

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A Marriage In Extremis

IN early 1880, a curious sight would emerge each morning from 608 Bush Street in San Francisco. From a distance the ungainly figure might be mistaken for a scruffy schoolboy, but sported a drooping moustache of the kind used by gunslingers to mask their upper lip, in a town where the six-shooter often did the talking. Louis was no gunslinger but was aware of the danger on the streets, having seen 'a man standing watchfully at the street corner with a long Smith-and-Wesson glittering in his hand behind his back. Somebody had done something he should not, and was being looked for with a vengeance.' With a gun, the new lodger at 608 Bush Street was a danger only to himself. With a pen, he knew what he was doing - but first he needed sustenance.

The gentleman is R.L.S. ... He descends Powell, crosses Market, and descends in Sixth on a Branch of the original Pine Street Coffee House... he seats himself at a table covered with waxcloth; and a pampered menial, of high Dutch extraction and indeed as yet only partially extracted, lays before him a cup of coffee, a roll and a pat of butter... A while ago, and R.L.S. used to find the supply of butter insufficient; but he has now learned the art to exactitude, and butter and roll expire at the same moment. For this refecton, he pays 10 cents or five pence sterling (£0.0.5) Half an hour later, the inhabitants of Bush Street observe the same slender gentleman armed, like George Washington, with his little hatchet, splitting kindling and breaking coal for his fire. He does this quasi publicly upon the window sill... The reason is this: that the sill is a strong, supporting beam, and that blows of the same emphasis in other parts of the room might knock the entire shanty into hell. Thenceforth, for three to four hours, he is engaged darkly with an inkbottle... The younger child of his landlady remarks several times a day as this strange occupant enters or quits the house: 'Dere's de author.' Can it be that this bright-haired innocent has found the true clue to the mystery? The Being in question is, at least, poor enough to belong to that honourable craft...¹

Louis's poverty was largely self-inflicted and there was no need for him to be living in a rickety boarding house, no matter how kind his Irish landlady Mrs

Carson might be. Had he sent to New York for his mail, he would have discovered substantial money orders from his father, who could not understand how so many had gone astray. Yet Louis felt too fragile to face his parents' entreaties, and only in the direst emergency would he answer their telegrams - to send a reply cost \$7.60, enough to feed him for a fortnight. He now had to watch every cent because, in addition to himself, he had to feed Fanny, Nellie Vandegrift and occasionally Sammy when he came home from boarding school, plus five cats, two dogs and three horses. Sam Osbourne's promise to maintain his ex-wife until she remarried was worthless. Shortly after the divorce, he had lost his job at the law court, for reasons unspecified, and claimed to be penniless.

Yet poverty was relative. Lunch was cheaper than dinner, so after a morning's work Louis would take the 50 cent lunch at Donnadieu's restaurant in Bush Street, a 'copious meal' including coffee, brandy and half a bottle of wine: 'The wine is put down in a whole bottleful, and it is strange and painful to observe the greed with which the gentleman in question seeks to secure the last drop of his allotted half, and the scrupulousness with which he seeks to avoid taking the first drop of the other.'² Even when Louis, in extremis, reduced himself to the 25 cent lunch, sans brandy but still with wine, he was in no danger of starvation. Yet he remained painfully thin and, to anyone able to spot consumption, the flushed cheeks and bright eyes did not augur well.

Back in Scotland, the Stevensons were so mortified by their son's behaviour that Mr Stevenson was talking of leaving his beloved Edinburgh for England, where he would not be known. Now news of Louis's illness at the start of December had found its way into the Glasgow Herald, which reported he was 'lying seriously ill in the United States. The last accounts were very alarming'³. At once the Stevensons sent frantic telegrams to Monterey - Louis had not informed them of his move to San Francisco. After five days without a reply, they telegraphed the Monterey postmaster: 'Has Mr Stevenson got telegram.' The reply was 'Yes', but no word from Louis, whom they still believed to be in Monterey. Meanwhile 17 Heriot Row was besieged by concerned friends and relatives seeking news, while Mrs Stevenson had hysterics and her husband slipped into despair. Eventually, on January 12, they

received Louis's letter of December 22, saying he was recovering and had been given quinine for the after-effects of malaria. His mother confided to her diary: 'I want to go at once to California but George [her doctor brother] says Tom could not stand the journey.'⁴

Meanwhile, Louis laboured on by his little fire at *The Amateur Emigrant*, unaware that it was a fruitless task financially. Very little of what he wrote in America would bring him ready cash. *The Pavilion On The Links* would not be serialised until the autumn, although two essays - on the Japanese patriot Yoshida Torajiro and the American writer Henry Thoreau - appeared in the *Cornhill*. More of Louis's time was wasted on the *Vendetta*, and on dramatic ideas for Henley to work up into plays. Towards the end of January the mail brought a copy of *Deacon Brodie*, which Henley had persuaded Constable to print. But already Louis had told his friend bluntly: 'Plays, dear boy, are madness for me just now.'⁵

