

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### Fanny

*FALLING in love is the one illogical adventure, the one thing of which we are tempted to think as supernatural, in our trite and reasonable world. The effect is out of all proportion with the cause. Two persons, neither of them, it may be, very amiable or very beautiful, meet, speak a little, and look a little into each other's eyes. That has been done a dozen or so times in the experience of either with no great result. But on this occasion all is different. They fall at once into that state in which another person becomes to us the very gist and centre-point of God's creation, and demolishes our laborious theories with a smile...<sup>1</sup>*

PASSING through Paris with the Simp, en route from Pontoise to the Forest of Fontainebleau, Louis met up with his American artist friend Will Low who told him of the female presence at Grez. As if seized by a premonition, Louis cried: 'It's the beginning of the end!'<sup>2</sup> As he and the Simp relaunched their canoes on the Loing and paddled the last few miles to Grez, Louis was heading for a meeting that would change his life forever. His nemesis was a dumpy little woman with dusky skin, short, dark curls and even darker eyes that flashed with a strange, golden light. As Louis made his dramatic entrance at the Hotel Chevillon that September of 1876, vaulting in through the window from the riverside lawn to the cheers of his fellow Bohemians, he was aware of those eyes fixed on him like a man sighting a pistol. In 36 years they had seen several lifetimes of love and hatred, hardship, grief and sorrow, all experienced at the speed of an express train that left memories confused and indistinct. Some were so painful it was probably better that way.

Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne could not only handle a six-shooter, blowing away a row of six bottles at 20 yards, but carried a revolver in her luggage. Her early married life had been spent in the prospecting towns of the American Wild West, where men were gunned down over rival claims, the streets were awash with gambling-saloon whores and a respectable woman might need to kill to escape a fate worse than death. Yet Fanny was no prudish Mrs Grundy, and as Louis called for

coffee and took a seat beside her he was aware of a strong, primitive, animal sensuality in this little woman ten years his senior. Those eyes, which even the fastidious Colvin would describe as 'full of sex', had an unblushing frankness beyond anything Louis had encountered in the brothels of Edinburgh and Paris. Fanny was nothing like the shy young virgins at his parents' dinner parties. He felt he could tell her anything. During long conversations in the woods or sitting by the little stove at the Hotel Chevillon, they would share the stories of their lives.

Fanny Matilda Vandegrift had been born on March 10, 1840, into a prosperous, Presbyterian family in Indianapolis. Her father Jacob, of Dutch extraction, was a lumber merchant with interests in property and a railroad company. Her mother, Esther Keen, was of Swedish descent and had been a divorcee when she married Jacob Vandegrift. Curiously Esther, Fanny and Belle experienced three generations of broken marriages, at a time when divorce was rare. Indianapolis was a new town and the family lived in a red-brick house next to a church. Fanny grew up with her four younger sisters and a younger brother in a happy, apple-pie environment. She was a tomboy, always playing outdoor games, and her dusky complexion was the despair of her grandmother - the American ideal of female beauty called for pale skin, while young Fanny looked like a little Red Indian. Yet she was pretty in an unconventional way and when Sam Osbourne came calling he was captivated by her lively, direct manner.

Sam was a young Southern gentleman from Kentucky with a plum job as secretary to the Governor of Indiana. He was handsome, courteous and could have been the pick of the belles of Indianapolis, yet it was Fanny's dark sensuality that fascinated him. They married on Christmas Eve, 1857, when he was 20 and she was 17, the ceremony taking place in the house Fanny's father had provided for the newlyweds. The following year their daughter Isobel was born.

In 1861, civil war broke out in America. Sam chose to side with the North against his own people and enlisted with the 46th Indiana regiment. Following basic training he was made Captain but never saw active service. After six months in the Union army, he resigned his commission. His friend George Marshall, who had married one of Fanny's sisters, had developed tuberculosis in the army and doctors

had prescribed a change of climate to California. Sam volunteered to accompany him. The journey was long and precarious, via Panama where George's condition grew critical and he died. In his last hours he was nursed by Betty Kelly, an attractive blonde widow they had met on the boat down from New York. Sam buried his friend and then, instead of returning to his wife and child, continued with Mrs Kelly to California, and then on to try his luck in the silver mines.

Fanny found herself summoned out with little Belle to the remote mining community of Austin, Nevada, where she found herself one of just six women in a town of men. The Osbournes lived in a shack with next to no furniture, yet despite the tomboy image Fanny was a homemaker who could turn it into a comfortable dwelling place. She was a good cook, a skilled seamstress and a green-fingered gardener who could turn a wilderness into a horticultural paradise. Yet the area was populated by unpacified Indians and there was always the fear of attack. During one false alarm, the women and children lay cowering on the floor of a cabin while the men waited with rifles cocked for the hideous war cries of a scalping party that never came. Fanny learned to shoot and always kept the revolver handy.

When Sam wearied of Austin, they moved to the mining town of Virginia City, the most lawless place in America. Men drank and gambled round the clock, hardly a day went by without a shooting, and the streets and saloons were full of cheap, gaudy women. Sam developed a taste for them which he could never shake off.

It was after Belle had recovered from a bout of scarlet fever and been taken by her mother to convalesce on the coast at San Francisco that Sam bumped into Mrs Kelly again. She was setting up a boarding house in Virginia City but as yet had no furniture. Bizarrely, Sam lent her the furniture from his own house and moved in with her. When Fanny came back early, she found her home empty. An ugly scene outside Mrs Kelly's boarding house secured the rapid return of the furniture and, shortly afterwards, a shamefaced Sam. For Fanny it must have been a painful shock to discover her handsome husband had roving desires she could not satisfy. Restless and footloose, he just had to have other women. He could be a good husband and a loving father but Sam Osbourne simply could not be true.

