

CHAPTER III

INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD--1850-59

"I please myself often by saying that I had a Covenanting childhood."—R. L. S., ms. fragment

"I am one of the few people in the world who do not forget their own lives."—R. L. S., *Letters*, ii 107.

ROBERT LEWIS BALFOUR STEVENSON was born at No. 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh, on the 13th November, 1850, and a few days after his birth was baptized by his grandfather, the minister of Colinton, according to the Scots custom, in his father's house. He was called after his two grandfathers, and to their names that of his mother's family was added.¹

¹ It was as Robert Louis Stevenson that he was known to all the world, and the earlier variations of his name, remembered but by few, are of small importance. Nevertheless it may be as well to set them down here.

In his earliest letters, and down to 1865, the boy signed himself "R. Stevenson." After that he occasionally used "R. L. B. Stevenson," but in 1868 asked his mother in place of this to address him as "Robert Lewis." For the next five years he was generally but not invariably "R. L. Stevenson," until about 1871 the final change is marked by his usage and an undated letter to Mr Baxter belonging to this period (now the property of the Savile Club) "After several years of feeble and ineffectual endeavour with regard to my third initial (a thing I loathe), I have been led to put myself out of reach of such accident in the future by taking my first two names in full."

The Pentland Rising was published in 1866, without the author's name; the first magazine article, "On Roads," in the *Portfolio* for December, 1871, was signed "L. S. Stoneven," and *Treasure Island* and *The Black Arrow* appeared in *Young Folks* as "by Captain

His birthplace was the home which Thomas Stevenson had prepared for his bride two years before; a small, unpretentious, comfortable stone house, forming part of a row still standing, situated on low ground just to the north of the Water of Leith. Two and a half years later this was changed for No. 1 Inverleith Terrace, a more commodious dwelling on the other side of the same road; but that, having three outside walls, proved too cold for the delicate boy. Accordingly, in 1857, the little family of three—for Louis remained an only child—moved half a mile further south into what was then the centre of the New Town, and

George North." With these exceptions, all his work, but the very small part of it which was anonymous, was formally announced as by "Robert Louis Stevenson," or, in the case of the *Cornhill Magazine*, by "R. L. S."; initials, says Mr. Barrie, "the best beloved in recent literature."

The change of the name of Lewis from the Scots form to the French was made when he was about eighteen; the exact date is not easy to fix on account of his practice of using the initial only in his signature at that period. The alteration was due, it is said, to a strong distaste, shared by his father, for a fellow-citizen, who bore the name in the form in which Lewis had received it. But it was only the spelling that Stevenson changed and never the pronunciation. Lewis he remained at all times in the mouth of his family and of his intimate friends.

From his infancy his father called him "Smout" or "Smoutie" (*i.e.* smolt, young salmon, small fry), and this continued to be his pet name through childhood. When he was in his tenth year, his mother changes finally to "Lou" in her diary; but the early name was only abolished several years later by means of the fine of a penny, which the boy exacted for each offence from every one who employed it.

"Robert," says his mother, "was his school name, but it was never used at home," one reason perhaps being that his cousin, R. A. M. Stevenson, was already known in the family as "Bob."

occupied No. 17 Heriot Row, which continued to be their home in Edinburgh for thirty years. This was a substantial house of grey stone, built with the solidity so customary in Scotland and so unusual in the South, looking across the Queen Street Gardens, where the lilacs bloomed in spring and the pipe of the blackbird might be heard; while from its back windows could be seen the hills of "the kingdom of Fife."

For the first year of his life the infant seemed healthy and made satisfactory progress. He climbed a stair of eighteen steps at nine months, at eleven months walked freely, and in two months more called people by their names. But with his mother's brightness of disposition he had unfortunately inherited also from her a weakness of chest and a susceptibility to cold, which affected the whole course of his life. When he was a little over two he had a severe attack of croup, and from that time until he was eleven there was no year in which he was not many days in bed from illness—bronchitis, pneumonia, feverish cold, or chills affecting his digestion, as well as one severe gastric fever, and all the ordinary maladies of childhood in rapid succession. In the summer months he kept fairly well, and was then for most of his time away from Edinburgh at Portobello, Lasswade, Bridge of Allan, Burntisland, North Berwick, Aberdour, or some other of the Edinburgh summer resorts as yet frequented by few visitors. It was to the manse at Colinton, however, that he most frequently went until the death of his grandfather in 1860, and it was here, as we shall see, that the happiest days of his childhood were passed.

Of his earliest memories he speaks thus:—

“I remember with particular pleasure running up-stairs in Inverleith Terrace with my mother—herself little more than a girl—to the top flat of this our second house, both of us singing as best we could “We ’ll all go up to Gatty’s room, to Gatty’s room, etc.,” *ad lib.*; Gatty being contracted for Grandpapa, my mother’s father, who was coming to stay with us. I mention that because it stands out in stronger relief than any other recollection of the same age. I have a great belief in these vivid recollections: things that impress us so forcibly as to become stereotyped for life have not done so for nothing.

