

Robert Louis Stevenson

**The Works of  
Robert Louis Stevenson –  
Swanston Edition. Volume...**



Роберт Льюис Стивенсон

**The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson  
– Swanston Edition. Volume 23**

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# Robert Louis Stevenson

## The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson – Swanston Edition, Vol. 23

### INTRODUCTION

The circumstances which have made me responsible for selecting and editing the correspondence of Robert Louis Stevenson are the following. He was for many years my closest friend. We first met in 1873, when he was in his twenty-third year and I in my twenty-ninth, at the place and in the manner mentioned at page 54 of this volume. It was my good fortune then to be of use to him, partly by such technical hints as even the most brilliant beginner may take from an older hand, partly by recommending him to editors – first, if I remember right, to Mr. Hamerton and Mr. Richmond Seeley, of the *Portfolio*, then in succession to Mr. George Grove (*Macmillan's Magazine*), Mr. Leslie Stephen (Cornhill), and Dr. Appleton (the Academy); and somewhat, lastly, by helping to raise him in the estimation of parents who loved but for the moment failed to understand him. It belonged to the richness of his nature to repay in all things much for little, ἐκατόμβοι ἐννεαβοιῶν, and from these early relations sprang the affection and confidence, to me inestimable, of which the following correspondence bears evidence.

One day in the autumn of 1888, in the island of Tahiti, during an illness which he supposed might be his last, Stevenson put into the hands of his stepson, Mr. Lloyd Osbourne, a sealed paper with a request that it might be opened after his death. He recovered, and had strength enough to enjoy six years more of active life and work in the Pacific Islands. When the end came, the paper was opened and found to contain, among other things, the expression of his wish that I should prepare for publication “a selection of his letters and a sketch of his life.” I had already, in 1892, when he was anxious – needlessly, as it turned out – as to the provision he might be able to leave for his family, received from him a suggestion that “some kind of a book” might be made out of the monthly journal-letters which he had been in the habit of writing me from Samoa: letters begun at first with no thought of publication and simply in order to maintain our intimacy, so far as might be, undiminished by separation. This part of his wishes I was able to carry out promptly, and the result appeared under the title *Vailima Letters* in the autumn following his death (1895). Lack of leisure delayed the execution of the remaining part. For one thing, the body of correspondence which came in from various quarters turned out much larger than had been anticipated. He did not love writing letters, and will be found somewhere in the following pages referring to himself as one “essentially and originally incapable of the art epistolary.” That he was a bad correspondent had come to be an accepted view among his friends; but in truth it was only during one period of his life that he at all deserved such a reproach.<sup>1</sup> At other times, as became apparent after his death, he had shown a degree of industry and spirit in letter-writing extraordinary considering his health and his occupations. It was indeed he and not his friends, as will abundantly appear in the course of these volumes, who oftenest had cause to complain of answers neglected or delayed. His letters, it is true, were often the most informal in the world, and he generally neglected to date them, a habit which is the despair of editors: but after his own whim and fashion he wrote a vast number, so that the work of sifting, copying, and arranging was long and laborious. It was not until the autumn of 1899 that the *Letters to his Family and Friends* were ready for publication, and in the meantime the task of writing the *Life* had been taken over by his cousin and my friend, Mr. Graham Balfour, who completed it two years later.

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<sup>1</sup> From 1876 to 1879 – see p. 185.

“In considering the scale and plan on which my friend’s instruction should be carried out” (I quote, with the change of a word or two, from my Introduction of 1899), “it seemed necessary to take into account, not his own always modest opinion of himself, but the place which he seemed likely to take ultimately in the world’s regard. The four or five years following the death of a writer much applauded in his lifetime are generally the years when the decline of his reputation begins, if it is going to suffer decline at all. At present, certainly, Stevenson’s name seems in no danger of going down. On the stream of daily literary reference and allusion it floats more actively than ever. In another sense its vitality is confirmed by the material test of continued sales and of the market. Since we have lost him other writers, whose beginnings he watched with sympathetic interest, have come to fill a greater immediate place in public attention; but none has exercised Stevenson’s peculiar and personal power to charm, to attach, and to inspirit. By his study of perfection in form and style – qualities for which his countrymen in general have been apt to care little – he might seem destined to give pleasure chiefly to the fastidious and the artistically minded. But as to its matter, the main appeal of his work is not to any mental tastes and fashions of the few; it is rather to universal, hereditary instincts, to the primitive sources of imaginative excitement and entertainment in the race.

“The voice of the *advocatus diaboli* has been heard against him, as it is right and proper that it should be heard against any man before his reputation can be held fully established. One such advocate in this country has thought to dispose of him by the charge of ‘externality.’ But the reader who remembers things like the sea-frenzy of Gordon Darnaway, or the dialogue of Markheim with his other self in the house of murder, or the re-baptism of the spirit of Seraphina in the forest dews, or the failure of Herrick to find in the waters of the island lagoon a last release from dishonour, or the death of Goguelat, or the appeal of Kirstie Elliot in the midnight chamber – such a reader can only smile at a criticism like this and put it by. These and a score of other passages breathe the essential poetry and significance of things as they reveal themselves to true masters only: they are instinct at once with the morality and the romance which lie deep together at the soul of nature and experience. Not in vain had Stevenson read the lesson of the Lantern-Bearers, and hearkened to the music of the pipes of Pan. He was feeling his way all his life towards a fuller mastery of his means, preferring always to leave unexpressed what he felt that he could not express adequately; and in much of his work was content merely to amuse himself and others. But even when he is playing most fancifully with his art and his readers, as in the shudders, tempered with laughter, of the *Suicide Club*, or the airy sentimental comedy of *Providence and the Guitar*, or the schoolboy historical inventions of Dickon Crookback and the old sailor Arblaster, a writer of his quality cannot help striking notes from the heart of life and the inwardness of things deeper than will ever be struck, or even apprehended, by another who labours, with never a smile either of his own or of his reader’s, upon the most solemn enterprises of realistic fiction, but is born without the magician’s touch and insight.

“Another advocate on the same side, in the United States, has made much of the supposed dependence of this author on his models, and classed him among writers whose inspiration is imitative and second-hand. But this is to be quite misled by the well-known passage of Stevenson’s own, in which he speaks of himself as having in his prentice years played the ‘sedulous ape’ to many writers of different styles and periods. In doing this he was not seeking inspiration, but simply practising the use of the tools which were to help him to express his own inspirations. Truly he was always much of a reader: but it was life, not books, that always in the first degree allured and taught him.

‘He loved of life the myriad sides,  
Pain, prayer, or pleasure, act or sleep,  
As wallowing narwhals love the deep’ —

so with just self-knowledge he wrote of himself; and the books which he most cared for and lived with were those of which the writers seemed – to quote again a phrase of his own – to have been

‘eavesdropping at the door of his heart’: those which told of experiences or cravings after experience, pains, pleasures, or conflicts of the spirit, which in the eagerness of youthful living and thinking had already been his own. No man, in fact, was ever less inclined to take anything at second-hand. The root of all originality was in him, in the shape of an extreme natural vividness of perception, imagination, and feeling. An instinctive and inbred unwillingness to accept the accepted and conform to the conventional was of the essence of his character, whether in life or art, and was a source to him both of strength and weakness. He would not follow a general rule – least of all if it was a prudential rule – of conduct unless he was clear that it was right according to his private conscience; nor would he join, in youth, in the ordinary social amusements of his class when he had once found out that they did not amuse *him*; nor wear their clothes if he could not feel at ease and be himself in them; nor use, whether in speech or writing, any trite or inanimate form of words that did not faithfully and livingly express his thought. A readier acceptance alike of current usages and current phrases might have been better for him, but was simply not in his nature. No reader of this book will close it, I am sure, without feeling that he has been throughout in the company of a spirit various indeed and many-mooded, but profoundly sincere and real. Ways that in another might easily have been mere signs of affectation were in him the true expression of a nature ten times more spontaneously itself and individually alive than that of others. Self-consciousness, in many characters that possess it, deflects and falsifies conduct; and so does the dramatic instinct. Stevenson was self-conscious in a high degree, but only as a part of his general activity of mind; only in so far as he could not help being an extremely intelligent spectator of his own doings and feelings: these themselves came from springs of character and impulse much too deep and strong to be diverted. He loved also, with a child’s or actor’s gusto, to play a part and make a drama out of life: but the part was always for the moment his very own: he had it not in him to pose for anything but what he truly was.

“When a man so constituted had once mastered his craft of letters, he might take up whatever instrument he pleased with the instinctive and just confidence that he would play upon it to a tune and with a manner of his own. This is indeed the true mark and test of his originality. He has no need to be, or to seem, especially original in the form and mode of literature which he attempts. By his choice of these he may at any time give himself and his reader the pleasure of recalling, like a familiar air, some strain of literary association; but in so doing he only adds a secondary charm to his work; the vision, the temperament, the mode of conceiving and handling, are in every case personal to himself. He may try his hand in youth at a *Sentimental Journey*, but R. L. S. cannot choose but be at the opposite pole of human character and feeling from Laurence Sterne. In tales of mystery, allegorical or other, he may bear in mind the precedent of Edgar Poe, and yet there is nothing in style and temper much wider apart than *Markheim* and *Jekyll and Hyde* are from the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* or *William Wilson*. He may set out to tell a pirate story for boys ‘exactly in the ancient way,’ and it will come from him not in the ancient way at all, but re-minted; marked with a sharpness and saliency in the characters, a private stamp of buccaneering ferocity combined with smiling humour, an energy of vision and happy vividness of presentment, which are shiningly his own. Another time, he may desert the paths of Kingston and Ballantyne for those of Sir Walter Scott; but literature presents few stronger contrasts than between any scene of *Waverley* or *Redgauntlet* and any scene of the *Master of Ballantrae* or *Catriona*, whether in their strength or weakness: and it is the most loyal lovers of the older master who take the greatest pleasure in reading the work of the younger, so much less opulently gifted as is probable – though we must remember that Stevenson died at the age when Scott wrote *Waverley*– so infinitely more careful of his gift. Stevenson may even blow upon the pipe of Burns and yet his tune will be no echo, but one which utters the heart and mind of a Scots maker who has his own outlook on life, his own special and profitable vein of smiling or satirical contemplation.

“Not by reason, then, of ‘externality,’ for sure, nor yet of imitativeness, will this writer lose his hold on the attention and regard of his countrymen. The debate, before his place in literature is settled, must rather turn on other points: as whether the genial essayist and egoist or the romantic inventor

and narrator was the stronger in him – whether the Montaigne and Pepys elements prevailed in his literary composition or the Scott and Dumas elements – a question indeed which among those who care for him most has always been at issue. Or again, what degree of true inspiring and illuminating power belongs to the gospel, or gospels, airily encouraging or gravely didactic, which are set forth in the essays with so captivating a grace? Or whether in romance and tale he had a power of inventing and constructing a whole fable comparable to his admitted power of conceiving and presenting single scenes and situations in a manner which stamps them indelibly on the reader’s mind? And whether his figures are sustained continuously by the true spontaneous breath of creation, or are but transitorily animated at happy moments by flashes of spiritual and dramatic insight, aided by the conscious devices of his singularly adroit and spirited art? These are questions which no criticism but that of time can solve. To contend, as some do, that strong creative impulse and so keen an artistic self-consciousness as Stevenson’s was cannot exist together, is quite idle. The truth, of course, is that the deep-seated energies of imaginative creation are found sometimes in combination, and sometimes not in combination, with an artistic intelligence thus keenly conscious of its own purpose and watchful of its own working.

