

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Flirtations on the Stairs

LOUIS... the hysterical fellow, who wrote the article about Belle, is a tall gaunt Scotsman with a face like Raphael, and between over-education and dissipation has ruined his health, and is dying of consumption. Louis reformed his habits a couple of years ago, and Bob, this winter. Louis is the heir to an immense fortune which he will never live to inherit. His father and mother, cousins, are both threatened with insanity, and I am quite sure the son is... the two mad Stevensons, who with all their suffering are men of spirits, but so filled with the joyfulness of men living, that their presence is exhilarating, I will never see them again...¹

FANNY Osbourne's feelings about Louis after he left her that April in Paris are hard to fathom. This letter to her San Francisco lawyer friend Timothy Rearden shows a startling ability to embroider and confuse the facts. Tom and Maggie Stevenson were not cousins and while Louis's uncle Alan died paralysed and possibly insane, his father merely had strong religious views and a quick temper, while his mother's refusal to think ill of others was hardly madness. If Louis had given Fanny a hint of the unmentionable disease that had led him to reform his dissipated habits, she might have had stronger grounds to fear for his long-term sanity. She might have believed Bob was heading for the same fate as his unfortunate father. But her claim that Louis was dying of consumption was not born out by any firm diagnosis and no chest haemorrhages would occur for another three years.

It is possible Louis capitalised on his weak chest to win sympathy. He delighted in detailing his symptoms before dismissing them with cavalier bravado. But would he have sought to persuade Fanny to divorce Sam, and marry him, by hinting he would soon be dead and she and her children might end up with his father's fortune? Gold-digger or not, Fanny had to consider the financial implications of any choice about her future - the spectre of little Hervey was a reminder of what could happen when you tried to live on dreams alone.

It is probably true that Fanny did not expect to see Louis again. If Sam cared

enough about his family to come all the way to Paris, he might be prepared to give up his fancy women, and the Osbournes could all go back to San Francisco. Louis was aware of this danger and anxious that Fanny should not forget him. This might explain two letters that arrived almost simultaneously at 5 Rue de Douay. According to Fanny, a letter from Bob (still lovesick for Belle) read: 'I implore you to write a little letter to my poor cousin in that prison house of his in Edinburgh. I am only a poor cad but Louis is a true and good man and your letters may cheer him for he is said to be dying, God help me.' At the same time, the allegedly dying Louis wrote: 'They tell me dear Bob is not long for this world. I know him better than anyone and the good that is in him, and you need not fear to write to him.'²

Since reports of the two mad Stevensons' demise turned out to be greatly exaggerated, this looks like a put-up job in the spirit of jink, albeit in the serious hope of not being forgotten. However ill Louis may have been, he showed no sign of it that May, although depression and possibly dissipation were setting in again. He had given up writing for London, leaving Henley to sweat over its pages and deal with Glasgow Brown, whose health was giving way after years of high living. Meanwhile Louis had been trying his hand at another novel, *The Hair Trunk*, 'a most absurd story of a lot of young Cambridge fellows who are going to found a new society, with no ideas on the subject, and nothing but Bohemian tastes in the place of ideas; and who are - well, I can't explain about the trunk - it would take too long - but the trunk is the fun of it - everybody steals it; burglary, marine fight, life on desert island on W. Coast of Scotland, sloops, etc.'

Henley, still at Bristo Place, read the first chapter and laughed till the tears ran down his face. The plot outlined by Louis contained elements gleaned from his happy West Coast voyage with the Simp, Baxter and Tom Barclay that would be pressed into service later in *Kidnapped*, but *The Hair Trunk* did not progress far that summer. Instead Louis threw himself into rehearsals for that year's Jenkin theatricals. The part of a Messenger in the Sophoclean Greek tragedy *Deianira* was hardly taxing but, for the comedy *Art and Nature*, Louis had the plum role of Sir Charles Pomander, a fashionable fop, playing opposite Leila Scot-Skirving as the rustic beauty Mabel Chester. Bath bun ribaldry notwithstanding, Leila continued to

be quite taken with Louis and he found her good fun.

The two would walk home together after rehearsals, chaperoned by Leila's younger brother Owen, who remarked wryly: 'Needless to say he did not walk in the opposite direction from his home for the pleasure of my society... On one of these occasions when Stevenson walked home with us we invited him in. We found the household had gone to bed, so we could not offer much in the way of hospitality. We discovered, however, scones, jam and milk; and on this stimulating refreshment R.L.S. got quite hilarious, so much so, that I said, "Look out! You will have the Governor down." We expected each moment to see an irate, white-robed parent; but only a voice from above reached us - an angry voice, demanding who we were and why we were making a disturbance at such an hour. To this R.L.S., quite undaunted, replied: "It's only me, sir; I am having small beer with your son."³

To a man of the world involved with the gun-toting wife of a San Francisco philanderer, this claustrophobic little incident must have seemed small beer indeed, but Louis would never forget it. As he neared the end of his life, pacing the veranda at Vailima while dictating his novel *St Ives* to Belle, he would shift the scene to Swanston Cottage. Scones and milk became meat pie and port wine, a repast more fit for the soldier *St Ives* whose surname so curiously resembled Stevenson. Owen Scot Skirving became Ronald Gilchrist but Leila, perhaps to her chagrin, would be supplanted in Louis's imagination by her friend Flora Masson, the girl he once wanted to marry.

The shutters were up, the lamp guiltily turned low; the beautiful Flora greeted me in a whisper; and when I was set down to table, the pair proceeded to help me with precautions that might have seemed excessive in the Ear of Dionysius.

'She sleeps up there,' observed the boy, pointing to the ceiling; and the knowledge that I was so imminently near to the resting-place of that gold eyeglass touched even myself with some uneasiness... It is impossible to exaggerate the pleasure I took to be thus sitting at the same table with Flora, in the clothes of a gentleman, at liberty...

