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Robert Louis Stevenson

– A Biography

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Extract

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BARON BROADNOSE

> Born 1850 at Edinburgh. Pure Scotch blood; descended from the Scotch Lighthouse Engineers, three generations. Himself educated for the family profession . . . But the marrow of the family was worked out, and he declined into the man of letters.
>
> Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Autobiographical Note'[1]

In 1884 or thereabouts, Robert Louis Stevenson purchased a copy of a slim booklet by the scientist Francis Galton (grandson of Erasmus Darwin and inventor of the term 'eugenics'), that purported to help members of the public forecast the mental and physical faculties of their children by arranging in tabular form as much data as could be gathered about their ancestors. No clear way of making deductions from this process was indicated; Galton seemed merely to be suggesting that the *Record of Family Faculties* would serve as a sort of life album for future perusal. In fact his design was more 'to further the science of heredity' than to enlighten individuals about their genes, for Galton was offering a prize of £500 to whichever reader compiled 'the best extracts' from the point of view of 'completeness', 'character of evidence', 'cleanness' and 'conciseness', to be sent, with accompanying documentation if possible, to his London address.

Robert Louis Stevenson did not oblige the insatiable statistician by posting off his copy of the booklet, and only filled in two pages of information, one for each of his parents. Like so many of his own books, this was one he couldn't quite finish. But Galton's introductory remarks, full of provocative assumptions about race,

personality, inherited and acquired behaviour, touched subjects of perennial fascination to the scientist-turned-literary man. 'We do not yet know whether any given group of different faculties which may converge by inheritance upon the same family will blend, neutralise, or intensify one another,' Galton had written, 'nor whether they will be metamorphosed and issue in some new form.' The year in which the project was advertised, 1883, was a time when Stevenson himself thought he was going to be a father, an eventuality he had tried to avoid on the grounds of his poor health. But whether or not Stevenson bought Galton's book in order to predict his expected child's chances in the lottery of family attributes, the author's words certainly resonated for himself.

Robert Louis Stevenson characterised his paternal ancestors as 'a family of engineers', which they were for the two generations preceding his own, but in the seventeenth century they had been farmers and maltsters near Glasgow, 'following honest trades [. . .], playing the character parts in the Waverley Novels with propriety, if without distinction', as Stevenson wrote satirically.[2] In the mid-eighteenth century two Stevenson brothers, working in partnership as traders between Glasgow and the West Indies, both died suddenly from tropical fever within six weeks of each other while in pursuit of an agent who had cheated them. Jean, the twenty-three-year-old widow of the younger brother, was left almost destitute by his death, as her father also died in the same month and she had an infant son to support. She moved from Glasgow to Edinburgh with her child, married a man called Hogg, then in the early 1790s met and married her third husband, Thomas Smith, 'merchant burgess', ship-owner, ironmonger and underwriter.

Smith was the founder of the 'family of engineers', or rather, the step-family, since it was his new wife's teenaged son Robert Stevenson, not his own son, James Smith, who was grafted onto his thriving enterprise as heir. Thomas Smith seems to have been

a man of enormous industry and ingenuity, setting up a business in lamps and oils, running something called the Greenside Company's Works in Edinburgh (a kind of super-smithy) and inventing a new system of oil lamps for lighthouses to replace the old coal-lit beacons like that on the Isle of May. The lights of 'lights' remained a source of fascination in the step-branch of the family: Robert Stevenson experimented with revolving devices, his son Thomas developed both holophotal and condensing lights, and Robert Louis Stevenson's one and only contribution to the Royal Scottish Society of Arts was a paper on a proposed new device to make lighthouse lights flash. But there was another reminder of this heritage, closer to home. One of Thomas Smith's lamp-making projects was the design of the street lighting in Edinburgh's New Town at the end of the eighteenth century. His parabolic reflector system quadrupled the power of oil-lit lamps and focused their beams, a revolutionary innovation that must have made the elegant Georgian streets look even more modern and sleek, even more of a contrast to the dark, narrow closes and wynds of the Old Town. And it was the successor to one of these lamps, just outside 17 Heriot Row, that Robert Louis Stevenson celebrated many years later in his poem about Leerie the Lamp-Lighter from *A Child's Garden of Verses*:

> *For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door,*
> *And Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more;*
> *And O! before you hurry by with ladder and with light,*
> *O Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!*[3]

But the original lighter of the lamps had been the poet's ingenious forebear.*

Thomas Smith's involvement in lighthouse-building began in 1787, just prior to his marriage to Jean Stevenson, when he was

* I am grateful to John Macfie for telling me an interesting fact about the real lamplighter on Heriot Row in the 1850s: he was a piece-worker, and therefore habitually rushed his work. So the 'hurrying by' of the poem is more realism than romance.

appointed engineer to the new Board of Northern Lighthouses, a post his stepson and three grandsons would hold after him. Until this time, the Scottish coastline had been one of the most dangerous in the world, so jagged and treacherous that mariners used to steer well clear of it, keeping north of Orkney and Shetland and west of the Hebrides. There were no maps or charts of the coastline before the late sixteenth century, and the first lighthouse, built in 1636 on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth, was one of only a handful in existence before the Industrial Revolution. The Spanish Armada, forced to go north when the English blockaded the Channel in 1588, lost half its vessels around the Scottish coast because of its perilousness, and the stormy Atlantic waters continued to claim lives for centuries after.

Little was done about the protection of ships around Scotland until a series of violent storms in the early 1780s led to public protests and the setting up of the Northern Lighthouse Board by an Act of Parliament in 1786, with a mandate to oversee a programme of lighthouse construction. Thomas Smith, whose parabolic reflectors had impressed the Board, was appointed its first chief engineer and sent south to pick up technical expertise from an English lighthouse-builder.* Smith needed all the help he could get; the Board had commissioned him to build four lighthouses, and he was totally inexperienced. He faced innumerable difficulties, from the very design of the structures to the organisation of labour and transport of materials to some of the bleakest spots around the coast. But the former lamp-maker rose to the challenge and through extraordinary persistence and hard work produced his first lights, at Kinnaird Head beyond Fraserburgh, Eilean Glas off Harris, North Ronaldsay and the Mull of Kintyre. None of them is elegant or ambitious in design, but the fact that they got built at all is quite remarkable.

Smith's stepson Robert Stevenson was a keen assistant in the

* It is not known who Smith learned from, but it could have been John Smeaton, who built the third Eddystone light in the 1750s, and whose work was very influential on the whole Smith/Stevenson family.

works. Jean Stevenson had intended her son for the Church, but engineering and surveying were far more to his taste and he was apprenticed to his stepfather in 1791. He proved fiercely motivated; all summer he was a director of works (superintending the construction of Little Cumbrae light on the Firth of Clyde when he was still only nineteen), while in the winters he studied mathematics and sciences at the Andersonian Institute and Edinburgh University. In *Records of a Family of Engineers*, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote with sympathetic admiration of his grandfather's relish for the life:

> The seas into which his labours carried the new engineer were still scarce charted, the coasts still dark; his way on shore was often far beyond the convenience of any road, the isles in which he must sojourn were still partly savage. He must toss much in boats; he must often adventure on horseback by the dubious bridle-track through unfrequented wildernesses; he must sometimes plant his lighthouse in the very camp of wreckers; and he was continually enforced to the vicissitudes of outdoor life. The joy of my grandfather in this career was strong as the love of woman.[4]

The step-relationship between young Robert Stevenson and Thomas Smith was close and admiring, and it makes one wonder where Smith's natural son, James, fitted in – if at all. Thomas Smith was twice a widower before his marriage to Jean Stevenson and had five children by the first wife (only a daughter, Jane, and the son James survived infancy) and one daughter, Mary-Anne, by the second. Little information remains about James except that he left home to found his own ironmongery business, but whether this was the result of some rift with his father is not clear. Certainly to the outside world Robert Stevenson must have looked like Smith's favourite, possibly only, son. The bond between them became even more complicated when Robert married his stepsister Jane in 1799. As Robert's namesake wrote years later, 'The marriage of a man of twenty-seven and a girl of twenty, who have lived for twelve years as brother and sister, is difficult to conceive'[5] – but it was

legal. The union was a sort of mirror-image of the parents': in temperament and disposition Jane resembled her pious stepmother as much as Robert did his stepfather, who was now not just parent, employer and teacher, but also father-in-law.