Back in London, his two literary mentors were convinced he was going to the dogs as a writer. Henley and Colvin mistrusted and disliked Fanny and felt the American escapade was an unmitigated disaster. Henley in particular scoffed at all things Californian and the frank brutality of his criticism was already becoming clouded by resentment of Fanny's influence over his friend, until at times it seemed like backstabbing. Sometimes Louis was cut to the quick but attempted to be diplomatic in his replies: 'If you despised the Donkey, dear boy, you should have told me so at the time, not reserved it for a sudden revelation just now when I am down in health, wealth and fortune. But I am glad you have said so at last.'⁶

Colvin was more circumspect, telling Baxter: 'What disturbs me most of all about him is that the works he has sent me from out there are not good... Having left his country and burdened himself with a divorced invalid, at the same time incurring the irrenconcilable (I suppose) displeasure of his father, here he is doing work which is quite below his mark...'⁷ Colvin's concern about Louis was shared by Henley, who wrote: 'Come back he must, and that soon. Married or unmarried - *Je m'en fiche*. If we can't have Louis without the rice, we must have him with it... He has gone too far to retract; he has acted and gushed and excited himself too nearly into the heroic spirit to be asked to forbear his point.'⁸

This put Louis's great love affair almost on a par with Burns 'battering himself into a warm affection' to justify a sexual liaison. Yet for all Henley and Colvin's cynical view of Fanny Osbourne, Louis seemed to have no doubts, replying indignantly to Colvin: 'By what you say about marriage, you leave me in wonder. I marry her certainly. What else should I do? Do I not want to have all rights to protect my darling? Perhaps you think there has been some scandal here; none.'⁹

By now Louis and Fanny were engaged and the only question in his mind was how long it would be before they could marry. If Henley and Colvin's attitudes seemed churlish, they did love Louis deeply. Colvin might fuss like an old woman and Henley could bitch and backbite but they both wished him happiness and believed in his genius. Henley was also going through an upsetting time, telling Louis: 'My wife had a dead baby yesterday; and we are very much disappointed. She is wonderfully well and sends you her love.'¹⁰

But Louis was preoccupied with his own problems, and wrote to Henley: 'Do not damp me about my work; *qu'elle soit bonne ou mauvaise*, it has to be done. You know the wolf is at the door, and I have been seriously ill.'¹¹ Copies of the privately printed Deacon Brodie having been distributed to friends, Louis received a letter from Bob: 'It is curious that where there are such excellent touches of character etc as in Lawson and Jean and Smith etc there shall exist M. Brodie... The curious thing is to see the dissipated head of a debauched, strange-speaking sentimental traveller of 30 peeping out from under Mary's hood.'¹²

That Louis could bring Jean Watt the Deacon's whore to life while failing with the nice girl Mary Brodie simply reflected his contrasting experiences with the girls of Leith Street and the young ladies of the New Town. For the same reason Bob, the casual consumer of two-franc *poules*, had been tongue-tied with Belle. He had still not got over her and confided to his cousin: 'I never think of Belle, or look at letters or anything, yet really I am always conscious of her and of course if she really took to me I would go for her. Only I would not seek after, as if a person does not love you, one should not risk being the active cause of stress. Fancy enduring the regrets of a person who had made a false step for a momentary gratification or a sudden sensual impulse. Fancy yourself bound to the casual whore because she had been

necessary for 5 minutes. But I would still less like to be the casual whore in the circumstances.'¹³

Bob's conscience was troubled by his Portuguese grisette, who needed something more substantial than casual sex with a feckless artist. Bob lamented: 'My Paris girl goes away very soon - 3 months - to Brazil. It is disgusting that I can never be with her and have never had a penny to spend on her. She is a brick but the most sensual party I ever met. She is very good and considerate. She does not excite me physically much, being a blonde Béb e more meant for affection than lust: which is awkward as she is a burning fiery furnace really.' Yet, for all his own troubles, Bob had only good wishes for his cousin: 'Love to Fanny, do marry quickly and come back. The most difficult must be over.'¹⁴

Yet more upheavals lay ahead. By the end of January, Fanny was well, and painting again - but Tom Stevenson, fearing the worst about Louis's involvement with the American woman, had finally run out of patience. On January 23, Louis informed Edmund Gosse: 'My people have cast me off... You know more than most people whether or not I loved my father; but he is now a stranger to me, and writes about how he has remarked my growing aversion to him all these years.'¹⁵ Yet even as Louis resigned himself to being disinherited, the diplomatic Colvin was urging his father to show patience and restraint. By January 26, having received a telegram from Louis, Tom Stevenson was writing to him: 'If the account given by Colvin is correct, I admit that the case is not what I supposed, and providing my wish is carried out, I shall be prepared to do my best in the matter. The wish is that there be as long a delay as possible.'¹⁶

It was perhaps inevitable that he should feel his son only loved him for his money. Louis felt a strong sense of guilt at still being dependent on his father, yet without funds from Heriot Row it is hard to see how he would have survived. Despite vague promises, no money was forthcoming from Sam Osbourne, leaving Louis to support Fanny's household at the cottage in East Oakland. Yet Fanny herself did try to earn money. The January issue of Lippincott's Magazine carried a feature article by 'F.M. Osbourne' entitled An Old Spanish Rodeo on Cattle Rancho in Carmel Valley. This was a semi-fictionalised account of being invited to see cattle

rounded-up on a ranch owned by Sargent Bros, stock rearers in Monterey County. The party appears to have included Fanny, her sister Nellie, Adulpho Sanchez, Belle, Joe Strong and young Sam - no mention of Louis, although he may have helped Fanny knock her article into shape. The supernatural tales she recalled Adulpho telling them as they passed the Mission would have been to his taste:

Once, a man walking near this place heard the cry of a new-born baby: he looked down and saw it lying at his feet. In pity he took it up in his arms; after a time it seemed to grow strangely heavy. He looked at it: it had become much larger, and an impish intelligence shone in its eyes. 'What is this?' cried the man, affrightened - 'See how my teeth are growing,' said the child. The man looked, and saw that teeth a couple of inches long were projecting from its mouth, which now spread from ear to ear. He dashed the creature to the earth and ran away. For a long time he could hear its piteous wailings behind him.¹⁷

And if Louis needed colourful portrayals of cowboy life to weave into his dime novel *A Vendetta In The West*, he need look no further than Fanny's account:

Sam and I made for the adobe house, which we just reached in time. A dismounted vaquero dodged in after us and fastened the door. The bull came charging after us, turned at the gate, and lashing out with his hind hoofs, sent it flying. The vaquero closed the shutters of the only window that had any sort of fastening.

'Keep back!' he cried: 'don't let the bull see you through the slats or he will be upon us.'

I crept cautiously back to my post of observation, and peeping between the slats, saw the bull's head only a couple of feet distant. His eyes were rolling in frenzy, and as he made charges at a couple of dogs that were worrying him, blood spouted in fountains from the stumps of his horns. His strong, nervous flanks were quivering with rage and agony. He lowered his head, pawed the earth and made a sudden plunge toward the open window in the next room...¹⁸

Despite the lurid prose and liberties with the truth, Fanny knew how to paint a vivid picture. Meanwhile Louis continued to lose his way up unprofitable blind alleys. His illness strengthened his sense that in coming to America he had left his old self behind, and prompted him to begin an autobiography to lay the past to rest:

I have the more interest in beginning these memoirs where and how I do, because I am living absolutely alone in San Francisco, and because from two years of anxiety and,

*according to the doctors, a touch of malaria, I may say I am altogether changed into another character. After weeks in this city, I know only a few neighbouring streets; I seem to be cured of all my adventurous whims and even of human curiosity; and am content to sit here by the fire and await the course of fortune...*¹⁹

Around the same time, Louis completed some verses he had begun on the train going west, described to Colvin as 'a beayootiful poem by me'.

Requiem

*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die
And I laid me down with a will...*

*This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

He had a good idea of what lay ahead, and semi-jokingly described to Colvin what he would like to have on his gravestone 'when I die of consumption'. Along with the famous Requiem, he included a brief prose epitaph summing up his philosophy of life and death:

*You, who pass this grave, put aside hatred; love kindness; be all services remembered in your heart and all offences pardoned; and as you go down among the living, let this be your question: Can I make some one happier this day before I lie down to sleep? Thus the dead man speaks to you from the dust: you will hear no more from him.*²⁰

Confronting the mortality of a child was another matter. In February, four-year-old Robbie Carson's daily refrain of 'Dere's de author' fell silent. He had pneumonia and was soon sinking fast. Louis insisted on sharing a round-the-clock bedside vigil with the Carsons, heedless of the risk to his own health. Between fits of coughing the

child's breath came rapidly, with curious grunting, wheezing sounds. The sweat stood out on Robbie's forehead and he could not keep food down, vomiting and groaning with the pain in his chest and belly. In delirium he threw off the bedclothes and lay near-naked, his breathing now so laboured that with each breath the muscles between the ribs and below the rib cage contracted violently, throwing the tiny skeleton into sharp relief in the flickering light of the lantern.

On the third day, the doctor shook his head, and Louis wrote to Colvin: 'My landlord and landlady's little four year old child is dying in the house; and O what he has suffered. It has really affected my health. O never, never any family for me!'²¹ It is hard to see how Louis could write like this if he were already a father, as would one day be claimed - unless some kind of barrier had grown up in his mind.

Against the odds, young Robbie survived, but despite this happy outcome there came a stern reproof from Tom Stevenson to his son: 'What an idiot you were to act as a nurse. When will you learn to take care of yourself?'²² By the end of February, Louis's own health was poor, although he continued to write - sometimes in his bed. Twice a week he would meet up with Fanny at a cheap restaurant in San Francisco. A month previously, on discovering Sam Osbourne's promises of money were a sham, they had been on the brink of getting married at once - but the letter from Louis's father urging a discreet delay caused them to think again, and it was now largely in deference to his wishes that the charade of chaste respectability needed to be maintained.

By March, Louis was racked by a cough and struggling to work on three novels at once. The Vendetta had been joined by Prince Otto, based on a play Louis wrote in his teens called Semiramis, and The Adventures of John Carson, inspired by the real life story of Robbie's father. At the same time Louis was dreaming up yet another play scenario for Henley, all to no avail.

