parents called him 'Smout', the Scots name for the small fry of a salmon, and indulged his eccentricities. At the age of two, his favourite occupation was to play at churches, making a pulpit from a chair and a stool. One devout visitor was scandalised to see Smout in a paper set of clerical bands, but he was only pretending to be 'Gatty', his revered grandfather. The Rev Lewis Balfour came for a short visit when the Stevensons moved to a bigger house at 1 Inverleith Terrace, and one of Louis's earliest memories was of dancing upstairs with his mother, singing 'We'll all go up to Gatty's room...', as they prepared for his arrival.<sup>5</sup>

Around this time Louis paid his first visit to the Zoological Gardens to see the monkeys and the parrots, the bears in their pits, the tiger in its cage - 'My no frightened!' he declared - and, most splendid of all, 'the Eelinfault'. His childish mishearing perhaps stemmed from his assumption that animals, like humans, had faults and were prone to sin. He would later worry that sheep and horses had nobody to tell them about Jesus. Louis was precociously aware of sin, damnation and the need to be saved. Every night he would lisp out a prayer for deliverance, for fear he might die in his sleep and go to hell. Whenever he expressed a hope for the future, he would add 'if I am spared'.<sup>6</sup> Death might strike at any moment, lurking behind the gravestones as he and Cummy walked in Warriston Cemetery where a dark culvert beneath a railway line yawned wide like the Gates of Hell. As Louis clutched his nurse's hand, thrilling with terror as a train roared overhead, he would recall the 23rd Psalm:

*Yea, though I walk through Death's dark vale,  
Yet will I fear no ill,  
For thou art with me, and thy rod  
And staff me comfort still*

It comforted him to imagine the rough, shepherd's staff and the rod, like a billiard cue, on either hand in that dark passage, warding off evil.<sup>7</sup> The breakdown in his health soon after the move to Inverleith Terrace can only have developed his early awareness of human frailty. The house was cold and damp. Louis went down with croup and was put to bed with a mustard plaster on his chest and two leeches on his little foot. Upset by the sight of blood, he cried 'cover it up, cover it up', but did not

flinch when the leech bites were burned with caustic.<sup>8</sup>

Chest trouble kept him housebound each winter. In a pre-antibiotic age, such illnesses could prove fatal. Louis was only three when he learned that 'Poor Bo is ill and he is not better yet'. His cousin Robert James Stevenson lay seriously ill at the smart house in Royal Terrace where Uncle David and Aunt Elizabeth prayed to God for his recovery. Yet 'Poor Bo' did not get better and died before his fourth birthday.

The news was broken to Louis that same day. He did not like to hear about it, and said he hoped it would please God never to let him die. He asked if Bo would be playing in Heaven. The thought seemed to console him and, five days later, while playing with coloured chinks, he said to his mother: 'I have drawn a man's body. Shall I do his soul now?' Two months later his thoughts were still on Heaven and golden harps: 'I am afraid I couldn't play nicely upon my one.' At four, he was experimenting with the power of prayer, declaring: 'You can never be good unless you pray.' When asked why, he replied: 'Because I've tried it.'<sup>9</sup>

Even as a small child, he grappled with theology. On hearing a sanitised version of the story of Mary Magdalene, the penitent whore who washed Christ's feet with her tears, he asked: 'But Mama, why did God make the woman so naughty?'<sup>10</sup> This question troubled older minds than his, notably the Society for the Support of the Edinburgh Magdalene Asylum, devoted to rescuing fallen women. The Society's supporters included the Stevensons, who subscribed annually. Lest there be any misunderstanding, the ten shillings donation was always in Maggie Stevenson's name. Uncle David's wife and Uncle Alan's wife in Regent Terrace subscribed in the same way, while the venerable James Balfour, 4th Laird of Pilrig and head of the Balfour family at Pilrig House, made his donation personally.<sup>11</sup> Little Louis knew nothing of this and the Society's reports would be filed away discreetly in Tom Stevenson's study. Children must be protected against evil.

