

CHAPTER II

HIS PARENTS

"We are the pledge of their dear and joyful union, we have been the solicitude of their days and the anxiety of their nights, we have made them, though by no will of ours, to carry the burden of our sins, sorrows, and physical infirmities . . . A good son, who can fulfil what is expected of him, has done his work in life. He has to redeem the sins of many, and restore the world's confidence in children."—R. L. S., "Reflections and Remarks on Human Life," *Miscellaneous*, p. 27.

"Peace and her huge invasion to these shores
Puts daily home; innumerable sails
Dawn on the far horizon and draw near;
Innumerable loves, uncounted hopes
To our wild coasts, not darkling now, approach:
Not now obscure, since thou and thine are there,
And bright on the lone isle, the founded reef,
The long, resounding foreland, Pharos stands.
These are thy works, O father, these thy crown."
R. L. S., *Underwoods*, xxviii.

Without a knowledge of his parents it would be hard to understand the man whose life and character are set forth in these pages. Yet of Thomas Stevenson, at any rate, I should despair of presenting any adequate image, were it not for the sketch in *Memories and Portraits*, and an account of his boyhood, written by his son in 1887, and as yet unpublished, which would have formed a later chapter of *A Family of Engineers*.

He was born in 1818, the youngest son of Robert Stevenson, and one of a family of thirteen children.

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“He had his education at a private school, kept by a capable but very cruel man called Brown, in Nelson Street, and then at the High School of Edinburgh. His first year, or half-year, was in the old building down Infirmity Street, and I have often heard him tell how he took part in the procession to the new and beautiful place upon the Calton Hill. Piper was his master, a fellow much given to thrashing. He never seems to have worked for any class that he attended; and in Piper’s took a place about half-way between the first and last of a hundred and eighty boys. Yet his friends were among the duxes. He tells most admirably how he once on a chance question got to the top of the class among all his friends; and how they kept him there for several days by liberal prompting and other obvious devices, until at last he himself wearied of the fierce light that beat upon the upper benches. ‘It won’t do,’ he said. ‘Good-bye.’ And being left to his own resources, he rapidly declined, and before that day was over was half-way back again to his appropriate level. It is an odd illustration of how carelessly a class was then taught in spite of the many stripes. I remember how my own Academy master, the delightful D’Arcy Thompson, not forty years later, smelling a capable boy among the boobies, persecuted the bottom of the class for four days, with the tawse going at a great rate; until the event amply justified his suspicion, and an inveterate booby, M—— by name, shot up some forty places, and was ever afterwards a decent, if not a distinguished pupil.

“On one occasion my father absented himself from the idle shows of the Exhibition day, and went off

rambling to Portobello. His father attributed this escapade to social cowardice because of his humble position in the class. It was what in his picturesque personal dialect the old man called 'Turkeying'; he made my father's life a burthen to him in consequence; and long after (months, I think—certainly weeks) my grandfather, who was off upon his tour of inspection, wrote home to Baxter's Place in one of his emphatic, inimitable letters: 'The memory of Tom's weakness haunts me like a ghost.' My father looked for this in vain among the letter-books not long ago; but the phrase is expressly autochthonic; it had been burned into his memory by the disgrace of the moment when it was read aloud at the breakfast-table.

"At least it shows, at once and finally, the difference between father and son. Robert took education and success at school for a thing of infinite import; to Thomas, in his young independence, it all seemed Vanity of Vanities. He would not have been ashamed to figure as actual booby before His Majesty the King. Indeed, there seems to have been nothing more rooted in him than his contempt for all the ends, processes, and ministers of education. Tutor was ever a by-word with him; 'positively tutorial,' he would say of people or manners he despised; and with rare consistency, he bravely encouraged me to neglect my lessons, and never so much as asked me my place in school. . . .

"My father's life, in the meantime, and the truly formative parts of his education, lay entirely in his hours of play. I conceive him as a very sturdy and madly high-spirited boy. Early one Saturday, gambolling and tricksying about the kitchen, it occurred to him to use

Cayenne pepper as snuff; no sooner said than done; and the rest of that invaluable holiday was passed, as you may fancy, with his nose under the kitchen spout.

