

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Thunderbolt

THE call of the war conch echoed through the evening air as it was sounded from the front and back verandahs at Vailima, yet it was not a call to war but to prayers. As the white members of the family took their places at one end of the large hall, Samoan men, women and children trooped in through the open doors, some carrying lanterns, all moving quietly and dropping with Samoan decorum to sit in a wide semicircle on the floor beneath a great lamp. To Louis they were like children, even when they passed the house with faces blackened and giant war clubs raised, intent on taking heads. Like children they needed the comfort and certainty of religious routine, which was why Louis had developed his own version of the family prayers that once marked the passing of each day at Heriot Row, conducted by his father. The late Thomas Stevenson's portrait had pride of place at Vailima, looking down benignly as the service began with Louis's step-son Lloyd reading from the Bible in Samoan. In a while there would be a lusty Samoan singing of hymns, but first Louis recited a prayer of his own devising:

*Help us to look back on the long way that Thou hast brought us, on the long days in which we have been served, not according to our deserts, but our desires; on the pit and the miry clay, the blackness of despair, the horror of misconduct, from which our feet have been plucked out. For our sins forgiven or prevented, for our shame unpublished, we bless and thank Thee, O God . . .<sup>1</sup>*

THIS was far from Louis's attitude to Christianity on returning from Malvern in early 1873, determined to be honest with his parents. When they were already struggling to come to terms with their only son's debauchery and disease, further brutal honesty was unwise. Before his 'moral quagmire', Louis had been prepared to compromise, refraining from proclaiming his new, agnostic views to the unco guild of Edinburgh but telling Bob: 'One must continue precisely what we have begun, silence and questions... It can never be wrong to ask a question.'<sup>2</sup>

Now it was Tom Stevenson's turn to ask questions. In Louis's absence he had come across a copy of the LJR constitution, rejecting established religion and exhorting members to disregard all their parents had taught them. As a believer in original sin and the reality of hell and damnation, he could see his son heading for the fiery furnace. It was not so much the sexual misconduct that bothered him. Tom Stevenson may have coped already with syphilis in the family - had he not done his best for poor Alan and his family? If he could forgive the poor sinners who sought shelter at the Magdalene Asylum, how much more could he forgive an unwise son who had fallen victim to a prostitute's evil charms? But the one sin that could not be forgiven was wilful denial of God and rejection of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. On the evening of Friday January 31, Louis let himself in through the front door after a convivial dinner with Baxter to find the Wrath of the Lord awaiting him.

'The thunderbolt has fallen with a vengeance now,' he told Baxter as the dust settled two days later. 'You know the aspect of a house in which somebody is still waiting burial - the quiet step - the hushed voices and rare conversation - the religious literature that holds a temporary monopoly - the grim, wretched faces; all is here reproduced in this family circle in honour of my (what is it?) atheism or blasphemy. On Friday night after leaving you, in the course of conversation, my father put me one or two questions as to beliefs, which I candidly answered. I really hate all lying so much now - a new found honesty that has somehow come out of my late illness - that I could not so much as hesitate at the time; but if I had foreseen the real Hell of everything since, I think I should have lied as I have done so often before... Of course, it is rougher than Hell upon my father; but can I help it? They don't see either that my game is not the light-hearted scoffer; that I am not (as they call me) a careless infidel... I do not think I am thus justly to be called a 'horrible atheist'...

'Now, what is to take place? What a damned curse I am to my parents! As my father said, "You have rendered my whole life a failure." As my mother said, "This is the heaviest affliction that has ever befallen me." And, O Lord, what a pleasant thing it is to have just damned the happiness of (probably) the only two people who care a damn about you in the world...

'Imagine, Charles, my father sitting in the arm chair, gravely reading up Butler's Analogy in order to bring the wanderer back. Don't suppose I mean this jocularly - damn you. I think it's about the most pathetic thing I ever heard of - except one: and that I could not tell, but I can write it. My mother (dear heart) immediately asked me to join Nicholson's young men's class: O what a remedy for me! I don't know whether I feel more inclined to laugh or cry over these naivetes; but I know how sick at heart they make me.

