

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### The Double Life

THE bundle of newspapers that landed with a thump on the doorstep at Skerryvore in July 1885 contained enough sexual dynamite to blow Mrs Grundy's world apart. For four days and 58,000 words, the Pall Mall Gazette under its campaigning editor W.T. Stead brought the full horrors of child prostitution into the polite drawing-rooms of stunned Victorian society. To have a suspicion that 'respectable' middle-class men were having furtive sex with young girls was one thing - to have proof laid in front of you beside the breakfast teacups quite another. If so many girls were being lured into this ghastly trade, who and where were all the men prepared to pay for acts so gross that no decent woman could imagine them - and with girls of 14, 13, 12, who hardly understood what they were forced to do? Mrs Grundy did her best to keep such uncomfortable thoughts from her head, but with Stead's lurid prose in front of her she could not help wondering for a moment where her husband went when he left the fireside and slipped out for an hour or two on 'business'.

*The examination [to confirm virginity] was very brief and completely satisfactory. But the youth, the complete innocence of the girl, extorted pity even from the hardened heart of the old abortionist. 'The poor little thing,' she exclaimed. 'She is so small, her pain will be extreme. I hope you will not be too cruel with her' - as if to lust when fully roused the very acme of agony on the part of the victim has not a fierce delight. To quiet the old lady the agent of the purchaser asked if she could supply anything to dull the pain. She produced a small phial of chloroform...*

*From the midwife's the innocent girl was taken to a house of ill fame, No. - , P - - - street, Regent-street, where, notwithstanding her extreme youth, she was admitted without question. She was taken up stairs, undressed, and put to bed, the woman who bought her putting her to sleep. She was rather restless, but under the influence of chloroform she soon went over. Then the woman withdrew. All was quiet and still. A few moments later the door opened, and the purchaser entered the bedroom. He closed and locked the door. There was a brief silence. And then there rose a wild and piteous cry - not a loud shriek, but a helpless,*

*startled scream like the bleat of a frightened lamb. And the child's voice was heard crying, in accents of terror, 'There's a man in the room! Take me home; oh, take me home!' And then all once more was still.*<sup>1</sup>

No wonder Mrs Grundy had hysterics, and Mr Grundy fidgeted uncomfortably in his armchair, as Stead stoked up his righteous wrath: 'Many a similar cry will be raised this very night in the brothels of London, unheeded by man, but not unheard by the pitying ear of Heaven...'<sup>2</sup>

Louis did not take the Pall Mall Gazette daily, but Henley sent him all four instalments of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*. The invalid at Skerryvore was too well-versed in the realities of prostitution to be shocked, and seemed more amused by the newspaper's self-righteous moralising. Thanking Henley for the bundle, he wrote: 'The P.M.G. is wonderful; the simplicity of C. Morley [the paper's manager] in person: a kind of impudent innocence, as of an inexperienced devil, or one of his own virgins. But maybe there is some truth in some of the things; and if there is, I suppose it's worth doing. Anyway, it's worth doing for the P.M.G.'<sup>3</sup>

The Maiden Tribute issues of the paper sold a million and a half copies, despite W.H. Smith, which held a monopoly of the news stalls, refusing to sell them because of their lurid and prurient content. Members of the Salvation Army joined newsboys to distribute copies, while the Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, was so fearful of riots on a national scale that he asked Stead to stop publication. But Stead had a political axe to grind. The Maiden Tribute had been boiling up since 1882, when attempts to get a new Act through Parliament to raise the age of consent from 12 to 14 were thwarted after around 250 public protests, largely got up by brothel keepers. In 1885, it seemed the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, passed three times by the Lords and thrown out twice by the Commons, would be frustrated once more by the prevarication of MPs. Unable to secure a guarantee from Harcourt that the Bill would be passed forthwith, Stead ordered that the presses keep running until they ran out of paper.<sup>4</sup>

Under massive public pressure, the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, raising the age of consent to 16 and placing severe penalties on white slavery, was passed on August 14, less than five weeks after Stead's articles appeared. The shockwaves

would continue for years afterwards, providing a large and receptive audience for Jekyll and Hyde six months later. Louis did not need to outline what Mr Hyde did on his nocturnal adventures around Soho - thanks to Stead, all Britain knew and was gripped by a prurient frisson of horror and hysteria.