“Once more, it may be questioned whether, among the many varieties of work which Stevenson has left, all distinguished by a grace and precision of workmanship which are the rarest qualities in English art, there are any which can be pointed to as absolute masterpieces, such as the future cannot be expected to let die. Let the future decide. What is certain is that posterity must either be very well or very ill occupied if it can consent to give up so much sound entertainment, and better than entertainment, as this writer afforded his contemporaries. In the meantime, among judicious readers on both sides of the Atlantic, Stevenson stands, I think it may safely be said, as a true master of English prose; scarcely surpassed for the union of lenity and lucidity with suggestive pregnancy and poetic animation; for harmony of cadence and the well-knit structure of sentences; and for the art of imparting to words the vital quality of things, and making them convey the precise – sometimes, let it be granted, the too curiously precise – expression of the very shade and colour of the thought, feeling, or vision in his mind. He stands, moreover, as the writer who, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, has handled with the most of freshness and inspiriting power the widest range of established literary forms – the moral, critical, and personal essay, travels sentimental and other, romances and short tales both historical and modern, parables and tales of mystery, boys’ stories of adventure, memoirs – nor let lyrical and meditative verse both English and Scottish, and especially nursery verse, a new vein for genius to work in, be forgotten. To some of these forms Stevenson gave quite new life; through all alike he expressed vividly an extremely personal way of seeing and being, a sense of nature and romance, of the aspects of human existence and problems of human conduct, which was essentially his own. And in so doing he contrived to make friends and even lovers of his readers. Those whom he attracts at all (and there is no writer who attracts every one) are drawn to him over and over again, finding familiarity not lessen but increase the charm of his work, and desiring ever closer intimacy with the spirit and personality which they divine behind it.

“As to the fitting scale, then, on which to treat the memory of a man who fills five years after his death such a place as this in the general regard, and who has desired that a selection from his letters shall be made public, the word ‘selection’ has evidently to be given a pretty liberal interpretation. Readers, it must be supposed, will scarce be content without the opportunity of a fairly ample intercourse with such a man as he was accustomed to reveal himself in writing to his familiars. In choosing from among the material before me” (I still quote from the Introduction of 1899), “I have used the best discretion that I could. Stevenson’s feelings and relations throughout life were in almost all directions so warm and kindly, that very little had to be suppressed from fear of giving pain.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The point was one on which Stevenson himself felt strongly. In a letter of instructions to his wife found among his posthumous papers he writes: “It is never worth while to inflict pain upon a snail for any literary purpose; and where events may appear to be

On the other hand, he drew people towards him with so much confidence and affection, and met their openness with so much of his own, that an editor could not but feel the frequent risk of inviting readers to trespass too far on purely private affairs and feelings, including those of the living. This was a point upon which in his lifetime he felt strongly. That excellent critic, Mr. Walter Raleigh, has noticed, as one of the merits of Stevenson's personal essays and accounts of travel, that few men have written more or more attractively of themselves without ever taking the public unduly into familiarity or overstepping proper bounds of reticence. Public prying into private lives, the propagation of gossip by the press, and printing of private letters during the writer's lifetime, were things he hated. Once, indeed, he very superfluously gave himself a dangerous cold, by dancing before a bonfire in his garden at the news of a 'society' editor having been committed to prison; and the only approach to a difference he ever had with one of his lifelong friends arose from the publication, without permission, of one of his letters written during his first Pacific voyage.

"How far, then, must I regard his instructions about publication as authorising me to go after his death beyond the limits which he had been so careful in observing and desiring others to observe in life? How much may now fairly become public of that which had been held sacred and hitherto private among his friends? To cut out all that is strictly personal and intimate were to leave his story untold and half the charm of his character unrevealed: to put in too much were to break all bonds of that privacy which he so carefully regarded while he lived. I know not if I have at all been able to hit the mean, and to succeed in making these letters, as it has been my object to make them, present, without offence or intrusion, a just, a living, and proportionate picture of the man as far as they will yield it. There is one respect in which his own practice and principle has had to be in some degree violated, if the work was to be done at all. Except in the single case of the essay *Ordered South*, he would never in writing for the public adopt the invalid point of view, or invite any attention to his infirmities. 'To me,' he says, 'the medicine bottles on my chimney and the blood on my handkerchief are accidents; they do not colour my view of life; and I should think myself a trifler and in bad taste if I introduced the world to these unimportant privacies.' But from his letters to his family and friends these matters could not possibly be left out. The tale of his life, in the years when he was most of a correspondent, was in truth a tale of daily and nightly battle against weakness and physical distress and danger. To those who loved him, the incidents of this battle were communicated, sometimes gravely, sometimes laughingly. I have greatly cut down such bulletins, but could not possibly omit them altogether."

In 1911, twelve years after the above words were written, the estimate expressed in them of Stevenson's qualities as a writer, and of the place he seemed likely to maintain in the affections of English readers all the world over, had been amply confirmed by the lapse of time. The sale of his works kept increasing rather than diminishing. Editions kept multiplying. A new generation of readers had found life and letters, nature and human nature, touched by him at so many points with so vivifying and illuminating a charm that it had become scarcely possible to take up any newspaper or magazine and not find some reference to his work and name. Both series of letters – even one mainly concerned, as the *Vailima Letters* are, with matters of interest both remote and transitory – had been read in edition after edition: and readers had been and were continually asking for more. The time was thought to have come for a new and definitive edition, in which the two series of letters already published should be thrown into one, and as much new material added as could be found suitable. The task of carrying out this scheme fell again upon me. The new edition constituted in effect a nearly complete epistolary autobiography. It contained not less than a hundred and fifty of Stevenson's letters hitherto unpublished. They dated from all periods of his life, those written in the brilliant and troubled days of his youth predominating, and giving a picture, perhaps unique in its kind,

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favourable to me and contrary to others, I would rather be misunderstood than cause a pang to any one whom I have known, far less whom I have loved." Whether an editor or biographer would be justified in carrying out this principle to the full may perhaps be doubted.

of a character and talent in the making. The present edition is a reprint of the edition of 1911, with a few errors of transcription and one or two of date corrected, and with a very few new letters added.

Much, of course, remains and ought to remain unprinted. Some of the outpourings of the early time are too sacred and intimate for publicity. Many of the letters of his maturer years are dry business letters of no general interest: many others are mere scraps tossed in jest to his familiars and full of catchwords and code-words current in their talk but meaningless to outsiders. Above all, many have to be omitted because they deal with the intimate affairs of private persons. Stevenson has been sometimes called an egoist, as though he had been one in the practical sense as well as in the sense of taking a lively interest in his own moods and doings. Nothing can be more untrue. The letters printed in these volumes are indeed for the most part about himself: but it was of himself that his correspondents of all things most cared to hear. If the letters concerned with the private affairs of other people could be printed, as of course they cannot, the balance would come more than even. We should see him throwing himself with sympathetic ardour and without thought of self into the cares and interests of his correspondents, and should learn to recognise him as having been truly the helper in many a relation where he might naturally have been taken for the person helped.

As to the form in which the Letters are now presented, they fill three volumes instead of the four of the 1911 edition, the division into fourteen sections according to date being retained. As to the text, it is faithful to the original except in so far as I have freely used the editorial privilege of omission when I thought it desirable, and as I have not felt myself bound to reproduce slips and oddities, however characteristic, of spelling. In formal matters like the use of quote-marks, italics, and so forth, I have adopted a more uniform practice than his, which was very casual and variable.

To some readers, perhaps – (from this point I again resume my Introduction of 1899, but with more correction and abridgment) – to some, perhaps, the very lack of art as a correspondent to which Stevenson, as above quoted, pleads guilty may give the reading an added charm and flavour. What he could do as an artist in letters we know. I remember Sir John Millais, a shrewd and very independent judge of books, calling across to me at a dinner-table, “You know Stevenson, don’t you?” and then going on, “Well, I wish you would tell him from me, if he cares to know, that to my mind he is the very first of living artists. I don’t mean writers merely, but painters and all of us. Nobody living can see with such an eye as that fellow, and nobody is such a master of his tools.” But in his letters, excepting a few written in youth and having more or less the character of exercises, and a few in after years which were intended for the public eye, Stevenson the deliberate artist is scarcely forthcoming at all. He does not care a fig for order or logical sequence or congruity, or for striking a key of expression and keeping it, but becomes simply the most spontaneous and unstudied of human beings. He has at his command the whole vocabularies of the English and Scottish languages, classical and slang, with good stores of the French, and tosses and tumbles them about irresponsibly to convey the impression or affection, the mood or freak of the moment; pouring himself out in all manner of rhapsodical confessions and speculations, grave or gay, notes of observation and criticism, snatches of remembrance and autobiography, moralisings on matters uppermost for the hour in his mind, comments on his own work or other people’s, or mere idle fun and foolery.

By this medley of moods and manners, Stevenson’s letters at their best come nearer than anything else to the full-blooded charm and variety of his conversation. Nearer, yet not quite near; for it was in company only that his genial spirit rose to his very best. Few men probably have had in them such a richness and variety of human nature; and few can ever have been better gifted than he was to express the play of being that was in him by means of the apt, expressive word and the animated look and gesture. *Divers et ondoyant*, in the words of Montaigne, beyond other men, he seemed to contain within himself a whole troop of singularly assorted characters. Though prose was his chosen medium of expression, he was by temperament a born poet, to whom the world was full of enchantment and of latent romance, only waiting to take shape and substance in the forms of art. It was his birthright —

“to hear  
The great bell beating far and near —  
The odd, unknown, enchanted gong  
That on the road hales men along,  
That from the mountain calls afar,  
That lures the vessel from a star,  
And with a still, aerial sound  
Makes all the earth enchanted ground.”

He had not only the poet's mind but the poet's senses: in youth ginger was only too hot in his mouth, and the chimes at midnight only too favourite a music. At the same time he was not less a born preacher and moralist and son of the Covenanters after his fashion. He had about him, as has been said, little spirit of social or other conformity; but an active and searching private conscience kept him for ever calling in question both the grounds of his own conduct and the validity of the accepted codes and compromises of society. He must try to work out a scheme of morality suitable to his own case and temperament, which found the prohibitory law of Moses chill and uninspiring, but in the Sermon on the Mount a strong incentive to all those impulses of pity and charity to which his heart was prone. In early days his sense of social injustice and the inequalities of human opportunity made him inwardly much of a rebel, who would have embraced and acted on theories of socialism or communism, could he have found any that did not seem to him at variance with ineradicable instincts of human nature. All his life the artist and the moralist in him alike were in rebellion against the bourgeois spirit, – against timid, negative, and shuffling substitutes for active and courageous well-doing, – and declined to worship at the shrine of what he called the bestial goddesses Comfort and Respectability. The moralist in him helped the artist by backing with the force of a highly sensitive conscience his instinctive love of perfection in his work. The artist qualified the moralist by discountenancing any preference for the harsh, the sour, or the self-mortifying forms of virtue, and encouraging the love for all tender or heroic, glowing, generous, and cheerful forms.

Above all things, perhaps, Stevenson was by instinct an adventurer and practical experimentalist in life. Many poets are content to dream, and many, perhaps most, moralists to preach: Stevenson must ever be doing and undergoing. He was no sentimentalist, to pay himself with fine feelings whether for mean action or slack inaction. He had an insatiable zest for all experiences, not the pleasurable only, but including the more harsh and biting – those that bring home to a man the pinch and sting of existence as it is realised by the disinherited of the world, and excluding only what he thought the prim, the conventional, the dead-alive, and the cut-and-dry. On occasion the experimentalist and man of adventure in him would enter into special partnership with the moralist and man of conscience: he was prone to plunge into difficult social passes and ethical dilemmas, which he might sometimes more wisely have avoided, for the sake of trying to behave in them to the utmost according to his own personal sense of the obligations of honour, duty, and kindness. In yet another part of his being he cherished, as his great countryman Scott had done before him, an intense underlying longing for the life of action, danger and command. “Action, Colvin, action,” I remember his crying eagerly to me with his hand on my arm as we lay basking for his health's sake in a boat off the scented shores of the Cap Martin. Another time – this was on his way to a winter cure at Davos – some friend had given him General Hamley's *Operations of War*: – “in which,” he writes to his father, “I am drowned a thousand fathoms deep, and O that I had been a soldier is still my cry.” Fortunately, with all these ardent and divers instincts, there were present two invaluable gifts besides: that of humour, which for all his stress of being and vivid consciousness of self saved him from ever seeing himself for long together out of a just proportion, and kept wholesome laughter always ready at his lips; and that of a most tender and loyal heart, which through all his experiments and agitations made the law of kindness the one ruling law of his life. In the end, lack of health determined his career, giving the chief part in his

life to the artist and man of imagination, and keeping the man of action a prisoner in the sickroom until, by a singular turn of destiny, he was able to wring a real prolonged and romantically successful adventure out of that voyage to the Pacific which had been, in its origin, the last despairing resource of the invalid.

