

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Advocate of Liberty

HE had not learned to dance until he was 40, when social life among the white traders, plantation owners and government officials of Samoa made it *de rigueur*. Sitting out every dance in Apia was unthinkable, so Louis, who still recalled his 'disappointing' dance class as a child, at last took lessons until he could be let loose in a quadrille. Since Fanny was not always well enough to accompany him to dances, his frequent partner was his step-daughter Belle, still recovering from the shock of separation from her unfaithful artist husband Joe Strong. Yet at dances she cast care aside, the Belle of the ball in crisp white flounces, contrasting with her big, dark eyes and dusky skin as she capered across the floor. When the dancing was done, the breathless pair might stay the night in Apia or ride home together up the track to Vailima, laughing at the moon. Yet in the mornings, when Belle came to Louis's room on the upper verandah to take dictation of *Weir of Hermiston* or the picaresque novel *St Ives*, his mind would be on social occasions long ago, and the nice girls of Edinburgh he had never swept off their feet... much though some might have liked him to try.

High-nosed Miss Pringle of Drumanno and high-stepping Miss Marshall of the Mains were understood to have had a difference of opinion about him the day after the ball - he was none the wiser, he could not suppose himself to be remarked by these entrancing ladies. At the ball itself my Lord Muirfell's daughter, the Lady Flora, spoke to him twice, and the second time with a touch of appeal, so that her colour rose and her voice trembled a little in his ear, like a passing grace in music. He stepped back with a heart on fire, coldly and not ungracefully excused himself, and a little after watched her dancing with young Drumanno of the empty laugh...¹

IN the autumn and winter of 1875 there were many carriages at the door of 17 Heriot Row, which a new brass plate proclaimed to be the residence of R.L. Stevenson, Advocate. Not one of the carriages bore Louis a client, for he had no wish to plead

anyone's case in court and his entire legal career would involve just four briefs at a guinea a time - he kept the pounds and gave the shillings to his mother. But the carriages at night brought many young ladies to the dinner parties his parents loved to host, in the forlorn hope that one might make their wayward son a wife.

Louis could not think of himself as part of a couple. He disparaged 'Noah's Ark' dinner parties where the guests came in pairs but, whenever he dropped in late at the Republic after the Simpsons had attended a formal dinner, he would enquire 'what other beasts they had gone to feed with, two and two, and what talking entertainment the animal they had been paired with had treated them to'. His aversion to dances amused Eve Simpson: 'Balls he refused to attend, because he had to abandon his usual clothes and go in regulation dress-suit, which, he boasted, stank in his nostrils. Not even fancy balls, which would have given him full scope for fantastic dressing, tempted him.

'Before one fancy ball, an Edinburgh daily paper supplied ticket-givers with schedules for their guests to fill in with descriptions of their characters. Louis spent a happy afternoon with us "supposing" many staid, religious citizens were going as very remarkable characters. With dress to suit their parts the tempting schedules were supplied. One man of aldermanic proportions was dressed as "Chieftain of the Puddin' Race" in haggis tartan. It was a wet afternoon, and we all assisted to robe many unsuspected ball-goers.'²

These comic schedules were actually sent off to the newspaper before the Simp regained his sense of propriety and called on the editor to ask for the descriptions to be withdrawn. Since the nonsense was already set in type, it was a close call. Yet much though Louis might ridicule such social events, he was fascinated by the ritual and would demand details of everything, right down to the flowers and dresses.

'The table was all blobs of purple and yellow things,' grunted the Simp, engrossed in his meerschaum.

'You mean violets and primroses?' suggested Eve.

'Spring!' exclaimed Louis, and launched into a rapturous eulogy on the season whose sensations had so ravished Henley and himself.³

But Edinburgh was fast moving into the winter purgatory Louis loathed,

shivering and complaining that his boots let wet. One gloomy October afternoon, he went out to Leith and 'God bless me, what horrid women I saw. I never knew what a plain looking race it was before. I was sick at heart with the looks of them. And the children, filthy and ragged! and the smells! and the fat black mud! My soul was full of disgust ere I got back.'⁴

To please his parents, Louis had to spend each morning at the Parliament House, pretending to be an advocate seeking briefs. As he sauntered self-consciously up and down the ancient hall from which Scotland had once been governed before losing her independence in an Act of Union, he tried to avoid solicitor's clerks wanting to do business. For a free Bohemian this was tantamount to prostitution, no different from the gaudy whores parading their wares on Princes Street. Like them, Louis had to get dressed up to sell himself, his dress-suit pressed into service as the advocate's traditional day wear.

