

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Return of the Prodigal

EVERY man has his own romance; mine clustered exclusively about the practice of the arts, the life of Latin Quarter students, and the world of Paris as depicted by that grimy wizard, the author of the Comedie Humaine. I was not disappointed... Z. Marcas lived next door to me in my ungainly, ill-smelling hotel of the Rue Racine; I dined at my villainous restaurant with Lousteau and with Rastignac... and this was not from need, but sentiment. My father gave me a profuse allowance, and I might have lived (had I chosen) in the Quartier de l'Etoile...

I always looked with awful envy on a certain countryman of my own who had a studio in the Rue Monsieur le Prince, wore boots, and long hair in a net, and could be seen tramping off, in this guise, to the worst eating-house of the quarter, followed by a Corsican model, his mistress... for my own part, I had to content myself by pretending very arduously to be poor, by wearing a smoking-cap on the streets, and by pursuing, through a series of misadventures, that extinct mammal, the grisette...¹

FOR years in the guilt-ridden Calvinist climate of an Edinburgh seemingly trapped in eternal winter, Louis had longed for the freedom of Paris in the spring, his imagination fuelled by Balzac and Henri Murger's *Scenes De La Vie De Boheme*. Before returning to parental control, he was determined to sample the Bohemian life. Instead of returning directly to Scotland, Louis got off the train in Paris and headed for the Hotel de Russie in the Rue Racine, off the Boulevard St Michel. There Bob had a room alongside an artist friend, which he had described in a letter: 'We have two garrets du cinquieme next to each other and a bogshop between us. They are I suppose bloody artistic and damned uncomfortable, I know. But as the weather is warm it does not matter. We can bring in women at all hours of the day... but strange to say although we have been here so long not one of the many fair ones of the quartier have penetrated into our fair tenements. We meet them day after day in the stairs in the restaurants at dinner and supper but we have never seemed to go in

for them. I am sick of whores. I should like a nice woman to live with...'²

In fact Bob was still stuck on an old flame: 'I saw Mathilde Brand the first moment I got to Paris. She did not see me. It was just like jumping into cold water suddenly, the first shock and the after glow... I have never been to see Mathilde yet. I have been reading Ninon de l'Enclos' life and letters the other day. She knows damn well about love affairs and no wonder... I take the advice of Ninon de l'Enclos to M. de Sevigne that it was impossible for a man like him to do without a love affair, not a damned 2fr bitch and yet a swell woman... I begin to see we must not allow the years of youth to elapse without caring about a woman. It is ruin to stifle that part of nature by 2fr fucking...'³

For Tom and Maggie Stevenson, the thought of their delicate son being shown the delights of Paris by Bob, the dangerous unbeliever who had all but ruined him in Edinburgh, was cause for alarm. When Louis checked in at the Hotel St Romain, he found an urgent telegram from Heriot Row - which he ignored for a while before replying casually by letter: 'My dear Mother, I got a telegram the night of my arrival here, saying you disapproved of the move; well I didn't approve of it particularly myself; I only did it to be the sooner able to come home.'⁴ The logic of this escaped his parents, and they were puzzled further by a hare-brained scheme for Louis to study Roman Law at Gottingen, recommended by Nadia Zassetsky's lover Prince Galitzine. If Tom Stevenson would pay for all this, Louis wrote home, his parents could always come out for an extended stay to see him, rather than wait for him to return to Heriot Row.⁵

For the next two weeks they were too angry to reply. Meanwhile, Louis amused himself with Bob, who seemed to be painting better than ever, despite being hard up and not eating properly. This was the first time Louis had experienced the Bohemian world of artists' studios and models prepared not only to pose naked for a few francs but also to share a painter's bed in exchange for board and lodging. As yet Bob had not found his nice grisette, as these girls were known, but lived in hope. In the absence of such a comfortable arrangement, Paris was full of licensed and regularly inspected brothels, each clearly marked with a large number at the door, where the problem of sex could be solved with blunt French pragmatism.

Yet Louis probably steered clear of the 2fr fucking that spring, kept on the straight and narrow by his platonic passion for the Vicar's wife and his still precarious health which, after a couple of days of *la vie de Boheme*, took a turn for the worse with 'a very violent cold'. In his room at the Hotel du Globe, in the Rue des Ecoles, he was examined by a doctor, who 'said I might compliment myself on what I had, as I might just as well have had small pox or typhoid fever or what you will'. Louis's lungs were unaffected but his mucus membrane was 'raw over the best part of me and my eyes are the laughablest deformed loopholes you ever saw'.⁶ He suffered violent headaches and heavy sweating, perhaps consistent with the small pox but more probably a grumbling reminder of the great one.

For three weeks Louis remained in Paris before consenting to come home. Publication of *Ordered South*, about his experiences in Mentone, was imminent in Macmillan's Magazine and he now laboured at an essay on Victor Hugo which Colvin hoped to get accepted by Leslie Stephen, editor of the *Cornhill*. Confined to bed and sweating with a fever, Louis dictated the essay to Bob and awaited word from his parents. At last he received 'quite a nice note from my father (after a fortnight's silence), with scarcely a word of anger or vexation or anything'⁷. His parents, still fearing for his sanity, had decided to humour him, even to the extent of agreeing to the Gottingen proposal. But by now Louis could see the advantages of returning to Edinburgh as an invalid with whom his father would hesitate to cross swords. On April 23, 1874, Louis arrived in London after five months' sojourn on the Continent and spent only two days with his Consuelo and Colvin before boarding the train to Edinburgh. His mother, expecting an invalid, was delighted to find him looking 'wonderfully well'⁸.