“I believe I was what is called a good child: I learned large passages of Scripture and hymns, and recited them, I understand, with very good action and emphasis. After I was in bed I used to be heard lying awake and repeating to myself—crooning over to myself in the dark—certain curious rambling effusions, which I called my ‘songstries.’ One of these, which was taken down by my father, who stood outside the door for the purpose, I have seen; it was in a sort of rhythmic prose, curiously approximating to ten-syllable blank verse, and was religious in its bearing; I think it is now lost.”¹

The following appears to be the songstry in question:² it is dated April 23rd, 1857:—

“Had not an angel got the pride of man,
No evil thought, no hardened heart would have been
seen.

¹ Unpublished ms., dated 18th May, 1873.

² There is a singular parallel at an even earlier age in the *Life of Charles Kingsley*.

No hell to go to, but a heaven so pure;
 That angel was the Devil.
 Had not that angel got the pride, there would have
 been no need
 For Jesus Christ to die upon the cross."

"That I was eminently religious, there can be no doubt. I had an extreme terror of Hell, implanted in me, I suppose, by my good nurse, which used to haunt me terribly on stormy nights, when the wind had broken loose and was going about the town like a bedlamite. I remember that the noises on such occasions always grouped themselves for me into the sound of a horseman, or rather a succession of horsemen, riding furiously past the bottom of the street and away up the hill into town; I think even now that I hear the terrible *howl* of his passage, and the clinking that I used to attribute to his bit and stirrups. On such nights I would lie awake and pray and cry, until I prayed and cried myself asleep; and if I can form any notion of what an earnest prayer should be, I imagine that mine were such.¹ . . .

"All this time, be it borne in mind, my health was of the most precarious description. Many winters I never crossed the threshold; but used to lie on my face on the nursery floor, chalking or painting in water-colours the pictures in the illustrated newspapers; or sit up in bed, with a little shawl pinned about my shoulders, to play with bricks or whatnot. I remember the pleasant maternal casuistry by which I was allowed to retain my playthings of a Sunday, when a pack was sewn

¹ Cf. "Nuits Blanches," *Juvenilia*, p. 35.

on to the back of one of the wooden figures, and I had then duly promised to play at nothing but 'Pilgrim's Progress.' . . . Although I was never done drawing and painting, and even kept on doing so until I was seventeen or eighteen, I never had any real pictorial vision, and instead of trying to represent what I saw, was merely imitating the general appearance of other people's representations. I never drew a picture of anything that was before me, but always from fancy, a sure sign of the absence of artistic eyesight; and I beautifully illustrated my lack of real feeling for art, by a very early speech, which I have had repeated to me by my mother: 'Mama,' said I, 'I have drawed a man. Shall I draw his soul now?'

"My ill-health principally chronicles itself by the terrible long nights that I lay awake, troubled continually with a hacking, exhausting cough, and praying for sleep or morning from the bottom of my shaken little body. I principally connect these nights, however, with our third house, in Heriot Row; and cannot mention them without a grateful testimony to the unwearied sympathy and long-suffering displayed to me on a hundred such occasions by my good nurse. It seems to me that I should have died if I had been left there alone to cough and weary in the darkness. How well I remember her lifting me out of bed, carrying me to the window, and showing me one or two lit windows up in Queen Street across the dark belt of gardens; where also, we told each other, there might be sick little boys and their nurses waiting, like us, for the morning.¹ Other night scenes connected with my ill-health were

¹ *C. Underwoods*, No. xxvi., "The Sick Child."

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the little sallies of delirium that used to waken me out of a feverish sleep, in such agony of terror as, thank God, I have never suffered since.¹ My father had generally to come up and sit by my bedside, and feign conversations with guards or coachmen or innkeepers, until I was gradually quieted and brought to myself; but it was long after one of those paroxysms before I could bear to be left alone."

When Louis was a little child, he accidentally locked himself into a room alone one day. He could not turn the key again as he was directed; darkness was coming on, and his terror became extreme. His father sent for a locksmith to open the door, and during the period of waiting talked to Louis through the keyhole, the child becoming so engrossed by the charm of his father's conversation that he forgot all his fears.

His nurse was, it will already be seen, even more than is usual with children, an important factor in his life. When he was eighteen months old, Alison Cunningham — "Cummie" to him for the rest of his days

¹ One of the causes of his panic "seems to indicate," as he says, "a considerable force of imagination. I dreamed I was to swallow the world, and the terror of the fancy arose from the complete conception I had of the hugeness and populousness of our sphere. Disproportion and a peculiar shade of brown, something like that of sealskin, haunted me particularly during these visitations." For a further description of these early dreams the reader may refer to *Additional Memories and Portraits*, p. 318. To the sense of disproportion may be ascribed the version for the *Child's Garden*, xxiv.:

"The world is so great and I am so small,
I do not like it at all, at all,"

which afterwards passed into the well-known brave and characteristic "Happy Thought."

