

CHAPTER V

STUDENT DAYS—1867-73

“ Light foot, and tight foot,
And green grass spread,
Early in the morning,
But hope is on ahead.”

R. L. S.

THE time had come for the boy to leave school, and for his education to be shaped in some conformity with the profession supposed to lie before him. What this would be was never for a moment in doubt. Father and sons, the Stevensons were civil engineers, and to the grandsons naturally, in course of time, the business would be transferred. The family capacity for the work, though undeniable, was very elusive, consisting chiefly of a sort of instinct for dealing with the forces of nature, and seldom manifested clearly till called forth in actual practice. The latest recruit had certainly shown no conspicuous powers at any of his schools, but to such a criterion no one could have attached less value than his father. That he did possess the family gift was proved before he left the profession; but even had he never written his paper “On a New Form of Intermittent Light,” no one could reasonably have condemned on his behalf the choice of this career.

Accordingly, the next three and a half years were devoted to his preparation for this employment. He spent the winter and sometimes the summer sessions at the University of Edinburgh working for a Science

degree, and saw something of the practical work of engineering during the other summer months.

For the first two years he attended the Latin class, Greek being abandoned as hopeless after the first session; to Natural Philosophy he was constant, so far as his constancy in such matters ever went; Mathematics then replaced Greek, and Civil Engineering took the room of Latin. But all this was none of his real education. Although he remembered that "the spinning of a top is a case of Kinetic Stability" (one of the few facts recorded in a still surviving notebook), and that "Emphyteusis is not a disease, nor Stillicide a crime," and would not willingly part with such scraps of science, he never "set the same store by them as by certain other odds and ends that he came by in the open street while he was playing truant." The last word recurs with every reference to his education. In fact, as far as the University was concerned, he "acted upon an extensive and highly rational system of truancy, which cost him a great deal of trouble to put in exercise"; and "no one ever played the truant with more deliberate care, and none ever had more certificates (of attendance) for less education."

Nor was the attention he bestowed on engineering any more assiduous. As for his practical instruction, he followed out his father's views on training—that it was waste of time for an engineer to attempt to be a craftsman in any one trade, but that he should become familiar in "shops" and yards with the materials used in his work, and should learn their employment in practice.

In the summer of 1868 Stevenson spent the month

of July at Anstruther, and the six weeks following at Wick: records of which he has left in various letters written to his parents at the time, and in the essay on "Random Memories" entitled "The Education of an Engineer." In the first-named place he was privileged to hear it said of him for the first time, "That 's the man that 's in charge." At Wick, besides his descent in a diving-suit ("one of the best things I got from my education as an engineer"), an accident afforded him one of those opportunities for prompt action, of which his life contained all too few. It comes as the post-script to a short business letter to his father.

"September, 1868.

"P. S.—I was forgetting my only news. A man fell off the staging this forenoon. I heard crying, and ran out to the end. By that time a rope had been lowered and the man was holding himself up by it, and of course wearing himself out. Some were away for a boat. 'Hold on, Angus,' they cried. 'I can not do it,' he said, with wonderful composure. I told them to lower a plank; everybody was too busy giving advice to listen to me; meantime the man was drowning. I was desperate, and could have knocked another dozen off. One fellow, Bain, a diver, listened to me. We got the plank out and a rope round it; but they would not help us to lower it down. At last we got assistance, and were just about to lower it down, when some one cried, 'Hold your hand, lads! Here comes the boat.' And Angus was borne safely in. But my hand shòok so, that I could not draw for some time after with the excitement.—R. S."

He had some rough experience, but was apparently none the worse for it. "*Wick, September, 1868.*—I have had a long, hard day's work in cold, wind, and almost incessant rain. . . . We got a lighter and a boat, and were out till half-past seven, doing labourers' work, pulling, hauling, and tugging. It was past eight before I got dinner, as I was soaking, and bathed with mud to the ears; but, beyond being tired with the unusual exertion, I am all right now."

The following year he went with his father in the *Pharos*, the steamer of the Commissioners of Northern Lights, to Shetland, a part of the same cruise as that on which his grandfather had attended Sir Walter Scott. He treasured the memories of this time, but the record contained in his letters is somewhat disappointing. It was years afterwards that mentioning a boat-cloak, the use of which belonged chiefly to these days, he said: "The proudest moments of my life have been passed in the stern-sheets of a boat with that romantic garment about my shoulders. This, without prejudice to one glorious day when, standing upon some water-stairs at Lerwick, I signalled with a pocket-handkerchief for a boat to come ashore for me. I was then aged fifteen or sixteen [eighteen]. Conceive my glory."

In 1870, besides a week at Dunoon, to look after some work that was being done there, and one or two expeditions with the University engineering class, he spent three weeks on the little island of Ferraidd, off Mull, the scene of David Balfour's shipwreck, commemorated also in *Memories and Portraits*, but then in use as headquarters for the building of the deep-sea lighthouse of Dhu Heartach.

All this was the attractive part of his work. "As a way of life," he wrote, "I wish to speak with sympathy of my education as an engineer. It takes a man into the open air; it keeps him hanging about harbour-sides, which is the richest form of idling; it carries him to wild islands; it gives him a taste of the genial dangers of the sea; it supplies him with dexterities to exercise; it makes demands upon his ingenuity; it will go far to cure him of any taste (if he ever had one) for the miserable life of cities. And when it has done so, it carries him back and shuts him in an office. From the roaring skerry and the wet thwart of the tossing boat, he passes to the stool and desk; and with a memory full of ships, and seas, and perilous headlands, and the shining pharos, he must apply his long-sighted eyes¹ to the pretty niceties of drawing, or measure his inaccurate mind with several pages of consecutive figures. He is a wise youth, to be sure, who can balance one part of genuine life against two parts of drudgery between four walls, and for the sake of the one, manfully accept the other."²

But even the open-air life had only a very slight hold upon him, as far as it was devoted to professional work. Nothing could be more convincing than the little picture of his father and himself given in the *Family of Engineers*.³

"My father would pass hours on the beach, brooding over the waves, counting them, noting their least deflection, noting when they broke. On Tweedside, or by Lyne and Manor, we have spent together whole

¹ This also was his own experience.

² *Additional Memories and Portraits*, p. 313.

³ P. 200.

afternoons; to me, at the time, extremely wearisome; to him, as I am now sorry to think, extremely mortifying. The river was to me a pretty and various spectacle; I could not see—I could not be made to see—it otherwise. To my father it was a chequer-board of lively forces, which he traced from pool to shallow with minute appreciation and enduring interest. ‘That bank was being undercut,’ he might say. ‘Why? Suppose you were to put a groin out here, would not the *filum fluminis* be cast abruptly off across the channel? and where would it impinge upon the other shore? and what would be the result? Or suppose you were to blast that boulder, what would happen? Follow it—use the eyes that God has given you: can you not see that a great deal of land would be reclaimed upon this side?’ It was to me like school in holidays; but to him, until I had worn him out with my invincible triviality, a delight.”

Meanwhile his life was surrounded by the ordinary material comforts belonging to his class, and the customary diversions of society were open to him, had he found them at all to his taste.

In Heriot Row he had now for his own use the two rooms on the top floor of his father's house which had been his nurseries. The smaller chamber, to the east, was his bedroom, while the other held his books, and was used as his study as long as he lived in Edinburgh.¹

At the beginning of this period a change was made in the household arrangements, which was of material service both to his health and also to his subsequent

¹ The roof was raised and the front of the two rooms improved about 1873.

work. In May, 1867, his father took the lease of a house known as Swanston Cottage, lying in a nook at the foot of the Pentland Hills,¹ at a distance of some five miles from Edinburgh and two and a half from the boy's paradise of Colinton.

This was afterwards the home of the heroine of *St. Ives*, and in the *Picturesque Notes on Edinburgh* its situation and history were described.