The cough persisted and appeared to get worse. In a letter to his mother, Louis enquired about a respirator²³. More than six months after he had left Scotland, his parents remained in almost total ignorance of his circumstances. His mother complained: 'We cannot understand why you have never attended to our request for information as to your plans... We do not even know the names of any of your

friends in San Francisco...'²⁴

Louis's health was now giving cause for concern. The distance between Bush Street and East Oakland was too great for Fanny to come to him in an emergency, so he decamped to the Tubbs Hotel, a short walk from the Osbourne cottage. There his hollow cough continued, and each night found him drenched with sweat. Each day, when Fanny came to him, he seemed more wasted and cadaverous, yet the dark eyes burned ever brighter.

It began as a tickle in the chest. He was so sore from the coughing that he tried to suppress it, but the tickle grew stronger and more irritating. Perhaps one quick cough would clear it... There was a strange, tearing sensation and a warm rush of liquid bubbling up in his throat. He knew what it was before the salt taste reached his tongue and the blood gushed out between his lips and ran down his chin, staining the sweat-yellow sheets bright red. Arterial, yes, no doubt about it, he mused in calm contemplation of his death warrant. Bluidy Jack had left his calling card at last. Even as the blood welled up from the ruptured vessels in the rotten lung, his consciousness seemed curiously heightened and detached. Was this how death came? He felt no fear, just a surge of sadness welling up with the blood in his throat, for so much left unsaid and so much still undone. To give up the fight now would be like deserting the colours when so much was about to begin. And it would break his poor parents, the death of their only child, alone and far from home - darling Lou, breathing his last. Blood, mama, blood...

Then Fanny was bending over him, strong, capable arms turning him gently on his side as she shouted for the doctor in a voice that would stop a waggon train. She had lost one boy like this already, and she was damned if she would lose another. There seemed to be less blood now, and so long as Louis kept still and didn't struggle... he did seem remarkably calm...

Dr William Bamford shook his head. He couldn't work miracles. It seemed a clear case of galloping consumption and he would be very surprised if this poor young man were still alive a few weeks hence. Even with round-the-clock nursing there was virtually no chance... Yet Fanny would not give up. Respectability, Sam Osbourne, even the Vandegrifts and the Stevensons in Edinburgh could all go hang.

She was going to move Louis into her home right now, she was going to nurse him and care for him and watch him like a hawk - and she was going to get him well...

On the evening of March 31, Tom Stevenson was at a Provident dinner in Edinburgh when Charles Baxter sought him out, and steered him into a private corner to break the bad news. All Louis's father's rage slipped away, and he thought only of the child for whom he had once raked in the ash pit for a feeding bottle; whom he had watched with such pride as he climbed his first set of stairs; whom he had calmed with soothing words through a keyhole and comforted with tales of adventure when nightmares loomed large on stormy nights... What story could Tom Stevenson tell now from half a world away to banish the bloody horror that threatened his son?

He sent a telegram to California at once, and for three tense days the Stevensons awaited a reply. At last it came: 'Better.' Then a long wait for over a week before a more extravagant three-word bulletin: 'Health steadily improving.'²⁵ Yet for several days it had been touch and go. At the cottage in East Oakland, the sweating, skeletal figure lay on a camp bed downstairs, while Fanny maintained a round-the-clock vigil, sometimes catching an hour or two's sleep on a mattress nearby. She cleaned away blood, vomit, diarrhoea, sponged his brow and body while the fevered night sweats ran their course, and administered the remedies prescribed by Dr Bamford, who now believed there was a chance he could save his patient. Never again would Louis be without a medicine chest at hand, including a bottle of the powerful alkaloid ergotin to constrict the blood vessels and staunch the flow of a haemorrhage. Yet although from now on Louis would always be an invalid, never far from the shadow of death, he had been given more precious time for love and work - and if this meant living each day as if it were his last, what better philosophy was there?

His letter to Dr Bamford, accompanying a copy of *Travels With A Donkey*, spoke volumes: 'But for your skill and kindness, this would have been my last book, and now I am in hopes that it will be neither my last nor my best. You doctors have a serious responsibility. You recall a man from the gates of death, you give him health and strength once more to use or to abuse. I hope I shall feel your responsibility

added to my own, and seek in the future to make a better profit of the life you have renewed to me...'²⁶

Apart from Bamford's care and Fanny's love, the best medicine for Louis came in a telegram from Edinburgh. The last time he had been pulled back from death's door, as a child of seven, his father had founded a home for fallen women. This time, profound gratitude to God had combined in Tom Stevenson's heart with an awareness that now, as in childhood, Louis needed the protection a father could give. The telegram read simply: 'Count on 250 pounds annually.'

Never again would the wolf be at Louis's door. On £250 a year he could support a wife and step-son in comfort. Immediately the pressure to write for money was relieved. Louis wrote at once to Colvin, telling him there was no need to pay back the £400 in 'filthy lucre' which he had lent him to sort out the affair of the stolen prints, and urging him to send his honest criticism of *The Amateur Emigrant*: 'When I HAD to go on anyway, for dear life, I thought it a kind of pity and not much good to discourage me. Now all's changed. God only knows how much courage and suffering is buried in that MS. The second part was written in a circle of hell unknown to Dante; that of the penniless and dying author... Another week, the doctor said, and I should have been past salvation.'²⁷

Since the main thing wrong with the *Emigrant* was its unacceptable subject matter, nothing could make it seemly in the eyes of Tom Stevenson, who eventually paid for it to be withdrawn from publication. Louis could hardly gainsay his generous father's wishes and was wise to accept defeat with a smile. Fanny was accepted, all previous angry correspondence was to be treated as *non scripta* and the fatted calf awaited the prodigal whenever he was able to return home.