None embodied the stop-it-I-like-it Victorian attitude to prostitution more perfectly than William Gladstone, who had been Prime Minister for six years while the scandal of white slavery and child prostitution came to a head without legislation to stop it. Gladstone's nocturnal exploits on the streets of London as the 'saviour' of fallen women were notorious and the talk of all the London clubs, including the Savile. In 1882, the Prime Minister had been accosted by a prostitute on the Duke of York's Steps by the Athenaeum, and the story became so widespread that Gladstone was forced to write a postcard of reassurance to a 'distressed woman' who had heard of this scandalous occurrence. In fact he merely took the streetwalkers home to Mrs Gladstone for a cup of tea and a square meal, before finding them places at 'penitentiaries' in the country. Yet he was not impervious to the girls' charms, hence his habit of scourging himself after every impure thought - and recording each instance with a little symbol of a whip in his diary. His conversations with one streetwalker, Elizabeth Collins, produced such turmoil in the Prime Ministerial breeches that his diary was littered with scourges afterwards.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1880, Gladstone had been MP for Midlothian, including Swanston. Louis's father, as a confirmed Tory, had long despised the man for his defection to the Liberals and could not forgive him for the national humiliation of the fall of Khartoum with the death of General Gordon. Louis also regarded Gladstone as a humbug, and in 1884 he had been mortified to learn he was a great lover of his work: 'It appears Gladstone talks all the time about Treasure Island; he would do better to attend to the imperial affairs of England.' Yet Louis's father had more in common with the Grand Old Man than he cared to admit. Like Gladstone, Tom Stevenson believed in saving fallen women and reforming them at the Edinburgh Magdalene Asylum. While Louis the moraliser might find some virtue in this, Louis the one-time frequenter of brothels had scant regard for 'old Glad-eye', as the girls on the street knew the man renowned for his double life - Prime Minister by day, accoster

of streetwalkers by night. In such lurid territory, the now respectably married Louis hesitated to cast the first stone.

AT the start of 1879, a few months before Gladstone's Midlothian campaign, Louis had moved out to Swanston to work with Henley on the precursor to *Jekyll & Hyde*. To allow uninterrupted work on the drama of the disreputable Deacon Brodie and his debauched double life in the dark closes of Edinburgh, the two young men had the house to themselves, with Cummy nearby to keep an eye on their domestic requirements. With Henley in fine form, the whisky bottle no doubt took a caning once the aspiring playwrights had finished each day's labour, reporting on their progress in a jubilant joint letter to Colvin. 'Act III is done and the last tableau is the most passionate thing in the English drama since the Elizabethans. It is, by God...' declared Louis, while Henley concurred: 'He's quite right, Colvin. It is an admirable thing. The third Act is what a good third Act should be. We neither of us slept last night after having completed it...'<sup>6</sup>

Under the heady influence of the Deacon's double life, the two would have had many memories to revisit. Louis had tales to tell of the night houses off Leith Street where he and Baxter once rubbed shoulders with the likes of Chantrelle, while Henley could boast of his London brothel exploits with Harry Nicholls. Now of course he had Anna, but Louis's emotional capital was invested more precariously in a married woman in California whom he might never see again. In despair he could be prone to dissipation, as his earlier confessions to Mrs Sitwell revealed, and he may have been tempted that dark January to seek solace in the arms of another woman.

Then at last, on returning to Heriot Row following Henley's departure, Louis received a coherent letter from Fanny. Although Sam Osbourne still refused to give her a divorce, he had agreed to a separation, taking a lease on lodgings for her and the children in the old Spanish Californian town of Monterey while he remained in San Francisco with his actress.

The little narrow-gauge train had brought Belle, Lloyd and their aunt Nellie to join Fanny in Monterey. They were greeted by Joe Strong, a leading light in the new

community of artists and Bohemians, who came galloping by on horseback and was delighted to recognise a pretty past acquaintance. He and Belle had enjoyed a chance encounter on the Oakland ferry when she was 14 and on a trip with a friend to the theatre. Later, to her surprise, she had found Joe Strong in the stalls beside her: 'I was wearing lemon-coloured kid gloves fastened with gold buttons like cuff links with little gold chains. The young man beside me artfully admired them and finally succeeded in removing one so that he could hold my hand under the programme...'<sup>7</sup>

Eventually Joe had gone off to Germany, and Belle to France, but now here he was again in Monterey, a lovely old town where the dirt of the main street was kicked up by galloping vaqueros and the jingle of spurs could still be heard on the wooden sidewalks. Fishing boats, whaling ships, rolling waves and the ruins of a Spanish castle offered painters an infinity of artistic opportunities, and in the Bohemian community of artists Fanny felt more at home than she had been since leaving Grez.

Under Joe's influence, Belle soon got over her passion for Frank O'Meara. Love was certainly in the warm, scented air of Monterey, for Nellie Vandegrift was soon falling for Joe's dark and handsome friend Adolpho Sanchez, a member of an aristocratic Spanish family who now owned a saloon. In the presence of such happiness, who knows what Fanny was feeling? If only her own handsome husband had proved true, she might have been content. As it was, she wrote intermittently to Louis - but for long months did not summon him to her side.

On February 5, Louis left Edinburgh for London, hoping in vain to persuade Britain's greatest actor/manager to stage Deacon Brodie: 'Continued chase of the wild Henry Irving. He flees before me like the night. He is silent as the Sphynx; but I persevere.'<sup>8</sup> During Louis's visits to London in the year of separation from Fanny, he would sometimes spend the whole night wandering through the city, carrying for protection the heavy walking stick which had so impressed young Sammy.

