

LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

CHAPTER I

HIS ANCESTORS

"The ascendant hand is what I feel most strongly ; I am bound in and in with my forbears. . . . We are all nobly born ; fortunate those who know it ; blessed those who remember."—R. L. S., *Letters*, ii. 230.

"The sights and thoughts of my youth pursue me ; and I see like a vision the youth of my father, and of his father, and the whole stream of lives flowing down there far in the north, with the sound of laughter and tears, to cast me out in the end, as by a sudden freshet, on these ultimate islands. And I admire and bow my head before the romance of destiny."—R. L. S., *Dedication of Catriona*.

"IT is the chief recommendation of long pedigrees," as Stevenson once wrote, "that we can follow back the careers of our component parts and be reminded of our ante-natal lives."¹ But the threads are many and tangled, and it is hard to distinguish for more than a generation or two the transmission of the characteristics that meet in any individual of our own day. The qualities that would be required by other ages and for other pursuits are often unperceived, and the same man might scarce be recognised could he renew his life in three several centuries, and be set to a different task in each.

¹ *Memories and Portraits*, p. 162.

Moreover, when any one has been dead for a hundred years, it is seldom that anything is remembered of him but his name and his occupation; he has become no more than a link in a pedigree, and the personal disposition is forgotten which made him loved or feared, together with the powers that gained him success or the weaknesses that brought about his failure. Therefore it is no unusual circumstance that, while we can trace the line of Stevenson's ancestors on either side for two and four hundred years respectively, our knowledge of them, in any real sense of the word, begins only at the end of the eighteenth century. After that date we have four portraits, drawn in part by his own hand, together with the materials for another sketch; and in these may be discerned some of the traits and faculties which went to make up a personality so unusual, so fascinating, and so deeply loved.

The record of his father's people opens in 1675 with the birth of a son, Robert, to James Stevenson, "presumably a tenant farmer" of Nether Carsewell in the parish of Neilston, some ten miles to the south-west of Glasgow. Robert's son, a maltster in Glasgow, had ten children, among whom were Hugh, born 1749, and Alan, born June, 1752.

"With these two brothers my story begins," their descendant wrote in *A Family of Engineers*.¹ "Their deaths were simultaneous; their lives unusually brief and full. Tradition whispered me in childhood they

¹ Except where it is otherwise stated, the quotations in this chapter and most of the facts about his father's people are drawn from the unfinished fragment of *A Family of Engineers*, printed in the volume of *Biography* in the Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson's works.

HIS ANCESTORS

were the owners of an islet near St. Kitts; and it is certain they had risen to be at the head of considerable interests in the West Indies, which Hugh managed abroad and Alan at home," almost before they had reached the years of manhood. In 1774 Alan was summoned to the West Indies by Hugh. "An agent had proved unfaithful on a serious scale; and it used to be told me in my childhood how the brothers pursued him from one island to another in an open boat, were exposed to the pernicious dews of the tropics, and simultaneously struck down. The dates and places of their deaths would seem to indicate a more scattered and prolonged pursuit." At all events, "in something like the course of post, both were called away, the one twenty-five, the other twenty-two."

Alan left behind him a wife and one child, aged two, the future engineer of the Bell Rock, who was also destined to be the grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson. The widow was daughter of David Lillie, a Glasgow builder, several times Deacon of the Wrights, but had lost her father only a month before her husband's death, and for the time, at any rate, mother and son were almost destitute. She was, however, "a young woman of strong sense, well fitted to contend with poverty, and of a pious disposition, which it is like that these misfortunes heated. Like so many other widowed Scotswomen, she vowed her son should wag his head in a pulpit; but her means were inadequate to her ambition." He made no great figure at the schools in Edinburgh to which she could afford to send him; but before he was fifteen there occurred an event "which changed his own destiny and moulded

that of his descendants—the second marriage of his mother.”