I had filled all the glasses. 'I have a toast to propose,' I whispered... It is to be feared I may have lent at times a certain resonancy to my voice; it is to be feared that Ronald, who was none the better for his own hospitality, may have set down his glass with something of a

clang. Whatever may have been the cause, at least, I had scarce finished my compliment before we were aware of a thump upon the ceiling overhead...⁴

The Jenkin theatricals were presided over by Fleeming, who directed his wife as Peg Woffington in the comedy, and in the title role of Deianira. Jenkin took his Greek drama seriously, which Louis would have done well to remember. His own part as the Messenger involved little more than a spirited altercation with Lychas, played by William Hole the artist and engraver who would one day illustrate Louis's work. But later in the play came a scene involving Hole and Flora Masson's brother Orme, which Louis made memorable for the wrong reasons. As an old lady, Flora would still recall it with a smile:

The curtain had fallen on a powerful and moving scene, amid the applause of the audience, and the stage was left in the possession of two of the young actors - Mr Hole and my brother - both in Greek garb. In a momentary reaction after so much unrelieved tragedy, these two, oblivious of their classic draperies, threw themselves into one another's arms, performed a rapid war-dance, and then flung themselves on to opposite ends of a couch at the back of the stage, with their feet meeting in a kind of triumphal arch in the centre. Louis Stevenson, who had been officiating at the curtain, took one look at them. He touched a spring - and up went the curtain again.

The audience... gave one gasp of amazement, and then broke into a roar of applause. That roar was the first thing that showed the two luckless acrobats that something had happened. They leapt to their feet - only to see the curtain fall once more. Professor Jenkin, who was host and stage manager in one, had been watching this particular portion of the play from the front. Without a word, he left his seat and went behind the scenes. 'Mr Stevenson,' he said, with icy distinctness. 'I shall ask you to give me a few minutes in my own room.'

Anybody who ever saw Louis Stevenson can imagine the little enigmatic flutter of a smile, the deprecatory bend of the head, with which he followed the Professor. What happened in that stage manager's room? There was some trepidation among the members of the company, and a furtive whisper circulated among them: 'Can it be corporal punishment?' And there was a general feeling of relief when Louis Stevenson sauntered into the drawing-room with a look of absolute unconcern.

But one of the little company - the brilliant, charming, irrepressible Leila Scot-Skirving

(afterwards, Mrs Maturin) - was interested enough to linger behind the others, and to waylay Louis Stevenson as he left the Professor's room...

*'What happened?' she whispered; and Louis Stevenson whispered back: 'The very worst ten minutes I ever experienced in the whole course of my life!'*⁵

But he was soon forgiven. As always, each of the three theatrical evenings concluded with a supper for the cast, retaining their stage finery. Louis, resplendent in 18th-century lace cuffs, velvet breeches and with silver buckles in his shoes, was in his element. Leila's brother Owen recalled: 'There were songs and speeches - scintillating with wit - and Stevenson spoke, from the exuberance of his joyous heart, winged words and felicitous fancies, with fluent tongue and mobile lips, while the soul within shone from large luminous eyes that entranced and fascinated.'⁶

Alfred Ewing had a slightly different perspective. In 1877, the future Principal of Edinburgh University had the more menial role of call boy and took charge of props, stationing himself between the stage and the basement kitchen at the upstairs, downstairs interface of the Jenkin household: 'My duties, which were many, required me to procure each night from the kitchen a practicable and really eatable pie for consumption by the family of Triplet; and also to disturb at necessary intervals, always discreetly and at the last minute, various promising flirtations on the stairs.'⁷

Were the actors engaged in amorous banter with each other - or the servants? One of Louis's biographers would claim he had an affair with a girl in the Jenkins' employ⁸. It is easy to assume Louis was so in love with Fanny that he took no interest in other women, yet his curious behaviour the previous year suggests some clandestine affair before they met, and he may not have broken it off. The artists at Grez all had their grisettes in Paris, to whom they returned in the winter. Will Low insisted Louis never kept such a girl in France - why should he, when Fanny was there? But Edinburgh was another matter. For years Louis had led a double life, split between New Town respectability and the low-life twilight world he frequented with Baxter and Henley. Now his ever more complicated life was split between France and Edinburgh, two hermetically sealed existences. The people he knew in Edinburgh were blind to what went on down south, and those he knew in Paris and

Greze, except Bob and the Simp, had no inkling of his life in Edinburgh. He had the perfect opportunity to enjoy two or more affairs in separate places.

Fanny had not sworn undying love, and Louis knew her husband was returning to her. There is no surviving correspondence between him and Fanny to suggest plans for a future together. Meanwhile Sam turned up in Paris on May 28, the week after the Jenkin theatricals, and was met at the Saint-Lazare railway station by his wife and children.

There is no doubt that Belle and Sammy doted on their father, a tall, handsome man of action, quite unlike the scruffy Bohemians with whom they had spent the summer. Belle, involved in her first big love affair with O'Meara, was anxious for her father's approval. Eight-year-old Sammy had hero-worshipped Lully Stevenson, but Lully was not his father and Lully had gone away. Here now was Sammy's real father, who had bought him a pony to ride when they went back to San Francisco. The boy would have been quite happy to go back to being a regular family.

But what about Fanny? On seeing her husband on the station platform, she no doubt felt the old physical attraction. Unlike the skinny, scruffy Louis, who always looked in need of a good wash, Sam was clean-cut and good-looking and Fanny was soon reminded why she married him. Husband and wife may even have shared a bed that first night in Paris. But although the first week of Sam's visit was happy enough, the mood changed when the Osbournes moved to Greze. Sam did not fit in with the Bohemian code. He was the kind of person Bob Stevenson sought to evict from the Hotel Chevillon, a bourgeois who speculated on the San Francisco stock exchange and came to the enchanted Forest of Fontainebleau as a tourist. It was as well Louis was not there - he would have found it impossible to resist a satirical comment, prompting Sam to flatten him.

Yet this was no way for Sam to win back his wife's heart. By now Fanny knew a return to normal married life was impossible. Sam began to flirt with the peasant girls in Greze. On June 9, after less than two weeks with his family, he headed back for the States alone. It cannot have been easy to persuade him to return without his children, and to finance more of his wife's Bohemian madness. Maybe Fanny again threatened him with a very public San Francisco divorce.

