

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### Fairy Land No More

HE had been left alone in a hotel chalet in the Swiss Alps, where the high altitude and cold, crisp air of the fashionable resort for consumptives did not agree with his wife's constitution. By the December of 1881, the doctor had ordered Fanny away from Davos, taking young Sam with her 'as sick nurse'<sup>1</sup>. Until then, Sam had been quite happy playing military games with his step-father's toy soldiers, or printing lottery tickets for a charity bazaar on his miniature printing press, used also for the little books of poems illustrated with woodcuts on which he and Louis collaborated. Now such pleasures were denied the lonely invalid in the icy prison of his second winter in Switzerland.

Davos was a place full of invalids, lean and tanned by the Alpine sun so they all looked pictures of health, even when their lungs were in shreds and the Grim Reaper just around the corner. Only the previous winter, poor Bertie Sitwell had been brought to Davos by his mother - once Louis's 'Madonna' but now simply an old friend in need of consolation. At 18, Bertie arrived in the Alps close to death from consumption, only weeks after falling ill at school. For a while he seemed to rally, then went into a swift decline and was dead inside two months. Mrs Sitwell had lost her second son and faced a childless future. Louis was hopelessly bad at consolation, but after the initial pain she may have found some comfort in the poem he wrote and sent to her in young Bertie's memory:

*All that life contains of torture, toil, and treason,  
Shame, dishonour, death, to him were but a name.  
Here, a boy, he dwelt through all the singing season  
And ere the day of sorrow departed as he came.<sup>2</sup>*

The boy had died with the bloom of youth still on him. Louis, after winning his initial tussle with the disease in San Francisco - 'I was, at one time, worse than Bert - the difference was in constitution, I fear' - was now engaged in a long, drawn-out war with 'Bluidy Jack'. Dr Ruedi was pleased with his progress in keeping the

disease down to occasional blood-spitting, but what good was that if you could never leave this barren, white wasteland of snow? In the chalet behind the smart Hotel & Pension Buol, which consumed Tom Stevenson's money like a furnace, there was little to enjoy beyond petty pleasures such as cigarettes (frowned upon by Dr Ruedi) and Valtellina red wine, which Louis consumed daily by the litre as an approved tonic. When Fanny was there, he had delighted in exceeding his nicotine ration as a small act of rebellion. Each time the 'fat lady' or 'barrel of butter', as Louis fondly described his wife, broke her diet, he would insist on smoking an extra cigarette. But now he was alone, what was the point?

For intellectual stimulation, he could visit John Addington Symonds. The consumptive Symonds was an eminent critic, biographer and Renaissance historian who had made his home permanently in Davos. Having married as a vain attempt to cure his homosexuality, he now enjoyed an openly gay relationship with Buol the hotelier, supplemented on sorties to Venice by casual sex with gondoliers. Symonds would return with photographs of naked Venetian boys which he circulated among a select group of like-minded individuals, including Louis's other gay friend, Edmund Gosse.

While Louis was aware of the love that dared not speak its name – but which may have drawn Gosse, Symonds and possibly Sidney Colvin to him – there is no evidence that he felt it himself. His relationship with Symonds was intellectual, with long conversations on serious subjects. But Symonds was not much good at cheering him up. For that, Louis needed fun. Tobogganing might be dangerous, but when you were dying already, what did it matter? After dining alone, he would step out into the crisp, cold darkness...

*Then you push off; the toboggan fetches way; she begins to feel the hill, to glide, to swim, to gallop. In a breath you are out from under the pine trees, and a whole heavenful of stars reels and flashes overhead. Then comes a vicious effort; for by this time your wooden steed is speeding like the wind, and you are spinning round a corner, and the whole glittering valley and all the lights in all the great hotels lie for a moment at your feet; and the next you are racing once more in the shadow of the night with close-shut teeth and beating heart. Yet a little while and you will be landed on the highroad by the door of your own hotel. This, in an*

*atmosphere tingling with forty degrees of frost, in a night made luminous with stars and snow...<sup>3</sup>*

From such illicit thrills, Louis now returned to the warmth and loneliness of his chalet room. He poured himself a dram, lit a cigarette and sat down to write to Charles Baxter in Edinburgh, the city that now haunted him constantly in dreams as he plunged back into the bitter-sweet days of his youth. Outside in the biting cold, a clock somewhere in the town was striking twelve. The chimes at midnight. In desperation, Louis appealed to his old friend...

*Pray write to me something cheery. A little Edinburgh gossip, in heaven's name. Ah! What would I not give to steal this evening with you through the big, echoing college archway, and away south under the street lamps, and to dear Brash's, now defunct! But the old time is dead also; never, never to revive. It was a sad time too, but so gay and so hopeful, and we had such sport with all our low spirits, and all our distresses, that it looks like a lamplit, vicious fairy land behind me. O for ten Edinburgh minutes - sixpence between us, and the ever glorious Lothian Road, or dear mysterious Leith Walk! But here, a sheer hulk, lies poor Tom Bowling... and aspires – yes, C.B. with tears – after the past. See what comes of being left alone...*

*I swear it by the eternal sky*

*Johnson – nor Thomson – ne'er shall die!*

*Yet I fancy they are dead too; dead like Brash.<sup>4</sup>*

Thomas Brash the publican had been dead eight years. The days were long gone when Louis and Baxter would emerge from the university into Nicholson Street and bear away from the city centre to Brash's Clerk Street hostelry. They had always delighted in Brash's dour response to students and, in the coming weeks at Davos, a series of comic odes to the publican would help Louis maintain his sanity:

*In the foot-haunted city, in the night,*

*Among the alternate lamps, we went and came*

*Till, like a humorous thunderbolt, that name,*

*The hated name of Brash, assailed our sight.*

*We saw, we paused, we entered, seeking gin.*

*His wrath, like a huge breaker on the beach,*

*Broke instant forth. He on the counter beat  
In his infantile fury; and his feet  
Danced impotent wrath upon the floor within.  
Still as we fled, we heard his idiot screech.<sup>5</sup>*

The taverns and shebeens of Louis's youth now glittered bright in his memory. The Green Elephant, Baxter's favourite in the Lothian Road, was still there, but the shutters had gone up at the Twinkling Eye and the Gay Japanee, once so full of laughter as drink and women flowed free. In Davos now, Louis felt shut out from a past to which he could never go back.