His wife was an intelligent, strong-willed woman with an occasional tendency

towards hysteria and might not always have been easy to live with. Early in 1867, Sam left Fanny and Belle in Virginia City to go prospecting. His wife may have suspected more sexual shenanigans. She and Belle moved to San Francisco, where word came through that Sam had been ambushed and killed by Indians. Fanny's grief may have been tempered by the hope that this was her husband up to his tricks again. Being dead was the perfect excuse for not sending her money and Fanny, now ostensibly a widow, was forced to scrape a living as a seamstress.

At last Sam, having got the badness out of his system for a while, reappeared in San Francisco. If Fanny had really believed he was dead, this must have been traumatic. Yet as the shock subsided, the Osbournes slipped into a second honeymoon. Sam secured a job as a court stenographer, bought a wooden cottage across the bay in East Oakland and, for a while, all was well. Despite everything, Fanny still loved him, and in 1868 little Samuel Lloyd was born. Yet the strain of monogamy proved too much for Sam and he started having other women again. All the insecurities Fanny had tried to suppress since finding her husband with Mrs Kelly now rose to the surface. One evening, when Sam was reading Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* to Belle, she burst out bitterly: 'I wonder, Captain Osbourne, you can read your own story!'

'My God, woman!' shouted Sam. 'Can't you ever forget?'

Half San Francisco knew Sam Osbourne couldn't keep his hands off the ladies. Angry, hurt and publicly humiliated, Fanny took her children back to her parents' house in Indianapolis. But after a year's trial separation she returned to San Francisco and once more patched up her marriage. In 1871, little Hervey was born.

Fanny turned the cottage in Oakland into a rose-covered idyll for her family, yet soon her husband again developed chronic priapism in the direction of other women, leaving his wife to vent her fury on a rifle range set up in the garden. On a bad day, had Sam appeared, Fanny might have been tempted to put a bullet through his cheating heart. But increasingly he stayed away, coming home at weekends after spending the rest of the week across the bay in another woman's bed. His wife was left in Oakland with a baby, a small boy and a girl just entering her teens who needed a stable father figure. Fanny tried hard to give them a happy home but her

own future as the pathetic, neglected wife of an incurable philanderer was an intolerable prospect.

Art saved Fanny's sanity. San Francisco had a burgeoning young artistic community and, when Belle enrolled as an art student at San Francisco's new School of Design, founded by Virgil Williams, Fanny followed suit and soon became friends with Williams and his wife Dora. Literature was another outlet for Fanny's frustration, and she enjoyed a rather prickly acquaintance with the lawyer Timothy Rearden, head of the city's mercantile library, a chauvinist who guided her reading while disparaging her attempts to liberate herself from her depressing domestic circumstances.

By 1875 it was clear the Osbourne marriage was a sham. Desperate to escape, Fanny told her husband she wished to accompany Belle to Europe to develop her art, taking Sammy and Hervey, too. Sam, in the throes of a new affair, was nevertheless reluctant to lose the children. But Fanny's persistence, coupled with the threat of a scandalous divorce that could cost Sam his job, forced him to agree. Realising he could have more fun with women in his family's absence, he would even keep his promise for a while to send funds to Europe. So it was that Fanny and her children arrived in Antwerp and later proceeded to Paris to study at Monsieur Julian's academy.<sup>3</sup>

Less than a year later, Hervey's death would shatter Fanny's life. She was still in mourning black when Louis met her. However quickly he might have fallen in love, Fanny certainly was not smitten at first sight. In a curious repetition of Louis's first meeting with Mrs Sitwell, he made friends with Fanny through taking an interest in her tousled-haired, eight-year-old son, who went about barefoot on the banks of the Loing and loved to fish all day, earning him the nickname of 'petit fish' or 'Pettifish'. From the outset young Sammy would hero-worship Louis.

*After the meal when we all trooped down to the riverside to see the Cigarette and the Arethusa... the stranger allowed me to sit in his, and even went to the trouble of setting up the little masts and sails for my amusement. I was very flattered to be treated so seriously - RLS always paid children the compliment of being serious, no matter what mocking light might dance in his brilliant brown eyes... While the others talked I appraised him silently. He*

*was tall and slight, with light brown hair, a small golden moustache, and a beautiful ruddy complexion; and was so gay and buoyant that he kept everyone in fits of laughter.*<sup>4</sup>

Young Sammy had a blissful Indian summer, boating with his new friend. A flirtatious girl of 17 was more problematic, and Belle's big eyes and trim little figure wreaked havoc among the artists. Grez had been recommended to the Osbournes by a New England sculptor nicknamed 'Pardessus' (French for 'overcoat') who had designs on Belle. More seriously, Bob had fallen for her from their first meeting in the hotel courtyard. It was one of life's cruel ironies that the most brilliant, witty and entertaining man in the world had no idea how to make a 17-year-old love him. French bitches could be bought for two francs, but American girls with a headful of romance had to be wooed and won, and poor Bob lacked the self-confidence to do it.

Besides, Belle was in love with Frank O'Meara. The young Irish artist, then 23, had left his native land to study in Paris with Carolus Duran, where he met Bob and the American artist John Singer Sargent. The three had rooms in the Latin Quarter. O'Meara was pale and intense, a devout Catholic with a shock of flame-red curls, cutting a dash in plus fours, a blue beret and brandishing a walking stick. That summer, as the others painted, he paid court to Belle. While Pardessus refused to admit defeat, attempting to monopolise her conversation at mealtimes, Bob kept his feelings to himself. He found it easier to talk to her mother - seemingly oblivious to the fact that Fanny was attracted to him.

Was it so wrong for an unhappily married woman of 36, who had just lost a child, to yearn for the strong arms of a younger man? Perhaps in a desperate attempt to shut out the pain of Hervey's death and seize life with both hands, Fanny flirted shamelessly that summer with all the artists as they sketched and painted her endlessly. The most carefree times were on the river, where she kicked off her purple espadrilles to bathe in a voluminous black costume whose knee-length skirt would still have shocked Mrs Grundy. The artists took to canoes and rowing boats for mock sea battles, at which Bob excelled, doing battle in an outlandish leather canoe of his own design, weaving effortlessly among the other craft with strong, deft paddle strokes to capsize the enemy and leave them bobbing and spluttering in the Loing.