Smith's business, which built not only lighthouses but roads, bridges and harbours, set an intimidating example of industry and efficiency that Robert Stevenson was happy to match, or outdo. He became a full partner in 1800, the year after his marriage, and the next year went south to see for himself some of the English lighthouses and get ideas for the improvement of the firm's designs, especially from John Smeaton's handsome pharos at Eddystone. Stevenson's additions to Thomas Smith's work included adding silvered reflectors to the lights, experimenting with different oils and types of burner (he opted for a variant on the new Argand lamps that had glass chimneys above the flame, and which became standard in Victorian domestic interiors). He also tried to get the reflectors to revolve so that the lights seemed to flash (to make the lighthouse beacons easily distinguishable from lights on shore or at sea).

His ingenuity was great, and so was his ambition; in fact Stevenson turned out to be a ruthlessly single-minded man and greedy of fame. In the early years of the new century he became absorbed by the challenge of building a light on the Bell Rock, the notoriously dangerous reef in the North Sea twelve miles south-east of Arbroath, on the northern approach to the Firth of Forth. It was formerly called Inchcape Rock, but was renamed to commemorate the warning-bell which had been put there in the fourteenth century by the safety-conscious Abbot of Arbroath. At high tide the perilous outcrop, 1,400 feet at its widest, was submerged twelve feet, a death-trap to passing ships. Public pressure on the Board to build a lighthouse had met with little success, even after the loss of the warship *York* with all hands in the gales of 1799. The cost of the lighthouse programme had finally caught up with the Commissioners, and in any case they considered the Bell Rock simply too dangerous and difficult a location to build on. Their

objections were music to the ears of young Stevenson, who relished the chance to overcome the obstacles involved; he surveyed the site independently and conducted a long campaign of letters to the Board, making the vaunting claim that his projected Bell Rock lighthouse was 'a work which cannot be reduced to the common maxims of the arts and which in some measure stands unconnected to any other branch of business'.[6]

Stevenson's lobbying seemed to have paid off when a Bill authorising construction of a lighthouse on the Bell Rock was passed in 1806, but it was not his design that the NLB chose, nor him as chief engineer: that honour went to John Rennie. Stevenson's pride was given an extra knock by his appointment as Rennie's assistant, but instead of making a loud protest he decided to get his own way by subtler means. Over the years it took to build the lighthouse, during which Stevenson was always on site and Rennie rarely, he took over the project bit by bit, and by the time it was finished, in February 1811, he had not only done almost all the work of the chief engineer but had amassed most of the credit too. God-like, he named various parts of the reef after himself, his father-in-law, the head workmen and – strategically – the Commissioners of the Board, and he encouraged the general perception of the project as entirely his own by publishing an *Account of the Bell Rock Lighthouse Including the Details of the Erection and Peculiar Structure of that Edifice*, a stirring record of the technical and human difficulties which had been overcome, in which Rennie was scarcely mentioned. The public and the newspapers were fascinated by the story, and delighted with the lighthouse that so thoroughly revolutionised the safety of the lanes into the Firth. Stevenson was suddenly famous and could be seen round Edinburgh proudly sporting the gold medal sent him by the King of Denmark for his services to seafarers.

Rennie, understandably, was piqued by Stevenson's machinations and considered him dishonest, or at best self-deluding. His assistant engineer had a history of stealing credit, Rennie complained to a friend, and 'has assumed the merit of applying

coloured glass to lighthouses, of which Huddart was the actual inventor, and I have no doubt that he will assume the whole merit of planning and erecting the Bell Rock Lighthouse, if he has not already done so'.[7] That was exactly what Stevenson did, and to this day he is credited with the design, which was nothing to do with him. No shadow of guilt or self-doubt troubled the assistant engineer; the carrying-through of a plan was, to him, far more difficult and important than merely generating it. It was an attitude inherited by his son Thomas, who displayed similar confidence in his own viewpoint and who was also accused of professional plagiarism when he 'stepped in and brought to [. . .] perfection' (his son's generous phrase)[8] a revolving light designed by the French inventor Leonor Fresnel. This makes it look as if the family ethos was one of raw self-interest, but the case was rather subtler than that. The Stevensons were old-fashioned, and refused to register for patent any of their lighthouse inventions, on the grounds that as government appointees 'they regarded their original work as something due already to the nation'.[9] They made a distinction between what was owed to the Northern Lighthouse Board (service) and what was right for the family business (maximum profit), and willingly gave up exclusive rights in their own inventions in order to be able to cash in on other people's unexploited ideas. This family trait would work out interestingly in Robert Louis Stevenson, whose flexible attitude to matters of intellectual property led to the most traumatic quarrel of his life, and who remained high-minded about copyright right up to the moment when he wrote a bestseller.

Of all the engineering works that the Stevenson family were involved in, the Bell Rock lighthouse was the most impressive, firing the public imagination with its combination of romantic endeavour and futuristic technology. It already had a celebrator in the Poet Laureate Robert Southey, whose ballad 'The Inchcape Rock', published in 1803, commemorated the story of the Abbot and the bell in thrumming lines:

When the rock was hid by the surge's swell,
The mariners heard the warning bell;
And then they knew the perilous rock,
And blessed the Abbot of Aberbrothok.

Walter Scott also took a keen interest in the Bell Rock, which he visited in 1814. The NLB Commissioners had invited him on a tour of the lighthouses conducted by 'the celebrated engineer' (Scott's phrase) Robert Stevenson. The party went all round the coast, from the Isle of May in the Firth to the Inner Hebrides, calling in at Bell Rock (where Scott wrote some verses in the visitors' book) and getting out, with difficulty, to survey a jagged reef off Tiree called Skerry Vohr which Stevenson was trying to persuade the Commissioners to build a light on. The novelist was gathering material for his next book, *The Pirate*, and worked on his notes with an application which impressed Robert Stevenson, who had not at this date read any of Scott's works. '[Scott] was the most industrious occupier of time,' Stevenson recorded in his journal,

> he wrote much upon deck – often when his seat on the camp stool was by no means steady. He sometimes introduced Rob Roy's exploits in conversation so fully that when I read the Book many parts of it were like a second reading to me.[10]

The description is oddly prophetic of another industrious writer who composed much upon deck and was able to talk of his fictional creations as if they were real, Robert Stevenson's grandson. But it was Scott's work ethic, not his genius, that won Robert Stevenson's approval; he clearly thought artists in general to be rather a waste of space. Two generations later, Robert Louis Stevenson judged himself by the same rigid family standards, which venerated professionalism, inventiveness, hard work and money-making and thought little of self-expression and art. He came to feel that he was a very inadequate heir to these active men, a mere 'slinger of ink', sunk in comparative idleness. When he was writing his *Records of a Family of Engineers* in the last year of his life,

Stevenson burst out in a letter to his friend Will Low, 'I ought to have been able to build lighthouses and write *David Balfours* too.'[11] A poem Stevenson wrote in the 1880s (when, incidentally, he was living in a house named after his uncle's most famous lighthouse and surrounded by lighthouse memorabilia) expresses the same feeling of having failed his inheritance:

> *Say not of me that weakly I declined*
> *The labours of my sires, and fled the sea,*
> *The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,*
> *To play at home with paper like a child.*
> *But rather say:* In the afternoon of time
> A strenuous family dusted from its hands
> The sand of granite, and beholding far
> Along the sounding coast its pyramids
> And tall memorials catch the dying sun,
> Smiled well content, and to this childish task
> Around the fire addressed its evening hours.[12]

How neatly the change in typeface separates what the poet would like to have said about himself from what he thinks will be said. And how much more striking than his engrossed images of the strenuous family and their colossal achievements is his bitter description of himself left 'playing at home with paper like a child'.