HIS return from America in the summer of 1880 had been to a different Edinburgh, circumscribed by sickness and his new responsibilities as husband and step-father. No more would Louis roam the lamplit streets. He was scarcely allowed to venture beyond the threshold of 17 Heriot Row, where Fanny had become a firm favourite with his father. Now recovered from the public disgrace of having a divorcee as a daughter-in-law, Tom Stevenson found an unexpected ally in this determined little American woman who could wrap him round her little finger by giving him cheek and calling him 'Master Tommy'.

When Louis first met Fanny, he had thought she was a wild, Bohemian free spirit who held bourgeois values in contempt. Her Wild West adventures and skill with a revolver seemed quite at odds with Edinburgh respectability. Yet Fanny had seen enough wild times among the street fights and saloon brawls of Virginia City to last a lifetime. After all her first husband's sexual misdemeanours, she longed for Victorian respectability. She had no desire to dress like a frontierswoman, and much preferred it when Louis dressed respectably. Fanny had been stunned to discover her husband had a wardrobe of impeccably tailored clothes which he never wore. The silk underwear was so immaculate that she decided to wear it herself, beneath the beautiful dresses which Louis's mother insisted on giving her. Respectability was now a reality: 'The tramp days are over, and this poor boy is now, for the rest of his life to be dressed like a gentleman.'

For Louis, it felt strange returning to the house where only a few years ago the air

had been full of his lively dinner-party talk to impress the likes of Flora Masson. No more would he walk young ladies home and gaze up at them adoringly in the lamplight as they closed the front door. Like it or not, what he needed now was a nurse, to sponge him down when the fever ran hot and be ready with the ergotin bottle when Bluidy Jack struck. The ideal girl of his youth and the woman he had brought home from the States were two different creatures.

*In his father's chair a woman, habited like a nun, sat eating. As he appeared in the doorway, the nun rose, gave a low cry, and stood staring. She was a large woman, strong, calm, a little masculine, her features marked with courage and good sense; and as John blinked back at her, a faint resemblance dodged about his memory... 'I do believe you're Flora.' 'Of course I am,' replied she. And yet it is not Flora at all, thought John; Flora was slender; and timid, and of changing colour; and dewy-eyed; and had Flora such an Edinburgh accent?<sup>6</sup>*

Flora Masson, the girl Louis once wanted to marry, had become one of Florence Nightingale's pioneering nurses and would eventually serve as matron of the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford before returning to Edinburgh to write books as an elderly spinster. In Louis's short story, to contrast the past and present of his comic hero John Nicholson, he contrived a curious fictitious morphing of Flora the dewy-eyed virgin into Fanny, the other nurse who would care for him from now on. John and Louis, both newly returned from California, would henceforth settle down as married men, and accept that their wives knew best. Yet there was also a hint of bitterness and wry sarcasm in the way Louis concluded John's story.

*The last I saw of them, on a recent visit to the north, was at a dinner party... I had an opportunity to overhear Flora conversing with another married woman on the much canvassed matter of a husband's tobacco. 'Oh yes!' said she; 'I only allow Mr Nicholson four cigars a day. Three he smokes at fixed times - after a meal, you know, my dear; and the fourth he can take when he likes with any friend.' 'Bravo!' I thought to myself; 'this is the wife for my friend John!'<sup>7</sup>*

In future, there would be few opportunities for Louis to enjoy a cigar with old friends - illness and Fanny's watchful presence made sure of that. From now until the onset of his South Sea swan song, she would regard all visitors as a potential

source of infection who might put his life in jeopardy. Rumbustious friends who encouraged Louis to recall his riotous student days were discouraged. Baxter was going off to North Berwick and invited Louis to visit him there. He received a plaintive telegram in reply: 'I am not allowed to come. Can I not see you even for twenty minutes ere you go?'<sup>8</sup>

More sedate visitors such as Louis's childhood playmate Henrietta Balfour, now married to James Milne, were thanked for their wedding presents and invited to call at Heriot Row. Sir Walter Simpson and his sister Eve, whom Louis had once dreamed of marrying, would likewise be welcomed by the newlyweds. The Simp wished to buy the Stevensons a dog as a wedding present, while Eve was getting them a Manx cat - fortunately there was no Freudian psychology to interpret the significance of her giving Louis a creature with a stump instead of a tail. In the end the creature proved impossible to house train – just as Eve had found Louis impossible to domesticate as a respectable New Town gentleman – and was found another owner.

The one old friend who may not have been invited to Heriot Row was Walter Ferrier. There had been no redemption for the once-beautiful aesthete and ruined man of letters, so drunk and pitiful as he had wept over his friend's departure the previous year. For all his patience and sweet nature when sober, Ferrier remained firmly in the grip of the demon alcohol. There is no record of him meeting Fanny and Sam, although Louis may have managed to slip out to see the bloated, 30-year-old wreck who had once shared his literary dreams.