Unlike the pigeon-chested Louis, Bob at 28 was a fine specimen. Dressed in a

tattered fisherman's jersey, paint-spattered trousers and wooden sabots, he had no need of sartorial ornamentation. In a letter to Timothy Rearden in San Francisco, Fanny recounted how 'Stevenson, the boating man, is also called Adonis, and Apollo because of his wonderful grace and perfect figure'<sup>5</sup>. Moreover Bob had a hint of something rakish in his past. The story of how he had divided up his inheritance into ten equal parts for ten years of pleasure before committing suicide might not be true but it was generally accepted and caused eight-year-old Sammy some anxiety: 'I never saw him lay out a few coppers for tobacco without a quivery feeling that he had shortened his life.'<sup>6</sup>

While Bob's behaviour at Grez was impeccable, his fellow artists were all aware of his two-franc pleasures in Paris and this may have filtered through to Fanny, who believed Bob had only recently turned his back on debauchery. Yet she had lived for years with a faithless husband and could only sympathise with a handsome young bachelor yearning for a more lasting relationship than a brief encounter in a brothel. After lunch one day, Fanny and Bob went for a long walk together. The talk turned upon which of the artists in Paris she might rely on as friends that winter. Perhaps sensing Fanny was drawn to him, Bob painted himself as a 'vulgar cad' who was not to be trusted. He may also have been aware his cousin was falling for her, and told her: 'Louis is a gentleman and you can trust him and depend upon him.'<sup>7</sup>

Fanny now realised Bob would never love her and was in love with her daughter. Yet she could not transfer her affections overnight to an eight-stone weakling. Intellectually, of course, Louis was almost as brilliant as his cousin and Fanny could not help feeling flattered at being drawn into long conversations about art, literature and life, with those wide-set, warm brown eyes gazing intently into hers. When she went into the forest to paint, she let Louis carry her paintbox, easel and umbrella and lie beneath a tree with his book.

In any case, it was doubtful if a passionate affair was advisable so soon after the trauma of Hervey's death. Louis was simply an interesting and sympathetic man she could talk to. Sooner or later she would have to return to San Francisco and they could have no long-term future. She lived in the present, in the merry communal life at the Hotel Chevillon, painting and boating and gathering after the evening meal to

sing at the old piano, purchased jointly by the artists.

A dozen or more would dine together, recounting the day's exploits. The elder statesman was the Italian Joseph Palizzi, who had been coming to Grez for 15 years and now rented a whole wing of the hotel as a studio. With his luxuriant white moustache, knee breeches and wide Panama hat, Palizzi was as impressive as he was kind and courteous, encouraging all the young artists and helping them to wine from his private cellar.

The British contingent was made up of O'Meara and four Scots - the two Stevensons, the Simp (who eschewed art, preferring to read philosophy) and his artist brother Willie, mildly eccentric in a three-piece suit and round felt hat, and built like the bull terrier he had once owned. Willie had given the dog a taste for absinthe, which proved fatal, so he now kept a similarly alcoholic marmoset - after a good drink the pair would sleep it off together.

Most gifted among the Americans was Theodore Robinson, newly arrived at Carolus Duran's atelier that year. Two years younger than Louis, he was already plagued by the asthma that would kill him at 43, by when he would have made friends with Claude Monet and achieved immortality as America's first Impressionist. Will Low was another young artist of promise, while Pardessus was the son of a millionaire who had sent him to learn sculpture as a commercial proposition. Undistinguished artistically, he would achieve immortality as the original for Loudon Dodd when years later Louis and the young man who was once 'Pettifish' came to write *The Wrecker*.

And then there was poor little Bloomer. A former pupil of Virgil Williams in San Francisco, Hiram Reynolds Bloomer - not 'William Frigmore Blugmer' as Bob once threatened to satirise him in a cod biography - was a tragic figure of fun. Desperately poor and arrayed in rags, he had been denied access to the Luxembourg gallery for being 'indecently dressed'. While his fellow Bohemians found this hilarious, Bloomer was mortified and despaired of ever selling a painting. Later he would achieve success and respect in California but his end, nearly four decades after those happy days at Grez, would lack dignity. In a final scene equal to anything Bob might have devised, 65-year-old Bloomer would be struck down and killed by a San Francisco

cable car. Yet that summer in Grez, when the artists were young, even a child could appreciate they were engaged in a wonderful game, thumbing their noses at the wealthy bourgeoisie to whom they hoped to sell paintings. Years later Lloyd Osbourne would remember:

*All these lads - for they were scarcely more - were gloriously under the spell of the Vie de Boheme; they wanted to be poor, improvident and reckless; they were eager to assert that they were outcasts and rebels. One of the Americans, who had an ample allowance, found enjoyment in wearing an old frock coat and a fez; another, equally well provided for, always wore expensive rings so as to have the extreme enjoyment of pawning them... It was the custom for them all to rail at the respectable and well-to-do; RLS's favourite expression was 'a common banker,' used as one might refer to a common labourer. 'Why, even a common banker would renig at a thing like that!' - 'renig' being another favourite word. I got the impression that people with good clothes and money in their pockets, and pleasant big houses, were somehow odious, and should be heartily despised. They belonged to a strange race called Philistines...<sup>8</sup>*

After three weeks at Grez, Louis returned to Paris for a short stay with Bob and Will Low in the Latin Quarter. Tom Stevenson's bounty must have held good, because they breakfasted one morning on lobster mayonnaise, kidneys *brochet* and *tomates farcies* with 'lots of Corton' champagne<sup>9</sup>. Fanny, Belle and Sammy took lodgings in Montmartre at 5 Rue Douay, shared with an American lady journalist called Margaret Wright and her art student daughter. Here Fanny would not have the stress of keeping house - she still suffered sleeplessness and memory loss and her nerves had not fully recovered from losing Hervey.