While his mother continued to worry about what Edinburgh society would say about the whole affair, Louis was enjoying the new pleasure of deathbed bravado in letters to his friends. The first, written barely a week after the haemorrhage, was to Walter Ferrier: 'I have been very nearly on a longer voyage than usual; I am fresh from giving Charon a quid instead of an obulus; but he, having accepted the payment, scorned me, and I had to make the best of my way backward through the mallow-wood, with nothing to show for this displacement but the fatigue of the

journey... I have, truly, been very sick... I shall be married early in May and then go to the mountains, a very withered bridegroom.¹²⁸

Yet Ferrier, in his own alcoholic circle of hell, was less than impressed, telling his sister Coggie: 'Louis Stevenson is a vile Yankee now, I suppose - he doesn't talk about being "ill", but says he "I have been very sick" - can you vomit?' Nor was Ferrier at all in sympathy with the 'withered bridegroom's' plans to marry: 'A cheerful prospect for his wife, ain't it? But I believe SHE takes fits like fun, so it's all right... It's a sad business I think and so does Henley, who seems indeed to think RLS has committed *felo de se*.¹²⁹

Author or not of his own destruction, Louis was determined to marry as soon as he had recovered - around five weeks, according to Bamford, followed by a period of convalescence in clear mountain air. Fanny and young Sam would go with him, along with Nellie Vandegrift. While the potential scandal of Louis's presence under the same roof as Fanny had led to tension with her sister, 23-year-old Nellie was soon won over by the seriousness of his illness and the charm and playful humour that re-emerged like the sun as he began to recover. Blonde, attractive and 16 years younger than Fanny, Nellie was just the tonic Louis needed and soon volunteered to be his amanuensis to save him the labour of writing the first chapters of his projected novel *Prince Otto*. Yet as soon as Louis was able to get up, he began the restless pacing up and down that characterised his conversation. Fanny and Nellie, fearful he might overstrain himself, positioned furniture strategically in a bid to keep him safely corralled.

Nellie could now see why her sister still wanted to marry a physical wreck with a life expectancy nobody would bet on. There was more life in Louis Stevenson than in many who enjoyed perfect health. Fanny's friend Dora Williams was likewise won over, although her husband Virgil, as a friend of Sam Osbourne's, was initially more reticent. On first meeting Louis, he was convinced a tramp had entered the room unasked. But the Stevenson charm soon worked its magic, and it was Virgil who suggested the mountains above Calistoga as a good place to recuperate.

They were married on a Wednesday, May 19, at the home of the Rev Dr William Scott in San Francisco. The previous day, Louis had left the cottage in East Oakland

and returned to spend his last night as a bachelor at Mrs Carson's in Bush Street. He had managed to find a Scottish Presbyterian minister, obtain a marriage licence and purchase two silver wedding rings. Bearing in mind his precarious health, he sent off the necessary fee to the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh to ensure Fanny would receive a small pension whenever he died. As he would explain later: 'It was not my bliss that I was interested in when I married; it was a sort of marriage *in extremis*; and if I am where I am, it is thanks to the care of that lady, who married me when I was a mere complication of cough and bones, much fitter for an emblem of mortality than a bridegroom.'³⁰

When Fanny shut the door of the cottage in East Oakland - the home of little Hervey before she took him away to Europe and his death; the home of Louis when he lay dying in America and she brought him back to life - she put aside the past. As Louis's wife, it would be wrong for her to return there. She took the ferry across San Francisco Bay to a new life with a new husband. Louis was waiting for her on the quayside, a painfully thin figure in his blue serge travelling suit, but the dark, wide-set eyes had never burned brighter.

They needed two witnesses, and called on the Williamses at short notice. Virgil was elsewhere, so Dora had to be 'Best Man and Bride's Maid', with Dr Scott's wife supplying the second signature. It was a short and simple ceremony at which, for the record, 40-year-old Fanny's status was entered as 'widow' and Louis's age was misstated as 30, when in fact he was still 29. With the knot tied, the new Mr and Mrs Stevenson took Mrs Williams out for lunch, before retiring to celebrate their nuptials at San Francisco's giant Palace Hotel. They stayed there for three days - counting on Tom Stevenson to pay the bill.

Then it was time to head for the mountains to give Louis's lungs a chance of recovery. By train and ferry the Stevensons, young Sam (now taken out of boarding school) and Nellie made their way up the Napa Valley with its infant vineyards to the end of the railway line at Calistoga, a new spa town and health resort at the foot of the mountains. They checked into the Springs Hotel, which had little cottages for guests, 'each with a verandah and a weedy palm before the door'³¹. For the next few days they were tourists, exploring the hot springs and geysers. Louis was delighted

to discover a real stagecoach, driven by a living legend in the shape of Clark Foss: 'Wonderful tales are current of his readiness and skill. One in particular, of how one of his horses fell at a ticklish passage of the road, and how Foss let slip the reins, and, driving over the fallen animal, arrived at the next stage with only three...'³²

One evening, on dropping in at Cheeseborough's hotel, Louis was asked if he would like to speak to Mr Foss. Since Foss was far away at his ranch outside Calistoga, Louis was intrigued. It was curious that he should first encounter the telephone in 'the very skirts of civilisation'³³, surrounded by Indians and grizzly bears, rather than in Edinburgh, the Athens of the North where one Alexander Graham Bell was born.

