

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Monterey

AT the end of the tracks after the final, 130-mile journey from San Francisco to Monterey, Louis stepped down from the train and asked the way to Alvarado Street. The Pacific breeze revived him as he took in his new surroundings, the Spanish-style adobe houses adorned with roses, and many with the jawbone of a whale as an archway for the front gate. They reminded him of the whale's jaw on the summit of the Law above North Berwick, from which as a child he had gazed out over the Firth of Forth. In Monterey they used whale's vertebrae for paving stones while old Spanish cannon, planted muzzle-down in the ground, served as hitching posts for the horses that were galloped furiously down Alvarado Street, the silver ornamentation on saddles and bridles proclaiming the status of each rider.

Louis sought directions to the large old house belonging to Senora Bonifacio and her sister, two elderly Spanish ladies who occupied the upper storey. Finding the downstairs door open, the young man who just three years ago had vaulted lightly through the window of Chevillon's Inn now stepped into Fanny Osbourne's lodgings with trepidation. Young Sammy was stunned by the change in 'Luly'.

Until that moment I had never thought of him as being in ill health. On the contrary, in vigour and vitality he had always seemed among the foremost of those young men at Grez... Now he looked ill, even to my childish gaze; the brilliancy of his eyes emphasised the thinness and pallor of his face. His clothes, no longer picturesque but merely shabby, hung loosely on his shrunken body; and there was about him an indescribable lessening of his alertness and self-confidence.¹

The boy who would become Louis's step-son would recall also 'the outcry of delight that greeted him; the incoherence, the laughter, the tears; the heart-swelling joy of reunion'², yet in the cold light of day Fanny must have felt some misgivings. How could such a wreck, such a shadow of a Louis, on his beam ends and likely to be disinherited by his parents, support her and her family if she cast her husband aside? There was a lot of hard thinking to do. Fanny had not, it turned out, taken any

step towards divorcing Sam Osbourne. Despite the hysterical telegram summoning Louis from the other side of the world, she still needed space to think. Her husband was about to visit Monterey, and she did not want a confrontation with Louis.

Belle might also be difficult. She had not forgiven her mother for breaking up her love affair with O'Meara, and found it hard to accept that Fanny was prepared to ditch respectability and the father Belle adored to pursue her own love affair with Louis. There was a strange knowingness about Belle these days which Fanny could not pin down. To complicate matters, Fanny's sister Nellie was still being serenaded by Adolpho Sanchez, proprietor of the Bohemian Saloon, with a view to matrimony. Nellie was head over heels in love, but Adolpho's family were devout Catholics and might balk at him marrying the sister of a scarlet woman, divorcing her husband to live with the lover who had shared her bed in Paris. As yet Fanny was introducing Louis simply as her 'literary friend' from Scotland.

Joe Strong found Louis cheap lodgings in Monterey. Strong was a likeable young man whose talent as a painter won him a steady stream of commissions in San Francisco. But he was also weak and feckless, and Fanny would probably have dealt with him as a prospective son-in-law in the same way as she had the indecisive O'Meara. So on August 9, three weeks before Louis's arrival, Strong and Belle had married secretly in Monterey. Sam Osbourne knew about it and had given his blessing, but Fanny had no idea Strong was now her son-in-law. For several weeks, she and Louis would be kept in the dark while Belle continued to live like a single woman with her mother and little brother.

Now Louis's presence in Monterey caused more problems. It was fortuitous that shortly after his arrival Nellie went down with diphtheria. Fanny at once begged Louis to leave town, to protect his health, while she nursed her sister. Little more than a week after arriving, he found himself departing with Joe Strong in a horse-drawn wagon, bound for the Carmel Valley where he planned to spend three weeks camping alone 'having had the itch and a broken heart'³. It is strange that Fanny would let him risk his health on such an expedition - certainly he did not seem at all sure of her commitment to marrying him.

The Carmel river flows down to the ocean at Monterey through a green valley

edged by hills the size of the Pentlands above Swanston. The pastures of the valley floor and lower slopes were grazed by cattle, sheep and goats. Through this pleasant ranch country, the one-time traveller with a donkey now ventured alone on horseback. Louis did not feel well. His head was swimming and the dark flannel shirt was soaked with more sweat than could be blamed on the light California sunshine. All around lay paradise, and he felt like hell. Surely he wasn't going to die here - a poor end to a life of unfulfilled promise. What had been his achievements? Two charming little travel books, a tourist guide to Edinburgh, some stylish but insubstantial essays, one or two good short stories - and a love affair with a married woman who could not make her mind up.