Among the first visitors to her new lodgings was Louis. In private, and sometimes in public, Fanny found he could exhibit quite curious behaviour: 'I do wish he wouldn't burst into tears in such an unexpected way; it is so embarrassing. One does not know what to do, whether to offer him a pocket handkerchief, or look out of the window. As my handkerchief generally has charcoal upon it, I choose the latter alternative... I like him very much, he is the wittiest man I ever met, but when he begins to laugh, if he is not stopped in time, he goes into hysterics, and has to have his fingers bent back to bring him to himself again...'<sup>10</sup>

Strangely nobody else commented on his curious behaviour. It may have been part of some Bohemian code of conduct dreamed up by Louis and Bob - let your feelings out, don't bottle them up like a bourgeois. It may even have been a variation on their old game of jink, doing absurd things to embarrass strangers. Louis was prone to mood swings and fits of attention-seeking, but it must have been hard to take seriously a man who behaved like a child having a tantrum. Yet a child was what Fanny had lost that spring and something in Louis may have appealed to her maternal instincts. His behaviour would have been instantly recognisable to Mrs Sitwell, in whose lap he had often buried his face like a child at his mother's knee.

There is no telling what his Madonna would have made of seeing him now with this curious little American woman. On the way home to Edinburgh there was no time to call on Mrs Sitwell at Chepstow Place - the Scottish law courts had long been back at work and Louis's prolonged absence from home was getting hard to justify. In Edinburgh, he resumed the bewigged morning pantomime of playing the advocate, followed by long, aimless afternoon wanderings. As winter closed in, it was as if his Bohemian sojourn had been a dream. Yet Henley was still at Bristo Place and, when Louis dropped by, it must have been strange to recollect his time there 'in hiding' just three months previously. Henley was eager to learn of his friend's new adventures and it seems Louis confided almost all. His enthusiastic description of Fanny Osbourne even prompted the author of *Invictus* to compose a poem in her honour:

*A passion flatters her, but she  
Is icy hard unless she shares.  
Unprejudiced, quite indifferent, free,  
She pardons everything - and dares.  
Et voila! There's her photograph,  
I wonder, will she recognize it?  
I think she'll greet it with a laugh  
And - very coldly - analyze it.<sup>11</sup>*

But Louis's memories of Fanny at Grez, recalled years later, were far more haunted by her sensuality:

*The hue of heather honey,  
The hue of honey bees,  
Shall tinge her golden shoulder,  
Shall gild her tawny knees...*<sup>12</sup>

Such liberated women did not exist in polite Edinburgh society. Instead, the Mackenzie girls were staying once more at Heriot Row and Louis did his best to be agreeable. He also viewed an exhibition of portraits by Raeburn at the Royal Scottish Academy, and criticised the artist's inability to portray vibrant young women. Louis's response echoed his own frustration at having to exchange drawing-room pleasantries with demure virgins: 'The younger women do not seem to be made of good flesh and blood... They are dry and diaphanous... In all these pretty faces, you miss character, you miss fire, you miss that spice of the devil which is worth all the prettiness in the world; and what is worst of all, you miss sex...' <sup>13</sup>

By November Louis was depressed and had an eye inflammation that interfered with his work (and doubtless excused his absence from the Parliament House). He wrote to Mrs Sitwell: 'I have had sad misfortune in almost every way; and if I were not an exceptionally light-hearted man, I do not think I could have survived all that has been centred on my head. And just now, when I know so well that I am making another daily tie around my heart only that it may be broken in its turn (or alas! not broken after all; for I find I have no talent for forgetfulness) for God's sake let me feel I have something to fall back upon a little; and that, think how you may of me, you will not join all the world in thinking me an unfeeling and hard hearted dog, when Christ knows I have enough on my heart to break it if it were of steel...' <sup>14</sup>

How much did Mrs Sitwell know of Fanny Osbourne, the new tie around Louis's heart? And how did she feel about being relegated to the status of 'something to fall back upon'? She felt no inclination to send a long reply.

Henley, who had real troubles of his own, would have laughed at Louis's histrionics. The well-fed, non-paying guest at 17 Heriot Row had merely suffered a

couple of journalistic setbacks and was pining for a married woman in Paris. It was undignified for a man of 26 still to be bursting into floods of tears and penning self-pitying letters. Aware of this, Louis sought a new maturity. In a letter to Baxter, who had been ill and was convalescing in Bournemouth, he declared: 'I am for sweeping all these maudlin, piping sentiments into the common sewer. We are a little too old for greensickness and Wertherism. If we haven't cleared our spirits of that unripe rubbish by this time, I wonder how we expect to die.' Yet the same letter contained a maudlin reflection: 'I am not so young as once I was; there is a relish of time in me; I find myself heavy and a little sad-hearted in comparison with the past; and above all, laughter, the old incontrollable, hyperbolic laughter that took you by the midriff and kept you crowing until the tears came into your eyes, laughter is all extinct...' The only mention of Fanny was in the sign-off: 'I am damnably in love, a great deal in debt and yours ever, Robert Louis Stevenson.'<sup>15</sup>

He found a sympathetic ear in Walter Ferrier, whose health was permanently wrecked by drink. Finishing the novel had been an uphill battle for the young alcoholic on the Isle of Wight, interspersed with begging letters to Blackwood.

March 21: 'Can you see your way to assisting me to the amount of £7?'

April 12: 'I have been knocked up again... Many thanks for your note of last week and its enclosure...'

