

Prelude

AS the sun went down over Samoa he was on the verandah with a bottle of Burgundy, helping his wife make a salad when the stroke blew a hole in his brain. Winged hands that had fluttered in counterpoint to the resonant voice for 44 years now flew to the pain in his head. 'Do I look strange?' cried the author of Jekyll and Hyde, as darkness flooded into the light and he lost consciousness in this world forever.

*Yet when the lamp from my expiring eyes
Shall dwindle and recede, the voice of love
Fall insignificant on my closing ears,
What sound shall come but the old cry of the wind
In our inclement city? what return
But the image of the emptiness of youth,
Filled with the sound of footsteps and that voice
Of discontent and rapture and despair?
So, as in darkness, from the magic lamp,
The momentary pictures gleam and fade
And perish, and the night resurges – these
Shall I remember . . .¹*

THE night was cold and rainy, paving slabs glistening in the gaslight along Heriot Row, down which the east wind cut like a knife. Winter was slow to lose its grip on Victorian Edinburgh, an austere city that hid its desires beneath an overcoat of Calvinist respectability. It was once famed as the Athens of the North, the city of Enlightenment that nurtured David Hume, James Boswell, Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott... But to the young man who emerged from the door of No 17 it seemed a mere metropolis of Mammon, whose excessive religious devotions on the Sabbath could not obscure its weekday worship of the bourgeois god of commerce.

Louis Stevenson pulled the outsize coat more closely around his scarecrow-thin figure as somewhere in the damp, April night a clock struck. Nine-thirty. He could

escape no earlier from a household where he was an only child, under constant scrutiny by doting parents. As the three dined together, he had been drawn into the lively conversation of his mother Maggie, daughter of a Church of Scotland minister, who at heart remained the same blythe-spirited girl who gave birth to her darling 'Lou' 20 years ago. Loath to think evil of anyone, she coped with any crisis by smiling sweetly and refusing to acknowledge it was happening. But this charitable attitude could not paper over the cracks between her husband and son.

Thomas Stevenson, wealthy Victorian lighthouse engineer, was a popular if eccentric figure in Edinburgh society. Wherever he went, his cheerful benevolence and quirky humour endeared him to all, right down to the dogs on the street which would run up to be clapped and spoken to as if human. But in private he suffered fits of melancholy and a creeping Calvinist conviction that he was doomed for sins unspecified. A man of strong religious convictions, he brooked no argument with the tenets of his faith and regarded unbelievers as fools or instruments of the devil. When his son reserved the right to question everything, it was inevitable their arguments would take them sometimes to the brink of hysteria. Since they loved each other deeply, this was the cause of much pain.

After a quiet pipe by the fireside with his father, puffing wordlessly at the meerschaum whenever he felt the urge to make a smart remark, Louis had made his excuses and slipped away. The ragged figure now glided over the wet pavement with a strange, light, heel-and-toe footstep. To his left, below the arches of the stone steps to prosperous front doors, slaveys washed pots in subterranean kitchens. The affluent lifestyle of New Town Edinburgh was founded on a substratum of servants, whose quarters looked out into deep slit-trenches below pavement level, guarded by iron railings to prevent wayward sons of the wealthy pitching in headfirst when drunk. As a further safeguard, the windows of the servants' quarters were barred - to guard property against housebreakers, or morality against dalliance with the staff? Or simply to stop the servants escaping? Women in cages, mused Louis, his outraged chivalry marred by a guilty frisson of desire on glimpsing a servant girl, dark hair adrift, rubbing vigorously at a dirty pan in the soft glow of the kitchen gas.

To his right lay the wild side of the street where the wind came rushing through

the dark trees in the locked garden to which each householder had a key. In summer it was a pleasant place, where nurses strolled while their young charges played on the grass, lost in imagination. Most adults forgot what it was to be a child, but Louis still had perfect recall of the excitement he once felt at burying one of his toy soldiers.