Louis put parched lips to the water bottle. He needed to refill it, and to camp for the night. The San Clemente Creek ran nearby, and a tree beside it offered shade. Like a bundle of rags he slid down from the saddle, stumbled a few steps and collapsed with his back against the trunk. For two days and nights he would lie there, occasionally dragging himself down to the stream to refill the bottle and water the horse. Somehow he got a small fire of sticks alight and made coffee. Weak as a kitten but stark awake, he lay all night listening to the clink of goat bells and the singing of tree frogs, until he thought it would drive him mad...

Back in Monterey, young Sammy had been looking forward to his father's visit. Sam Osbourne was the kind of father a boy could hero-worship - tall and fine-looking with a pointed, golden beard. Like Louis, Sam had charm in abundance and a winning, lovable nature. It was this charm that made him such a potent lady-killer, but Sammy knew nothing of this. He merely sensed that on this visit his father was too distracted to give him the attention he longed for.

*His handsome, smiling face was just a little clouded, and there was a curious new intonation in his voice during his long closeted talks with my mother... reproaches on her side and a most affecting explanation on his of his financial straits at the time of my little brother's death - I suddenly heard my mother say, with an intensity that went through me like a knife: "Oh, Sam, forgive me!"*⁴

By the San Clemente Creek, a thin whisp of smoke and the horse grazing by the tree caught the bear hunter's attention. As he drew near, the sound of his footsteps

caused the bundle of rags to stir. 'Captain' Anson Smith, a fine old frontiersman of 72, could see the young man was in a bad way. Laying down his gun, he placed a hand on Louis's burning forehead. He was real sick.⁵ Smith had seen men die with the fever. He had to get this one back to the ranch house right away.

Smith's angora goat-farming partner Jonathan Wright helped get Louis into bed. It was no struggle, for he weighed no more than a child. For several days and nights, Smith, Wright and the ranch hand Tom the Indian kept constant vigil, sponging the sick man with cold water to keep his temperature below the fatal point of no return, as Cummy had done all those years ago. And then the fever broke, and Louis sank into peaceful slumber.

In convalescence, he repaid the men's kindness by teaching Wright's two daughters to read. The illness had left him too weak to stand, but he could write as he lay near-naked in an upstairs room, with flies crawling over his body and the clink of a thousand goat bells in his ears.⁶ In a letter to Baxter, he sorted out his finances – £50 was on its way. On his hopes of marrying Fanny, he could only write: 'Whether anything will occur is another matter. Things are damned complicated, and I have had the art to complicate 'em more since my arrival.'⁷

His own close call with death made him solicitous about the health of Walter Ferrier, who seemed to be losing his battle with the drink. He enquired also after Baxter's mother, who was seriously ill. But above all, what Louis wanted was news of his father: 'Since I have gone away I have found out for the first time how much I love that man: he is dearer to me than all except F.'⁸

At the smart town house in Heriot Row, Tom Stevenson had been out of his mind with worry since receiving Louis's letter from Greenock. As his son lay recovering from the fever, Mr Stevenson still believed he could be induced to return home immediately, and had sent £20 for a first-class ticket. The Stevensons' fraught correspondence from this period has all been destroyed, but it is clear their concern was aggravated by a fear that their son's disgraceful behaviour would render them outcasts from Edinburgh society. What was his mother to tell social callers when they asked after Louis? 'He's gone to California to steal another man's wife'? The thought that Lou might even now be sharing a bed with that American woman was

enough to send any Victorian middle-class mother into hysterics.

Tom Stevenson soon realised his best chance of keeping in touch with his son lay with Charles Baxter, through whom messages were relayed. If Louis's parents knew exactly where he was, there was a risk they might turn up on the doorstep in Monterey. His father was in poor health and the long trip could kill him. For the first few weeks, Baxter was sworn to secrecy regarding his friend's whereabouts, with all correspondence sent under cover via Joe Strong. There was more to this than a desire to cushion the Stevensons from reality. On the journey across the States, Louis had written a letter cautioning Baxter to 'give my address to no one, not even the Queen; it is no part of my programme to bestrew America with my brains'⁹. Was someone out to get him? He may have feared a violent reaction by Fanny's husband, but Sam Osbourne was already coming round to the idea that he might be better off without his wife, and showed no desire to shoot the man who would take her off his hands. If the danger lay in Scotland, where it would one day be alleged that Louis had left a shamed woman behind, pregnant with his child, her family might wish to know his whereabouts.