Under a new regime in Scotland, Louis was to receive an allowance of £84 a year. A working man might have to feed a family on £7 a month, yet Louis had the same amount to spend on sundries such as membership of the Savile Club in London, where Colvin had put his name forward. In Scotland life was far from unbearable, and in May the Stevensons removed to Swanston, where Louis could roam the hills once more, alone or with the shepherd John Tod.

Louis had returned too late to take part in the Jenkin theatricals, whose cast for

Mademoiselle de la Gergliere and *Only An Actress* included Flora Masson's brother Orme. Jenkin's growing affluence as an engineer had allowed him to move to a large New Town residence in Great Stuart Street, where he had replaced a wall with a partition that folded down to create an auditorium and stage on which his wife could display her talents. At Great Stuart Street, Louis could always find a sympathetic ear whenever he found the atmosphere at Heriot Row too oppressive.

Baxter, too, was delighted to have Louis back, as was the Simp at the Republic in St Colme Street, where his sister Eve had blossomed into a sharp-witted young woman of 18, as yet unaware of her brother's double life as the lover of Etta Mackay. Only Walter Ferrier was absent, alienated from his poor, paralysed mother in Edinburgh and wrestling with his inner demons on the Isle of Wight, where he had descended into such a debauched, alcoholic state that later he would reflect: 'I really don't know how I existed.'⁹

None of Louis's Edinburgh friends was aware of the intense inner life he shared only with Mrs Sitwell. Making love to another man's wife, if only by letter, was not something you could talk about. Colvin knew, of course, although it is not clear if he read any of their passionate correspondence while Louis was alive – after his death, he would bowdlerise the letters shamelessly. They reveal the intensity of a tormented young man's feelings for a married woman 11 years his senior, yet in reality the Vicar's wife was little more than a conduit for a long and powerful overspilling of emotion - she and Louis spent only a few days together and the idea of them living together as lovers was preposterous. Nevertheless, these were adult emotions, way beyond Louis's puppy love for his cousin Katharine. His attitude to Bob's youngest sister was now matter-of-fact and almost paternal, although she probably held a candle for Louis till the end of her life.

Ursula Wyllie Roberts, whose father Robert Wyllie was a cousin of Bob and Katharine, would claim in a memoir that Louis 'was said to have been in love with Katharine. Whether she did not love him enough to marry him or whether the parents were opposed to marriage between first cousins I do not know. The man she did marry failed to make her happy and there was a separation.'¹⁰

It is hard to see what Katharine saw in Sydney de Mattos, a minor Cambridge

intellectual whose one claim to fame was becoming lecture secretary of the Fabian Society under George Bernard Shaw. Certainly Louis and Bob had a poor opinion of de Mattos, while Tom Stevenson strongly disapproved of him because he was an atheist. Had Alan been alive, he would never have countenanced his daughter marrying such a man, but the wedding was set for June 25 and 23-year-old Louis was to be a trustee of Katharine's marriage settlement.

The house in Portobello where Aunt Alan lived with Katharine and her middle daughter Dora should have been the scene of joyous preparation. Despite misgivings about the suitability of Sydney de Mattos, the family all hoped the youngest and most unusual of Alan Stevenson's daughters would be happy with her choice. Bob, as the bride's only brother and nominal head of his branch of the family, came home from Paris towards the end of May to give her away. Yet instead of being the life and soul of the party, he took to his bed with a high temperature and soon the tell-tale blueish-white membrane of diphtheria had formed in his throat. It thickened into greyish green, threatening to choke him as his neck puffed out like that of a bullfrog until Bob was fighting for his life.

Louis was distraught. The disease, he told Colvin, was 'the most murderous malady on earth and the curse of Edinburgh. This is the sixth case in my immediate family; whereof three have been fatal'¹¹. There was a real possibility that the wonderful, witty Bohemian had come home to his own funeral.

Tom Stevenson was too good a Christian to wish his wayward nephew harm, but there was no denying Bob's demise would remove a bad influence. As the family at Swanston waited daily for news, Louis cannot have found it easy to share his anxiety with his parents. Instead, after an anxious trip to Portobello on June 3, he confided in his Consuelo: 'I went down and saw the doctor; but it is not thought right that I should go in to see him in case of contagion... I wish we could pray; it would be amusing now for both of us.'¹² With artistic detachment, Louis noted next day: 'It is curious how calm I am in such a case. I wait with perfect composure for further news; I can do nothing; why should I disturb myself. And yet if things go wrong I shall be in a fine way I can promise you...'¹³

A high wind was blowing off the Pentlands, bearing the scent of the whins across

which Louis, Bob and Katharine had once galloped on their ponies. Birdsong and a little powder of white apple blossom blowing into the Swanston garden lifted Louis's spirits as he sat there behind the yew hedge, but his concern about Bob was compounded by news of the Vicar's unreasonable behaviour. Mrs Sitwell, too, was going through hell as her marriage fell apart, and that night Louis confessed to her: 'I had many a look down ugly vistas in the future, for you, dear friend, or for Bob.'¹⁴

Two days later, he wrote: 'I heard this morning that yesterday Bob had been very much worse, and I went down to Portobello with all sorts of horrible presentiments. I was glad when I turned the corner and saw the blinds still up. He was definitely better... I am very tired after my excitement and a lot of knocking about that I had necessarily... One thing I see so clearly. Death is the end neither of joy nor sorrow. Let us pass into the clods and come up again as grass and flowers, we shall still be this wonderful shrinking, sentient matter - we shall still thrill to the sun and grow relaxed and quiet after the rain, and have all manner of pains and pleasures that we know not of now.'¹⁵