Meanwhile Louis in Edinburgh remained in good health, although to Colvin he wrote cryptically: 'O, about my paralysis. I was glad you told me; when you meet with the genius of evil, it's as well to study him thoroughly.'⁹ Despite Louis's alleged years of dissipation, there was no sign of the dying consumptive in this young man of 26. As Alfred Ewing put it: 'Stevenson was then in what, for him, was excellent health; happy in the steady advance of his position as a writer.'¹⁰

Dissatisfied with his comic novel, Louis was writing an essay for Leslie Stephen on the French vagabond poet Francois Villon. But more impressive was the short story it spawned, placed eventually with Temple Bar magazine. *A Lodging For The Night* was more vivid and powerful than anything Louis had written so far. In it he created another world, a mediaeval Paris in the grip of cruel winter, where poets, thieves and whores might freeze to death in streets overshadowed by the great gibbet of Montfaucon, on which the bones of criminals rattled in the icy blast. Louis wrote the story at the start of June, but in Edinburgh that was no guarantee of sunshine. He complained to Colvin: 'I wish to God we could get a little of the heat you speak about. Our poor bones are still full of winter frost.'¹¹

Nor was the sunny, sociable Louis of the Jenkin theatricals the secret, solitary Louis who wrote *A Lodging For The Night* and suffered dark moments of self-loathing, brooding over his image in the mirror, seeking signs of moral deformity within. Just as he felt a kinship with the vicious, white-faced boy Fergusson, his fictionalised Francois Villon was an unlovely reflection of himself.

The poet was a rag of a man, dark, little, and lean, with hollow cheeks and thin black locks. He carried his four-and-twenty years with feverish animation. Greed had made folds about his eyes, evil smiles had puckered his mouth... His hands were small and prehensile, with fingers knotted like a cord; and they were continually flickering in front of him in violent and expressive pantomime¹².

The Villon created by Louis is shockingly amoral. When he witnesses the casual stabbing of a fellow villain in a gambling den by a cemetery, there is no sense of a heinous crime - only primitive horror at the sight of the bald head with a fringe of red hair, lolling back lifeless. Right or wrong never enters the self-absorbed student poet's head, preoccupied with sensual verses on the pleasures of food, and he breaks

out in hysterical laughter. As he flees, his concern is self-preservation from armed guards, ravening wolves and a night so cold it could kill. The most disturbing scene is when Villon takes refuge in the porch of a half-ruined hotel.

He stumbled over some substance which offered an indescribable mixture of resistances, hard and soft, firm and loose. His heart gave a leap, and he sprang two steps back and stared dreadfully at the obstacle. Then he gave a little laugh of relief. It was only a woman, and she dead. He knelt beside her to make sure upon this latter point. She was freezing cold, and rigid like a stick. A little ragged finery fluttered in the wind about her hair, and her cheeks had been heavily rouged that same afternoon. Her pockets were quite empty; but in her stocking, underneath the garter, Villon found two of the small coins that went by the name of whites. It was little enough; but it was always something; and the poet was moved with a deep sense of pathos that she should have died before she had spent her money... Two whites would have taken such a little while to squander; and yet it would have been one more good taste in the mouth, one more smack of the lips, before the devil got the soul...¹³

This Hyde-like, animal desire to claw the last scrap of pleasure out of life was at odds with the Calvinist self-denial espoused by Louis's father. The Louis who was his father's son was a moralist with a conscience - but the Louis who roamed the cold streets of Edinburgh late at night, seeking refuge in dens of iniquity by the Calton cemetery, was a creature bent on his own desires. Every sixpence he could save from his allowance or wheedle out of his mother meant one more moment of pleasure.

To spendthrifts money is so living and actual - it is such a thin veil between them and their pleasures! For such a person to lose his money is to suffer the most shocking reverse, and fall from heaven to hell, from all to nothing, in a breath... Villon stood and cursed; he threw the two whites into the street; he shook his fist at heaven; he stamped, and was not horrified to find himself trampling the poor corpse.¹⁴

Who was the dead whore in the entrance to the hotel? One of Bob's French bitches, with his two francs tucked in her garter? Or perhaps she was part of Louis's own past in another country, the girl who wrote the flower-arabesque letter to him in Edinburgh and could barely scrape together the small coins to post it - the girl whose memory caused Louis to cry: 'Don't I deserve the gallows?' He might joke that

the Simp should be hanged for his sexual misdemeanours, but feelings of guilt about his own 'past hard-heartedness' were harder to laugh away. Time and again the gallows would appear in his writing, with a sense that something he had done warranted the ultimate punishment - Bryce's last breakfast of a hearty choke and hoister, witnessed by the assembled citizens of Edinburgh.

Yet Louis survived the cold of Edinburgh and, if ever his father really did throw him out of the house, he could always find a lodging for the night in Bristo Place, where Henley had taken him in when he was 'in hiding' the previous autumn. Like the Seigneur de Brisetout who gives Villon shelter, Henley was a big and burly man of honour who would not shut his door on the ragged Bohemian, however much he might criticise or laugh at Louis's conduct.

The bleak mood of introspection lifted on June 19, when Louis left for London, en route to sunnier days in France. With Sam Osbourne gone, the coast was clear for more pleasant diversions in the forest and on the river, during which Louis was rarely away from Fanny's side, or reading at her feet. Before leaving Edinburgh he may have picked up an advance copy of Mottiscliffe: An Autumn Story. Shortly after sending off final proofs, the alcoholic Ferrier had gone to dry out at the Chalmers Hospital in Edinburgh's Lauriston Place, where he tiddled surreptitiously and awaited the critics' verdict.

The Saturday Review was unkind, and the book did not sell. But far from being a depressive, self-pitying work, Mottiscliffe is a humorous tale of nothing very much, gently cocking a snook at the bourgeois values upheld by Mrs Grundy and underpinned by the 'common bankers' whose God was money. Louis would have enjoyed his friend's treatment of Adolphus P. Sutton, the millionaire financier who takes Cherrycombe house to inveigle his family into good society around Mottiscliffe:

Mr Sutton was a devout man. His life was 'one grand sweet song' in honour of the deity - Mammon. He was a great high priest... He rose from bed to worship; his luncheon was a savoury sacrifice in three courses; before dinner he thanked his God for all His goodness, and after dinner he spoke with emotion of his God to eupeptic listeners; in the night-watches, too, he dreamed of auriferous paradises, while his better, if uglier, half accompanied his

*wanderings in regions of bullions and bliss on her tuneful nose, the only instrument of which she was complete mistress, good woman...*¹⁵