Colvin would recall how, early one morning, Louis 'presented himself to my astonished servant, on her opening the shutters, wearing a worn-out sleeved waistcoat over a black flannel shirt, and weary and dirty from a night's walking followed by a couple of hours' slumber in a garden outhouse he had found open. He had spent the night on the pad through the southern slums and suburbs, trying to

arouse the suspicions of one policeman after another till he should succeed in getting taken up as a rogue and vagabond and thereby gaining proof for his fixed belief that justice, at least in the hands of its subordinate officers, has one pair of scales for the ragged and another for the respectable. But one and all saw through him, and refused to take him seriously as a member of the criminal classes...'<sup>9</sup>

Yet on these nocturnal adventures, Louis could let his imagination roam. Who knows what he might encounter? Housebreakers moving stealthily in the shadows, like Deacon Brodie in search of rich pickings? Streetwalkers such as Elizabeth Collins, hoping for a late-night reveller? Maybe even old Glad-eye himself, on the pad after a late sitting at Westminster...

*Although a fog rolled over the city in the small hours, the early part of the night was cloudless, and the lane, which the maid's window overlooked, was brilliantly lit by the full moon. It seems she was romantically given, for she sat down upon her box, which stood immediately under the window... And as she so sat she became aware of an aged and beautiful gentleman with white hair, drawing near along the lane; and advancing to meet him, another and very small gentleman, to whom at first she paid less attention. When they had come within speech (which was just under the maid's eyes) the older man bowed and accosted the other with a very pretty manner of politeness... Presently her eye wandered to the other, and she was surprised to recognise in him a certain Mr. Hyde, who had once visited her master and for whom she had conceived a dislike. He had in his hand a heavy cane, with which he was trifling; but he answered never a word, and seemed to listen with an ill-contained impatience. And then all of a sudden he broke out in a great flame of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane, and carrying on (as the maid described it) like a madman. The old gentleman took a step back, with the air of one very much surprised and a trifle hurt; and at that Mr. Hyde broke out of all bounds and clubbed him to the earth. And next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows, under which the bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway...'<sup>10</sup>*

Who was the victim of this brutal killing, carried out with all the mindless rage once expended by Louis on his pious relative James Balfour, the 'bald-headed bummer' whose cranium he had felt a strong urge to batter against a wall? Hyde's

victim is described as a Member of Parliament, Sir Danvers Carew - and bears a marked resemblance to William Ewart Gladstone. Was Carew's unexplained late-night mission to save the fallen women with whom Hyde sought pleasure?

Yet Louis may have modelled Carew on a figure much closer to home. While he would hardly describe Gladstone as an 'aged and beautiful gentleman with white hair', he might have taken Carew's 'innocent and old-world kindness of disposition, yet with something high too, as of a well-founded self-content' from his own father. Much though the moral, spiritual Louis might love and respect Tom Stevenson, in his youth he may have raged inwardly at the stern Calvinist who stood between himself and his pleasures, robbing gaudy street girls of their allure by offering them redemption through laundry, needlework and Bible-reading at the Magdalene Asylum. Patricide might be unthinkable in real life, but in literature it could relieve a lot of resentment.

During the February 1879 trip to London, Louis dined with his publisher Kegan Paul, who would offer only £30 for *Travels With A Donkey*, plus a royalty of two shillings a copy after 700 copies. 'The foul Paul' had, however, commissioned a short story from Louis for the *New Quarterly*. Gloomy and depressed, he returned to Edinburgh, his love life at a loose end. To Henley he wrote: 'I am a poor creature, but try to work. Until I hear again, I am nowhere.'<sup>11</sup>

In his depression, Louis turned to moralising: 'What next? you will exclaim. I should not care to prophesy. Perhaps a work on Manures...'<sup>12</sup> He was aware that nothing excited his friends' mirth and derision more than the spectacle of St Louis pontificating on the rights and wrongs of human conduct. Was this not the Louis of the brothels and shebeens, the free Bohemian who had slept with another man's wife in Paris? On hearing of the proposed treatise, Henley enquired mischievously: 'What is your "work on morals"? Bob gave a horrid laugh when he came to that part of your letter.'<sup>13</sup>

*Lay Morals* was a curious rag-bag of reflections on Christianity, morality and the Grundyite, Mammon-serving code of conduct Louis saw all around him in Edinburgh. In it he sought also to exorcise the demon of lust that had plagued him since Fanny's departure whenever the Devil was well: 'Man is tormented by a very

imperious physical desire; it spoils his rest, it is not to be denied; doctors will tell you, not I, how it is a physical need like the want of food or slumber. In the satisfaction of this desire, as it first appears, the soul sparingly takes part; nay, it oft unsparingly regrets and disapproves the satisfaction. But let a man love a woman as far as he is capable of love; and for this random affection of the body there is substituted a steady determination, a consent of all his powers and faculties, which supersedes, adopts and commands all others... Life is no longer a tale of betrayals and regrets...'14