*When the grass was closely mown,
Walking on the lawn alone,
In the turf a hole I found
And hid a soldier underground...²*

He had no recollection of retrieving it. Unless some other child had struck lucky, that secret soldier would still be standing guard somewhere. On the unlit pavement, two figures embraced by the railings. Disturbed by Louis's hacking cough, the white-faced young man stepped back and the girl turned away, smoothing her skirts. Louis recognised the housemaid from three doors along, and inclined his head in courteous salutation. Poor things, had they nowhere warmer on a night like this? He turned right, where a broad, well-lit street cut the gardens in half, then left down Queen Street, heading east into the teeth of the wind, its noise now mixed with the clatter of hoofs on cobbles as carriages ferried the Edinburgh bourgeoisie between evening engagements. The reputation of Queen Street was impeccable, but a little past the point where it dipped down into York Place lay the soiled mouth of hell through which no respectable woman could pass at night without risking her reputation. Here lay the domain of Satan in Petticoats. As Louis turned into Elder Street, the dirtiest street in the New Town, his pulse quickened. He was scarcely ten paces from the bright lights and carriages when a woman stepped out of the shadows and laid a gloved hand on his arm.

'Are ye gaun tae stan' a budge the nicht?'

They always said that. Would you buy a girl a drink? Judging by the smell of whisky, blended with bad hair oil and cheap scent, she'd had a drink or two already. Maybe a man or two as well. But the white face with rouged cheeks and mouth the colour of blood was past the first flush of youth. The cheap, damp silk of her dress was frayed and the button-boots below the torn and muddy hem were broken down

from walking the streets. Any man with a care for his health would have pushed her aside, but Louis treated all women like ladies. He bowed and kissed her hand, murmuring polite words of apology.

'Ma Goad, but ye're a queer yin!' she guffawed, shocked by his gallantry.

There were many reasons to refuse a woman, not least of them financial. In his pocket, Louis Stevenson had twopence. Tom Stevenson kept his son on a short leash. Twopence would barely buy a dram, or two small glasses of beer. Even the cheapest woman in the foulest, spew-and-sawdust Old Town shebeen cost sixpence. However much you believed in free love, in Edinburgh you paid for it. It certainly didn't come cheap at Clara's, on the corner of Clyde Street, which catered for the exotic needs of the well-to-do whose wives and sweethearts shrank from such enormities. At the entrance the brazen gas burned bright, while alluring forms moved behind the blinds upstairs and laughter, male and female, cut across the tinkling of a piano. The forbidden pleasures therein were beyond a poor student whose wealthy father did not trust him. But like every young man in Edinburgh, Louis had heard about Clara's. Famous throughout Europe, Clara Johnson ran the smartest house and most beautiful girls in Edinburgh, and none walked the streets. They were not ladies, although 'gay lady' was the euphemism many used for their occupation. A pretty face, a good figure and an unblushing ability to perform intimate acts with strangers were the main requirements. Before joining the world's oldest profession, they had struggled to survive in respectable occupations. A milliner or dressmaker, stitching her life away, earned around £8 a year. At Clara's, she could earn that in a night. Instead of stitching silks and trimming hats, she could have the pleasure of wearing them. She could take wine and dance with men in evening dress. And if what happened later made her feel dirty, at Clara's she had the luxury of a bath. Few of the girls felt like fallen women. Compared to their previous existence, it was like promotion to glory.

Before the start of business, Clara held an inspection. Among the laughing company were two former dressmakers, Lilly Carrick, 20, from Dumfries and Rosina Black, 22, from Glasgow. Mary Edwards, 22, had come up from Liverpool, while Emma Gray, 25, and former machinist Ellen Morly, 19, were from London.

Seventeen-year-old Priscilla Lawson from Inverness had escaped the drudgery of work as a barmaid, while milliner Louisa Graham, 18, had left virtue behind in her Perthshire home town of Crieff. Kate Rutherford, 17, was a compliant quine from Aberdeen for old gentlemen who liked little girls, while customers in need of domination might prefer 22-year-old Gertrude Hard, 'theatrical', from Dublin.³

For an evening of discreet satisfaction with one or more of these, some of Edinburgh's more prominent citizens would part with a large, white, five pound note, quickly tucked away in a garter or low décolletage - but not before Clara's sharp eyes spotted it. Half the proceeds went to the house, and from the other half the girls had to pay for the use of their silk evening dresses, their board and lodging and laundry and, of course, the doctor's fees. Small wonder Clara had been the talk of the city when it emerged that she had £14,000 in the bank (approaching £2 million in today's money). She might be morally bankrupt, but financially she was in the same league as Tom Stevenson.