The paternal line dominates Robert Louis Stevenson's family history, for 'the celebrated engineer' made it one of the most respectable names in Edinburgh at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Robert and his sister-wife Jean had thirteen children, only five of whom survived infancy: one girl (Jane) and four sons, three of whom followed their father into the family business, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, and the youngest of whom, Thomas, became the father of our subject.* They lived in the large house that Thomas Smith had built in 1803 in Baxter Place, fronting

* What happened to the fourth brother, Robert, is a complete mystery. He was born in 1808, died in 1851, didn't marry officially and doesn't figure anywhere in the extensive family papers.

onto busy Leith Street, with a long garden at the back running to the bottom of the Calton Hill. The Stevenson children played in the cellars or the orchard, and hung around their father's office or the specially-built workshops, where there was always 'a coming and going of odd, out-of-the-way characters, skippers, lightkeepers, masons, and foremen of all sorts'.[13] Though the Stevensons were not known for keeping a lavish table (Jean Stevenson, a strict Calvinist, made a habit of choosing both her butcher and her cook on religious grounds), the house was always open to employees of the Northern Lighthouse Board. Robert Stevenson was a paternalistic boss, minutely concerned with all aspects of the men's lives: their wives' confinements, their children's schooling, the welfare of the sick and the conduct of prayers. 'My grandfather was much of a martinet,' Stevenson reported,

> with his powerful voice, sanguine countenance, and eccentric and original locutions, he was well qualified to inspire a salutory terror in the service [. . .] In that service he was king to his finger-tips. All should go his way, from the principal lightkeeper's coat to the assistant's fender, from the gravel in the garden walks to the bad smell in the kitchen, or the oil-spots on the storeroom floor.[14]

Oddly enough, with this Jove for a father, young Thomas Stevenson managed for years to evade discovery that he was doing very little schoolwork. Being the youngest of many children, seventeen years his sister Jane's junior, perhaps he just adopted the tactic of keeping his head down at home. He wasn't a stupid boy (although he never mastered mathematics, which was a considerable handicap in his professional life), but early on developed a strong aversion to book-learning. This amounted to an obsession in later life, when he would stop schoolboys on the street and advise them to learn only what seemed to them good. 'There seems to have been nothing more rooted in him than his contempt for all the ends, processes, and ministers of education,' his son was to claim; 'he bravely encouraged me to neglect my lessons, and never so much as asked me my place in school. What a boy should learn

in school he used to say is "to sit on his bum". It could scarcely be better put.'[15]

Thomas's hatred and fear of school were due to the teachers' constant use of the cane, and he was to say that the sufferings he endured there were worse than any he experienced in later life. His survival strategy was based on maintaining a low profile, as this spirited incident, related by his son, shows:

> He never seems to have worked for any class that he attended; and in Piper's took a place about half-way between the first and last of a hundred and eighty boys. Yet his friends were among the duxes. He tells most admirably how he once on a chance question got to the top of the class among all his friends; and how they kept him there for several days by liberal prompting and other obvious devices, until at last he himself wearied of the fierce light that beat upon the upper benches. 'It won't do,' he said. 'Goodbye.'[16]

Thomas, like his son, was a dreamy, quirky child with a strong vein of the perverse: 'there was always a remarkable inconsequence, an unconscious spice of the true Satanic, rebel nature, in the boy. Whatever he played with was the reverse of what he was formally supposed to be engaged in learning. As soon as he went, for instance, to a class of chemistry, there were no more experiments made by him. The thing then ceased to be a pleasure, and became an irking drudgery.'[17] It was not the temperament to mould easily to Robert Stevenson's expectations. Thomas worked for a short time in a printing office and toyed with the idea of becoming a bookseller or publisher – a practical slant to his deeper ambition, which was to be a writer. But his father was furious at this notion and before he was out of his teens Thomas had succumbed to the family fate of engineering, joining his two older brothers.

Alan, the eldest of the boys, had also needed some coercion to become an engineer. He was the scholar and polymath of the family, and wanted to study Classics and enter the Church. He turned out to be an outstanding engineer, making important improvements in optics and designing and building several lights,

including the family's most beautiful lighthouse, Skerry Vohr, on that dismal Atlantic reef surveyed by his father and Scott in 1814. Skerry Vohr proved a challenge as great as Bell Rock, though Alan was not the man to brag about it. He took over when his father retired from the post of chief engineer in 1842, but found the burden of work intolerable and in 1852, when he was forty-five, suffered a 'sudden shattering of his nervous system' which forced him 'to withdraw absolutely from his profession and the world'. The few remarks about this collapse in an anonymous but highly sympathetic obituary notice indicate a family tragedy of large proportions:

> What a trial this must have been to one of his keen, intrepid temper, his high enthusiasm, and his delight in the full exercise of his powers, no one but himself and those who never left him for these long dreary years can ever tell – when his mind, his will, his affections survived, as it were, the organ through which they were wont to act – like one whose harp is all unstrung, and who has the misery to know it can do his bidding no more.[18]

The collapse happened when Alan had been married only six years and had four tiny children, two of whom, Katherine and the brilliant, mercurial Bob, were to be Robert Louis Stevenson's close friends in adult life. All through their childhoods their father was a nervous invalid, who beguiled his 'great sufferings' by reading, learning languages, committing Homer to memory, and making a verse translation of the hymns of Synesius. 'During many an hour the employment helped to soothe my pain,' Alan wrote pathetically in the prologue to his privately printed translation. It was a startling example of how violently a sensitive nature could be shipwrecked by mental breakdown.

Thomas Stevenson was not as brilliant as his brother Alan, nor as versatile as his brother David, with whom he ended up running the family business. With his robust, serious, four-square face and figure, he looked every inch the Victorian paterfamilias, but there was instability at the centre of his character too: volatile, charming

and puzzling, a straight-faced joker, he must have been a difficult man to have as father. In his obituary tribute, remarkable for its air of objectivity, his son characterised him as 'a man of a somewhat antique strain':

> with a blended sternness and softness that was wholly Scottish and at first somewhat bewildering; with a profound essential melancholy of disposition and (what often accompanies it) the most humorous geniality in company; shrewd and childish; passionately attached, passionately prejudiced; a man of many extremes, many faults of temper, and no very stable foothold for himself among life's troubles.[19]

Thomas was a staunch Tory and devout churchgoer, with a strong belief in ultimate salvation – not through any merits of his own, but through God's infinite mercy. There was not a shred of complacency in his view of himself. In the speech he wrote to be read at his own funeral, he expressed the hope that he would not be 'disowned by Him when the last trumpet shall sound', a characteristically negative construction, and among the Bible verses to be read he chose 'Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.'[20] Over a lifetime's constant service to the Kirk, he never accepted any sort of lay office, on grounds of a seemingly inexpungeable 'unworthiness'.