“Upon the main slope of the Pentlands . . . a bouquet of old trees stands round a white farmhouse; and from a neighbouring dell you can see smoke rising and leaves rustling in the breeze. Straight above, the hills climb a thousand feet into the air. The neighbourhood, about the time of lambs, is clamorous with the bleating of flocks; and you will be awakened in the grey of early summer mornings by the barking of a dog, or the voice of a shepherd shouting to the echoes. This, with the hamlet lying behind unseen, is Swanston. . . . Long ago, this sheltered field was purchased by the Edinburgh magistrates for the sake of the springs that rise or gather there. After they had built their water-house and laid their pipes, it occurred to them that the place was suitable for junketing. . . . The dell was turned into a garden; and on the knoll that shelters it from the plain and the sea winds, they built a cottage looking to the hills. They brought crockets and gar-

¹ “I have been on a good many Scotch hills; but the competitors for the first prize are only four: Ben Lomond, Goatfell, Demyet, and Swanston (Caerketton), the eastmost of the Pentlands . . . Considering the beauty of Edinburgh, and the dignity imparted to scenery by objects of importance, I am rather inclined to give the palm to that Pentland.” — Lord Cockburn, *Circuit Journeys*, 12th September, 1842.

goyles from old St. Giles', which they were then restoring, and disposed them on the gables and over the door and about the garden; and the quarry which had supplied them with building material, they draped with clematis and carpeted with beds of roses. In process of time the trees grew higher, and gave shade to the cottage, and the evergreens sprang up and turned the dell into a thicket." ¹

Here for the next fourteen years the family spent a large part of their summers in place of taking a furnished house at North Berwick or elsewhere.

Hither at all seasons Louis would often retire alone or in the company of a friend; here he gained a knowledge of the Pentlands only to be acquired by living among them; here he saw something of the country folk, and enriched his vocabulary of Lallan; here made the acquaintance of John Todd the shepherd, and Robert Young the gardener, and the military beggarman who had a taste for Keats. This was to him *ille terrarum angulus* of *Underwoods*; on the hill above Swanston there lies the tiny pool, overhung by a rock, where he "loved to sit and make bad verses"; and to this spot he asked his old nurse, four months before he finally left England, "some day to climb Halkerside for me (I am never likely to do it for myself), and sprinkle some of the well water on the turf."

Here one winter-tide he read Dumas again. "I would return in the early night from one of my patrols with the shepherd: a friendly face would meet me in the door, a friendly retriever scurry upstairs to fetch my slippers; and I would sit down with the *Vicomte de Bragelonne*

¹ *Picturesque Notes on Edinburgh*, p. 76.

for a long, silent, solitary, lamplit evening by the fire. . . . I would rise from my book and pull the blind aside, and see the snow and the glittering hollies chequer a Scottish garden, and the winter moonlight brighten the white hills."¹

Now he joined in various sports; at first he rode a good deal, and was even known to follow the hounds. At this time he skated, chiefly from Edinburgh, at Duddingston Loch. It was in these years that he was in Glenogil, in Mr. Barrie's country, and there caught as many as three dozen trout in one day, and forthwith forswore fishing.² Now he made his first acquaintance with canoes, which at this time were introduced by Mr. Baxter on the Firth of Forth. Sir Walter Simpson, the companion of the *Inland Voyage*, was another pioneer, and owned a large double canoe that often carried Stevenson, who had no boat of his own. His more experienced friends had no high opinion of his skill, but he occasionally joined them at Granton, and later at Queensferry, and spent many an afternoon in the fresh air of the Forth and the healthful employment of his paddle.

Conventional persons and conventional entertainments never had any attraction for him, and from general society in Edinburgh he was not long in withdrawing himself. There were exceptions of course; for several years after 1871 he took part in the private theatricals at Professor Fleeming Jenkin's house: at first as prompter, and afterwards in some minor parts, for he never was proficient as an actor. But mostly he preferred to see his friends apart from general company,

¹ *Memories and Portraits*, p. 217.

² *Letters*, ii. 345.

and as for his clothes, of which a great deal has been said—he dressed to please himself. It would be impossible to record the varying phases in which a certain vanity, a need of economy, and a love of ease were combined. The top-hat and frock-coat of convention became him extremely ill, and were finally abandoned after 1878, when as Jenkin's secretary he adopted them in Paris only to be referred to by the hotel clerk as a gentleman who knew all about Mabille. The notorious "black shirt," which was his favourite wear, dated, I believe, from his engineering days, and was made of dark-blue flannel. It was only a little care that was needed in selecting for him appropriate garments, but it was just this trouble he never was willing to take.

His father's was ever a hospitable house, and Louis was there able to entertain his friends. He joined the University Conservative Club, an organisation for elections, and made his first speech at its dinner; he dined with his Academy class for several years; and—more important than any of these—he was elected to the "Speculative Society"—that "Spec." of which the fame has gone abroad in the world largely by means of his writings.

"It is a body of some antiquity, and has counted among its members Scott, Jeffrey, Horner, Benjamin Constant, Robert Emmet, and many a legal and local celebrity besides. By an accident, variously explained, it has its rooms in the very buildings of the University of Edinburgh: a hall, Turkey-carpeted, hung with pictures, looking, when lighted up with fire and candle, like some goodly dining-room, a passage-like library, walled with books in their wire cages; and a corridor

with a fireplace, benches, a table, many prints of famous members, and a mural tablet to the virtues of a former secretary. Here a member can warm himself and loaf and read; here, in defiance of Senatus-consults, he can smoke."¹

The Society is limited to thirty ordinary members, who acquire honorary privileges at the end of four years. Meetings are held once a week from November to March; first an essay is read and criticised, and then a motion is debated. The roll is called thrice on each of these evenings, and at each call every ordinary member is bound to be present; an elaborate system of procedure has grown up, fenced in with penalties and fines. Stevenson was elected a member on 16th February, 1869, and in the proceedings he took an increasing interest. During his first complete session he attended six, during the next eight, and during the third session thirteen out of nineteen meetings. And in 1873 he wrote to one of his fellow-members: "O, I do think the Spec. is about the best thing in Edinburgh."²

The records of the Society contain several entries of interest, even if we do not press too closely the opinions advanced by a student in the heat of debate or the exhilaration of paradox.

The scene in *Weir of Hermiston* where the son of the Lord Justice-Clerk moves the abolition of Capital Punishment appears to have been not wholly imaginary.

¹ *Memories and Portraits*, p. 127.

² I must take this opportunity of expressing my thanks to the Society for kindly allowing me to have the necessary extracts made from their records, and especially to Mr. J. R. N. Macphail for obtaining this permission and in giving up his time to the task.

On March 1, 1870, Stevenson himself opened in the affirmative a debate on the question, "Is the Abolition of Capital Punishment desirable?" Like his hero, he found no seconder; but if he ever held the opinion, it certainly found no favour with him in after-life. The first essay he read before the Society (March 8, 1870) was on "The Influence of the Covenanting Persecution on the Scotch Mind," showing how closely this part of the national history occupied his attention. His opinion of the literature of the day was not high; in 1870 he moved that the revival of letters which took place early in the century is on the wane, and two years later he supported the view that American literature could compare favourably with the contemporaneous literature of England.

The "Spec." was probably the first place where Stevenson came into contact and rivalry with contemporaries who, being his equals, were not necessarily the friends of his own choice; and upon the members in general he seems to have made small impression. He was elected one of the five Presidents of the Society in 1872, but was at the bottom of the list and had only seven votes, whereas the first received eighteen, and the man next above him had thirteen supporters. In 1873 he was re-elected apparently without a contest; in his valedictory address, delivered in the same year, there is an amusing picture of the members, ending with a sketch of himself:—"Mr. Stevenson engaged in explaining to the other members that he is the cleverest person of his age and weight between this and California."

"It is good for boys to be violent and unruly, and to hate all constituted authority," he wrote before he him-

self had yet ceased to be a student, "for it is of such boys that good citizens are made." And in 1870 he himself, as a riotous student, fell into the hands of the police. He must have chafed at his own inaction and the injustice of the arrest, for, on that occasion at any rate, he was but a looker-on at one of the traditional snowball fights between the University and the Town. The magistrates, however, behaved with great discretion, inflicted lenient sentences, and merely bound Stevenson over to keep the peace.