Louis's own health still gave cause for concern. His uncle, Dr George Balfour, insisted his only hope of survival was to winter in the Alps. After less than three weeks in Edinburgh, Louis, Fanny and Sam boarded the train for London, where they checked into the Grosvenor Hotel. Before going into icy exile, Louis was determined to live high for a few days with Bob, Henley, Colvin, Gosse and his other friends at the Savile. There a celebratory dinner was held, but such was the feverish excitement in Louis's eye that his friends wondered if it might not be a last supper. Fanny did her best to indulge Louis with his friends, but to his mother she complained: 'It is not good for my mind, or my body either, to sit smiling at Louis's

friends until I feel like a hypocritical Cheshire cat, talking stiff nothings with one and another in order to let Louis have a chance with the one he cares the most for, and all the time furtively watching the clock and thirsting for their blood because they stay so late.<sup>9</sup>

Before leaving London for Switzerland, Louis visited his Aunt Alan in Chelsea, where Bob was recovering after a bout of illness. Sydney de Mattos still occupied the house next door, which remained the nominal home of Katharine, Snoodie and Richard, although by now Katharine was wishing she had the courage to leave her husband for good. In a letter to his parents, Louis reported: 'Aunt Alan fat; Bob better; Katharine looking, I think, a little haggard.'<sup>10</sup>

Katharine and Fanny had met two years previously in London, both then estranged from their husbands and with aspirations to write. Fanny was certainly impressed and, shortly before the Stevensons descended on the Grosvenor, had declared in a letter to Bob: 'I long to see Katharine. I have always thought her one of the finest creatures going...'<sup>11</sup> There is no record of Katharine returning the compliment, although for several years she remained on good terms with the Stevensons for Louis's sake. Until the fiasco over Katharine's story that Fanny would misappropriate, there was no overt hostility between Louis's wife and his childhood sweetheart. But whereas Fanny had got rid of her troublesome first husband and returned from America with a new one, Katharine was still trapped with a man she hated, while Fanny had taken the cousin she loved.

For Katharine's true feelings about the slightly unstable American woman whom some of Louis's friends referred to as 'the bedlamite', one must look at her writing. In *The Old River House*, Dick Shadwell - Katharine's fictionalisation of Louis - has a personal tragedy. He is married to a woman who has gone insane, and must be kept out of the public gaze. At an afternoon party at the house in Chelsea, Dick overhears another guest talking about him:

*'It's rough on him, poor old chap,' a voice was saying, in friendly tones that were familiar to him. 'He hardly shows anywhere nowadays; makes "no moan", but takes it hard. His wife - beautiful woman she was - something wrong with the brain, you know.'* The listener felt rather than saw the gesture. *'Shadwell doesn't seek the consolations the gods - or others -*

*provide. Not that sort, though we shouldn't have guessed it once on a time, should we, eh?*  
*Poor old Dick!*'<sup>12</sup>

In these few words, Katharine would take revenge on the woman who stole her short story and took her cousin's love away. Louis might spend the rest of his life with the bedlamite, but in Katharine's imagination he would remain captivated by the fey young cousin to whom Jekyll and Hyde would always be dedicated. To the end of her days, her heart would belong to the two men so close in nature that they seemed like twin facets of the same personality, her brother Bob and her cousin Louis: 'No other men nor other women were ever quite to me what these two were and remained.'<sup>13</sup>

After squandering £46 of Tom Stevenson's money at the Grosvenor - an enormous sum for a 12-night stay - Louis, Fanny and Sam spent a fortnight travelling down to Davos, along with their new dog. Known initially as Wattie, after Sir Walter Simpson whose gift it was, this belligerent, psychotic Skye terrier underwent various name-changes through Woggs to Bogue, inspired by the brute's resistance to toilet-training. From a hotel in Troyes, Louis reported to Baxter: 'The dog has bogged more on this hostile soil, with preference for hostile carpets, than could be believed of a creature so inconsiderable in proportions.'<sup>14</sup> When not soiling carpets or biting humans, Bogue picked fights with other dogs. Yet something in the creature's anarchic nature struck a chord in Louis's heart - through all the petty restrictions that hemmed him in as an invalid, Bogue's gross behaviour shone like a beacon of hope.

Back in Edinburgh, the Simp felt it was time to regularise his own position. If respectable Edinburgh could accept Louis Stevenson marrying a divorcee, would it not accept Etta Mackay? Perhaps, in time, it might even accept the daughter she had borne him. The prospect of the Baronet preparing to make a decent woman of his mistress prompted Louis to enquire of Baxter: 'How goes the Bart's infatuation? seems d\_\_d odd, d\_\_d odd; where'n hell's he going to bring up? An old roué.'<sup>15</sup>

Baxter's friendship would become ever more precious as the years went by. Apart from displaying endless patience with Louis's chaotic finances - it was Baxter who sorted out the extravagant bill for the Grosvenor - he enjoyed the same kind of anarchy-within-matrimony that kept Louis sane. On the surface, Baxter was a sober,



upright citizen of Edinburgh, Writer to the Signet and staunch supporter of the Church of Scotland and the Freemasons. But in private, over a late-night dram in the quiet house when Gracie was in bed, he revelled in the scurrilous Tamson/Johnson correspondence through which Louis now sought various favours in return for not exposing alleged petty larceny with kirk finances: 'I wad be real blyth an' tak' it real kind o' ye, an' maybe we might arrange thon auld sair bit about the Session funds - *an' the Han' in the Plate*, eh, Johnson?'<sup>16</sup>

That winter in Davos was not productive for Louis. Under the influence of Symonds, he developed a bad case of scholastic seriousness and planned a history of the Highlands. While he did plenty of background reading, he wrote little. Louis had yet to realise his genius lay in fiction, and that highbrow essays were best left to the likes of Symonds or Colvin. The one thing that kept his name to the fore was *The Pavilion On The Links*, now serialised at last in the *Cornhill*, prompting one critic to exclaim: 'It is surprising to see the now well-known initials "R.L.S." appended to so breathless and powerful a tale.'<sup>17</sup>