Melancholic by nature, Thomas Stevenson's awareness of his own sins seems morbid; like his son's creation Dr Henry Jekyll, he had perhaps an over-fine conscience about his shortcomings, shown in the story as a mark of extreme moral vanity: 'many a man would have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of'.[21] Sex seems to have been the focus of Thomas's neuroses, as he held views so strong about the protection of women as to amount to a blanket condemnation of men. He believed, for instance, that any woman who wanted a divorce should be granted one automatically, whereas no man should ever have one. He also, intriguingly, set up a Magdalen Mission in Edinburgh for 'fallen women', which he supported financially all his adult life. Was this a gesture of general philanthropy or some private effort at atonement for real

or imagined crimes against women – his own, or those of his sex in general? Thomas's interpretation of chivalry did not lie anywhere on the usual axis between protectiveness towards women and the will to dominate them, but had a neurotic, slightly masochistic edge. It was taken on almost wholesale by his son.

In the autumn of 1847 this rather troubled man, then twenty-nine years old, was on a train to Glasgow when he met a young woman travelling with her uncle and aunt and got into conversation. Margaret Isabella Balfour was eighteen, cheerful, unaffected and a daughter of the manse. Thomas must have been looking out for a wife, for their first meeting was followed promptly by a brief formal courtship and a proposal; not the behaviour of an indecisive lover. On the brink of being thirty, Thomas was old enough to have had a considerable history of dealings with women, or a long-drawn-out history of wanting to have dealings with them.

Margaret came from genteel, Lowland stock and was the youngest surviving child of a family of thirteen, nine of whom had outlived infancy. Among her forebears were the Lairds of Pilrig and, possibly, the John Balfour who in 1656 was one of the religious zealots who murdered Archbishop Sharp. That notorious incident in the history of the 'Covenanters' (which became such an obsessive interest of her son Louis) formed part of Scott's *Tale of Old Mortality* in which John Balfour appears as 'Balfour of Burley'; so when Stevenson said that his father's family played 'the character parts in the Waverley Novels' he might have added that his mother's family appeared in the leading roles.

Margaret was good-looking (though not a beauty), intelligent and lively. She was known as an indefatigable optimist, 'a determined looker at the bright side of things', as Sidney Colvin described her, 'better skilled, perhaps, to shut her eyes to troubles or differences among those she loved than to understand, compose, or heal them'.[22] She had none of the accomplishments, such as musical or artistic ability, that were valued as bargaining counters in the marriage market (in worldly society at least), but her plainness of manner was in itself a recommendation to the God-fearing

Thomas Stevenson. His surviving letters to his young bride-to-be show the tenderness and teasing tone of a man who really wanted to get married, addressing her as 'My dearest Mag' and indulgently calling her 'child'. Margaret must have drawn attention to his behaviour around children (clearly a matter of some concern), for he writes to reassure her, 'Don't think my love that because I am strict or inclined to be strict with children that I like them less than other people. [. . .] I have the family failing of taking strong views and expressing those views strongly.'[23] He ends the letter 'Your ever affectionate and devoted lover', an intensity that deepened after the marriage, when he wrote home frequently from his work trips, pining to be reunited with 'my own dear wife'.[24] Thomas remained extremely protective and anxious about his young bride, strenuously encouraging the idea of her frailty and poor health. Their daughter-in-law Fanny's judgement when she met them in 1880 was that Margaret – then well into middle age – was 'adored by her husband, who spoils her like a baby'.[25]

Thomas and Margaret were married about a year after they first met, on a date in August deliberately chosen to coincide with the anniversary of her father's ordination (he, naturally, performed the ceremony). Margaret proved a most devoted wife to Thomas Stevenson, subservient to his wishes and interests, protective of his well-being, mainstay of his morale. Her chief talent, Louis declared, in one of his very few analytical remarks about his mother, was for organisation, and she was good at identifying and diverting possible starting points of domestic tension. This presumably came of years dealing with her husband's sporadic dips into melancholia, and was a technique that her son would emulate closely in his dealings with an equally volatile spouse.

Although she became, in later life, a remarkably enthusiastic and adventurous traveller, tolerant of discomforts and extreme temperatures, game for anything, Margaret Stevenson spent her youth half in and half out of a sort of vaporous decline. She was encouraged in this first by a valetudinarian father, himself a sufferer from weak lungs, then by her hypochondriac husband.

All through her son's childhood, she varied between high spirits and sickliness: her chest was weak, her heart; she must rest, she must take the waters. She was only twenty-one when the baby was born, but stayed in bed most mornings and was unable to play or go out with him when she was up. Most of the active side of mothering was left to the child's nurses, yet there were welcome, if perplexing, surges of energy: one of Stevenson's earliest memories was of his mother rushing him up the stairs at their house in Inverleith Terrace to see his grandfather, as excitable and skittish as a girl.

In the summer of 1850, when Margaret was pregnant for the first and only time, old Robert Stevenson died. He had been ill for some months, but had been looking forward to his annual inspection tour of the lighthouses. When his sons tried to convince him that no more travelling was possible, the old man seemed to acquiesce, but on the day of departure 'was found in his room, furtively packing a portmanteau'.[26] Thomas Stevenson was deeply affected by the pathos of his father's decline and death and when his first child was born four months later, on 13 November, had no hesitation in naming the baby for him.

The little boy's name was in fact an amalgamation of both grandfathers', one inside the other: Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson. The names were in strong demand in the family: Alan Stevenson had also called his first son Robert (the little boy was known as Bob), and there was a veritable epidemic of Lewis Balfours on the other side of the family; two born in 1850 (the same year as RLS), another called Lewis Henry two years earlier, Lewis ('Noona') in 1842, Lewis Charles in 1851. Despite that, Thomas and Margaret stuck with 'Lewis' for the baby's everyday name. Or 'Smout', or 'Lou', or 'Signor Sprucki', or 'Baron Broadnose': Thomas Stevenson was a great coiner of comical aliases.

Margaret, who was weakened and possibly traumatised by the experience of childbirth, was not put through that hazard again: there were no more children. This in a family that showed typical Victorian fecundity – little Lewis had *fifty-four* first cousins – must

have marked out the Stevenson household as a trifle eccentric. It wasn't easy to limit a family to one child; to avoid conception successfully during a marriage that lasted another thirty-seven years must have required strict regulation of both partners' sexual appetites. But Thomas Stevenson was not the man to put anything before his young wife's well-being, and a challenge of this sort suited his self-mortifying temperament. However they solved the contraception issue, the couple remained conspicuously devoted and dependent, and fussed contentedly about each other's health.

The baby made a delicate third member of this hypochondriac household. He seemed healthy enough to begin with, but an attack of croup in his third year was so alarming that ever after his parents lived in fear of another chest infection carrying him off. Both Thomas Stevenson and his wife came from large families with a high incidence of infant mortality: between them they had twelve live siblings and twelve dead ones. Consumption was a threat – Margaret had developed a patch of 'fibroid pneumonia' after the baby's birth – and incipient tuberculosis seemed an increasingly plausible explanation for the child's uneven, rickety growth and extreme thinness.[27] So whether from genuine danger, or from excessive solicitude, the child spent long stretches of time confined to bed. The catalogue of his ailments that appears in his mother's diary is truly astonishing: in his first nine years, apart from numerous chills and colds, the boy had scarlatina, bronchitis, gastric fever, whooping cough, chickenpox and scarlet fever. But the persistent cough was what worried everyone most. It seems likely that the croup had damaged his lungs or that he suffered (among other possible things) from asthma, since his health often worsened in the damp, cold winters of smoggy Auld Reekie. The sound of his cough starting up was heard in the household with dread.