But evil must also be punished, and Edinburgh still did it publicly. On January 25th, 1854, a crowd of 10,000 gathered, little more than a mile from where Louis played in the nursery, to see William Cumming hanged for the murder of his wife in Leith. To the end he protested his innocence, but the crowd shouted him down with cries of 'Shame!' They cheered and hooted when the hangman pulled the traditional

white nightcap down over the head of the pinioned murderer. But Cumming had the last black laugh, somehow pushing back the nightcap as the trap fell, and looked his tormentors in the eye as he choked to death at the rope's end.<sup>12</sup>

At three, Louis could not read newspaper reports, but his keen ears may have picked up adult conversations, as the hanging was the talk of the town. Cummy's taste for the macabre may even have prompted her to tell him the cautionary tale of the bad man going to the gallows. She was certainly unwise enough to supplement their reading of *Pilgrim's Progress* or the writings of the Rev Robert Murray McCheyne with gruesome tales of bodysnatchers or ghost stories in which the Devil appeared as a black man.

*Pilgrim's Progress* gave Louis an excuse to play with his toy soldiers on the day of rest. So long as a soldier wore a little pack to make him look like a pilgrim, and Louis stuck to the *Pilgrim's Progress* script, there could be no sabbatarian objections. By his fourth birthday he was mad about soldiers, and anxious to be read the latest reports from the Crimea. The excitement over Balaclava and the Charge of the Light Brigade had been replaced by bad news from Sebastopol, where British soldiers were dying from disease. Far away in an Edinburgh nursery, Louis prayed 'for our poor soldiers... and that they might get the victory'. For Christmas he was given a sword: 'I can tell you, Papa, it is a silver sword and a gold sheath.' But the shawl he had to wear to fend off bronchitis ruined the effect, until he asked hopefully: 'Do you think it will look like a night march, Mama?'<sup>13</sup>

Cummy read Louis a serial called *The Soldier of Fortune* from Cassell's Family Paper, until the number of love affairs troubled her Free Presbyterian conscience and she feared it might turn out 'a regular novel'. This gave Louis a restless night with a pain in his side, worrying about Hell, and next morning he declared he would hear no more of *The Soldier of Fortune*. The result was that 'instead of something healthy about battles, I continued to have my mind defiled with Brainerd, McCheyne, and Mrs Winslow, and a whole crowd of dismal and morbid devotees'.<sup>14</sup>

Around this time, Louis accidentally locked himself in the nursery. Only his father, conversing through the keyhole, could calm him until the locksmith arrived. On emerging, Louis declared anxiously: 'I was afraid I would never get out any

more but would just be lost.<sup>15</sup> Yet between illnesses he did get out into the world, clinging to Cummy's hand, and became aware of the city around him. Edinburgh, with its ancient Castle on a rock above Princes Street Gardens, was in many ways a beautiful place and on a misty day its church spires and tall tenements known as 'lands' seemed to stretch up endlessly, house above house, spire above spire, until it was received into a sky of softly glowing clouds, a New Jerusalem, bodily scaling heaven.<sup>16</sup>

But at close quarters much of Edinburgh was ugly and evil, full of poverty and vice, with large families often crowded into a single room. Sanitation was poor and most of the city relied on the night-soil men. Wages were low, child mortality high, and hard drinking resorted to by both sexes. Destitution and prostitution lived a stone's throw from affluence and respectability, and little Louis glimpsed many scenes of degradation in the 'rainy, beggarly slums'. Four decades later, he would recall 'complete sensations, concrete, poignant and essential to the genius of the place... they were observed as I walked with my nurse, gaping on the universe... I seem to have been born with a sentiment of something moving in things, of an infinite attraction and horror coupled.'

Yet he was never melancholy for long, inheriting his mother's sunny disposition. After playing all day alone, he was asked if he ever felt lonely. 'Oh no,' he said. 'I'm always doing something, you know.' At times he did long for another child in the house, and one night he prayed: 'O Lord, if it seems good to you, let me have a new brother or sister, if you think proper.' Maggie Stevenson, who noted these words in her baby book, would dearly have loved a daughter, but her husband would never put her health in jeopardy again. So she contented herself with noting the remarkable progress of her only child. At four, Louis had composed his first poem:

*No sun is in the sky*

*When night comes on*

*Then stars and moon comes out*

*And then another day*

*The sun comes out again*

His precocious interest in theology continued: 'How can God give us his Holy

Spirit, and yet be good Himself? I'm at a loss.' At five, he showed a better understanding of God's love than many a hell-fire preacher: 'Why should people fear Him as if He was going to kill them?' Likewise he could run rings round many adult theologians on the concept of salvation:

'Did He die to save me?'