The same gift of gentle ridicule, perhaps inherited from Ferrier's literary great-aunt Susan, shone through his descriptions of the Rev Charles Cope, Bishop of the uninhabited Diocese of Tristan d'Acunha, who in the absence of any other duties had attached himself to the Suttons as family chaplain and parasitical *bon viveur*:

*The bishop had been on thorns - a painful situation for a man of sixteen stone - during the prevalence of sinister rumours regarding the solvency of the capitalist with whom he lived, but now he was as suave, fat and happy as he had ever been. There was no necessity for him to seek another trunk round which to wreath his tendrils...*¹⁶

Only in odd corners could Louis glimpse the author's personal tragedy. Ferrier's friends might not find it so easy to laugh at the fate of Mrs Sutton's brother on a voyage to Madeira - 'her brother's death had been directly caused by his having jumped overboard in a fit of delirium tremens' - or the forced jocularity of the author's advice to the Cambridge student Tom Hesketh, hung over after the Channel Club Ball: 'Perhaps, too, for thy looks art fishy, thou drankest more freely of the yachtsman's wine than thou should'st have done? If so, thy case is lamentable indeed, and I counsel thee to go across to the house of Aesculapius, and procure from him some soothing antibilious drug. So may the irritation of thy mucus membrane be allayed, and the action of thy cerebrum become healthy.'¹⁷

Nevertheless, Ferrier had completed a two-volume novel and Louis's pride in his friend's achievement must have been tinged with envy when he still had no book to his name. His own review of Mottiscliffe was guarded, trying hard not to damn with faint praise. While admitting 'there is no story to speak of' he declared that Mr Ferrier displayed 'a "greatness of gusto". He writes with a smack of enjoyment'. The delight of the book, Louis observed, 'lies in a sort of lazy, Epicurean atmosphere, which wooingly pervades the reader as he advances from page to page. The lines have fallen to him in pleasant places, and everyone around him is content. The rector dozes away the warm afternoon on manifold cushions: Sir Valentine smokes interminable cigars; the girls are playing croquet or bathing; thirsty souls have an eye to an afternoon drink; and you may be sure that there is some mild junketing on

hand for the evening or the next day.' Perhaps in the hope of persuading his friend to shake off his addiction to the bottle, Louis concluded: 'Mr. Ferrier, with this enviable quality on his side, among others, has only to try for more compression and solidity, and make his next book as good as the best parts of Mottiscliffe, to produce something worthy of himself.'

Louis's own attempt at a novel, *The Hair Trunk*, had collapsed and the notes from his canoe voyage still showed no sign of becoming a book. Yet instead of labouring at a sustained piece of literature, Louis became involved in a new Bohemian project. He and Bob had cajoled the Simp into the joint purchase of a barge on the Loing at Moret. A local carpenter was to convert her into a houseboat christened *The Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne*, aboard which the Bohemians might travel the canals of France, heedless of all crass, material conventions prevailing on land. Artistic decoration of the interior was left to Bob, adorning the cabin ceiling with naked angels. It kept his mind off Belle's romance with O'Meara, now in full bloom at Grez amid uproarious 'sea battles' in which the *Arethusa* and the *Cigarette* took part.

Sometimes Louis and Fanny would take a boat and slip away up the river alone. Amorous activities afloat were nothing new in 1870s France, where Guy de Maupassant would row out into the countryside around Paris with a couple of whores for summer dalliance on an undisturbed riverbank. But Fanny was no whore and Louis's professed intentions were as honourable as those of a man with another man's wife could be. It seems he had not yet usurped the place of Belle and Sammy's father in Fanny's bed. At 26, it is probable that Louis's experience of sex was solely on a paying basis, with working girls such as Mary H., while any romance with a middle-class Miss such as Flora Masson remained Platonic. At some point that summer, perhaps on a grassy riverbank beside a pool of water lilies, love and lust made their peace and Louis's affair with Fanny crossed into the realm of physicality.

Mine eyes were swift to know thee, and my heart

As swift to love. I did become at once

Thine wholly, thine unalterably, thine

In honourable service, pure intent,

Steadfast excess of love and laughing care:

*And as she was, so am, and so shall be.
I knew thee helpful, knew thee true, knew thee
And Pity bedfellows: I heard thy talk
With answerable throbbings.
On the stream,
Deep, swift, and clear, the lilies floated; fish
Through the shadows ran.
There, thou and I
Read Kindness in our eyes and closed the match¹⁸.*

This summer of love seemed a world apart from the need to earn a living. The best Louis could do was pick up an easy five guineas for a piece in July's Cornhill about the importance of being idle. One can only imagine Tom Stevenson's feelings as he sat back in his overstuffed armchair at Swanston Cottage to peruse An Apology For Idlers:

Just now, when every one is bound, under pain of a decree in absence convicting them of lese-respectability, to enter on some lucrative profession, and labour therein with something not far short of enthusiasm, a cry from the opposite party who are content when they have enough, and like to look on and enjoy in the meanwhile, savours a little of bravado and gasconade. And yet this should not be...¹⁹

It had been Tom's dearest wish that his son should become an engineer and part of a distinguished third generation of Lighthouse Stevensons. Now only his brother David's sons Davie and Charlie would carry on the work, while Louis idled away however many more years God might allow him. Not that Louis had shown any inclination to follow God's laws - some of his conduct had been downright sinful. Yet at times he seemed to appreciate the difference between right and wrong... if only he could be more serious and stop all this gallivanting. The law, for which he had studied and qualified, now seemed cast aside, and this writing business hardly seemed like a full-time profession for a man. Yet he really was a clever young dog, despite his disinclination to work...