This may have been Louis's conscience bothering him. How many women had he betrayed, and how long was his catalogue of regrets? And with the woman he loved on the other side of the world, married to another man and showing no sign of seeking a divorce, had his 'steady determination' slipped? If he had resumed an old casual affair, there might now be consequences. In March, he wrote to Colvin: 'Just now I have a perplexity, and do you know I can tell it to none of my friends. There is a reason why none can hear it, except Baxter. To breathe it to another would be a mean thing... I cannot even tell it to you, nor to Henley, nor to Bob, nor to Ferrier, nor to F., nor to Madame. As for my good father, he would not understand me, and would cut the knot in a way that would draw it tighter on my conscience...'15

What was Colvin to make of this? If Louis could not discuss his perplexity with Fanny Osbourne – 'F' – it would seem it did not relate directly to her. Nor would it appear to have anything to do with Katharine's troubles, for Louis could always discuss these with her brother Bob. It might be difficult to confess something of a sexual nature to Mrs Sitwell – 'Madame' – but this would hardly rule out Henley or Ferrier. So what was Louis's 'perplexity' about?

Years after his death there would be unsubstantiated claims that in the January of 1879 he fathered a child, in which case the mother would have known by March that she was pregnant. If a girl's reputation had been compromised, Louis might consider it 'a mean thing' to discuss her pregnancy with his friends. He would only do so if she or her family were threatening to expose him, and he needed to consult his lawyer - Charles Baxter. Had his father found out, there was always the possibility that he might cut through the knot of the problem by simply insisting that Louis



must marry the girl and forget about any moral obligation to Fanny Osbourne. All this is hypothetical, but clearly Louis was deeply troubled about something and felt a strong urge to confess - but couldn't.

On returning from London with the commission for the New Quarterly, he had begun to write *The Story Of A Lie*. In it, Swanston and its surrounds appear thinly disguised as the 'Vale of Thyme' in rural England. There the young artist Dick Naseby lives with his father, now retired from trade and living as a country squire. Their strained relationship has much in common with the uneasy truce that prevailed in 1879 between Louis and Tom Stevenson, and in the story Louis poured out his own feelings of despair at being 'treated with daily want of comprehension and daily small injustices, through childhood and boyhood and manhood, until you despair of a hearing, until the thing rides you like a nightmare, until you almost hate the sight of the man you love, and who's your father after all... My father is the best man I know in all the world; he is worth a hundred of me, only he doesn't understand me, and he can't be made to.'<sup>16</sup>

Dick Naseby tells this to Esther Van Tromp, a creature fashioned from aspects of Fanny Osbourne, bearing her mother's first name and a rather less elegant Dutch surname than Vandegrift. Transported to Swanston and set down on the slopes of the Pentlands, perched on a stone and sketching, Esther is dressed in mourning black when Dick first sets eyes on her - as Fanny was, mourning for little Hervey, when Louis arrived in Grez.

Esther Van Tromp has a father every bit as careless for her welfare as James More Drummond is for Catriona's. Before turning up in the Vale of Thyme, the alcoholic artist Peter Van Tromp - who in other ways resembles Sam Bough - has not seen his daughter since she was a child of six. Esther, like Catriona, has been left to fend for herself and seems in need of a protector. Likewise the chivalrous Louis felt Fanny needed his protection, yet he was far from sure of her love. When Esther tells Dick 'I want you to take me away', there is no sign of affection and, when he seeks some assurance of her love, she responds brusquely: 'Let me go - don't touch me - what right have you to interfere? Who are you to touch me?'<sup>17</sup>

The whole feeling about the relationship is that Esther sees Dick as a solution to

her problems and does not love him. At the time Louis felt desperately insecure about Fanny's love and was sending her money, via her brother, without any assurance that she would leave her husband for him. No wonder Tom Stevenson was fearful of his son wrecking his life by pursuing a married woman in America. The response of Dick's father, on learning his son has taken Esther away in what looks like a failed elopement, is one of a pragmatic man who, despite his devout Christian views, will not scruple to cut the knot that threatens to ensnare his son. To Dick's old nurse Nance - or Cummy living next door to Swanston Cottage - Squire Naseby declares: 'I'll save him from this gang; God help him with the next! He has a taste for low company, and no natural affections to steady him.'<sup>18</sup>

To Dick himself, his father whispers: 'Come away, you need not be afraid of any consequences. I am a man of the world, Dick: and she can have no claim on you... we'll give them a good round figure, father and daughter, and there's an end.'<sup>19</sup> Did Tom Stevenson believe the American woman could be bought off in this fashion - or was Louis recalling how his father had perhaps tried to get him out of an earlier jam resulting from his taste for low company in Leith Street? Was the girl of the flower arabesque letter offered a 'good round figure' to get out of Louis's life? Had there been a real Kate Drummond, trampled under foot by a callous young Hyde who refused to answer her letters, and was her family paid off with a cheque bearing the signature of Henry Jekyll?