Then on May 21, Ferrier's literary labours were finally over: 'At last I send you the conclusion of Mottiscliffe.' It had taken him a year, not bad for a first novel composed in difficult circumstances. But the fledgling author, freed from the treadmill of composition, now had nothing to keep him from the bottle – and he hit it hard, indulging his Mr Hyde side. By June 26 he was *in extremis* with a notice to quit from his landlord, to whom he owed £40 rent. In a hand shaking with *delirium tremens*, he scrawled another letter to his publisher: 'My circumstances compel me to write.' The sob story this time was that he had been laid up for three weeks with congestion of the lungs, though the doctor had told him 'there is no lung disease'. The bottom line was he needed cash: 'None of my people are Croesuses. Those whom I have cared to apply to have never been anything but kind...'<sup>16</sup>

When Blackwood again sent him money - 'Pray accept my most hearty thanks for

your letter and the cheque enclosed in it' – he can only have suspected it would fuel Ferrier's addiction to drink. But Louis's once-beautiful friend had enough presence of mind to realise he needed to come home. That July, James Walter Ferrier returned at last to Edinburgh to live with his mother and sister Coggie in Torphichen Street, where he preferred not to burden his friends with his troubles when they came to visit him.

*You would not have dreamed, if you had known him then, that this was that great failure, that beacon to young men, over whose fall a whole society had hissed and pointed fingers. Often have we gone to him, red-hot with our own hopeful sorrows, railing on the rose-leaves in our princely bed of life, and he would patiently give ear and wisely counsel; and it was only upon some return of our own thoughts that we were reminded what manner of man this was to whom we disembosomed: a man, by his own fault, ruined; shut out of the garden of his gifts; his whole city of hope both ploughed and salted; silently awaiting the deliverer... sorrow was so swallowed up in admiration that we could not dare to pity him.<sup>17</sup>*

The old night-roving through Edinburgh, singing lustily from Don Giovanni, was beyond poor Ferrier now, but he loved to be driven out in a carriage by night to indulge a 'romantic affection for pharmacies'<sup>18</sup> whose gas-lit windows full of coloured bottles would appear like poems from the darkness, redolent of the chemical mixture that changed from red to dark purple to pale green before transforming Jekyll into Hyde. Ferrier once told Louis that he knew no pleasure like driving through a lamplit city, 'waiting for the chemists to go by'.<sup>19</sup>

Christmas came and New Year, with its orgy of drunkenness on the streets. There is no record of where Louis saw in 1877 - in his mother's drawing room or rolling round the Old Town closes with Henley. But by January 2, with his first quarter's allowance in his pocket, he was heading south, ostensibly to stay in London. The next his parents knew, he was writing from a cafe in Paris: 'London was simply an absurdity; it was hot, rained incessantly and was about ankle deep in a mixture of tar, soot, train oil and other matters which we may here touch upon under the general and I think quite inoffensive term, Ingredients. I saved myself. Paris is better...'<sup>20</sup>

It is doubtful his surprised parents would have rejoiced had they known who

lived at the forwarding address he gave - 5 Rue Douay, where Fanny and Belle now lodged. In the evenings, mother and daughter would go out to dinner separately with Louis and O'Meara. Will Low and Bob were left in the Latin Quarter as Louis disappeared to Montmartre. Sometimes Bob would make up a threesome, giving of his entertaining best to avoid playing the gooseberry, but seeing Belle with O'Meara was a torment and he could sense Louis and Fanny were better left alone. On a bad night poor Bob may have slunk away alone to drown his sorrows in cheap wine and two-franc fucking.

It was poor consolation that he at last had two buyers for his art, both relatives. Tom Stevenson had forgiven him sufficiently to commission a painting, at which Bob had been working with trepidation. Unsatisfied with the result, he tried to offer a substitute which he had left with his mother in London - only to learn his Uncle David Stevenson had called there already and bought it. Such comic avuncular rivalry to own a genuine Stevenson brought a momentary smile to Bob's face.

Louis, too, became a patron of the arts. Flush with his quarterly allowance, or perhaps a Cornhill magazine cheque for *On Falling In Love*, he ordered a picture from poor Bloomer for two sovereigns, or 50 francs. The little painter was stunned. 'You should have seen us!' Louis told his mother. 'I was so embarrassed that I could not finish a single phrase, and kept beginning "you know" and "you understand" and "Look here Bloomer" and ending in pitiful intervals of silence. I was perspiring all over. Suddenly I saw B. begin to break out all over in a silvery dew; and he just made a dive at me and took me in his arms...'<sup>21</sup>

That winter there was a Bohemian ball at a studio in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs, at which the sole refreshments were syrup and water and sweet biscuits. The studio was that of an artist Louis called 'Mr Elsinare', who shared it with Bloomer. The two had spent the morning rubbing the floor with candle-ends until it was suitably slippery for dancing. Two Chinese lanterns and a couple of bronze lamps shone down on the plaster casts and busts on shelves, while a piano against the wall supplied the music.

Louis would recall how Bloomer 'has waxed his moustaches until he is nearly off the face of the earth, and radiates welcome and good happiness as though he had six

thousand a year and an island in the Aegean. The floor is just a trifle too much waxed for his free, Californian style of dancing; and, as he goes round in the last figure of the quadrille, he falls into the arms of all the ladies in succession. It makes no difference, however, for they are mostly bigger than he is, and he carries it off with a good humour that is more beautiful than grace.'

Louis was happy to sit the dances out with Fanny. In a slightly disingenuous letter to his mother, he told how 'One of the matrons was a very beautiful woman indeed; I played old fogey [sic] and had a deal of talk with her, which pleased me. She turned out to be the mother of the pretty girl.' The girl was of course Belle, described by Louis in a barely fictionalised account.