But while the external course of his life seemed smooth, the deeper current had far more troubled a stream. For one thing, as we have seen, he was not interested in engineering, and all the time he could spare from it was given up to the pursuit which had taken firm possession of him. The art of writing was his one concern, and to learn this he was giving all his real self. In later life, when a master of his craft, he sometimes doubted whether he would not have preferred a life of action, had that been possible to him. But it was not for any reason of health that he gave up engineering, but because his impulse to letters was at this time overpowering, and admitted of neither substitute nor rival.

There were, however, besides the misspending of his time and the misdirection of his labour, other difficulties that were far more grave. He had begun to work out for himself his own views of life: his religion and his ethics, his relations to society and his own place in the universe. He was following out the needs of his mind and nature: strictly sincere with himself, he could never see things in their merely conventional

aspect. He was "young in youth," and travelling at the fiery pace of his age and temperament; his senses were importunate, his intellect inquiring, and he must either find his own way, or, as he well might have done, lose it altogether.

When a young man with all the impetuosity of youth is involved in doubts as to the truth of religion, the constitution of society, and the contending claims of different duties, and further is bound to the service of a profession to which he is indifferent, while eagerly yearning after the practice of an art absorbing his whole powers, it is at once impossible he should be happy, and highly improbable that he should satisfy his parents.

Of all Stevenson's difficulties those concerned with religion were the most important, if for no other reason than that they alone affected his relations with his father. The one was questioning dogmas and observances which the other regarded it as impious to examine; and no sacrifice was too great for the father, no duty too arduous, if it could only avert from his child the doom of the freethinker. On the other hand, sooner than be tied to the doctrines of Calvinism, the lad called himself an atheist—such is ever the youthful formula of independence. Of the precise nature of his difficulties at this time he has left no record. He was revolting generally against doctrines held with severity and intolerance, and struggling for that wider view and larger conception of life, which he afterwards found to be less incompatible than he thought with the lessons of his earliest years.

He speaks of the startling effect that the Gospel of

St. Matthew produced on him,¹ but this seems to have been chiefly upon the social side. He was never at any time prone to compromise, and the discrepancy between Christ's teaching and the practice of Christian societies he was neither ready to explain away nor able to ignore.² As in religion he designated himself for the moment an atheist, so he seems in economics, if not in politics, to have become "a red-hot Socialist."³ The direction of his views was no doubt partly due to the "healthy democratic atmosphere" of the Scottish University system.

"At an early age the Scottish lad begins his . . . experience of crowded class-rooms, of a gaunt quadrangle, of a bell hourly booming over the traffic of the city to recall him from the public-house where he has been lunching, or the streets where he has been wandering fancy-free. His college life has little of restraint, and nothing of necessary gentility. He will find no quiet clique of the exclusive, studious, and cultured; no rotten borough of the arts. All classes rub shoulders on the greasy benches. The raffish young gentleman in gloves must measure his scholarship with the plain, clever, clownish laddie from the parish school."⁴

But to him especially, the truant and the scapegrace,

¹ *Juvenilia*, p. 327. *Later Essays*, p. 278.

² At the "Spec.," on 12th November, 1872, he read an essay on "Two Questions on the Relations between Christ's Teaching and Modern Christianity." But on 24th November, 1871, he spoke against Communism being a maintainable theory. In March, 1871, he voted a want of confidence in Mr. Gladstone's Ministry, and probably throughout his life would, if compelled to vote, have always supported the Conservative candidate.

³ *Virginibus Puerisque*, p. 64.

⁴ "The Foreigner at Home," *Memories and Portraits*, p. 95.

the contrast came home with severity. In *Lay Morals* he unfolds some of the details of his experience in recounting "a few pages out of a young man's life."

"He was a friend of mine; a young man like others; generous, flighty, as variable as youth itself, but always with some high motions, and on the search for higher thoughts of life. . . . But he got hold of some unsettling works, the New Testament among others, and this loosened his views of life and led him into many perplexities. As he was the son of a man in a certain position, and well off, my friend had enjoyed from the first the advantages of education, nay, he had been kept alive through a sickly childhood by constant watchfulness, comforts, and change of air, for all of which he was indebted to his father's wealth.

"At college he met other lads more diligent than himself, who followed the plough in summer-time to pay their fees in winter; and this inequality struck him with some force. He was at that age of a conversible temper, and insatiably curious in the aspects of life; and he spent much of his time scraping acquaintance with all classes of man- and woman-kind. In this way he came upon many depressed ambitions and intelligences stunted for want of opportunity; and this also struck him. He began to perceive that life was a handicap upon strange, wrong-sided principles; and not, as he had been told, a fair and equal race. He began to tremble that he himself had been unjustly favoured, when he saw all the avenues of wealth, and power, and comfort closed against so many of his competitors and equals, and held unwearingly open before so idle, desultory, and so dissolute a being as himself. . . .

My friend was only unsettled and discouraged, and filled full with that trumpeting anger with which young men regard injustices in the first blush of youth; although in a few years they will tamely acquiesce in their existence, and knowingly profit by their complications. Yet all this while he suffered many indignant pangs. And once when he put on his boots, like any other unripe donkey, to run away from home, it was his best consolation that he was now, at a single plunge, to free himself from the responsibility of this wealth that was not his, and to do battle equally against his fellows in the warfare of life."

Unfortunately the well-meant action of his parents added to his unhappiness a touch of squalor. They were generosity itself; they provided for their son all that they thought a young man could possibly want. So long as he cared for such entertainments, they gave dinners and dances to his friends, whom they welcomed (if thought suitable) on all occasions to their house; for his health and education there was nothing they were not ready to do. One thing only was wanting to him, and that was liberty, or rather the means of using it. They knew how generous he was by nature, probably they guessed how open-handed he was likely to be, and until he was three-and-twenty they restricted him—as others of his friends also were restricted—to half-a-crown or, at the most, five shillings a week as pocket-money. The result was that the lad went his own way, and frequented places which consorted with his means. This may have extended the future novelist's knowledge of man and woman and of the many aspects of human life, but it was scarcely a successful policy in his father's

eyes (had he but known) which placed his son's headquarters at a tobacconist's shop,¹ and sent him to the Lothian Road and a succession of such hostelries as "The Green Elephant," "The Twinkling Eye," and "The Gay Japaneese."

Stevenson's own account of it ran thus:—

"I was always kept poor in my youth, to my great indignation at the time, but since then with my complete approval. Twelve pounds a year was my allowance up to twenty-three [which was indeed far too little],² and though I amplified it by a very consistent embezzlement from my mother, I never had enough to be lavish. My monthly pound was usually spent before the evening of the day on which I received it; as often as not, it was forestalled; and for the rest of the time I was in rare fortune if I had five shillings at once in my possession. Hence my acquaintance was of what would be called a very low order. Looking back upon it, I am surprised at the courage with which I first ventured alone into the societies in which I moved; I was the companion of seamen, chimney-sweeps, and thieves; my circle was being continually changed by the action of the police magistrate. I see now the little sanded kitchen where Velvet Coat (for such was the name I went by) has spent days together, generally in silence and making sonnets in a penny version-book; and rough as the material may appear, I do not believe these days were among the least happy I have spent.

¹ "Although tobacco is an admirable sedative, the qualities necessary for retailing it are neither rare nor precious in themselves."—*"An Apology for Idlers," Virginibus Puerisque*, p. 90.

² The words in brackets are added in pencil.

I was distinctly petted and respected; the women were most gentle and kind to me; I might have left all my money for a month, and they would have returned every farthing of it. Such indeed was my celebrity that when the proprietor and his mistress came to inspect the establishment, I was invited to tea with them and it is still a grisly thought to me, that I have since seen that mistress, then gorgeous in velvet and gold chains, an old, toothless, ragged woman, with hard voice enough to welcome me by my old name of Velvet Coat."