The Stevensons' first home in Edinburgh was the one Thomas had prepared for his bride and where the baby was born, 8 Howard Place, on the northern fringes of the New Town, by the Botanic Garden. They moved in 1853 to 1 Inverleith Terrace, a larger property just around the corner. In the baby's first years, Thomas

and Margaret had a run of bad luck with nurses (or weren't very good at choosing them): two left unbidden and the third took the infant Smoutie to a bar and left him wrapped in a shawl on the counter while she soaked up a few gins. But the fourth hire produced a family servant of the most reassuring type: sober, single and religious to a fault. Alison Cunningham was a weaver's daughter from Fife, thirty years old when she came to the household (Margaret Stevenson was twenty-three that year) and an experienced nurse. 'Cummy' was given free rein with the toddler, and became a pivotal figure in the household.

Cummy was the type of servant who derived the keenest gratification from being indispensable, and turned down more than one suitor, it is said, to stay in the Stevensons' service for twenty years. Her devotion to Lewis, intensified by his vulnerability and the emerging realisation that he was to be the Stevensons' only child, went hand in hand with an equally powerful intention to mould the boy to her pattern. She could delight the child with her songs and dances and was selfless in the devotion of her time to his care (no trips to the bar for her, or even the usual nurse's expedient of meeting with friends in the park). Her genuine interest in his company fed the child's already pronounced egotism and her relation to him was – oddly enough – more that of companion than nanny, as Stevenson's later description of her as 'my first Wife' would seem to corroborate.

In 1857 this compact household moved from Inverleith Terrace, which had proved damp and uncongenial, to a splendid house on Heriot Row in the heart of the elegant New Town, overlooking Queen Street Gardens from the south. Beyond the gardens, whose trees were only half-mature at this date, were the tall fronts of the houses on Queen Street and in the distance, beyond the great metal river of the railway line, the smoky wynds and tenements of the Old Town climbed towards the Castle. This was the view from Lou's day and night nurseries on the top floor; Cummy's room was at the back of the house on the same floor, with views, in clear weather, of the Firth and, distantly, the coast

of Fife, her home. There was a wide landing, with other bedrooms and storerooms off, and then the grand spiral staircase running down the core of the house and lit from above by a large glazed cupola. As a student, Stevenson was to be grateful for the fact that the stairs were made of stone and made little or no sound when he crept past his parents' bedroom on the first floor late at night.

Thomas and Margaret's bedroom looked out to the back of the property and had a bathroom leading off it; at the front on the same level was the elegant drawing room, with its fireplace and recesses and twelve-foot-high windows looking out on the genteel greenery of the Gardens. Down the stairs again was the ground floor, with its high-ceilinged, panelled dining room and wide entrance hall. The kitchens and sculleries were in the basement, accessible to tradesmen by the area steps. Heriot Row was a truly substantial home, exuding an aura of wealth well-spent. Nobody seeing it could have the least doubt that the only son of the house was a privileged child.

Robert Louis Stevenson's many autobiographical essays and memoirs leave vividly contrasting impressions of his childhood. On the one hand, it contained the idyllic pleasures described in essays such as 'The Manse' and 'Child's Play' and poems such as 'My Kingdom' and 'Foreign Lands', on the other it was a time of chronic ill-health and piquant terrors. There is a temptation, given the subject's own obsessive recourse to images and tropes of duality, and his 'clinching' creation of the Jekyll–Hyde poles, to see his life in terms of strong contrasts. But Stevenson was unusual – in those last days before Freud – in recognising not just the co-existence of states of mind (in childhood particularly), but their inextricability. The author of *A Child's Garden of Verses* was to say of his own earliest memories, 'I cannot allow that those halcyon-days or that time of ''angel infancy'' have ever existed for me. Rather, I was born, more or less, what I am now – Robert Louis Stevenson, and not any other, or better person.'[28] The 'good'

and 'bad' parts of his childhood could no more be pulled apart than could the child and adult self. In its puzzling variability and dizzying plunges into dark and light, life was all of a piece.

Looking back on his childhood when he was twenty-nine, Stevenson concluded that he had been 'lovingly, but not always wisely treated' by his parents.[29] In fact, there were aspects of his upbringing that seem not only ill-advised, but even dangerous. It is a minor mystery, for instance, how the frail little boy survived the custom of the time to seal up a nursery 'almost hermetically'[30] so that it was always draught-free (i.e. airless), or how he ever slept, given Cummy's treatment for insomnia, which was to give the fretful child a soothing drink of strong coffee in the middle of the night. Fanny Stevenson retrospectively blamed her husband's 'feverish excitement' as a child on the powerful drugs he was given during bouts of gastric fever, and the regular use of antimonial wine, which Margaret Stevenson's doctor brother George later believed had ruined the boy's constitution. These remedies were held to be sovereign by the parents, and if the child seemed overwrought they would sooner remove his toys or send his playmates away to calm him, than lower the doses of strong or inappropriate medicine.

Even his parents' happy marriage was problematic, for, as Stevenson was to say memorably in his essay 'Virginibus Puerisque', 'the children of lovers are orphans'. Margaret gave over much of the childcare to Cummy, not thinking any harm could come of it, the nanny being such a religious body. But the strength of Cummy's religious views (possibly a source of mild amusement to her employers) made hers a very troubling influence. Cummy was a devout member of the Free Church, and far more stringent in her interpretation of doctrine than Lou's Church of Scotland parents. The theatre was the mouth of hell, cards were 'the Devil's Books' and novels (meaning romances) paved the road to perdition. She filled the little boy's head with stories of the Martyrs of Religion, of the Covenanters and the Presbyters and the blood-drenched religious fundamentalists of the previous two centuries, stories

that were rendered, confusingly enough, in highly dramatic style. (Stevenson later told Cummy mischievously that her declamations had sparked his own obsessive interest in the drama.) The Bible and the Shorter Catechism were to Lou what Mother Goose might have been to a luckier child, visits to the Covenanters' graves in Greyfriars churchyard were the substitute for playing in the park, and though there was opportunity to read adventure stories, *Cassell's Family Paper* and (clandestinely) bound copies of *Punch* downstairs, Cummy's regime of spiritual education was based around Low Church tract-writers and theologians, 'Brainerd, M'Cheyne, and Mrs Winslow, and a whole crowd of dismal and morbid devotees', as Stevenson recalled about twenty years later.

Cummy had mutually respectful relations with her employers and was trusted implicitly, but her religious brainwashing of her charge clearly subverted their authority over him. She was a simple woman who undoubtedly meant no harm, but her anxieties about the religious liberalism of the household were always clear. The Stevensons gave dinner parties and were known to drink wine; Mrs Stevenson had been flagrantly evasive of the ban on Sunday recreation by sewing a little pack onto the back of Lou's doll so that his game could pass as 'Pilgrim's Progress'. One of Stevenson's early memories was of his nurse 'comforting' him at night by pressing him to her in a ferment of prayer for the souls of his parents, who had broken the Sabbath by playing a game of whist after dinner. The scene sounds ludicrous now, but to the child spelled eternal damnation for his mother and father. He was wound up to such a pitch that he sometimes thought none of them would be saved, for even Cummy had lapses: he remembers them both straining to make out the contents in the printer's window of serial stories she herself had cut short on the grounds of them threatening to turn out to be 'regular novels'.