By June 9, Louis could report that Bob was on the mend 'so my great trouble is perhaps at an end'¹⁶. Katharine and Dora, released from sickroom duty, came out for a day at Swanston, where Louis's Balfour cousin Maggie Wilson was staying. The four of them ended a sunny afternoon lying out in the garden together on a shawl where 'we all lay so close that we half pretended, half felt, we had lost our individualities and become merged and mixed up in a quadruple existence. We had the shadow of an umbrella over ourselves; and when anyone reached up a brown hand into the golden sunlight overhead we all feigned that we did not know whose hand it was until at last I really do not think we quite did... There was a splendid sunlit silence about us; and as Katharine said the heaven seemed to be dropping oil upon us, or honeydew - it was all so "bland".'¹⁷

Katharine, now only two weeks from wedlock, may have recalled another balmy summer's day when they lay on a bed of blaeberrys by Neidpath Castle, and the way Louis's dark eyes had looked at her then. But she and de Mattos were determined to go through with it. The wedding took place at Dunblane and Bob, after a spell of convalescence at nearby Bridge of Allan, returned to Paris.

Louis, meanwhile, had not stayed in Scotland to see his childhood sweetheart wed but made his escape to London, where his grand passion for Mrs Sitwell would come to a head. He was to stay in Hampstead with Colvin and make the acquaintance of various editors and journalists including Leslie Stephen, who had accepted the Victor Hugo essay. While in London Louis could visit his new club – and also see his Consuelo alone. For months he had poured out his heart by letter, and he longed for physical intimacy. Exactly what happened is unknown but it seems Louis made his play - and was gently, kindly rebuffed.

Of course, he knew it was impossible, quite apart from the understanding that one day she would be Colvin's. She was going through the trauma of formal separation from the Vicar, for which approval had to be sought from Lambeth Palace, and planned to support herself and her son Bertie by working as secretary of the College for Working Women in Queen's Square, taking lodgings nearby. The slightest scandal, such as an adulterous liaison with an outlandish young man from Scotland, would compromise her already difficult position.

Louis could see this and hated himself for putting his own selfish desires before her wellbeing. From Colvin's house he wrote to his 'dear friend', for now that was all she could ever be, expressing contrition: 'Looking back upon some of my past in continuation of my humour of the last two or three days, I am filled with shame. If I have shown myself to be so poor and selfish a creature, try to set some of it down, as I try to do myself, to my shaken health... Try to forget utterly the R.L.S. you have known in the past: he is no more, he is dead: I shall try now to be strong and helpful, to be a good friend to you and no longer another limp dead-heavy burthen on your weary arms.'¹⁸

He now worried about the ill health of his 'Madonna' and, in commiserating with young Bertie, who had gone down with the measles, fabricated a bizarre white lie: 'Tell Bert I had measles eighteen months ago, so he is not much behind me.'¹⁹ A child would not appreciate the significance of Louis's health trip to Malvern, nor the cause of the roseola that flowered under the influence of mercury. To equate syphilis with a childhood illness would be black humour indeed - or had Louis become so affected by his mother's habit of smiling and pretending unpleasant things weren't

happening that he had rewritten his medical history?

Thwarted in Love, Louis could at least enjoy the pleasures of companionship at his new club, along with a very good three-shilling table d'hote dinner: 'Two soups, two fish, two entrees, two joints and two puddings; so it is not dear; and one meets agreeable people.'²⁰ Not surprisingly his health improved and he could tell his mother: 'I have stopped my tonic now for a fortnight without harm, and I can walk a great deal more.'²¹

His recovery proceeded apace when, after a fortnight at Swanston working on the oft-delayed Walt Whitman essay and a new venture, Notes on the Movements of Young Children, Louis accepted the Simp's offer of a month-long yachting trip around the Inner Hebrides. The wealthy Baronet and his friend Thomas Barclay had chartered the Heron, a 16-ton, fore-and-aft rigged schooner with two Devon men to crew her, and Charles 'the Stout' Baxter completing a foursome in the cabin. Scarcely had they left the quayside at Greenock than Louis was writing to his Madonna: 'This healthy jolly open air life is the fountain of youth to me. I scull boats and pull ropes and steer the boat and do all manner of things.'²² By the time they reached Oban, he was telling his mother: 'I am so stupid, I never do think, I prattle and am very easily satisfied with my own and other people's jests, I eat, I drink, I bathe in the briny. I sleep; generally I live as a beast with the beasts of the field. It is so nice.'²³

On-board hygiene left much to be desired, although Barclay made half-hearted attempts at washing up: 'Simpson looking at his glass the other day suspiciously through half-shut eyes, opined that "Tom had been tampering with it"; and the word was hailed with acclamation.'²⁴ The four fed like fighting cocks - 'we live principally on chops and steaks, with every now and again a leg of mutton' - although they would also make do with 'sham' food in tins²⁵. After three weeks of this, Louis reported to his mother: 'My health is a miracle to man. I expose myself to rain and walk and row and overeat myself. Also I eat breakfast: I struggled against this because it gave me indigestion; but my appetite and the smell of the eggs in the morning were always too much for me; and now I have no more indigestion. Only I have forgotten how to write, how to think and how to wash.'²⁶