'Yes.'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, doesn't that look very like as if I was saved already?'<sup>17</sup>

In the dark he might worry about death and damnation, but by day he believed in the pursuit of happiness. 'I've been playing all day,' he announced. 'At least, I've been making myself cheerful.'<sup>18</sup> At five he had hit on his life-long philosophy, that people had a duty to be happy. Succumbing to gloom and depression was a form of cowardice. Despite countless close encounters with death, Louis would strive always to make himself and those around him cheerful.

Early attempts at socialisation were not very successful. Although at ease with adults or his young cousins, Louis found it hard to relate to strange children. At his first dancing class, he was so inept or reluctant to dance with the other five-year-olds that the dancing master gave him a rap with his fiddle stick. On returning home, Louis declared ruefully: 'It was rather disappointing.'<sup>19</sup>

But otherwise he enjoyed a blissful summer. His mother's ill health, and both his parents' enduring appetite for holidays, sitting oddly with the Calvinist work ethic, necessitated numerous short breaks - to the seaside at Portobello, where Louis learned to swim, or the Borders, where he had his first pony. At Innerleithen he went fishing with a bent pin with his cousin Jessie Warden, while at Bridge of Allan near Stirling he was found crawling through the bushes with his gun, declaring: 'I'm hunting blawbacks.'

When winter kept him cooped up in Edinburgh, Louis shared his imaginings with his cousin Bob, who arrived for an extended stay at Inverleith Terrace. The reason for this was the mysterious illness that had struck down Bob's father, Alan Stevenson, four years previously, when 'it pleased God in 1852 to disable me, by a

severe nervous affection, for my duties, as engineer to the Board of Northern Lighthouses'. A decade later, the affliction would be described on his death certificate as 'general paralysis'. Modern theorists have suggested that at 45 he developed multiple sclerosis, not then identified. To the Victorians, 'general paralysis' was a skeleton in the closet because of its association with the unmentionable disease that brought tragedy to many a respectable family. Alan Stevenson was of an age when God's punishment for youthful indiscretion would descend in the shape of tertiary syphilis.

The disease could lodge in the spinal cord, producing the paralysis known as locomotor ataxia, or attack the brain, resulting in strange character changes, delusions of grandeur and the ultimate Victorian horror - 'general paralysis of the insane'. Whether or not Alan Stevenson actually had syphilis, the unspoken suspicion must have crossed the minds of his brothers Tom and David, who took over his lighthouse responsibilities. Louis's father always had ambivalent feelings about the older brother to whom he was closest. While David Stevenson was a sound man, a good engineer and respectable Victorian, the brilliant Alan had the same wayward character traits that Tom recognised and feared in himself.

In their youth both had evinced an idle, artistic, pleasure-seeking attitude to life that gave their father Robert cause for concern. To his horror, he found his sons more interested in frittering their lives away, penning idle verses, than in getting to grips with engineering. This was tantamount to moral depravity, and he did not rest until they had seen the error of their ways and joined the family firm. The artistic urge in Tom was reduced to telling himself long adventure stories to help get to sleep at night, but Alan maintained a lifelong interest in poetry, corresponding with Wordsworth and Coleridge even as storms pounded the rocks on which he laboured to erect great lights.

As a young man of 26, on a tour of lighthouses south of the Border, Uncle Alan had fallen in love with Margaret Scott Jones, daughter of a wealthy Welsh landowner on Anglesey. But her father was insufficiently impressed with Alan's prospects, so the young lovers embarked on an 11-year period of separation and self-denial while Alan went to 'prove himself'. This he did with Freudian aplomb in



heavy storms off the west coast of Scotland, producing a towering erection known as Skerryvore, a 138ft pharos that dwarfed his father's Bell Rock lighthouse. Alan's stunning demonstration of his engineering potency brought him fame, wealth, and at last marriage in 1844 to the woman he loved.