By the end of September, Louis was back in Monterey. There is no record of Fanny's reaction when she learned how close he had come to death's door. Nellie had made a full recovery, of course, and Sam had returned to San Francisco. Louis was weak but on the mend, and the fever appeared to have driven the vile itch away at last. His illness would be diagnosed retrospectively as malaria and, although Louis and medical science were not then aware of it, the dangerously high temperatures experienced during a malarial fever could destroy the bacterium known as *Treponema pallidum*, or his old enemy the pox. Any damage over the past seven years to the heart, arteries or nervous system would be irreversible, but the insidious progress of syphilis may at least have been halted.

The news back in Monterey was good. Sam Osbourne had accepted that he and his wife must go their separate ways. But in the interests of respectability it would have to be a long, drawn-out process. Sam, for all his sexual shenanigans, was a proud man with a position in society to maintain, and Fanny would not force the issue for fear of him contesting her custody of Sammy. Louis now realised he would

be staying in America for some time, and cheap accommodation was vital. He found it at 'the French House', a rough rooming house belonging to a Frenchman, Dr Heintz. The Heintzes were kind folk who appreciated a lodger who could chat to them in their native tongue over coffee each morning. And Louis made another good friend in Jules Simoneau, who ran a cheap little French restaurant, catering for working men and Monterey's new community of artists such as Joe Strong and Jules Tavernier, who were responsible for the Bohemian decor.

To the front, it was part barber's shop, part bar; to the back, there was a kitchen and a salle-a-manger. The intending diner found himself in a little, chilly, bare, adobe room, furnished with chairs and tables, and adorned with some oil sketches roughly brushed upon the wall in the manner of Barbizon and Cernay. The table, at whatever hour you entered, was already laid with a not spotless napkin and, by way of épergne, with a dish of green peppers and tomatoes, pleasing alike to eye and palate. If you stayed there to meditate before a meal, you would hear Simoneau all about the kitchen, now rattling among the dishes, now clearing a semi-military chest with a 'hroum-hroum,' a drumming of his fists, and a snatch of music. Out of the single window, you beheld a court, with a well, and hens and chickens and stacks of empty bottles, and on the other side, a very massive and crumbling outhouse of adobe... one of the oldest buildings on the Pacific coast: the prison of Monterey, where many a poor soul has slept his last night, and Padres, long since dead themselves, have wrestled by the hour with those about to die.¹⁰

Perhaps it was Louis's determination to defy a death sentence of his own that banished all gloomy thoughts as he turned his face to the sun. In mid-October, he wrote to Baxter: 'In coming here, I did the right thing. I have not only got Fanny patched up again in health; but the effect of my arrival has straightened out everything. As now arranged there is to be a private divorce in January...'¹¹

Meanwhile Sidney Colvin, worried about Louis's health, had written to Joe Strong. The dyslexic reply, typical of a man more used to expressing himself visually, was nevertheless reassuring: 'You may depend on my writting or telegraphing in case of his illness, or doing anything else within my power for him. Though at present he is quite able to write for himself as he is in excelent health and actualy growing fat... I am greatly attatched to him – as I think every one must be

who has the opportunity of knowing him.'¹²

Never had Louis's ability to make friends at the drop of a hat stood him in better stead. At Simoneau's, where he could afford just one meal a day, he found a whole circle of them, from Francois the baker to Frank the Italian fisherman and the Portuguese captain of the Carmel whalers. He even made friends with Bob Hammil, the town drunk, with whom he had long conversations in the street. Other friends were more respectable, such as Francis Doud, an Irishman who farmed cattle and owned the local meat market. Louis soon had a standing invitation to lunch at the Douds' each Sunday. As he put it to Colvin: 'I take one of my meals in a little French restaurant; for the other two, I sponge.'¹³

Among occasional diners at Simoneau's was Crevole Bronson, editor, proprietor, composer and printer of the Monterey Californian, 'a very stout, large-faced, brown man with handsome eyes' who 'hurled polysyllables, somewhat vaguely, at the Monterey public'. Most of the type on Bronson's composing stick was made up into advertisements for local businesses, or items for the Personal column: 'Jack Smith came over Tuesday, from Tres Pinos where he is doing a great hardware business. He was looking splendid, and left a bottle of whiskey at our office. Call again, Jack!' Or, more wryly and succinctly: 'It is not true that Alexandro Gomez lost his way going home from the Fandango.'¹⁴