Life was sweet, but too expensive at the Springs Hotel. The Stevensons needed somewhere cheap for an extended stay and had learned of deserted silver-mining towns up in the mountains where they might take over an empty shack, rent-free. To a capable frontierswoman such as Fanny, this seemed a viable if Bohemian way of getting Louis well enough to return to Scotland. Nellie, who had no desire to shack up in a *menage a trois* plus young Sammy, returned to San Francisco to live with the Strongs until her marriage to Adulpho Sanchez in the autumn.

By now Louis had made the acquaintance of Mr Kelmar, a Russian Jew and general storekeeper who supplied the requirements of remote homesteads up in the hills. He recommended the old mining town of Silverado where he had once run a store, but whose population was now reduced to just one customer. Rufe Hanson had been consumptive but in the clear air of Silverado had recovered his health and now supported his family through hunting on the slopes of Mount Saint Helena. Mr Kelmar was taking his family out that way on a business trip and offered to drop the Stevensons at the Toll House hotel, just below Silverado, where the stage coaches stopped each day.

Not a lot of the old mining town was left: 'A piece of ground was levelled up, where Kelmar's store had been; and facing that we saw Rufe Hanson's house, still bearing on its front the legend Silverado Hotel. Not another sign of habitation. Silverado town had all been carted from the scene; one of the houses was now the schoolhouse far down the road; one was gone here, one there, but all were gone

away. It was now a sylvan solitude, and the silence was unbroken but by the great, vague voice of the wind. Some days before our visit, a grizzly bear had been sporting round the Hansons' chicken-house.'³⁴

Rufe was away hunting, but his buxom, blonde wife recalled there were still some derelict buildings by the mine tunnel itself. So the party pressed on, along a road through the forest to a red, rocky canyon blocked by a wall of spoil from the mine, dumped from a rusty iron chute that protruded like a gargoyle from the parapet. The only way up was by wooden ladders, but neither Louis's frailty nor Fanny's long skirts held them back. From the top they could see the head of the canyon, filled by a triangular platform with the mountain at the back and the front like the proscenium of a theatre, overlooking the country through which they had ascended. On the platform was a line of iron rails, a single truck, a blacksmith's forge - and an old, brown, wooden bunkhouse: 'Not a window-sash remained. The door of the lower room was smashed, and one panel hung in splinters... The window, sashless of course, was choked with the green and sweetly smelling foliage of a bay; and through a chink in the floor, a spray of poison-oak had shot up and was handsomely prospering in the interior...'³⁵

On June 9 they returned to convert this overgrown wreck into a comfortable summer camp. Everything from a small, wood-burning stove to a side of bacon and a packing case full of books had to be hauled up the ladders. Light cotton material tacked over the sashless windows kept out the worst of the breeze, and the holes in the roof did not matter so long as there was no rain. Eventually, late in the evening, Rufe Hanson came up with bundles of hay to put in the old miners' bunks, and the family of three, plus Chuchu the setter-spaniel cross, retired for the night.

The first few days were a struggle, but Fanny worked with ferocious energy while Louis fouted about: 'The first night I had a cramp and was quite worn out after it; the second day Fanny mashed her thumb while carpentering and had a nervous chill; the third day, she had another from sleeplessness...'³⁶ Mrs Hanson's idle brother, described by Louis as a Caliban, was after much coaxing persuaded to clear a proper pathway up to the mine. But after four days, disaster struck - Fanny and Sam both went down with diphtheria. There was no question now of Louis being

kept at a safe distance. He had to get them down the mountain to a doctor at Calistoga: 'I got them down in an open cart; the cases are slight, Sam's especially, but Fanny has been pretty sick and a little light-headed for forty-eight hours.'³⁷

Twelve days later they returned to Silverado, with Joe Strong to help out. They were late leaving Calistoga and by the time they began the climb into the mountains it was dark:

*The sky itself was of a ruddy, powerful, nameless, changing colour, dark and glossy like a serpent's back. The stars, by innumerable millions, struck boldly forth like lamps... The moon shone in at the eastern doors and windows, and over the lumber on the platform. The one tall pine beside the ledge was steeped in silver. Away up the canyon, a wild cat welcomed us with three discordant squalls. But once we had lit a candle, and began to view our improvements, homely in either sense, and count our stores, it was wonderful what a feeling of possession and permanence grew up in the hearts of the lords of Silverado.'*³⁸