Again, it was characteristic of this multiple personality that he never seemed to be cramped like the rest of us, at any given time of life, within the limits of his proper age, but to be child, boy, young man, and old man all at once. There was never a time in his life when Stevenson had to say with St. Augustine, “Behold! my childhood is dead, but I am alive.” The child lived on always in him, not in memory only, but in real survival, with all its freshness of perception unimpaired, and none of its play instincts in the least degree extinguished or made ashamed. As for the perennial boy in Stevenson, that is too apparent to need remark. It was as a boy for boys that he wrote the best known of his books, *Treasure Island*, and with all boys that he met, provided they were really boys and not prigs nor puppies, he was instantly and delightedly at home. At the same time, even when I first knew him, he showed already surprising occasional traits and glimpses of old sagacity, of premature life-wisdom and experience.

Once more, it is said that in every poet there must be something of the woman. If to be quick in sympathy and feeling, ardent in attachment, and full of pity for the weak and suffering, is to be womanly, Stevenson was certainly all those; he was even like a woman in being ἀρτίδακρυς, easily moved to tears at the touch of pity or affection, or even at any specially poignant impression of art or beauty. But yet, if any one word were to be chosen for the predominant quality of his character and example, I suppose that word would be manly. In his gentle and complying nature there were strains of iron tenacity and will: occasionally even, let it be admitted, of perversity and Scottish “thrawnness.” He had both kinds of physical courage – the active, delighting in danger, and the passive, unshaken in endurance. In the moral courage of facing situations and consequences, of readiness to pay for faults committed, of outspokenness, admitting no ambiguous relations and clearing away the clouds from human intercourse, I have not known his equal. The great Sir Walter himself, as this book will prove, was not more manfully free from artistic jealousy or irritability under criticism, or more unfeignedly inclined to exaggerate the qualities of other people’s work and to underrate those of his own. Of the humorous and engaging parts of vanity and egoism, which led him to make infinite talk and fun about himself, and use his own experiences as a key for unlocking the confidences of others, Stevenson had plenty; but of the morose and fretful parts never a shade. “A little Irish girl,” he wrote once during a painful crisis of his life, “is now reading my book aloud to her sister at my elbow; they chuckle, and I feel flattered. – Yours, R. L. S. P.S.– Now they yawn, and I am indifferent. Such a wisely conceived thing is vanity.” If only vanity so conceived were commoner! And whatever might be the abstract and philosophical value of that somewhat grimly stoical conception of the universe, of conduct and duty, at which in mature years he had arrived, want of manliness is certainly not its fault. Take the kind of maxims which he was accustomed to forge for his own guidance: – “Acts may be forgiven; not even God can forgive the hanger-back.” “Choose the best, if you can; or choose the worst; that which hangs in the wind dangles from a gibbet.” “‘Shall I?’ said Feeble-mind; and the echo said, ‘Fie!’” “‘Do I love?’ said Loveless; and the echo laughed.” “A fault known is a fault cured to the strong; but to the weak it is a fetter riveted.” “The mean man doubts, the great-hearted is deceived.” “Great-heart was deceived. ‘Very well,’ said Great-heart.” “‘I have not forgotten my umbrella,’ said the careful man; but the lightning struck him.” “Shame had a fine bed, but where was slumber? Once he was in jail he slept.” With this moralist maxims meant actions; and where shall we easily find a much manlier spirit of wisdom than this?

There was yet another and very different side to Stevenson which struck others more than it struck myself, namely, that of the freakish or elvish, irresponsible madcap or jester which sometimes appeared in him. It is true that his demoniac quickness of wit and intelligence suggested occasionally a “spirit of air and fire” rather than one of earth; that he was abundantly given to all kinds of quirk

and laughter; and that there was no jest (saving the unkind) he would not make and relish. The late Mr. J. A. Symonds always called him Sprite; qualifying the name, however, by the epithets “most fantastic, but most human.” To me the essential humanity was always the thing most apparent. In a fire well nourished of seasoned ship-timber, the flames glance fantastically and of many colours, but the glow at heart is ever deep and strong; it was at such a glow that the friends of Stevenson were accustomed to warm their hands, while they admired and were entertained by the shifting lights.

It was only in company, as I have said, that all these many lights and colours could be seen in full play. He would begin no matter how – perhaps with a jest at some absurd adventure of his own, perhaps with the recitation, in his vibrating voice and full Scotch accent, of some snatch of poetry that was haunting him, perhaps with a rhapsody of analytic delight over some minute accident of beauty or expressiveness that had struck him in man, woman, child, or external nature. And forthwith the floodgates would be opened, and the talk would stream on in endless, never importunate, flood and variety. A hundred fictitious characters would be invented and launched on their imaginary careers; a hundred ingenious problems of conduct and cases of honour would be set and solved; romantic voyages would be planned and followed out in vision, with a thousand incidents; the possibilities of life and art would be illuminated with search-lights of bewildering range and penetration, sober argument and high poetic eloquence alternating with coruscations of insanely apposite slang – the earthiest jape anon shooting up into the empyrean and changing into the most ethereal fantasy – the stalest and most vulgarised forms of speech gaining brilliancy and illuminating power from some hitherto undreamt-of application – and all the while an atmosphere of goodwill diffusing itself from the speaker, a glow of eager benignity and affectionate laughter emanating from his presence, till every one about him seemed to catch something of his own gift and inspiration. This sympathetic power of inspiring others was the special and distinguishing note of Stevenson’s conversation. He would keep a houseful or a single companion entertained all day, and day after day and half the nights, yet never seemed to monopolise the talk or absorb it; rather he helped every one about him to discover and to exercise unexpected powers of their own.

Imagine all this helped by the most speaking of presences: a steady, penetrating fire in the brown, wide-set eyes, a compelling power and richness in the smile; courteous, waving gestures of the arms and long, nervous hands, a lit cigarette generally held between the fingers; continual rapid shiftings and pacings to and fro as he conversed: rapid, but not flurried nor awkward, for there was a grace in his attenuated but well-carried figure, and his movements were light, deft, and full of spring. There was something for strangers, and even for friends, to get over in the queer garments which in youth it was his whim to wear – the badge, as they always seemed to me, partly of a genuine carelessness, certainly of a genuine lack of cash (the little he had was always absolutely at the disposal of his friends), partly of a deliberate detachment from any particular social class or caste, partly of his love of pickles and adventures, which he thought befel a man thus attired more readily than another. But this slender, slovenly, nondescript apparition, long-visaged and long-haired, had only to speak in order to be recognised in the first minute for a witty and charming gentleman, and within the first five for a master spirit and man of genius. There were, indeed, certain stolidly conventional and superciliously official kinds of persons, both at home and abroad, who were incapable of looking beyond the clothes, and eyed him always with frozen suspicion. This attitude used sometimes in youth to drive him into fits of flaming anger, which put him helplessly at a disadvantage unless, or until, he could call the sense of humour to his help. Apart from these his human charm was the same for all kinds of people, without distinction of class or caste; for worldly-wise old great ladies, whom he reminded of famous poets in their youth; for his brother artists and men of letters, perhaps, above all; for the ordinary clubman; for his physicians, who could never do enough for him; for domestic servants, who adored him; for the English policeman even, on whom he often tried, quite in vain, to pass himself as one of the criminal classes; for the shepherd, the street arab, or the tramp, the common seaman, the beach-comber, or the Polynesian high-chief. Even in the imposed silence and

restraint of extreme sickness the power and attraction of the man made themselves felt, and there seemed to be more vitality and fire of the spirit in him as he lay exhausted and speechless in bed than in an ordinary roomful of people in health.

But I have strayed from my purpose, which was only to indicate that in the best of these letters of Stevenson's you have some echo, far away indeed, but yet the nearest, of his talk – talk which could not possibly be taken down, and of which nothing remains save in the memory of his friends an impression magical and never to be effaced.

*Sidney Colvin.*

# THE LETTERS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON 1868-1882

## I STUDENT DAYS AT EDINBURGH

### TRAVELS AND EXCURSIONS

1868-1873

The following section consists chiefly of extracts from the correspondence and journals addressed by Louis Stevenson, as a lad of eighteen to twenty-two, to his father and mother during summer excursions to the Scottish coast or to the Continent. There exist enough of them to fill a volume; but it is not in letters of this kind to his family that a young man unbosoms himself most freely, and these are perhaps not quite devoid of the qualities of the guide-book and the descriptive exercise. Nevertheless they seem to me to contain enough signs of the future master-writer, enough of character, observation, and skill in expression, to make a certain number worth giving by way of an opening chapter to the present book. Among them are interspersed four or five of a different character addressed to other correspondents, and chiefly to his lifelong friend and intimate, Mr. Charles Baxter.

On both sides of the house Stevenson came of interesting stock. His grandfather was Robert Stevenson, civil engineer, highly distinguished as the builder of the Bell Rock lighthouse. By this Robert Stevenson, his three sons, and two of his grandsons now living, the business of civil engineers in general, and of official engineers to the Commissioners of Northern Lights in particular, has been carried on at Edinburgh with high credit and public utility for almost a century. Thomas Stevenson, the youngest of the three sons of the original Robert, was Robert Louis Stevenson's father. He was a man not only of mark, zeal, and inventiveness in his profession, but of a strong and singular personality; a staunch friend and sagacious adviser, trenchant in judgment and demonstrative in emotion, outspoken, dogmatic, – despotic, even, in little things, but withal essentially chivalrous and soft-hearted; apt to pass with the swiftest transition from moods of gloom or sternness to those of tender or freakish gaiety, and commanding a gift of humorous and figurative speech second only to that of his more famous son.

Thomas Stevenson was married to Margaret Isabella, youngest daughter of the Rev. Lewis Balfour, for many years minister of the parish of Colinton in Midlothian. This Mr. Balfour (described by his grandson in the essay called *The Manse*) was of the stock of the Balfours of Pilrig, and grandson to that James Balfour, professor first of moral philosophy and afterwards of the law of nature and of nations, who was held in particular esteem as a philosophical controversialist by David Hume. His wife, Henrietta Smith, a daughter of the Rev. George Smith of Galston, to whose gift as a preacher Burns refers scoffingly in the *Holy Fair*, is said to have been a woman of uncommon beauty and charm of manner. Their daughter, Mrs. Thomas Stevenson, suffered in early and middle life from chest and nerve troubles, and her son may have inherited from her some of his constitutional weakness. Capable, cultivated, companionable, affectionate, she was a determined looker at the bright side of things, and hence better skilled, perhaps, to shut her eyes to troubles or differences among those she loved than understandingly to compose or heal them. Conventionally minded one might have thought her, but for

the surprising readiness with which in later life she adapted herself to conditions of life and travel the most unconventional possible. The son and only child of these two, Robert Louis (baptized Robert Lewis Balfour<sup>3</sup>), was born on November 13, 1850, at 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh. His health was infirm from the first, and he was with difficulty kept alive by the combined care of his mother and a most devoted nurse, Alison Cunningham; to whom his lifelong gratitude will be found touchingly expressed in the course of the following letters. In 1858 he was near dying of a gastric fever, and was at all times subject to acute catarrhal and bronchial affections and extreme nervous excitability.

In January 1853 Stevenson's parents moved to Inverleith Terrace, and in May 1857 to 17 Heriot Row, which continued to be their Edinburgh home until the death of Thomas Stevenson in 1887. Much of the boy's time was also spent in the manse of Colinton on the Water of Leith, the home of his maternal grandfather. Ill-health prevented him getting much regular or continuous schooling. He attended first (1858-61) a preparatory school kept by a Mr. Henderson in India Street; and next (at intervals for some time after the autumn of 1861) the Edinburgh Academy.

Schooling was interrupted in the end of 1862 and first half of 1863 by excursions with his parents to Germany, the Riviera, and Italy. The love of wandering, which was a rooted passion in Stevenson's nature, thus began early to find satisfaction. For a few months in the autumn of 1863, when his parents had been ordered for a second time to Mentone for the sake of his mother's health, he was sent to a boarding-school kept by a Mr. Wyatt at Spring Grove, near London. It is not my intention to treat the reader to the series of childish and boyish letters of these days which parental fondness has preserved. But here is one written from his English school when he was about thirteen, which is both amusing in itself and had a certain influence on his destiny, inasmuch as his appeal led to his being taken out to join his parents on the French Riviera; which from these days of his boyhood he never ceased to love, and for which the longing, amid the gloom of Edinburgh winters, often afterwards gripped him by the heart.