They wed in their mid thirties, when the bloom of youth had gone. Alan had remained true in his heart, but did he always 'save himself' during those 11 long years, in an age where prostitutes were readily available? One moment of sin could have led to the tragedy that struck him down in the 1850s, after he had fathered the four children who all bore his first name - Robert Alan Mowbray, Jean Margaret Alan, Dorothea Frances Alan and Katharine Elizabeth Alan, to whom Louis would one day dedicate *Jekyll and Hyde*. The dark romance of the name Alan - even Alan's wife was known as 'Aunt Alan' - permeated that whole branch of the family and crept into the subconscious of five-year-old Louis, long before he knew the whys and wherefores.

All he knew was that Bob was coming to stay, a playmate at last. Three years older than Louis, Bob was 'an imaginative child who had lived in a dream with his sisters, his parents and the Arabian Nights, and more unfitted for the world, as was shown in the event, than an angel fresh from heaven'. Well might he dream when reality was so unsettling, as his father's illness uprooted the family in search of better health. First they lived by the sea at St Cyrus near Montrose, where Bob attended St Cyrus Primary School before going on to Edinburgh Academy. Later Uncle Alan would seek warmer climes in France, while Bob was sent to board at Windermere College in the Lake District. As Alan's paralysis worsened, his morbid sense of guilt grew. The man who once penned the carefree, sensuous poem *Manuela*, the Spanish Mountain-Maid set himself the pious task of translating and versifying the Ten Hymns of Synesius. He became obsessed with past sins, such as making men labour on a Sunday to build Skerryvore, and wrote to each of them begging their forgiveness. But there was perhaps the hint of a more youthful sin preying on his conscience as he inscribed a Bible and Prayer Book to Bob on his fifth birthday:

*Read in this blessed Book, my gentle boy;*

*Learn that thy heart is utterly defiled*

*That JESUS, Love Incarnate, died (great joy!)*

*And sinners to JEHOVAH reconciled.*

*This day five years thou numberest; and I*

*Write on a bed of anguish.*

*O my son, Seek thy Creator, in thine early youth;*

*Value thy soul above the world, and shun*

*The sinner's way; oh! seek the way of truth...*

From such doom-laden sentiments Bob escaped to the happy atmosphere of Inverleith Terrace. Cummy rose to the challenge of two lively boys to look after, which was no great problem after they discovered Skelt's Juvenile Drama. For Louis's sixth birthday, he was given a Skelt's toy theatre by 'Aunt Warden', his father's widowed sister Jane. He and Bob let their imaginations roam as they coloured in the pasteboard scenery. Then they discovered more plays could be purchased at Wilson's the stationers in Antigua Street, which they passed on Saturday walks to see the ships at Leith. Despite Cummy's objections to the theatre, she no doubt appreciated the new interest that kept her charges out of mischief. Besides, it was not really the performance of the play they enjoyed. After everything was coloured in, it seemed sacrilege to actually cut the figures out. The enjoyment lay in letting their imaginations roam as they painted.

Each ruled his own imaginary country - Bob had Nosingtonia, while Louis presided over Encyclopaedia - and they never tired of making wars and inventions and drawing maps, even tracing the outline of their countries in their breakfast porridge. Bob ate his with sugar, so Nosingtonia was continually buried under snow, its population dwelling in cabins set on perches, and going about on stilts. Louis preferred to drench his porridge in milk, so Encyclopaedia was constantly flooded and its inhabitants boat people. Their two rulers traded and made treaties as the fancy took them. One 'state paper' in Bob's handwriting acknowledged: 'Received by me from Rex Encyclopaedia: patent thickness 1 Air Gun of Grundrungia cloth and 1000 yards therefore in exchange for the Pine Islands, - R. Stevenson, Rex Nozzinton.'

