CHAPTER FOUR

Stevenson of Swanston

THE tropical heat of Samoa had forced him onto the verandah, unable to bear the oven-like conditions beneath the hot tin roof of his study. His exile weighed heavy, and he would have given almost anything to feel again the chill winds of Edinburgh that had once plagued his health and kept him wrapped in layers of flannel. Louis now sat barefoot and perspiring in thin white pyjamas – further divestment was impossible without indecency. If only there were a breeze. He picked up the manuscript at his side and scanned the dedication he had penned before beginning the troubled love story of Archie Weir and Christina Elliott.

I see rain falling and the rainbow drawn
On Lammermuir; hearkening, I hear again
In my precipitous city beaten bells
Winnow the keen sea wind; and looking back
Upon so much already endured and done
From then to now – reverent, I bow the head!

Lammermuir. He had been in the Lammermuir Hills just once, as a boy, on a visit to his farming uncle Ramsay Traquair. Louis should have written 'Allermuir', but Fanny was too intelligent not to pick up resonances from his own life and he did not want to explain his early amours to a wife so prone to jealousy.

Poor Fanny, she was not well, the heroic little figure in the blue missionary smock, digging like a mad woman to turn jungle into garden. Since Louis had started dictating his work to Belle, before seeking an opinion from his step-son and sometime co-author Lloyd, Fanny had been painfully aware that her husband was capable of greatness without her. Yet he still felt he owed her everything. Had she not been there for him when his life had hung by a thread? His old loves were gone, along with his youth, though he would hold on to their memory forever. Fanny did not have to know, they were not part of her story. What she needed was to feel valued above all others by the husband to whom a world of readers paid homage.

Take now the writing; thine it is. For who
Burnished the sword, blew on the drowsy coal,
Held still the target higher, chary of praise
And prodigal of counsel – who but thou?
So now, in the end, if this the least be good,
If any deed be done, if any fire
Burn in the imperfect page, the praise be thine![1]

Suddenly he felt the first breath of wind, and heard the rain drawing near across the forest. Soon it was roaring on the tin roof, spitting in through the Japanese blinds and streaming down the windows. Outside, the crystal rods of the shower came criss-crossing down over everything, pattering on dry soil and transforming it into the good wet earth from which arose a smell as strong as memory, the smell of the hills of home...[2]

AS the carriage took his parents off to the railway station, Louis gazed up at Allermuir, the lofty hill down which the rain from the Pentlands ran in rivulets to the waterman's house near his father's country property, from which it was fed to the pumps and faucets of Edinburgh. The city might be out of earshot from the Lammermuirs, but on a still day its church bells were audible on the hills above Swanston, the hills Louis knew and loved best.

It was a relief to be out in the country, and away from his father, after such a wretched winter. Tom Stevenson had not been amused to find Louis being hauled before the police court, although bail money had been found to save his delicate son from four nights in a chilly cell. Shivering in the dock, despite layers of flannel, Louis had not enjoyed his one experience of Scottish criminal justice.

In the dock, the centre of men's eyes, there stood a whey-coloured, misbegotten caitiff... His story, as it was raked out before him in that public scene, was one of disgrace and vice and cowardice, the very nakedness of crime... He kept his head bowed and his hands clutched upon the rail; his hair dropped in his eyes and at times he flung it back; and now he glanced about the audience in a sudden fellness of terror, and now looked in the face of his judge and gulped. There was pinned about his throat a piece of dingy flannel... yet a little longer, and with a last

sordid piece of pageantry, he would cease to be. And here, in the meantime, with a trait of human nature that caught at the beholder's breath, he was tending a sore throat.[3]

Poor Duncan Jopp, on trial for his life in Weir of Hermiston, bore certain superficial resemblances to Drunken Fop, the respectable engineer's son who had made a public nuisance of himself in the snow. Fortunately snowballing was not a capital offence and on the morning of Tuesday March 1, Louis was admonished for his petty crime – a light sentence compared to the fate of poor Jopp.