'What is my life to be, at this rate? What, you rascal? Answer - I have a pistol at your throat. If all that I hold true and most desire to spread, is to be such death and worse than death, in the eyes of my father and mother, what the devil am I to do? Here is a good heavy cross with a vengeance, and all rough with rusty nails that tear your fingers: only it is not I that have to carry it alone; I hold the light end, but the heavy burthen falls on these two... If PEOPLE ONLY WOULD admit in practice (what they are so ready to assert in theory) that a man has a right to judge for himself; and is culpable if he do not exercise that right... Ever your affectionate and horrible Atheist. R.L. Stevenson, C.I., H.A., S.B., [Careless Infidel, Horrible Atheist, Son of Belial] Etc.'<sup>3</sup>

This was not a storm that would blow over, and the coming year would see all three inhabitants of 17 Heriot Row approaching the brink of nervous collapse. In private, the Stevensons went through hell, but appearances had to be maintained. Family prayers with the servants present continued to be observed each day, and on Sundays Louis attended St Stephen's kirk with his parents to hear the Rev Maxwell Nicholson preach - even if the Horrible Atheist did decline to attend Nicholson's young men's class.

Sunday mornings, after a Saturday night's carouse with Baxter, were a torment as a dozen kirks within earshot of Heriot Row summoned the righteous to worship. Louis once gave an account of the experience in a thinly-disguised fictional correspondence with 'Charles Butler' (Baxter): 'My head, my dear Charles, is a belfry, where innumerable insane bellringers leap and swing and bob up and down upon excruciating bellropes... When they strike on a fine, deep, sonorous boom, like a crooning stock dove, I can dominate the agony and contain my spirit; but when

they fly off into a treble clang with a shrill chord in it, it seems to me as if my sutures were uncemented, and my ribs unjointed, and my little, bare, blind, naked, immortal spirit went floating up and away into death-in-life and the inter-stellar spaces. All the time, the feet of the demon bellringers go flitting and skipping to and fro on the unhappy belfry floor, and every step is agony to me. In short, I have neuralgia.<sup>4</sup>

Or possibly a hangover. Louis continued his night-roving but always crept in on stocking-soles and tried not to have a confrontation with his parents. Having damned his father's happiness, he now seemed desperate to humour him. Tom Stevenson was a member of the Scottish Meteorological Society and to please him Louis wrote a paper *On The Thermal Influence Of Forests*. On May 19 he went with his father to a meeting of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, where he was invited to read the paper. For a moment, Tom Stevenson forgot his son was a careless infidel and glowed with paternal pride. Encouraged, Louis presented a paper on *Local Conditions Influencing Climate* to the Scottish Meteorological Society.

Otherwise he tried to keep out of his father's way that summer, rising from his bed at Swanston at 6.30am to give him time to walk into Edinburgh alone before law classes began at nine. On the walk in he would meet tramps and other wayfarers heading out into the country, including a German band that went out to play in Midlothian village squares. Often Louis would skip his law classes and spend the day lounging and smoking in Princes Street Gardens, eyeing the shop girls on their break, avoiding distributors of tracts and humouring the 'vague wandering old men with all the Ancient Mariner's desire to tell their story and no story after all to tell'.<sup>5</sup> Then he would return to Swanston in the family carriage, trying to steer small talk with his father away from contentious issues. After dinner and a smoke in the garden, Louis would read or write for a while before an early bed: 'A life of beautiful regularity, is it not?'<sup>6</sup>