After three chapters, *The Story Of A Lie* became bogged down as Louis sank into depression and Lay Moralising. Now his health also began to deteriorate. That March, he wrote to Henley: 'I am a kind of pallid Christian martyr with a swelled testicle; languid, non-walking, a poorish sort.'<sup>20</sup> While there may have been a disreputable cause for this painful condition, which confined Louis to a sofa for more than a week, it may simply have been a symptom of liver disease. Curiously he would blame his poor health that spring on 'that rough time when letters did not come; I have never been right since'<sup>21</sup>. Colvin had reported in February that Louis had been 'all to pieces'<sup>22</sup>, which suggests the rough time with no news from California had been in January, before Fanny's reasonably coherent letter. Was it merely the mental anguish that Louis blamed for his illness, or did it spring from

some fleeting, physical diversion by which he had sought to escape from his unhappiness?

On his bed of pain, the self-styled Knight of the Sofa now set about turning his 24,000-word diary into *Travels With A Donkey*. Walter Ferrier, no stranger to the medical consequences of debauchery, was well enough to call on the invalid in Heriot Row and offer his sympathy and critical support. The start of April found Louis still sorely afflicted, but he wrote to Henley: 'I don't care, if I am ill or well; I'll be a good man, I'll grow better every day, or be damned. If people knew all that was in my mind, they would know me at least, and know besides that I have parted company with half of man and nearly half of myself.'<sup>23</sup>

With which half had Louis parted, and would Henley approve? Since the demise of London on April 5, the whisky-swilling piratical poet and journalist had been 'on his back entirely'<sup>24</sup> with money worries, and in the circumstances the maudlin, moralising St Louis was probably the half he'd rather throw away. Fighting his way up onto his one good foot and one wooden one, Henley plundered other publications for freelance commissions to feed himself and Anna, and humoured his friend's pious outpourings. Yet there were still flashes of the old Louis in response to Henley's criticism of his poetry: "'Clarify and strain", indeed? "Make it like Marvell", no less. I'll tell you what - you may go to the devil, that's what I think. "Be eloquent" is another of your pregnant suggestions. I cannot sufficiently thank you for that one...'<sup>25</sup>

When Louis was then dragged off by his parents to convalesce at Shandon Hydropathic on the Firth of Clyde, he had little to divert him but his writing. With Ferrier's help, he had been tinkering with a 'sensation novel' which he and Fanny had started together before her departure. All that survives is the title, *What Was On The Slate?* This suggests it may have been inspired by the dumb pimp who attempted to debauch the youth of Edinburgh with his indecent written proposals on a slate 'pressed into the service of corruption'<sup>26</sup>. The original story had been rather unpleasant but Louis had attempted to make it more saleable 'with a new and, on the whole, kindly denouement'<sup>27</sup>. Despite this, it would seem it remained more than Mrs Grundy could stomach and was destroyed.

As Louis continued to languish, he received another letter from Fanny - still positive but stopping short of the expected summons. In any case, the Knight of the Sofa was in no state to gallop to her aid, although he told Colvin: 'A man I am, and they can't crush the sport out of me, were Edinburgh ten times Edinburgh, and a time to spare.'<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile Louis and Ferrier amused themselves writing joke letters or blagues to Bob in London, and Louis also had a serious request to make to his cousin - could Aunt Alan put him up in Chelsea for a few weeks?

On May 8, Bob met him off the 7pm train at King's Cross and took him round to St Leonard's Terrace. Aunt Alan seemed pleased enough to see her nephew and give him the run of the house. Katharine may also have been back at St Leonard's Terrace, her escape to France abandoned. Before leaving Edinburgh, Louis had written to Bob about her: 'You will not answer me about Katharine? Why? *I want to know.*'<sup>29</sup>

The shockwaves from Katharine's split with de Mattos had been felt in Edinburgh, where her brother-in-law Alec Thomson had been spreading scandal. The son of a wealthy Leith wine merchant, Thomson was in no position to cast stones since his own six-year-old marriage to Bob and Katharine's sister Mab was likewise heading for the rocks. Perhaps it was because of this that he felt the need to bad-mouth his wife's sister, much to Louis's disgust: 'He behaved so piggish about Katharine; everybody is against K. and swallows his scandal and filth about her like milk, that I mean to show I won't... Damn me if ever he shakes my hand, in any spirit other than hostility.'<sup>30</sup>

At 16 St Leonard's Terrace, Bob ruled the roost when at home and held parties for his friends at the house, set a little back from the Thames behind the Royal Hospital and its red-coated Chelsea Pensioners. Katharine's imagination would remove this obstacle and transform her mother's home into *The Old River House*, a short story published eventually in the same volume as the *Red-litten Windows*. In it, she left a portrait of her mother as Susan Grey, presiding rather absently over the artistic gatherings assembled by her son Leonard - who was Bob rechristened with the name of the street and translated from painter to composer:

*Without being fussy or formal he was everywhere at once, looking after things and enjoying himself in a special manner besides... His eyes testified, just then, to an enjoyment,*