Then followed the brutal instant of extinction, and the paltry dangling of the remains like a broken jumping-jack. Archie had been prepared for something terrible, not for this tragic meanness. He stood a moment silent, and then - "I denounce this God-defying murder," he shouted; and his father, if he must have disclaimed the sentiment, might have owned the stentorian voice with which it was uttered.

Frank Innes dragged him from the spot... Frank was by nature a thin, jeering creature, not truly susceptible whether of feeling or inspiring friendship; and the relation between the pair was altogether on the outside... Archie, who had just defied - was it God or Satan? - would not listen to the word of a college companion.

'I will not go with you,' he said. 'I do not desire your company, sir; I would be alone.'

'Here, Weir, man, don't be absurd,' said Innes, keeping a tight hold upon his sleeve. 'I will not let you go until I know what you mean to do with yourself... This has been the most insane affair; you know it has. You know very well that I'm playing the good Samaritan. All I wish is to keep you quiet.'

'If quietness is what you wish, Mr Innes,' said Archie, 'and you will promise to leave me entirely to myself, I will tell you so much, that I am going to walk in the country and admire the beauties of nature...'

'You won't forget the Spec?' asked Innes.

'The Spec?' said Archie. 'O no, I won't forget the Spec.'[4]

Nor had Louis forgotten the Speculative Society. On the evening of his court ordeal, he appeared there in the mantle of a convicted criminal and submitted to the predictable ragging. But instead of keeping his head down, he sprang a debate - Is the Abolition of Capital Punishment Desirable? - and spoke passionately in favour. Sadly, like Archie Weir, Louis could not find a seconder and the motion fell. Tom

Stevenson would not have been pleased to learn of his son's dangerous liberal pronouncements in defiance of the justice system that had just treated his own misdemeanour so leniently.

It was as well Louis's parents were going away with their niece Henrietta Traquair on a health trip to Scarborough. The young laird Louis was left in charge at Swanston, waited on by Cummy with a local lassie to help in the kitchen. There was also one house guest, 'Noona' Balfour, the Degenerate Douglas of old who had finished his university session and needed somewhere to spend the summer holidays.

And so it was agreed that he was to stay, with no term to the visit... On such vague conditions there began for these two young men (who were not even friends) a life of great familiarity and, as the days drew on, less and less intimacy. They were together at meal times, together o' nights when the hour had come for whisky-toddy; but it might have been noticed (had there been any one to pay heed) that they were rarely so much together by day...[5]

Louis did his best to get on with Noona, but could not refrain from sending Henrietta a pen portrait of the ennui: 'D.D. is seated in the square chair reading a novel, I am in the arm chair writing this epistle. On the table stand the chess-men, two empty tumblers and an empty canister of tobacco. A peculiar atmosphere pervades the room, which Cummy designates as a "nasty, wauf smell".'[6]

Louis amused himself also by playing the country squire, paying calls around the local farms and inviting several young farmers back to Swanston Cottage, including Charles Macara, 24-year-old master of 772 acres,[7] who lived a short stroll away at Swanston House. He dined with Louis one night along with George Scott, 26-year-old tenant of Oxgangs Farm,[8] and a farmer called Watson from Dreghorn Mains.

Harum-scarum, clodpole young lairds of the neighbourhood paid him the compliment of a visit. Young Hay of Romanes rode down to call, on his crop-eared pony; young Pringle of Drumanno came up on his bony grey. Hay remained on the hospitable field, and must be carried to bed; Pringle got somehow to his saddle about 3am, and (as Archie stood with the lamp on the upper doorstep) lurched, uttered a senseless view-holloa, and vanished out of the small circle of illumination like a wraith...[9]

In the more sober light of day, Louis returned the social call to George Scott at

Oxgangs, where they sat in the garden and young Stevenson of Swanston composed a poem. Not far from the farmhouse was the Hunters' Tryst, an ancient inn where the young squires liked to meet. It had once been the headquarters of the Six-Feet-High Club, a convivial band of lofty individuals including Sir Walter Scott. George Scott may have lacked his illustrious namesake's literary skills, but young farmers knew how to drink and Louis would have had a hard time keeping up.