—came to him and watched over his childhood with the most intense devotion. She refused, it is said, an offer of marriage, that she might not have to leave her charge, and she remained with the family long after the care of him had passed out of women's hands, never taking another place, as indeed she had no need to do. Her true reward has been a monument of gratitude for which a parallel is hard to find. At twenty (an age when young men are not generally very tender to such memories) Louis wrote the paper on Nurses printed in *Juvenilia*. Fifteen years later the dedication of the *Child's Garden* was "To Alison Cunningham, From Her Boy," and this was but the preface to one of the happiest sets of verses in one of the happiest of books. Alison Hastie, the lass at Limekilns, who put David Balfour and Alan Breck across the Forth, was, he told her, an ancestress of hers, just as David was a kinsman of his own. Of all his works he sent her copies; throughout his life he wrote letters to her; when he had a house, he had her to stay with him, and even proposed to bring her out on a visit to Samoa. In another fragment of autobiography he has again described her services: "My recollections of the long nights when I was kept awake by coughing are only relieved by the thought of the tenderness of my nurse and second mother (for my first will not be jealous), Alison Cunningham. She was more patient than I can suppose of an angel; hours together she would help and console me . . . till the whole sorrow of the night was at an end with the arrival of the first of that long string of country carts, that in the dark hours of the morning, with the neighing of horses, the cracking of

the whips, the shouts of drivers, and a hundred other wholesome noises, creaked, rolled, and pounded past my window."

Thus she tended his bodily life, watchfully and unweariedly: to his spiritual welfare, as she conceived it, she gave, if possible, even greater care. His father and mother were both genuinely religious people: the former clung, with a desperate intensity, to the rigid tenets of his faith; the latter was a true "child of the manse," and visited and befriended churches and missions wherever she went. But if Louis spent, as he tells us, "a Covenanting childhood," it was to Cummie that this was due. Besides the Bible and the Shorter Catechism, which he had also from his mother, Cummie filled him with a love of her own favourite authors, M'Cheyne and others, Presbyterians of the strictest doctrine. It was she, in all probability, who first introduced him to "The Cameronian Dream."¹ That poem, he afterwards told Mr. Gosse, made the most indelible impression on his fancy, and was the earliest piece of literature which awakened in him the sentiment of romantic Scottish history.

From her, too, he first heard some of the writings of the Covenanters, Wodrow, Peden, and others, who directly influenced his choice of subjects, and according to his own testimony (*Letters*, ii. 312) had a great share in the formation of his style. A special favourite also was an old copy of *A Cloud of Witnesses*, which had belonged to his nurse's grandmother.

¹ This poem of fourteen stanzas was written by James Hyslop (1798-1827), originally a herdbooy in the Cameronian country, and may be found in Chambers's *Cyclopædia of English Literature*, 3rd edition, vol. ii. p. 216.

In matters of conduct Cummie was for no half-measures. Cards were the Devil's books. Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson played whist, decorous family whist—the mother had the keenest zest for all games—and Louis could remember praying fervently with his nurse that it might not be visited on them to their perdition. The novel and the playhouse were alike anathema to her; and this would seem no very likely opening for the career of one who was to be a novelist and write plays as well. For her pupil entered fully into the spirit of her ordinances, and insisted on a most rigorous observance of her code.

"I was brought up on *Cassell's Family Paper*," he wrote, "but the lady who was kind enough to read the tales aloud to me was subject to sharp attacks of conscience. She took the *Family Paper* on confidence; the tales it contained being Family Tales, not novels. But every now and then, something would occur to alarm her finer sense; she would express a well-grounded fear that the current fiction was 'going to turn out a regular novel,' and the *Family Paper*, with my pious approval, would be dropped. Yet neither she nor I were wholly stoical; and when Saturday came round, we would study the windows of the stationer, and try to fish out of subsequent woodcuts and their legends the further adventures of our favourites."¹

In spite of her restrictions, Cummie was full of life and merriment. She danced and sang to her boy, and read to him most dramatically. She herself tells how, the last time she ever saw him, he said to her, "before a room full of people, 'It's *you* that gave me a passion for the drama, Cummie.' 'Me, Master Lou,'

¹ *Scribner's Magazine*, July, 1888.

I said; 'I never put foot inside a playhouse in my life.' 'Ay, woman,' said he; 'but it was the grand dramatic way ye had of reciting the hymns.'"

When he was just three, his mother's diary contains this entry:—

"Mr. Swan at dinner. Smout recited the first four lines of 'On Linden' in great style, waving his hand and making a splendid bow at the end. This is Cummie's teaching." And no doubt the trick of gesture, partly inherited from his father, which accompanied his conversation through life, received some of its emphasis from his nurse.