Always an early riser, Louis would waken before the rest and light the stove, put on the water to boil and then stroll out onto the platform to greet the day. He made porridge and coffee, cut kindling for the next day's fire, then handed over the domestic chores to Fanny. Thereafter he was allowed to do nothing more than sunbathe and listen to the sound of the rattlesnakes, unaware of their deadly potential. He made ineffectual attempts to teach Euclid and Latin Grammar to Sam, while his 12-year-old step-son remained far more interested in a small printing press he had been given, on which he produced anything from letterheads to a schoolboy magazine. While Sam was still at Locust Grove boarding school near Sonoma, Louis had sent him a contribution with a covering letter: 'Dear Sir, If the enclosed should be found suitable for the pages of your esteemed periodical, you will oblige me by giving it an early insertion. My usual charges are at the rate of the price of half a doughnut per column...'³⁹

The relationship between Louis and Sam, or Lloyd as he became as a young man, would remain close. Those who portray Lloyd as a spoilt parasite, interested only in Louis's money, miss the point that he hero-worshipped his step-father, while Louis loved him like the son he never had - or never acknowledged, if one believes the rumours of an illegitimate child. In any case, Lloyd was no more a parasite on Louis

than Louis was on his parents, now bankrolling him substantially. While Louis lived rent-free at Silverado, his father sent out upwards of £200 via Charles Baxter - a sum more akin to £40,000 at the start of the 21st century. Some of this would be needed for the passage home to Scotland, but much probably went to repay debts incurred by Louis and Fanny around the time of the divorce. By now Louis had abandoned the facade of supporting himself and accepted he was hopelessly dependent on Heriot Row. This put an unfortunate financial complexion on his protestations of filial affection: 'Both Fanny and Sam have been very sick with diphtheria; and I was afraid to tell you... We had to get down from Silverado double quick; had I not been so quick, we might have all been dead... I have drawn another hundred...' After a request for 'fifty or sixty dollars more a head' to allow him and his family to break their impending rail journey across America, Louis declared: 'I am very homesick for once; I suppose from perversity, because it is for once really rather a difficult thing to get home, and also because I want to see both of you after so long an absence.' Even a plea for his parents to love his wife carried the rider that this would 'make me love both her and you the better'⁴⁰.

Just how ill was Louis at this stage? To his mother he complained of 'cramp in the stomach', another classic symptom of consumption. The descriptions he gave of his illness would suggest a textbook case of tuberculosis, yet subsequent diagnoses cast doubt. He could be seriously ill at the drop of a hat, then right as rain a few days later, and he himself described his case as a 'sport' or curious deviation from the normal run of the disease. Consumption is spread through people in close contact with the patient inhaling his germs, yet nobody in regular contact with Louis went down with it. Various other pulmonary ailments have been suggested, inconclusively. All that can be said with any degree of certainty is that he did suffer from serious chest haemorrhages. The most likely cause was *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, but this may have been part of a cocktail including residual elements of *Plasmodium falciparum*, or malaria, which may or may not have got rid of *Triponema pallidum* or the pox. If Louis did go on to develop cardiovascular syphilis, with an enlarged heart and weakened blood vessels, this might have led to further complications within his narrow chest.

Curiously Colvin, defending Louis posthumously from his critics, would write in all innocence: 'Anaemic! thin-blooded! the main physical fact about him, according to those of his doctors whom I have questioned, was that his heart was too big and its blood supply too full for his body. There was failure of nutrition, in the sense that he could never make flesh; there was weakness of the throat and lungs, weakness above all of the arteries, never of the heart itself.'⁴¹

For well over a month, Louis convalesced at Silverado. Around the middle of July, Fanny plucked up her courage and wrote for the first time to her new mother-in-law. Her letter reveals the fascinating combination of vanity, hypochondria, intelligence, perceptiveness and sound, practical wisdom that made up her contradictory character. Maggie Stevenson was left in no doubt that her son's wife was well out of the normal run of women, and the overall impression she received was favourable, despite a letter that confided at the start: 'A few days ago I was taken with bilious cholera, or some call it sporadic cholera; I suppose that I had made some mistake in diet, but the doctor says it was caused by the remnants of blood poisoning from the diphtheria.'⁴²

The Heriot Row Stevensons, as confirmed hypochondriacs, would have lapped all this up, but it is also clear that Fanny had swallowed a medical dictionary and could never be relied on to give an unexaggerated description of any illness. Yet her understanding of her husband and how to handle him could not fail to impress her new in-laws: 'Taking care of Louis is, as you must know, very like angling for sly trout; one must understand when to pay out the line, and exercise the greatest caution in drawing him in.'⁴³ And if Fanny showed herself susceptible to female vanity, at the same time she knew how to win people over by appearing vulnerable: 'Please remember that my photograph is flattering; unfortunately all photographs of me are; I can get no other. At the same time, in spite of the description, Louis thinks me, and to him I believe I am, the most beautiful creature in the world. It is because he loves me he thinks that, so I am very glad. I do so earnestly hope that you will like me...'⁴⁴

Louis had few illusions about his marriage, and realised that for the rest of his life he would remain physically dependent on Fanny. Yet despite her remarkable

strength and energy, mentally he would always be the tougher of the two and assumed the role of his wife's protector. The clarity with which he saw his own situation was revealed in a letter of reassurance to Fanny's brother Jacob: 'I fear she did not quite tell you the truth about my health... if I can keep well next winter I have every reason to hope the best; but on the other hand, I may very well never see next spring. In view of this, I am all the more anxious she should see my father and mother; they are well off, thank God; and even suppose that I die, Fanny will be better off than she had much chance of being otherwise.'⁴⁵

Less than a fortnight after writing this, Louis, Fanny and Sam were in a first-class railway carriage heading east, having made their farewells to Belle and Joe, Nellie and the Williamses. There had been talk of returning to California the following year, if Louis survived the winter, but Fanny would not see her daughter nor any of her American friends and family for more than seven years. The journey across America took just eight days to New York, where they boarded the City of Chester for a ten-day crossing of the Atlantic in first-class cabins.