The door was unbarred by a company of the tallest lads my eyes had ever rested on, all astonishingly drunk and very decently dressed... They jostled me among them into the room where they had been sitting, a plain hedgerow alehouse parlour, with a roaring fire in the chimney and a prodigious number of empty bottles on the floor; and informed me that I was made, by this reception, a temporary member of the Six-Feet-High Club...[10]

That Louis lacked the stature to be counted among this heroic band of yore was recorded on a door at Oxgangs farmhouse, where George Scott took his measure and Louis confirmed the mark in his own handwriting: 'R.L. Stevenson, June 1870. Stocking soles.'[11] His height then, at the age of 19, was five feet, eight and three-quarter inches - fully grown and ready for love.

While roaming the countryside between Swanston and Edinburgh, Louis would drop in at Buckstane farmhouse in the Braid Hills, the home of Jean Romanes. Mrs Romanes was a widow whose late husband had kept a hotel, but she was a Denholm, from farming stock, and at the age of 64 she now ran 95 acres of arable land with the help of two young farm hands.[12] A cheerful, hospitable woman, she would sit by her sitting-room window with an eye on the entrance gate. Whenever Louis appeared, she exclaimed: 'Ah! here comes that daft laddie Stevenson; he must hae smelled my scones.'[13]

In the farmhouse kitchen she kept open house, and there Louis would have met her extended family. She was close to her sister Elizabeth, who had married William Evans, a farmer from Fife. Their children would come to stay at Buckstane, among them a daughter named after her aunt. Miss Jane Romanes Evans was her Sunday name, but at Buckstane she would simply have been young Jeannie, and had just turned sixteen. That June in 1870, Louis came his closest yet to falling in love.

I dreamed of forest alleys fair

And fields of gray-flowered grass,

Where by the yellow summer moon

My Jenny seemed to pass...[14]

Restless in his bed at Swanston Cottage, Louis may have risen and slipped downstairs quietly in his stocking soles before putting on his boots and walking a mile beneath the summer moon to stand like a lovesick swain outside Buckstane farmhouse.

Last night I lingered long without

My last of loves to see.

Alas! the moon-white window-panes

Stared blindly back on me...[15]

The girl had left the area shortly before Louis's parents departed for Scarborough. They might not have agreed to leave him behind had they thought she was still in the area. An amour with a farmer's daughter was not the social connection the Stevensons envisaged. In a letter to Bob, Louis confided: 'I have been very busy, and very much a hit with a certain damsel who shall be nameless during the last month or so... the lady in question has been withdrawn to the paternal province. I never was so nearly hooked, I may remark *en passant*, as I was by the damsel already noticed - indeed it was perhaps as well she left when she did, as I detected a nasty over-friendliness towards me on the part of her relations - one of the most sobering observations that the ardent youth can make. To be well received by the lady is pleasant; but it is appalling when the friends "take up the wondrous tale" and you find yourself gracefully sliding into the position of an acknowledged shooter.'

But the young lady was not so easily banished from his thoughts, and a fortnight later Louis wrote mischievously to Henrietta at Scarborough: 'You can also tell my respected mother that I have received a most satisfactory message from the north; whereupon my heart expandified... My heart is in the Highlands.' Yet the girl was gone, leaving Louis to the melancholy of lost love, in which mood he completed the poem.

Once more upon the same old seat
In the same sunshiny weather,
The elm-trees' shadows at their feet
And foliage move together...