*Spring Grove School, 12th November 1863.*

MA CHERE MAMAN, – J'ai reçu votre lettre Aujourd'hui et comme le jour prochaine est mon jour de naissance je vous écrit ce lettre. Ma grande gâteaux est arrivé il leve 12 livres et demi le prix était 17 shillings. Sur la soirée de Monseigneur Faux il y était quelques belles feux d'artifice. Mais les polissons entrent dans notre champ et nos feux d'artifice et handkerchiefs disappeared quickly, but we charged them out of the field. Je suis presque driven mad par une bruit terrible tous les garçons kik up comme grand un bruit qu'il est possible. I hope you will find your house at Mentone nice. I have been obliged to stop from writing by the want of a pen, but now I have one, so I will continue.

My dear papa, you told me to tell you whenever I was miserable. I do not feel well, and I wish to get home. Do take me with you.

*R. Stevenson.*

This young French scholar has yet, it will be discerned, a good way to travel; in later days he acquired a complete reading and speaking, with a less complete writing, mastery of the language, and was as much at home with French ways of thought and life as with English.

For one more specimen of his boyish style, it may be not amiss to give the text of another appeal which dates from two and a half years later, and is also typical of much in his life's conditions both then and later: —

*2 Sulgarde Terrace, Torquay, Thursday [April 1866].*

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<sup>3</sup> It was the father who, from dislike of a certain Edinburgh Lewis, changed the sound and spelling of his son's second name to Louis (spoken always with the "s" sounded), and it was the son himself who about his eighteenth year dropped the use of his third name and initial altogether.

RESPECTED PATERNAL RELATIVE, – I write to make a request of the most moderate nature. Every year I have cost you an enormous – nay, elephantine – sum of money for drugs and physician’s fees, and the most expensive time of the twelve months was March.

But this year the biting Oriental blasts, the howling tempests, and the general ailments of the human race have been successfully braved by yours truly.

Does not this deserve remuneration?

I appeal to your charity, I appeal to your generosity, I appeal to your justice, I appeal to your accounts, I appeal, in fine, to your purse.

My sense of generosity forbids the receipt of more – my sense of justice forbids the receipt of less – than half-a-crown. – Greeting from, Sir, your most affectionate and needy son,

*R. Stevenson.*

From 1864 to 1867 Stevenson’s education was conducted chiefly at Mr. Thomson’s private school in Frederick Street, Edinburgh, and by private tutors in various places to which he travelled for his own or his parents’ health. These travels included frequent visits to such Scottish health resorts as Bridge of Allan, Dunoon, Rothesay, North Berwick, Lasswade, and Peebles, and occasional excursions with his father on his nearer professional rounds to the Scottish coasts and lighthouses. From 1867 the family life became more settled between Edinburgh and Swanston Cottage, Lothianburn, a country home in the Pentlands which Mr. Stevenson first rented in that year, and the scenery and associations of which sank deeply into the young man’s spirit, and vitally affected his after thoughts and his art.

By this time Louis Stevenson seemed to show signs of outgrowing his early infirmities of health. He was a lover, to a degree even beyond his strength, of outdoor life and exercise (though not of sports), and it began to be hoped that as he grew up he would be fit to enter the family profession of civil engineer. He was accordingly entered as a student at Edinburgh University, and for several winters attended classes there with such regularity as his health and inclinations permitted. This was in truth but small. The mind on fire with its own imaginations, and eager to acquire its own experiences in its own way, does not take kindly to the routine of classes and repetitions, nor could the desultory mode of schooling enforced upon him by ill-health answer much purpose by way of discipline. According to his own account he was at college, as he had been at school, an inveterate idler and truant. But outside the field of school and college routine he showed an eager curiosity and activity of mind. “He was of a conversable temper,” so he says of himself, “and insatiably curious in the aspects of life, and spent much of his time scraping acquaintance with all classes of men and womenkind.” Of one class indeed, and that was his own, he had soon had enough, at least in so far as it was to be studied at the dinners, dances, and other polite entertainments of ordinary Edinburgh society. Of these he early wearied. At home he made himself pleasant to all comers, but for his own resort chose out a very few houses, mostly those of intimate college companions, into which he could go without constraint, and where his inexhaustible flow of poetic, imaginative, and laughing talk seems generally to have rather puzzled his hearers than impressed them. On the other hand, during his endless private rambles and excursions, whether among the streets and slums, the gardens and graveyards of the city, or farther afield among the Pentland hills or on the shores of Forth, he was never tired of studying character and seeking acquaintance among the classes more nearly exposed to the pinch and stress of life.

In the eyes of anxious elders, such vagrant ways naturally take on the colours of idleness and a love of low company. Stevenson was, however, in his own fashion an eager student of books as well as of man and nature. He read precociously and omnivorously in the *belles-lettres*, including a very wide range of English poetry, fiction, and essays, and a fairly wide range of French; and was a genuine student of Scottish history, especially from the time of the persecutions down, and to some extent of history in general. The art of literature was already his private passion, and something within him even already told him that it was to be his life’s work. On all his truantries he went pencil and copybook in

hand, trying to fit his impression of the scene to words, to compose original rhymes, tales, dialogues, and dramas, or to imitate the style and cadences of the author he at the moment preferred. For three or four years, nevertheless, he tried dutifully, if half-heartedly, to prepare himself for the family profession. In 1868, the year when the following correspondence opens, he went to watch the works of the firm in progress first at Anstruther on the coast of Fife, and afterwards at Wick. In 1869 he made the tour of the Orkneys and Shetlands on board the steam yacht of the Commissioners of Northern Lights, and in 1870 the tour of the Western Islands, preceded by a stay on the isle of Earraid, where the works of the Dhu Heartach lighthouse were then in progress. He was a favourite, although a very irregular, pupil of the professor of engineering, Fleeming Jenkin, whose friendship and that of Mrs. Jenkin were of great value to him, and whose life he afterwards wrote; and must have shown some aptitude for the family calling, inasmuch as in 1871 he received the silver medal of the Edinburgh Society of Arts for a paper on a suggested improvement in lighthouse apparatus. The outdoor and seafaring parts of an engineer's life were in fact wholly to his taste. But he looked instinctively at the powers and phenomena of waves and tide, of storm and current, reef, cliff, and rock, with the eye of the poet and artist, and not those of the practician and calculator. For desk work and office routine he had an unconquerable aversion; and his physical powers, had they remained at their best, must have proved quite unequal to the workshop training necessary to the practical engineer. Accordingly in 1871 it was agreed, not without natural reluctance on his father's part, that he should give up the hereditary vocation and read for the bar: literature, on which his heart was set, and in which his early attempts had been encouraged, being held to be by itself no profession, or at least one altogether too irregular and undefined. For the next several years, therefore, he attended law classes instead of engineering and science classes in the University, giving to the subject a certain amount of serious, although fitful, attention until he was called to the bar in 1875.

So much for the course of Stevenson's outward life during these days at Edinburgh. To tell the story of his inner life would be a far more complicated task, and cannot here be attempted even briefly. The ferment of youth was more acute and more prolonged in him than in most men even of genius. In the Introduction I have tried to give some notion of the many various strains and elements which met in him, and which were in these days pulling one against another in his half-formed being, at a great expense of spirit and body. Add the storms, which from time to time attacked him, of shivering repulsion from the climate and conditions of life in the city which he yet deeply and imaginatively loved; the moods of spiritual revolt against the harsh doctrines of the creed in which he had been brought up, and to which his parents were deeply, his father even passionately, attached; the seasons of temptation, to which he was exposed alike by temperament and circumstance, to seek solace among the crude allurements of the city streets.

In the later and maturer correspondence which will appear in these volumes, the agitations of the writer's early days are often enough referred to in retrospect. In the boyish letters to his parents, which make up the chief part of this first section, they naturally find no expression at all; nor will these letters be found to differ much in any way from those of any other lively and observant lad who is also something of a reader and has some natural gift of writing. At the end of the section I have indeed printed one cry of the heart, written not to his parents, but about them, and telling of the strain which matters of religious difference for a while brought into his home relations. The attachment between the father and son from childhood was exceptionally strong. But the father was staunchly wedded to the hereditary creeds and dogmas of Scottish Calvinistic Christianity; while the course of the young man's reading, with the spirit of the generation in which he grew up, had loosed him from the bonds of that theology, and even of dogmatic Christianity in general, and had taught him to respect all creeds alike as expressions of the cravings and conjectures of the human spirit in face of the unsolved mystery of things, rather than to cling to any one of them as a revelation of ultimate truth. The shock to the father was great when his son's opinions came to his knowledge; and there ensued a time of extremely painful discussion and private tension between them. In due time

this cloud upon a family life otherwise very harmonious and affectionate passed quite away. But the greater the love, the greater the pain; when I first knew Stevenson this trouble gave him no peace, and it has left a strong trace upon his mind and work. See particularly the parable called “The House of Eld,” in his collection of *Fables*, and the many studies of difficult paternal and filial relations which are to be found in *The Story of a Lie*, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*, *The Wrecker*, and *Weir of Hermiston*.

## To Thomas Stevenson

In July 1868 R. L. S. went to watch the harbour works at Anstruther and afterwards those at Wick. Of his private moods and occupations in the Anstruther days he has told in retrospect in the essay *Random Memories: the Coast of Fife*. Here are some passages from letters written at the time to his parents. “Travellers” and “jennies” are, of course, terms of engineering.

*Kenzie House or whatever it is called, Anstruther. [July 1868.]*

First sheet: Thursday.

Second sheet: Friday.

MY DEAR FATHER, – My lodgings are very nice, and I don’t think there are any children. There is a box of mignonette in the window and a factory of dried rose-leaves, which make the atmosphere a trifle heavy, but very pleasant.

When you come, bring also my paint-box – I forgot it. I am going to try the travellers and jennies, and have made a sketch of them and begun the drawing. After that I’ll do the staging.

Mrs. Brown “has suffered herself from her stommick, and that makes her kind of think for other people.” She is a motherly lot. Her mothering and thought for others displays itself in advice against hard-boiled eggs, well-done meat, and late dinners, these being my only requests. Fancy – I am the only person in Anstruther who dines in the afternoon.

If you could bring me some wine when you come, ’twould be a good move: I fear *vin d’Anstruther*; and having procured myself a severe attack of gripes by two days’ total abstinence on chilly table beer I have been forced to purchase Green Ginger (“Somebody or other’s ‘celebrated’”), for the benefit of my stomach, like St. Paul.

There is little or nothing doing here to be seen. By heightening the corner in a hurry to support the staging they have let the masons get ahead of the divers and wait till they can overtake them. I wish you would write and put me up to the sort of things to ask and find out. I received your registered letter with the £5; it will last for ever. To-morrow I will watch the masons at the pier-foot and see how long they take to work that Fifeness stone you ask about; they get sixpence an hour; so that is the only datum required.

It is awful how slowly I draw, and how ill: I am not nearly done with the travellers, and have not thought of the jennies yet. When I’m drawing I find out something I have not measured, or, having measured, have not noted, or, having noted, cannot find; and so I have to trudge to the pier again ere I can go farther with my noble design.

Love to all. – Your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

*Kenzie House, Anstruther [later in July, 1868].*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – To-night I went with the youngest M. to see a strolling band of players in the townhall. A large table placed below the gallery with a print curtain on either side of the most limited dimensions was at once the scenery and the proscenium. The manager told us that his scenes were sixteen by sixty-four, and so could not be got in. Though I knew, or at least felt sure, that there were no such scenes in the poor man's possession, I could not laugh, as did the major part of the audience, at this shift to escape criticism. We saw a wretched farce, and some comic songs were sung. The manager sang one, but it came grimly from his throat. The whole receipt of the evening was 5s. and 3d., out of which had to come room, gas, and town drummer. We left soon; and I must say came out as sad as I have been for ever so long: I think that manager had a soul above comic songs. I said this to young M., who is a "Phillistine" (Matthew Arnold's Philistine you understand), and he replied, "How much happier would he be as a common working-man!" I told him I thought he would be less happy earning a comfortable living as a shoemaker than he was starving as an actor, with such artistic work as he had to do. But the Phillistine wouldn't see it. You observe that I spell Philistine time about with one and two l's.

