CHAPTER SEVEN

The Burnt Letters

THE sun was down, the sky all on fire, and the lamp had been some time lighted, when Case came back with Uma and the negro. She was dressed and scented; her kilt was of fine tapa, looking richer in the folds than any silk; her bust, which was of the colour of dark honey, she wore bare only for some half a dozen necklaces of seeds and flowers; and behind her ears and in her hair she had the scarlet flowers of the hibiscus. She showed the best bearing for a bride conceivable, serious and still; and I thought shame to stand up with her in that mean house and before that grinning negro. I thought shame, I say; for the mountebank was dressed with a big paper collar, the book he made believe to read from was an odd volume of a novel, and the words of his service not fit to be set down. My conscience smote me when we joined hands; and when she got her certificate I was tempted to throw up the bargain and confess. Here is the document. It was Case that wrote it, signatures and all, in a leaf out of the ledger:-

This is to certify that Uma, daughter of Fa'avao of Falesa, Island of - , is illegally married to Mr. John Wiltshire for one week, and Mr. John Wiltshire is at liberty to send her to hell when he pleases.

JOHN BLACKAMOAR. Chaplain to the hulks.

Extracted from the Register by William T. Randall, Master Mariner.

A nice paper to put in a girl's hand and see her hide away like gold. A man might easily feel cheap for less.[1]

AS Louis in Samoa took a break from planning David Balfour's further adventures to read proofs of his South Sea novella The Beach of Falesa, he could already sense Mrs Grundy's moral outrage. The story of a colonial trader pairing off with a native girl was daring, disturbingly frank - and already his syndicating editor wanted him to cut out the travesty of the marriage contract and 'make the young folks married properly before "that night" '.[2] But Louis refused. The ugliness of the fraudulent marriage was central to the story. Illiterate native girls did give their love to

unscrupulous Europeans on the strength of a meaningless piece of paper and a pantomime ceremony with a work of fiction substituted for the word of God and a 'cleric' dressed up like the infant Louis in a paper dog collar. At least one girl had been 'wed' by a charlatan using a copy of one of Louis's own novels. The thought of treating a girl unkindly and dishonourably troubled his conscience, whether in the South Seas... or in Edinburgh.

On the quayside at Leith, Randall the Master Mariner had been a real figure, although his first name was George, not William. He may have been less depraved than 'Papa Randall' in the South Seas, but there was no doubting the morals of his daughter. Barbara Randall grew up to become one of the most celebrated brothel madams in Edinburgh, second only to Clara Johnson. She had learned the game at a brothel in Rose Street, where she married the piano player, William Kay, whose mother ran the establishment. By 1871, 27-year-old Barbara Kay had a 12-girl house of her own in Clyde Street.[3]

Barbara's father, too old now to go to sea, may have been a familiar sight there, sitting in the corner with a drink as the lusty young bloods and lecherous old men of Edinburgh tumbled the girls on the shabby horsehair sofas and parted with extortionate sums for cheap brown sherry or rotgut whisky. Sometimes a foolish young fellow might fancy himself in love and make rash promises before witnesses that he might regret in the morning.

'Marriages' without benefit of clergy or registrar were as common in the Bohemian purlieus of Edinburgh as in the South Seas. Yet in Edinburgh not even a piece of paper was required for a 'Scotch marriage'. Scots law required only that a couple acknowledge each other as man and wife before witnesses. Any problems arose later, when one or other party denied the marriage took place.

In the year before Louis entered university, Edinburgh had been scandalised by rumours that a penniless divinity student called Wilson had been living at Clara Johnson's brothel, that she had supported him through his studies until he took holy orders, and had then married him. There is no legal record of a conventional marriage, but in 1866 Clara tried to thwart a court case brought against her by Flora Young, formerly one of her girls, by claiming the summons was in the wrong name

and that legally she was Clara Wilson.

During Louis's first year as a law student, Edinburgh learned all the salacious details of the Murthly Case, arising from a disputed Scotch marriage that took place in the same Leith Street tenement block where Louis spent his days in the tavern, tobacconist's shop or surrounding brothels. Major William George Drummond Steuart was a minor Perthshire aristocrat and war hero who had won the Victoria Cross during the Indian Mutiny. His father was Sir William Drummond Steuart, 18th Lord of Grandtully and 6th Baronet of Murthly, who had lived in the American Wild West and brought a herd of bison and a couple of Red Indians home to adorn the family estates. He married a washerwoman and from this exotic pairing the war hero was born.