Yet the domestic atmosphere remained tense, and Louis could not forget the disease that lurked within him. That summer he confided to Baxter his fear of the worm in the bud that would never go away: 'Death is a sort of roaring lion that produces itself between three and four in the morning and at divers other disrespectable hours. I may also observe, in the same connection, that the worm

dieth-not quite free. No-one is so good at not-dying as the worm.<sup>17</sup>

Time now was running out for Noona, Louis's cousin Lewis Balfour. The Degenerate Douglas of old was dying at the age of 30. He had been right as rain the previous December when he dined at Heriot Row with Louis and Bob, and was doubtless treated to their new, heretical views on life and religion over a pipe or two, once the old man had retired to bed. Louis had always tolerated rather than liked the cousin who had been a dull, insipid house guest so often during college holidays, and he now felt guilty at not caring that Noona was coughing blood and not long for this world. His impending death, however, was a welcome distraction for Tom Stevenson who could offer the consolations of religion to the shallow young man who lay in bed in his bachelor chambers, adorned with fencing foils and tobacco pipes and mildly indecent prints. In a fictionalised account, Louis wrote:

*My poor father took it into his head that I should go with him and see my cousin Nathaniel. The goodman is, as you know, a great believer in deathbed scenery; and Nath is in the Dark Valley... his cough has nearly killed me in a single morning call, so that I can judge what it must be for him all night and all day long. I have a great dislike to see slight empty characters placed in these grave situations... he is really of such small account as a fellow creature, that he seems unfit for dying altogether; the part is too serious for him; he is in his place well enough in a tea party but to think of him alone in the Dark Valley! I feel choked with a sort of sobbing laughter at the thought...*

*I noticed by my father's manner and the knowledge he seemed to have, that he must call nearly every day, which is indeed good of him, and like him; for you remember how he used to look down upon Nath in his better days. He professed himself overjoyed to see me, which I am afraid was a lie; and he must have found it difficult to articulate, for it set him coughing for quite a while...*

*'You don't know how tired of himself, a fellow gets lying here,' he said. 'I declare if ever I get well, which is damned unlikely, I shall take to visiting the sick.' This probably is the only speech of Nath's in all his life that can be recorded to his credit... I could find nothing to say; I felt so ashamed of myself for hating him when he was sick, for one thing; and for another, when a fellow is quite deadly stupid, and absolutely corrupt in every thought, and has not a week to live, I should like to know what is the appropriate vein to talk to him in. I suppose*

*perhaps it is the one my father chose; for down he sat by him; and prattled a sort of grown-up baby-talk, about dogs, and the weather and the man in the moon... and humorous enough it was. I can't think how he kept it up; for I could see his heart was just broken all the time; and I could have fallen on his neck and wept...*

*When the visit was over, my father and I got out into the street, and I hastened to excuse myself and slip away... if he had not touched me so nearly by his gentleness with Nath, I might have risked a walk with him; but as things are, I could trust neither him nor myself; we should have been safe to grow confidential; and confidence, where there is so great a gulf in sympathy, means quarrelling. I had to let him go on alone with the dogs, while I took refuge in a tobacconist's shop. Of course, with the admirable instinct of a father, he will misunderstand me and be bitterly offended...<sup>8</sup>*

Louis was not in Edinburgh for the final act of Noona's tragedy. He was packed off down south that July to Cockfield Rectory in Suffolk, where his cousin Maud now lived with her clergyman husband, Professor Churchill Babington. At 52, the classical scholar and archaeologist was not the type to try saving Louis's soul. Instead, he and his young wife provided a happy haven where Louis, after six months of religious trauma, could unwind and breathe freely... and fall in love.

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<sup>1</sup> RLS, Vailima Prayers.

<sup>2</sup> RLS to Bob Stevenson, Edinburgh, October 1872, Yale 112, MS Yale.

<sup>3</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Heriot Row, February 2, 1873. Yale 123, MS Yale.

<sup>4</sup> RLS, Letter III, Edifying Letters of the Rutherford Family, ed. Roger Swearingen.

<sup>5</sup> RLS to Elizabeth Crosby, Speculative Society Hall, Edinburgh, July 1873, Yale 128, MS Yale.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Edinburgh, June or July, 1873. Yale 127, MS Yale.

<sup>8</sup> RLS, Letter III, Edifying Letters of the Rutherford Family, ed. Roger Swearingen.