Dread of judgement, midnight coffee and a predisposition to overheated dreaming and daydreaming made much of the sick little boy's life a misery. He speaks of fevers that seemed to make the room swell and shrink, and 'terrible long nights, that I lay

awake, troubled continually with a hacking, exhausting cough, and praying for sleep or morning from the bottom of my shaken little body'.[31] He had a recurring nightmare of standing before the Great White Throne and being asked to recite some form of words, on which salvation or damnation depended; 'his tongue stuck, his memory was blank, hell gaped for him',[32] for the idea of eternal punishment had been 'seared', as he said, into his infant consciousness. When his night-horrors were particularly bad, Cummy would call for Thomas Stevenson, who would try to calm his son by sitting by the bed, or outside the bedroom door, feigning conversations with imaginary coachmen or inn-keepers. But, as the adult Louis recalled, 'it was long, after one of these paroxysms, before I could bear to be left alone'.[33]

Though in time the severity of his nightmares lessened, Stevenson continued to dream vividly and with disturbing conviction of reality, so that he was unable to distinguish whether his conscious or subconscious was in control. By the time he was a student his dreams produced the impression in him, nightmarish in itself, of leading a double life, at which point he began to fear for his reason. He learned in time to control his night-terrors, more or less (partly by the use of drugs), but if he hadn't been terrified by hellfire rantings as a child, this habit of feverish dreaming and neurotic invention, that was to prove important to his writing, might possibly never have set in.

Stevenson avoided much reference in his published works to his 'Covenanting childhood', but left some strong words about it in manuscript (some of which were published in posthumous collections or used by his first biographer). There is a controlled savagery in these fragments about the adults who infected his young mind with 'high-strung religious ecstasies and terrors':

> I would not only lie awake to weep for Jesus, which I have done many a time, but I would fear to trust myself to slumber lest I was not accepted and should slip, ere I awoke, into eternal ruin. I remember repeatedly [. . .] waking from a dream of Hell, clinging to the horizontal bar of the bed,

> with my knees and chin together, my soul shaken, my body convulsed with agony. It is not a pleasant subject. I piped and snivelled over the Bible, with an earnestness that had been talked into me. I would say nothing without adding 'If I am spared,' as though to disarm fate by a show of submission; and some of this feeling still remains upon me in my thirtieth year.[34]

Of the 'morbid devotees' whose works were his constant diet, the adult Stevenson had this to say: 'for a child, their utterances are truly poisonous. The life of Brainerd, for instance, my mother had the sense to forbid, when we [he and Cummy] were some way through it. God help the poor little hearts who are thus early plunged among the breakers of the spirit!'[35]

He makes it – for politeness' sake – sound as if he was not one of those 'poor little hearts' himself, but the accusation of negligence against his parents and Cummy is unmistakable – especially against his mother for knowing better than Cummy, but being inattentive. Colvin's description of Margaret Stevenson as 'shutting her eyes to troubles' seems pertinent here. The child's precocious utterances, recorded faithfully in her diary notes, clearly struck the young mother as amusing and a source of pride, but to less sentimental readers they brim with complex fears. Little Lou worried constantly about the quality and quantity of his prayers, whether his family were good or bad in the Lord's eyes, and whether he would be sufficiently adept at harp-playing during an eternity in heaven – and all this before the age of six. Adding to his discomfort was a strong rational streak and a quick intellect. His mother relates that when she told him of 'the naughty woman pouring the ointment upon Christ' he asked why God had made the woman so naughty,[36] and, hearing it confirmed that Christ had died to save him, concluded, 'Well, then, doesn't that look very much as if I were saved already?'[37] These exchanges, engaging so adroitly with Calvinist theology, were not intended as cute additions to the Baby Album. The child must have been puzzled why they only elicited fond smiles.

In the years following Stevenson's death, a minor cult grew up around the figure of his old nurse, fuelled mostly by his emotional dedication to her of *A Child's Garden of Verses*, and a passage in his fragmentary memoir in which Cummy is singled out for her tender care of him when he was sick:

> She was more patient than I can suppose of an angel; hours together she would help console me in my paroxysms; and I remember with particular distinctness, how she would lift me out of bed, and take me, rolled in blankets, to the window, whence I might look forth into the blue night starred with street-lamps, and see where the gas still burned behind the windows of other sickrooms.[38]

But in all honesty, it hardly constitutes excess of attention or devotion to attend to a chronically sick child at night. 'My second mother [. . .] angel of my infant life'; the epithets are cloyingly excessive, and one can't help wondering if Stevenson's retrospective praise of his nurse was a desperate attempt to accentuate the positive. His fond memories of his father soothing him with nonsense-stories are also in the context of the child on the other side of the door being too terrified to sleep. And the same Cummy who was ready to calm the child with cuddles and blankets was just as likely to wake him up and assault him with prayers. It was, to say the least, a confusing world.

The boy learned to read quite late (aged six), but was lazy about reading on his own and preferred to get Cummy to do it for him. He liked to be attended to as much as possible, especially by women. He had been composing his own stories some time before this, using his mother and aunt Jane Balfour as amanuenses, and his first recorded work was a history of Moses, which won him the prize of 'The Happy Sunday Book of Painted Pictures' in an informal competition among the cousins. The text is illustrated with some wonderful drawings by Lewis of the Israelites, all wearing mid-Victorian chimneypot hats, with pipes in their mouths,

gathering in the manna or crossing the Red Sea.[39] He was good at drawing, in a speedy, impressionistic style: one blotchy ink picture of 'A steamer bound for Londonderry' has written on it in Thomas Stevenson's hand: 'Note. This steamer may be *bound for* Londonderry but I fear she will never reach it.'[40]

Religion entered everything and dominated play; when he was aged two and a half, Lou's favourite game was 'making a church', which he did by putting a chair and stool together to form a pulpit and conducting his own solitary services in the character of both minister and congregation. At 'an astoundingly tender age'[41] he voiced strong antipathy to a theological iconoclast then attending the Edinburgh Kirk assembly. His sayings, many of them parroted from his parents or nurse (such as Cummy's constant refrain of 'If I'm spared'), were noted and preserved by his mother with the utmost care. At home, this little 'dictator' strove to be the centre of attention, and he later remembered his young self unflatteringly: 'I was as much an egotist as I have ever been; I had a feverish desire of consideration.'[42] To other children he was a bit of a liability; being an only child, he didn't know how to handle rivals and expected to dominate play. As so often with children who insist on taking the lead, he had a markedly sadistic streak too, devising a ritual involving whacks on the hand with a cane when he and his cousins were bartering items for their 'museums'. If the 'buyer' flinched during the transaction, the whole procedure had to start again.[43]

Among the flocks of Balfour and Stevenson cousins with whom he played at Colinton Manse (his grandfather Balfour's house), or Cramond (his uncle George Balfour's house), or the Royal Crescent (Uncle David Stevenson's house), or Heriot Row, Louis remained an essentially lonely figure. But school was worse, and schoolwork a great trouble. Fortunately for him, he had minimal exposure to it; the combination of his father's views on pedagogy and his parents' shared hypochondria ensured he was often at home, 'too delicate to go to school', as Margaret records.[44] That was Mr Henderson's in India Street, his first school. It didn't last long.

Perhaps Louis recited in his father's hearing the unofficial school song:

> Here we suffer grief and pain
> Under Mr Hendie's cane.
> If you don't obey his laws
> He will punish with his tawse.[45]

At age ten, he went to the Edinburgh Academy for a while (contemporary with Andrew Lang, the future folklorist, although they had nothing to do with each other at this age). There was a brief attempt at a private tutor from England, but that didn't work out either. In the interstices of these arrangements months at a time would be spent having informal lessons with Cummy, or simply being cosseted in bed, surrounded by picture books and toy soldiers and with a little shawl pinned round his shoulders. Indulged so thoroughly over the years, he could have become an appallingly spoilt brat.