But the Major grew weary of army life. On returning from India, he sold his commission for £3,000 and set about blowing this fortune on his twin passions of fishing and debauchery. This brought him frequently to George Wilson's fishing tackle shop in the Waterloo Place frontage of the Leith Street tenement, where the Major also encountered the gaudy lures dangled by gay ladies. Like a fish in fine fettle, he took them without heed of consequences.

Soon the Major found himself in debt to his fishing tackle supplier and decided the best solution was to marry Wilson's daughter Maggie. So on the eve of Valentine's Day, 1866, after the Major in gay company had enjoyed a fish dinner at Newhaven, he was seen by witnesses to get down on his knee at a party at Wilson's house, slip a ring on the finger of his 17-year-old daughter and declare: 'Maggie, you are my wife before heaven, so help me great God.'

The couple were together only intermittently, yet enjoyed an active sex life chez Wilson and in various hotels, and the following year Maggie gave birth to a son. The Major seemed in no hurry to register the birth, so eventually Maggie went to the registrar with Arthur Collett the shebeener for moral support. Collett would recount later how there was an altercation with the registrar, who refused to register the birth as legitimate unless the Major acknowledged it, there being no record of the irregular Scotch marriage. Eventually the child's name was registered as William George Drummond Stewart Wilson[4].

Sadly little William did not survive and in 1868 the Major expired also, at the age of 37 in Kent – after a drunken attempt at a sword-swallowing trick went wrong. In 1871 his father died and the Murthly estates were inherited by Sir William's brother. By then Maggie Wilson or Steuart had taken up with another army officer, who went to law on her behalf to secure a portion of the estate. All this was being played out in the courts and newspapers as Louis began to leaf through his first law textbooks.

His own affair with Kate Drummond, if such there was, may still have been going on as Louis went back to the university to begin his legal studies. In Catriona he would describe David Balfour likewise studying law, but would dress up Edinburgh in Dutch clothes and call it Leyden. David and Catriona arrive there on foot, having walked all night to escape from the port of Rotterdam which, like the port of Leith, was 'thronged with wild-like, outlandish characters - bearded Hebrews, black men, and the hordes of courtesans, most indecently adorned with finery and stopping seamen by their very sleeves'[5].

In this fictional Leydenburgh, David and Catriona live together in all innocence in a house backing onto a canal. Edinburgh's canal runs into the city past Colinton and terminates just short of Tollcross, but it is hard to imagine Louis setting up his lady love in lodgings there. Yet many young gentlemen of means, including at least one of Louis's close friends[6], kept mistresses in Edinburgh to solve the problem of sex until they were ready to marry a respectable girl of their own class.

In Steuart's novel, Kate finds lodgings of her own after escaping from the Leith Street brothel. She is fiercely independent and continues to sing in Collett's shebeen. While Kate remains in the shadow world to which sin-loving middle-class Edinburgh gravitates at night, Louis returns each evening to respectable Heriot Row. When confined to the house by illness, he writes love letters conveyed to Kate by Charles Baxter, to whom he confides the details of the affair.

In Steuart's book, it is Baxter who suggests a Scotch marriage. Louis would know, without asking, what Tom Stevenson's reaction would be to him marrying a girl who sang in a shebeen. Yet Louis may have tried first to square things with his parents. Steuart has Kate calling at Heriot Row and having tea with Louis's mother, who sees how happy the girl makes Louis but fears what his father will say. Before

she can broach the subject, Tom Stevenson is told of the affair by one of Edinburgh's unco guid, 'pouring poison into my father's ears' as Louis puts it. If Mr Stevenson's informant happened to be George Omond, this might explain Louis's curious antipathy to his former colleague on the Edinburgh University Magazine. Whatever the case, Steuart describes the paterfamilias of 17 Heriot Row flying into a rage:

'Sit down!' thundered his father, and there was something in tone and mien which compelled obedience. 'You're a talker, oh! a grand talker when you get going; but this time you've got to listen... you are running round like an idiot disgracing yourself, and me and all belonging to you... The question is what I'm to do with you? You're not fit for light-house engineering. You've proved that. The sea would laugh at you. You can't talk down the sea. It seems you are not going to be fit for the law either...'

Louis, rebellious and quivering, made an attempt to break in but once more was peremptorily silenced.