That worthy gentleman's son now glided on through the shadows into St James Square. Here a brisk trade was in progress, with demand exceeding supply. From the doorway of one house of sin emerged a little girl of maybe eight or ten, running as hard as she was able to fetch back one of the gay ladies from her pavement patrol in Princes Street. Soliciting was superfluous when the shadowy clientele made its own way to St James Square in such numbers. Around the square, men in overcoats, heavily muffled beneath their hats, were attempting to mount selected stairs without being recognised. Among them Louis spotted an advocate and a divinity student of his acquaintance, but refrained from hailing them by name. Anonymity was the unspoken rule in this shadowy realm, a world apart from respectable Edinburgh. What you saw a kirk elder doing in Elder Street on Saturday night would be expunged from your memory when he passed the plate at Sunday morning service. Amnesia by day and blindness by night were what held this hypocritical society together. You had to be two separate people, each afraid to acknowledge the other's existence. Anyone who sought to unite the two and live his whole life openly was heading for misery and disgrace.

Louis, who hated this hole-in-corner approach to sex, longed to cast off the

overcoat and muffler and frolic in the sunshine of a more liberated land. His cousin Bob had done so already. But Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson, son of Tom Stevenson's late brother Alan, had no stern father to stand in his way. Instead he had a small inheritance to spend as he desired – on pleasure. Bob had spent the summer of 1869 in the sunny glades of Fontainebleau, familiarising himself with the naked female form while studying art in the studio of Auguste Ortman. But now he had enrolled at the Edinburgh School of Art, an establishment under pressure from respectable citizens who wanted its funding withdrawn until it abandoned the shameless indecency of life classes. So far the school was winning, so Bob could enjoy an eyeful. But for Louis there was nowhere short of Elder Street where an unmarried young man could find out what an unbustled, uncorseted, warm, living female looked like. Small wonder Louis was constantly disrobing young women in his imagination.

*Now bare to the beholder's eye
Your late denuded bindings lie,
Subsiding slowly where they fell,
A disinvested citadel;
The obdurate corset, Cupid's foe,
The Dutchman's breeches frilled below.
Those that the lover notes to note,
And white and crackling petticoat...⁴*

Around the corner of the Register House, the little girl came running - in her wake the unsmiling whore, summoned to her duty. She seemed not to notice Louis, but he could read the tiredness and anxiety in her face. He pitied her and all her sisterhood. At the top of Leith Street, he paused, shivering, while a late horse tram rattled by. Then he crossed over to the hotel where he had arranged to meet Bob and pushed through the door into the billiard room, which was almost empty. In the convivial glow of the gas, the barmaid bent over the green baize to take a shot, while a wolfish, moustachioed figure, cue in hand, surveyed her trim figure. Catching sight of Louis, Bob let out a whoop like a Mexican vaquero. It was some time before a cough from the barmaid broke through the hugging and back-slapping.

'I'll take a dram,' said Louis, recklessly cleaning out his exchequer. 'By God, Bob, it's good to see you. You've no idea how dreary it's been.'

Louis cast aside his overcoat, revealing a threadbare velvet jacket of the type favoured by Bohemians. As the two young men moved around the table, their conversation flowed effortlessly, punctuated by the click of the balls. Superficially they were different - Bob dark as a gypsy, Louis clean-shaven and fair - but from the way they moved and talked there was no doubting these two Robert Stevensons shared a common grandfather, whose name they both bore. Never had two people been more alike, yet more unlike, than Louis and Bob.

Jessie Broun⁵ set down two glasses and withdrew to the bar, her eyes lingering on Bob's lithe figure. Already a dram or two ahead of Louis, he was in full flight - and when Bob talked, his words were touched with genius, exploding with a firecracker wit matched only by the insane lucidity of his conclusions as he twisted and turned in his argument like a serpent. The question he grappled with now was the one that troubled most young men in Victorian Edinburgh. It was not so much a question of sex as a question of Mrs Grundy, the formidably bombazined mythological matron standing guard over public morals.