While Bob was at Inverleith Terrace, Uncle David Stevenson decided to encourage

all his nephews and nieces along the path of righteousness by offering a prize of £1 - a week's wages for a labouring man - for the best History of Moses. At six the delicate, unschooled Louis remained illiterate but dictated his entry to his mother and illustrated it. To bring solace to the Israelites in the wilderness, he pictured them all puffing away at pipes, like his father and uncles. He did not win the £1, but was given The Happy Sunday Book as a special prize - full of Christian humility, he protested: 'But I don't deserve it!'<sup>20</sup>

At the end of winter, Bob returned to his troubled family. Louis was now deemed well enough to go to the school at Canonmills, just around the corner. There one of his young classmates would recall Louis being taught to count on a frame of coloured beads - a task he probably found an insult to his intelligence. But he was too fragile for the rough-and-tumble of the bigger boys, though he longed to be accepted. The classmate recalled: 'While I, as a thoughtless boy, was roving and shouting in the playground, he arrested my attention when I was near the school door, by his solitary, appealing posture, with his eyes intently fixed on me... I stopped suddenly and looked at him for a minute or two, but I regret to say that I did not respond to his apparent appeal for friendship...'<sup>21</sup>

So the strange and often solitary child held his own inner conversations, some taking the form of 'songstries' which he composed and crooned to himself in bed. His father, listening at the nursery door, took pencil and paper one night to record what he heard:

*Had not an angel got the pride of man,  
No evil thought, no hardened heart would have been seen,  
No hell to go to, but a heaven so pure;  
That angel was the Devil.  
Had not that angel got the pride, there would have been no need  
For Jesus Christ to die upon the Cross.*

Louis can only have been at Canonmills school for a few weeks when the family moved in May 1857 to a warmer, more healthy house at 17 Heriot Row. It had a large front dining room, a light and airy drawing room on the first floor, overlooking the private gardens, and a nursery and bedroom in the roof for Louis and Cummy.

In the basement was the kitchen and accommodation for the two other servants, a cook and a housemaid - a modest retinue when half a dozen servants were common. It was not the expense that deterred Louis's parents, when a housemaid could be hired for £12 a year, plus bed, board, a dress and a pair of shoes. The Stevensons liked to think of the servants as part of a small, family unit. The long-serving Cummy was not the only one to appreciate this - Isabella Williamson stayed with the family, as housemaid and later as cook, for more than 20 years. But this does not imply any over-familiarity between the classes - Isabella was never a close enough part of the family to warrant more than a passing reference in Louis's correspondence.

It was not until after the long summer round of holiday resorts that in late September Louis began attending Mr Henderson's school in India Street from 10am to noon each day - hardly taxing for a precocious seven-year-old who, despite flashes of verbal brilliance, was still unable to read. But Louis found the atmosphere less daunting than Canonmills, and soon declared: 'Mr Henderson is the most nicest man that ever was!' Yet even two hours' schooling a day proved too much as Louis was struck down again by bronchitis and spent his birthday in bed. The big consolation was Coolin, the Stevensons' new Skye terrier on which the bedridden Smout could lavish his affection. He was in need of Coolin's comfort as the darkness of an Edinburgh winter closed in and the horrors of Hell returned. For this, Cummy was much to blame. One day Louis's mother found her reading him *The Life and Diaries of the Rev David Brainerd*, an 18th-century Presbyterian missionary employed by the Honourable Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge to convert the American Red Indians. In fine, dramatic style, Cummy became the zealous young Brainerd, reliving his call to God's Ministry:

*When the discoveries of my vile, hellish heart, were made to me, the sight was so dreadful, and showed me so plainly my exposedness to damnation, that I could not endure it... One night I remember in particular, when I was walking solitarily abroad, I had opened to me such a view of my sin, that I feared the ground would cleave asunder under my feet, and become my grave; and would send my soul quick into hell, before I could get home. And though I was forced to go to bed, lest my distress should be discovered by*

*others, which I much feared; yet I scarcely durst sleep at all, for I thought it would be a great wonder if I should be out of hell in the morning.*<sup>22</sup>

Small wonder Maggie Stevenson banned Cummy from reading any more Brainerd and her husband found Louis wide-eyed and troubled in the nursery. 'You see I have my bad nights, Papa,' explained the seven-year-old. 'I'm always thankful when the morning comes.' Yet Cummy was also Louis's comforter during the many sleepless nights when he kept her from her solitary, chaste bed. All the deep, maternal feelings of a woman who would never marry and have children of her own were invested in him.