In Davos the restless invalid relied on his young step-son to keep him in good spirits, playing with his tin soldiers or writing little books - "Not I, and Other Poems by R L Stevenson", price sixpence' - for Sam to print on his miniature press. Christmas was for once a happy time, with enough snow and sleighbells to keep the liveliest child happy. Young Sam was aghast, however, to discover his mother had not bought Louis a present, 'so F. and I had to go and buy things for ourselves and go through a representation of surprise when they were presented next morning. It gave us both quite a Santa Claus feeling on Xmas eve to see him so excited and hopeful; I enjoyed it hugely.'<sup>18</sup>

Sam would later be called upon to save Louis from a comic scandal in the hotel dining room. The intense and haggard wife of a dying clergyman had learned the curious Scottish writer was an unbeliever. At breakfast, she would always sit beside him and slip him little notes of the 'Jesus loves you' variety in a passionate attempt to save his soul. This was observed by a priggish young male hotel guest, who jumped to the wrong conclusions and cut Louis dead, speaking only to Fanny. Sam would recall: 'This led to an explanation in our bedroom. The young man was sent

for, the notes were shown him in the presence of my mother, I gave my childish evidence, and RLS was exonerated. But my principal recollection was the zest in the whole little drama - the unjust accusation, the conspicuous public affront borne in silence, the thumping vindication with its resultant apologies and expressions of regret, and finally the stinging little sermon on scandal and scandal mongers.<sup>19</sup>

For the next month, Sam was under orders to interpose himself between Louis and the clergyman's wife at every meal. Meanwhile, the snow lay thick on Davos and the January of 1881 was far too early to risk Scotland, where Sir Walter Simpson was now resolved to make an honest woman at last of Etta. On January 13, at the age of 37, the Simp wed his mistress quietly at the Manse in the village of Banchory Devenick near Aberdeen. Etta was now 24, but described as a spinster – if there had been an earlier Scotch marriage, it did not appear to count. Nor would it have been thought proper for their five-year-old daughter Flo to be present. The Simp's Bohemian brother Willie acted as a witness, but other members of the Simpson clan stayed away. Eve was not pleased to learn the brother she respected, and who had once regarded Louis as an unsuitable match for her, had spent six years fornicating and fathering a child while she was kept in virginal ignorance.

If the Simp thought doing the decent thing would put matters right with respectable Edinburgh, he was mistaken. The wedding kept New Town drawing-rooms fuelled with gossip for weeks. The new Lady Simpson was regarded as little better than a whore and was not received in polite society. When Louis in Davos learned of this, he immediately sent Simpson a message of congratulation and support, and remarked angrily to Baxter: 'The public of Edinburgh may be damned for me. They have behaved most beastly to the Simp, they and their lying forces. I feel awfully hot against poor Eve. Of course she did not and does not know, as I know, how he (the Simp) lay to for her sake; but it does seem a low and a rough return for even his ordinary and patent kindness.'<sup>20</sup>

Shaking the dirt of Edinburgh from their feet, Sir Walter and Lady Simpson embarked on a Continental honeymoon. They had hoped Louis and Fanny could join them by the Italian Lakes in March, but Louis's desperate thrill-seeking on a toboggan put paid to the plan. In a note to Baxter, he explained: 'Not been well; then

been better; then double-somersault, landing twice on crown of head, speed calculated forty-five miles an hour; consequent stiff neck and blasted depressing hemorrhage this morning.'<sup>21</sup>

Yet by April he had recovered and could leave Davos. Sam had already been sent off to be tutored by a clergyman in Yorkshire, and now Louis and Fanny headed north via Barbizon, staying at Siron's Inn for old time's sake. But the golden days of boating with Bob and long country rambles with the Simp were thing of the past: 'We'll walk the woods no more.'

By the time the Louis Stevensons reached London, they had got through vast sums of money. Baxter, Henley and Colvin all blamed it on Fanny being 'careless and thriftless'. In a letter to Baxter, Henley declared: 'Louis, I am afraid, is not morally so strong as he used to be. His illness and adventures together - and perhaps his marriage, I know not - seem, from what I can gather, to have a little sapped and weakened, and set up a process of degeneration in, his moral fibre. Thus, he has terrible fits of remorse and repentance; but he is lavish and thriftless all the same. You'll have, therefore, to deal with a sick child, who is the husband of a schoolgirl of forty.'<sup>22</sup>

Yet after seeing Louis and Fanny in London, Henley revised his judgment, telling Baxter: 'Be as kind and as nice to Mrs Louis as ever you can. I have seen much of her, and I have modified a good deal. I like her some, and I can't help pitying her much.'<sup>23</sup>

The day after arriving in Edinburgh, at what should have been an enjoyable dinner with Baxter at Heriot Row, Louis seemed frail and easily distressed. Unable to face his mother's social callers, he departed next day to a hotel in the small highland town of Pitlochry. In a few days he, Fanny and his mother removed to a nearby holiday cottage. There, against all the odds, Louis's creative juices began to flow.

At Kinnaird Cottage, he began to write a volume of horror stories, which he called 'crawlers'. Louis's London friends who regarded themselves as his literary mentors might denigrate his wife, but he did some of his best work under her encouragement and criticism. That summer the Stevensons spent their days writing stories and

would read them to each other at night. Fanny's best effort, which has not survived, was called *The Shadow On The Bed*. But the story that sent them both creeping up to bed with their spines still crawling was Louis's *Thrawn Janet*, a Scots masterpiece in which the devil appears as a black man and takes possession of a poor, half-crazed and crippled old crone who keeps house for a country minister.