As we went home we heard singing, and went into the porch of the schoolhouse to listen. A fisherman entered and told us to go in. It was a psalmody class. One of the girls had a glorious voice. We stayed for half an hour.

*Tuesday.* – I am utterly sick of this grey, grim, sea-beaten hole. I have a little cold in my head, which makes my eyes sore; and you can't tell how utterly sick I am, and how anxious to get back among trees and flowers and something less meaningless than this bleak fertility.

Papa need not imagine that I have a bad cold or am stone-blind from this description, which is the whole truth.

Last night Mr. and Mrs. Fortune called in a dog-cart, Fortune's beard and Mrs. F.'s brow glittering with mist-drops, to ask me to come next Saturday. Conditionally, I accepted. Do you think I can cut it? I am only anxious to go slick home on the Saturday. Write by return of post and tell me what to do. If possible, I should like to cut the business and come right slick out to Swanston. – I remain, your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

An early Portfolio paper *On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places*, as well as the second part of the *Random Memories* essay, written twenty years later, refer to the same experiences as the following letters. Stevenson lodged during his stay at Wick in a private hotel on the Harbour Brae, kept by a Mr. Sutherland.<sup>4</sup>

*Wick, Friday, September 11, 1868.*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – ... Wick lies at the end or elbow of an open triangular bay, hemmed on either side by shores, either cliff or steep earth-bank, of no great height. The grey houses of Pulteney extend along the southerly shore almost to the cape; and it is about half-way down this shore – no, six-sevenths way down – that the new breakwater extends athwart the bay.

Certainly Wick in itself possesses no beauty: bare, grey shores, grim grey houses, grim grey sea; not even the gleam of red tiles; not even the greenness of a tree. The southerly heights, when I came here, were black with people, fishers waiting on wind and night. Now all the S.Y.S. (Stornoway boats) have beaten out of the bay, and the Wick men stay indoors or wrangle on the quays with dissatisfied fish-curiers, knee-high in brine, mud, and herring refuse. The day when the boats put out to go home to the Hebrides, the girl here told me there was "a black wind"; and on going out, I found the epithet

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<sup>4</sup> See a paper on *R. L. Stevenson in Wick*, by Margaret H. Robertson, in Magazine of Wick Literary Society, Christmas 1903.

as justifiable as it was picturesque. A cold, *black* southerly wind, with occasional rising showers of rain; it was a fine sight to see the boats beat out a-teeth of it.

In Wick I have never heard any one greet his neighbour with the usual “Fine day” or “Good morning.” Both come shaking their heads, and both say, “Breezy, breezy!” And such is the atrocious quality of the climate, that the remark is almost invariably justified by the fact.

The streets are full of the Highland fishers, lubberly, stupid, inconceivably lazy and heavy to move. You bruise against them, tumble over them, elbow them against the wall – all to no purpose; they will not budge; and you are forced to leave the pavement every step.

To the south, however, is as fine a piece of coast scenery as I ever saw. Great black chasms, huge black cliffs, rugged and over-hung gullies, natural arches, and deep green pools below them, almost too deep to let you see the gleam of sand among the darker weed: there are deep caves too. In one of these lives a tribe of gipsies. The men are *always* drunk, simply and truthfully always. From morning to evening the great villainous-looking fellows are either sleeping off the last debauch, or hulking about the cove “in the horrors.” The cave is deep, high, and airy, and might be made comfortable enough. But they just live among heaped boulders, damp with continual droppings from above, with no more furniture than two or three tin pans, a truss of rotten straw, and a few ragged cloaks. In winter the surf bursts into the mouth and often forces them to abandon it.

An *émeute* of disappointed fishers was feared, and two ships of war are in the bay to render assistance to the municipal authorities. This is the ides; and, to all intents and purposes, said ides are passed. Still there is a good deal of disturbance, many drunk men, and a double supply of police. I saw them sent for by some people and enter an inn, in a pretty good hurry: what it was for I do not know.

You would see by papa’s letter about the carpenter who fell off the staging; I don’t think I was ever so much excited in my life. The man was back at his work, and I asked him how he was; but he was a Highlander, and – need I add it? – dickens a word could I understand of his answer. What is still worse, I find the people here-about – that is to say, the Highlanders, not the northmen – don’t understand *me*.

I have lost a shilling’s worth of postage stamps, which has damped my ardour for buying big lots of ’em: I’ll buy them one at a time as I want ’em for the future.

The Free Church minister and I got quite thick. He left last night about two in the morning, when I went to turn in. He gave me the enclosed. – I remain your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## **To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson**

*Wick, September 5, 1868. Monday.*

MY DEAR MAMMA, – This morning I got a delightful haul: your letter of the fourth (surely mis-dated); papa’s of same day; Virgil’s *Bucolics*, very thankfully received; and Aikman’s *Annals*,<sup>5</sup> a precious and most acceptable donation, for which I tender my most ebullient thanksgivings. I almost forgot to drink my tea and eat mine egg.

It contains more detailed accounts than anything I ever saw, except Wodrow, without being so portentously tiresome and so desperately overborne with footnotes, proclamations, acts of Parliament, and citations as that last history.

I have been reading a good deal of Herbert. He’s a clever and a devout cove; but in places awfully twaddley (if I may use the word). Oughtn’t this to rejoice papa’s heart —

“Carve or discourse; do not a famine fear.

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<sup>5</sup> Aikman’s *Annals of the Persecution in Scotland*.

Who carves is kind to two, who talks to all.”

You understand? The “fearing a famine” is applied to people gulping down solid viviers without a word, as if the ten lean kine began to-morrow.

Do you remember condemning something of mine for being too obtrusively didactic. Listen to Herbert —

“Is it not verse except enchanted groves  
And sudden arbours shadow coarse-spun lines?  
Must purling streams refresh a lover’s loves?  
*Must all be veiled, while he that reads divines  
Catching the sense at two removes?”*

You see, “except” was used for “unless” before 1630.

*Tuesday.*— The riots were a hum. No more has been heard; and one of the war-steamers has deserted in disgust.

The *Moonstone* is frightfully interesting: isn’t the detective prime? Don’t say anything about the plot; for I have only read on to the end of Betteredge’s narrative, so don’t know anything about it yet.

I thought to have gone on to Thurso to-night, but the coach was full; so I go to-morrow instead.

To-day I had a grouse: great glorification.

There is a drunken brute in the house who disturbed my rest last night. He’s a very respectable man in general, but when on the “spree” a most consummate fool. When he came in he stood on the top of the stairs and preached in the dark with great solemnity and no audience from 12 p. m. to half-past one. At last I opened my door. “Are we to have no sleep at all for that *drunken brute*?” I said. As I hoped, it had the desired effect. “Drunken brute!” he howled, in much indignation; then after a pause, in a voice of some contrition, “Well, if I am a drunken brute, it’s only once in the twelvemonth!” And that was the end of him; the insult rankled in his mind; and he retired to rest. He is a fish-curer, a man over fifty, and pretty rich too. He’s as bad again to-day; but I’ll be shot if he keeps me awake, I’ll douse him with water if he makes a row. – Ever your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

The Macdonald father and son here mentioned were engineers attached to the Stevenson firm and in charge of the harbour works.

*Wick, September 1868. Saturday, 10 a. m.*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – The last two days have been dreadfully hard, and I was so tired in the evenings that I could not write. In fact, last night I went to sleep immediately after dinner, or very nearly so. My hours have been 10-2 and 3-7 out in the lighter or the small boat, in a long, heavy roll from the nor’-east. When the dog was taken out, he got awfully ill; one of the men, Geordie Grant by name and surname, followed *shoot* with considerable *éclat*; but, wonderful to relate! I kept well. My hands are all skinned, blistered, discoloured, and engrained with tar, some of which latter has established itself under my nails in a position of such natural strength that it defies all my efforts to dislodge it. The worst work I had was when David (Macdonald’s eldest) and I took the charge ourselves. He remained in the lighter to tighten or slacken the guys as we raised the pole towards the perpendicular, with two men. I was with four men in the boat. We dropped an anchor out a good bit, then tied a cord to the pole, took a turn round the sternmost thwart with it, and pulled on the anchor line. As the great, big, wet hawser came in it soaked you to the skin: I was the sternest (used, by way

of variety, for sternmost) of the lot, and had to coil it – a work which involved, from *its* being so stiff and *your* being busy pulling with all your might, no little trouble and an extra ducking. We got it up; and, just as we were going to sing “Victory!” one of the guys slipped in, the pole tottered – went over on its side again like a shot, and behold the end of our labour.

You see, I have been roughing it; and though some parts of the letter may be neither very comprehensible nor very interesting to *you*, I think that perhaps it might amuse Willie Traquair, who delights in all such dirty jobs.

The first day, I forgot to mention, was like mid-winter for cold, and rained incessantly so hard that the livid white of our cold-pinchd faces wore a sort of inflamed rash on the windward side.

I am not a bit the worse of it, except fore-mentioned state of hands, a slight crick in my neck from the rain running down, and general stiffness from pulling, hauling, and tugging for dear life.

We have got double weights at the guys, and hope to get it up like a shot.

What fun you three must be having! I hope the cold don’t disagree with you. – I remain, my dear mother, your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

The following will help the reader to understand the passage referring to this undertaking in Stevenson’s biographical essay on his father where he has told how in the end “the sea proved too strong for men’s arts, and after expedients hitherto unthought of, and on a scale hyper-Cyclopean, the work must be deserted, and now stands a ruin in that bleak, God-forsaken bay.” The Russels herein mentioned are the family of Sheriff Russel. The tombstone of Miss Sara Russel is to be seen in Wick cemetery.

*Pulteney, Wick, Sunday, September 1868.*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – Another storm: wind higher, rain thicker: the wind still rising as the night closes in and the sea slowly rising along with it; it looks like a three days’ gale.

Last week has been a blank one: always too much sea.

I enjoyed myself very much last night at the Russels’. There was a little dancing, much singing and supper.

Are you not well that you do not write? I haven’t heard from you for more than a fortnight.

The wind fell yesterday and rose again to-day; it is a dreadful evening; but the wind is keeping the sea down as yet. Of course, nothing more has been done to the poles; and I can’t tell when I shall be able to leave, not for a fortnight yet, I fear, at the earliest, for the winds are persistent. Where’s Murra? Is Cummy struck dumb about the boots? I wish you would get somebody to write an interesting letter and say how you are, for you’re on the broad of your back I see. There hath arrived an inroad of farmers to-night; and I go to avoid them to Macdonald if he’s disengaged, to the Russels if not.

*Sunday (later).* – Storm without: wind and rain: a confused mass of wind-driven rain-squalls, wind-ragged mist, foam, spray, and great, grey waves. Of this hereafter; in the meantime let us follow the due course of historic narrative.

Seven p. m. found me at Breadalbane Terrace, clad in spotless blacks, white tie, shirt, et cætera, and finished off below with a pair of navvies’ boots. How true that the devil is betrayed by his feet! A message to Cummy at last. Why, O treacherous woman! were my dress boots withheld?