*almost to a delight, hardly warranted by the scene around him; yet it was in part explained when they turned often, as though instinctively, in the direction of a young and very beautiful girl...*<sup>31</sup>

Katharine may have met Belle Osbourne during her stay in London. Certainly she knew her beloved brother was still hopelessly in love with the flirtatious American girl whose charms as they went boating on the river at Grez he could never forget. In the story Belle's place is taken by the delectable but hard-hearted Gwendolen Brook, with whom Leonard and his friends go boating on the Thames. Katharine portrayed herself as Leonard's young sister Avis, a strange, shy girl who pours all her feelings into playing the piano and singing, unaware that she is being observed by her cousin. Just as Louis in *The Story Of A Lie* turned himself into Dick Naseby, so Katharine would portray him as the painter Dick Shadwell, fascinated by young Avis.

*Screened by the surrounding greenery, she sang on, evidently to herself alone, without thought of the other room and its occupants. What she sang was new to Shadwell. Above the noise of talk and talkers he only made out words here and there... Sprays of flame-coloured flowers, on a projecting bracket, cast a deep glow on the reflection of her white gown... He had looked on her as a mere accessory of her brother, as a being devoted to and inseparable from his larger, stronger vitality... Now, into the unknown melody there crept, or so he thought, an undercurrent of her own feeling, sweet and strange, broken-winged yet seeking to soar...*

*The dying flush had faded from the sky, the glamour had passed from the picture, leaving the girl and her reflection wan and white. He spoke her name softly over her shoulder, and with a slight start and a soft cry of "Oh, Dick, is it you?" she turned to him as though reluctantly. The spell broke, it was only little Avis Grey, all unidealised, who showed her face. What should he feel for her but the mildest, kindest affection?*<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps part of the reason Katharine could not settle with de Mattos was that she had never stopped loving Louis, while knowing fond affection was all she might expect in return. Certainly the Louis who stayed at St Leonard's Terrace in 1879 was preoccupied with events on the other side of the world – whence came messages from a woman sometimes lucid, sometimes on the brink of madness, to whom at any moment he might be summoned. His life was in suspense and he found it hard to

work. The Story of a Lie lay unfinished, and he had made no progress with an essay on Burns which Leslie Stephen had suggested for the Cornhill. He spent most of his days at the Savile Club, where he lunched and frittered away the afternoons spouting inspired nonsense. As his friend and fellow long-luncher Edmund Gosse observed, this period was 'about the idlest and silliest part of Louis's existence'. Often Gosse would take Louis home with him to Delamere Terrace in Little Venice, where his wife Nellie and small daughter Tessa were always happy to see the loquacious young Scotsman, clad untidily in a suit of blue sea-cloth, black shirt 'and a wisp of yellow carpet that did duty for a necktie'<sup>33</sup>.

At the start of June, Louis went out to Box Hill to visit George Meredith and receive the great man's congratulations for *Travels With A Donkey*, now published and selling well. Within a month Louis would report it had sold 450-60 copies in a week, whereas only 485 copies of the *Inland Voyage* had been disposed of altogether. His third book found favour with almost everyone, although his father did reprimand him for 'some three or four irreverent uses of the name of God which offend me and must offend many others'<sup>34</sup>.

Rather than return home to argue the point, Louis went off to France with Bob, who was resuming his summer quarters at Cernay-la-Ville. For both cousins Grez had too many painful memories, which could not be invoked by this pleasant old town, nestling beside an ancient abbey in a setting of forests, ponds, waterfalls and boulders that made it perfect for the painters who frequented Cernay's cafes and hostelries. Having taken rooms at the pension Leopold, the two Stevensons continued their artistic and literary pursuits, or passed the bottle around with their fellow Bohemians. Among them was the Scandinavian artist Peder Severin Kroyer, who sketched Bob and Louis separately. His picture of Bob, done on June 17, is of a kindly anarchist with a slightly sad cast of feature, a man who has known suffering. The portrait of Louis is the embodiment of charm. The bright intelligence, warmth and sensitivity captured by Kroyer that summer's day in 1879 outshine any photograph of Louis ever taken. It was also the last time he would be pictured as a young man in full health.

The weather at Cernay was disappointing: 'One day, we are dining in the arbour

with linen clothes; the next, cold, wind, rain - like Scotland upon my word; I could fancy myself at Swanston.<sup>'35</sup> Worse still, Louis's attempts to maintain a fund to answer any call to America was dealt a blow by a letter demanding income tax: 'I got so muddled over it, I could have died. They want next year's income; who knows what it may be? So I broke out all over the margin into explanatory and apologetic notes. It must be droll, I think, to others; it was death to me. I shall have to pay, I'm afraid.'<sup>36</sup> By the time he left France at the end of June, he was *in extremis* and told his mother: 'After a desperate struggle with the elements of every sort and principally money, I arrived last night in London the possessor of four shillings. You can count on me for Friday next absolutely; but unless some money is sent I shall probably have died of hunger in the meanwhile.'<sup>37</sup>