The one notable sin in Janet McClour's life has been to have an illegitimate child by a dragoon, back in the days when she was young and buxom and roamed the hills with her skirts kilted high. For this she is spurned by the rest of the village, until by the time of *Thrawn Janet* she has aged into an auld limmer, or dried-up whore, who lifts her skirts only to do the minister's washing in the burn. One night, after hearing terrible noises in Janet's room, the minister goes in and finds 'Janet hangin' frae a nail beside the auld aik cabinet; her heid aye lay on her shoulder, her e'en were steekit, the tongue projected frae her mouth, an' her heels were twa feet clear abune the floor.'<sup>24</sup>

Was this simply a story to make the flesh creep - or was Louis also exorcising a woman from his past, a tall, strong girl who once roamed the Pentlands above Swanston and whose father was a blacksmith - a trade associated in folklore with the devil? A black man appears also in another story planned out by Louis at Kinnaird Cottage. At the climax of *The Merry Men*, Gordon Darnaway, a deeply religious man who has murdered a shipwrecked sailor on the island of Earraid and gone out of his wits with guilt, is pursued by a black man until they both run into the sea and are drowned. The murdered sailor had escaped from the wreck of the *Christ-Anna*. The last romantic female Louis would create, in his unfinished masterpiece *Weir of Hermiston*, is called Christina. In *The Merry Men*, was he laying to rest the wreck of some other old love affair? Darnaway's nephew Charles realises he is in love with his cousin Mary Ellen: 'All my days I have thought the world of you.'<sup>25</sup> Had Louis once felt the same way about his cousin Katharine, whose half-crazy father had died paralysed and racked with religious guilt?

Among other stories planned was *The Travelling Companion*. Louis would work on it for the next five years - then suddenly it was thrown in the fire. He would state that an editor had judged *The Travelling Companion* to be 'a work of genius, but

indecent'<sup>26</sup>. The truth was that when Louis destroyed work, it was often because Mrs Grundy would not like it. Fanny had promised his father she would never let Louis publish anything which she had not seen and approved. In commercial terms, her judgment was sound - if Louis wanted to be a best-selling author, he must not offend Victorian sensibilities. For this reason, more than one work of genius may have gone up in flames.

According to Colvin, *The Travelling Companion* was a story about a prostitute, set in Scotland and Northern Italy – possibly Mentone. Its subject matter would be enough to render it 'indecent', no matter how moral a tale Louis made it. He probably got the idea from a new work by a writer who was the talk of Paris towards the end of 1880, when Guy de Maupassant published what many regard as his best short story. In *Boule de Suif*, or 'Ball-of-Fat', Maupassant condemned decadent French society in all its hypocrisy. The story is set during the Franco-Prussian war, and portrays characters from all strata of society, travelling together in a large coach across war-torn France.

One of the travelling companions is a prostitute, Elizabeth Rousset, at first ostracised, then courted by the others when they find she has food. When the travellers stop overnight at an inn, they are detained by a German officer, who refuses to let them continue their journey until the prostitute, nicknamed 'Ball-of-Fat', has serviced his desires. For days she refuses, saying she would rather die than sleep with the enemy, until her hypocritical travelling companions urge her to do the very thing for which they condemn her. When eventually she submits to a long ordeal upstairs with the German, the others sit listening in the room below, making ribald remarks. On rejoining them in the coach, she finds herself ostracised once more:

*She felt herself drowned in the scorn of these honest scoundrels, who had first sacrificed her and then rejected her, like some improper or useless article. She thought of her great basket full of good things which they had greedily devoured, of her two chickens shining with jelly, of her pates, her pears, and the four bottles of Bordeaux; and her fury suddenly falling, as a cord drawn too tightly breaks, she felt ready to weep. She made terrible efforts to prevent it, making ugly faces, swallowing her sobs as children do, but the tears came and glistened in*

*the corners of her eyes...*<sup>27</sup>

On reading this, Louis can only have felt anger – and admiration for Maupassant's courage in attacking Grundyite hypocrisy. It was a decade since Louis likewise had vented his anger on the 'fine, religious, decent folk' of Edinburgh, crying: 'Give me the publican and harlot!' If this poetic outburst had been fuelled by anger and shame at being forced to give up Kate Drummond, was it the memory of that old affair that now drove him to write *The Travelling Companion*? The affair with Kate, if there was such a thing, had come to an end in Scotland shortly before Louis fled to Northern Italy to repair his shattered health in Mentone. Perhaps in this destroyed story he tried to make matters right in his imagination by taking the girl with him.

But somebody told Louis *The Travelling Companion* was indecent, and it was destroyed as a 'bitter, ugly daub'<sup>28</sup>. Maupassant was all very well, but Louis professed to dislike the French realism espoused by him and his mentors Zola and Flaubert. He read and admired their works, but pronounced them ugly and did not try to emulate them. For Louis, the squalid behaviour of the bourgeoisie was not a fit subject for literature – he yearned for high adventure and dark romance, and was about to weave it into the book that would make his name immortal.

*Treasure Island* was born in a stone cottage in the village of Braemar, near Queen Victoria's Highland residence Balmoral. It was a typical Scottish summer, with the Queen often glimpsed driving past in her carriage through the pouring rain. By the time the Stevensons arrived at the start of August, Louis was already in poor health. At Pitlochry, a severe cold had left him spitting blood and he spent most of the day in bed. In Braemar he suffered similar confinement, alleviated by visits from friends including Edmund Gosse, who fought his way through hail and driving rain to get there. In the mornings, Louis was not allowed to talk, for fear of haemorrhage, but after breakfast Gosse would sit and play chess with him on the coverlet until Louis rapped with his knuckles on the board to signal he'd had enough. Then writing materials would appear, Gosse would withdraw, and Louis would embark on his daily voyage to *Treasure Island*.