The opposite sex played no part in this Boys' Own adventure, although Simpson's

private thoughts must have turned at times to Etta Mackay, with whose virtue he had been tampering. In quiet moments Louis wrote also to his Madonna: 'The storm is over. I believe in the future faithfully. I am not sad nor angry, nor regretful. I am fully content and fear nothing, not death, nor weakness, not any falling away from my own standard and yours. I shall be a man yet, dear, and a good man...'²⁷

While waiting in port for a favourable breeze, the four young men sat watching an Oban-bound steamer disgorging its passengers. Louis, in the spirit of jink, proposed that he and his friends should attempt to shake hands with as many of the new arrivals as possible, with the winner taking a shilling per handshake off each of the losers. The resulting pantomime would be described years later by the Simp's sister Eve:

Charles Baxter then tried to claim acquaintance with several new-comers, but, despite all his commanding presence and bland assurance of manner, he could not wring a handshake from one of his imagined friends who were luggage-laden with bags and umbrellas. RLS, not to be behindhand, glided forward, bowing and smiling to perturbed passengers and tried to coax them to greet him; but with his strange appearance in his ragamuffin attire he was scowled at, threatened with the one policeman, and told to go away.

Suddenly my brother, who had been watching with amusement his friends' bold, fruitless efforts, rose, alert, from his seat on a belaying pin, with a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth, and stepped up to the gangway. He had spied a large family he knew, about to disembark, and, casting shyness to the winds, wrung each of them ecstatically by the hand.

'There are eight girls, father and mother, a governess,' said Charles Baxter, in a sad tone of voice to RLS. 'Look! he is carrying the basket with the cat the cook had, and I believe he is going to shake hands with all the servants.'

*By the time Walter had piloted his friends ashore, packed them all into a waiting omnibus and helped the servants with their bundles, he found he had won 15s from each of his friends, who pretended to be inconsolable and wrathful at his luck. RLS said he would invent no more games for idle afternoons.'*²⁸

The Heron sailed as far as Portree on the Isle of Skye before turning for home. Louis had enjoyed the time of his life and landed on the quayside at the end of the voyage in fine disarray. On arriving back at Swanston he told his mother: 'I left my

pipe on board the yacht, my umbrella in the dog cart, and my portmanteau by the way, and I reached home in the baronet's hat, the scribe's [Baxter's] coat and my own integrity...'²⁹

*Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,
Say, could that lad be I?
Merry of soul he sailed on a day
Over the sea to Skye.*

*Mull was astern, Rum on the port,
Eigg on the starboard bow;
Glory of youth glowed in his soul:
Where is that glory now?*

*Billow and breeze, islands and seas,
Mountains of rain and sun,
All that was good, all that was fair,
All that was me is gone.³⁰*

The autumn of 1874 saw Louis making an effort to get on with his parents. He had long talks with his father about Sydney de Mattos's atheism, and the immoral conduct of Louis's uncle Mackintosh Balfour in marrying his dead brother's wife, a subject that still sent Louis's mother into hysterics. To please his father, that August the agnostic Louis wrote An Appeal to the Clergy of the Church of Scotland, seeking to heal the rift between the Kirk and the Free Kirk that had opened up with the Disruption of 1843. In September, the Stevensons went off together for a holiday in Wales, staying at Barmouth and Llandudno. Tom Stevenson was on top form, as Louis wrote to Mrs Sitwell: 'He is always skipping about into the drawing-room, and speaking to all the girls, and telling them God knows what about us all. My mother and I are the old people who sit aloof.'³¹

From Llandudno Louis wrote to Bob, pronouncing himself in good health, but

never able to forget the unmentionable disease: 'I am still rather bothered about what you know; I am always keeping myself from thinking of it and always wakening to the fact that there it is still, as if it were some sort of a pin [in] my cushion. It has busted me up a good deal, God knows, and haunts me at all odd moments with an ugly look.'³²

Yet Louis's writing was progressing steadily, as was his cousin's painting. 'How about your work?' he asked Bob. 'Stick in; we shall never be swells, but we can be cheesy sort of shits, with a push.'³³ Since in Victorian slang a 'cheese', or a 'howling cheese', was Louis's highest accolade for a creative artist, he was clearly pleased with the way his work was going. Quite apart from a steady trickle of essays now finding their way into print in Macmillan's, the Portfolio or the Cornhill, Louis was churning out enough short stories to plan a book. In the end nearly all would be destroyed, as was a novel begun at this time, but in the winter of 1874/5 Louis got through a power of work. This was in addition to his law studies, abandoned for a full year, which must now be completed. Tom Stevenson had promised his son the enormous sum of £1,000 if he qualified as an advocate the following summer - far more than his writing brought in. Louis reluctantly accepted the need to waste precious time poring over law textbooks, but first he needed another trip south. Leaving his parents at Liverpool, he boarded the train for London.

For cheapness Louis stayed with Colvin's architect friend Basil Champneys in Hampstead, but flitted in and out to the Savile. He would call on Mrs Sitwell in Brunswick Row, and a highlight of his stay was going with her to see the Elgin Marbles, whose colossal, impassive female nakedness had a profound effect on him. Yet the October weather made little or no impact on Louis's constitution, even when he had to walk back to Hampstead in a torrential downpour: 'It fell all round the umbrella so thick and white in the lamplight, that one felt as if one were under a glass case. But my heart was full of happiness; so I did not mind it a single naughty word. Hansom after hansom took me in, lost heart at the weather and turned me out again; so that it was a sort of ride and tie all the way to the Adelaide. When I got out of my last hansom there, I stepped into the gutter and was immediately aware of the fact that it was flooded and I had stepped into four or five inches of running water.