To earn his first guinea, he need only stand up in front of the judge and utter three words: 'Intimation and Service?' More nervous than a street girl accosting her first customer, he could not get the words out and had to be assisted. His more learned colleagues soon realised this scarecrow in a dress suit with long, poetic locks escaping from his wig did not take their high calling seriously, and wrought terrible revenge. Some other young advocates told him, in all solemnity, that a clerk was looking for him with an urgent brief - Louis tore off his wig and robes and fled in terror. A more senior legal wit, apropos the flowing locks, dubbed Louis 'the new Chatterton' and would hail him loudly: 'Here comes the Marvellous Boy!'⁵ Louis could never cope with teasing and again fled in abject misery.

Notwithstanding his new professional status, Louis still roamed the streets like a tramp and drank in low dives. On issuing from one such public house, he bumped into a Lord of Session and had no option but to salute him. It took the judge a while to realise this exotic specimen was a practitioner of the law - but he recognised Louis immediately next day.

On returning to Heriot Row, Louis had discovered a brief waiting for him. It was impossible to escape, and next morning found him in court with instructions to 'revive' a case. This should have been a simple procedure but he found himself up in

front of the same Lord of Session. Worse still, the other young advocates had wind of something afoot and the normally empty benches were packed. Swallowing nervously, Louis rose to his feet. His lordship leaned over his desk with a twinkle in his baleful eye and bombarded him with endless extraneous questions about the case. Unable to assist, Louis turned in desperation to seek instruction from his solicitor - only to discover the man was in on the joke and had vanished. After a *mauvais quart d'heure*, Louis at last spotted him lurking at the back of the court and referred his lordship thither for all further information.⁶

After this, Louis's wig and gown were rarely taken down from their peg at Parliament House and his brief box remained empty. The one facility he did make full use of was the Advocates' Library, the finest collection in Scotland of books on all subjects. That winter Louis went through everything he could find about Robert Burns, having secured a commission to compile an entry on the Scottish Bard for the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

In the afternoons he would go for walks of five or six miles around the city and its outskirts. This area of his life remained undocumented and unknown to his parents, who did not normally see him before the bell rang for dinner. Louis might have been anywhere. Did he return to his old haunts among the brothels of Leith Street? Or did he, like some of his learned friends, frequent the house near the law courts which did brisk pre-prandial business in the late afternoon, once the Clerk of Court had cried: 'All rise!'?

Sadly the new Clerk was not a patch on old Johnnie Adam, who had wiped himself out with the demon alcohol. That October, Louis penned a humorous farewell to the man who had afforded him and Baxter long hours of merriment, written in the style of that other debauched Robbie - poor Fergusson who died in the madhouse:

*Whusky an' he were pack together,
Whate'er the hour, whate'er the weather,
John kept himsel' wi' mistened leather
An' kindled spunk.
Wi' him, there was nae askin' whether –*

John was aye drunk.

Louis himself could hit the bottle when depressed, sitting alone in his little room with a large dram before stumbling into bed in the small hours. In a letter to Colvin he confessed cheerfully: 'I sit up late at night and sometimes wet my whistle... I must live; because if I die just now, I shall have little profit of all my abstinence.'⁷ He still wrote to his Madonna but Mrs Sitwell was now more confidante and dear friend than grand passion, and his correspondence grew intermittent with apologies for not writing sooner. The sense that he was in some way saving himself for her was wearing thin and there was nothing to stop him seeing other women.