*She was more patient than I can suppose of an angel; hours together she would help console me in my paroxysms; and I remember with particular distinctness, how she would lift me out of bed, and take me, rolled in blankets, to the window, whence I might look forth into the blue night starred with street-lamps, and see where the gas still burned behind the windows of other sickrooms. These were feverish, melancholy times... yet the sight of the outer world refreshed and cheered me; and the whole sorrow and burden of the night was at an end with the arrival of the first of that long string of country carts that, in the dark hours of the morning, with the neighing of horses, the cracking of whips, the shouts of drivers and a hundred other wholesome noises, creaked, rolled and pounded past my window.*

Worst of all were the nightmares, particularly when he had a fever and ordinary objects loomed large and terrifying. His clothes, hanging on a nail, would grow to the size of a church, then draw away into a horror of infinite distance. He knew the nightmare was coming and fought to stay awake, but sooner or later the terrors of his juvenile subconscious would be unleashed. Worries about school got jumbled up with bits of Brainerd as he found himself summoned before the Great White Throne. There he was required to recite some form of words, perhaps the Shorter Catechism which Cummy had drummed into him, only now his salvation depended on it, his tongue stuck, his memory was blank and hell yawned wide. 'The night-hag had him by the throat' and, struggling and screaming, he awoke clinging to the curtain rod with his knees to his chin.

In such moments, even Cummy could not allay his fears, but Tom Stevenson would rise from his bed and talk calmly about ordinary, daytime things, sometimes

making up aimless, imaginary conversations with the guard or driver of a mailcoach to divert the troubled Smout until he lapsed into slumber. In these tales of the open road there was mystery, adventure and romance without Cummy's unhealthy focus on damnation. But on stormy nights when the wild wind broke loose about Edinburgh like a bedlamite, rushing through the trees of the dark gardens outside, its many sounds would group themselves into the image of a horseman in Louis's fevered imagination.

*Whenever the moon and the stars are set,*

*Whenever the wind is high,*

*All night long in the dark and wet,*

*A man goes riding by.*

*Late in the night when the fires are out,*

*Why does he gallop and gallop about?<sup>23</sup>*

The terrible howl of the horseman's passage, the clinking of the bit and stirrups, drove Smout under the blankets where he would pray and cry himself to sleep. But on windless nights when no demons were afoot and the fires of hell burned low in his imagination, his thoughts would roam in the pleasurable realm of romance, where there was no stern God or damnation, nor a Cummy to warn that his wanton imaginings were in danger of turning into 'a regular novel'. The pagan side of him embarked on far journeys and Homeric battles, and always there were women - not the sort who mouthed pious sentiments and patted you on the head, but beautiful girls to die for. Such adventures, tinged with early erotic awareness, ended always in his own heroic and often cruel demise: 'I never left myself till I was dead.'

Edinburgh always had a dark side, but when Tom Stevenson's smart carriage and pair took the family off to Colinton to stay with 'Gatty' at the Manse, Smout's happiness was unalloyed. Colinton Manse, tucked behind the Rev Dr Lewis Balfour's church in a loop of the Water of Leith, was a rustic retreat on the edge of the city. Rather than the howl of the wind, there was the gentle sound of running water from the wheel of the snuff mill upstream to the dam of a flour mill below. The garden was full of birdsong, and in summer when the grass was mown it was placed in piles along the wall, in which the children would play at being birds in

their nests.

Louis spent many blissful weeks at Colinton, playing with his Balfour cousins. Four of his mother's five brothers were away building the British Empire in New Zealand and India - a merchant in Calcutta, a banker in Bombay, and the family hero Dr John Balfour, surgeon in Her Majesty's Indian Army and reputedly the last man out of Delhi during the Indian Mutiny. To escape the 'infanticidal' climate of India, the children were sent home to the Manse and placed in the care of Maggie Stevenson's elder sister Jane, 'chief of aunts', who had taken charge of the household on the death of her mother in 1844. Once a headstrong, imperious and witty young woman, Jane Balfour had been tamed by a riding accident that left her nearly deaf and blind, 'the most serviceable and amiable of women' as Louis once somewhat unfeelingly put it. She never married but became a second mother to the Balfour hordes who arrived from India for an extended stay in Scotland. In Aunt Jane's loving tenderness, Louis would say, her nephews and nieces were 'born a second time', while delicate Maggie Stevenson - happy to have her child-care duties lightened by 'Auntie' as well as Cummy - was fond of quoting the pious sentiment: 'More are the children of the barren than the children of the married wife.'