'Did I tell you of a wonderful discovery I've made?' said Bob. 'There's no Mrs Grundy. She's merely an instrument, Louis. She's borne the blame. Grundy's a man. Grundy unmasked. Rather lean and out of sorts. Early middle age. With bunchy black whiskers and a worried eye. Been good so far, and it's fretting him! Moods!'

Bob drove the cue ball down the table and the red coasted into a corner pocket. Straightening, he flew into a pantomime of consternation: 'There's Grundy in a state of sexual panic, for example, - "For God's sake cover it up! They get together - they get together! It's too exciting! The most dreadful things are happening!" Rushing about - long arms going like a windmill. "They must be kept apart!" Absolute separations. One side of the road for men, and the other for women, and a hoarding - without posters - between them. Every boy and girl to be sewed up in a sack and sealed, just the head and hands and feet out until twenty-one. Music abolished, calico garments for the lower animals! Sparrows to be suppressed - ab-so-lutely!'

Louis had collapsed on the over-stuffed divan that ran round the edge of the

room, helpless with laughter. Instantly Bob composed himself and regarded his cousin with the look of a long-suffering university professor encountering an imbecile.

'Well, that's Mr Grundy in one mood,' he continued. 'And it puts Mrs Grundy - She's a much-maligned person, Louis - a rake at heart - and it puts her in a most painful state of fluster - most painful! When Grundy tells her things are shocking, she's shocked - pink and breathless. She goes about trying to conceal her profound sense of guilt behind a haughty expression...'

With a haughty expression, Bob drained the last of his dram: 'Grundy, meanwhile, is in a state of complete whirlabout. Long lean knuckly hands pointing and gesticulating! "They're still thinking of things - thinking of things! It's dreadful. They get it out of books. I can't imagine where they get it! I must watch! There're people over there whispering! Nobody ought to whisper! - There's something suggestive in the mere act! Then, pictures! In the museum - things too dreadful for words. Why can't we have pure art - with the anatomy all wrong and pure and nice - and pure fiction, pure poetry, instead of all this stuff with allusions - allusions?... Excuse me! There's something up behind that locked door! The keyhole! In the interests of public morality - yes, Sir, as a pure, good man - I insist - I'LL look - it won't hurt me - I insist on looking - my duty - M'm'm - the keyhole!" '

Dancing with excitement, Bob clutched himself obscenely and fell back on the divan, kicking his legs in the air and sending his cousin into further hysterics: 'Grundy sins. Oh, yes, he's a hypocrite. Sneaks round a corner and sins ugly. It's Grundy and his dark corners that make vice, vice! We artists - we have no vices.'

Ignoring Louis's snort of derision, he pressed on: 'And then Grundy's frantic with repentance. And wants to be cruel to fallen women and decent, harmless painters of the simple nude - like me - and so back to his panic again.'

'Mrs Grundy, I suppose, doesn't know he sins,' chipped in Louis, at last regaining the power of speech.

'No? I'm not so sure.... But, bless her heart, she's a woman.... Then again you get Grundy with a large greasy smile - like an accident to a butter tub - all over his face, being Liberal Minded - Grundy in his Anti-Puritan moments, "trying not to see

Harm in it" - Grundy the friend of innocent pleasure. He makes you sick with the Harm he's trying not to see in it...

'And that's why everything's wrong, Louis. Grundy, damn him! stands in the light, and we young people can't see. He does his silly utmost to prevent our reading and seeing the one thing, the one sort of discussion we find - quite naturally and properly - supremely interesting. So we don't adolcesce; we blunder up to sex. Dare - dare to look - and he may dirt you for ever! The girls are terror-stricken to silence by his significant whiskers, by the bleary something in his eyes.'

Suddenly Bob sat up as if galvanised by a lightning-bolt. 'He's about us everywhere, Louis," he said, very solemnly. 'Sometimes - sometimes I think he is - in our blood. In MINE.'⁶

'You're the remotest cousin he ever had,' laughed Louis. 'Come on, it's gone closing time. Now where, in this God-forsaken city, can a man get another drink?'