The new husband was “a merchant burghess of Edinburgh of the name of Thomas Smith,” a widower of thirty-three with children, who is described as “a man ardent, passionate, practical, designed for affairs, and prospering in them far beyond the average.” He was, among other things, a shipowner and underwriter; but chiefly he “founded a solid business in lamps and oils, and was the sole proprietor of a concern called the Greenside Company’s Works—‘a multifarious concern of tinsmiths, coppersmiths, brassfounders, blacksmiths, and japanners.’” Consequently, in August, 1786, less than a year before his second marriage, “having designed a system of oil lights to take the place of the primitive coal fires before in use, he was dubbed engineer to the newly-formed Board of Northern Lighthouses.”

The profession was a new one, just beginning to grow in the hands of its first practitioners; in it Robert Stevenson found his vocation and so entered with great zest into the pursuits of his stepfather. “The public usefulness of the service would appeal to his judgment, the perpetual need for fresh expedients stimulate his ingenuity. And there was another attraction which, in the younger man at least, appealed to, and perhaps first aroused a profound and enduring sentiment of romance; I mean the attraction of the life. The seas into which his labours carried the new engineer were still scarce charted, the coasts still dark; his way on shore was often far beyond the convenience of any road, the isles in which he must sojourn were still partly savage. He must toss much in boats; he must often adventure on

HIS ANCESTORS

horseback by the dubious bridle-track through unfrequented wildernesses; he must sometimes plant his lighthouse in the very camp of wreckers; and he was continually enforced to the vicissitudes of outdoor life. The joy of my grandfather in this career was strong as the love of woman. It lasted him through youth and manhood, it burned strong in age, and at the approach of death his last yearning was to renew these loved experiences. Snared by these interests, the boy seems to have become at once the eager confidant and adviser of his new connection; the Church, if he had ever entertained the prospect very warmly, faded from his view; and at the age of nineteen I find him already in a post of some authority, superintending the construction of the lighthouse on the isle of Little Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde. The change of aim seems to have caused or been accompanied by a change of character. It sounds absurd to couple the name of my grandfather with the word indolence; but the lad who had been destined from the cradle to the Church, and who had attained the age of fifteen without acquiring more than a moderate knowledge of Latin, was at least no unusual student. From the day of his charge at Little Cumbrae he steps before us what he remained until the end—a man of the most zealous industry, greedy of occupation, greedy of knowledge, a stern husband of time, a reader, a writer, unflagging in his task of self-improvement. Thenceforward his summers were spent directing works and ruling workmen, now in uninhabited, now in half-savage islands; his winters were set apart, first at the Andersonian Institution, then at the University of Edinburgh, to improve himself in mathematics, chemistry,

natural history, agriculture, moral philosophy, and logic."

His mother's marriage made a great change also in his domestic life: an only child hitherto, he had become a member of a large family, for his stepfather had already five children. However, "the perilous experiment of bringing together two families for once succeeded. Mr. Smith's two eldest daughters, Jean and Janet, fervent in piety, unwearied in kind deeds, were well qualified both to appreciate and to attract the step-mother," just as her son found immediate favour in the eyes of her husband. Either family, it seems, had been composed of two elements; and in the united household "not only were the women extremely pious, but the men were in reality a trifle worldly. Religious the latter both were; conscious, like all Scots, of the fragility and unreality of that scene in which we play our uncomprehended parts; like all Scots, realising daily and hourly the sense of another will than ours, and a perpetual direction in the affairs of life. But the current of their endeavours flowed in a more obvious channel. They had got on so far, to get on further was their next ambition—to gather wealth, to rise in society, to leave their descendants higher than themselves, to be (in some sense) among the founders of families. Scott was in the same town nourishing similar dreams. But in the eyes of the women these dreams would be foolish and idolatrous."