To help Louis, his new friends at Simoneau's passed the hat and secretly slipped Bronson two dollars a week to take him on as 'staff'. Young Sammy, a spoilt child who was upset that Louis 'should take his meals at a grubby little restaurant with men in their shirt-sleeves, and have so bare and miserable a room in the old adobe house on the hill', would write years later: 'Conceive my joy, therefore, when one day he burst in with the news of a splendid job, and prolonged the suspense by making us all try to guess what it was; and my crushing disappointment when it turned out to be as a special reporter on the local paper at two dollars a week.'¹⁵

Yet Louis was having the time of his life, taking long walks along the beach and through the pine woods above the town, sometimes with Sammy. As they walked on the sand, Louis's fancy roamed free, as it had when he had Crusoe'd about the beach at North Berwick long ago. At a moment's notice, his 11-year-old companion

might find himself transformed into a pirate, or a redskin, or a young naval officer with secret despatches for a famous spy. But one day Luly's 'supposings' failed to appear, and the two walked in silence.

All at once he spoke, and here again was this strange, new intonation, so colourless and yet so troubling, that had recently affected the speech of all my elders. 'I want to tell you something,' he said. 'You may not like it, but I hope you will. I am going to marry your mother.' I could not have uttered a word to save my life. I was stricken dumb. The question of whether I was pleased or not did not enter my mind at all. I walked on in a kind of stupefaction, with an uncontrollable impulse to cry... all I know is that at last my hand crept into Luly's, and in that mutual pressure a rapturous sense of tenderness and contentment came flooding over me. It was thus we returned, still silent, still hand in hand, still giving each other little squeezes, and passed under the roses into the house.¹⁶

Around the middle of October, Fanny returned to the cottage in Oakland with Nellie, Sammy and Belle, whose two-month marriage to Joe Strong was still unsuspected. The legal process for Fanny's divorce had to be started in San Francisco and Louis must be kept at a discreet distance, so he was to remain alone in Monterey. Even in straitened circumstances, it was a pleasant place to stay. Yet insidious change was already under way, the old Spanish California giving way to the new commercial realities. One of Louis's first assignments for the Monterey Californian was to mark the passing of an old tradition. On November 4, the feast day of San Carlos Borromeo, a priest held mass in the ruins of the old Jesuit mission in the Carmel valley which bore the saint's name. Louis's report, in the form of a letter to Bronson, was couched in what he believed to be brash, American newspaper style.

Well, sir, I went to Carmello in a buggy from Wolter's over a road which would be an extravagant farce in the country from which I came; I beheld a considerable concourse of people in their best, some firing guns – one standing up in a waggon and unwearingly beating a drum, just as though something were about to happen. I ate for the first time in my life... some carna asada en las brassas, for which I'm indebted to the Rev Mr Murphy, and washed down my repast with my part of two bottles of wine – one from Simoneau and the other furnished and, I am bound to say, shared by Adolpho Sanchez...¹⁷

Louis was distressed to see the roofless, neglected Carmel Mission of San Carlos, and urged the inhabitants of Monterey County to put it back into good repair. But what touched him most was the sight of the Indians, the Carmel valley's original inhabitants, converted to Christianity by Jesuit priests well over a century ago, and now reduced to a dwindling band.

I heard the old Indians singing mass... It was like a voice out of the past. They sang by tradition, from the teaching of early missionaries long since turned to clay: 'King Pandion he is dead, All your friends are lapped in lead.' And still in the roofless church, you may hear the old music... Peace on earth, good will to men, so it seemed to me to say... Here was an old, mediaeval civilisation, and your old primeval barbarian, hand-in-hand, the one devoutly following the other. And I could not help thinking that if there had been more priests and fewer land sharks and Indian agents, there would have been happier days for a considerable number of human bipeds in your American continent.¹⁸

If this touched a nerve with the more commercially-minded white citizens of Monterey, Louis's next exploit nearly got him strung up. Forest fires were a constant danger around the town and, when one broke out, the local inhabitants had to work like demons to stop the damage spreading. One day Louis was in the woods and started to speculate. Was it the tassels of tinder-dry moss on the tree-trunks that rendered them so inflammable? The small boy within Louis who had once delighted in fires on the beach at North Berwick could not resist the urge. In a spirit of unthinking scientific inquiry, he put a match to a tassel...