On the corner of Leith Street and Waterloo Place, the wet wind bit into them. With the hour now past eleven, no legitimate hostelry in Edinburgh could offer further refreshment. Mr Grundy, by means of the Forbes Mackenzie Act, had seen to it that nobody could offend public morals by drinking all night in licensed premises, so the good burghers of Edinburgh frequented illegal shebeens and brothels. At this time of night, the cousins sought nothing more than another dram, or perhaps cheap champagne to celebrate Bob's return. Louis might be penniless, but Bob's allowance was not yet exhausted and to go home at this early hour was out of the question. It was time to call on 'Colette'.

To go to Colette's was to see life, indeed; it was wrong; it was against the laws; it partook, in a very dingy manner, of adventure... Colette (whose name I do not know how to spell, for I was never in epistolary communication with that hospitable outlaw) was simply an unlicensed publican, who gave suppers after eleven at night, the Edinburgh hour of closing... You were very ill-supplied. The company was not recruited from the Senate or the Church, though the Bar was very well represented... And Colette's frequenters, thrillingly conscious of wrong-doing and "that two-handed engine (the policeman) at the door," were perhaps inclined to somewhat feverish excess...⁷

The two cousins rounded the corner into Leith Street. Across the street, on a

terrace above a row of shops, a rather drunken young man stood gazing up at the row of windows. Putting his fingers in his mouth he gave a shrill signal and, in a few moments, a blowsy figure in red silk appeared, and led him up the gaslit stair.

Underwood's had a customer - and God have mercy on his soul. The Leith Street brothels were smaller and less salubrious than Clara's, and a young man could go to heaven or hell on the terrace for a few shillings. At 29, Cicelia Underwood from Forfar could satisfy most requirements with the help of 23-year-old Luisa Leslie, an Irish girl who had once been a milliner, and 18-year-old Clara Millar, a former dressmaker from England.⁸

Off the same stair at No 11 lived Arthur Collett, a curious case whose origins remained obscure to his customers, who knew him only as 'Colette'. This pronunciation led many to believe he was a Frenchman, but he had been born Thomas Arthur Corlett, son of the vicar general in the Isle of Man. He was not, as rumoured, an unfrocked divine but had been an advocate at the Manx bar, with a wife and son, until debt caused him to flee the island following the death of his wife, having first sold all her property. A decade later, now 45, he lived as Arthur Collett, with a 32-year-old Manx housekeeper called Matilda Waterston who shared his bed and bore him children.⁹

In the evening, as the whores on the stair dressed up for business, Collett would saunter down from the terrace to open the subterranean supper house for which Louis and Bob were now bound. The sound of revelry drifted up from the pavement beneath their feet as they turned down into the Low Calton, a place of ill fame since the days when contemporaries of their revered grandfather took their pleasures in 'the Sautbucket'. This wedge-shaped close between Leith Street and Waterloo Place lay between two tall tenements, converging so close at the far end that it would be possible to shake hands through the window with a person in the room opposite. Within the tenements lived scores of respectable working people, from shoemakers and railway engine drivers to the local police constable and a little Italian who made plaster saints. Tucked in among them were lodging houses and temperance hotels that rented rooms by the hour to girls who worked as 'fly' prostitutes to supplement their income from respectable day jobs. Often they picked up customers at Collett's.

The two Stevensons turned in through a low doorway, up a dimly-lit passage with stone flags. At the end was a door with a small, circular window, covered by a flap. As the cousins approached, the flap lifted and a pair of eyes peered out. Although the establishment claimed to be a private club, Collett took the broadest view of what constituted membership and would rather not have his activities scrutinised by the police. Recognising two bona fide customers, he drew the bolt.

Stepping into the heat of the windowless shebeen, warmed by hissing gas jets and sweaty bodies, was like diving into a giant plate of Collett's greasy soup. For the privilege of paying over the odds for alcoholic beverages, his customers were required to eat (or at least purchase) a very bad supper, served at rough tables in vaulted cellars under the pavement of the street above. On Collett's maculate table linen, several examples of this coarse meal lay barely touched by the customers, who chatted loudly, glass in hand, or joined in lustily with the singing. Someone was playing a fiddle, and one of the sailors had a squeezebox. Pushing through the heaving mass, the two Stevensons managed to secure a seat in a corner, but not before Louis had been recognised.