The diary just quoted records somewhat irregularly the development of the boy's powers and tastes and the working of his mind in childhood, but the nature and interest of the entries are fairly represented by the following extracts:—

"*26th July, 1853.*—Smout's favourite occupation is making a church; he makes a pulpit with a chair and a stool; reads sitting, and then stands up and sings by turns.

"*1st October, 1853.*—He is a great chatterbox, and speaks very distinctly; he knows many stories out of the Bible, and about half of the letters of the alphabet, but he is not so fond of hymns as he used to be.

"*6th November, 1853.*—I read the story of Samson once or twice out of the Bible to Smout, and was much surprised by his repeating it almost word for word.

"*8th December, 1854.*—Lou said, 'You can never be good unless you pray.' When asked how he knew, he said with great emphasis, 'Because I've tried it.'

"*22nd December, 1854.*—Lou prays every night of

his own accord that God would bless 'the poor soldiers that are fighting at Sebastopol.'

"*25th December, 1854.*—Smout gets a sword for his Christmas present. When his father was disparaging it, he said, 'I can tell you, papa, it's a silver sword and a gold sheath, and the boy's very well off and quite contented.'

"*9th January, 1855.*—When made to wear a shawl above his sword, he was in distress for fear it would not look like a soldier, and then said, 'Do you think it will look like a night-march, mama?'

"*6th February, 1855.*—Lou dreamed that he heard 'the noise of pens writing.'

"*17th February, 1855, Sunday.*—When I asked Lou what he had been doing, he said, 'I've been playing all day,' and then when I looked at him, he added, 'at least, I've been making myself cheerful.'

"*18th April, 1856.*—Smout can't understand the days getting longer, and says he 'would rather go to bed at the seven o'clock that used to be.'

"*17th July, 1856.*—I heard to-day that what had made Smout so ill on the 5th was that he and Billy had been eating buttercups, which are poisonous; both were ill, so we may be thankful that they were not worse. Billy confessed, and Smout acknowledged whenever he was asked." (Mrs. Stevenson, however, omits the true explanation— that the boys were shipwrecked sailors, and could get no other food to support life.)

It was in the end of 1856 that Louis was for the first time experiencing "the toils and vigils and distresses" of composition. His uncle, David Stevenson, offered to his children and nephews a prize for the best history

of Moses. Louis was allowed to try for it by dictating his version to his mother, and to this he devoted five successive Sunday evenings. A Bible picture-book was given to him as an extra prize, and, adds his mother, "from that time forward it was the desire of his heart to be an author."

For this he had already a qualification, which children either seldom possess, or of which at any rate they but seldom remember the possession. In a late reminiscence¹ he greatly applauds his nurse's ear and speaks of her reading to him "the works of others as a poet would scarce dare to read his own; gloating on the rhythm, dwelling with delight on the assonances and alliterations." So he tells us of the delight he already took in words for their own sake, and of the thrill which the mere sound of "Jehovah Tsidkenu" produced in him without reference to any possible meaning. To the same source I must refer for his account of the imagery called up in his mind from local surroundings by the metrical version of the Twenty-third Psalm; the "pastures green" being stubble-fields by the Water of Leith, and "death's dark vale" a certain archway in the Warriston Cemetery.

But in these suburbs only a part of his childhood was spent. Of other and happier playing-places he has left two records; the one a brief reference, with which the first description of his Edinburgh life, already quoted, terminates; the other, much more detailed, was written probably about 1872, and was manifestly the quarry from which was drawn most of the material for "The Manse" in *Memories and Portraits*.

¹ "Rosa quo Locorum," *Juvenilia*, pp. 303, 308.

From these two essays it may be seen that Stevenson, alike at two-and-twenty and at five-and-thirty, remembered his childhood as it is given to few grown men and women to remember, and both papers contain the raw material or perhaps rather the prose version of many passages in the *Child's Garden of Verses*.

“One consequence of my ill-health was my frequent residence at Colinton Manse. Out of my reminiscences of life in that dear place, all the morbid and painful elements have disappeared. I remember no more nights of storm; no more terror or sickness. Beyond a thunder-storm when I was frightened, after a half make-believe fashion, and huddled with my cousins underneath the dining-room table; and a great flood of the river, to see which my father carried me wrapped in a blanket through the rain; I can recall nothing but sunshiny weather. That was my golden age: *et ego in Arcadia vixi*. There is something so fresh and wholesome about all that went on at Colinton, compared with what I recollect of the town, that I can hardly, even in my own mind, knit the two chains of reminiscences together; they look like stories of two different people, ages apart in time and quite dissimilar in character.”¹

In the “Reminiscences of Colinton Manse,”² “I take pleasure,” he says, “in writing down these recollections, not because I fear to forget them, but because I wish to renew and to taste more fully the satisfaction that they have afforded me already.