His health was better than ever - the Devil was well and could only be kept in check by plenty of exercise. There was no ice on Duddingston Loch but that winter Louis discovered a new craze. The day after his birthday, he wrote to Mrs Sitwell: 'I have got back a good deal into my old random, little-thought way of life... I have another great delight in this wheel skating... so that I can go there whenever I am unwilling to do anything else, and work my wicked carcass into a proper state of subjection.'⁸

He did not mention his roller-skating partner Emma Barclay, a girl of 21 who took part in the Jenkin theatricals and was a member of Professor Masson's English class. Her father was a wealthy corn factor who had no idea his daughter was helping subdue a young man's wicked carcass. Emma was equally innocent and would cherish memories of Louis Stevenson as a picturesque rather than graceful wheel-skater in a velvet turban and velvet suit with a sash. As an old lady of 97, she would still recall how he 'really cared about things' and was very good-natured, 'not malicious at all', with a great sense of humour.⁹

Louis was obliged to spend time entertaining respectable young ladies, some resident at Heriot Row. Louisa and Alice Mackenzie were daughters of Maggie Stevenson's cousin James Mackenzie of Auchenhelish House in Dunbartonshire. Alice loved to dance but Louis refused to accompany her to balls, remaining at home with Louisa who would recall: 'Louis, perhaps thinking I, not at the ball, might be feeling dull, asked me to go up to his study with him, and he read to me something he was then writing, and began to criticise it as he read. I remember one of his

remarks was: "Now, I think that bit rather fine," - to which I meekly agreed!

Another time, Louis gave a long dissertation on his experiences at Mentone. Poor Louisa would recollect how 'Mrs Stevenson took my hand in hers and whispered: "Now we shall listen," - which we had to do for quite an hour! His mother simply hung on his every word... But to us young people Louis seemed rather eccentric and erratic in those days, and I must confess that at the end of his long dissertation I felt a little bit tired, not to say bored.'

Louis likewise wearied of nice young girls and took covert revenge. Among the dinner party guests that winter were Ella Riach and her younger sister, both shy and gauche. Louis had encountered their Gaelic surname before and, in a spirit of mischief, demanded to know what it meant - rejecting Ella's innocuous explanations until the whole dinner table was listening in. Then, almost in tears, the girl blurted out: 'Some people say it means the Devil!'

Ella's sister would recall how 'Louis Stevenson drew himself up and sat for some moments with his hand at the salute, as in the presence of Royalty; and kind Mr Stevenson came to Ella's rescue by making everybody talk about something else.' But Louis calmly filed away her curious surname in his memory. It meant the brindled one, or even the singed one, the devil incarnate - and years later he would use the name for the mate of the brig Covenant in Kidnapped.

There were few words with which Louis was not familiar, and in his city wanderings he encountered women whose language and behaviour would have made the Riach girls die of shame. He used slang to extend his vocabulary - much to the annoyance of his father, who when Louis was younger would fine him whenever he deviated from standard English. Slang also allowed Louis and his friends, notably Henley who would later help compile the voluminous Dictionary of Slang and its Analogues, to hold coded conversations of a risqué nature. Among the young ladies Louis met at the Jenkins' was Leila Scot-Skirving, daughter of a retired East Lothian gentleman farmer with a country residence on the isle of Islay. A strong-willed girl of extrovert temperament, Leila took a fancy to Louis. Her brother Robert would recall: 'One night my sister, who greatly admired him, was at supper next him. He turned, and said, "Could you eat three Bath buns before breakfast?" "Yes, I could in

Islay," replied my sister. "Thank God, you are yet young!" said R.L.S.'

Since 'bath of birth' was Walt Whitman's poetic expression for the female genitalia, and 'bun' was common Victorian slang for the same thing, Louis may have been having a dirty joke at the expense of young Leila, still innocent at 21. He would not have done this with Flora Masson, then a highly intelligent young woman of 19 who had just become the first female student to secure a First in English Literature. Judging by Archie's response to Lady Flora in *Weir of Hermiston*, Louis probably admired her from afar. Nearly two decades later he would create a Flora Gilchrist who visits the prisoner St Ives in Edinburgh Castle, much as Miss Masson helped make life more bearable for Louis in what he now sometimes called his 'cage' in Heriot Row.