But now deep sleep is on my heart,
Deep sleep and perfect rest.
Hope's flutterings now disturb no more
The quiet of my breast.[16]

The area around Swanston not only inspired several of Louis's fictional romances, including the love story of Archie Weir and Christina Elliott, but may also have been the setting for other real-life affairs with local girls. Louis was rumoured to have been involved with the tall, well-built daughter of a blacksmith from the Highlands. Such an Amazon, fictitiously called Janet M'Clour, appears twice in his work. Early on in his marriage, Louis portrayed her as an old woman with a disreputable past, possessed by the devil in the horror story Thrawn Janet. But in his abandoned novel Heathercat, written towards the end of his life when Fanny exerted less influence on his writing, Louis depicted Janet in her strapping, amorous youth, dallying with the curate Haddo on a Pentland hillside not far from Swanston:

The curate went on with his little, brisk steps to the corner of a dyke, and stopped and whistled and waved upon a lassie that was herding cattle there. This Janet M'Clour was a big lass, being taller than the curate; and what made her look the more so, she was kilted very high. It seemed for a while she would not come, and Francie heard her calling Haddo a 'daft auld fule,' and saw her running and dodging him among the whins and hags till he was fairly blown. But at the last he gets a bottle from his plaid-neuk and holds it up to her; whereupon she came at once into a composition, and the pair sat, drinking of the bottle, and daffing and laughing together, on a mound of heather...'[17]

Could Louis have enjoyed similar rustic dalliances in the hills above Swanston? He may have formed a romantic attachment to a girl from one of the hill farms, or even the daughter of a blacksmith at the smithy in Lothianburn, where the Swanston horses were shod, but she could never be accepted as a social equal by his parents.

To please them, he still kept up the pretence of studying to be an engineer, and had enrolled that summer for the field trips that were a part of Fleeming Jenkin's innovative teaching - to a timber yard, to learn the properties of different woods, or to the harbour and docks at Leith. In the Braid Hills, Jenkin also taught his students the art of surveying. While the more competent got to grips with using a theodolite, Louis could only injure himself by running a levelling rod into his leg. Bleeding like a wounded duellist, he was carried to the nearest house in Jordan Lane, which happened to be the home of the artist Sam Bough.

The Bohemian but wealthy Bough was not at home, but his wife responded to the emergency. Bella Bough, voluptuous in middle-age, had been an actress in her youth, when she was wooed from the wings by her husband, then but a painter of theatrical sets. Louis's injury appealed to her sense of the dramatic, and she clasped the wounded soldier to her blowsy bosom while calling for the servants to bring bandages. Jenkin, likewise a connoisseur of drama, directed operations and soon the patched-up Louis was chatting away at his charming, witty best.[18]

The short session of field studies with Jenkin was now over, but there was more engineering for Louis that summer. At the start of August, he took the train to Greenock and boarded the paddle steamer Iona, en route to a tiny islet on the edge of Mull. As yet Earraid had no great significance except to its handful of residents and the firm of D. & T. Stevenson, which was using it as a land base during construction of the Dhu Heartach lighthouse on a rock some 12 miles out to sea.

On the first leg of the journey Louis found himself in the company of Jenkin *en famille*, traveling with his wife and their three sons to a Highland farmhouse they had taken for a late summer break. Anne Jenkin, still enamoured of the young Scottish Heine, was charming as ever, as were her sons Frewen and Bernard. But the eldest, Austin or 'Ossie', was precociously bright for an eight-year-old and Louis found him 'a disgusting, priggish, envious, diabolically clever little specimen'.[19]

The Iona called in at Rothesay, rounded the Kyles of Bute and steamed north for Ardrishaig before passing through the Crinan Canal to Oban. Having said farewell to the Jenkins, Louis found himself alone for the evening and decided to hire a rowing boat. Anchored in the bay was the yacht of George Robert Stephenson,

millionaire nephew of the famous locomotive engineer. The strains of music from a band on board wafted through the night air. The bay was as smooth as a millpond, and at intervals blue lights were burned on the water and rockets sent up. Sometimes great stars of clear fire fell from them, until the bay received and quenched them, as Louis sculled around the yacht in the dark.[20]