Up the hill, it was rather solemn work; but I managed to keep myself going with cigarettes, by keeping my hands dry and making one whenever I got to a bit of shelter, and I was very placid in mind. It lightened occasionally - very blue lightning. I got here about one, and had some brandy, turned into bed and have had a capital sleep.'³⁴

Before returning to Edinburgh, Louis planned a longer walk to clear the mind and bring in coin by furnishing material for another magazine article. At High Wycombe in the heart of the Chilterns he alighted from the down train, dressed in his usual outlandish apparel plus a knapsack, and began to climb the hill out of the Buckinghamshire town. By exposing his mind to new surroundings, he would create the essay *An Autumn Effect*. With the day half gone and a ten-mile journey on foot ahead, he laboured up the hill under a grey, overcast sky, noting that 'the solid bricks of woodland that lay squarely on slope and hill-top were not green, but russet and grey, and ever less russet and more grey as they drew off into the distance'.³⁵

Soon the sun cut through the clouds and the air was filled with the sound of larks that would accompany Louis throughout his three-day journey. For a while he walked in the company of the parish constable, discussing the ways of rustic petty criminals, before striking out across country to find the fields and footpaths full of farm workers ploughing the land and children making their way home from school. Then in the beech-woods he came across a donkey that had wound its halter tight around a tree. After freeing the brute, he was rewarded by a show of 'impertinence that inspired his whole face as he curled up his lip and showed his teeth, and began to bray'³⁶. At this, Louis roared with laughter until alerted to the presence of a prim old maid who clearly thought him a dangerous lunatic - all of which would make good copy later.

Louis arrived in Great Missenden that evening to find a fair in progress, with stalls selling pastry and cheap toys and the streets full of children who latched on to the ragamuffin Bohemian traveller 'blowing simultaneously upon penny trumpets as though they imagined I should fall to pieces like the battlements of Jericho'. Louis took refuge at the inn, but emerged after nightfall to stroll through the village, pitch dark except where curtains lay open, revealing lamplit country cameos: 'In a room,

all white wainscot and crimson wall-paper, a perfect gem of colour after the black, empty darkness in which I had been groping, a pretty girl was telling a story, as well as I could make out, to an attractive child upon her knee, while an old woman sat placidly dozing over the fire.'³⁷

Next morning, after breakfast, Louis smoked a pipe in the sloping garden behind the inn and fell into a long conversation with the landlord, who for eight years had driven the Wendover coach. Would the distance he had covered equate to a circumnavigation of the globe? Having made several calculations, Louis discovered 'a small lacuna in my information. I did not know the circumference of the earth', whereupon the landlord lost interest.³⁸

Packing his knapsack, Louis covered the five or six miles to Wendover on foot. He dallied in a wood and marvelled at the way it seemed to listen as he passed through, numbering his footfalls: 'One could not help feeling that there ought to be some reason for this stillness; whether, as the bright old legend goes, Pan lay somewhere near in siesta, or whether, perhaps, the heaven was meditating rain, and the first drops would soon come pattering through the trees.' In the middle of all this, he stumbled upon a jewel - a farm in a clearing where around 30 peacocks strutted around the rick-yard.³⁹

He made his way on to Wendover and his lodging at the Red Lion. There Louis spent the evening in an armchair with his nose in a book, or conversing with the landlord's little daughter who showed him her dolls. But his usual, magical empathy with children failed him. A twee notion on his part resulted in the girl running 'straight out of the room and into the bar - it was just across the passage and I could hear her telling her mother in loud tones, but apparently more in sorrow than in merriment, that THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR WANTED TO KISS DOLLY. I fancy she was determined to save me from this humiliating action, even in spite of myself.'⁴⁰

Next morning Louis gave up travelling on foot in favour of a dog cart. Now he was driven across brown ploughland on which 'the horses smoked and the men laboured and shouted and drank in the sharp autumn morning', until they reached Tring, where 'I had a last walk, among russet beeches as usual, and the air filled, as

usual with the carolling of larks; I heard shots fired in the distance, and saw, as a new sign of the fulfilled autumn, two horsemen exercising a pack of fox-hounds. And then the train came and carried me back to London.'⁴¹

For three days, far from his parents, Mrs Sitwell, disputes over religion and the need to study law, Louis had lived with just his own thoughts for company. In travel he would always find release, and from a hotel at Euston station he now wrote to his mother: 'You must understand (I want to say this in a letter) that I shall be a nomad, more or less, until my days be done. You don't know how much I used to long for it in old days; how I used to go and look at the trains leaving, and wish to go with them... take me as I am, and give me line. I *must* be a bit of a vagabond; it's your own fault, after all, isn't it? You shouldn't have had a tramp for a son!'⁴²

Edinburgh that winter was cold and cheerless and Louis found the repressive overcoat more irksome than ever. He busied himself writing to his cousin Katharine, now in London and already finding married life with de Mattos a disappointment. Perhaps as an assertion of her own independence, she was trying to write and had sought Louis's criticism of a story she had written. He found much to praise but pulled no punches: 'You have to learn first to write a good deal better. Do you understand me, when I say you are writing with gloves on now; you must learn to write with the quick of your fingers. If you persevere, you will learn, and well... And I say, you must not despond; however bad things are, you know they do come straight; when I think of the time I wished to kill myself, for instance, and see the pleasure I should have missed, I am humbled at my own precipitate folly.'⁴³

Louis already had half an idea that de Mattos, the unbeliever, was not giving his cousin the love she needed. Confirmation came in a letter from Bob, to which Louis replied: 'I am sorry to hear about Katharine. I did not twig it myself... Of course, one always knew De Mattos had no nerves, and was rather a braying ass; I never should have liked to marry him myself; and I'm damned sorry Katharine has, since it's come to that. It's awful depressing, like most things.'⁴⁴

Louis's own love affair with the Vicar's wife seemed likewise ill-starred. Perhaps in a bid to provoke a pang of jealousy, he had informed his Madonna back in September that he was planning a trip to Poland to see Sophie Garschine, but it now

seemed this would not come off. Meanwhile Louis continued to labour over his endlessly delayed two-part essay on John Knox. The first part, he admitted, was dry, learned and dull, and he could not write as he wished in the second part for fear of offending Mrs Grundy. By the time the much-mauled essay made it into print a year later, even the title, John Knox And His Relations With Women, would be bowdlerised to a meaningless John Knox And His Relations To Women.