It is admitted that the presence of people who refuse to enter in the great handicap race for sixpenny pieces, is at once an insult and a disenchantment for those who do. A fine fellow (as

we see so many) takes his determination, votes for the sixpences, and in the emphatic Americanism, 'goes for' them. And while such an one is ploughing distressfully up the road, it is not hard to understand his resentment, when he perceives cool persons in the meadows by the wayside, lying with a handkerchief over their ears and a glass at their elbow...²⁰

After a month of lying in meadows, Louis took the train to Paris en route to London and Edinburgh, where he submitted willingly to the strictures of a dress suit to act as best man at his best friend's wedding. Charles Baxter had long since fallen for Gracie Stewart, daughter of a Major-General commanding the Bengal Native Infantry. Now returned from convalescence abroad, Baxter had secured her hand in marriage. For five years he had enjoyed his double life as respectable lawyer by day, low-life *bon viveur* by night, seeking pleasure amid the coded whistles and catcalls of Waterloo Place, Leith Street and the Low Calton. But next year Baxter would be 30, and it was time to settle down. He was the first of Louis's friends to do so - the Simp, despite rumours of an irregular Scotch marriage, was still unable to live openly with Etta and their little daughter. For Louis, Baxter's letter calling him to the wedding - or funeral as he referred to it jokingly - heralded the end of an era. He replied with all the warmth, charm and sincerity of an old friend:

My dear Chawles,

I shall make my arrangements. The convoy shall be followed; and sincerely, it will give me a very hearty pleasure to be chief mourner... the fact is that I have felt great pleasure in your request; and damn it all. I am not eloquent. I'll hold the bottles. And I wish you a rare good time, and plenty of children. If you have as good a time in the future as you had in the past, you will do well. For making all allowance for little rubs and hitches, the past looks very delightful to me; the past when you were not going to be married, and I was not trying to write a novel; the past when you went through to B. of Allan to contemplate Mrs Chawles in the house of God and I went home trembling every day lest Heaven should open and the thunderbolt of parental anger light upon my head; the past where we have been drunk and sober, and sat outside of grocers' shops on fine dark nights, and wrangled in the Speculative, and heard mysterious whistling in Waterloo Place, and met missionaries from Aberdeen: generally, the past. But the future is a fine thing also, in its way; and what's more, it's all we have to come and go upon. So, let us strike up the Wedding March, and bedeck ourselves with

the loose and graceful folds of the frockcoat, and crown ourselves with Sunday hats as with laurel; and go, leaping, and singing, and praising God, and under the influence of champagne and all the finer feelings of humanity, towards that sacred edifice, or secular drawing room, from whence you, issuing forth, shall startle mankind with the first splendours of the wedded Chawles. Proudest moment of my life, C.B.

Ever your old friend

Louis Stevenson²¹

The spectacle of a respectably-clad Louis was so remarkable that Eve Simpson recorded it for posterity: 'He allowed himself to be led to the tailor's and have his clothes ordered for him. He begged for a velvet collar and cuffs to a frock coat, a gayer waistcoat; but his tailor, backed by his two boon companions who had escorted him to prevent escape, remonstrated: "On this occasion, Mr Stevenson, you must allow me to use my judgment; you can order what vagaries you choose when you have only yourself to please."

'He dressed for this feast at our house, as his people were at Swanston, and the bridegroom feared, unless under surveillance to the last, he might appear in his usual docked velveteen jacket. But he was childishly interested in these novel clothes. He felt so strange in orthodox attire that we had difficulty in persuading him we were not chaffing when we did not laugh, when he, holding himself erect, strutted in. Just as we thought he was safely started for his post of duty, he rushed back and stood on a chair to see himself once more in a side-board mirror, and, with a smile of incredulity, he sallied forth, apprehensive of hearing jeers from an astonished populace.'²²

Having waved off the happy couple, Louis did not return at once to France but spent three weeks with his parents, partly on holiday in Cornwall. It must have felt strange, after all his adventures, to be sitting in chintzy English hotel drawing rooms with his mother while his gregarious father made humorous small-talk with the other hotel guests. Louis was so bored that he took up his pen to write to Mrs Sitwell: 'Cornwall is not much to my taste, being as bleak as the bleakest parts of Scotland and nothing like so pointed and characteristic. It has a flavour of its own, though, which I must try and catch...'²³

Having visited St Michael's Mount, Louis planned an essay comparing it with Mont Saint Michel across the Channel, perhaps throwing in Scotland's Bass Rock for good measure. Nothing came of this, but the success of *A Lodging For The Night* had galvanised Louis into writing more fiction. The easygoing mood of *An Apology For Idlers* had been replaced by a determined return to the Calvinist work ethic: 'I have quite lost all power of resting. I have a goad in my flesh continually, pushing me to work, work, work...'²⁴

The *Sire de Maletroit's Mousetrap*, eventually published as the *Sire de Maletroit's Door*, is a short story revisiting the dark, haunting atmosphere of mediaeval France which Louis had created in *A Lodging For The Night*. Trapped in the grand hotel of Alain, Sire de Maletroit, young Denis de Beaulieu is given an ultimatum - marry Alain de Maletroit's beautiful niece Blanche, or be hanged the next morning. Blanche has been compromised, if not impregnated, by Captain Florimond de Champdivers who has left her in the lurch, and her uncle now wishes to find a replacement to make an honest woman of her. It was impossible for Louis to use the name Alan without recalling the spectre of his paralysed uncle, and in the story the unlovely Alain addresses Denis as 'nephew'. If Blanche de Maletroit was a romanticisation of Alan Stevenson's daughter Katharine de Mattos, impregnated but abandoned by her atheist husband, then Louis/Denis had a duty as her trustee and guardian laid on his shoulders by the shade of Uncle Alan. Significantly in the story he refuses to do what is required unless Blanche/Katharine loves him. In this perplexing tale, Louis may have been trying to lay to rest old feelings for his childhood sweetheart as he stepped into an unknown future with Fanny Osbourne.

After less than two weeks with his parents in Cornwall, Louis had to get away. Leaving Tom and Maggie to continue their sight-seeing, he boarded the train to London. Soon he was back in Grez for the tail end of a disappointingly cool summer. Louis found work on the barge almost complete, although Bob's artistic labours had been hampered by an injured foot, crushed between boats during a particularly fierce 'sea battle'. Fanny had received a similar foot injury, with a torn calf muscle that was taking a long time to heal and prevented her walking, so she had to be carried about by her fellow Bohemians. Meanwhile the rivalry of O'Meara and

Pardessus for Belle's affections had resulted in a most un-Bohemian atmosphere of sexual jealousy until flashpoint was reached when the Irishman slapped the American in the face and was sent sprawling in return. To satisfy honour, a duel was deemed necessary and the artists sold their piano to purchase pistols for use at dawn in a clearing in the forest. Only the timely intervention of Fanny and Bob prevented possible fatalities before breakfast on the morning of August 10. Louis, arriving just over a week later, soon found himself 'living in an atmosphere of personal quarrel, apologies and (God save the mark! - what has become of all my theories) imminent duelling'.²⁵

The Bohemian idyll was dented further by unpleasant financial embarrassments. Neither Bob nor Louis had funds to pay for the work on barge, leaving the Simp with the prospect of picking up the tab. While it was quite possible for the wealthy baronet to draw on his despised 'common banker' back in Edinburgh, he felt this was hardly in the Bohemian spirit of share-and-share-alike. As affably as he could, he declined to bail his friends out and eventually the debt was paid by transferring ownership of the barge, plus the Cigarette and Arethusia, to the disgruntled carpenter of Moret.