His easy charm was much in evidence that summer. It was not like Edinburgh, where a conversation could lead to a wearisome obligation to attend dull dinner parties and pay pointless social calls. On a ship you could chat away to fellow passengers, knowing you were unlikely to meet again. Louis passed a pleasant evening with Henry Watson, a company director from Sheffield, and his sister, who was intrigued to find herself talking to one of the Stevenson dynasty immortalised by R.M. Ballantyne in his novel The Lighthouse.[21]

Back on the steamer, Louis made the acquaintance at last of Sam Bough, rising like a brandy-fuelled Caliban from the bowels of the ship to meet the one-time wounded soldier who had used his home as a dressing station. Bough, who pronounced his surname 'Bo' and was known to a select band of friends as Sambo, was a rough diamond, an acquired taste, whose considerable artistic talents had forced themselves on the Royal Scottish Academy until it grudgingly accorded him the inelegant suffix 'ARSA'. He sketched and painted with alacrity, his works sold well at high prices, and his much-extended home in Jordan Lane testified to his commercial success.[22]

Bough and Louis took to each other instantly, despite an age gap of 28 years. Behind the brandy fumes and the rough and frequently sarcastic exterior, Bough was a man of culture and Louis was delighted to find they had read the same authors. At last he could discuss Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster and Fletcher with someone who knew what he was talking about. Bough in turn was stunned to find that, far from being a vacuous spoilt brat, Louis had literature coming out of his ears: 'Where the devil did you read all those books?'[23]

Their first meeting was interrupted by Miss Amy Sinclair. Pretty as a picture and not quite 17, she was cruising the isles with a plainer girl cousin, accompanied by Amy's elderly father, Sir John Sinclair of Thurso Castle, and the cousin's mother.

Louis decided to lay siege. 'Eh bien,' says I to myself, 'that seems to be the best investment on board. So I sidled up to the old gentleman, got into conversation with him and so with the damsel; and thereupon, having used the patriarch as a ladder, I kicked him down behind me.'[24]

While Bough fumed in the background, Louis went below for brandy and biscuit to settle the cousin's seasick stomach, and thus fell into conversation with Miss Amy. As she prattled away unselfconsciously, he was amazed to find such a pretty girl could be so naive and willing to flout all the social conventions. When they called briefly at the isle of Staffa, she allowed Louis to row her into Fingal's Cave where they marvelled at the hexagonal basalt columns. Bough meanwhile busied himself with 'making himself agreeable or otherwise to everybody' and left Miss Amy with some charming drawings in her sketchbook.[25]

But it was Louis she invited to join her for lunch on the steamer. Over a plate of fresh salmon, the girl ignored all propriety as she poured out her heart to her new young squire - how she could not have enjoyed herself so much without him, how she wished they'd met sooner, how Louis must visit her in Caithness or in London and must give her his address in Edinburgh. As the object of this schoolgirl crush, Louis later confided in a letter to his mother: 'I could scarce keep from laughing and blushed, I might say, at her aunt's satyrical face and sharp ears on the other side. Wasn't it delicious?'[26]

At Iona, Louis and Miss Amy went round the ruins of the Abbey, then said their farewells. It had been a perfect romantic interlude, despite the efforts of Bough whose erratic behaviour quite alarmed the girl's aunt. Louis was forced to admit the 'strange, wild man' was an acquaintance of his, and groaned inwardly when the befuddled Bough, on being thanked by the aunt for his kind attentions, responded jovially: 'Fair maid, in thy orisons be all my sins remember'd...'[27]

Miss Amy waved her handkerchief from the deck until the steamer was out of sight, with Louis responding until his arm ached. He spent the rest of the afternoon sketching on Iona with Bough, who regaled him with his family history. Born the son of a Carlisle cobbler, Bough had followed that trade before becoming a lawyer's clerk until he could make a living as a landscape painter. Proud of his origins in

Cumberland, where he had known the John Peel immortalised in song, Bough had wandered like a Bohemian gypsy in a pony and cart loaded with artist's materials before settling in Glasgow.