These were the days when there was most truth in the analogy that Stevenson loved to trace between himself and Robert Fergusson, the forerunner of Burns—the poor Edinburgh lad, who "died in his acute, painful youth, and left models of the great things that were to come":¹ "so clever a boy, so wild, of such a mixed strain, so unfortunate, born in the same town with me, and as I always felt, rather by express intimation than from evidence, so like myself."² So far indeed did he carry this sympathy that, in writing from Samoa, he expressed his conviction that in him Fergusson lived again.³

The days were the days of green-sickness, and they were often miserable. Many a time he leaned over the great bridge which connects the New Town with the Old, and watched the trains smoking out from under him, and vanishing into the tunnel on a voyage to brighter skies.⁴ Often he haunted the station itself, envying the passengers; and again, "in the hot fits

¹ *Letters*, ii. 223.

² *Ibid.*, ii. 329.

³ *Ibid.*, ii. 212.

⁴ *Picturesque Notes*, p. 4.

youth," he went to the Calton burying-ground, "to be unhappy." "Poor soul," he says of himself, "I remember how much he was cast down at times, and how life (which had not yet begun) seemed already at an end, and hope quite dead, and misfortune and dishonour, like physical presences, dogging him as he went."

Yet the days were the days of youth, and often they were days of happiness. The clouds rolled away in their season; most of the troubles were subjective, and though they were acutely felt, yet their ultimate solution was certain.

The one difficulty most immediately affecting his outer life—the pursuit of engineering—was, however, among the first to be solved. On April 8, 1871, Louis told his father of his extreme disinclination for the work, and asked to be allowed to follow literature. It must have come as a heavy disappointment to Thomas Stevenson, who, as we have seen, was devoted to the practice of his calling. Moreover, only twelve days previously Louis had read before the Royal Scottish Society of Arts his first and only contribution to the literature of his profession, a paper on a New Form of Intermittent Light, which was afterwards judged "well worthy of the favourable consideration of the Society, and highly creditable to so young an author."¹ The father felt the blow, but he must to some extent have been prepared for it by his son's entire lack of interest

¹ The proposed light has never been constructed in consequence of several mechanical difficulties, as I am informed by Mr. D. A. Stevenson, the present head of the firm and Engineer to the Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses.

in the solution of problems which to him were the most entrancing in the world. He seems to have met the request with calm; his wife's diary records that he was "wonderfully resigned"; and the matter was compromised without difficulty or delay. Engineering was to be given up forthwith, but lest Louis should find himself with no other profession than that of "failed author," he was to read Law and to be called to the Scottish Bar. If he chose to practise, he would have his profession; his necessary legal and historical studies would add more or less to his general culture, and he would be able during his preparation to carry on the literary training that was already occupying so large a portion of his time.

The general alleviation of his position was more gradual, but of this he has left an account, the fragment of a larger scheme of biography written in San Francisco in the beginning of 1880.¹

"I had a happy afternoon scrambling with Bob upon the banks of the Water of Leith above Slateford. And so I may leave this part of my life and take it up in another direction. At last I am now done with morbidity and can wash my hands.

"BOOK III.—FROM JEST TO EARNEST

"I date my new departure from three circumstances: natural growth, the coming of friends, and the study of Walt Whitman. The order or degree of their effec-

¹ For Book I., *vide* p. 53 n. Of Book II. only the last lines survive, and the fragment on p. 99.

tiveness I shall not seek to distinguish. But I shall first say something of my friends.

“My cousin Bob,¹ who had now, after a long absence, returned to Edinburgh, is the man likest and most unlike to me that I have ever met. Our likeness was one of tastes and passions, and, for many years at least, it amounted in these particulars to an identity. He had the most indefatigable, feverish mind I have ever known; he had acquired a smattering of almost every knowledge and art; he would surprise you by his playing, his painting, his writing, his criticism, his knowledge of philosophy, and, above all, by a sort of vague, disconnected, and totally inexplicable erudition. What was specially his, and genuine, was his faculty for turning over a subject in a conversation.² There was an insane lucidity in his conclusions; a singular, humorous eloquence in his language, and a power of method, bringing the whole of life into the focus of the subject under hand; none of which I have ever heard equalled or even approached by any other talker. I am sure that he and I together have, in a brief, conspectory manner, turned over the stuff of a year's reading in one half-hour of talk. He was the most valuable man to talk to, above all in his younger days; for he twisted like a serpent, changed like the patterns in a kaleidoscope, transmigrated (it is the only word) from one point of view to another with a swiftness and completeness that left a stupid and merely logical mind panting in the rear; and so, in an incredibly brief space of time, helped you to view a question upon every side. In sheer

¹ The late R. A. M. Stevenson; *vide* p. 104 n.

² Cf. “Talk and Talkers,” *Memories and Portraits*, p. 187

trenchancy of mind, I have ever been his humble and distant follower. The multiplicity and swiftness of his apprehensions, if they do not bewilder, at least paralyse his mind. He is utterly without measure. He will spend a week in regulating the expenses of an imaginary navy; and then in ten minutes crush a subtle fallacy or create a new vein of criticism. We have perhaps only one moral quality in common: a desire to do justice to those with whom we are at enmity. I am now in my thirtieth year, and I have found sufficient excuses for all whom I think to have injured me but two; and for one of these I still hope to do the like. As for the other, I give him up to obscene furies; duck him where Stinchar¹ flows; it was he who first taught me, in my twenty-seventh year, to believe that it was possible for man to be evil with premeditation; and that was perhaps an evil enough service in itself.² But in this particular Bob so far outstrips or (may I say?) outshines me, that I have sometimes been put to the blush by the largeness and freedom of his allowances for others.³

¹ A river in Ayrshire, at the mouth of which is Ballantrae. Cf. Burns's song: "Behind yon hills where Stinchar flows."

² Cf. *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*, p. 151.

³ Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, 25th March, 1847, and died 18th April, 1900. He was educated at Windermere College and at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. He then studied painting chiefly at Antwerp and in France, but became an art critic about 1885, and from 1885 to 1889 was Professor of Fine Arts at University College, Liverpool. "The Art of Velasquez" and the monograph on Rubens in the *Portfolio* series are the chief works he has left behind him, but, like Gerard de Nerval, "il a versé plus d'une urne dans le tonneau sans fond du journalisme." These notes and the

“The next friend who came to me (I take them in the order of time) was, I think, Charles Baxter. I cannot characterise a personality so unusual in the little space that I can here afford. I have never known one of so mingled a strain. As a companion, when in spirits, he stands without an equal in my experience. He is the only man I ever heard of who could give and take in conversation with the wit and polish of style that we find in Congreve’s comedies.¹ He is likewise the only person I ever knew who could *advise*, or, to explain more perfectly my meaning, who could both make

subsequent essay in *Memories and Portraits* give some idea of his talk as it was at this time — perhaps the most brilliant in England. In the *Pall Mall Magazine* for July, 1900, Mr. Henley describes its mellowing, and says of such copiousness and intolerance as ever distinguished “Spring-Heel’d Jack”: “’T is a good ten years since I saw the last of that exorbitant and amazing person — a person, be it noted, ever, for all his amazingness and for all his exorbitancy — ever, I may insist, an influence for the best, alike in morals and in art; and I can say with a certain assurance that the younger men knew nothing of him. What they got in his room was a some one, bright-eyed, a little flushed, ever courteous, ever kindly, ever humorous, taking any bit of the universe as his theme, descanting upon it as if he had a prescriptive right in it, and delighting every one who listened by the unfailing excellence, wisdom, sanity (however insane it seemed at times) of what he had to say.” And another of his friends, writing in the *Saturday Review* (28th April, 1900), says: “We know what the joy was of the ‘Mermaid’ since we have known him.”

Of these earlier days he wrote to Louis as long ago as 1874: “We used to think we were like no one else about certain things, but that was a real phase too.”

¹ He was, even then, as a letter from R. L. S. in 1894 reminds him, “a great maker of reminiscences,” and to his influence, perhaps, it was partly due that Stevenson turned so early and so frequently to the past.

helpful suggestions and at the same time hold his tongue when he had none to offer.

“The next was James Walter Ferrier. It is only now when I come to describe them that I perceive how strange a crew were my associates; but Ferrier's strangeness was of a tragic character. The grandson of old Wilson, the son of Ferrier the metaphysician, he was gifted with very considerable abilities; he was by nature the most complete and gentle gentleman (I must risk the pleonasm) I have known.