His closest friend in childhood was his cousin Bob, three years his senior, a tall, dreamy boy 'more unfitted for the world [. . .] than an angel fresh from heaven'.[46] Bob spent the whole winter of 1856 with his aunt and uncle at Heriot Row, possibly because of his father Alan's mental breakdown. Louis was delighted; he had been praying for a brother or sister for years. 'We lived together in a purely visionary state,' he wrote in 'Memoirs of Himself'; the two boys invented countries to rule over, with maps and histories and lead-soldier armies, they coloured in the figures for the pasteboard theatre – Skelt's Juvenile Drama – that had been the inspired gift on Lewis's sixth birthday from his aunt Jane Warden, they talked and daydreamed. 'This visit of Bob's was altogether a great holiday in my life,' Louis recalled later.[47]

The acute sensibility that made his nights a torment also afforded the child intense pleasures. He loved going to his grandfather Balfour's house, Colinton Manse, in a quiet village southwest of Edinburgh, where there was a large garden and other children of the family to play with, and his charming, devoted aunt

Jane Balfour on call. His happiness there was 'more akin to that of an animal than of a man', he thought later:

> The sense of sunshine, of green leaves, and of the singing birds, seems never to have been so strong in me as in that place. The deodar upon the lawn, the laurel thickets, the mills, the river, the church bell, the sight of people ploughing, the Indian curiosities with which my uncles had stocked the house, the sharp contrast between this place and the city where I spent the other portion of my time, all these took hold of me, and still remain upon my memory, with a peculiar sparkle and sensuous excitement.[48]

The garden was divided up into sections by a large beech hedge and adjoined the church and churchyard. This fascinated and horrified the child, a connoisseur of graves, who imagined 'spunkies' dancing among the tombstones at night and the glinting eye of a dead man looking at him through a chink in the retaining wall. The paper mill just upstream from the manse and the snuff mill next to it made a constant sound of industry, which was as much a part of the place's charm for the child as the birdsong and running water. Stevenson recalled 'the smell of water all around', and admitted 'it is difficult to suppose it was healthful', an opinion stoutly shared by his wife Fanny, who wrote in her preface to *A Child's Garden of Verses* rather crushingly that 'in any other part of the world [the situation] would suggest malaria'.[49]

Aunt Jane lived at the manse with her widower father and was Margaret Stevenson's only unmarried sibling, older by thirteen years and by far the more motherly of the two sisters. She had been 'a wit and a beauty' when young, 'a wilful empress' whose social and marriage prospects were reversed after some accident left her sight and hearing permanently damaged. She used to say that it was a riding fall that had effected the change, but that was accepted in the family as a euphemism, and the cause was probably a disease such as scarlet fever or typhus. She proved an invaluable matriarch, as Louis recalled with affection: 'all the children of the family came home to her to be nursed, to be educated, to be

mothered [. . .] there must sometimes have been half a score of us children about the Manse; and all were born a second time from Aunt Jane's tenderness'.[50] Stevenson had a charming, intensely sensual memory of sitting on the stairs at Colinton when he was a small boy and being passed over, rather than passed by, his aunt descending precipitately in her full-skirted dress:

> I heard a quick rustling behind: next moment I was enveloped in darkness; and the moment after, as the reef might see the wave rushing on past it towards the beach, I saw my aunt below rushing downwards.[51]

Aunt Jane's good spirits and kindness compensated for grandfather Balfour's withdrawn and intimidating manner. The Reverend Lewis Balfour was a man of few words, and those mostly broad Scotch, which to his grandson Louis was almost a foreign language. Scotch had been thoroughly displaced in middle-class life by English by the 1850s, but Balfour was of the old school, and only spoke English in the pulpit as a concession to his bourgeois parishioners. Louis guessed that his sermons were 'pretty dry', for the minister was an unemotional and unapproachable man. His grandson regarded him with a certain discomfort, and recalled vividly his last sight of the old gentleman at Colinton in 1860, when the boy was nine and his dying grandfather eighty-three:

> He was pale and his eyes were, to me, somewhat appallingly blood-shot. He had a dose of Gregory's mixture administered and then a barley-sugar drop to take the taste away; but when my aunt wanted to give one of the drops to me, the rigid old man interfered. No Gregory's mixture, no barley sugar, said he. I feel with a pang, that it is better he is dead for my sake; if he still see me, it is out of a clearer place than any earthly situation, whence he may make allowances and consider both sides. But had he lived in the flesh, he would have suffered perhaps as much from what I think my virtues as from what I acknowledge to be my faults.[52]

Colinton was a place of leisure and licence, where Lewis could root through the library unhindered. The child was particularly

drawn to the four volumes of Joanna Baillie's melodramas, since Cummy had always enticingly denounced plays.[53] These he approached with such furtiveness that he didn't so much read them as just let a few wicked words flash into his consciousness before shutting the book up quickly. Murders and murderers, a decapitation, a dark forest, a stormy night; the child took away these strong ideas and spun them together when he was alone into stories probably much more sensational and alarming than Miss Baillie's originals. He was fond of frightening himself: at home, he used to go at night into the dark drawing room 'with a little wax taper in my hand . . . a white towel over my head, intoning the dirge from *Ivanhoe,* till the sound of my voice and the sight of my face in the mirror drove me, in terror, to the gas-lit lobby'.[54]

The stolen pleasures of the Colinton library linked directly with his sanctioned obsession, Skelt's Juvenile Drama. Skelt produced dozens of different printed cutouts for use in children's toy theatres, 'a penny plain and twopence coloured', which Lewis bought in quantity at the stationer's on Antigua Street. He loved them, not so much because of the potent, transient joy of buying and colouring in a new set of characters or scenes – 'when all was painted, it is needless to deny it, all was spoiled' – but on account of the playbooks, with their stirring up of the sense of adventure and romance, the exoticism of the scenes and situations, the heart-stopping allure of the characters, highwaymen, smugglers and pirates:

> What am I? What are life, art, letters, the world, but what my Skelt has made them? He stamped himself upon my immaturity. The world was plain before I knew him, a poor penny world; but soon it was all coloured with romance. [. . .] Indeed, out of this cut-and-dry, dull, swaggering, obtrusive and infantile art, I seem to have learned the very spirit of my life's enjoyment; met there the shadows of the characters I was to read about and love in a late future; got the romance of *Der Freischütz* long ere I was to hear of Weber or the mighty Formes; acquired a gallery of scenes and characters with which, in the silent theatre of the brain, I might enact all novels and romances[.][55]

* * *

The Stevensons and their queer little son, with his unexpressive face and out-of-proportion head, made a close-knit, self-protective trio. Their shared hypochondria became a great comfort to them. When Thomas developed some unspecified complaint and was ordered to take the waters at Homburg in 1862, the family went with him. The next year it was Margaret's turn to be chief invalid and the destination was the South of France, where they stayed three months, returning through Italy on a splendidly leisurely tour and home via the Alps and the Rhine. All this time Lewis had been off school, but when Margaret was advised to return south for the winter of 1863–64, the Stevenson parents realised that if the boy was ever going to get an education they would have to leave him out of the next health tour. Thomas enrolled him at Burlington Lodge Academy in Isleworth, Surrey, chosen because three Balfour cousins were day boys there, looked after at weekends by the obliging Aunt Jane from her brother's rented house nearby. It was a well-intentioned scheme, but not a particularly good one. Lewis could only feel the separation from his parents more keenly in a boarding school so far from home (and in a foreign country), however many little Balfours were on hand.