Louis was glad to turn his back on Fontainebleau and move to Paris with Fanny and her children. At 5 Rue Ravignan, below Sacre Coeur and Montmartre, the four of them took lodgings together with Margaret Wright, her artistic daughter Marian and young son Charles, who attended the same school as Sammy. Naturally this scandalous *menage* was kept secret from Louis's parents and Sam Osbourne in San Francisco. Sammy was perhaps young enough to accept the new arrangements, but 19-year-old Belle may have found it more difficult to accept Louis's presence in her mother's bed. It was hard to see why she must observe the proprieties with O'Meara when her mother had so easily cast them aside.

For the best part of two months, Louis and Fanny lived in Paris like man and wife, or artist and grisette. They did not look the most romantic of couples, Fanny still hobbling on crutches with the calf injury while Louis was almost blinded by an infection in his eyes. The hypochondriac in Fanny feared her ailing lover might lose his sight permanently and insisted Louis must see a doctor in London immediately.

Leaving Belle and Sammy in Margaret Wright's care, the two invalids took the train and ferry to England, where to placate Mrs Grundy they stayed in separate lodgings - Louis with Colvin and Fanny with Mrs Sitwell - while a specialist sorted out Louis's eyes and a minor operation put right Fanny's foot. It must have been a curious experience for the former Consuelo and Madonna to play host to the woman who had supplanted her in Louis's affections, yet Mrs Sitwell was the quintessential English lady and did all she could to make the tough little American woman feel at home. Fanny had never met people like this before, and boasted of her new experiences to her lawyer friend Timothy Rearden in San Francisco:

I was with very curious people in London, the leaders of the Purists. I was so out of place in their house that a corner was arranged for me. They wrapped me in yellow shawls and spread a tiger skin over my sofa, and another by me. Everything else was of dull pale blue or green, so that I quite had the feeling of being a sort of Pocohontas in my corner. This seems most incongruous to have the solemn Mr Colvin, a professor at Cambridge, and the stately, beautiful Mrs Sitwell sit by me and talk in the most correct English about the progress of literature and the arts...

I was told beforehand that they must never know that I had ever dreamed of smoking a cigarette, and that one puff of tobacco smoke would be a desecration and pollute their house forever. One afternoon a Mr Henley, who had written a poem about me last winter without knowing me or ever having seen me, and Mr Leslie Stephen, Thackeray's son-in-law, were brought to see me. I was very much interested in their talk and forgot where I was, and suddenly finding a cigarette in my pocket began smoking it quite calmly. Not the slightest notice was taken of it, but when they were gone, instead of killing me as I expected, Mr Colvin went out and bought some Turkish tobacco and papers and made me teach him and Mrs Sitwell to roll cigarettes. Now I call that real politeness.²⁶

Once Fanny's foot was on the mend, she returned to her family in Paris but Louis did not go with her. Filial obligation, or lack of funds, necessitated his return to Edinburgh where he would remain for five weeks. It was good to see his parents again, but claustrophobia soon set in with the cold and damp of a city in which Louis's circle of friends was contracting. Baxter was a newly-married man and one could not intrude too far on his domestic bliss. The Simp was still engrossed in his

convoluted and clandestine love life and Ferrier, now discharged from the Chalmers Hospital, was continuing his battle with the bottle in lodgings by the sea in the East Neuk of Fife, where in more lucid moments he penned articles for London. This idiosyncratic publication had been without an editor since August, when Glasgow Brown had succumbed to consumption and been packed off to France to join the invalids on the seafront at Trouville. Henley took over Brown's Park Side residence in London and was from then on effectively in control of the paper. In addition to commissioning articles from Ferrier, he was able to offer work to Louis's cousin Katharine, still struggling to assert her independence from her husband. In December, when Brown, now at death's door, finally relinquished any pretence of editing, Henley had a struggle to make him pay Katharine £5 2s 6d for a backlog of seven articles. Henley was then left to edit London without the assistance of Jim Runciman, who had been alienated from the paper by a blazing row with the departing Brown. The heavy thump of Long John Silver's wooden leg was heard no more on the cobbled streets of Edinburgh and there would be no more friendly lodgings for the night for Louis in Bristo Place.

The Jenkins' door in Great Stuart Street remained always open, but Jenkin was more the liberal father figure than a bosom companion. He might be more broad-minded than Louis's real father, but is unlikely he would have been told of Louis's affair with Fanny. The Louis he knew was not the Bohemian lover in the Rue Ravignan but the golden youth who had charmed the young ladies at last May's theatricals, to say nothing of any promising flirtations on the kitchen stairs. To those who believe Bob's assertion that Louis was a perfect gentleman, it is inconceivable that after sharing Fanny's bed he would resume an affair with another woman in Scotland.