“No. 1 Baxter’s Place, my grandfather’s house, must have been a paradise for boys. It was of great size, with an infinity of cellars below, and of garrets, apple-lofts, etc., above; and it had a long garden, which ran down to the foot of the Calton Hill, with an orchard that yearly filled the apple-loft, and a building at the foot frequently besieged and defended by the boys, where a poor golden eagle, trophy of some of my grandfather’s Hebridean voyages, pined and screamed itself to death. Its front was Leith Walk with its traffic; at one side a very deserted lane, with the office door, a carpenter’s shop, and the like; and behind, the big, open slopes of the Calton Hill. Within, there was the seemingly rather awful rule of the old gentleman, tempered, I fancy, by the mild and devout mother with her ‘Keep me’s.’ There was a coming and going of odd, out-of-the-way characters, skippers, lightkeepers, masons, and foremen of all sorts, whom my grandfather, in his patriarchal fashion, liked to have about the house, and who were a never-failing delight to the boys. Tutors shed a gloom for an hour or so in the evening . . . and these and that accursed school-going were the black parts of their life. But there were, every Saturday, extraordinary doings in Baxter’s Place. Willie Swan, my father’s first cousin, and chief friend from boyhood, since Professor of Natural Philosophy at St. Andrews, would be there; and along with him a tribe of other cousins. All these boys together had great times, as you may fancy. There were cellars full

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of barrels, of which they made fortifications; sometimes on the stair, at a great risk to life and limb. There was the eagle-house in the garden, often held and assaulted as a fort. Once my father, finding a piece of iron chimney-pot—an 'auld wife,' as we say in Scotland—brought it home and donned it as a helmet in the next Saturday's wars. I doubt if he ever recovered from his disappointment over the result; for the helmet, far from rendering him an invulnerable champion, an Achilles of the field, turned him into a mere blind and helpless popinjay, spurned and hustled by every one; and, as well as I remember the story, he was at last ignominiously captured by the other side.

"They were all, I gather, quaint boys, and had quaint enjoyments. One diversion of theirs was to make up little parcels of ashes, labelled 'Gold Dust, with care, to Messrs. Marshall & Co., Jewellers,' or whatever the name might be, leave them lying in a quiet street, and conceal themselves hard by to follow the result. If an honest man came by, he would pick it up, read the superscription, and march off with it towards Marshall's, nothing fearing; though God knows what his reception may have been. This was not their quarry. But now and again there would come some slippery being, who glanced swiftly and guiltily up and down the street, and then, with true legerdemain, whipped the thing into his pocket. Such an one would be closely dogged, and not for long either; his booty itched in his pocket; he would dodge into the first common-stair, whence there might come, as my father used to say, 'a blaff of ashes'; and a human being, justly indignant at the imposition, would stalk forth out of the common-stair and go his way.

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“Every summer the family went to Portobello. The Portobello road is rather a dreary one to ordinary mortals, but to my father it was, I believe, the most romantic four miles of all Christendom; he had looked at it so often from the carriage-windows during the annual family removal, his heart beating high for the holidays; he had walked it so often to go bathing; he knew so many stories and had so rich a treasure of association about every corner of the way. . . . He had a collection of curiosities, like so many other boys, his son included; he had a printing-press, and printed some sort of dismal paper on the *Spectator* plan, which did not, I think, ever get over the first page. He had a chest of chemicals, and made all manner of experiments, more or less abortive, as boys' experiments will be. But there was always a remarkable inconsequence, an unconscious spice of the true Satanic, rebel nature, in the boy. Whatever he played with was the reverse of what he was formally supposed to be engaged in learning. As soon as he went, for instance, to a class of chemistry, there were no more experiments made by him. The thing then ceased to be a pleasure, and became an irking drudgery.”

Robert Stevenson had intended only one of his sons to follow his own profession. But in the end their natural tastes prevailed, and no less than three of the brothers entered the business, practised it at large with great ability and success, and were all three, conjointly or in turn, appointed to the official post their father and grandfather had held of engineer to the Board of Northern Lights. Thomas Stevenson did much valuable work in lighthouse building and in the improvement of rivers

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and harbours, but it is in connection with the illumination of lighthouses that his name will be remembered. He brought to perfection the revolving light, and himself invented "the azimuthal condensing system." More familiar to the world at large, if less remarkable, are the louvre-boarded screens which he applied to the protection of meteorological instruments. He became, moreover, a recognised authority on engineering; he gave much weighty evidence before Parliamentary committees; and his position in the scientific world was marked in 1884 by his election to the Presidentship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

His entire life was devoted to the unremitting pursuit of a scientific profession, in which it was his dearest wish to see his son following in his footsteps; yet it was from him that Louis derived all the romantic and artistic elements that drew him away from engineering, and were the chief means by which he became an acknowledged master of his art.

The apparent inconsistencies of the father were numerous, but all of them were such as add force and picturesqueness to a character, and only increased the affection of those who knew and understood him most thoroughly.

"He was a man," writes his son,¹ "of a somewhat antique strain; with a blended sternness and softness that was wholly Scottish and at first somewhat bewildering; with a profound essential melancholy of disposition and (what often accompanies it) the most humorous geniality in company; shrewd and childish; passionately attached, passionately prejudiced; a man

¹ *Memories and Portraits*, p. 175.