“The Water of Leith, after passing under Colinton

¹ Dated Swanston, Sunday, 18th May, 1873.

² Unpublished ms., written probably about 1872-73.

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Bridge, makes a curve, following the line of the high, steep, wooded bank on the convex, but on the concave enclosing a round flat promontory, which was once, I suppose, a marsh, and then a riverside meadow. . . . Immediately after crossing the bridge the roadway forks into two; one branch whereof tends upward to the entrance of the churchyard; while the other, green with grass, slopes downward, between two blank walls and past the cottage of the snuff-mill, to the gate of the manse.

“There were two ways of entering the manse garden: one the two-winged gate that admitted the old phaeton, and the other a door for pedestrians on the side next the kirk. . . . On the left hand were the stable, coach-house, and washing-houses, clustered round a small paven court. For the interior of these buildings, as abutting on the place of sepulture, I had always considerable terror; but the court has one pleasant memento of its own. When the grass was cut and stacked against the wall in the small paven court at the back of the house, do you not remember, my friends, making round holes in the cool, green herb and calling ourselves birds? It did not take a great height, in those days, to lift our feet off the ground; so when we shut our eyes, we were free to imagine ourselves in the fork of an elm bough, or half-way down a cliff among a colony of gulls and gannets. . . .

“Once past the stable you were now fairly within the garden. On summer afternoons the sloping lawn was literally *steeped* in sunshine; and all the day long, from the impending wood, there came the sweetest and fullest chorus of merles and thrushes and all manner of

birds, that it ever was my lot to hear. The lawn was just the centre of all this — a perfect goblet for sunshine, and the Dionysius' ear for a whole forest of bird-songs. This lawn was a favourite playground; a lilac that hung its scented blossom out of the glossy semicirque of laurels was identified by my playmates and myself as that tree whose very shadow was death. In the great laurel at the corner I have often lain *perdu*, with a toy-gun in my hand, waiting for a herd of antelopes to defile past me down the carriage drive, and waiting (need I add?) in vain.¹ Down at the corner of the lawn next the snuff-mill wall there was a practicable passage through the evergreens and a door in the wall, which let you out on a small patch of sand, left in the corner by the river. Just across, the woods rose like a wall into the sky; and their lowest branches trailed in the black waters. Naturally, it was very sunless. . . . There was nothing around and above you but the shadowy foliage of trees. It seemed a marvel how they clung to the steep slope on the other side; and, indeed, they were forced to grow far apart, and showed the ground between them hid by an undergrowth of butter-bur, hemlock, and nettle. . . . I wish I could give you an idea of this place, of the gloom, of the black slow water, of the strange wet smell, of the dragged

¹ Another version runs: "Once as I lay, playing hunter, hid in a thick laurel, and with a toy-gun upon my arm, I worked myself so hotly into the spirit of my play, that I think I can still see the herd of antelope come sweeping down the lawn and round the deodar; it was almost a vision."

In 1857, at Bridge of Allan, he was one day asked, "What are you doing?" "Ah 'm just hunting blaauwboks!"

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vegetation on the far side whither the current took everything, and of the incomparably fine, rich yellow sand, without a grit in the whole of it, and moving below your feet with scarcely more resistance than a liquid. . . . I remember climbing down one day to a place where we discovered an island of this treacherous material. O the great discovery ! On we leapt in a moment; but on feeling the wet, slucy island flatten out into a level with the river, and the brown water gathering about our feet, we were off it again as quickly. It was a 'quicksand,' we said; and thenceforward the island was held in much the same regard as the lilac-tree on the lawn.

"The wall of the church faces to the manse, but the churchyard is on a level with the top of the wall, that is to say, some eight or ten feet above the garden, and the tombstones are visible from the enclosure of the manse. The church, with its campanile, was near the edge, so that on Sundays we could see the cluster of people about the door. Under the retaining wall was a somewhat dark pathway, extending from the stable to the far end of the garden, and called 'The Witches' Walk,' from a game we used to play in it. At the stable end it took its rise under a yew, which is one of the glories of the village. Under the circuit of its wide, black branches, it was always dark and cool, and there was a green scurf over all the trunk among which glistened the round bright drops of resin. . . . This was a sufficiently gloomy commencement for the Witches' Walk; but its chief horror was the retaining wall of the kirkyard itself, about which we were always hovering at even with the strange attraction of fear. This it was that supplied