The connection thus established was destined yet further to affect the life of the young man, and this contrast in the household was still to be perpetuated. "By an extraordinary arrangement, in which it is hard

not to suspect the managing hand of a mother, Jean Smith became the wife of Robert Stevenson. The marriage of a man of twenty-seven and a girl of twenty, who have lived for twelve years as brother and sister, is difficult to conceive. It took place, however, and thus in 1799 the family was still further cemented by the union of a representative of the male or worldly element with that of the female and devout.

"This essential difference remained unabridged, yet never diminished the strength of their relation. My grandfather pursued his design of advancing in the world with some measure of success; rose to distinction in his calling, grew to be the familiar of members of Parliament, judges of the Court of Session, and 'landed gentlemen'; learned a ready address, had a flow of interesting conversation, and when he was referred to as 'a highly respectable *bourgeois*,' resented the description. My grandmother remained to the end devout and unambitious, occupied with her Bible, her children, and her house; easily shocked, and associating largely with a clique of godly parasites.

"The cook was a godly woman, the butcher a Christian man, and the table suffered. The scene has been often described to me of my grandfather sawing with darkened countenance at some indissoluble joint—"Preserve me, my dear, what kind of a reedy, stringy beast is this?"—of the joint removed, the pudding substituted and uncovered; and of my grandmother's anxious glance and hasty, deprecatory comment, 'Just mismanaged!' Yet with the invincible obstinacy of soft natures, she would adhere to the godly woman and the Christian man, or find others of the same kidney to replace them."

LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Readers of *Weir of Hermiston* will recognise in this picture the original of Mrs. Weir in all her piety, gentleness, and incompetence, yet in real life "husband and sons all entertained for this pious, tender soul the same chivalrous and moved affection. I have spoken with one who remembered her," her grandson continues, "and who had been the intimate and equal of her sons, and I found this witness had been struck, as I had been, with a sense of disproportion between the warmth of the adoration felt and the nature of the woman, whether as described or observed."

It is no part of my purpose to follow the professional life of Robert Stevenson, which was, moreover, written by his son David. In 1807 he was appointed sole engineer to the Board of Northern Lights, and in the same year began his great work at the Bell Rock, the first lighthouse ever erected far from land upon a reef deeply submerged at every tide.¹ He built twenty lighthouses in all, and introduced many inventions and improvements in the systems of lighting. He did not resign his post until his powers began to fail in 1843, and he died in 1850, four months before the birth of the most famous of his grandsons.

"He began to ail early in that year, and chafed for the period of the annual voyage, which was his medicine and delight. In vain his sons dissuaded him from the adventure. The day approached, the obstinate old gentleman was found in his room, furtively packing a portmanteau, and the truth had to be told him ere he would desist—that he was stricken with a malignant

¹ The Eddystone was scarcely covered at high tide, whereas the Bell Rock was twelve feet below water at such times.

HIS ANCESTORS

malady, and that before the yacht should have completed her circuit of the lights must himself have started on a more distant cruise. My father has more than once told me of the scene with emotion. The old man was intrepid; he had faced death before with a firm countenance; and I do not suppose he was much dashed at the nearness of our common destiny. But there was something else that would cut him to the quick—the loss of the cruise, the end of all his cruising; the knowledge that he had looked his last on Sumburgh, and the wild crags of Skye, and that Sound of Mull, with the praise of which his letters were so often occupied; that he was never again to hear the surf break in Clashcarnock; never again to see lighthouse after lighthouse (all younger than himself, and the more part of his own device) open in the hour of dusk their flowers of fire, or the topaz and the ruby interchange on the summit of the Bell Rock. To a life of so much activity and danger, a life's work of so much interest and essential beauty, here came a long farewell.¹

"My grandfather was much of a martinet, and had a habit of expressing himself on paper with an almost startling emphasis. Personally, with his powerful voice, sanguine countenance, and eccentric and original locutions, he was well qualified to inspire a salutary terror in the service. . . . In that service he was king to his finger-tips. All should go in his way, from the principal lightkeeper's coat to the assistant's fender, from the gravel in the garden-walks to the bad smell in the kitchen, or the oil-spots on the storeroom floor. It