The local miller in Braemar, one John Silver, supplied the name<sup>29</sup>, but the figure that drove Louis's imagination was the one-legged man Henley, who remained

resolutely in London, resisting pleas to visit Braemar. Had the rumbustious Henley come stumping through the Highland rain, his exuberant oaths and raucous laughter would have destroyed the creative quiet of the cottage and rendered his own literary immortalisation impossible. Instead, the influential presence downstairs was Louis's father, whose tales of high adventure had calmed Louis in childhood after Cummy's foolishness had given him nightmares. Of all those to whom Louis read each day's new chapter after dinner, Tom Stevenson was the most enthusiastic, enumerating every item that should be discovered in Billy Bones's sea chest. Young Sam was simply the excuse for Louis trying his hand at a 'boys' book', although it was allegedly at Sam's request that *Treasure Island* contained no women (barring a brief appearance by Mrs Hawkins). The book might deal with death in its most bloodthirsty and violent forms but, to avoid upsetting Mr and Mrs Grundy, for whose offspring *Treasure Island* would be purchased, there could be no hint of sex or bad language. As Louis lamented in a letter to Henley: 'The trouble is to work it off without oaths. Buccaneers without oaths – bricks without straw. But youth and the fond parent have to be consulted.'<sup>30</sup>

Through the incessant Highland mist, another visitor came knocking on the cottage door. Alexander Japp was a literary talent scout who had taken issue with Louis about an essay he had written on Thoreau, and was now keen to meet him personally. Soon Japp was sitting by the cottage fire, listening to Louis read out early chapters of *The Sea Cook* or *Treasure Island*. Japp immediately saw this story could be sold to James Henderson, editor of *Young Folks* magazine, which devoured adventure stories and whose editor was always desperate for more copy.

Among Henderson's present contributors was a brother of Edward Viles, who wrote under the pseudonym 'Walter Villiers'. Like Walter Ferrier, this unfortunate Viles was in the grip of drink and on his final warning from the magazine. The blood-spitting Louis hardly seemed a much better long-term prospect, but Henderson offered good terms. Ferrier, meanwhile, remained silent, causing Louis to complain to Henley: 'J.W.F. knew my address; but did not choose to write to me.'<sup>31</sup>

For fifteen days, Louis churned out a chapter a day of *Treasure Island* - then stuck. On September 13, his uncle Dr George Balfour arrived at the cottage, took one

look at his nephew and telegraphed for a respirator. By September 21, Louis was on the train to Edinburgh en route to Davos once more, his face ludicrously obscured by a 'pig's snout' or 'ori-nasal respirator for the inhalation of pine wood oil'<sup>32</sup>. Yet he was able to spend a couple of weeks in London, staying at first with Aunt Alan and Bob in Chelsea. This was a curious experience, because Louis, Fanny and Bob all knew something Aunt Alan did not.

On August 27, Bob had married Louisa Purland. It was a Bohemian arrangement, whereby they spent weekends and the odd holiday together but otherwise lived like single people - Bob with his mother when not in France and Louisa in London with her elderly father, a retired dentist, whom she supported through her journalism. Apparently the Purlands disapproved strongly of Bob, who was not altogether cut out for marriage, and not a word of all this could be breathed to Aunt Alan, which made things awkward.

After a few days Louis moved out to a bolthole at the Hand and Spear pub in Weybridge, where he could go through the proofs of the first half of *Treasure Island*. Once serialisation started, he would be committed to finishing the book. Fortunately, on settling once more in Davos, he found the story came to him as easily as before, a chapter a day until it was finished - his first novel at last.

The second winter in Davos was more productive than the first, although much energy would still be wasted on Quixotic projects such as a plan to get Louis elected as Professor of Law and Constitutional History at Edinburgh University. Although Louis spent months soliciting testimonials from key figures, there was never the slightest hope of the university giving him the job.

Letters from friends continued to be a lifeline, although Baxter was going through a bad patch. From a visit to Braemar, he had returned to the seaside villa at North Berwick to find his little daughter Mary seriously ill, and on September 17 she died, a fortnight short of her second birthday. Louis's attempt at a letter of sympathy was wretchedly inadequate: 'There is nothing, in such cases, to be said; but that the child has not lost, and is done with suffering and dying...'<sup>33</sup> Fanny, however, had been in that dark place before: 'I have lost a child myself, and I have no word of consolation to offer... I thought once that I could not lose my child and live, such sorrow seemed



impossible to bear. But I had to bear it, and I lived...'<sup>34</sup>

Baxter soldiered on through tragedy, and continued to be Louis's 'flower of doers', always willing to sort out a problem. While in London, Louis had encouraged Katharine to make the break from her abusive husband. Separation would make it imperative to secure the best deal possible regarding the money held in trust as part of her marriage settlement. Baxter moved swiftly and Louis wrote at once to thank him: 'I cannot say how much obliged I am to you for this kindness about K. d. M. A firm hand is needed to keep her to it, but I believe a good solicitor would do the trick.'<sup>35</sup>

In the mountain air of Davos, Louis's health began slowly to improve under Dr Ruedi's supervision, but it would be well into the April of 1882 before he could leave Switzerland. In addition to the trouble with his lungs, he had been alarmed to discover he was losing all his hair. There are many possible causes but hair loss could be part of the long-term fallout from syphilis. Ruedi prescribed a remedy - 'I put filth on head at night, for I am bald, bald, bald, bald, bald, bald, bald'<sup>36</sup> - and eventually the hair grew back. Yet it was no longer the old light-brown but would henceforth remain lank and so dark it was almost black. Certainly the old enemy within was on Louis's mind, for on reading the *The Tempest* he formed the idea that Shakespeare had been gripped by syphilitic madness and wild flights of fancy as he wrote it. Laughingly he proposed to Henley that he would use 'internal evidence' to divide the Bard's plays into 'the Pre-Poxian and the Post-Poxian', adding: 'I am not joking. I do believe *Troilus* was written by a pockster; *Timon*, too; and, in the summer vein, *As You Like It*. As for the *Tempest* - Gawd.'<sup>37</sup>