In fact Louis spent another fortnight in London before his return to Swanston, where at last he buckled down to writing *Some Aspects of Robert Burns* for Leslie Stephen. What fascinated him was Burns's affairs with women, and he had been at pains to compile 'a kind of chronological table of his various loves and lusts, and have been comparatively speechless ever since. I am sorry to say it, but there was something in him of the vulgar, bagmanlike, professional seducer'<sup>38</sup>. The essay was intended as a corrective to a new biography of Burns by John Campbell Shairp, whom Louis accused of being out of sympathy with the Bard, declaring: 'To write with authority about another man, we must have fellow-feeling and some common ground of experience with our subject.'<sup>39</sup>

He was fascinated by the idea of the 'three Robbies' - Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns. Louis had long claimed mystic kinship with the vicious, white-faced boy who died in the madhouse, but how much common ground did he share with Robert Burns the professional seducer, who ended up trapped in marriage to a woman he did not love? In places the essay reads less like a detached analysis of Burns's troubled amours and more like the guilty confessions of another young man who had been going down the same road.

The qualities of Burns that Louis found most interesting were those he found in himself. Burns loved to dress idiosyncratically, changed his name from Burness to Burns just as Lewis would become Louis, and was a great talker who was proud of

his skills as a conversationalist. In describing aspects of Burns's behaviour, Louis may also have explained his own. It may seem incredible that a young man who was as bashful and reticent as David Balfour when confronted by the daughters of respectable, New Town households such as Eve Simpson, Flora Masson, Leila Scot Skirving or Miss Mackenzie the judge's daughter, could enjoy an easy, physical intimacy with the girls of Leith Street, yet Louis found nothing odd about this. While Burns maintained an easy familiarity with farm servants and nurse maids, 'Ladies, on the other hand, surprised him; he was scarce commander of himself in their society; he was disqualified by his acquired nature as a Don Juan; and he, who had been so much at his ease with country lasses, treated the town dames to an extreme of deference.'<sup>40</sup>

But where did love fit into a heartless Don Juan's code of conduct? Time and again Louis described how Burns tried to convince himself he was in love, 'battering himself into a warm affection' to justify his sexual behaviour. In describing how Burns, spurned at first by Jean Armour, sought instant consolation in the arms of Mary Campbell, Louis did not condemn his conduct but reflected: 'It is perhaps one of the most touching things in human nature, as it is a commonplace of psychology, that when a man has just lost hope or confidence in one love, he is then most eager to find and lean upon another.'<sup>41</sup> In 1878-9, during the dark weeks when no letters came, did Louis lose hope or confidence in Fanny Osbourne and resort to the same remedy?

Like Louis, Burns had fallen for a married woman, Nancy McLehose, who like Fanny Osbourne had two children in tow and would eventually cross the Atlantic to return to an unfaithful husband. Unlike Louis, Burns did not follow the woman he had convinced himself he loved, because out of pity he had decided he must marry one of the girls he had got pregnant, Jean Armour. Louis summed up the poet's dilemma succinctly: 'It is the punishment of Don Juanism to create continually false positions - relations in life which are wrong in themselves, and which it is equally wrong to break or to perpetuate.'<sup>42</sup>

Could this be what Louis had meant when he worried about how his father might 'cut the knot in a way that would draw it tighter on my conscience'? Was this what



lay at the heart of the 'perplexity' which he could discuss only with his lawyer? Might there have been a risk that, as he lived from day to day at Swanston, expecting a call to cross the Atlantic, he might like Burns have been 'served with a writ IN MEDITATIONE FUGAE, on behalf of some Edinburgh fair one, probably of humble rank, who declared an intention of adding to his family'<sup>43</sup>? If claims made about Louis in the 1920s had any foundation, a girl he knew, who had met Henley, was now six months pregnant and had been obliged to quit her job.

When the pregnant Jean Armour was cast out by her family, 'Burns had her received and cared for in the house of a friend. For he remained to the last imperfect in his character of Don Juan, and lacked the sinister courage to desert his victim'<sup>44</sup>. While Louis might applaud Burns's tragic attempts to do the right thing by a woman he had wronged, he was quite clear about the tragic consequences of marrying a girl who could never be a soul mate or intellectual equal: 'One after another the lights of his life went out, and he fell from circle to circle to the dishonoured sickbed of the end.'<sup>45</sup> If such a girl did exist in Louis's life, it is hard to escape the conclusion that he did otherwise than Burns and, through 'sinister courage' or otherwise, deserted her in the summer of 1879.

There was a time when Burns, pursued for alimony by Jean Armour's family, laid plans to emigrate – 'now, he had "orders within three weeks at latest to repair aboard the NANCY, Captain Smith"; now his chest was already on the road to Greenock'<sup>46</sup> – yet with the death of Mary Campbell all these plans fell apart. Louis's own plans for a transatlantic crossing suffered no such setback. A telegram arrived at Swanston, bearing news from California. It has not survived, but would appear to have been a cry for help. The chivalrous knight within Louis responded at once by going down to a shipping agents in Edinburgh's Hanover Street and purchasing a one-way ticket from Greenock to New York. After months of waiting, he was a man of action at last.