our Arcady with its gods; and in place of classic forms and the split hooves of satyrs, we were full of homely Scottish superstitions of grues and ghosts and goblins. . . . Often after nightfall have I looked long and eagerly from the manse windows to see the 'spunkies' playing among the graves, and have been much chagrined at my failure; and this very name of spunkie recalls to me the most important of our discoveries in the supernatural walk. Henrietta, Willie,¹ and I, just about dusk, discovered a burning eye looking out from a hole in the retaining wall, in the corner where it joins the back of the stable. In hushed tones we debated the question; whether it was some bird of ill omen roosting in the cranny of the wall, or whether the hole pierced right through into a grave, and it was some dead man who was sitting up in his coffin and watching us with that strange fixed eye. If you remember the level of the churchyard, you will see that this explanation suited pretty well; so we drew a wheelbarrow into the corner; one after another got up and looked in; and when the last was satisfied, we turned round, took to our heels, and never stopped till we were in the shelter of the house. We ourselves, in our after-discussions, thought it might have been the bird, though we preferred the more tremendous explanation. But for my own part, I simply believe that we saw nothing at all. The fact is, we would have given anything to have seen a ghost, or to persuade ourselves that we had seen a ghost. . . . I remember going down into the cellars of our own house in town, in company with

¹ Cf. *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Envoy I. His two favourite cousins, the children of his mother's sister, Mrs. Ramsay Traquair.

another, . . . and persuading myself that I saw a face looking at me from round a corner; and I may even confess, since the laws against sorcery have been for some time in abeyance, that I essayed at divers times to bring up the Devil, founding my incantations on no more abstruse a guide than Skelt's *Juvenile Drama of Der Freischütz*. I am about at the end of horrors now; even out of the Witches' Walk, you saw the manse facing towards you, with its back to the river and the wooded bank, and the bright flower-plots and stretches of comfortable vegetables in front and on each side of it; flower-plots and vegetable borders, by the way, on which it was almost death to set foot, and about which we held a curious belief—namely, that my grandfather went round and measured any footprints that he saw to compare the measurement at night with the boots put out for brushing; to avoid which we were accustomed, by a strategic movement of the foot, to make the mark longer. . . .

“So much for the garden; now follow me into the house. On entering by the front door you had before you a stone-paved lobby, with doors on either hand, that extended the whole length of the house. There stood a case of foreign birds, two or three marble deities from India, and a lily of the Nile in a pot; and at the far end the stairs shut in the view. . . . With how many games of ‘tig’ or brick-building in the forenoon is the long low dining-room connected in my mind!

. . . “But that room is principally dear to me from memories of the time when I, a sickly child, stayed there alone. First, in the forenoon about eleven, how my

aunt used to open the storeroom at the one end and give me out three Albert biscuits and some calf-foot jelly in a black pot with a sort of raised white pattern over it. That storeroom was a most voluptuous place with its piles of biscuit boxes and spice tins, the rack for buttered eggs, the little window that let in sunshine and the flickering shadow of leaves, and the strong sweet odour of everything that pleaseth the taste of man. . . . But after my biscuits were eaten and my pot emptied (I am supposing one of those many days when I was not allowed to cross the threshold), what did there remain to do? . . . I would often get some one for amanuensis, and write pleasant narratives, which have fallen some degree into unjust oblivion. One, I remember, had for scene the Witches' Walk, and for heroine a kitten. It was intended to be something very thrilling and spectral; but I can now only recall the intense satisfaction (I illustrated these works myself) with which I contemplated three coats of gamboge upon the cat's supper of pease-brose. Another story was entitled *The Adventures of Basil*, and consisted mainly of bungling adaptations from Mayne Reid, to whom I was indebted even for my hero's name; but I

1 "I have mentioned my aunt. In her youth she was a wit and a beauty, very imperious, managing, and self-sufficient. But as she grew up, she began to suffice for all the family as well. An accident on horseback made her nearly deaf and blind, and suddenly transformed this wilful empress into the most serviceable and amiable of women. There were thirteen of the Balfours as (oddly enough) there were of the Stevensons also, and the children of the family came home to her to be nursed, to be educated, to be mothered, from the infanticidal climate of India. There must sometimes have been half a score of us children about the manse; and all were born a second time from

introduced the further attraction of a storm at sea, where the captain cried out, 'All hands to the pumps.' . . .

"Another time my aunt had brought me a large box of tin soldiers from town. I had only to drop the smallest hint of what I wanted and I had it the next time the phaeton went in. . . . So after dinner on the first day of my new acquisition, I was told to exhibit my soldiers to grandpapa. The idea of this great and alarming dignitary stooping to examine my toys was a new one; and I ranged my wooden militia with excessive care upon the broad mahogany, while my grandfather took his usual nuts and port wine. Not only was he pleased to approve of the way in which I had 'marshalled my array'; but he also gave a new light to me on the subject of playing with soldiers—a technical term, you observe. He told me to make the battle of Coburg. Now Waterloo I knew; and Crimean battlefields I knew (for they were within my own memory); but this Coburg was a new and grand idea, a novel vista of entertainment, an addition to my vocabulary of warlike sports; and so I have never forgotten it.