¹ "Scott's Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht," by R. L. S., *Scribner's Magazine*, October, 1891, vol. xiv p. 493.

might be thought there was nothing more calculated to awake men's resentment, and yet his rule was not more thorough than it was beneficent. His thought for the keepers was continual, and it did not end with their lives. . . . While they lived, he wrote behind their backs to arrange for the education of their children, or to get them other situations if they seemed unsuitable for the Northern Lights. When he was at a light-house on a Sunday he held prayers and heard the children read. When a keeper was sick, he lent him his horse and sent him mutton and brandy from the ship. 'The assistant's wife having been this morning confined, there was sent ashore a bottle of sherry and a few rusks—a practice which I have always observed in this service.' . . . No servant of the Northern Lights came to Edinburgh but he was entertained at Baxter's Place to breakfast. There at his own table my grandfather sat down delightedly with his broad-spoken, homespun officers. His whole relation to the service was, in fact, patriarchal; and I believe I may say that throughout its ranks he was adored. I have spoken with many who knew him; I was his grandson, and their words may very well have been words of flattery; but there was one thing that could not be affected, and that was the look and light that came into their faces at the name of Robert Stevenson."

In such a character a love of the picturesque is a trait quite unexpected, and yet in him it existed as a very genuine and active feeling. In the destruction of old buildings and the interference with scenery, inevitable to the engineer, he was careful to secure the best effect and to produce the least possible disfigurement. One

road that in the course of his practice he had to design was laid out by him on Hogarth's line of beauty;¹ and of another of his works, the eastern approaches to Edinburgh, Cockburn wrote that "the effect was like drawing up the curtain of a theatre."

Sir Walter Scott accompanied the Commissioners and their officer on one of the annual voyages of the *Pharos* round the coasts of Scotland; his *Journal*, published by Lockhart, shows that he found Robert Stevenson an appreciative and intelligent companion. *The Pirate* and *The Lord of the Isles* were a direct result of this cruise; and it is a curious link in the history of our literature that Scott then visited Skerryvore, the future site of the lighthouse which, as one of the greatest achievements of the Stevenson family, gave its name long afterwards to the only home that their representative in letters ever found in this country.

While the great engineer was the man of action that his grandson longed to be, he also essayed authorship to some purpose. He wrote and published an *Account of the Bell Rock Lighthouse*, which "is of its sort a masterpiece, and has been so recognised by judges; 'the romance of stone and lime,' it has been called, and 'the Robinson Crusoe of engineering,' both happy and descriptive phrases. Even in his letters, though he cannot always be trusted for the construction of his sentences, the same literary virtues are apparent—a strong sense of romance and reality, and an almost infallible instinct for the right detail."²

Traits are obliterated and the characteristics of a

¹ Cf. "On Roads," *Juvenilia*, p. 119.

² *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. xiv p. 490.

family may change, but the old man's detestation of everything slovenly or dishonest, "his interest in the whole page of experience, and his perpetual quest and fine scent for all that seems romantic to a boy," were handed down, if ever taste was transmitted, to his grandson. Of the one as of the other it might well have been said that "Perfection was his design." But when we come to Thomas Stevenson, we shall find in him even more of the habits of mind and temper which distinguished his more celebrated son.

Stevenson's mother was the youngest daughter of the Rev. Lewis Balfour, D.D., minister of Colinton, a parish on the stream known as the Water of Leith, five miles to the south-west of Edinburgh. The earliest known member of his family was one Alexander Balfour, placed in charge of the King's Cellar by James IV. in 1499, and of the Queen's Cellar in 1507; he held the lands of Inchrye in Fife, and was in all probability one of the Balfours of Mountquhannie, a numerous family, high in the favour of King James. The descendants of Alexander¹ were chiefly ministers, advocates, or merchants. John Balfour of Kinloch, the Covenanter whom Scott in *Old Mortality* designates Balfour of Burley, may possibly have belonged to this family, but of this there is absolutely no evidence. In the direct line of descent, James Balfour, minister of St. Giles', Edinburgh, from 1589 to 1613, married a niece of Andrew Melville the Reformer, and was, as a brass in his church now records, "one of those who, summoned by

¹ His eldest son was David, a name otherwise unknown in the family; this fact was only re-discovered several years after the publication of *Kidnapped*. So does reality supplement fiction.