'What brings ye doon here the nicht, Velvet Coat?' cried a girl perched drunkenly on the knee of an army sergeant from the barracks at Jock's Lodge. 'Does yer mammy ken ye're here? Nah, ye'd get a richt good spanking if she kent. Wid ye like a good spanking, Velvet Coat? Or wid ye rather spank a bad lassie like me?'

The soldiers guffawed loudly, while Louis grinned and gave a low bow. A nice enough lassie, but the drink made her outrageous. Already he had recognised several faces, transformed from their daytime aspect by the amber liquor. Obscure writers' clerks, set free from desks and ledgers, became bar-room buccaneers or Don Juan on a shoestring. Medical students, steeped daily in the reality of pain, suffering and death, became ribald buffoons, enjoying a fleeting hour of life and love before stumbling into alcoholic oblivion. And among these middle-class interlopers sat the apprentices and shop lads who worked in Leith Street, now blinking over their beer and fancying themselves fine fellows to be 'doing fast life' in such wild company. Some had their sweethearts with them, poor little half-starved milliners and bookfauldiers, each holding tight to her man's hand, holding out for a future of

honest poverty, drudgery and the joys of regular childbirth if she could only save him from wicked women and guide him towards a sober and industrious life. For the world was full of predators, and many could be found at Collett's, where thieves and pickpockets drank cheek-by-jowl with lawyers, and the young Aphrodite now leading the student to the stair, his handsome face flushed and eyes bright with romance, would in a minute empty his purse and blight his future with an incurable disease.

Louis watched them go, and drained his glass. The way of the world. No way of stopping it. Suddenly he wished he had not had so much to drink. Bob was locked in conversation with a gin-soaked old harridan who kept telling him he had 'come-tae-bed eyes'. Louis stood up abruptly, staggered slightly and took his cousin's arm. But Bob seemed oblivious to the call of his own bed at the house in Portobello, a long walk away, where his widowed mother and three sisters lay sleeping.

'Awa, man!' yelled Louis, over the drunken din. 'Time tae go . . .'

On the pavement outside, the cold cleared their heads. With a word of adieu, Bob reeled off towards Leith Walk while Louis set a course for Princes Street. In the small hours no further encounter with Satan in Petticoats hindered his progress up Hanover Street to the safety of the New Town. As he changed tack at the corner of Heriot Row and came rolling home to No 17, there was a rustling in Queen Street Gardens and a woman's voice: 'No, George, dinna do that - you'll gie me a wean.'

Must be a servant, mused Louis, in a flash of wondering lucidity. She'll have taken the key. Dear God, they must be desperate. A cold, damp, joyless place to bury your soldier in the dark. He reached the steps to No 17 and steadied himself on the railings as he fumbled for the pass key which had taken years to extract from his father. With slow deliberation Louis inserted it in the lock, praying no one was awake. The hallway gas was at a low peep. Downstairs, an alarm clock ticked like a time bomb beside the housemaid's narrow bed. In three hours it would spring its alarm and waken the household to a new day. Louis struggled out of his boots and crept up the stone stair to bed.

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¹ RLS, To My Old Familiars, Songs of Travel

² RLS, *The Dumb Soldier, A Child's Garden of Verses*

³ 1871 Scotland Census, GROS.

⁴ RLS, *Now Bare to the Beholder's Eye, New Poems*

⁵ 1871 Scotland Census, GROS. Jessie Brown, who would unwittingly lend her name to *The Master of Ballantrae's* whore, is listed as a barmaid at the Waterloo Hotel in Waterloo Place.

⁶ HG Wells, *Tono-Bungay*. Wells based this monologue by Bob Ewart on the conversation of Bob Stevenson.

⁷ RLS, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*

⁸ 1871 Scotland Census, GROS. Typically the Leith Street brothel residents appear as a mistress, giving her trade as 'lodging house keeper', plus two to four unmarried young women, some of whom give their former trade, such a milliner, while others appear as 'gay lady' or simply 'prostitute'. Since Luisa and Clara gave their occupations as 'milliner' and 'dressmaker', it is not possible to prove they were engaged in prostitution. I may have miscalled them but, in a street of brothels, I doubt it.

⁹ 1871 Scotland Census, GROS.