“I never knew any man so superior to himself. The best of him only came as a vision, like Corsica from the Corniche. He never gave his measure either morally or intellectually. The curse was on him. Even his friends did not know him but by fits. I have passed hours with him when he was so wise, good, and sweet, that I never knew the like of it in any other.¹

“The fourth of these friends was Sir Walter Simpson, son of Sir James who gave chloroform to the world. He was, I think, the eldest of my associates; yet he must have been of a more deliberate growth, for when we encountered, I believe we were about equal in intellectual development. His was a slow fighting mind. You would see him, at times, wrestle for a minute at a time with a refractory jest, and perhaps fail to throw

¹ I have here substituted a portion of a letter which Stevenson wrote upon hearing of the death of Ferrier (*Letters*, i 281) for the original ms., which says nearly the same things in a more halting fashion, and is generally less suitable for quotation. For the finished study, pitched in a loftier key, the reader is referred to “Old Mortality” in *Memories and Portraits*.

it at the end. I think his special character was a profound shyness, a shyness which was not so much exhibited in society as it ruled in his own dealings with himself. He was shy of his own virtues and talents, and above all of the former. He was even ashamed of his own sincere desire to do the right. More than half the man, as you first knew him, was a humbug; and that was utterly the worser part. But this very foible served to keep clean and wholesome the unusual intimacy which united him, Baxter, and myself; for he would permit no protestations and scarce any civility between us. It is odd that this had to be dropped in time; for, as we went on in life and became more seriously involved, we found it then more necessary to be kind. Then, indeed, Simpson could show himself not only kind but full of exceptional delicacies. Some of them I did not appreciate till years after they were done and perhaps forgotten by him. I have said his mind was slow, and in this he was an opposite and perhaps an antidote to Bob. I have known him battle a question sometimes with himself, sometimes with me, month after month for years; he had an honest stubbornness in thinking, and would neither let himself be beat nor cry victory.

“The mere return of Bob changed at once and for ever the course of my life; I can give you an idea of my relief only by saying that I was at last able to breathe. The miserable isolation in which I had languished was no more in season, and I began to be happy.¹ To have

¹ At this point it may be as well to mention the L. J. R., “that mysterious society.” It consisted of six members, and its meetings, of which only five took place, were held at a public-house situated, I be-

no one to whom you can speak your thoughts is but a slight trial; for a month or two at a time, I can support it almost without regret; but to be young, to be daily making fresh discoveries and fabricating new theories of life, to be full of flimsy, whimsical, overpowering humours, that seem to leave you no alternative but to confide them or to die, and not only not to have, but never to have had a confidant, is an astounding misery. I now understand it best by recognising my delight when that period was ended. I thought I minded for nothing when I had found my Faithful; my heart was like a bird's; I was done with the sullens for good; there was an end of green-sickness for my life as soon as I had got a friend to laugh with. Laughter was at that time our principal affair, and I doubt if we could have had a better. It is true we debated many things from the first, above all, problems of art, in which we advanced wonderfully; and it is also true that under all this mirth-making there kept growing up and strengthening a serious, angry, and at length a downright hostile criticism of the life around us. This time we call, in looking back, the period of Jink.

"Jink was a word of our own; for we had a language, compounded of many slangs and languages, in which we expressed, indifferently, common things that had already a much better name in English, and the

lieve, in Advocates' Close, which had apparently been visited by Burns. Its complete name was concealed with a mystery as deep and not less important than that which broods over the Greek-letter societies of American colleges. Its principles, generally speaking, were liberty of thought and freedom from prejudice. The abolition of the House of Lords was, it is said, one of its tenets.

new or half-understood ideas for which there were no names, or none with which we were acquainted.

“As a rule of conduct, Jink consisted in doing the most absurd acts for the sake of their absurdity and the consequent laughter. I will give an instance of the colossal jests which we used to enact, and of which this at least is to be said, that if they were silly, they were never cruel. One of us was once travelling from Wales to Edinburgh, strangely dilapidated as usual in the matter of coin; and when he got to Crewe, he was stopped before the booking-office for a paltry half-crown. There were fifteen minutes to spare before the train started. He opened his portmanteau on the platform, got out a pair of dress-trousers, ran into the town, stumbled straight on a pawnbroker's shop, got his half-crown, and was back in time to book and get a seat. But when the hurry was over he began to wonder over a circumstance in this little comedy. When asked his name by the pawnbroker, he had replied instantly and without conscious thought, ‘John Libbel,’ and when further questioned as to the spelling, had rapped out in the same swift and perfectly mechanical way, ‘Two B's.’ On his return the matter was discussed. It seemed to us, I remember, a case of plenary inspiration; and we agreed, at last, that it must have been so, because the name was so suitable for one who pawned. It seemed to us, and it seems to me still, a mean, hungry, slinking sort of name; hence we thought that all of us should use it as a name to pawn under; and hence germinated the great idea of Libbelism. A large, growing, pushing society of men should go all over the world and continually pawn articles under the

name of John Libbel; until at length, when some great German statist took it into his blockhead to examine the books of pawnbrokers, it would gradually dawn upon him that, in all lands and for year after year, innumerable persons all answering to this one name of John Libbel were daily engaged in the act of pawning, and yet when he turned his eyes outward on the world to follow the conduct of these persons in a different sphere, behold there would be no John Libbel, no, not one. We exulted over the mystification of the German statist. To pawn anything under this name was to perform an 'act of Libbelism.'

"I remember these words from the '*Corpus totius Juris Libbelism,*' which I drew up: '*vel si rem suam, vel si rem alienam, maxime quidem si rem alienam.*'

"But the idea did not rest here: we had tasted blood, and soon began to find out other ways of building up evidence of this imaginary person's existence. We bought some type for marking pocket-handkerchiefs one day at the corner of North College Street, and retiring to a public-house, printed off, with incredible patience, many hundred visiting cards with the name of 'Mr. Libbel.' The type being worthless, and the printing being done without a press, and amateur at that, you may conceive the aspect of the cards. These began to be handed about Edinburgh at a great rate, sometimes with manuscript additions which did not tend to improve the moral character of Mr. Libbel. A whole street would suddenly be flooded from end to end with Mr. Libbel's visiting cards; or one would be softly pressed into the hand of a gentleman going by. Parcels, containing nothing, 'With Mr. Libbel's com-

pliments,' were handed into houses. Letters from Mr. Libbel to leading citizens were carried by the unconscious postman. I have spent whole days going from lodging-house to lodging-house inquiring anxiously, 'If Mr. Libbel had come yet?' and when the servant or a landlady had told us 'No,' assuring her that he would come soon, and leaving a mysterious message. And at last—crowning point of the edifice—there came the Libbel Succession. Wherever we went, we had a notebook in our hand; we would put questions, look at each other, purse our lips, and gradually let it escape to our auditor, as if by accident, that we were agents looking for the heir to the great Libbel fortune. We tried to get an advertisement into the *Scotsman* newspaper, but the clerk plainly smelling a hoax, we were ejected from the office. Did we labour in vain from first to last? After all this apostledom, was there not one disciple? Did no two of our victims ever take counsel together, and after comparing notes, cry out: 'But who the devil is this Libbel?' We can never know now; but we were disinterested, we required none of the encouragement of success, we pursued our joke, our mystification, our *blague* for its own sake, and had a good time.

"Yet for this and other mad pranks of a like order, we were rewarded in a strange way, by one flash of infernal glory. This is so odd in itself that I must tell it with every particularity. One afternoon, hunting round for the absurd, we entered the shop of a jeweller called Bargany — on — Street, rather low down, and there proceeded for about quarter of an hour to pass off some piece of vaulting absurdity on the shopman. Suddenly

the man's eye took fire, and he started back. 'I know who you are,' he cried; 'you 're the two Stevensons.' We were dumbfounded. 'Oh,' he went on, 'Bargany's been dying to see you. He'll be so vexed that he was out. Oh, *be* 's heard of your ongoings.' And the man shouted with laughter again and again. He told us to come back later in the afternoon, or any other afternoon, and have tea in the back shop with Bargany and his sister, who had also heard of us, and desired to make our acquaintance. And I must say if our reputation did us any justice, that sister was a liberal lady. Would you believe it? we never went back.