*Belle Bird... is a Californian girl, and has spent her childhood among Bret Harte's stories, petted by miners, and gamblers, and trappers, and ranche-men... She looks like a Russian... The pleasant gentlemen, old and young, who make it their business to accost ladies on the streets of Paris, had a favourite phrase by way of endeavouring to open a friendly understanding with her:- 'Quelle jolie, gentille petite Russe' they would remark. Belle says it was by mistake she hit one of these intelligent young men over the mouth last winter... to employ her own idiom, you bet your sweet life she'd fetch him! Tonight she is dressed in gilt, like a stage fairy, and her hair is full of gold powder; her dark face is flushed, and her eyes shine with happiness.*

Among the artists present was the Simp's brother Willie, alarming in full Highland dress with 'a powerful atmosphere of sporran... A sporran, like a bag-pipe, is most agreeable in the extreme distance, and in breezy, mountainous places.'<sup>22</sup>

Louis 'wrote up' the ball as a light article for London, The Conservative Weekly Journal of Politics, Finance, Society and the Arts, a new publication launched by Glasgow Brown, who had wealthy Tory backers. Henley was heavily involved as a contributor, with Runciman sub-editing and Louis as Paris correspondent to the extent of three articles - the ball, a description of Monsieur Julian's ladies' art class, and a piece on the Paris Bourse or stock exchange. But the sudden demands of journalism were not to his taste, and he was soon writing testily to Brown: 'You are quite right, according to me, in being dissatisfied with my work; but not right at all in expressing your dissatisfaction as you did. I have never written rudely to you...'

London was a ravening maw, devouring words with next to no staff to feed it. Louis threw it a story which would run for four weeks. *An Old Song* was his first known published fiction, although it carried no signature and Louis did not care to acknowledge it, particularly after Brown's ham-fisted editing, but it has certain similarities to *The Master of Ballantrae*.

John and Malcolm Falconer are two orphaned brothers adopted by their uncle, a retired Lieutenant-Colonel newly returned from India. John, as the elder, is to inherit the Colonel's estate and marry Mary Rolland, daughter of a neighbouring landowner, with whom Malcolm also fancies himself in love. In a moment of self-denying madness, John hands over the girl, gets stinking drunk and is thrown out of the house by the Colonel, whose estate eventually passes to the more malleable Malcolm. Just as Henry Durie marries Alison Graeme, usurping his elder brother James and becoming laird of Durrisdeer, Malcolm marries Mary and John goes off to support a lost cause - not Jacobitism but journalism for insolvent newspapers (a little joke which Brown probably did not appreciate). As Louis penned the tale, he may have had in mind his own father's threats to cast him out from his inheritance, and the respectable, good girls such as Flora Masson whom he had forsaken in Edinburgh for the pleasures of self-inflicted exile, like the Master, in France.

Unlike the Colonel, Tom Stevenson remained in contact with his son and longed to see him: 'Why don't you return to the bosom of your family. Why spend so much of your time among the "Mossoos". Life is short, at least mine is. So come home.'<sup>23</sup> Louis duly complied, after a week in London, and arrived in Edinburgh on February 19th. The brass advocate's plaque at the door of 17 Heriot Row was now a bigger joke than ever, but Tom Stevenson was not laughing. After a brief honeymoon period, the returned prodigal was again under pressure to explain his plans for the future. To avoid ugly scenes, he would go out to visit the Simp or call on Walter Ferrier, now struggling with the proofs of his novel. On February 26th, Ferrier wrote apologetically to his publisher John Blackwood: 'Stevenson has carried off some sheets of proof, so the enclosed does not represent what you saw yesterday. I will send the remainder on Wednesday.'<sup>24</sup>

To what extent Louis helped Ferrier with *Mottiscliffe* is impossible to tell. In later

life he would dress up Fanny's short stories, collaborate with Henley to write plays and with Lloyd on three novels, but his curious respect for Ferrier as a superior being laid low by drink may have confined him to moving commas and correcting literals - probably not a good idea when Louis's own spelling could be delightfully dyslexic.

While in Edinburgh, Louis also visited the Royal Scottish Academy to view three paintings by Bob. He found one hung in the same room as a work by the French Impressionist Corot and had to be brutally honest with his cousin, 'the Corot is better than yours'. Among Louis's artist acquaintances in Edinburgh was George Paul Chalmers, who had risen from humble origins in Montrose to become one of Scotland's most gifted painters, but the more Grundyite denizens of the Edinburgh art world lacked his insight. 'The damned raving maniacs up here don't understand Corot,' raged Louis in his letter to Bob. 'Chalmers, who got the thing for the exhibition, nearly wept with gratitude when he found I liked it.'<sup>25</sup>

Louis's friendship with the painter Sam Bough had continued intermittently throughout the 1870s since their inedible dinner on Iona, and the road out to Swanston ran past Bough's sprawling 22-room residence at Jordan Bank, where the artist now lived in considerable affluence with his 'damned saucy old woman'. Yet the blowsy Bella, running to fat, was not enough for the complex Bough, who even in his fifties liked to lead a bachelor existence. For many years he enjoyed the affections of at least two other women. In Cumberland, his long-term love Fanny James kept a place in her heart for him in Whitehaven, while in Edinburgh he had formed a relationship with Mary Tait, younger sister of Louis's father's friend the Professor. Thirteen years younger than Bough, Mary had aspirations to be an artist and would often visit his studio in Upper Dean Terrace, where Bella never disturbed her husband's Bohemian ways.

Despite Bough's grandiose lifestyle, he always felt the pull of his working-class roots and his family, and the proceeds of his genius also supported the widow and children of his brother James, who had died of general paralysis in Lancaster Asylum, presumably the result of syphilis. All in all, Bough carried a lot of responsibilities on his broad shoulders and lived a complicated life, from which

he sought refuge in drink. From lunchtime long into the afternoon, Bough propped up the bar at the Rifleman or Volunteer's Arms on the corner of Canaan Lane and Morningside Road. If Louis, on one of his long, lone afternoon walks, felt the need of company, he could always find Bough there.<sup>26</sup>

Among other afternoon drinking cronies was Henri Van Laun, one-time French master at Louis's old school, Edinburgh Academy. Louis had first met Van Laun at the home of another Frenchman, Victor Richon, who conducted daily classes at his French Academy for Ladies and Gentlemen in Castle Street. While Richon was a scholar and a gentleman, Van Laun was a 'big, gross, fat, black, hyperbolical, and entirely good-humoured adventurer... I should think he never harmed any one except those whom he induced to drink with him'.<sup>27</sup> Weary of teaching, Van Laun now sought to make a living by writing books about French literature. On discovering Louis wrote for *Vanity Fair* and *London*, Van Laun latched on to him.