The City of Chester docked in Liverpool early on Tuesday, August 17. Sidney Colvin had taken the night mail to meet his friend and his new family. He found Louis's parents in Liverpool also, although they had not been down to the quayside, where Colvin was the first to greet the returning prodigal, now smiling through the best set of dentures Tom Stevenson's money could buy. Louis was soon reunited with his parents, and Colvin was invited to stay on for lunch with 'old Mrs Stevenson (who looks the fresher of the two), young Mrs Stevenson, old Mr Stevenson, Mr Louis Stevenson, and Sam - who distinguished himself (it should be said in passing that he is not a bad boy) by devouring the most enormous luncheon that ever descended a mortal gullet.'⁴⁶

In a letter to Henley, Colvin reported on Louis's health: 'It was too soon to tell you how he really was; in the face looking better than I expected, and improved by his new teeth; but weak and easily fluttered, and so small you never saw, you could put your thumb and finger round his thigh... When I had him alone talking in the smoking room it was quite exactly like old times... but whether you or I will ever get reconciled to the little determined brown face and white teeth and grizzling (for

that's what it's up to) grizzling hair, which we are to see beside him in future - that is another matter.¹⁴⁷

© Jeremy Hodges 2010

¹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, San Francisco, January 18, 1880. Yale 678, MS Yale.

² Ibid.

³ Glasgow Herald, January 5, 1880.

⁴ Footnote to Yale 675, Thomas Stevenson to Sidney Colvin, January 8, 1880.

⁵ RLS to WE Henley, Monterey, December 11, 1879. Yale 670, Text Silverado Museum.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sidney Colvin to Charles Baxter, St Leonards, December 22, 1879. Yale 671, Text Yale.

⁸ WE Henley to Sidney Colvin, London, January 2, 1880. Yale 673, MS Yale.

⁹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, San Francisco, late January, 1880. Yale 685, MS Yale.

¹⁰ WE Henley to RLS, December, 1879. Footnote to Yale 677, RLS to WE Henley, January 12, 1880.

¹¹ RLS to WE Henley, January 12, 1880. Yale 677, MS National Library of Scotland.

¹² Bob Stevenson to RLS, n.d., MS Yale.

¹³ Bob Stevenson to RLS, January, 1880. MS Yale.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ RLS to Edmund Gosse, San Francisco, January 23, 1880. Yale 682, MS British Library.

¹⁶ Tom Stevenson to RLS, January 26, 1880. Footnote to Yale 683, RLS to Charles Baxter.

¹⁷ Fanny Osbourne, An Old Spanish Rodeo, Lippincott's Magazine, January 1880.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ RLS, *Memoirs of Himself*.

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

²¹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, San Francisco, mid-February, 1880. Yale 688, MS Yale.

²² Tom Stevenson to RLS, March 11, 1880. Footnote to Yale 688.

²³ See Margaret Isabella Stevenson to RLS, March 22, 1880, quoted in Yale Letters, page 70.

²⁴ Margaret Isabella Stevenson to RLS, March 22, 1880. Quoted in Yale Letters, Vol III, page 70.

²⁵ Telegrams quoted in Yale Letters Vol III, page 70.

²⁶ RLS to Dr William Bamford, East Oakland, April 1880. Yale 694, facsimile from American Art Association sale catalogue, New York, February 17, 1920.

²⁷ RLS to Sidney Colvin, mid-April, 1880. Yale 697, MS Yale.

²⁸ RLS to James Walter Ferrier, East Oakland, April 8, 1880. Yale 696, MS Yale.

²⁹ James Walter Ferrier to Coggie Ferrier, June 1, 1880. Footnote to Yale 696, MS The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

³⁰ RLS to PG Hamerton, Pitlochry, early July, 1881. Yale 821, Text Hamerton Memoir.

³¹ RLS, *The Silverado Squatters*, Calistoga.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ RLS, *The Silverado Squatters*, First Impressions of Silverado.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Calistoga, June 17, 1880. Yale 706, MS National Library of Scotland.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ RLS, *The Silverado Squatters*, A Starry Drive.

³⁹ RLS to Lloyd Osbourne, San Francisco, February 1880, Yale 691, MS Yale.

⁴⁰ RLS to his Parents, Calistoga, c. June 23, 1880. Yale 707, MS Yale.

⁴¹ Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places*, Robert Louis Stevenson.

⁴² Fanny Stevenson to Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Silverado, July 16, 1880. Yale 709, MS Yale.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ RLS to Jacob Vandegrift, San Francisco, late July, 1880. Yale 710, MS Yale.

⁴⁶ Sidney Colvin to WE Henley, August, 1880. Quoted in Yale Letters, Vol III, page 93.

⁴⁷ Ibid