A letter to Henley that December reveals Louis sad but determined not to be depressed, trying to write an essay on his old hero Walt Whitman, although this would not see publication for another ten months: 'I must work, though it's bad for the eyes; above all as the weather is so dark that I have to light the gas all day long... I don't know that I'm unhappy; I'm cast down about my eyes; and I'm a miserable widower; but as long as I work, I keep cheerful... And do I not love? and am I not

loved? and have I not friends who are the pride of my heart? O no, I'll have none of your blues; I'll be lonely, dead lonely, for I can't help it; and I'll hate to go to bed, where there is no dear head upon the pillow; for I can't help that either, God help me; but I'll make no mountain of my little molehill, and pull no damnable faces at the derisive stars...'²⁷

If Louis's eyes were still bad, he may not have felt inclined to wander city streets alone, but Edinburgh was much on his mind as he planned out a series of Picturesque Notes on the city of his birth. This, like the Whitman essay, did not progress far, and the untouched notes from his canoe voyage remained a constant reproach. Then at last Louis shut himself away in his little attic study in Heriot Row and began to write his first book in earnest. Once he got going, it was not too daunting a task. As he told Colvin, 'it is written with a running pen, hot and hot, and as the thing comes. Pages and pages of it are my original journal written in inns, with hardly a word changed'.²⁸

At least 33,000 words of *An Inland Voyage* had been written when something happened to cause Louis's abrupt and possibly acrimonious departure from home. His mother noted simply in her diary for December 22nd: 'Louis starts suddenly for London at night.' It may have been another cataclysmic row which made it impossible for him to spend Christmas with his parents. Some have suggested a woman from Louis's past was involved - perhaps the person who caused him to go into hiding at Henley's lodgings a year previously. If so, he cannot have broken with her after meeting Fanny, and may have been playing the dangerous game of running two women at once, several hundred miles apart - yet there is no hard evidence to support this theory.

What is known is that Louis had heard from Fanny in Paris that young Sammy was ill. Although Fanny could rival the Stevensons when it came to hypochondria, there had been nothing imagined about the disease that caused Hervey's death and Louis confided in Colvin that 'the last accounts of F.'s little boy make me think he is going the way of the other'²⁹. The thought of young Pettyfish at death's door, especially if it was through lack of money, might prompt sudden, chivalrous action.

Yet this does not altogether explain Louis's urgent letter to the now respectably

married Charles Baxter, echoing the 'thunderbolt' letter he had sent him after his father had realised he was an unbeliever. In dramatic if slightly more jocular terms Louis wrote: 'My dear Charles, the Blow has fallen. I am swept from my native Heaths. Those who may once have shared with me the Innocent Levities of Youth will now be so very kind as to cash the enclosed and forward by return of post a ten-pound note in a registered letter addressed R. Stevenson, 5 Rue Ravignan, Paris.'³⁰

Louis's parents knew he had gone to London. They did not know he was bound for France on a mercy mission. Had he simply told them the child of a friend in poor circumstances was dangerously ill and needed his help, there would have been no need for cloak-and-dagger strategems with Baxter - the charitable Stevensons would have been happy to assist financially. Louis's reluctance to take their money, preferring to scrape together small sums himself, suggests he left Edinburgh under a cloud.

By December 29 he was in Paris. Sammy's health seemed far better than he had feared, but a couple of days of sea air seemed in order. The £10 had arrived from Baxter, and with it Louis took Fanny and Sammy to Dieppe, where in a room at the Hotel des Etrangers he drove himself to complete *An Inland Voyage* at great speed, desperate to turn his words into cash. By January 7 he was back in London, negotiating with a publisher. Whatever the state of relations with his father, he kept in touch with his mother, writing from the Savile Club: 'Kegan Paul won't let me go today as I had meant. He is going to produce a book of mine, and I have been all day at work with him on details.'³¹

The fact that Louis was to become a published author may have mollified his mother, but his next piece of news was bewildering. From a cafe on the Boulevard St Michel, he informed her: 'As my business hangs fire, I have run over to Paris for two days to see my friends...'³² Several days later, he was still there: 'I am kept here a day or so longer than I had meant. I have been to see Salvini...'³³ In fact his return home, expected in early January, would be delayed a full two months. Although Kegan Paul was in London, it seemed curiously necessary for Louis to see his book through the presses at arm's length while sharing Mrs Osbourne's bed in Paris.

While this arrangement might be economical, Fanny and her family were living

on a shoestring and it was not long before the £10 forwarded to Louis in Paris by Baxter at the end of 1877 had evaporated. There was also no telling when Sam Osbourne's patience and monthly cheques would run out. Fanny was now ill with nervous trouble and the strain of her predicament was beginning to show. Her daughter's affair with O'Meara was becoming intense, yet how could she warn them of the penalties of immorality when she herself was now a scarlet woman?

To make things worse, Louis wanted to tell the world of his love for her - beginning with his parents. Fanny realised this could be social suicide. If Louis's mother had gone into hysterics at the thought of her brother having carnal knowledge of his dead brother's wife, she might die of shock on hearing her son was sleeping with an American mother-of-two, ten years his senior, whose husband was still alive and well and fornicating in San Francisco.

How much Louis was prepared to tell his father is uncertain - probably no more than was necessary to restore good relations after the pre-Christmas contretemps and unlock the paternal coffers. Louis was now desperate for hard cash, informing Colvin he was '*sans le sou*', and only Colvin's timely loan of a further £10 kept him going. He spent some of it on respectable lodgings in the Rue des Abbesses, in preparation for meeting his father. Louis had asked him to come to Paris to clear the air. 'Don't be astonished,' he told Colvin, 'but admire my courage and F.'s. We wish to be right with the world as far as we can; 'tis a big venture; wish us God speed.'³⁴

The rift between father and son must have been hurting Tom Stevenson enough to persuade him to travel such a distance for an interview. When the two met at the start of February for Louis to tell his father 'about the new complications of his life', it is unlikely Fanny was there. Louis was aware the interview was critical, and before his father's arrival told Colvin: 'Three days from hence, I shall know where I am, and either be well off or quite a beggar.'³⁵

Louis would not have told his father he was sleeping with Fanny - the charade of separate lodgings in the Rue des Abbesses makes that clear. Yet he would have been anxious to explain he was in love, and that his love was honourable. This would be particularly important if his father believed Louis had been involved with another woman in Scotland who was still unaware of the 'new complications of his life'. If

Tom Stevenson could be persuaded his son was now in a serious relationship with a woman who was not a whore, and that his long absences from home were not merely frivolous, it would be wise not to push matters further. So long as no hint of scandal reached Mrs Grundy in Edinburgh, and Louis did right by any woman in Scotland who imagined she had a prior claim on his affections, his father would be happy to play a waiting game. Louis had entertained plenty of other mad notions that came to nothing.