HIS ANCESTORS

James VI. to Hampton Court in 1606, refused to surrender their principles to his desires for the establishment of Episcopacy in Scotland." James, born 1680, whose father was one of the Governors of the Darien Company, bought the estate of Pilrig, lying between Edinburgh and Leith, with which the family has ever since been connected, and to which David Balfour is brought in *Clara*. The laird whom David met was James, born 1705, who, having studied at Leyden, became Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, and then exchanged this Chair for that of the Laws of Nature and Nations. His wife was a daughter of Sir John Elphinstone of Logie and granddaughter of Sir Gilbert Elliot, known as Lord Minto, a judge of the Court of Session. It was through this connection that Stevenson was able to say, "I have shaken a spear in the Debatable Land and shouted the slogan of the Elliots." The Professor's son, John Balfour, father of the minister of Colinton, married his cousin Jean Whyte; and so by this marriage Stevenson's mother was a second cousin of the novelist, Major George Whyte-Melville.

Lewis Balfour was born at Pilrig in 1777; about the age of twenty he showed symptoms of a weak chest, and was sent for a winter to the Isle of Wight with the most entire success. On returning, he took orders, went to his first Ayrshire parish, and there fell in love with and married a daughter of Dr. Smith of Galston, the Dr. Smith who in Burns's *Holy Fair* "opens out his cauld harangues on practice and on morals." In 1823 he came to the parish of Colinton, and there remained until his death thirty-seven years later. In 1844 he lost

his wife, a woman of great personal beauty and sweetness of character, and the management of the household fell into the hands of his eldest unmarried daughter. His is the manse of *Memories and Portraits*, the favourite home of his grandson's childhood. The essay in question describes him "as a man of singular simplicity of nature; unemotional, and hating the display of what he felt; standing contented on the old ways; a lover of his life and innocent habits to the end. We children admired him—partly for his beautiful face and silver hair, for none more than children are concerned for beauty, and, above all, for beauty in the old; partly for the solemn light in which we beheld him once a week, the observed of all observers, in the pulpit. But his strictness and distance, the effect, I now fancy, of old age, slow blood, and settled habit, oppressed us with a kind of terror. . . . He had no idea of spoiling children, leaving all that to my aunt; he had fared hard himself, and blubbered under the rod in the last century; and his ways were still Spartan for the young. . . . When not abroad, he sat much alone, writing sermons or letters to his scattered family in a dark and cold room with a library of bloodless books—and these lonely hours wrapped him in the greater gloom for our imaginations. But the study had a redeeming grace in many Indian pictures, gaudily coloured and dear to young eyes. I cannot depict (for I have no such passions now) the greed with which I beheld them; and when I was once sent in to say a psalm to my grandfather, I went, quaking indeed with fear, but at the same time glowing with hope that if I said it well, he might reward me with an Indian picture.

HIS ANCESTORS

'Thy foot He 'll not let slide, nor will
He slumber that thee keeps,'

it ran—a strange conglomerate of the unpronounceable, a sad model to set in childhood before one who was himself to be a versifier, and a task in recitation that really merited reward.