In fact, as Louis knew from his perusal of the indecent Abbe de Brantome, Knox had a powerful sexual hold over women. There was, for example, his curious menage a trois with Elizabeth Bowes and her daughter Marjorie, whom Knox had married. Mrs Bowes simply left her husband in Yorkshire to live with Knox, who had become her confessor. In small print Louis was able to write about this, so long as he maintained moral balance in his conclusion: 'And now, looking back, it cannot be said that Knox's intercourse with women was quite of the highest sort. It is characteristic that we find him more alarmed for his own reputation than for the reputation of the women with whom he was familiar...'⁴⁵

Apart from the obligatory Edinburgh coughs and colds, Louis was now the healthiest he had been since the moral quagmire of November 1872 and the disease which had so traumatically put a stop to his sex life. He was now increasingly aware that he had normal drives and desires which his chaste love for Mrs Sitwell could not satisfy. In the words of an old Scots saying he was fond of quoting:

When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be;

*When the devil was well, the devil a monk was he.*⁴⁶

Frustration spilled over in a letter to Mrs Sitwell: 'O I do hate this damned life that I lead. Work - work - work; that's all right, it's amusing, but I want women and I want pleasure. John Knox had a better time of it than I, with his godly females all leaving their husbands to follow after him; I would God I were John Knox: I hate living like a hermit.'⁴⁷

He consoled himself by hanging a photograph of the Elgin Marbles, 'three deep-breasted women, living out all their days on remote hilltops', on the wall of his room up in the roof at Heriot Row. 'And think dear,' he wrote to Mrs Sitwell, 'if one could love a woman like that once, see her once grow pale with passion, and once wring

your lips out upon hers, would it not be a small thing to die?'⁴⁸

Perhaps still slightly resentful of Mrs Sitwell rejecting his advances that summer, Louis delighted in dropping hints that he was now going to the devil. With the onset of winter and the need to knuckle down to courses in Conveyancing, Scots Law and Constitutional Law, depression set in and with it a strong urge towards dissipation. In the company of Baxter or alone, he resumed his late-night wanderings through the less-salubrious quarters of the city.

One night, around 11pm, he came across a little boy of three, lost in the crowds spilling out of the taverns and crying out in terror for his 'Mammy'. After carrying Master Tommy Murphy past the brothels of Leith Walk to Tobago Street, where the child said he lived, Louis knocked on the door of every house to no avail. In the end he wrapped his coat around wee Tommy, gave him a currant scone from a late-night grocer, and carried him to the Police Office - whence his parents did not bother to collect him until ten next morning. This made a heart-warming story to tell Mrs Sitwell, but other nocturnal exploits were perhaps best kept to himself.⁴⁹

The temptations of the walk down from Queen Street beckoned once more. Now 'limed' for life, what did Louis have to lose? The disease was no longer infectious, so why not escape his worries in a fallen woman's arms? In late November, teetering on the brink of the abyss that had swallowed his friend Walter Ferrier, 24-year-old Louis wrote frankly to Mrs Sitwell for the first time in two weeks: 'It is strange to think of how you are just holding me by one hand out of the gulph... I have had a bad struggle with myself day by day and night by night. Opium and wine and everything that is death for soul and body, tempt me, one after another; and in bed at night, (I am always feverish and seedy and in a certain gloomy state of light-headedness at night) I often make up my mind that tomorrow I shall begin to descend to the mouth of the pit; but on the morrow, thank God, I manage to give myself a turn the other way, and keep as straight as can be expected.

'O my dear, my dear, don't let go my hand.'⁵⁰

If the object was to secure an invitation down south to save him from his wicked self, it worked. Three days later, Louis reported to Bob: 'This drunken city exerts its strange prerogative; and I do sometimes sacrifice to the god of the coloured bottles.

However, I am going to be good (I have not been very bad, you know, only I don't like the game at all); and in the meantime I've got enough coin scraped together to go down to London for three days...'⁵¹

In fact he was there for ten, returning on December 13 to find Scotland in a big freeze with heavy snowfalls blocking the railway line north of Berwick. His train was diverted and arrived three hours late in Edinburgh, where he was met by his father 'waiting for me in the snow, with a very long face'⁵².

Back at Heriot Row, Louis had much on his mind, not least the troubles of Katharine, whose marriage was already falling to pieces and who was now desperate for an income independent of de Mattos. To Mrs Sitwell Louis confided: 'I am sorely exercised about my poor cousin - the married girl - I have had a very distressing letter from her, praying for some immediate work that should remunerate - you can't tell (so she writes) you can't tell the difference it would make.'⁵³

Louis's solution was to get The Scotsman newspaper to commission him to write book reviews. He would then send the books down to Katharine, and would dress up what she wrote about them for publication. This complicated arrangement does not seem to have lasted long, but with essays, short stories and legal studies all competing for Louis's attention, not to mention his voluminous secret correspondence with Mrs Sitwell, he can hardly have welcomed the extra chore.