"To tell what else we did would be interminable and, besides, extremely tedious. As Bob said, we did nothing obvious; the least joke was spiced to us by being imbedded in mountains of monotony."

Here the manuscript breaks off. Some notes on an earlier page enable us to learn in what direction it might have been continued. "Whitman: humanity: L. J. R.: love of mankind: sense of inequality: justification of art: decline of religion: I take to the New Testament: change startling: growing desire for truth: Spencer: should have done better with the New Test."

Thus the coming of happiness was due partly to his friends and partly to his reading. To the list of the former there is still an addition to be made—the name of Fleeming Jenkin. It was in 1868 that Jenkin came to Edinburgh as Professor of Engineering, and it was first in the character of a truant that Stevenson came under his notice.¹ The professor was fifteen years older than his pupil—a difference in age which is often diffi-

¹ *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*, p. 155.

cult to surmount. But besides his boundless energy and vitality, there was about Jenkin a perpetual boyishness, which showed itself not least in this, that his development continued to the end of his life. His delight in all that was high-minded and heroic, his fiery enthusiasm, his extraordinary readiness and spirit, were just the qualities to win and to stimulate the younger man. Moreover, at the time that Stevenson fell under his influence, the detachment and independence of Jenkin's religious views rendered that influence of far greater weight than if he had been content to yield a lifeless assent to established observances and conventional creeds. Stevenson was in revolt, or meditating an outbreak. Here was a man, ready to question everything, exercising a clear-sighted judgment, and yet full of earnestness and piety, who "saw life very simple," who did not love refinements, but was "a friend to much conformity in unessentials." And about Jenkin there were these further points which distinguished him from Stevenson's other friends, and gave him a great advantage. He was the only one who had already fought the battle of life, and not only was victorious but knew how to carry his success.¹ Moreover, he was the first of Stevenson's friends who was already married. Perhaps the most charming passages in the *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin* are those which suggest rather than describe the infinite tenderness and romance which marriage brought into his life and made his house all it was to those who loved him. And so to Stevenson it was from the first a double friendship, renewed each spring in Edinburgh by the theatricals in which

¹ *Letters*, ii. 80.

LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

he took part, and also by a long visit to the family in their country quarters. To Jenkin he resorted in many of his troubles, and from him and his wife he never failed to obtain the sympathy and wise counsel of which he stood in need. Mrs. Jenkin, writing in 1895, says that her husband loved him best of all his friends, and Stevenson, when he came to write Jenkin's biography, records what mingled pain and pleasure it was "to dig into the past of a dead friend, and find him, at every spadeful, shine brighter."¹

Stevenson's numerous and characteristic letters to Jenkin were returned to their writer after his friend's death, and, in the confusion of the departure from Bournemouth, they were unfortunately destroyed. Of his first introduction to Mrs. Jenkin, she has herself given an account.

Late on a winter afternoon in 1868 she paid her first visit to 17 Heriot Row, and there found Mrs. Stevenson sitting by the firelight, apparently alone. They began to talk, when "suddenly, from out of a dark corner beyond the fireplace, came a voice, peculiar, vibrating; a boy's voice, I thought at first. 'Oh!' said Mrs. Stevenson, 'I forgot that my son was in the room. Let me introduce him to you.' The voice went on: I listened in perplexity and amazement. Who was this son who talked as Charles Lamb wrote? this young Heine with the Scottish accent? I stayed long, and when I came away the unseen converser came down with me to the front door to let me out. As he opened it, the light of the gas-lamp outside ('For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door,' he sings) fell on him, and

¹ *Letters*, ii. 13.

I saw a slender, brown, long-haired lad, with great dark eyes, a brilliant smile, and a gentle, deprecating bend of the head. 'A boy of sixteen,' I said to myself. But he was eighteen, looking then, as he always did, younger than his age. I asked him to come and see us. He said, 'Shall I come to-morrow?' I said 'Yes,' and ran home. As I sat down to dinner I announced, 'I have made the acquaintance of a poet!' He came on the morrow, and from that day forward we saw him constantly. From that day forward too, our affection and our admiration for him, and our delight in his company, grew."

Thus much of his friends and their influence. There was also the other continual and stimulating influence of books, and though Stevenson was never a scholar in the strict and more arid sense, few men ever brought so great an enthusiasm to the studies of their choice. His ardour was now at its height. Twenty years later he wrote: "I have really enjoyed this book as I—almost as I—used to enjoy books when I was going twenty—twenty-three; and these are the years for reading."¹

"Books were the proper remedy: books of vivid human import, forcing upon the minds of young men the issues, pleasures, busyness, importance, and immediacy of that life in which they stand; books of smiling or heroic temper, to excite or to console; books of a large design, shadowing the complexity of that game of consequences to which we all sit down, the hanger-back not least."²

Besides his books at home, he had always access to

¹ *Letters*, ii. 246.

² *Memories and Portraits*, p. 112.

the Advocates' Library, the great public library of Edinburgh, which is entitled to receive a copy of everything published in the kingdom. But for the present the question is of those works with which a man lives, which for the time become an intimate part of himself, and closer than any friend. Such were to Stevenson the three already mentioned, the New Testament, Walt Whitman,¹ and Herbert Spencer. Of the first he says but little, and of that I have already spoken: to Whitman he has done a measure of justice in one of the *Familiar Studies*, and also in a paper on "Books which have Influenced Me."² In the latter, too, Mr. Herbert Spencer also receives his meed of gratitude, and to him succeed Shakespeare, Dumas, Bunyan, Montaigne, and

¹ "His book . . . should be in the hands of all parents and guardians as a specific for the distressing malady of being seventeen years old. Green-sickness yields to his treatment as to a charm of magic; and the youth, after a short course of reading, ceases to carry the world upon his shoulders" (p. 108).

² Republished in his *Later Essays*, in the Edinburgh Edition.

"I come next to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a book of singular service, a book which tumbled the world upside down for me, blew into space a thousand cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion, and having thus shaken my tabernacle of lies, set me back again upon a strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues.

" . . . Close upon the back of my discovery of Whitman, I came under the influence of Herbert Spencer. No more persuasive Rabbi exists, and few better. . . . His words, if dry, are always manly and honest; there dwells in his pages a spirit of highly abstract joy, plucked naked like an algebraic symbol, but still joyful; and the reader will find there a *caput mortuum* of piety, with little indeed of its loveliness, but with most of its essentials; and these two qualities make him a wholesome, as his intellectual vigour makes him a bracing, writer. I should be much of a hound if I lost my gratitude to Herbert Spencer." — "Books which have Influenced Me," *Later Essays*, p. 279.

many others in rapid sequence, until the writer was manifestly overwhelmed in returning thanks to the whole world of books which brought him so much wisdom and happiness.¹

But learning to write—there was the business of life. Although the description of the method by which he taught himself this most difficult of arts has been quoted again and again, and has long ago become classical, I have no alternative and no desire but to give it in this place. The process described had long begun when this period opened, as it continued after its close; but to these years it chiefly refers—a space of protracted and laborious application without encouragement or immediate reward.²

“All through my boyhood and youth I was known

¹ In a notebook of 1871-72 I find this *Catalogus Librorum Carissimorum*:—

Montaigne's <i>Essays</i> .	Hazlitt's <i>Table-Talk</i> .
Horace, his <i>Odes</i> .	Burns's works.
Pepys, his <i>Diary</i> , esp. <i>the Trip to Bristol, Bath, etc.</i>	<i>Tristram Shandy</i> .
Shakespeare, his works, <i>Lear, Hamlet, Falstaff, Twelfth Night</i> .	Heine.
	Keats.
	Fielding.

Scott, strange to say, does not appear, but though Stevenson now and again said hard things of Sir Walter, they were all upon the technical side, and his incomparable merits perhaps no one ever better understood. Not all books, however, were of service: elsewhere he bewails the inhumanity of *Obermann* (*Memories and Portraits*, p. 112) and counts *Moll Flanders* and *The Country Wife* more wholesome reading.