The tree went off simply like a rocket; in three seconds it was a roaring pillar of fire. Close by I could hear the shouts of those who were at work combating the original conflagration... Had anyone observed the result of my experiment, my neck was literally not worth a pinch of snuff; after a few minutes of passionate expostulation I should have been run up to a convenient bough.. I have run repeatedly, but never as I ran that day...¹⁹

It was fortunate that Fanny was in San Francisco. On hearing of this piece of foolery, she made Louis swear that 'never, never so-help-him-God, would he ever let as much as a whisper of this crime pass his lips'²⁰. Nor would the pistol-packing Mrs Osbourne have slept easy had she known of another near-death experience. As Louis told Henley in a letter: 'I had a near escape for my life with a revolver; I fired

six charges; and the six bullets all remained in the barrel, which was choked from end to end, from muzzle to breach, with solid lead; it took a man three hours to drill them out. Another shot and I'd have gone to Kingdom Come.²¹

Louis was often incapable of foreseeing the consequences of his actions. He took exception to the behaviour of the local priest, a man not known for his generosity, nor for the care shown to his flock. On hearing of one particularly un-Christian incident, Louis could contain his indignation no longer. That night, around 200 posters appeared around town:

PADRE DOS REALES

On the night of Sunday, 16th November, BIAGGINI, an Italian Swiss, from the same village as the Padre of Monterey and born in a house opposite to that of the Padre's family, came to the latter's door for charity. BIAGGINI had only to reach San Louis Obispo, where welcome and work were ready for him. He was now penniless, but naturally thought that all would be well since he had found his countryman. The Padre gave him - TWO BITS; and sent him for further help to - THE ITALIAN FISHERMEN. It will not be forgotten that the Apostles were fishermen. How long, O Lord, how long? People of Monterey, have you not a Bishop? Let us be done with PADRE DOS REALES.²²

By 8 am next day, all the posters had been torn down. Although the Padre was nominally a man of peace, there were those in town who might not take kindly to this public pillorying. Even 11-year-old Sammy in San Francisco was conscious of the risk Louis had run: 'I knew how men could be waylaid and stabbed in those unlit streets at night, and I trembled for Luly, and wished he had more sense.'²³

In Louis's sparsely furnished room at the French House, he now drove himself to work as hard as his health would allow - yet most of what he wrote would bring in no money. His account of his American journey, entitled *The Amateur Emigrant*, would be dismissed by Colvin as unworthy of him. The fact that it was a vivid, frank, original account of the emigrant experience cut no ice - Mrs Grundy would be shocked by the coarse scenes in steerage aboard the *Devonia*, or in the emigrant cars going west *Across The Plains*. It was a small masterpiece but would remain in manuscript and earn no money until after Louis's death.

He still had the bones of a short story in his head. *The Pavilion On The Links* had

been intended for the pages of London, but was laid aside with that precarious publication's demise. The opening chapters had set the scene at Yellowcraig by the small island of Fidra in the Firth of Forth near North Berwick. Here the Bohemian traveller Frank Cassilis camps with his horse and cart in the sea wood by the beach - a fantasy Louis had cherished since hearing Sam Bough's tales of sketching trips around Cumberland. Soon Cassilis finds himself caught up in a vendetta, waged by a sinister brotherhood of blood-thirsty Italians pursuing a man who has cheated them out of their money.

Vendettas, it seems, were much on Louis's mind in America. By October 21, he had written more than 70 pages of novel called *A Chapter in the Experience of Arizona Breckonridge, or A Vendetta in the West*. He would work on it intermittently over the next six months until it was almost complete - then it vanished. Authors occasionally destroy work which they feel is not up to standard, but in Louis's case the Vendetta set a precedent for a string of manuscripts that would be destroyed because their subject matter might offend Mrs Grundy. All we know of the story is that Arizona was one of many daughters of a man who named them all after American states and, as Louis told Colvin, 'the plot of the story is somewhat scandalous, containing an illegitimate father for *piece de resistance*'²⁴.

But there may have been another reason why the Vendetta was destroyed. By curious coincidence, as Louis began writing the story, a baby was born in Scotland who would grow up claiming to be his son. If Louis himself was an 'illegitimate father', fearing pursuit by the family of a girl he had left behind, the juxtaposition of vendetta and illegitimacy in this story may have made it too personally revealing to escape the flames. There is one further clue to the kind of novel it was. The Vendetta, Louis confessed to Henley, was 'about as bad as Ouida and not so good'²⁵.