Once, when sent to the Manse to convalesce, Louis had Auntie's attention all to himself. From the Manse store-room, a paradise full of biscuit boxes, spice tins and buttered eggs, she would emerge each day with three Albert biscuits and a little pot of calf-foot jelly to help build him up. When Auntie took the Minister's old phaeton into Edinburgh, she would bring back anything Louis wanted - on one glorious occasion, a whole box of tin soldiers, which Louis showed proudly to Gatty. The old man suggested he should play at the Battle of Coburg, within his memory but a novelty for Louis, who was more familiar with Waterloo and the Crimea. The Reverend Doctor, white-haired and austere, was held in awe by his grandchildren. A creature of habit, who liked his port and nuts after dinner, he spent much time in his study, writing to his sons in India, surrounded by the oriental curios they sent home. There he was disturbed by his grandson one day when Louis was sent in to recite a psalm. As the child negotiated the tricky elocution of 'Thy foot He'll not let slide, nor will He slumber that thee keeps', he was longing for an Indian picture as a reward.

Instead, quite unexpectedly, the stern old man took him up in his arms and kissed him - such a surprise that Louis forgot the picture entirely. Another time, when Gatty caught him reading the Arabian Nights, Louis feared a reprimand, but his grandfather simply smiled and said how much he envied him.

When Louis's parents visited the Manse, his father set up experimental lighthouse lens systems on the lawn, which the children had to take care to avoid. Louis played furiously with his cousins all day, driven by a nervous energy that overcame physical frailty. Away from the sick-room in Edinburgh, he could be a real boy, 'hunting antelope' with his gun in the garden thickets or pursuing his cousins across the flowerbeds - he would go back later and make his footprints longer, in case Gatty checked them against the shoes left out for cleaning.

The cousins played along the Witches Walk, as they called the path beside the retaining wall of the churchyard above the sunken garden of the Manse. Through that wall the dead lay sleeping, and at night Louis would watch out for their ghosts from his bedroom window, hoping to spot a spunkie flitting among the gravestones, near the heavy iron coffin-shaped mort safe used to protect newly-buried corpses from bodysnatchers. Yet somehow at Colinton it seemed almost comforting to have the dead sleeping so peacefully beside the house.

Louis's fascination with death was shared by his favourite cousins, Henrietta and Willie Traquair. Their mother Henrietta, Maggie Stevenson's nearest sister, had died at 27 when her daughter was five and Willie four. In another graveyard in Edinburgh, the young mother's flesh now lay rotting six feet under. At Colinton one evening, her two children and their cousin were peering into a crack in the graveyard wall, hoping for a glimpse of something ghoulish, when they fancied they saw a burning eye. Could it be some bird of ill omen roosting in there, or the eye of a dead man, sitting up in his coffin? Terrified, they fled to the safety of the house.

Inside the Manse, through the lobby with its stuffed oriental birds in a glass case, two or three marble deities and a lily of the Nile in a pot, lay the dining-room. After dinner, when the lamp was brought in for Auntie to sit reading in the rocking chair, the whole area behind the sofa was plunged into shadow. Here Louis crawled about, imagining himself out in the cool, dark night under the stars.



*Now, with my little gun, I crawl  
All in the dark along the wall,  
And follow round the forest track  
Away behind the sofa back.<sup>24</sup>*

On a dark shelf he found the plays of Joanna Baillie. Mindful of Cummy's lectures on the sinfulness of the drama, he dipped into the harmless volumes clandestinely and glimpsed 'a convent in a forest', 'a passage in a Saxon castle', delighting in the forbidden scenery that struck a chord with the romantic adventures he imagined in his bed at night. The more Louis was warned of a supposed evil, the more irresistible he found it.