*He calmly proposed to me to make the favourable reviewing of his own works the chief feature of my industry. What I was to receive in return, I never distinctly gathered; and for this reason, if for no other, the scheme was not pursued. Seemingly my fat acquaintance failed to find a substitute, for I have seen his works rather roughly handled; and indeed I suppose he has long since gone, where most of his old friends had preceded him, to the paradise of drinkers.'*<sup>28</sup>

Bough's drinking cronies included another Frenchman, Eugene Chantrelle, who spoke colloquial English fluently, albeit with a French accent. He had studied medicine in France but had never qualified as a doctor, although he was happy to treat people unofficially and supply remedies from his medicine cabinet. His main income came from teaching his native language to young ladies, and he advertised his French Academy, based at his home in George Street, as being:

*Conducted by M.E. Chantrelle, BA from Paris. Successor to M.A. Furby, BA, LLD, French tutor to their RHH the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Hesse at Holyrood Palace.*

*French classes are held for Young Ladies, at all stages of advancement, and lectures delivered in French on Literature, History and other interesting subjects.*

*N.B. Friends and governesses are admitted at every class.*

Any young lady attending lessons with Monsieur Chantrelle would be well advised to bring someone with her, for the neatly-dressed Frenchman with sleek black hair, moustache and mutton-chop whiskers was in private a brutal sex criminal who had served a nine-month sentence in an English prison for a grossly indecent assault on a girl pupil. When released he began a new life in Scotland but clearly had not learned his lesson, as Lucy Holme found to her cost when she called at his home to answer his advertisement for a housekeeper. On New Year's Day, 1867, Miss Holme found herself alone with Chantrelle. She was unhappy living with her clergyman father and unkind step-mother and wanted the job to assert her independence. As she poured out her troubles, Chantrelle offered her a glass of claret, which she declined. Inflamed with lust, he then threw her on the floor, pulled up the long skirts and petticoats, tore open the bloomers and raped her. Six months later he received a pathetic letter from a lodging house in Norfolk:

*Dear Mr Chantrelle - I am very much annoyed at being obliged to write to you, but as you are the only one that can help me out of my trouble, I am compelled to do so. You cannot have forgotten what happened in your house on the 1st of January, and how you quieted my fears by assuring me that nothing would result from what you had done, which I in my simplicity fully believed, but now I find that you must have been deceiving me all the time, if not yourself as well. You cannot be surprised when I tell you that I expect to be confined in three months time, and you, and you only, are the father of the child, and if I should not get over it, you too will be responsible for my death. I have left my situation, as governess, for my holidays, but in the state I find myself I cannot possibly return. Something must be done, and you are the only one to do it. Write and tell me what to do, I cannot go back and disgrace everyone, and as for going home that can never be, they none of them as yet know anything about it. Think for a moment what you would feel were your only sister to be treated, as you have treated me, and as for your offers of help, you have done nothing for me yet, but now you must save me by some means or another. Something must be done, you cannot this time quiet my fears, because the results of your conduct are showing themselves...*<sup>29</sup>

In fact Chantrelle did nothing to help Miss Holme or his illegitimate son, and the following year he became a respectable married man - or so he would appear in the polite drawing rooms of Edinburgh. But behind closed doors in George Street his

marriage was an unhappy one. He abused the young wife he had been obliged to wed after getting her pregnant when she was a pupil in his French class at Edinburgh's Newington Academy. Elizabeth Cullen Dyer, who was 17 and seven months pregnant on her wedding day in 1867, had since endured a decade of beatings and brutal, loveless sex with a husband who was always so mild-mannered and polite in company.<sup>30</sup> She did not accompany him when, unsatisfied with the bottle of whisky he consumed each day at home, he left the house to join Bough's afternoon drinking set. Nor was she there when night fell and Chantrelle, inflamed with drink and disappointed by his wife's dutiful submission to conjugal rights, went to vent his lust on the whores of Clyde Street.

Louis would have known little of this as he passed the time of day with Chantrelle in the pub. He was more interested in Chantrelle's stories of his days as a revolutionary who had fought for the Republican cause at the Paris barricades in 1851, receiving a sabre wound still clearly visible when he rolled up his sleeve. Louis admired such men of action, and would have been equally impressed by Chantrelle's description of his subsequent adventures in America before settling for a more mundane life in Scotland. Yet at times Chantrelle would be silent and brooding, a troubled man who was slipping deep into debt and prepared to clutch at straws. Perhaps, like Van Laun, he could strike gold through writing books. He broached the subject with Louis.

*One evening he met me on the street, asked me if I had seen Van Laun's translation of Moliere; and when I told him I had and confessed that I could see no merit in that piece of work, his eyes blazed with hope, he had me to a public house; and bidding me name any passage in Moliere with which I was well acquainted, offered to improvise without book a better version than Van Laun's. I accepted the challenge; and he, as far as I was in a position to judge, did well what he professed...*<sup>31</sup>

While impressed by Chantrelle's 'quite remarkable powers', Louis was too intelligent and perceptive not to sense the Frenchman was deeply disturbed:

*Chantrelle was coal-black in hair, coal-black of eye, and of a sallow, leathery skin. Ill-nature, a painfully acute temper, a quivering, black sensibility of nerves, were written on every line of his face and confessed in every movement of his body. When I knew him, he*

*seemed never happy except when he was drunk; and even then there was something uncomfortable in his mirth, something feverish and wild...*<sup>32</sup>

What does not ring true is Louis's subsequent claim that this troubled character was 'by all that I could learn of him, a model of kindness and good conduct'. Louis was familiar with the night houses at the east end of Princes Street, where any of the girls could have told him 'that Frenchie is a bad one'. At Barbara Kay's brothel in Clyde Street, where many a 'respectable' Edinburgh citizen would encounter Chantrelle, his gross sexual appetites were notorious, and pity the poor girl who drew the short straw. When drunk, Chantrelle could be violent - and he carried a loaded pistol in his pocket. More than once the Edinburgh night was split by the sound of shots and breaking glass, the screams of the girls and the oaths of their semi-clad customers, fearful of discovery. Of course Mrs Kay and her sleazy sisterhood were in no hurry to call the police, but it would be remarkable if Louis had not heard rumours of Chantrelle's wild behaviour.