Aunt Jane's tenderness. It was strange when a new party of these sallow young folk came home, perhaps with an Indian ayah. This little country manse was the centre of the world; and Aunt Jane represented Charity. The text, my mother says, must have been written for her and Aunt Jane: 'More are the children of the barren than the children of the married wife.'—From an autobiographical fragment, written in San Francisco early in 1880. (For other portions *vide* pages 99, 102. For the use of this I am indebted to Mrs. Strong, to whom the early part of this manuscript was presented at Vailima by her stepfather.) Cf. *Child's Garden*, Envoy III.

“But now I come to the crown of my dining-room reminiscences, for after dinner, when the lamp was brought in and shaded, and my aunt sat down to read in the rocking-chair, there was a great open space behind the sofa left entirely in the shadow. This was my especial domain: once round the corner of the sofa, I had left the lightsome, merry indoors, and was out in the cool, dark night. I could almost see the stars. I looked out of the back window at the bushes outside. I lay in the darkest corners, rifle in hand, like a hunter in a lonely bivouac. I crawled about stealthily, watching the people in the circle of lamplight, with some vague remembrance of a novel that my aunt had read to me, where some fellow went out from ‘the heated ballroom’ and moralised in the ‘Park.’¹ Down in the corner beside the bricks, whether on the floor or on a book-shelf I do not remember, were four volumes of Joanna Baillie’s plays. Now as Cummie always expatiated on the wickedness of anything theatrical, I supposed these books to be forbidden, and took every sly opportunity of reading them. But I don’t think I ever read one through: my chief satisfaction was puzzling out, in the obscurity, the scenes—‘a convent in a forest: the chapel lit: organ playing a solemn chant’—‘a passage in a Saxon castle’—and the like; and then transforming my dark place behind the sofa into one and all of these. . . .

“Opposite the study was the parlour, a small room crammed full of furniture and covered with portraits, with a cabinet at the one side full of foreign curiosities, and a sort of anatomical trophy on the top. During a

¹ Cf. “A Gossip on Romance,” *Memories and Portraits*, p. 249.

grand cleaning of this apartment I remember all the furniture was ranged on the circular grass-plot between the churchyard and the house. It was a lovely still summer evening, and I stayed out, climbing among the chairs and sofas. Falling on a large bone or skull, I asked what it was. Part of an albatross, auntie told me. 'What is an albatross?' I asked. And then she described to me this great bird nearly as big as a house, that you saw out miles away from any land, sleeping above the waste and desolate ocean. She told me that the *Ancient Mariner* was all about one; and quoted with great *verve* (she had a duster in her hand, I recollect) —

' With my crossbow
I shot the albatross.'

"Wonderful visions did all this raise in my imagination, so wonderful, that when, many years later, I came to read the poem, my only feeling was one of utter disappointment. Willie had a crossbow; but up till this date, I had never envied him its possession. After this, however, it became one of the objects of my life."

His mother and his nurse read to him, as we have seen, indefatigably, and so it was not until he was eight years old that he took any pleasure in reading to himself. The consciousness of this delight came upon him suddenly; its coming was connected in his memory with a book called *Paul Blake*, "a visit to the country, and an experience unforgettable. The day had been warm; Henrietta and I had played together charmingly all day in a sandy wilderness across the road; then came the evening with a great flash of colour and a heavenly sweetness in the air. Somehow my playmate

had vanished, or is out of the story, as the sagas say, but I was sent into the village on an errand; and taking a book of fairy-tales, went down alone through a fir-wood, reading as I walked. How often since then has it befallen me to be happy even so; but that was the first time: the shock of that pleasure I have never since forgot, and if my mind serves me to the last, I never shall; for it was then that I knew that I loved reading."¹

This day must have been followed closely by the evening recorded in another essay.² "Out of all the years of my life I can recall but one home-coming to compare with these (when he returned with some new play for his toy-theatre), and that was on the night when I brought back with me the *Arabian Entertainments* in the fat, old, double-columned volume with the prints. I was just well into the story of the Hunchback, I remember, when my clergyman grandfather (a man we counted pretty stiff) came in behind me. I grew blind with terror. But instead of ordering the book away, he said he envied me. Ah, well he might."

Although an only child and rendered more solitary by illness, Louis was not without companions, drawn (as often happens in early years) chiefly from the crowded ranks of his cousins, of whom he was nearly sure to find some at Colinton.³ By them he seems to have been treated, as Mr. Colvin so happily says, "as

¹ "Rosa quo Locorum," *Juvenilia*, p. 307.

² "A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured," *Memories and Portraits*, p. 288.