His father may have shared his concerns with Sidney Colvin when the professor came to lecture in Edinburgh and stayed at Heriot Row in Louis's absence, warned in advance of 'the Scotch Presbyterian who has been to Paris under such strange circumstances'³⁶. A fortnight after Tom Stevenson's visit, Louis would send his father a deep and solemn letter in which the one-time 'careless infidel' and 'horrible atheist' now declared: 'Christianity is, among other things, a very wise, noble and strange doctrine of life... I have had some sharp lessons and some very acute sufferings in these last seven and twenty years... but still I have a good heart and believe in myself and my fellow men and the God who made us all. It is not for a few anonymous letters that I would give up mankind; not for a few cancers that I would lose my trust in him who made me... I have written letters today that it hurt me to write and I fear it will hurt others to receive; I am lonely, and sick and out of heart.'³⁷

What were the 'anonymous letters' and who wrote them? Were they linked to Sam Osbourne in San Francisco, or did they have something to do with Louis's mysterious troubles in Edinburgh in the summer of 1876 and his period 'in hiding' in Bristo Place? The anonymous letter writer was male, but the letters may have been about a woman Louis was forced to give up. Supporters of this theory cite the letters 'it will hurt others to receive' as evidence that at this point he was forced to make some kind of choice.

Whatever the case, Louis's gamble had paid off and once more he had access to Tom Stevenson's bounty. For weeks he had been living under considerable strain and no sooner had his father departed than he indulged his illnesses by checking into the luxurious Hotel Meurice and making the most of room service. Fanny's attempts to dissuade Belle from the affair with O'Meara were being undermined by

Louis's presence at 5 Rue Ravignan, so it was as well he could now afford to stay elsewhere. In the interests of propriety, Bob was recruited to look after the invalid in his hotel room.

Just what was wrong with Louis is a mystery. He described it as a kind of severe rheumatoid neuralgia that gave him acute pain in his shoulderblade. Even his reports to his mother were self-contradictory. One minute he was telling her: 'I had another worry with the doctor today; he gives me a clean bill; but says I must take care for a little.'³⁸ Five days later, he was claiming: 'I did not tell you that in my first interview (indeed, I did not know it myself) the doctor was within an ace of planking me off to the south.'³⁹ Why Louis should be ordered south by a doctor who had given him a clean bill of health is beyond comprehension. Yet if his illness was a sham, his letter to Henley on getting over the worst of it was still more mysterious: 'I am nearly cured of life; in fact I was not far off being cured of it forever by the usual specific, not ten days ago... Only yesterday, the anonymous letter writer made his welcome appearance in my life; I think I was positively pleased; I had been expecting him so long.'⁴⁰

By now Louis was convalescing alone at the more modest Hotel Canterbury, where the walls may have been thinner and it was possible to eavesdrop on his fellow hotel guests to while away the boredom:

Silas Q. Scuddamore had many little vices of the more respectable order, and was not restrained by delicacy from indulging them in many rather doubtful ways. Chief among his foibles stood curiosity... and when he found a flaw in the partition between his room and Madame Zephyrine's, instead of filling it up, he enlarged and improved the opening, and made use of it as a spy-hole on his neighbour's affairs. One day, in the end of March, his curiosity growing as it was indulged, he enlarged the hole a little further, so that he might command another corner of the room. That evening, when he went as usual to inspect Madame Zephyrine's movements, he was astonished to find the aperture obscured in an odd manner on the other side, and still more abashed when the obstacle was suddenly withdrawn and a titter of laughter reached his ears...⁴¹

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- ¹ Fanny Stevenson to Timothy Rearden, April 11, 1877, Timothy H Rearden Papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Owen Scot Skirving, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ⁴ RLS, *St Ives*, Chapter IX.
- ⁵ Flora Masson, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ⁶ Owen Scot Skirving, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ⁷ Alfred Ewing, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ⁸ Malcolm Elwin, *Letter to Books and Bookmen*.
- ⁹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, *Heriot Row*, Mid-May 1877. Yale 471, MS Yale.
- ¹⁰ Alfred Ewing, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson.
- ¹¹ RLS to Sidney Colvin, *Heriot Row*, June 1877. Yale 472, MS Yale.
- ¹² RLS, *A Lodging For The Night*.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ James Walter Ferrier, *Mottiscliffe: An Autumn Story*.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ RLS, *Mine Eyes Were Swift To Know Thee*.
- ¹⁹ RLS, *An Apology For Idlers*.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ RLS to Charles Baxter, *Paris or Grez*, June or July 1877. Yale 474, Facsimile in Clement Shorter, *Letters to Charles Baxter*.
- ²² Eve Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*, Chapter IX.
- ²³ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, *Penzance*, August 10, 1877. Yale 478, MS Yale.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ RLS to Sidney Colvin, *Grez*, September or October 1877. Yale 484, MS Yale.
- ²⁶ Fanny Stevenson to Timothy Rearden, Timothy H Rearden Papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley.
- ²⁷ RLS to WE Henley, *Heriot Row*, December 1877. Yale 491, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ²⁸ RLS to Sidney Colvin, *Heriot Row*, December 1877. Yale 494, MS Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ RLS to Charles Baxter, *Savile Club*, London, December 23, 1877. Yale 496, MS Yale.
- ³¹ RLS to his Mother, *Savile Club*, January 7, 1878.
- ³² RLS to his Mother, *Paris*, January 15 or 17, 1878. Yale 501, MS Yale.
- ³³ RLS to his Mother, *Paris*, January 1878. Yale 502, MS Yale.
- ³⁴ RLS to Sidney Colvin, *Paris*, late January 1878. Yale 505, MS Yale.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ RLS to Fanny Sitwell, *Paris*, c. February 7, 1878. Yale 506, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ³⁷ RLS to his Father, *Paris*, February 15, 1878. Yale 511. MS formerly owned by Gordon A Block Jnr.
- ³⁸ RLS to his Parents, *Paris*, February 7, 1878. Yale 507, MS Yale.
- ³⁹ RLS to his Mother, *Paris*, February 12, 1878. Yale 508, Text extract in *Catalogue of Brick Row Bookshop*, New York, 1921.
- ⁴⁰ RLS to WE Henley, *Paris*, February 14, 1878. Yale 510, MS National Library of Scotland.
- ⁴¹ RLS, *Story of the Physician and the Saratoga Trunk*, *The Suicide Club*, *New Arabian Nights*.