The trip to London had lifted his depression and enabled him to contain his frustration a little longer. The cold, chaste weather, with the thermometer outside the drawing-room window showing ten degrees of frost, helped keep him out of trouble as the ice lay thick on Duddingston Loch and he skated there each afternoon, in the company of the Jenkins, the Simp and his sister Eve, and other young ladies such as Flora Masson. Yet as before Louis remained a solitary minnow, darting in and out among the snow-covered reeds past nightfall, when 'the little booths that hucksters set up around the edge, were marked, each one by its little lamp. There were some fires too, and the light, and the shadows of the people who stood round them to warm themselves, made a strange pattern all round on the snow-covered ice. A few people with torches began to travel up and down the ice, a lit circle

travelling with them over the snow. A gigantic moon rose, meanwhile, over the trees and the kirk on the promontory, among perturbed and vacillating clouds.¹⁵⁴

That night of December 23 he sat and poured out his feelings to Mrs Sitwell: 'You do know that I love you dearly -; and think of what I would say to you if I were there; and what I should look like as I saw you again, out of the body with delight; and how childish I should be for very pleasure; and so, if you love me, this letter shall be to you as a son's Christmas kiss.'¹⁵⁵

Christmas was peaceful but marred by both his parents going down with influenza. Tom Stevenson's health and behaviour gave his son cause for concern: 'I suspect I have been right about my father, and that he is really not well. He has jaundice, but jaundice (so I understand) is a symptom only; what it means in my father's case, I fear to think. I fear some of the family ailments.'¹⁵⁶ Was the fate of poor Uncle Alan weighing on Louis's mind? 'My father is so really mad - I know no other word for it - that we have no pleasant time here; this morning he was abusing my mother to me, and before the servants. I never felt so utterly adrift in my life.'¹⁵⁷

The religious rift between father and son reopened, this time with financial overtones. Would it be right for Tom Stevenson, a good Christian, to leave the family wealth to an unbeliever? If he hoped financial inducements would persuade Louis to return to the fold, he was much mistaken: 'I promised my father... that I shall never use a farthing of his money unless I am a Christian.' His father maintained he held his wealth in trust for the views in which he believed, to which Louis replied that 'I should reckon any person a thief who would use another's money in such circumstances. And he said fervently: "And a damned thief too."¹⁵⁸

Louis kept his head down and pressed on with his law studies, in his own haphazard way. Baxter, now quite the respectable Writer to the Signet when not sloping off to the brothel, could be called on to help out. One wet January afternoon, Louis called at Mitchell & Baxter's offices in South Charlotte Street with a query. Baxter was out, so he left him a note: 'My dear Charles, I want you to see my answers to condescendences (and damned condescending condescendences they were), before they go. Now I have hung about in the rain for forty minutes, and will no longer hang about in the rain. Can you make it convenient to call up at the Spec

after five? *Je vous attendrai, jusqu'à cinq heures et demi.*⁵⁹

Even half-hearted studies seemed to exhaust Louis that winter and he had difficulty getting to sleep at night. After insufficient slumber he would be roused from his bed to breakfast, then out of the door for a half-hour walk to his first class at the university. Yet he knew he had life easy compared to the poor people he was always passing in the street, who inhabited a different world. To Mrs Sitwell he wrote: 'When I was going up this morning, with my legs weak and my back aching, through the gaunt stone streets in the driving morning rain, I was taken by the throat at the sight of a wee pale boy, not ten years old, white as chalk and pinched and sickly, and yet stepping out through the rain cheerily, and whistling as he went. That child was a man; and you know there is a great bit of the child about me, I am afraid.'⁶⁰

This showed more awareness of the reality of childhood than the sentimental silliness of the young man who 'wanted to kiss Dolly', or even the kind-hearted Louis who spent half the night trying to locate little Tommy Murphy's parents when, as the bemused Simp later pointed out, he should simply have handed him to the nearest policeman⁶¹. Yet Louis's love of children was genuine, if unusual in a young man of his age. He may also have had nagging doubts about his fertility being affected by the nameless disease, denying him the right to fatherhood. In February he wrote to Mrs Sitwell: 'O I have such a longing for children of my own; and yet I do not think I could bear it, if I had one. I fancy I must feel more like a woman than like a man about that. I sometimes hate the children I see on the street - you know what I mean by hate? - wish they were somewhere else, and not there to mock me; and sometimes again, I don't know how to go by them for the love of them: especially the very wee ones.'⁶²

Meanwhile Louis continued to give birth to more literary creations. An Autumn Effect had been posted off to the Portfolio and he was now working on a new story set in Renaissance Italy, a tale of love, religion, infidelity and intrigue into which he poured all his feelings about Mrs Sitwell. He called it *When The Devil Was Well*, the first complete story he would not destroy. The central female character is the beautiful Ippolita, who takes refuge in a convent from her estranged husband the

Duke Orsino. When Orsino is well, he consorts with the high-class prostitute Isotta. When he is sick, he becomes repentant and religious and calls Ippolita back to the palace. Following a miraculous recovery, he casts aside his wife and goes looking once more for Isotta – on the night of his death.