³ He had more than fifty first cousins in all, forty being on his mother's side. Many of them were much younger than himself, but nearly all were born or bred in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh.

something of a small sickly prince"; over them he cast the spell of his imagination in devising games, and they submitted to the force of his character in accepting the rôles which he saw fit to allot. "We children had naturally many plays together," he says of Colinton; "I usually insisted on the lead, and was invariably exhausted to death by the evening. I can still remember what a fury of play would descend upon me." Whether solitary or in company, he could never be still, but always must follow out his fancies in action. Were a horse to be mounted, a ship to be handled, a dragon to be slain each and all of these operations must be conducted with all the fire and fury which the very idea aroused in his imagination.¹

The country and the summer months gave him more companions, but the whole winter of 1856-57 was spent in Heriot Row by the most brilliant of them all, the one who had most in common with Louis, and of all his kin was his closest friend in after-life, Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson, the only son of his uncle Alan. He was the cousin of "Child's Play,"² who ate his porridge "with sugar, and explained it to be a country continually buried under snow," while Louis took his "with milk, and explained it to be a country suffering gradual inundation."

"We lived together in a purely visionary state," wrote Louis, "and were never tired of dressing up." One of their chief delights was in the rival kingdoms of their own invention—Nosingtonia and Encyclopædia, of which they were perpetually drawing maps. Nosing-

¹ "Child's Play," *Virgibus Puerisque* p. 102.

² P. 107. See this volume, p. 104 n.

tonia was "shaped a little like Ireland"; Encyclopædia, Louis' island, "lay diagonally across the paper like a large tip-cat." I have before me a state-paper of the period; the Latin must be the elder boy's, as Louis had not yet been to school: "Received by me from Rex Encyclopædiæ: patent thickness 1 Air Gun of Grundrurgia cloth and 1000 yards therefore in exchange for the Pine Islands.—R. Stevenson, Rex Nozzinton."

It was during this winter and in this company that Louis, at the age of six, first entered the realms of gold described in "A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured" (*Memories and Portraits*), the region of the toy-theatre and the "scenery of Skeltdom." The romance of purchasing the plays for himself came a little later, for during these months he could hardly leave the house; but now began the delight in the book and the *dramatis personæ*. Years afterwards he described himself as "no melodramatist, but a Skelt-drunken boy; the man who went out to find the Eldorado of romantic comedy." Now also began the joys of illumination. Now he painted the characters "with crimson-lake (hark to the sound of it—crimson-lake!—the horns of elf-land are not richer on the ear)—with crimson-lake and Prussian blue a certain purple is to be compounded, which, for cloaks especially, Titian could not equal."

The last of his reminiscences of childish days that I have to give was written in Samoa, and describes with all the resources of his perfected art a state of mind more subtle and tragic than any that we are accustomed to associate with the confines of infancy. From any one who less accurately remembered the sensa-

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tions of his earliest years, it might seem fanciful and unreal; to those who know the truthfulness with which its author has depicted the successive stages through which he passed, it will be as convincing as it is delightful. On this page also we first meet his sentiment for the venerable city which to the end he thought of as his home.

“I was born within the walls of that dear city of Zeus,¹ of which the lightest and (when he chooses) the tenderest singer of my generation sings so well. I was born likewise within the bounds of an earthly city, illustrious for her beauty, her tragic and picturesque associations, and for the credit of some of her brave sons. Writing as I do in a strange quarter of the world, and a late day of my age, I can still behold the profile of her towers and chimneys, and the long trail of her smoke against the sunset; I can still hear those strains of martial music that she goes to bed with, ending each day, like an act of an opera, to the notes of bugles; still recall, with a grateful effort of memory, any one of a thousand beautiful and specious circumstances that pleased me, and that must have pleased any one, in my half-remembered past. It is the beautiful that I thus actively recall: the august airs of the castle on its rock, nocturnal passages of lights and trees, the sudden song of the blackbird in a suburban lane, rosy and dusky winter sunsets, the uninhabited splendours of the early

¹The reference is to “Seekers for a City” in the volume of poems by Mr. Andrew Lang, entitled *Grass of Parnassus* (London: Longmans & Co., 1888). The quotation prefixed to the poem is from the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, iv. 19. “The poet says, *dear city of Cecrops*, and wilt not thou say, *dear city of Zeus?*”

dawn, the building up of the city on a misty day, house above house, spire above spire, until it was received into a sky of softly glowing clouds, and seemed to pass on and upwards, by fresh grades and rises, city beyond city, a New Jerusalem, bodily scaling heaven.

“Memory supplies me, unsolicited, with a mass of other material, where there is nothing to call beauty, nothing to attract — often a great deal to disgust. There are trite street corners, commonplace, well-to-do houses, shabby suburban tan-fields, rainy beggarly slums, taken in at a gulp nigh forty years ago, and surviving to-day, complete sensations, concrete, poignant and essential to the genius of the place. From the melancholy of these remembrances I might suppose them to belong to the wild and bitterly unhappy days of my youth. But it is not so; they date, most of them, from early childhood; they were observed as I walked with my nurse, gaping on the universe, and striving vainly to piece together in words my inarticulate but profound impressions. I seem to have been born with a sentiment of something moving in things of an infinite attraction and horror coupled.”