Louis, however, was distracted by love and the atmosphere at Heriot Row was getting claustrophobic. In early March he again put several hundred miles between himself and his parents and returned to Fanny in Paris. There he made little progress with his writing - poor, befuddled Ferrier might somehow find the self-discipline to produce a two-volume novel, but Louis had yet to turn his canoe voyage of the previous autumn into a saleable book. He was distracted by love, and the days of love could be limited. That March a letter from Sam Osbourne in San Francisco arrived at 5 Rue de Douay, informing Fanny that her husband would not be sending more money but would be coming out to Paris to see her. Louis was forced to confront the depressing fact, so easily forgotten in Bohemian circles, that the woman he loved was another man's wife.

Osbourne's arrival was expected in May, but Louis lacked the funds to stay that long and neither he nor Fanny wanted a confrontation. The big question could only be answered by Fanny herself - were her feelings for Louis strong enough to hold out against the claims of her husband and her children? It was time for serious soul-searching and Louis felt obliged to withdraw. On April 2, he said goodbye and boarded the boat train, not knowing if Fanny, Belle and Lloyd would still be there

when he returned.

From Heriot Row he wrote to Baxter, now staying in Algiers for health reasons: 'My Obus [howitzer shell, in this case Louis's potentially explosive love affair] is in an irritable condition, but has not yet exploded. The man with the linstock [Osbourne] is expected in May; it makes me sick to write it.'<sup>13</sup> Yet Louis remained hopeful and was living frugally in Edinburgh to save up funds for another trip to Paris, should his love decide to stay.

He was not alone, however, in his sad predicament - Walter Simpson was having trouble trying to do the decent thing by Etta Mackay and their child. 'The Simp is also close-hauled with all manner of troubles and trials; love (the course of true) never did run smooth. The little bow-boy plays such almighty Hell in these neighbourhoods, and everybody has been thumped under the left pap to such an egregious degree, that nothing, by your leave, will satisfy any of us but marriage...

'All our news is so damned compromising that I prefer not writing it,' Louis continued to Baxter. 'And at any rate, I hate news. Love to the Dey. To Hell with the Pope. A man's a man for a' that. And three merry men are we; I on the Land (that's to say high and dry - no coin) - thou on the Sand (Afric's golden sand, down which the sunny fountains pour) - And Simp on the Gallows Tree! (or at least he ought to be - so should you for that matter...)'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> RLS, *On Falling In Love*, *Virginibus Puerisque*.

<sup>2</sup> Will H Low, *A Chronicle of Friendships*.

<sup>3</sup> Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, *The Life of Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson*; Alexandra Lapierre, *Fanny Stevenson Muse, Adventuress & Romantic Enigma*.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Osbourne, *Stevenson at Twenty-Six, An Intimate Portrait of RLS*.

<sup>5</sup> Fanny Osbourne to Timothy Rearden. *Timothy H Rearden Papers*, Bancroft Library, Berkeley.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd Osbourne, *Stevenson at Twenty-Six, An Intimate Portrait of RLS*.

<sup>7</sup> Fanny Osbourne to Timothy Rearden. *Timothy H Rearden Papers*, Bancroft Library, Berkeley.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd Osbourne, *Stevenson at Twenty-Six, An Intimate Portrait of RLS*.

<sup>9</sup> RLS to his Mother, Paris, October 11, 1876. Yale 450, Text Balfour.

<sup>10</sup> Fanny Osbourne to Timothy Rearden. *Timothy H Rearden Papers*, Bancroft Library, Berkeley.

<sup>11</sup> WE Henley, *The Californian*.

<sup>12</sup> RLS, *Songs of Travel*, VIII.

<sup>13</sup> RLS, *Some Portraits by Raeburn*, *Virginibus Puerisque*.

<sup>14</sup> RLS to Fanny Sitwell, Heriot Row, November 1876. Yale 453, MS National Library of Scotland.

<sup>15</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Heriot Row, November 1876. Yale 456, MS Yale.

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- <sup>16</sup> James Walter Ferrier to John Blackwood, Blackwood Papers, National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>17</sup> RLS, *Old Mortality, Memories and Portraits*.
- <sup>18</sup> RLS to Coggie Ferrier, *La Solitude*, Hyeres, November 22, 1883. Yale 1182, MS Yale.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> RLS to his Mother, Paris, January 1877. Yale 459, MS Yale.
- <sup>21</sup> RLS to his Mother, Paris, February 1, 1877. Yale 462, MS Yale.
- <sup>22</sup> RLS, *A Ball At Mr Elsinare's*.
- <sup>23</sup> Thomas Stevenson to RLS, February 5, 1877. Footnote to Yale 463.
- <sup>24</sup> James Walter Ferrier to John Blackwood, February 26, 1877. Blackwood Papers, National Library of Scotland.
- <sup>25</sup> RLS to Bob Stevenson, Heriot Row, Late February/early March, 1877. Yale 467, MS Yale.
- <sup>26</sup> Gil & Pat Hitchon, *Sam Bough RSA The Rivers in Bohemia*.
- <sup>27</sup> RLS, *Memoirs of Himself*.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Ellen Lucy Holme to Eugene Chantrelle, Cromer, July 1, 1867. MS The Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library.
- <sup>30</sup> Molly Whittington-Egan, *Scottish Murder Stories*, Chapter 12, *The French Schoolmaster's Wife*.
- <sup>31</sup> RLS, *Memoirs of Himself*.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> RLS to Charles Baxter, Edinburgh, March or April 1877. Yale 468, MS Yale.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*