His parents were expecting him to accompany them to another health spa at Gilsland in Cumbria. Instead, Louis met them at Waverley station and explained he had been called away to London on urgent business. The Stevensons, knowing how such trips could lead to their son's disappearance for months on end, cannot have been best pleased. Heriot Row was shut up in his parents' absence, but Baxter's

house lay empty and Louis had his friend's permission to spend the night there before catching the morning train to London. He had one important farewell to make in Edinburgh and sent word to Walter Ferrier that he was leaving - possibly forever. The news hit Ferrier hard. He could not face up to it sober, and made his way to Baxter's house via several hostelries. The distressed state in which he appeared on the doorstep hours later would haunt Louis forever.

'My God, you have had too much again,' he exclaimed.

'Yes,' said Ferrier meekly, devoid of the old, arrogant belligerence that marred his sweet nature when the drink transformed him into a beast.

And suddenly he burst into tears. The sight of this gifted wreck of a man, once possessed of such godlike beauty and talent, now reduced to a bloated, blubbing, whisky-sodden heap was more than Louis could bear and soon he, too, was weeping - weeping for their lost youth and the golden days when all had seemed possible before the shadows fell. In Baxter's drawing room they sat late, hugging each other for comfort as Ferrier swore to regain control of his life and slay the demon before it slew him. For the first and only time in their friendship, the two parted with kiss and the fervent hope that they would meet again in happier times<sup>47</sup>.

© Jeremy Hodges 2010

---

<sup>1</sup> The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon, July 6, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Skerryvore, Bournemouth, July 1885

<sup>4</sup> The WT Stead Resource Site at [www.attackingthedevil.co.uk](http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Philip Magnus, Gladstone: A Biography.

<sup>6</sup> RLS and WE Henley to Sidney Colvin, Swanston, mid-January, 1879. Yale 596, MS Yale.

<sup>7</sup> Isobel Field, This Life I've Loved.

<sup>8</sup> RLS to his Mother, Savile Club, London, c February 12, 1879. Yale 599A, Facsimile British Library.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney Colvin, Memories And Notes Of People And Places, 1852-1912, Robert Louis Stevenson.

<sup>10</sup> RLS, Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde, The Carew Murder Case.

<sup>11</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Edinburgh, early March, 1879. Yale 600, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>12</sup> RLS to Edmund Gosse, Swanston, March 8, 1879. Yale 601, Transcript Yale.

<sup>13</sup> WE Henley to RLS, March 1879. Footnote to Yale 603.

<sup>14</sup> RLS, Lay Morals, Chapter III.

<sup>15</sup> RLS to Sidney Colvin, Edinburgh, late March, 1879. Yale 605, MS Yale.

<sup>16</sup> RLS, The Story Of A Lie, Chapter IV.

<sup>17</sup> RLS, The Story Of A Lie, Chapter VII.

<sup>18</sup> RLS, The Story Of A Lie, Chapter VIII.

- 
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Heriot Row, c March 23, 1879. Yale 604, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>21</sup> RLS to Sidney Colvin, Edinburgh, April 1879. Yale 612, MS Yale.
- <sup>22</sup> Sidney Colvin to WE Henley, February 26, 1879. Footnote to Yale 600.
- <sup>23</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Edinburgh, early April 1879. Yale 607, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>24</sup> RLS to Sidney Colvin, Edinburgh, April 1879. Yale 612, MS Yale.
- <sup>25</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Heriot Row, early April, 1879. Yale 606, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>26</sup> RLS, Sketches, A Character.
- <sup>27</sup> RLS to WE Henley, Heriot Row, early April, 1879. Yale 606, MS National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>28</sup> RLS to Sidney Colvin, Edinburgh, April 1879, Yale 612, MS Yale.
- <sup>29</sup> RLS to Bob Stevenson, Edinburgh, April 1879. Yale 615, MS Silverado.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Katharine de Mattos, 'Theodor Hertz-Garten', The Old River House.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid
- <sup>33</sup> Edmund Gosse, Critical Kit-Kats, Robert Louis Stevenson.
- <sup>34</sup> Tom Stevenson to RLS, June 8, 1879. Footnote to Yale 625.
- <sup>35</sup> RLS to his Mother, Cernay-la-Ville, June 19, 1879. Yale 628, MS Yale.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> RLS to his Mother, Savile Club, London, late June/early July, 1879. Yale 631, MS Yale.
- <sup>38</sup> RLS to Edmund Gosse, Swanston, July 24, Yale 635, MS British Library.
- <sup>39</sup> RLS, Some Aspects Of Robert Burns.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> RLS to WE Henley, La Solitude, Hyeres, France, September 19, 1883. Yale 1140, MS National Library of Scotland.