A few years later he moved to Edinburgh, where the quality of his work, sometimes audaciously created from scratch on the eve of an RSA show, was equalled only by his outrageous drunkenness and obscene language at RSA dinners until he was banned from attending.[28] Bough sober, however, was a man of great humour, and he needed it that evening when he and Louis went in for dinner at the Argyll Hotel. They had ordered the meal for 5pm, but by 5.50 nothing had appeared, so Louis rattled a shovel and tongs at the stairhead.

At last in comes the tureen and the handmaid lifts the cover. 'Rice soup!' I yell, 'O no! none o' that for me!' - 'Yes,' says Bough savagely, 'But Miss Amy didn't take me downstairs to eat salmon.' Accordingly he is helped. How his face fell. 'I imagine myself in the accident ward of the infirmary,' quoth he. It was, purely and simply, rice and water. After this, we have another weary pause, and then herrings in a state of mash and potatoes like iron. 'Send the potatoes out to Prussia for grape-shot,' was the suggestion... At last 'the supreme moment comes', and the fowl in a lordly dish is carried in. On the cover being raised, there is something so forlorn and miserable about the aspect of the animal that we both roar with laughter.

Then Bough, taking up knife and fork, turns the 'swarry' over and over, shaking doubtfully his head. 'There's an aspect of quiet resistance about the beggar,' says he, 'that looks bad.' However, to work he falls until the sweat stands on his brow and a dismembered leg falls, dull and leadenlike, onto my dish. To eat it was simply impossible... I did not know before that flesh could be so tough. 'The strongest jaws in England,' says Bough, piteously harpooning his dried morsel, 'couldn't eat this leg in less than twelve hours.'

Nothing for it now, but to order boat and bill. 'That fowl,' says Bough to the landlady, 'is of a breed I know. I knew the cut of its jib whenever it was put down. That was the grandmother of the cock that frightened Peter.' - 'I thought it was an historical animal,' says I, 'What a shame to kill it. It's as bad as eating Whittington's cat or the Dog of Montargis.' - 'Na - na, it's not old,' says the landlady, 'but it eats hard.' - 'Eats!' I cry, 'where do you find

that? Very little of that verb with us.' So, with more raillery, we pay six shillings for our festival and run over to Earraid, shaking the dust of the Argyll Hotel from off our feet.[29]

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[1] RLS, Dedication of Weir of Hermiston 'To My Wife'.
[2] RLS to Sidney Colvin, Vailima, Samoa, October 6, 1894, Yale 2789, MS Harvard.
[3] RLS, Weir of Hermiston, Chapter III.
[4] Ibid.
[5] RLS, Weir of Hermiston, Chapter VII.
[6] RLS to Henrietta Traquair, Swanston Cottage, July 1, 1870, Yale 82, MS Ramsay Milne.
[7] 1871 Scotland Census, GROS.
[8] Ibid.
[9] RLS, Weir of Hermiston, Chapter V.
[10] RLS, St Ives, Chapter XXVII.
[11] The door was presented to Oxgangs School in 1958.
[12] 1871 Scotland Census, GROS.
[13] Information given by James S. Bennet, of Buckstane, to Compton Mackenzie, author of the International Profiles Robert Louis Stevenson.
[14] RLS, I Dreamed of Forest Alleys Fair, New Poems.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] RLS, Heathercat, Chapter II, in Lay Morals and Other Papers.
[18] Margaret Isabella Stevenson, Diary Notes.
[19] RLS to his Parents, Earraid, August 4, 1870, Yale 83, MS University of Texas.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Gil and Pat Hitchon, Sam Bough, RSA, The Rivers In Bohemia.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] RLS to his Parents, Earraid, August 5, 1870, Yale 83, MS University of Texas.