'I have listened too long and endured too long. Now here's what I have to say. You have your choice of obeying me in whatever I decide, or shutting the door of my house behind you for good. One or the other.'[7]

This is quite in keeping with Tom Stevenson in a rage. On more than one occasion he would threaten to disown Louis and cast him out. In the earlier biography, Steuart claimed simply that Louis wanted to marry Kate but buckled under pressure because 'unluckily he had no money, and the door of I7 Heriot Row was inexorably shut against her'. Inglorious though this conclusion seems, it explains the feelings of guilt and shame expressed in The Vanquished Knight, a poem by Louis which Steuart linked with the affair:

I have left all upon the shameful field,
Honour and Hope, My God ! and all but life.[8]

But by the time Steuart wrote The Cap Of Youth, he may have had further information. In the novel, Louis urges Kate to run away with him and tells Charles Baxter: 'I'm taking your hint. Yes, a Scotch marriage: blessings on the man who invented it.'[9]

Yet in Steuart's novel Kate decides to end the affair, refusing to let Louis destroy his prospects and his relationship with his family. When his father orders him south,

out of harm's way, Kate insists Louis should comply. They promise to keep in touch by letter, but she realises the hopelessness of their love and slips away to Rob Roy country, whence she came, and they never see each other again.

Ten years later, after Louis had crossed an ocean and returned from America with another love for a wife, the Kate Drummond whose uncle Peter ran a clothier's business in Leith Street was still unmarried at 29. Her parents were living in Glasgow but spinster Kate, her charms now fading, was looking after her younger brothers and sisters in Muthill, near Crieff, not far from the Braes of Balquidder.[10] Could this real woman have been the inspiration for Catriona Drummond, and did Louis, 20 years later, seek to retell the story with a happy ending?

In his historical romance, Catriona's itinerant father James More has a curious disregard for his daughter's welfare, leaving it to David Balfour to take care of her. If William Drummond the itinerant tailor showed a similar lack of care for his daughter Kate, leaving her to her own devices in Edinburgh among the brothels of Leith Street, might a lovestruck Louis likewise have offered her his protection? If art imitated life, this would have meant lending financial support, paying for the clothes on Kate's back and the roof over her head - even if Louis, like David, did nothing more reprehensible at her lodgings than read his law textbooks.

If the real Kate did flee from a Leith Street brothel, the clothes would have been critical. Whores in houses such as Clara Johnson's or Barbara Kay's did not own the silk dresses that adorned them and had to leave them behind when they left, wearing only the rags they arrived in. The new clothes David buys for Catriona are the most intimate symbol of their love, and the most poignant reminder of what he has lost when he finds the lodgings empty:

In a corner of the floor, I spied a little heap that brought my heart into my mouth. She had left behind at her departure all that she had ever had of me. It was the blow that I felt sorest, perhaps because it was the last; and I fell upon that pile of clothing and behaved myself more foolish than I care to tell of... The sight of these poor frocks and ribbons, and her shifts, and the clocked stockings, was not to be endured...[11]

Catriona retains only a corner cut from a kerchief, later returned by David when they are reunited. Earlier a flower, bought as a gift for Catriona, is thrown angrily

out of the window by David, to hang forlornly from a tree in the courtyard until recovered and restored like their love.

'I bought it for you, Catriona,' said I.

She fixed it in the midst of her bosom with the brooch, I could have thought tenderly.

'It is none the better of my handling,' said I again, and blushed.

'I will be liking it none the worse, you may be sure of that,' said she.[12]

There may have been another flower which Louis was trying to restore. Later he would confess to receiving letters which he had left unanswered 'until they ceased to come, from a person to whom the postage even must have been a matter of parsimony; left them unanswered, on purpose that they might cease. O God! a thing comes back to me that hurts the heart very much. For the first letter, she had bought a piece of paper with a sort of coarse flower-arabesque at the top of it'.

This was no daughter of the middle-class but a girl so poor that she could barely afford cheap stationery and a postage stamp - a girl, perhaps, called Kate Drummond. Louis told his confidante: 'Only one thing gives me any little pleasure... I never showed the letters to anyone, and some months ago they became insupportable to me and I burnt them. Don't I deserve the gallows?'[13]

The spectre of the gallows that hung over Louis's childhood appears time and again in his fiction, including Catriona. On a walk down Leith Street and on towards Pilrig, David comes upon a gibbet and two men hanged in chains.

They were dipped in tar, as the manner is; the wind span them, the chains clattered, and the birds hung about the uncanny jumping-jacks and cried... And, as I thus turned and turned about the gibbet, what should I strike on, but a weird old wife, that sat behind a leg of it, and nodded, and talked aloud to herself...

'Who are these two, mother?' I asked, and pointed to the corpses.