The twelve-year-old's letters during his first and only term in Isleworth are full of characteristic touches: his stoicism, his distractibility (several times stopping mid-sentence), his mixed interest in and fear of other children. 'I am getting on very well, but my cheif amusement is when I am in bed then I think of home and the holidays,' he wrote to his 'dear Parients' in September.[56] As the weeks went by, there were signs of education going on – bits of Latin and French, along with devil-may-care touches of sophistication – but the dreaded time was approaching when both parents would leave the country without him, which they did on 6 November. On the eve of his thirteenth birthday the following week, Lewis wrote his mother a letter in demi-French to thank her for the huge cake she had sent him, which, he noted, weighed twelve and a half pounds and cost seventeen shillings. There had been some trouble during the fireworks on Guy Fawkes' Night

when some bad boys ('les polissons') 'entrent dans notre champ et nos feux d'artifice et handkercheifs disappeared quickly but we charged them out of the feild. Je suis presque driven mad par un bruit terrible tous les garcons kik up comme grand un bruit qu'il est possible.' Writing to his parents this first time truly alone, with only a monstrous cake for company, seems to have been too much for the boy: he ends his letter abruptly and to the point: 'My dear papa you told me to tell you whenever I was miserable. I do not feel well and I wish to get home. Do take me with you.'[57]

Lewis must have guessed the effect this simple appeal would have: Thomas Stevenson wrote back quickly to comfort the boy with the promise of fetching him out at Christmas, and Lewis's subsequent letters are crowingly cheerful, looking forward to the prospect of joining them in Menton. When Lewis left Spring Grove at the end of term (the last boy to be picked up, his father being so late that he almost gave up hope) it was for good: he stayed in France until his mother finally left for home in May the next year. Menton was lovely: months of lounging in sunshine, reading, being fussed over by his mother and Cummy (brought out to attend him), being carried up and down the hotel stairs by two waiters when he was feeling weak. The party came back via Rome, Naples, Florence, Venice and the Rhine: a great improvement on Isleworth and the company of *les polissons*.

Cummy's diary of this trip, written at the request of (and addressed to) her friend Cashie, nurse to David Stevenson's children, gives a vivid glimpse of the woman with whom Lewis had spent so much of his time. Cummy had not travelled abroad before, and was appalled at how lost the world was to 'the Great Adversary'. In London, the sight of barges on the Thames on a Sunday made her lament, 'God's Holy Day is dishonoured!',[58] whereas France, with its sinister-looking priests and perpetual feeling of carnival, was even worse, a land 'where the man of sin reigns'.[59] She was shy of eating with or associating with Catholics and felt that contact with heathens was in some way eroding her capacity to reach out 'in deep, heart-felt love to Jesus'.[60] She therefore relished her minor ailments

and frustrations as signs of interest from the deity, as this entry, on recovering from a slight sore throat, illustrates:

> O how good is my Gracious Heavenly Father to His backsliding, erring child! He knows I need the rod, but O how gently does He apply it! May I be enabled to see that it is all in love when He sends affliction![61]

Cummy was not wholly consistent, of course, and proved susceptible to certain temptations. In Paris, she wrote to Cashie, she had been intrigued by the sight of some specially white and creamy-looking mashed potatoes, of which she sneaked tiny portions whenever the waiter's back was turned. Although they were French and possibly the work of the Devil, she had to admit, 'I never tasted anything so good.'[62]

One good thing had come of Lewis's time at Spring Grove; he had been able to indulge a growing mania for writing. 'The School Boys Magazine' ran to just one issue and all four stories were by the editor, but at least he had the possibility of an audience among his schoolfellows and cousins. An opera libretto followed the next year, with the promising title 'The Baneful Potato', and a very early version of his melodrama *Deacon Brodie* was also written at this period, telling the gripping tale of the real-life Deacon of the Wrights who in the 1780s had carried on a notorious double life: respectable alderman by day, thief by night. The Stevensons owned a piece of furniture made by Brodie that stood in Lewis's bedroom, a tangible reminder of the criminal's duality. The idea of being an author intrigued the boy, though when one of his heroes, the famous adventure writer R.M. Ballantyne, visited the house of David Stevenson while researching his novel *The Lighthouse* (about the Bell Rock) and was introduced to the family, Lewis was so awestruck that he couldn't say a thing.

Stevenson's relations with his father were never anything other than intense, complex and troubling. Thomas Stevenson had on

the one hand unusual sympathy with the child, colluding instantly with his attempts to avoid school, while at the same time being in thrall to the strictest ideas of what it was to be a responsible parent. Lewis was on the whole frightened of being accountable to him, for the response was predictable. Years later he wrote to the mother of a new godson of his this heartfelt advice: 'let me beg a special grace for this little person: let me ask you not to expect from him a very rigid adherence to the truth, as we peddling elders understand it. This is a point on which I feel keenly that we often go wrong. I was myself repeatedly thrashed for lying when Heaven knows, I had no more design to lie than I had, or was capable of having, a design to tell the truth. I did but talk like a parrot.'[63]

Lewis became artful enough to know when to keep his mouth shut, as an incident which he related to Edmund Gosse in 1886 illustrates. When he was about twelve years old, he was so gripped by the romance and mystery of an empty house with a 'To Let' sign on it that he broke in by climbing through a rear window. Elated by his burgling skills, the boy then took his shoes off and prowled round, but once in the bedroom, thought he could hear someone approaching. Panic overcame him and he scuttled under the bed with his heart pounding. 'All the exaltation of spirit faded away. He saw himself captured, led away handcuffed,' and worst of all in his vision of retribution, he saw himself exposed to his parents (on their way into church) and cast off by them forever. This was such an alarming image that he lay under the bed sobbing uncontrollably for some time before realising that no one was in fact coming to get him, so he crept out and went home 'in an abject state of depression'. He was incapable of explaining to his parents what had happened, and their concern redoubled his guilty feelings, sending him into hysterics. During the evening, as he lay recuperating, he heard someone say 'He has been working at his books a great deal too much,' and the next day he was sent for a holiday in the countryside.[64]

More education was ventured sporadically, the last being at a private day-school in Edinburgh for backward and delicate chil-

dren. Mr Thomson's establishment in Frederick Street, which admitted girls as well as boys and whose regime did not include homework, was the softest possible cushion upon which to place young Lewis. As far as his father was concerned, the boy's eventual career was never in doubt; he would join the family firm. Therefore formal schooling was of minor importance: the greater part of his training would be got by observation and example in an apprenticeship. To this end, Thomas took his son on the annual lighthouse tour one year, and attempted to share his own knowledge of engineering and surveying whenever opportunity allowed. There is a touching memory of this in *Records of a Family of Engineers*:

> My father would pass hours on the beach, brooding over the waves, counting them, noting their least deflection, noting where they broke. On Tweedside, or by Lyne and Manor, we have spent together whole afternoons; to me, at the time, extremely wearisome; to him, as I now am sorry to think, extremely mortifying. The river was to me a pretty and various spectacle; I could not see – I could not be made to see – it otherwise. To my father it was a chequer-board of lively forces, which he traced from pool to shallow with minute appreciation and enduring interest. [. . .] '[S]uppose you were to blast that boulder, what would happen? Follow it – use the eyes that God has given you: can you not see that a great deal of land would be reclaimed upon this side?' It was to me like school in holidays; but to him, until I had worn him out with my invincible triviality, a delight.[65]

Thomas Stevenson had seen a painting at the Royal Scottish Academy exhibition titled *Portrait of Jamie* by James Falk, depicting an adolescent boy posed with a microscope. He wrote to Falk asking if a similar portrait could be made of his son and was told that the artist didn't do much in that line, but would take a look at the boy and see if he thought he could paint him. Falk was surprised to get a reply saying that Mr Stevenson had been back to look at the 'Jamie' portrait again and had changed his mind, feeling his son was 'too stupid looking to make a picture like that'.[66] The incident stuck in Falk's mind and thirty years later he

offered it to Stevenson's cousin Graham Balfour as a biographical curiosity (Balfour didn't use it): the father's turn of phrase was so odd and unsentimental. Odder still is the thought of Thomas Stevenson veering so completely between two different images of his son, one minute picturing him as a budding scientist, the next as too stupid-looking to be scrutinised.