Louise de la Ramee, the best-selling English author who wrote under the pen-name Ouida, was famous for her sensational, somewhat lurid novels. Among her more recent works was one that dealt with the shocking subject of a woman with an illegitimate child, seeking to have it acknowledged by the father. In the pages of Ouida's 1875 novel *Signa*, Louis would have found the following scenes.

She had come on foot by short stages all the way from the sea some forty miles over hill

and plain. She carried a bundle with her, and never let go her hold on it however wildly the wind seized and shook her, nor however roughly the rain blew her blind. For the bundle was a child... The boy began to stir and cry. She stopped and loosened her poor garments and gave him her breast. When he grew pacified, she stumbled on again; the child was quiet; the rain beat on her naked bosom, but the child was content and quiet... She did not care for herself. Life was over for her. She would have been glad to lie down and die where she was. But if the boy were not under some roof before morning, she knew he would perish of cold in her arms...

She would go up in the morning, she thought, and tell him the truth; if he were brutal to herself, he would not let the child starve... Once again in the dark she slipped, her foot slid farther on loose wet earth, a stone gave way, she clutched the child with one arm, and flung out the other... She slipped farther and farther, faster and faster; the soil was so drenched, and the stones were unloosed... She clasped the child with both arms once more, and was borne down through the darkness to her death.²⁶

An hour later, two men came with lanthorns into the fields that lie between the rough vineyards underneath the road from the sea... As they went they stumbled against something on the ground, and lowered their lights to look... She lay face upward, with her limbs stretched out; her right arm was close round the body of a living child; her breast was bare... The child was breathing and asleep... They lifted the boy with some roughness and some trouble from the stiffening arm that enclosed him...

The one who held the child turned his light on the little wet face; the baby ceased to cry, and opened his big, dark, wondering eyes at the flame.

'And whose byblow is this?' said he.

'The devil knows,' said he who knelt by the mother. 'Carry him to your wife.'

'There are too many at home.'

'She has one of his age; she can take him...'²⁷

Louis had set aside the Vendetta, and returned to The Pavilion On The Links as a quicker way of making money, when the telegram arrived from Scotland. For many weeks he had resisted parental entreaties to come home. Meanwhile 17 Heriot Row became ever more engulfed in anguish and hysteria and Tom Stevenson wrote in despair to Sidney Colvin: 'For God's sake use your influence. Is it fair that we should be half murdered by his conduct? I am unable to write more about this sinful mad

business...'²⁸

The stress was enough to make any father approaching his seventh decade seriously ill. The telegram that now arrived in Monterey was from Mr Stevenson's doctor, urging Louis to come home immediately because there was a chance his father might die. Colvin suspected this was a ruse to 'see what answer that brings'²⁹, and had checked with Charles Baxter that Tom Stevenson was in no danger before telegraphing Louis to put him in the picture.

In a letter to Henley, Louis confided: 'I have had an awful time. I got a telegram to come home because my father was ill. This I will not do anyway. He would be better or dead ere I got there anyway; and I won't desert my wife. That same night, F. nearly died; and I have the worst account of her health. All kinds of miseries here anyway. I telegraphed to my people "Send Money. Letter Following"'. The money was of course a trick, to let the letter reach. I could not refuse by telegram; it is so brutal.'³⁰

The dishonesty of obtaining money for a ticket home before informing his parents he was not coming might be excused by the pressure Louis was under. Fanny's mystery illness may have been linked to her discovery that for the past three months her daughter had been a married woman. The ensuing ructions cost Louis his postal address at Joe Strong's. He told Colvin: 'Write to me; no more to Strong, difficulties about Belle having bust us a good deal. More hell with that young lady.'³¹

Belle, now living with Joe in New Montgomery Street, San Francisco, may also have been the cause of the 'horrid feuds with threatening letters'³² at this time. Yet her marriage was a *fait accompli*, with her father's blessing, so why would she need to make threats? Louis would tell Henley how at this time 'I received from an enchanting young lady whom you have seen, or rather from her inspiration, threatening letters, exposure, etc.'³³. Henley may have met Belle during her stay in London before returning to California, but would she or Joe stoop to blackmailing Louis? The motive could not be financial – Joe was making good money, and Sam Osbourne had filled his daughter's handbag with twenty-dollar gold pieces as a wedding present, whereas Louis was clearly short of cash. Belle strongly opposed her parents' divorce, but when her beloved father had agreed to it in principle and

was anxious to avoid public scandal, what good would it do to 'expose' Louis? Yet the threatening letters came from somewhere, and if they did not come from San Francisco they most probably came from Scotland - where arrangements were being made to foster a baby who would one day claim he was Louis's son.