*The idea of sin, attached to particular actions absolutely, far from repelling, soon exerts an attraction on young minds. Probably few over-pious children have not been tempted, sometime or another and by way of dire experiment, to deny God in set terms... But the worst consequence is the romance conferred on doubtful actions; until the child grows to think of nothing more glorious, than to be struck dead in the very act of some surprising wickedness. I can never again take so much interest in anything, as I took, in childhood, in doing for its own sake what I believed to be sinful. And generally the principal effect of this false, common doctrine of sin, is to put a point on lust.*

After each sojourn in the Arcadia of Colinton, Louis returned to Heriot Row, where the eagerly-awaited arrival of Leerie with his ladder to light the gas outside the front door each night could not altogether banish the shadows from within.

*All round the house is the jet-black night;  
It stares through the window-pane;  
It crawls in the corners, hiding from the light,  
And it moves with the moving flame...  
The shadow of the balusters, the shadow of the lamp,  
The shadow of the child that goes to bed -  
All the wicked shadows coming, tramp, tramp, tramp,  
With the black night overhead.<sup>25</sup>*

The dark was about to touch Louis more menacingly than ever. In September, 1858, before he was quite eight, he was struck down with gastric fever and it was

touch and go whether he would survive or join 'poor Bo' in Heaven. As his parents watched helplessly over the weak little body and Cummy sponged his fevered brow, the delirious images that danced through his brain might easily have been the last he knew. But the fever broke and he lapsed at last into healthy slumber. Every day as he convalesced, he received a letter from poor Bo's four-year-old brother Davie, a kindness he would never forget. Such deliverance called for substantial thanks to the Almighty from Tom Stevenson. He wrote to his wife's uncle John Smith: 'Having a desire to express our gratitude to God for having answered our prayers for the recovery of our dear only child, I propose to set aside £100 for charitable purposes.' Discreetly attached was a proposal to set up a home for the rehabilitation of fallen women in Glasgow. The £100 would fund an institution modelled on the Edinburgh Magdalene Asylum. Little did Louis appreciate, as he now played happily, that his illness would lead to a chance of redemption for the whores of Glasgow.

Six months after Louis's eighth birthday, the Glasgow Magdalene Institution for the Repression of Vice and the Reclamation of Penitent Females was formed at a public meeting in the Merchants' Hall. The Lord Provost of Glasgow took the chair, and among those on the platform was John Smith Esq. of Irvine. After a speech by the Rev Dr Symington on the 'social evil' of prostitution, the meeting unanimously approved the formation of the institution, 'having for its object the repression of profligacy, and the reformation of penitent females who have strayed from the paths of virtue.'

Most of those present seemed more keen on repression and at once petitioned Parliament, stating they had 'learned with regret, that, in the Royal Academy of London, and in the Schools of Art and Design in Edinburgh and Dublin, the study of the nude living female model is avowedly supported by grants of public money. They humbly represent that the connexion of Parliament with this mode of study presents to the lower orders a dangerous example of laxity, and that it can scarcely fail to encourage shamelessness, and to lower the standard of female morality.'<sup>26</sup>

What the Bohemian within Louis, as yet undeveloped, would have made of all this is hard to imagine. A decade hence, his young adult self - collapsing with merriment - would have deplored such Grundyism entirely.

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- <sup>1</sup> Belle Strong, Journal, December 4 or 5, 1894.
  - <sup>2</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>3</sup> 1851 Scotland Census for 8 Howard Place, GROS.
  - <sup>4</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>7</sup> RLS, Random Memories: Rosa Quo Locorum.
  - <sup>8</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>11</sup> Edinburgh Magdalene Asylum records, The Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library.
  - <sup>12</sup> The Encyclopaedia of Scottish Executions, Alex F. Young, Eric Dobby Publishing, 1998.
  - <sup>13</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>14</sup> RLS, Memoirs of Himself
  - <sup>15</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>16</sup> RLS, Notes of Childhood.
  - <sup>17</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>18</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>19</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>20</sup> Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Stevenson's Baby Book.
  - <sup>21</sup> William Boss, I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Rosaline Masson.
  - <sup>22</sup> The Life and Diary of David Brainerd.
  - <sup>23</sup> RLS, Windy Nights, A Child's Garden of Verses.
  - <sup>24</sup> RLS, The Land of Story-books, A Child's Garden of Verses.
  - <sup>25</sup> RLS, Shadow March, A Child's Garden of Verses.
  - <sup>26</sup> Glasgow Magdalene Institution Minute Book, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.