This probably had less to do with the Rev Albert Sitwell's unreasonable behaviour than with Louis's own sexual predicament - his frustration with his chaste Ippolita, Mrs Sitwell, and the difficulty of remaining faithful when away from her in Edinburgh, plunged into depression and tempted by the pavement Isottas who paraded their charms at the bottom of Princes Street. Significantly, as Louis was writing *When The Devil Was Well*, he was offered the part of Orsino in Fleeming Jenkin's forthcoming amateur production of *Twelfth Night*. He accepted, and insisted on using the name Orsino in his story, rejecting Colvin's suggestion that 'Count Orso' would be better⁶³.

The main character in the story, however, is the young artist Sanazarro, a poet and sculptor who discovers Ippolita in her convent while working on a sculpture there. She is persuaded to sit as his model, but in strictly chaperoned circumstances - not a hint of the Parisian grisette. Although she and Sanazarro fall in love, it is a chaste, understated affair. After Ippolita leaves Orsino for the second time, he is slain by Sanazarro, who skewers him thrice on his rapier with such force that the blade rings loud on the pavement beneath the body. Then, without a pang of guilt, Sanazarro calmly goes off into the country and chances upon Ippolita on the steps of a wayside chapel. As they are reunited, the story fades to grey.

Louis's platonic affair with Mrs Sitwell would have a similar long, drawn-out ending, a slow cooling by degrees over the next few years. She and Colvin would always have a place in his heart, but new romances and adventures and a new literary partnership lay ahead.

© Jeremy Hodges 2010

¹ RLS and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrecker*, Chapter II.

² Bob Stevenson to RLS, Paris, March 1874. MS Yale.

³ Bob Stevenson to RLS, Hotel de Russie, Paris, January 6, 1874. MS Yale.

⁴ RLS to his Mother, Hotel St Romain, Paris, April 6, 1874. Yale 257, MS Yale.

-
- ⁵ RLS to his Mother, Paris, early April, 1874. Yale 258, MS Yale.
- ⁶ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Paris, April 11?, 1874. Yale 260, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁷ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Paris, April 12?, 1874. Yale 260, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁸ Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Diary.
- ⁹ James Walter Ferrier to John Blackwood, Isle of Wight, January 6, 1876. Blackwood Papers, National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁰ Ursula Wyllie Roberts (1887-1975) (using the pen name Susan Miles), *Memoirs of a Soldier's Daughter*, online at www.wyllie.org.nz
- ¹¹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, June 4?, 1874. Yale 278, MS Yale.
- ¹² RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Swanston, June 3, 1874. Yale 276, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ¹³ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Swanston, June 4, 1874. Yale 276, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Swanston, June 6, 1874. Yale 276, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁶ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Swanston, June 9, 1874. Yale 279, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁷ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Swanston, June 10, 1874. Yale 279, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁸ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Hampstead, London, late June, 1874. Yale 286, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁹ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Hampstead, London, July 1?, 1874. Yale 288. MS National Library of Scotland.
- ²⁰ RLS to his Mother, Hampstead, London, July 3?, 1874. Yale 290, facsimile in British Library.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Yacht Heron, July 25, 1874. Yale 300, MS Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library, Honolulu.
- ²³ RLS to his Mother, Yacht Heron, Oban, July 1874. Yale 301, MS James S Copley Library, La Jolla, California.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ RLS to his Mother, Yacht Heron, off Glenelg, mid-August, 1874. Yale 304, MS Yale.
- ²⁷ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Yacht Heron, August 1874. Yale 303, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ²⁸ Evelyn Blantyre Simpson, *The Robert Louis Stevenson Originals*, Chap III.
- ²⁹ RLS to his Mother, quoted in *MIS Diary Notes*.
- ³⁰ RLS, *Sing Me a Song of a Lad that is Gone*, *Songs of Travel*, XLIV.
- ³¹ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Barmouth, September 16, 1874. Yale 314, MS Yale.
- ³² RLS to Bob Stevenson, Llandudno, September 1874. Yale 315, MS Yale.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Hampstead, London, October, 1874. Yale 318, MS Yale.
- ³⁵ RLS *An Autumn Effect*.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² RLS to his Mother, Euston Station, London, October 16, 1874. Yale 321, MS Yale.
- ⁴³ RLS to Katharine de Mattos, Heriot Row, October 1874. Yale 323, MS Yale.
- ⁴⁴ RLS to Bob Stevenson, Heriot Row, October 20, 1874. Yale 324, MS Yale.
- ⁴⁵ RLS, *John Knox And His Relations To Women*.
- ⁴⁶ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, January 9, 1875. Yale 347, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁴⁷ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 25, 1874. Yale 326, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁴⁸ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, November 2, 1874. Yale 330, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁴⁹ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, November 1, 1874. Yale 330, MS National Library of Scotland.

-
- ⁵⁰ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, November 28, 1874. Yale 336, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁵¹ RLS to Bob Stevenson, Heriot Row, December 1, 1874. Yale 337, transcript British Library.
- ⁵² RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, December 13, 1874. Yale 339, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁵³ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, December 18, 1874. Yale 341, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁵⁴ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, December 23, 1874. Yale 343, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, December 27, 1874. Yale 345, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁵⁷ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, December 29, 1874. Yale 346, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ RLS to Charles Baxter, Chambers, 11 South Charlotte Street, Edinburgh, mid-January, 1875. Yale 351, MS Yale.
- ⁶⁰ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, January 18?, 1875. Yale 356, text *Scribner's Magazine*, February 1899.
- ⁶¹ Evelyn Blantyre Simpson, *The Robert Louis Stevenson Originals*, Chapter III.
- ⁶² RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, February 9, 1875. Yale 364, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁶³ Sidney Colvin comment on manuscript of *When The Devil Was Well*, quoted in the Appendix of the Boston Bibliophile Society edition but wrongly attributed to Thomas Stevenson.