There was one lady in particular, about eighteen or nineteen, tall, of a gallant carriage, and with a profusion of hair in which the sun found threads of gold. As soon as she came in the courtyard (and she was a rather frequent visitor) it seemed I was aware of it. She had an air of angelic candour, yet of a high spirit; she stepped like a Diana, every movement was noble and free... Her hair blew in the wind with changes of colour; her garments moulded her with the accuracy of sculpture; the ends of her shawl fluttered about her ear and were caught in again with an inimitable deftness...¹⁰

Louis would create another Flora in the autobiographical story which also described Arthur Collett's disreputable Leith Street shebeen, and which contrasted the respectable and low-life existences which the reluctant advocate was leading. Before John Nicolson's late-night rendezvous with his friend Alan, he has been at home at a dinner party, after which he was allowed to walk Flora Mackenzie back to her father's house in Royal Terrace - Flora Masson lived nearby in smart Regent Terrace, as befitted her professorial father who hailed from Aberdeen:

About half-past ten it was John's brave good fortune to offer his arm to Miss Mackenzie, and escort her home. The night was chill and starry; all the way eastward the trees of the different gardens rustled and looked black. Up the stone gully of Leith Walk, when they came to cross it, the breeze made a rush and set the flames of the street-lamps quavering; and when at last they had mounted to the Royal Terrace, where Captain Mackenzie lived, a great salt freshness came in their faces from the sea. These phases of the walk remained written on

John's memory, each emphasised by the touch of that light hand on his arm; and behind all these aspects of the nocturnal city he saw, in his mind's-eye, a picture of the lighted drawing-room at home where he had sat talking with Flora; and his father, from the other end, had looked on with a kind and ironical smile... Mr Nicholson had remarked his son's entanglement with satisfaction, tinged by humour; and his smile, if it still was a thought contemptuous, had implied consent.

At the captain's door the girl held out her hand, with a certain emphasis; and John took it and kept it a little longer, and said, 'Good-night, Flora, dear,' and was instantly thrown into much fear by his presumption. But she only laughed, ran up the steps, and rang the bell; and while she was waiting for the door to open, kept close in the porch, and talked to him from that point as out of a fortification. She had a knitted shawl over her head; her blue Highland eyes took the light from the neighbouring street-lamp and sparkled; and when the door opened and closed upon her, John felt cruelly alone.¹¹

Much though Tom Stevenson might have smiled his consent to having Flora Masson as a daughter-in-law, it was not to be. Despite the advocate's brass plate, Louis at this time was hardly a catch for a young lady and her pompous father may not have approved. Flora would never marry - although Louis did ask for her hand, according to William Robertson Nicoll, founder of the British Weekly, who knew her in later life. Nicoll was too discreet to commit this to print, but the author and editor J.A. Hammerton would recall: 'There was another lady... Miss Flora Masson, who might, had she wished, have been Mrs R.L. Stevenson, and I remember Nicoll telling me on one of my Sunday visits to Bay Tree Lodge, Frogna, [Hampstead] where Miss Masson was a near neighbour, that the proposal letter was still in existence.'¹²

Nothing survives in Louis's letters to suggest he fell for Flora Masson. There is only a curious coincidence, that from the seven-month period between October 1875 and April 1876 only 14 letters by Louis have survived - a trickle compared to his usual output. Did he simply weary of letter-writing, or did an unusually high number of letters go missing, perhaps containing material that might incline others to destroy them?

At this time Louis may not have been celibate and he no longer felt the need to stay faithful to Mrs Sitwell. He was under pressure from his parents to find a

suitable wife, and at the start of 1876 he admitted to his one-time Madonna: 'I don't believe I ever shall love anyone else although I know the world's experience against me, and I don't know but that a good dull marriage with a dull good girl would be a good move.'

This suggests a certain lack of passion in any proposals of marriage he might have made, although his literary treatment of Flora Masson is inconsistent with a girl he found dull. Nor was Flora the only young lady he fell for. When the Jenkins moved in 1874 to Great Stuart Street, their new neighbour was a judge, Lord Mackenzie, with three daughters still living at home - a scenario that would be recalled in Louis's novel *Catriona* with Mackenzie transformed into Prestongrange, the Lord Advocate.

Prestongrange appeared in the doorway and bade me eagerly into his big chamber. 'I have a moment's engagements,' said he; 'and that you may not sit empty-handed I am going to present you to my three braw daughters...' He led me into another long room above, where a dry old lady sat at a frame of embroidery, and the three handsomest young women (I suppose) in Scotland stood together by a window. 'This is my new friend, Mr Balfour,' said he, presenting me by the arm. 'And here,' says he, turning to the three younger ladies, 'here are my THREE BRAW DAUGHTERS. A fair question to ye, Mr Davie: which of the three is the best favoured?'