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of many extremes, many faults of temper, and no very stable foothold for himself among life's troubles. Yet he was a wise adviser; many men, and these not inconsiderable, took counsel with him habitually. . . . He had excellent taste, though whimsical and partial; . . . took a lasting pleasure in prints and pictures; . . . and, though he read little, was constant to his favourite books. He had never any Greek; Latin he happily retaught himself after he had left school, where he was a mere consistent idler; happily, I say, for Lactantius, Vossius, and Cardinal Bona were his chief authors. The first he must have read for twenty years uninterruptedly, keeping it near him in his study, and carrying it in his bag on journeys. Another old theologian, Brown of Wamphray, was often in his hands. When he was indisposed, he had two books, *Guy Mannering* and *The Parent's Assistant*,¹ of which he never wearied. He was a strong Conservative or, as he preferred to call himself, a Tory; except in so far as his views were modified by a hot-headed chivalrous sentiment for women. He was actually in favour of a marriage law under which any woman might have a divorce for the asking, and no man on any ground whatever; and the same sentiment found another expression in a Magdalen Mission in Edinburgh, founded and largely supported by himself. This was but one of the many channels of his public generosity; his private was equally unrestrained. The Church of Scotland, of which he held the doctrines (though in a sense of his own), and to which he bore a clansman's loyalty, profited often by his time and

¹ His copy of Miss Edgeworth's book is filled with the most entertaining notes.

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money; and though, from a morbid sense of his own unworthiness, he would never consent to be an office-bearer, his advice was often sought, and he served the Church on many committees. What he perhaps valued highest in his work were his contributions to the defence of Christianity; one of which, in particular, was praised by Hutchison Stirling, and reprinted at the request of Professor Crawford.

“His sense of his own unworthiness I have called morbid; morbid, too, were his sense of the fleetingness of life and his concern for death. He had never accepted the conditions of man's life or his own character; and his inmost thoughts were ever tinged with the Celtic melancholy. Cases of conscience were sometimes grievous to him, and that delicate employment of a scientific witness cost him many qualms. But he found respite from these troublesome humours in his work, in his lifelong study of natural science, in the society of those he loved, and in his daily walks, which now would carry him far into the country with some congenial friend, and now keep him dangling about the town from one old book-shop to another, and scraping romantic acquaintance with every dog that passed. His talk, compounded of so much sterling sense and so much freakish humour, and clothed in language so apt, droll, and emphatic, was a perpetual delight to all who knew him before the clouds began to settle on his mind. His use of language was both just and picturesque; and when at the beginning of his illness he began to feel the ebbing of this power, it was strange and painful to hear him reject one word after another as inadequate, and at length desist from the search and leave his phrase

unfinished rather than finish it without propriety. It was perhaps another Celtic trait that his affections and emotions, passionate as these were and liable to passionate ups and downs, found the most eloquent expression both in words and gestures. Love, anger, and indignation shone through him and broke forth in imagery, like what we read of Southern races. For all these emotional extremes, and in spite of the melancholy ground of his character, he had upon the whole a happy life; nor was he less fortunate in his death, which at the last came to him unaware."

The characteristics of the father in his boyhood might be ascribed with little alteration to his son. The circumstances differed, but the spirit, the freaks, and the idleness were the same. To increase the truth or to add to the beauty of the later picture is almost beyond the power of any one, but in the present connection it may be permissible to dwell a little upon the romantic side of Thomas Stevenson. Every night of his life he made up stories by which he put himself to sleep, dealing perpetually "with ships, roadside inns, robbers, old sailors, and commercial travellers before the era of steam." With these and their like he soothed his son's troubled nights in childhood, and when the son grew up and made stories of his own, he found no critic more unsparing than his father, and none more ready to take fire at "*his* own kind of picturesque." Many were the changes adopted on his proposal; and his suggestions extended to words and style as well as matter. "Mercy on us!" he wrote in 1885, "your story should always be as plain as plumb porridge." He was fanatical in the heresy that art should invariably have a conscious

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moral aim, but except in this his judgments were serviceable and shrewd.

The differences between the pair were slight, the points of resemblance many. The younger man devoted his life to art and not to science, and the hold of dogma upon him was early relaxed. But the humour and the melancholy, the sternness and the softness, the attachments and the prejudices, the chivalry, the generosity, the Celtic temperament, and the sensitive conscience passed direct from father to son in proportions but slightly varied, and to some who knew them both well the father was the more remarkable of the two. One period of misunderstanding they had, but it was brief, and might have been avoided had either of the pair been less sincere or less in earnest. Afterwards, and perhaps as a consequence, their comprehension and appreciation of each other grew complete, and their attachment was even deeper than that usually subsisting between father and only son. In the conditions of their lives there was this further difference: if the son missed the healthy boyhood, full of games and of companions, he was spared at the last the failure which he also dreaded; no less fortunate than his father in the unconsciousness of his death, he died before his prime and the fulness of his power, "in mid-career laying out vast projects," and so "trailing with him clouds of glory," he was taken away as one whom the gods loved.