Before leaving Davos, Louis fired off letters to his waiting relatives. First he wrote to Bob, whose marriage had at last been made public, promising: 'Of course, I shall paint your game in lively colours.'<sup>38</sup> True to his word, he wrote to his mother: 'Bob was only married last summer. She lives with her sister; she supports herself; she is quite a lady, very pretty, and I think a far stronger person than Bob... Aunt Alan was greatly pleased with Louisa; her heart was in her boots, she did not know what kind of a creature a madman like Bob would bring home, she told Fanny, and when the door opened she was overjoyed...'<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile Katharine had left her husband and was feeling the full weight of Grundyite censure from those who sided with de Mattos. In a short letter to his cousin, Louis could not resist joking: 'I hope you know that we both loathe, deprecate, detest and sicken at the thought of you. Never lose sight of that. Again assuring you of my uncontrollable disgust, Believe me, Yours abhorrently...'<sup>40</sup>

Louis still hoped to see Ferrier, who had taken his drink problem to London, where his health deteriorated further. Cirrhosis of the liver could lead to haemorrhages in the oesophagus, causing the sufferer to vomit blood. The previous November, Henley had told Louis: 'Of Ferrier I heard this morning... He replies that he has had a haemorrhage, and is very dicky. Poor old boy!'<sup>41</sup>

Louis and Fanny headed north to Edinburgh, where Tom Stevenson had been advised to take a break from work. While Fanny stayed with Louis's mother at Heriot Row, father and son went on a short trip to the Highlands for Louis to research an article on the Appin Murder. This was never written, but the material would go into Kidnapped. For once, Louis and his father had made their peace:

*It was the last of many journeys with my father. It was the first time I had travelled with him since we were at all on the footing of equality. The weather was very wild; we were confined whole days to the inn parlour... but the time sped with that delightful comrade. I have rarely been well received among strangers, never if they were womenfolk; and I recall how it pleased and amused me to be a sharer in my father's popularity, and in the public sitting rooms to be the centre of delighted groups of girls: the stormy and tender old man with the noble mouth and the great luminous eyes, had, almost to the end, so great a gift of pleasing.<sup>42</sup>*

Any friction over Louis's lack of Christian belief or past sexual indiscretions was long gone, although the memory of an old affair may still have lingered as The Travelling Companion continued to take shape in his imagination. His views on sex and prostitution were crystallised by a letter from a young admirer, Trevor Haddon, an 18-year-old art student troubled by carnal desires, who had sought his advice. From Heriot Row, Louis gave the benefit of his experience: 'Hang back from life while you are young. Shoulder no responsibilities. You do not know yet how far you can trust yourself - it will not be very far, or you are more fortunate than I am...

Don't make a boy and girl friendship that which it is not. The brothel is a more ennobling spot (in our state of society, which is not ideal) than any *amourette*... Whatever you do, see that you don't sacrifice a woman; that's where all imperfect loves conduct us. At the same time, if you can make it convenient to be chaste, for God's sake, avoid the primness of your virtue; hardness to a poor harlot is a far lower sin than the ugliest unchastity...<sup>143</sup>

From Edinburgh the Stevensons removed to Stobo Manse near Peebles in the Borders, but Louis's health deteriorated and he was packed off north to a cottage at Kingussie. It was the last he would see of the Highlands. Sidney Colvin came up to visit and it was quite like old times. Yet while Louis would always respect Colvin, he found his fastidious, prudish side amusing. Henley, after reading Colvin's 1881 monograph on Walter Savage Landor which glossed over the more lurid aspects of the poet's life, had speculated as to the kind of biography Colvin might write of RL Stevenson, to which Louis replied: 'As you say his life of R.L.S. will be a joke. "Chapter 2, Youth in Edinburgh" is like to be a masterpiece of the genteelly evasive... I seriously suggest that you should write a blackguard supplement...'<sup>144</sup>

At Kingussie Louis managed also to draft a lengthy short story, *The Treasure of Franchard*. It is the nearest he came to emulating Zola or Maupassant. While Flint's hoard in *Treasure Island* is simply squabbled over by murderous pirates and the gold-digging Doctor and Squire, the treasure of Franchard has a more subtle corrupting influence. Dr Henri Desprez has been saved from the dissipations of Paris by a financial disaster that forces him to live modestly but comfortably in the country at Grez-sur-Loing. His sensual, materialistic but good-natured wife Anastie cooks him gourmet meals, and they have an excellent cellar - but the couple are childless, until they adopt Jean-Marie, an orphan boy of around Jim Hawkins's age. When the boy and Desprez chance upon the treasure of Franchard in a cleft in the rock, the effect on the doctor is galvanic - he immediately begins to over-indulge himself and plan a return to the wild, gay life of Paris. Only the boy saves him, by secretly taking away the treasure and hiding it. Shortly afterwards, the decaying old house in which the Desprezes live is blown down in a storm. Anastasie escapes protesting in a flimsy nightdress, more worried about indecency than the prospect of

imminent death. As she and her husband face ruin, the boy reveals the whereabouts of the treasure...

This masterful satire on bourgeois complacency has something dark at the heart of it. Jean-Marie is not a normal, healthy boy like Jim Hawkins, but a creature more akin to Louis's own self-image - or even to Mr Hyde...

*He had a great arched skull, the forehead and the hands of a musician, and a pair of haunting eyes. It was not merely that these eyes were large, or steady, or the softest ruddy brown. There was a look in them, besides, which thrilled the Doctor, and made him half uneasy. He was sure he had seen such a look before, and yet he could not remember how or where. It was as if this boy, who was quite a stranger to him, had the eyes of an old friend or an old enemy... At last the Doctor hit on the solution at a leap. He remembered the look now. The little fellow, although he was as straight as a dart, had the eyes that go usually with a crooked back; he was not at all deformed, and yet a deformed person seemed to be looking at you from below his brows...<sup>45</sup>*

Victorian society was full of sickly children with large, misshapen heads and big, wondering eyes who seemed strangely old for their years – the result of congenital syphilis, the dark disease that must never be mentioned. Louis was born with a curiously-shaped skull and large, very wide-set eyes. Could Tom as well as Alan have strayed in his youth from the path of righteousness? In *Treasure Island*, Louis gave the names of his uncle and his father to two of the *Hispaniola*'s crew. Tom Morgan lives just long enough to reform and declare himself on the side of the righteous before Long John gets his knife into him, while poor Alan exists only as a ghastly, unseen presence:

*Far away out in the marsh there arose, all of a sudden, a sound like the cry of anger, then another on the back of it; and then one horrid, long-drawn scream...*

*Tom had leaped at the sound, like a horse at the spur, but Silver had not winked an eye. He stood where he was, resting lightly on his crutch, watching his companion like a snake about to spring...*

*'That?' returned Silver, smiling away, but warier than ever, his eye a mere pin-point in his big face, but gleaming like a crumb of glass. 'That? Oh, I reckon that'll be Alan.'*

*And at this point Tom flashed out like a hero.*

*'Alan!' he cried. 'Then rest his soul for a true seaman! And as for you, John Silver, long you've been a mate of mine, but you're mate of mine no more. If I die like a dog, I'll die in my dooty. You've killed Alan, have you? Kill me too, if you can. But I defies you.'*<sup>46</sup>

Is there something more than a boys' story in this - an attempt to exorcise a demon that had destroyed Louis's uncle, perhaps threatened his father and also lay dormant in himself? It is impossible to fathom Louis's imagination as he pored over the manuscript of *Treasure Island* in Braemar or Davos, or lay in the sun now at Kingussie. The sun went in behind a cloud, and his restless mind moved on. September had arrived and it was time to head south, but not to Davos. With strict medical instructions to find somewhere near pine forests and the coast, Louis was allowed to try wintering in a Mediterranean climate. Three summers of poor health had convinced him he could no longer live in his native Scotland. Now it seemed his second love, France, offered his last chance of happiness.

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<sup>1</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, December 15, 1881.

<sup>2</sup> RLS, To F.J.S. Davos, April 3, 1881, reprinted as In Memoriam F.A.S, Underwoods I, XXVII.

<sup>3</sup> RLS, *Alpine Diversions, Essays of Travel*.

<sup>4</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, December 15, 1881. Yale 885, MS Yale.

<sup>5</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, late March, 1882. Yale 933, MS Yale.

<sup>6</sup> RLS, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*, Chapter XIII.

<sup>7</sup> RLS, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*, Chapter IX.

<sup>8</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Heriot Row, September 18, 1880. Yale 722, MS Yale.

<sup>9</sup> Fanny Stevenson to Margaret Isabella Stevenson, quoted by her sister Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez in *The Life of Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson*, Chapter VI.

<sup>10</sup> RLS to his Parents, Savile Club, London, October 11, 1880. Yale 729, MS Yale.

<sup>11</sup> Fanny Stevenson to Bob Stevenson, Strathpeffer, September 13, 1880. Yale 721, MS Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>12</sup> Katharine de Mattos, as 'Theodor Hertz-Garten', *The Old River House*.

<sup>13</sup> Katharine de Mattos, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.

<sup>14</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Troyes, October 28, 1880. Yale 734, MS Yale.

<sup>15</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, c. December 9, 1880. Yale 754, MS Yale.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *The Examiner*, October 2, 1880.

<sup>18</sup> RLS to his Mother, Davos, December 26, 1880. Yale 766, MS Yale.

<sup>19</sup> Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS, Stevenson at Thirty-One*.

<sup>20</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, February 1881. Yale 774, MS Yale.

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- <sup>21</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, c. March 25, 1881. Yale 782, MS Yale.
- <sup>22</sup> WE Henley to Charles Baxter, London, May 18, 1881. Yale 801, MS Yale.
- <sup>23</sup> WE Henley to Charles Baxter, London, May 26, 1881. Yale 802, MS Yale.
- <sup>24</sup> RLS, Thrawn Janet.
- <sup>25</sup> RLS, The Merry Men, Chapter II.
- <sup>26</sup> RLS, A Chapter On Dreams.
- <sup>27</sup> Guy de Maupassant, Boule de Suif.
- <sup>28</sup> RLS to Sidney Colvin, Skerryvore, Bournemouth, June 28, 1886. Yale 1641, MS Yale.
- <sup>29</sup> GROS, 1881 Scotland Census shows John Silver, a 44-year-old meal miller, living with his wife Elizabeth, four children and a lodger called Robert Jolly at 10 Auchendryne, Braemar.
- <sup>30</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Braemar, August 24, 1881. Yale 843, MS Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
- <sup>31</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Braemar, September 1881. Yale 849, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>32</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Braemar, c. September 19, 1881. Yale 850, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>33</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Braemar or Edinburgh, late September 1881. Yale 852, MS Yale.
- <sup>34</sup> Fanny Stevenson to Charles Baxter, Braemar or Edinburgh, late September 1881. Yale 852, MS Yale.
- <sup>35</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Davos, October 19, 1881. Yale 857, MS Yale.
- <sup>36</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Davos, April 15, 1882. Yale 951, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>37</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Davos, April 18, 1882. Yale 956, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>38</sup> RLS to Bob Stevenson, Davos, April 16, 1882. Yale 953, MS Yale.
- <sup>39</sup> RLS to his Mother, Davos, April 16, 1882. Yale 954, MS Yale.
- <sup>40</sup> RLS to Katharine de Mattos, Davos, April 18, 1882. Yale 955, MS Yale.
- <sup>41</sup> WE Henley to RLS, London, mid/late November 1881. MS Yale.
- <sup>42</sup> RLS, Unfinished Note for Kidnapped, quoted by Mehew in page opposite Yale 959.
- <sup>43</sup> RLS to A Trevor Haddon, Heriot Row, Edinburgh, June 1882. Yale 961, MS Yale.
- <sup>44</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Pitlochry, c. July 29, 1881. Yale 833, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>45</sup> RLS, The Treasure of Franchard, Chapter I.
- <sup>46</sup> RLS, Treasure Island, Chapter XIV.