Dramatis personæ: père Russel, amusing, long-winded, in many points like papa; mère Russel, nice, delicate, likes hymns, knew Aunt Margaret (’tould man knew Uncle Alan); fille Russel, nominée Sara (no h), rather nice, lights up well, good voice, *interested* face; Miss L., nice also, washed out a little, and, I think, a trifle sentimental; fils Russel, in a Leith office, smart, full of happy epithet,

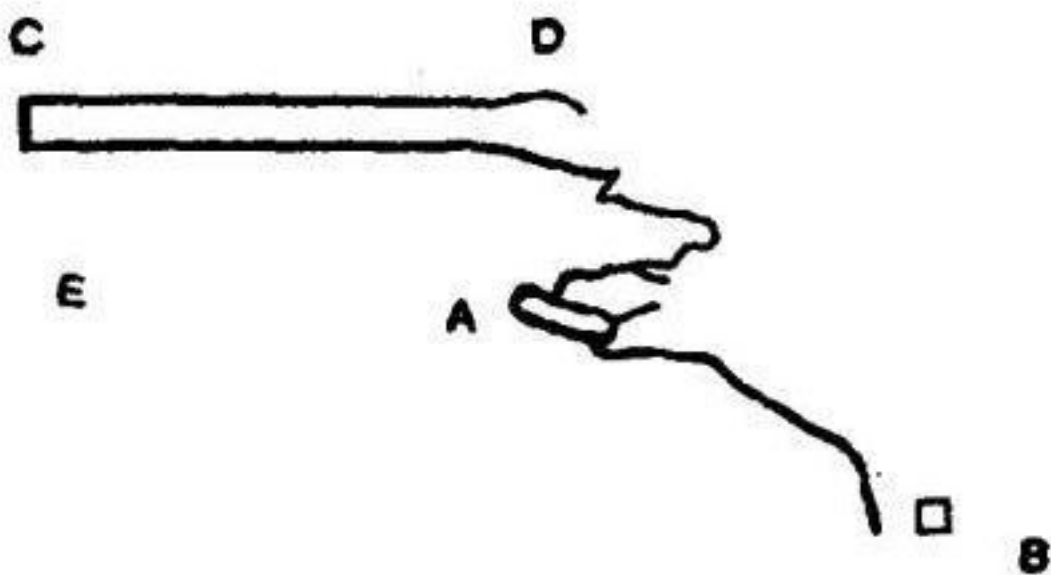
amusing. They are very nice and very kind, asked me to come back – “any night you feel dull: and any night doesn’t mean no night: we’ll be so glad to see you.” *C’est la mère qui parle.*

I was back there again to-night. There was hymn-singing, and general religious controversy till eight, after which talk was secular. Mrs. Sutherland was deeply distressed about the boot business. She consoled me by saying that many would be glad to have such feet whatever shoes they had on. Unfortunately, fishers and seafaring men are too facile to be compared with! This looks like enjoyment! better speck than Anster.

I have done with frivolity. This morning I was awakened by Mrs. Sutherland at the door. “There’s a ship ashore at Shaltigoe!” As my senses slowly flooded, I heard the whistling and the roaring of wind, and the lashing of gust-blown and uncertain flaws of rain. I got up, dressed, and went out. The mizzled sky and rain blinded you.

She was a Norwegian: coming in she saw our first gauge-pole, standing at point E. Norse skipper thought it was a sunk smack, and dropped his anchor in full drift of sea: chain broke: schooner came ashore. Insured: laden with wood: skipper owner of vessel and cargo: bottom out.

I was in a great fright at first lest we should be liable; but it seems that’s all right.



C D is the new pier.

A the schooner ashore. B the salmon house.

Some of the waves were twenty feet high. The spray rose eighty feet at the new pier. Some wood has come ashore, and the roadway seems carried away. There is something fishy at the far end where the cross wall is building; but till we are able to get along, all speculation is vain.

I am so sleepy I am writing nonsense.

I stood a long while on the cope watching the sea below me; I hear its dull, monotonous roar at this moment below the shrieking of the wind; and there came ever recurring to my mind the verse I am so fond of: —

“But yet the Lord that is on high  
Is more of might by far  
Than noise of many waters is  
Or great sea-billows are.”

The thunder at the wall when it first struck – the rush along ever growing higher – the great jet of snow-white spray some forty feet above you – and the “noise of many waters,” the roar, the hiss, the “shrieking” among the shingle as it fell head over heels at your feet. I watched if it threw the big stones at the wall; but it never moved them.

*Monday.*– The end of the work displays gaps, cairns of ten ton blocks, stones torn from their places and turned right round. The damage above water is comparatively little: what there may be below, on *ne sait pas encore*. The roadway is torn away, cross-heads, broken planks tossed here and there, planks gnawn and mumbled as if a starved bear had been trying to eat them, planks with spates lifted from them as if they had been dressed with a rugged plane, one pile swaying to and fro clear of the bottom, the rails in one place sunk a foot at least. This was not a great storm, the waves were light and short. Yet when we are standing at the office, I felt the ground beneath me *quail* as a huge roller thundered on the work at the last year’s cross wall.

How could *noster amicus Q. maximus* appreciate a storm at Wick? It requires a little of the artistic temperament, of which Mr. T. S.,<sup>6</sup> C.E., possesses some, whatever he may say. I can’t look at it practically however: that will come, I suppose, like grey hair or coffin nails.

Our pole is snapped: a fortnight’s work and the loss of the Norse schooner all for nothing! – except experience and dirty clothes. – Your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

I omit the letters of 1869, which describe at great length, and not very interestingly, a summer trip on board the lighthouse steamer to the Orkneys, Shetlands, and the Fair Isle. The following of 1870 I give (by consent of the lady who figures as a youthful character in the narrative) both for the sake of its lively social sketches – including that of the able painter and singular personage, the late Sam Bough, – and because it is dated from the Isle of Earraid, celebrated alike in *Kidnapped* and in the essay *Memoirs of an Islet*.

*Earraid, Thursday, August 5th, 1870.*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – I have so much to say, that needs must I take a large sheet; for the notepaper brings with it a chilling brevity of style. Indeed, I think pleasant writing is proportional to the size of the material you write withal.

From Edinburgh to Greenock, I had the ex-secretary of the E.U. Conservative Club, Murdoch. At Greenock I spent a dismal evening, though I found a pretty walk. Next day on board the *Iona*, I had Maggie Thomson to Tarbet; Craig, a well-read, pleasant medical, to Ardrishaig; and Professor, Mrs., and all the little Fleeming Jenkinseses to Oban.

At Oban, that night, it was delicious. Mr. Stephenson’s yacht lay in the bay, and a splendid band on board played delightfully. The waters of the bay were as smooth as a mill-pond; and, in the dusk, the black shadows of the hills stretched across to our very feet and the lights were reflected in long lines. At intervals, blue lights were burned on the water; and rockets were sent up. Sometimes great stars of clear fire fell from them, until the bay received and quenched them. I hired a boat and skulled round the yacht in the dark. When I came in, a very pleasant Englishman on the steps fell into talk with me, till it was time to go to bed.

Next morning I slept on or I should have gone to Glencoe. As it was, it was blazing hot; so I hired a boat, pulled all forenoon along the coast and had a delicious bathe on a beautiful white beach. Coming home, I *cotogai’d* my Englishman, lunched alongside of him and his sister, and took a walk

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Stevenson.

with him in the afternoon, during which I find that he was travelling with a servant, kept horses, *et cetera*. At dinner he wished me to sit beside him and his sister; but there was no room. When he came out he told me why he was so *empresé* on this point. He had found out my name, and that I was connected with lighthouses, and his sister wished to know if I were any relative of the Stevenson in Ballantyne's *Lighthouse*. All evening, he, his sister, I, and Mr. Hargrove, of Hargrove and Fowler, sate in front of the hotel. I asked Mr. H. if he knew who my friend was. "Yes," he said; "I never met him before: but my partner knows him. He is a man of old family; and the solicitor of highest standing about Sheffield." At night he said, "Now if you're down in my neighbourhood, you must pay me a visit. I am very fond of young men about me; and I should like a visit from you very much. I can take you through any factory in Sheffield and I'll drive you all about the *Dookeries*." He then wrote me down his address; and we parted huge friends, he still keeping me up to visiting him.

Hitherto, I had enjoyed myself amazingly; but to-day has been the crown. In the morning I met Bough on board, with whom I am both surprised and delighted. He and I have read the same books, and discuss Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Fletcher, Webster, and all the old authors. He can quote verses by the page, and has really a very pretty literary taste. Altogether, with all his roughness and buffoonery, a more pleasant, clever fellow you may seldom see. I was very much surprised with him; and he with me. "Where the devil did you read all these books?" says he; and in my heart, I echo the question. One amusing thing I must say. We were both talking about travelling; and I said I was so fond of travelling alone, from the people one met and grew friendly with. "Ah," says he, "but you've such a pleasant manner, you know – quite captivated my old woman, you did – she couldn't talk of anything else." Here was a compliment, even in Sam Bough's sneering tones, that rather tickled my vanity; and really, my social successes of the last few days, the best of which is yet to come, are enough to turn anybody's head. To continue, after a little go in with Samuel, he going up on the bridge, I looked about me to see who there was; and mine eye lighted on two girls, one of whom was sweet and pretty, talking to an old gentleman. "*Eh bien*," says I to myself, "that seems the best investment on board." So I sidled up to the old gentleman, got into conversation with him and so with the damsel; and thereupon, having used the patriarch as a ladder, I kicked him down behind me. Who should my damsel prove, but Amy Sinclair, daughter of Sir Tollemache. She certainly was the simplest, most naïve specimen of girlhood ever I saw. By getting brandy and biscuit and generally coaching up her cousin, who was sick, I ingratiated myself; and so kept her the whole way to Iona, taking her into the cave at Staffa and generally making myself as gallant as possible. I was never so much pleased with anything in my life, as her amusing absence of *mauvaise honte*: she was so sorry I wasn't going on to Oban again: didn't know how she could have enjoyed herself if I hadn't been there; and was so sorry we hadn't met on the Crinan. When we came back from Staffa, she and her aunt went down to have lunch; and a minute after up comes Miss Amy to ask me if I wouldn't think better of it, and take some lunch with them. I couldn't resist that, of course; so down I went; and there she displayed the full extent of her innocence. I must be sure to come to Thurso Castle the next time I was in Caithness, and Upper Norwood (whence she would take me all over the Crystal Palace) when I was near London; and (most complete of all) she offered to call on us in Edinburgh! Wasn't it delicious? – she is a girl of sixteen or seventeen, too, and the latter I think. I never yet saw a girl so innocent and fresh, so perfectly modest without the least trace of prudery.

Coming off Staffa, Sam Bough (who had been in huge force the whole time, drawing in Miss Amy's sketchbook and making himself agreeable or otherwise to everybody) pointed me out to a parson and said, "That's him." This was Alexander Ross and his wife.

The last stage of the steamer now approached, Miss Amy and I lamenting pathetically that Iona was so near. "People meet in this way," quoth she, "and then lose sight of one another so soon." We all landed together, Bough and I and the Rosses with our baggage; and went together over the ruins. I was here left with the cousin and the aunt, during which I learned that said cousin sees me *every Sunday* in St. Stephen's. Oho! thought I, at the "every." The aunt was very anxious to know who that

strange, wild man was? (didn't I wish Samuel in Tophet!). Of course, in reply, I drew it strong about eccentric genius and my never having known him before, and a good deal that was perhaps "strained to the extremest limit of the fact."

The steamer left, and Miss Amy and her cousin waved their handkerchiefs, until my arm in answering them was nearly broken. I believe women's arms must be better made for this exercise: mine ache still; and I regretted at the time that the handkerchief had seen service. Altogether, however, I was left in a pleasant frame of mind.