Of Mrs. Thomas Stevenson not a line of any sketch remains among the work of her son: a want easily explained by the fact that she survived him. It is the more necessary to supply in some measure this defi-

ciency, as the warmth of Louis' gratitude to his nurse has unjustly reacted to the prejudice of his mother, and has quite wrongly been supposed by those who did not know them to indicate neglect on one side and on the other a lack of affection.

In person she was tall, slender, and graceful; and her face and fair complexion retained their beauty, as her figure and walk preserved their elasticity, to the last. Her vivacity and brightness were most attractive; she made on strangers a quick and lasting impression, and the letters written on the news of her death attest the devotion and number of her friends. As a hostess she had great social tact, and her hospitality was but the expression of her true kindness of heart.

Her undaunted spirit led her when nearly sixty to accompany her son, first to America, and then, in a racing schooner, through the remotest groups of the Pacific, finally to settle with him in the disturbed spot where he had chosen his home.

She had in the highest degree that readiness for enjoyment which makes light of discomfort, and turns into a holiday any break of settled routine. Her desire to be pleased, her prompt interest in any experience, however new or unexpected, her resolute refusal to see the unpleasant side of things, all had their counterpart in her son, enabling him to pass through the many dark hours, that would have borne far more heavily upon his father's temperament.

Frail though his own constitution was, his early visits to various health-resorts were due in the first instance to the need of securing a better climate for his mother, who unfortunately fell into ill-health during the ten or

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twelve years of his boyhood. When he was ailing, she was often ill at the same time, and was frequently disabled from performing for him the services it would have been her greatest delight to render.

But of her devotion and of her incessant thought for the boy there can be no question. I have before me as I write a series of pocket-diaries, complete (but for the second year) from 1851 until the year of her death. The earlier books are occupied exclusively with her husband and her child, and in the later volumes these two are still the staple of her entries. Louis' place in class is scrupulously noted, and that, we may be sure, with no encouragement from his father. When he was small, she read to him a great deal, and to her he owed his first acquaintance with much that is best in literature. Almost every scrap of his writing that ever passed into her hands was treasured. His first efforts at tales or histories, taken down by herself, or some other amanuensis, before he was able or willing to write; nearly every letter he ever sent her; every compliment to him, and every word of praise—all were carefully preserved, long before he showed any definite promise of becoming famous; and by her method and accuracy she was able to record for his biographer, with hardly an exception, where he spent each month of his life. The story of almost the only letter she did not keep bears so directly on her character that I must set it down in her words. "In the spring of 1872 Louis was in a very depressed state; he wrote one terribly morbid letter to me from Dunblane, all about death and churchyards—it vexed me so much that I put it in the fire at once. Years after, when he was writing his

essay 'Old Mortality,' he applied to me for that letter, and was quite vexed when I told him that I had destroyed it."

The son's attachment to his mother was no less deep and lasting. The earliest record of it goes back to his very infancy, when, at three years old, he was left alone with her one day in the dining-room after dinner. He had seen his nurse cover her mistress with a shawl at such times; so he took a doyley off the table, unfolded it, and carefully spread it over her, saying, "That 's a wee bittie, mama." Another speech of his two years later was, "I'm going to call you 'Mother' sometimes, just that I may remember to do it when I'm a big man." And he ended the same day with "Good-night, my jewelest of mothers." This loving attention to her continued during his whole life. Through all her illnesses and whenever she needed his care, he was always most sedulous and affectionate, displaying at times a tenderness almost feminine. The most irregular of correspondents, he was almost regular to her; master of his pen though he was, several times after he had become a man of letters he bursts out into impatience at the difficulty he finds in expressing to her and to his father the depth of his affection and gratitude to them both. He kept numbers of her letters, even of those received during the most migratory periods of his life; and soon after his marriage, though his wife was the most devoted and capable of nurses, on the outbreak of an illness, like a child he turned to his mother and would be satisfied with nothing short of her presence.

After his father's death, when the doctors had ordered

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him to go to America, if he wanted to live, he wrote to her: "Not only would we not go to America without you; we should not persist in trying it, if we did not believe that it would be on the whole the best for you." From that time, but for two absences in Scotland, she made her home with him and his family, and had the reward of realising that the exile which severed him from so many of his friends had brought her to an even more intimate knowledge of his life and an even closer place in his affection.