As was the case with the Lord Advocate's daughters, the youngest Mackenzie girl was no more than a child. Mary, then aged nine, would grow up to marry Fleeming Jenkin's son Frewen. The middle sister Annie, aged 21, had the same name as Prestongrange's middle daughter. In *Catriona*, the oldest daughter Barbara Grant teases David Balfour for abandoning the three of them in Hope Park: "'He has thrown her out, overboard, his ain dear Annie!'" she hummed; "and his ain dear Annie and her two sisters had to taigle home by theirselves like a string of green geese!'"

Annie Mackenzie was spoken for already, and married in 1875. The eldest daughter, Charlotte, was born in 1850 - the same year as Louis, or 'not so much older than myself' as David Balfour put it. One of these young ladies took Louis's fancy, for, at the time of Frewen's wedding, Louis confessed to 'my own former admiration

for a sister of the bride's'.

In 1875, Louis attended Eve Simpson's birthday party in St Colme Street, ten days before Christmas. He had just turned 25, while at 20 Eve was of more than marriageable age. For a birthday present he brought her a pair of match-holders decorated with frogs, one held high in each hand as he made a dramatic entry into the drawing-room before laying his gifts at Eve's feet. If this turned her head, the wily Simp made sure any frivolous romantic notions came to naught. His own irregular liaison with Etta was complicated enough without his sister falling for Louis, who, dear fellow though he was, would make a disastrous husband.

The birthday party took the form of a dinner, but quite unlike the events Louis normally loathed. Eve fancied she could cook, and took over the kitchen with some female friends, much to the alarm of Jarvis the butler. Some of the male guests, including Louis, were required to act as waiters - which reconciled him to wearing his new dress-suit, purchased much against his will to replace the old one now used as advocate's day wear. The stiff formal dress was softened by a large white apron and a Bohemian cap made of newspaper, and soon Louis was in his element.

'He received the dishes at the door, and introduced the viands with a preface, at which he was as ready with his tongue as with his pen,' Eve would recall. 'We cooks promptly complained of the waiting, which was wrong-sided and spasmodic. Louis conveyed an entree in a grand march round the room with much high-stepping; but he was so engaged in talking that he was as awkward as his clumsy brother waiters at serving it.

'Sometimes, when he took pot luck with us, and seasoned our dinner with good company, he would be so busy holding forth on some new theory that a dish would wait at his elbow for a length of time Jarvis though inadvisable. The old man would give it what he called a shuggle to attract attention, and that failing, break out with "Hoot, sir, gang on wi your dinner or let ithers gang."... Our faithful tyrant's forbearance broke down when he caught sight of "yon laddie Stevenson" dealing forks (mixed with knives) like cards: "I'll wait on the twenty o' ye, but gi'e me my siller; I canna hae it dadded."

On hearing the amateur cooks had spilled the potatoes over the kitchen floor,

Louis consoled himself with a wedge from one of the round Dutch cheeses set out on the table, carved with a comic face and topped with 'hair' of celery and cress. Then he hit on the idea of making the cooks try every dish first to ensure it had not been poisoned.

'We finished our party off with a dance,' wrote Eve. 'Louis seldom danced in an Edinburgh drawing-room after he got into swallow-tails, but the motley assemblage of cooks and waiters, in many-coloured head-gear, suited his particular taste, and he footed it merrily at that irregular gathering, which left behind it laughter-moving memories for many long years.'¹³

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¹ RLS, *Weir of Hermiston*, Chapter V.

² Eve Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*, Chapter IX.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 9, 1875. Yale 421, MS National Library of Scotland.

⁵ Eve Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*, Chapter IX.

⁶ Graham Balfour, notes for *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, National Library of Scotland.

⁷ RLS to Sidney Colvin, Heriot Row, November 1875. Yale 424. MS Yale.

⁸ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, November 14, 1875. Yale 425, MS Yale.

⁹ Short item in *The Scotsman* in 1950. In the RLS press cuttings file in the Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library.

¹⁰ RLS, *St Ives*, Chapter I.

¹¹ RLS, *The Misadventures of John Nicolson*.

¹² J.A. Hammerton, *Books and Myself: Memoirs of an Editor*, p167.

¹³ Eve Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*, Chapter IX.