Compare also the beginning of “A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas’s” and “The Ideal House,” *Miscellanea*, p. 47.

² “A College Magazine,” *Memories and Portraits*, p. 122.

and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write. I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside, I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words.

“And what I thus wrote was for no ulterior use; it was written consciously for practice. It was not so much that I wished to be an author (though I wished that too) as that I had vowed that I would learn to write. That was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practised to acquire it, as men learn to whittle, in a wager with myself. Description was the principal field of my exercise; for to any one with senses there is always something worth describing, and town and country are but one continuous subject. But I worked in other ways also; often accompanied my walks with dramatic dialogues, in which I played many parts; and often exercised myself in writing down conversations from memory.

“This was all excellent, no doubt; so were the diaries I sometimes tried to keep, but always and very speedily discarded, finding them a school of posturing and melancholy self-deception. And yet this was not the most efficient part of my training. Good though it was, it only taught me (so far as I have learned them at all) the lower and less intellectual elements of the art, the choice of the essential note and the right word: things that to

a happier constitution had perhaps come by nature. And as regarded training, it had one grave defect; for it set me no standard of achievement. So that there was perhaps more profit, as there was certainly more effort, in my secret labours at home. Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful, and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts.

“I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire, and to *Obermann*. I remember one of these monkey-tricks, which was called ‘The Vanity of Morals’; it was to have had a second part ‘The Vanity of Knowledge’; but the second part was never attempted, and the first part was written (which is my reason for recalling it, ghost-like, from its ashes) no less than three times: first in the manner of Hazlitt, second in the manner of Ruskin, who had cast on me a passing spell, and third in a laborious pasticcio of Sir Thomas Browne. So with my other works: *Cain*, an epic, was (save the mark!) an imitation of *Sordello*; *Robin Hood*, a tale in verse, took an eclectic middle course among the fields of Keats, Chaucer, and Morris; in *Monmouth*, a tragedy, I reclined on the bosom of Mr. Swinburne; in my in-

numerable gouty-footed lyrics, I followed many masters; in the first draft of *The King's Pardon*, a tragedy, I was on the trail of no less a man than John Webster; in the second draft of the same piece, with staggering versatility, I had shifted my allegiance to Congreve, and of course conceived my fable in a less serious vein—for it was not Congreve's verse, it was his exquisite prose, that I admired and sought to copy. . . . So I might go on for ever, through all my abortive novels, and down to my later plays, of which I think more tenderly, for they were not only conceived at first under the bracing influence of old Dumas, but have met with resurrections: one, strangely bettered by another hand, came on the stage itself and was played by bodily actors; the other, originally known as *Semiramis*, a tragedy,¹ I have observed on bookstalls under the alias of *Prince Otto*. But enough has been said to show by what arts of impersonation and in what purely ventriloquial efforts I first saw my words on paper.

“That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was so Keats learned, and there was never a finer temperament for literature than Keats's. . . .

“It is the great point of these imitations that there still shines, beyond the student's reach, his inimitable model. Let him try as he please, he is still sure of failure; and it is an old and a very true saying that failure is the only highroad to success. I must have had some disposition to learn; for I clear-sightedly condemned my own performances. I liked doing them indeed; but when they were done, I could see they

¹ The tragedy was in blank verse, *Academy*, 19th May, 1900.

were rubbish. In consequence, I very rarely showed them even to my friends; and such friends as I chose to be my confidants I must have chosen well, for they had the friendliness to be quite plain with me. 'Padding,' said one. Another wrote: 'I cannot understand why you do lyrics so badly.' No more could I! Thrice I put myself in the way of a more authoritative rebuff, by sending a paper to a magazine. These were returned, and I was not surprised or even pained. If they had not been looked at, as (like all amateurs) I suspected was the case, there was no good in repeating the experiment; if they had been looked at—well then I had not yet learned to write, and I must keep on learning and living."

Thus the secret of learning was—for the right man—only the secret of taking pains: and yet in the history of his endeavours we find, where we should least expect it, a hereditary trait. It seems as absurd to couple with indolence the name of the indefatigable writer, as it was for him to bring his grandfather into a similar connection:¹ but it is from himself that we hear of this failing, although we know not to which year it must be referred.

"I remember a time when I was very idle, and lived and profited by that humour. I have no idea why I ceased to be so, yet I scarce believe I have the power to return to it; it is a change of age. I made consciously a thousand little efforts, but the determination from which these arose came to me while I slept and in the way of growth. I have had a thousand skirmishes to keep myself at work upon particular mornings,

¹ P. 5.

and sometimes the affair was hot; but of that great change of campaign, which decided all this part of my life and turned me from one whose business was to shirk into one whose business was to strive and persevere, it seems to me as though all that had been done by some one else. The life of Goethe affected me; so did that of Balzac; and some very noble remarks by the latter in a pretty bad book, the *Cousine Bette*. I dare say I could trace some other influences in the change. All I mean is, I was never conscious of a struggle, nor registered a vow, nor seemingly had anything personally to do with the matter. I came about like a well-handled ship. There stood at the wheel that unknown steersman whom we call God."¹

This may be assigned to the time immediately before his retirement from engineering; but it might relate equally to several periods when he was unable to settle down to work: they were seldom of long duration, and, except before his own conscience, there was hardly any time when the author of the *Apology for Idlers* ever really neglected the tasks of his true vocation.

As to the products of his labours, editors, as he has told us, would have nothing to say to them. So he became an editor himself. Magazines had risen and fallen wherever the boy had gone; but none of his serials had yet attained the distinction of type. The idea of the *Edinburgh University Magazine* was started in the rooms of the "Spec." by four of the members of that society, of which Stevenson was the youngest and least esteemed; the history of its rise and fall (for print did not save it from the fate of its manuscript predecessors)

¹ *Reflections and Remarks on Human Life*, p. 40

may be read in *Memories and Portraits*, while some of Stevenson's contributions are to be found in the volume of his *Juvenilia*. Interesting as they are, they constitute no great achievement, and the picture of "An Old Scots Gardener," retouched in after-days, is the only piece which has found a place with the works of his later years.

"The magazine appeared in a yellow cover, which was the best part of it, for at least it was unassuming; . . . it ran four months in undisturbed obscurity, and died without a gasp. The first number was edited by all four of us, with prodigious bustle; the second fell principally into the hands of Ferrier and me; the third I edited alone; and it has long been a solemn question who it was that edited the fourth. . . .

"It was no news to me, but only the wholesome confirmation of my judgment, when the magazine struggled into half-birth, and instantly sickened and subsided into night. . . . I cleared the decks after this lost engagement; had the necessary interview with my father, which passed off not amiss; paid over my share of expense; . . . and then, reviewing the whole episode, I told myself that the time was not yet ripe, nor the man ready; and to work again I went with my penny version-books, having fallen back in one day from the printed author to the manuscript student."¹

To the list of the works—books, plays, and articles—already mentioned, which were written at this time, the following names may be added, as showing the direction of his labours. In 1868 he wrote *Voces Fidelium*, a series of dramatic monologues in verse; and

¹ *Memories and Portraits*, p. 132.

“the bulk of a Covenanting novel,” possibly another attempt on Hackston of Rathillet or the Pentland Rising.¹ *The King's Pardon* (otherwise *Park Whitehead*) and *Edward Daven* likewise survive only as names; the manuscripts are gone, and we cannot even guess at the models on which they were planned; though the first of them seems to show that here, as well as in *Cain*, Robert Browning helped to educate the writer who of all others in his day perhaps the least resembled him in style.