"And I must suppose the old man thought so too, and was either touched or amused by the performance; for he took me in his arms with most unwonted tenderness and kissed me, and gave me a little kindly sermon for my psalm; so that, for that day, we were clerk and parson." The picture was not given (how should it have been?) but on that, and more than one other occasion, the minister showed himself in a very kind and sympathetic mood to his little kinsman. "Try as I please," wrote the grandson in later days, "I cannot join myself on with the reverend doctor; and all the while, no doubt, and even as I write the phrase, he moves in my blood, and whispers words to me, and sits efficient in the very knot and centre of my being." Yet even if no individual traits or physical resemblances can be traced to the old minister, much of the general Scottish cast of character in Stevenson—the "strong Scots accent of the mind"—was confirmed by this strain; and it is evident that his intensity, his ethical preoccupations, and, as he himself says, his "love of preaching" were due, at all events in part, to the fact that he was a "grandson of the manse."

Such, at any rate, was the history of his maternal ancestors, the Balfours, a family who possessed in a high degree the domestic virtues of the Lowland Scot.

The laird of Pilrig in *Catriona*, who was drawn (as far as possible) from existing records, was no unfair representative of them all: when good or evil, honour or dishonour, were presented to them as alternatives, there would be no hesitation in their choice, but they were rarely surprised in so distressing a dilemma. Till after the date I have reached, few of the cadets ever sought their fortunes abroad, though the next generation was more enterprising, and four out of Mrs. Stevenson's five brothers spent much of their lives in India or New Zealand. But for the most part the family were stay-at-home folk, and adventures, which are to the adventurous, came not near their peaceful dwellings.

From Stevensons, Balfours, and the two families of Smiths, their descendant turned to see if he could find no trace of any origin more stimulating or more romantic. The name of Stevenson seemed to him Norse; or again, he clung to a very vague tradition that his father's family was "somehow descended from a French barber surgeon who came to St. Andrews in the service of one of the Cardinal Beaton's."

Even more fascinating was the theory based on nothing more than the fact that Stevenson was used permanently as a surname by some of the proscribed Macgregors. To have proved himself a disguised clansman of Rob Roy, and to have had James Mohr for the black sheep of the family, was a dream which it was worth a world of pains to verify; and the possibility that James Stevenson in Glasgow "may have had a Highland *alias* upon his conscience and a claymore in his back parlour" was too delightful to be let go without a struggle. But death interrupted these inquiries,

HIS ANCESTORS

and for these shadowy speculations there seems to be no ground in history. Mr. J. H. Stevenson of Edinburgh, a namesake, and a specialist in these matters, has investigated the question dispassionately and thoroughly, and his conclusion¹ is that all theories of a possible Norse, Highland, or French origin are vain; that this family can be traced only to the stock of Westland Whigs settled in the end of the seventeenth century in the parish of Neilston; and that it is impossible to say anything about the date or origin of their first settlement in the locality. The most striking fact about them as a whole is, after all, the contrast between "this undistinguished perpetuation of a family throughout the centuries, and the sudden bursting forth of character and capacity" that began with Robert Stevenson.

If it be difficult to follow his ancestors, it is manifestly impossible to find any safe ground for speculating on the race to which Stevenson belonged. None of his forbears for many centuries, so far as we can tell, were newcomers to Scotland; and it is probable that in him, as in almost any other native of the same region, several strains of the long-established races were combined. The word "Balfour," as Cluny reminds us in *Kidnapped*, is "good Gaelic," its meaning being "cold croft or farm." The place of that name is in Fife. The estate was held by the Bethunes for five hundred years, until recently it passed again into the hands of a Balfour "of that ilk." But the appellation of a family need signify no more than the former possession of some holding to which the Celts had already given a name, and the Balfours of Pilrig belonged apparently to an

¹ *Family of Engineers*, p. 201, note.

East Lowland type. Renfrew, on the other hand, was part of the Celtic kingdom of the Britons of Alclyde, and it was in that territory that the name of Stevenson has been chiefly found, and that this particular family was settled. Neither name nor locality, however, is any sure guide to an origin so remote; and we can be certain of no more than this, that Louis Stevenson and his father and grandfather exhibited many moods and tendencies of mind attributed to the Celtic race.