Bob Stevenson was still in Cernay la Ville when he received Louis's letter, telling him of Belle's marriage. Always a dreamer, Bob took the news philosophically. Belle had not loved him, so it would never have come to anything good. His dream of becoming a great painter had crumbled and he now drifted on through the winter at Cernay with only a bleak, Stoical sadness to sustain him. The two brilliant Stevensons, once so alike and yet so unlike each other, had reached separate watersheds in their lives. Louis's future lay with Fanny Osbourne, while the broken remnants of the old Bob would be gathered up by Louisa Purland, an early feminist who supported herself and her elderly parents in London on the proceeds of journalism. As yet Bob remained unattached, although still in a sexual relationship with a Portuguese grisette in Paris, and Louisa was determined to save him from the bleak dead end where the world's most witty and original conversationalist now lay. Half a world away from his cousin, Bob was the only one of Louis's friends who gave his full blessing to the love affair with Fanny Osbourne and genuinely wished them happiness. In the depths of winter he wrote back:

My dearest Louis,

Many thanks for your letters. I write then to your private Box at Monterey. Never mind my letters to Belle, it is of no consequence now, don't get into any more troubles and hot water but try and steer clear and get away as soon as you can arrange matters. My very best love to Fanny. I do hope you will have a clear time of peace and happiness for what is to come.

What you say about Belle is probably perfectly true, but I don't believe in it, I mean I don't seem to care, or have any faith in such games. And I have absolutely no ambition, or no wish to buy female forms with kudos or money; at least not for the purpose of loving them and being their slave. Whores I don't say - that seems to me quite genteel.

No, Belle is married. I hope she will be happy... I have accustomed myself to regard the world as a place not to be happy in... Indeed, if I was to live in this world again and if I was to live for it, which God forbid, I would do on principle what I tried to do on instinct. Live for

sensuality. How much our elders deceived us in saying that the pleasures of sense were the most deceptive and fleeting. Scientifically and sagely pursued and varied, female flesh, old wines, conviviality, foods, fires, health exercise expeditions in the sun and snow could last forever...

Art is occasionally an amusement but I only care for it when it is about the future life, so now in painting I only care for vast, empty, triste landscapes with something somewhere in the sky that looks like hope and mystery - I can't do it because I can't paint, but thinking about it is some pleasure.

Miss Purland is a great friend of mine. I don't know anyone up to more. I have just got a letter from her begging me to let her send me coin and asking me to come to London, as she thinks I am out of it here, and will get into a bad frame of mind. She knows a little of my games. Don't tell any body. She is very unhappy herself, also, but then she has more life and force than I have. I will not take the coin, not that I mind, only I won't. She has made 64 quid by literature since I have been here, 2 or 3 months. Misfortunes make her work. It is very curious. How can she care?

I hope to sell a picture and get to London... I wish to sell, so as not to be a nuisance; I never can be anything Louis so don't make illusions. I have the curious futility that marks my father's family.

I heard nothing of your father except from Baxter, that he was much cut up. I did not like to write to him, then I wanted to. I did not know how he might like it.

I had a letter from Belle today. She appears to be ill, poor dear, but she says she is happy. I am glad you don't hate her, as I love nothing better.

My very best love and kisses to her mother and I am, dearest Louis,

Your ever affectionate

R.S.³⁴

At the start of December, Jules Simoneau grew concerned when for two days Louis failed to appear for his usual meal at the restaurant, followed by their customary game of chess and long chat in the corner by the stove. Simoneau went up to the French House, pushed open the door of Louis's room and found him lying ill, too weak to venture outside. For days he had lain there, coughing up phlegm with traces of blood. At once the good Simoneau took charge, scouring the town for

delicacies to tempt the invalid's appetite. Each morning, before dawn, Simoneau would be outside Louis's window, hailing him from the street - 'Stevenson! *Comment ca va?*' - until he was certain the poor Scotsman's health was on the mend.