A *Retrospect*, written at Dunoon in 1870, and the fragment of *Cochermouth and Keswick*, a visit to Cumberland in 1871, are printed in the Edinburgh Edition. The former contains the account of the spae-wife, “a poor, mad Highland woman,” who—along with much nonsense—predicted that he was to visit America, was to be very happy, and was to be much upon the sea. In the latter is an admirable portrait, such as Thackeray would have loved, of the London theatrical manager, lording it in the inn smoking-room at Keswick. There were also written at this date the article on Colinton Manse, from which I have quoted so largely, and another similar paper on his solitary games, which was afterwards transformed into “Child's Play.”²

In 1871 he wrote the paper on “A New Form of Intermittent Light for Lighthouses,” which was highly praised, and received a £3 medal from the Royal Scottish Society of Arts, and in May, 1873, his paper “On the Thermal Influence of Forests” was communicated to the Royal Society of Edinburgh by his father, and duly

¹ *Memories and Portraits*, pp. 297, 305.

² *Memories and Portraits*.

appeared in the *Proceedings* of that Society. Both these are contained in the Edinburgh Edition, but whatever scientific value they possess, as literature they are undistinguishable from ordinary papers of the kind.

Meanwhile their author was reading for the Bar, or at any rate attending some of the necessary lectures in Civil Law, Public Law, and Political Economy. In the second of these subjects he was even third in the class and received honourable mention, and from Professor Hodgson he gained a certificate for essays.

During the years 1872 and 1873 he spent some months in the office of Messrs. Skene, Edwards & Bilton, Writers to the Signet, in order to learn conveyancing. Part of the process consisted in copying documents, and for this in Scotland it was customary to pay the pupil. Scott in this way increased his meagre pocket-money, probably to a far greater amount than Stevenson ever achieved. I find, nevertheless, that in July, 1873, the latter was paid six pounds as "about the amount of your writings during the period you have been in the office." The senior partner of this firm was the well-known historian and antiquary, Mr. W. F. Skene, the author of *Celtic Scotland*, but it seems that he was hardly at all brought into connection with his pupil, and that, in later years, either learned the other's quality with much regret for a neglected opportunity.

In November, 1872, Stevenson, having no degree or qualification for exemption, passed the preliminary examination for the Scottish Bar; the circumstances are worth mention only for the light they throw on his character and his education. French was one of the subjects offered, and only the day before the examina-

tion he discovered that questions would be set him in the grammar of that language. He forthwith procured a book and realised that here was a body of knowledge the very existence of which had been unknown to him. It was manifestly useless to attempt to get it up in four-and-twenty hours, so he went in, relying on his practical acquaintance with the idiom. His ignorance was exposed, but his knowledge and his plausibility induced and enabled the examiner "to find a form of words," and his French was accepted as adequate. Another subject was Ethical and Metaphysical Philosophy, and Hamilton or Mackintosh (it is undesirable to be too precise) was the book prescribed. I give Stevenson's own account of what took place, as I have heard him tell the story. "The examiner asked me a question, and I had to say to him, 'I beg your pardon, but I do not understand your phraseology.' 'It's the text-book,' he said. 'Yes; but you could n't possibly expect me to read so poor a book as that.' He laughed like a hunchback, and then put the question in another form; I had been reading Mayne, and answered him by the historical method. They were probably the most curious answers ever given in the subject; I don't know what he thought of them, but they got me through."

In 1872 he proposed to take a summer session at some German university with Sir Walter Simpson, who was also studying Law. But his mother grew so nervous that he gave up the scheme, and in place of it the friends spent two or three weeks together during the first part of August, chiefly in lodgings in Frankfurt. His parents joined him at Baden-Baden, and he then went for a short walking tour in the Black Forest.

This was the single occasion on which he crossed the Channel during this period of his life, and indeed in these years he was hardly out of Scotland but for his trip to the Lakes, and a visit to R. A. M. Stevenson at Cambridge, where he had a glimpse of the life of the English undergraduate. The last twelve months are of interest as the only time when he turned his attention at all seriously to the study of the German language and literature. For the next year or two there is an occasional reference to Heine or Goethe in his letters, and even a few quotations, chiefly in his unpublished fragments. But with these insignificant exceptions German appears to have passed over him without effect, and French was the only modern language that ever exercised an influence upon his style.

But Stevenson as he was in the later years of this period may best be seen in the curiously diverse entries of a short diary kept on a folio sheet of paper upon his first entrance to the lawyers' office. I have printed nearly the whole of it for the sake of the contrasts; the high spirits and the sentiment, the humour, the humanity and the immaturity, make a remarkable conjunction. Already it would be difficult for any one to read it without either recognising the author, or else prognosticating for him a future which, at any rate, should be neither commonplace nor obscure.

"*Thursday, May 9th [1872].*¹—Went to office for first time. Had to pass an old sailor and an idiot boy, who tried both to join company with me, lest I should be late for office. A fine sunny, breezy morning,

¹ The year is settled beyond question by the corresponding entries in his mother's diary.

LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

walking in. A small boy (about ten) calling out 'Flory' to a dog was very pretty. There was a quaint little *tremolo* in his voice that gave it a *longing*, that was both laughable and touching. All the rest of the way in, his voice rang in my memory and made me very happy.

"*Friday, May 10th.*—Office work—copying, at least—is the easiest of labour. There is just enough mind-work necessary to keep you from thinking of anything else, so that one simply ceases to be a reasoning being and feels *stodged* and stupid about the head, a consummation devoutly to be wished for.

"*Sunday, May 21st [19th].*—My father and I walked over to Glencorse to church. A fat, ruddy farm wench showed us the way; for the church, although on the top of a hill, is so buried among the tree-tops that one does not see it till one trips against the plate.¹ It is a quaint old building, and the minister, Mr. Torrance (his father and grandfather were here before him), is still more quaint and striking. He is about eighty; and he lamed himself last summer dancing a reel at a wedding. He wears black thread gloves; and the whole manner of the man in the pulpit breathes of last century.

"*Monday, May 12th (20th).*—In all day at the office. In the evening dined with Bob. Met X——, who was quite drunk and spent nigh an hour in describing his wife's last hours—an infliction which he hired us to support with sherry *ad lib.* Splendid moonlight night. Bob walked out to Fairmilehead with me. We were in a state of mind that only comes too seldom in a lifetime.

¹ *I.e.* the plate for contributions, which is left at the door of Scotch churches.

We danced and sang the whole way up the long hill, without sensible fatigue. I think there was no actual conversation—at least none has remained in my memory: I recollect nothing but ‘profuse bursts of unpremeditated song.’ Such a night was worth gold untold. *Ave pia testa!* After we parted company at the toll, I walked on counting my money, and I noticed that the moon shone upon each individual shilling as I dropped it from one hand to the other; which made me think of that splendid passage in Keats, winding up with the joke about the ‘poor patient oyster.’¹

“*Wednesday, 22nd.*—At work all day at Court—work being periphrasis for sitting still, taking three luncheons, and running two errands. In the evening started in the rain alone, and seeing a fellow in front, I whistled him to wait till I came up. He proved to be a pit-worker from Mid-Calder, and—*faute de mieux*—I bribed him by the promise of ale to keep me company as far as New Pentland Inn. . . . I heard from him that the *Internationale* was already on foot at Mid-Calder, but was not making much progress. I acquitted myself as became a child of the *Proprietariat*, and warned him, quite apostolically, against all conversation with this Abomination of Desolation. He seemed much impressed, and more wearied.

“He told me some curious stories of body-snatching from the lonely little burying-ground at Old Pentland, and spoke with the exaggerated horror that I have always observed in common people of this very excusable misdemeanour. I was very tired of my friend be-

¹ The references are to Shelley's *Skylark*, l. 5; Horace, *Odes*, iii. 21, 4; Keats's *Endymion*, iii. 67.

fore we got back again, and so I think he was of me. But I paid for the beer; so he had the best of it.

"*Friday, July 5th.*—A very hot sunny day. The Princes Street Gardens were full of girls and idle men, steeping themselves in the sunshine. A boy lay on the grass under a clump of gigantic hemlocks in flower, that looked quite tropical and gave the whole garden a southern smack that was intensely charming in my eyes. He was more ragged than one could conceive possible. It occurred to me that I might here play *le dieu des pauvres gens*, and repeat for him that pleasure that I so often try to acquire artificially for myself by hiding money in odd corners and hopelessly trying to forget where I have laid it; so I slipped a halfpenny into his ragged waistcoat pocket. One might write whole essays about his delight at finding it."