'A blessing on your precious face!' she cried. 'Twa joes o'mine: just two o' my old joes, my hinny dear.'

'What did they suffer for?' I asked.

'Ou, just for the guid cause,' said she. 'Aften I spaed to them the way that it would end. Twa shillin' Scots: no pickle mair; and there are twa bonny callants hingin' for 't! They took it frae a wean belanged to Brouchton.'[14]

Who was the child from the Edinburgh suburb of Broughton, a stone's throw from Leith Street? And who were the two joes, once clients of this debauched old woman, who paid the price for a callous crime? It would have meant nothing to Stevenson's readers - except, perhaps, Charles Baxter, to whom the book was dedicated and who might have suspected the pair on the gallows were figuratively Louis and himself.

'Twa shillin' Scots' in 1871 would have purchased cheap carnal pleasure for two callous young law students - or paid the postage on two dozen letters, a lot of love to consign to the flames. In the same letter in which Louis confessed to his affair with the flower-arabesque girl, he wrote: 'Last night, a friend dropped in about supper time and strangely enough he was in much the same humour as myself and full of regrets for past hard-heartedness, utter, stark inhumanity of the cheerful butterfly order, surely the most abhorrent thing in this shameful world. If there is a "moral governor of the universe", he must feel heartily ashamed of having ever made me. My friend and I sat up till twelve and mutually confessed [to] each other and strengthened our sense of shame I think much.'[15]

The friend was Baxter, and the morning after these mutual confessions, in which the name Kate Drummond may have featured, Louis sent him a curious letter from Heriot Row, marked 'Private':

My dear Baxter, I wished to say a little word to you last night, and much of it I managed to say, yet left that unsaid that was made all the more important as I went forward. I wish you to understand that what I said to you is not to be judged exactly as other matters that go betwixt me and my friends; and to ask you, as a very particular act of friendship, two things. (First) that you will not mention anything of what you have heard from me to anyone else and (second) that you will not recur to the matter unnecessarily with me.

Please, old man, do not misunderstand this note. You will know how serious I am when I tell you that I had little sleep last night, because I had omitted to add these two requests which I know you will very kindly grant. Indeed it is perhaps better that they should be made to you in writing. You need not answer this note, either by word or in writing. Believe me, Ever your friend (as I hope you to stand mine)

Robert Louis Stevenson

You know there are some things, old man, on which chaff is not quite on the spot. Let this little note of considerable pain on my part, be forever among the number of such things and pardon me for having written it.

R.L.S.[16]

The girl's letters were all burnt, and by this letter Louis hoped Baxter's lips would be sealed forever. Apart from what Louis wrote in Catriona, which could be dismissed as fiction, there was nothing left to suggest a real Kate Drummond. Yet someone, somehow passed on the story to Steuart. Could his informant have been Baxter himself? Baxter died in 1919, five years before Steuart published his biography, but long before this Steuart had been one of the 'Henley Regatta', a group of young writers encouraged by the editor and poet W.E. Henley who had been Louis's close friend. Although any Kate Drummond affair would have been over before Henley met Louis in 1875, Henley also formed a lifelong friendship with Baxter, and the two of them would often reminisce about the more seamy side of Louis's life in Edinburgh. Henley may have been told about a Kate Drummond, and passed on the story, or may even have introduced Steuart to Baxter. Whatever the case, there was certainly a girl whose letters Louis burned - and perhaps the echo of a real love affair in the pages of Catriona.

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[1] RLS, The Beach of Falesa, Chapter I.
[2] RLS to Sidney Colvin, Vailima, Samoa, January 31, 1892, Yale 2384, MS Harvard.
[3] GROS, 1871 Scotland Census.
[4] GROS, Register of Births.
[5] RLS, Catriona, Chapter XXIII.
[6] Sir Walter Simpson.
[7] JA Steuart, The Cap of Youth, Chapter XXVII.
[8] RLS, The Vanquished Knight, New Poems.
[9] JA Steuart, The Cap of Youth, Chapter XXXIX.
[10] GROS, 1881 Scotland Census.
[11] RLS, Catriona, Chapter XXVIII.
[12] RLS Catriona, Chapter XXIV.
[13] RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 8, 1873, Yale 149, MS National Library of Scotland.
[14] RLS, Catriona, Chapter III.
[15] RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, October 8, 1873, Yale 149, MS National Library of Scotland.
[16] RLS to Charles Baxter, Heriot Row, October 1873, Yale 148, MS Yale.