Being thus left alone, Bough, I, the Rosses, Professor Blackie, and an Englishman called M – : these people were going to remain the night, except the Professor, who is resident there at present. They were going to dine *en compagnie* and wished us to join the party; but we had already committed ourselves by mistake to the wrong hotel, and besides, we wished to be off as soon as wind and tide were against us to Earraid. We went up; Bough selected a place for sketching and blocked in the sketch for Mrs. R.; and we all talked together. Bough told us his family history and a lot of strange things about old Cumberland life; among others, how he had known "John Peel" of pleasant memory in song, and of how that worthy hunted. At five, down we go to the Argyll Hotel, and wait dinner. Broth – "nice broth" – fresh herrings, and fowl had been promised. At 5.50, I get the shovel and tongs and drum them at the stair-head till a response comes from below that the nice broth is at hand. I boast of my engineering, and Bough compares me to the Abbot of Arbroath who originated the Inchcape Bell. At last, in comes the tureen and the hand-maid lifts the cover. "Rice soup!" I yell; "O no! none o' that for me!" – "Yes," says Bough savagely; "but Miss Amy didn't take *me* downstairs to eat salmon." Accordingly he is helped. How his face fell. "I imagine myself in the accident ward of the Infirmary," quoth he. It was, purely and simply, rice and water. After this, we have another weary pause, and then herrings in a state of mash and potatoes like iron. "Send the potatoes out to Prussia for grape-shot," was the suggestion. I dined off broken herrings and dry bread. At last "the supreme moment comes," and the fowl in a lordly dish is carried in. On the cover being raised, there is something so forlorn and miserable about the aspect of the animal that we both roar with laughter. Then Bough, taking up knife and fork, turns the "swarry" over and over, shaking doubtfully his head. "There's an aspect of quiet resistance about the beggar," says he, "that looks bad." However, to work he falls until the sweat stands on his brow and a dismembered leg falls, dull and leaden-like, on to my dish. To eat it was simply impossible. I did not know before that flesh could be so tough. "The strongest jaws in England," says Bough piteously, harpooning his dry morsel, "couldn't eat this leg in less than twelve hours." Nothing for it now, but to order boat and bill. "That fowl," says Bough to the landlady, "is of a breed I know. I knew the cut of its jib whenever it was put down. That was the grandmother of the cock that frightened Peter." – "I thought it was a historical animal," says I. "What a shame to kill it. It's as bad as eating Whittington's cat or the Dog of Montargis." – "Na – na, it's no so old," says the landlady, "but it eats hard." – "Eats!" I cry, "where do you find that? Very little of that verb with us." So with more raillery, we pay six shillings for our festival and run over to Earraid, shaking the dust of the Argyll Hotel from off our feet.

I can write no more just now, and I hope you will be able to decipher so much; for it contains matter. Really, the whole of yesterday's work would do in a novel without one little bit of embellishment; and, indeed, few novels are so amusing. Bough, Miss Amy, Mrs. Ross, Blackie, M – the parson – all these were such distinct characters, the incidents were so entertaining, and the scenery so fine, that the whole would have made a novelist's fortune.

MY DEAR FATHER, – No landing to-day, as the sea runs high on the rock. They are at the second course of the first story on the rock. I have as yet had no time here; so this is  $\alpha$  and  $\omega$  of my business news. – Your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Churchill Babington

This is addressed to a favourite cousin of the Balfour clan, married to a Cambridge colleague of mine, Professor Churchill Babington of learned and amiable memory, whose home was at the college living of Cockfield near Bury St. Edmunds. Here Stevenson had visited them in the previous year. “Mrs. Hutchinson” is, of course, Lucy Hutchinson’s famous *Life* of her husband the regicide.  
[*Swanston Cottage, Lothianburn, Summer 1871.*]

MY DEAR MAUD, – If you have forgotten the handwriting – as is like enough – you will find the name of a former correspondent (don’t know how to spell that word) at the end. I have begun to write to you before now, but always stuck somehow, and left it to drown in a drawerful of like fiascos. This time I am determined to carry through, though I have nothing specially to say.

We look fairly like summer this morning; the trees are blackening out of their spring greens; the warmer suns have melted the hoarfrost of daisies of the paddock; and the blackbird, I fear, already beginning to “stint his pipe of mellow days” – which is very apposite (I can’t spell anything to-day —*one p* or *two*?) and pretty. All the same, we have been having shocking weather – cold winds and grey skies.

I have been reading heaps of nice books; but I can’t go back so far. I am reading Clarendon’s *Hist. Rebell.* at present, with which I am more pleased than I expected, which is saying a good deal. It is a pet idea of mine that one gets more real truth out of one avowed partisan than out of a dozen of your sham impartialists – wolves in sheep’s clothing – simpering honesty as they suppress documents. After all, what one wants to know is not what people did, but why they did it – or rather, why they *thought* they did it; and to learn that, you should go to the men themselves. Their very falsehood is often more than another man’s truth.

I have possessed myself of Mrs. Hutchinson, which, of course, I admire, etc. But is there not an irritating deliberation and correctness about her and everybody connected with her? If she would only write bad grammar, or forget to finish a sentence, or do something or other that looks fallible, it would be a relief. I sometimes wish the old Colonel had got drunk and beaten her, in the bitterness of my spirit. I know I felt a weight taken off my heart when I heard he was extravagant. It is quite possible to be too good for this evil world; and unquestionably, Mrs. Hutchinson was. The way in which she talks of herself makes one’s blood run cold. There – I am glad to have got that out – but don’t say it to anybody – seal of secrecy.

Please tell Mr. Babington that I have never forgotten one of his drawings – a Rubens, I think – a woman holding up a model ship. That woman had more life in her than ninety per cent. of the lame humans that you see crippling about this earth.

By the way, that is a feature in art which seems to have come in with the Italians. Your old Greek statues have scarce enough vitality in them to keep their monstrous bodies fresh withal. A shrewd country attorney, in a turned white neckcloth and rusty blacks, would just take one of these Agamemnons and Ajaxes quietly by his beautiful, strong arm, trot the unresisting statue down a little gallery of legal shams, and turn the poor fellow out at the other end, “naked, as from the earth he came.” There is more latent life, more of the coiled spring in the sleeping dog, about a recumbent figure of Michael Angelo’s than about the most excited of Greek statues. The very marble seems to wrinkle with a wild energy that we never feel except in dreams.

I think this letter has turned into a sermon, but I had nothing interesting to talk about.

I do wish you and Mr. Babington would think better of it and come north this summer. We should be so glad to see you both. *Do* reconsider it. – Believe me, my dear Maud, ever your most affectionate cousin,

*Louis Stevenson.*

## **To Alison Cunningham**

The following is the first which has been preserved of many letters to the admirable nurse whose care, during his ailing childhood, had done so much both to preserve Stevenson's life and awaken his love of tales and poetry, and of whom until his death he thought with the utmost constancy of affection. The letter bears no sign of date or place, but by the handwriting would seem to belong to this year: —  
*1871?*

MY DEAR CUMMY, – I was greatly pleased by your letter in many ways. Of course, I was glad to hear from you; you know, you and I have so many old stories between us, that even if there was nothing else, even if there was not a very sincere respect and affection, we should always be glad to pass a nod. I say, “even if there was not.” But you know right well there is. Do not suppose that I shall ever forget those long, bitter nights, when I coughed and coughed and was so unhappy, and you were so patient and loving with a poor, sick child. Indeed, Cummy, I wish I might become a man worth talking of, if it were only that you should not have thrown away your pains.

Happily, it is not the result of our acts that makes them brave and noble, but the acts themselves and the unselfish love that moved us to do them. “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these.” My dear old nurse, and you know there is nothing a man can say nearer his heart except his mother or his wife – my dear old nurse, God will make good to you all the good that you have done, and mercifully forgive you all the evil. And next time when the spring comes round, and everything is beginning once again, if you should happen to think that you might have had a child of your own, and that it was hard you should have spent so many years taking care of some one else's prodigal, just you think this – you have been for a great deal in my life; you have made much that there is in me, just as surely as if you had conceived me; and there are sons who are more ungrateful to their own mothers than I am to you. For I am not ungrateful, my dear Cummy, and it is with a very sincere emotion that I write myself your little boy,

*Louis.*

## **To Charles Baxter**

After a winter of troubled health, Stevenson had gone to Dunblane for a change in early spring; and thence writes to his college companion and lifelong friend, Mr. Charles Baxter: —  
*Dunblane, Friday, 5th March 1872.*

MY DEAR BAXTER, – By the date you may perhaps understand the purport of my letter without any words wasted about the matter. I cannot walk with you to-morrow, and you must not expect me. I came yesterday afternoon to Bridge of Allan, and have been very happy ever since, as every place is sanctified by the eighth sense, Memory. I walked up here this morning (three miles, *tu-dieu!* a good stretch for me), and passed one of my favourite places in the world, and one that I very much affect in spirit when the body is tied down and brought immovably to anchor on a sickbed. It is a meadow and bank on a corner on the river, and is connected in my mind inseparably with Virgil's *Eclogues*. *Hic corulis mistos inter consedimus ulmos*, or something very like that, the passage begins (only I know my short-winded Latinity must have come to grief over even this much of quotation); and here, to a wish, is just such a cavern as Menalcas might shelter himself withal from the bright noon,

and, with his lips curled backward, pipe himself blue in the face, while *Messieurs les Arcadiens* would roll out those cloying hexameters that sing themselves in one's mouth to such a curious lilting chant.

In such weather one has the bird's need to whistle; and I, who am specially incompetent in this art, must content myself by chattering away to you on this bit of paper. All the way along I was thanking God that he had made me and the birds and everything just as they are and not otherwise; for although there was no sun, the air was so thrilled with robins and blackbirds that it made the heart tremble with joy, and the leaves are far enough forward on the underwood to give a fine promise for the future. Even myself, as I say, I would not have had changed in one *iota* this forenoon, in spite of all my idleness and Guthrie's lost paper, which is ever present with me – a horrible phantom.

No one can be alone at home or in a quite new place. Memory and you must go hand in hand with (at least) decent weather if you wish to cook up a proper dish of solitude. It is in these little flights of mine that I get more pleasure than in anything else. Now, at present, I am supremely uneasy and restless – almost to the extent of pain; but O! how I enjoy it, and how I *shall* enjoy it afterwards (please God), if I get years enough allotted to me for the thing to ripen in. When I am a very old and very respectable citizen with white hair and bland manners and a gold watch, I shall hear three crows cawing in my heart, as I heard them this morning: I vote for old age and eighty years of retrospect. Yet, after all, I dare say, a short shrift and a nice green grave are about as desirable.

Poor devil! how I am wearying you! Cheer up. Two pages more, and my letter reaches its term, for I have no more paper. What delightful things inns and waiters and bagmen are! If we didn't travel now and then, we should forget what the feeling of life is. The very cushion of a railway carriage – “the things restorative to the touch.” I can't write, confound it! That's because I am so tired with my walk... Believe me, ever your affectionate friend,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Charles Baxter

The “Spec.” is, of course, the famous and historical debating society (the Speculative Society) of Edinburgh University, to which Stevenson had been elected on the strength of his conversational powers, and to whose meetings he contributed several essays.

*Dunblane, Tuesday, 9th April 1872.*

MY DEAR BAXTER, – I don't know what you mean. I know nothing about the Standing Committee of the Spec., did not know that such a body existed, and even if it doth exist, must sadly repudiate all association with such “goodly fellowship.” I am a “Rural Voluptuary” at present. *That* is what is the matter with me. The Spec. may go whistle. As for “C. Baxter, Esq.,” who is he? “One Baxter, or Bagster, a secretary,” I say to mine acquaintance, “is at present disquieting my leisure with certain illegal, uncharitable, unchristian, and unconstitutional documents called *Business Letters: The affair is in the hands of the Police.*” Do you hear *that*, you evildoer? Sending business letters is surely a far more hateful and slimy degree of wickedness than sending threatening letters; the man who throws grenades and torpedoes is less malicious; the Devil in red-hot hell rubs his hands with glee as he reckons up the number that go forth spreading pain and anxiety with each delivery of the post.

I have been walking to-day by a colonnade of beeches along the brawling Allan. My character for sanity is quite gone, seeing that I cheered my lonely way with the following, in a triumphant chant: “Thank God for the grass, and the fir-trees, and the crows, and the sheep, and the sunshine, and the shadows of the fir-trees.” I hold that he is a poor mean devil who can walk alone, in such a place and in such weather, and doesn't set up his lungs and cry back to the birds and the river. Follow, follow, follow me. Come hither, come hither, come hither – here shall you see – no enemy – except a very slight remnant of winter and its rough weather. My bedroom, when I awoke this morning, was

full of bird-songs, which is the greatest pleasure in life. Come hither, come hither, come hither, and when you come bring the third part of the *Earthly Paradise*; you can get it for me in Elliot's for two and tenpence (2s. 10d.) (*business habits*). Also bring an ounce of honeydew from Wilson's.

R. L. S.

### To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

In the previous year, 1871, it had become apparent that Stevenson was neither fitted by bodily health nor by inclination for the family profession of civil engineer. Accordingly his summer excursions were no longer to the harbour works and lighthouses of Scotland, but to the ordinary scenes of holiday travel abroad.

*Brussels, Thursday, 25th July 1872.*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – I am here at last, sitting in my room, without coat or waistcoat, and with both window and door open, and yet perspiring like a terra-cotta jug or a Gruyère cheese.