In the end, the doctor's opinion was that it was only pleurisy - not the dreaded consumption, but disheartening. As Louis wrote to Gosse: 'To start a pleurisy about nothing, while leading a dull, regular life in a mild climate, was not my habit in past days.' Louis had now passed his 29th birthday and was 'going for thirty now', but confided gloomily: 'Unless I can snatch a little rest before long, I have, I may tell you in confidence, no hope of seeing thirty-one... It is a pity in one sense, for I believe the class of work I might yet give out, is better and more real and solid than people fancy. But death is no bad friend; a few aches and gasps, and we are done...'³⁵

Louis's failure to put on weight cannot have been helped by his lack of front teeth. He attributed this misfortune to 'a facer from God'³⁶ but the most likely cause was mercury poisoning. Those who took blue pill over a prolonged period could expect their teeth to loosen and drop out. The humiliating ravages of the pox were quite often caused by the medication rather than the disease. Yet Louis was more concerned about Fanny, whose health and mental state did not appear good. On December 12, her divorce had been granted by the Nineteenth Judicial District Court. Yet an immediate marriage to Louis would have been unseemly, and her ex-husband had agreed to continue to support her until a decent interval had elapsed. The cottage in Oakland, while technically Sam Osbourne's, had been purchased with Fanny's dowry and she would be allowed to continue living there with her sister and Sammy. Yet although Fanny was now a free woman, she seemed listless and depressed, devoid of her usual energy. Unable to help her at a distance of 130 miles, Louis made arrangements to move nearer. Having said farewell to many friends in Monterey, he boarded the train and, just before Christmas, took up lodgings at 608 Bush Street, San Francisco.

© Jeremy Hodges 2010

¹ Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS, Stevenson at Twenty-Nine*.

² *Ibid.*

³ RLS to Charles Baxter, Monterey, September 9, 1879. Yale 649, MS Yale.

-
- ⁴ Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS, Stevenson at Twenty-Nine*.
- ⁵ RLS to Edmund Gosse, Monterey, October 8, 1879. Yale 655
- ⁶ RLS to Charles Baxter, Carmel Valley, September 24, 1879. Yale 652, MS Yale.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ RLS to Charles Baxter, Union Pacific Transfer, Council Bluffs, Iowa, August 22, 1879. Yale 646, MS Yale.
- ¹⁰ RLS, fragment quoted by Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Chapter VIII.
- ¹¹ RLS to Charles Baxter, Monterey, October 15, 1879. Yale 657, MS Yale.
- ¹² Joe Strong to Sidney Colvin, Monterey, October 11, 1879. Yale 656, MS Yale.
- ¹³ RLS to Sidney Colvin, Monterey, early October, 1879. Yale 654, Text Silverado Meuseum.
- ¹⁴ RLS, *Simoneau's at Monterey*, published in *From Scotland to Silverado*.
- ¹⁵ Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS, Stevenson at Twenty-Nine*.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ RLS, *San Carlos Day*, *Monterey Californian*, November 11, 1879.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ RLS, *The Old Pacific Capital, The Woods And The Pacific*.
- ²⁰ Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS, Stevenson at Twenty-Nine*.
- ²¹ RLS to WE Henley, Monterey, late October/early November, 1879. Yale 660, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ²² Poster enclosed with RLS to Sidney Colvin, Monterey, early December 1879. Yale 667, MS Yale.
- ²³ Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of RLS, Stevenson at Twenty-Nine*.
- ²⁴ RLS to Sidney Colvin, Monterey, October 21, 1879. Yale 658, MS Yale.
- ²⁵ RLS to WE Henley, Monterey, late October/early November, 1879. Yale 660, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ²⁶ Marie Louise de la Ramee, 'Ouida', *Signa*, Vol I, Chap II.
- ²⁷ Marie Louise de la Ramee, 'Ouida', *Signa*, Vol I, Chap III.
- ²⁸ Tom Stevenson to Sidney Colvin.
- ²⁹ Sidney Colvin to Charles Baxter, Trinity College, Cambridge, November 18, 1879. Yale 662, Text Yale.
- ³⁰ RLS to WE Henley, Monterey, November 17, 1879. Yale 664, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ³¹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, Monterey, November 18, 1879. Yale 665, MS Yale.
- ³² RLS to Edmund Gosse, Monterey, November 15, 1879. Yale 663, MS British Library.
- ³³ RLS to WE Henley, 608 Bush Street, San Francisco, late January, 1879. Yale 684, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ³⁴ Bob Stevenson to RLS, Autumn, 1879. MS Yale.
- ³⁵ RLS to Edmund Gosse, Monterey, December 8, 1879. Yale 668, MS Princeton.
- ³⁶ RLS to WE Henley, Monterey, December 11, 1879. Yale 670, Text Silverado Museum.