We had a very good passage, which we certainly deserved, in compensation for having to sleep on the cabin floor, and finding absolutely nothing fit for human food in the whole filthy embarkation. We made up for lost time by sleeping on deck a good part of the forenoon. When I woke, Simpson was still sleeping the sleep of the just, on a coil of ropes and (as appeared afterwards) his own hat; so I got a bottle of Bass and a pipe and laid hold of an old Frenchman of somewhat filthy aspect (*fiat experimentum in corpore vili*) to try my French upon. I made very heavy weather of it. The Frenchman had a very pretty young wife; but my French always deserted me entirely when I had to answer her, and so she soon drew away and left me to her lord, who talked of French politics, Africa, and domestic economy with great vivacity. From Ostend a smoking-hot journey to Brussels. At Brussels we went off after dinner to the Parc. If any person wants to be happy, I should advise the Parc. You sit drinking iced drinks and smoking penny cigars under great old trees. The band place, covered walks, etc., are all lit up. And you can't fancy how beautiful was the contrast of the great masses of lamplit foliage and the dark sapphire night sky with just one blue star set overhead in the middle of the largest patch. In the dark walks, too, there are crowds of people whose faces you cannot see, and here and there a colossal white statue at the corner of an alley that gives the place a nice, *artificial*, eighteenth century sentiment. There was a good deal of summer lightning blinking overhead, and the black avenues and white statues leapt out every minute into short-lived distinctness.

I get up to add one thing more. There is in the hotel a boy in whom I take the deepest interest. I cannot tell you his age, but the very first time I saw him (when I was at dinner yesterday) I was very much struck with his appearance. There is something very leonine in his face, with a dash of the negro especially, if I remember aright, in the mouth. He has a great quantity of dark hair, curling in great rolls, not in little corkscrews, and a pair of large, dark, and very steady, bold, bright eyes. His manners are those of a prince. I felt like an overgrown ploughboy beside him. He speaks English perfectly, but with, I think, sufficient foreign accent to stamp him as a Russian, especially when his manners are taken into account. I don't think I ever saw any one who looked like a hero before. After breakfast this morning I was talking to him in the court, when he mentioned casually that he had caught a snake in the Riesengebirge. "I have it here," he said; "would you like to see it?" I said yes; and putting his hand into his breast-pocket, he drew forth not a dried serpent skin, but the head and neck of the reptile writhing and shooting out its horrible tongue in my face. You may conceive what a fright I got. I send off this single sheet just now in order to let you know I am safe across; but you must not expect letters often.

R. L. Stevenson.

P.S.– The snake was about a yard long, but harmless, and now, he says, quite tame.

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

*Hotel Landsberg, Frankfurt, Monday, 29th July 1872.*

... Last night I met with rather an amusing adventurette. Seeing a church door open, I went in, and was led by most importunate finger-bills up a long stair to the top of the tower. The father smoking at the door, the mother and the three daughters received me as if I was a friend of the family and had come in for an evening visit. The youngest daughter (about thirteen, I suppose, and a pretty little girl) had been learning English at the school, and was anxious to play it off upon a real, veritable Englishman; so we had a long talk, and I was shown photographs, etc., Marie and I talking, and the others looking on with evident delight at having such a linguist in the family. As all my remarks were duly translated and communicated to the rest, it was quite a good German lesson. There was only one contretemps during the whole interview – the arrival of another visitor, in the shape (surely) the last of God's creatures, a wood-worm of the most unnatural and hideous appearance, with one great striped horn sticking out of his nose like a boltsprit. If there are many wood-worms in Germany, I shall come home. The most courageous men in the world must be entomologists. I had rather be a lion-tamer.

To-day I got rather a curiosity —*Lieder und Balladen von Robert Burns*, translated by one Silbergleit, and not so ill done either. Armed with which, I had a swim in the Main, and then bread and cheese and Bavarian beer in a sort of café, or at least the German substitute for a café; but what a falling off after the heavenly forenoons in Brussels!

I have bought a meerschaum out of local sentiment, and am now very low and nervous about the bargain, having paid dearer than I should in England, and got a worse article, if I can form a judgment.

Do write some more, somebody. To-morrow I expect I shall go into lodgings, as this hotel work makes the money disappear like butter in a furnace. – Meanwhile believe me, ever your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

*Hotel Landsberg, Thursday, 1st August 1872.*

... Yesterday I walked to Eckenheim, a village a little way out of Frankfurt, and turned into the alehouse. In the room, which was just such as it would have been in Scotland, were the landlady, two neighbours, and an old peasant eating raw sausage at the far end. I soon got into conversation; and was astonished when the landlady, having asked whether I were an Englishman, and received an answer in the affirmative, proceeded to inquire further whether I were not also a Scotchman. It turned out that a Scotch doctor – a professor – a poet – who wrote books —*gross wie das*— had come nearly every day out of Frankfurt to the *Eckenheimer Wirthschaft*, and had left behind him a most savoury memory in the hearts of all its customers. One man ran out to find his name for me, and returned with the news that it was *Cobie* (Scobie, I suspect); and during his absence the rest were pouring into my ears the fame and acquirements of my countryman. He was, in some undecipherable manner, connected with the Queen of England and one of the Princesses. He had been in Turkey, and had there married a wife of immense wealth. They could find apparently no measure adequate to express the size of his books. In one way or another, he had amassed a princely fortune, and had apparently only one sorrow, his daughter to wit, who had absconded into a *Kloster*, with a considerable slice of the mother's *Geld*. I told them we had no *Klosters* in Scotland, with a certain feeling of superiority. No more had they, I was told – “*Hier ist unser Kloster!*” and the speaker motioned with both arms round the taproom. Although the first torrent was exhausted, yet the Doctor came up again in all sorts

of ways, and with or without occasion, throughout the whole interview; as, for example, when one man, taking his pipe out of his mouth and shaking his head, remarked *à propos* of nothing and with almost defiant conviction, “*Er war ein feiner Mann, der Herr Doctor,*” and was answered by another with “*Yaw, yaw, und trank immer rothen Wein.*”

Setting aside the Doctor, who had evidently turned the brains of the entire village, they were intelligent people. One thing in particular struck me, their honesty in admitting that here they spoke bad German, and advising me to go to Coburg or Leipsic for German. – “*Sie sprechen da rein*” (clean), said one; and they all nodded their heads together like as many mandarins, and repeated *rein, so rein* in chorus.

Of course we got upon Scotland. The hostess said, “*Die Schottländer trinken gern Schnapps,*” which may be freely translated, “Scotchmen are horrid fond of whisky.” It was impossible, of course, to combat such a truism; and so I proceeded to explain the construction of toddy, interrupted by a cry of horror when I mentioned the *hot* water; and thence, as I find is always the case, to the most ghastly romancing about Scottish scenery and manners, the Highland dress, and everything national or local that I could lay my hands upon. Now that I have got my German Burns, I lean a good deal upon him for opening a conversation, and read a few translations to every yawning audience that I can gather. I am grown most insufferably national, you see. I fancy it is a punishment for my want of it at ordinary times. Now, what do you think, there was a waiter in this very hotel, but, alas! he is now gone, who sang (from morning to night, as my informant said with a shrug at the recollection) what but *'s ist lange her*, the German version of Auld Lang Syne; so you see, madame, the finest lyric ever written *will* make its way out of whatsoever corner of patois it found its birth in.

“Mein Herz ist im Hochland, mein Herz ist nicht hier,  
Mein Herz ist im Hochland im grünen Revier.  
Im grünen Reviere zu jagen das Reh;  
Mein Herz ist im Hochland, wo immer ich geh.“

I don't think I need translate that for you.

There is one thing that burthens me a good deal in my patriotic garrulage, and that is the black ignorance in which I grope about everything, as, for example, when I gave yesterday a full and, I fancy, a startlingly incorrect account of Scotch education to a very stolid German on a garden bench: he sat and perspired under it, however, with much composure. I am generally glad enough to fall back again, after these political interludes, upon Burns, toddy, and the Highlands.

I go every night to the theatre, except when there is no opera. I cannot stand a play yet; but I am already very much improved, and can understand a good deal of what goes on.

*Friday, August 2, 1872.*— In the evening, at the theatre, I had a great laugh. Lord Allcash in *Fra Diavolo*, with his white hat, red guide-books, and bad German, was the *pièce-de-résistance* from a humorous point of view; and I had the satisfaction of knowing that in my own small way I could minister the same amusement whenever I chose to open my mouth.

I am just going off to do some German with Simpson. – Your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Thomas Stevenson

*Frankfurt, Rosengasse 13, August 4, 1872.*

MY DEAR FATHER, – You will perceive by the head of this page that we have at last got into lodgings, and powerfully mean ones too. If I were to call the street anything but *shady*, I should be boasting. The people sit at their doors in shirt-sleeves, smoking as they do in Seven Dials of a Sunday.

Last night we went to bed about ten, for the first time *householders* in Germany – real Teutons, with no deception, spring, or false bottom. About half-past one there began such a trumpeting, shouting, pealing of bells, and scurrying hither and thither of feet as woke every person in Frankfurt out of their first sleep with a vague sort of apprehension that the last day was at hand. The whole street was alive, and we could hear people talking in their rooms, or crying to passers-by from their windows, all around us. At last I made out what a man was saying in the next room. It was a fire in Sachsenhausen, he said (Sachsenhausen is the suburb on the other side of the Main), and he wound up with one of the most tremendous falsehoods on record, “*Hier alles ruht*– here all is still.” If it can be said to be still in an engine factory, or in the stomach of a volcano when it is meditating an eruption, he might have been justified in what he said, but not otherwise. The tumult continued unabated for near an hour; but as one grew used to it, it gradually resolved itself into three bells, answering each other at short intervals across the town, a man shouting at ever shorter intervals and with superhuman energy, “*Feuer – im Sachsenhausen*,” and the almost continuous winding of all manner of bugles and trumpets, sometimes in stirring flourishes, and sometimes in mere tuneless wails. Occasionally there was another rush of feet past the window, and once there was a mighty drumming, down between us and the river, as though the soldiery were turning out to keep the peace. This was all we had of the fire, except a great cloud, all flushed red with the glare, above the roofs on the other side of the Gasse; but it was quite enough to put me entirely off my sleep and make me keenly alive to three or four gentlemen who were strolling leisurely about my person, and every here and there leaving me somewhat as a keepsake... However, everything has its compensation, and when day came at last, and the sparrows awoke with trills and *carol-ets*, the dawn seemed to fall on me like a sleeping draught. I went to the window and saw the sparrows about the eaves, and a great troop of doves go strolling up the paven Gasse, seeking what they may devour. And so to sleep, despite fleas and fire-alarms, and clocks chiming the hours out of neighbouring houses at all sorts of odd times and with the most charming want of unanimity.

We have got settled down in Frankfurt, and like the place very much. Simpson and I seem to get on very well together. We suit each other capitally; and it is an awful joke to be living (two would-be advocates, and one a baronet) in this supremely mean abode.

The abode is, however, a great improvement on the hotel, and I think we shall grow quite fond of it. – Ever your affectionate son,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

*13 Rosengasse, Frankfurt, Tuesday Morning, August 1872.*

... Last night I was at the theatre and heard *Die Judin (La Juive)*, and was thereby terribly excited. At last, in the middle of the fifth act, which was perfectly beastly, I had to slope. I could stand even seeing the cauldron with the sham fire beneath, and the two hateful executioners in red; but when at last the girl’s courage breaks down, and, grasping her father’s arm, she cries out – O so shudderfully! – I thought it high time to be out of that *galère*, and so I do not know yet whether it ends well or ill; but if I ever afterwards find that they do carry things to the extremity, I shall think more meanly of my species. It was raining and cold outside, so I went into a *Bierhalle*, and sat and brooded over a *Schnitt* (half-glass) for nearly an hour. An opera is far more *real* than real life to me. It seems as if stage illusion, and particularly this hardest to swallow and most conventional illusion of them all – an opera – would never stale upon me. I wish that life was an opera. I should like to *live* in one; but I don’t know in what quarter of the globe I shall find a society so constituted. Besides, it would soon pall: imagine asking for three-kreuzer cigars in recitative, or giving the washerwoman the inventory of your dirty clothes in a sustained and *flourishous* aria.

I am in a right good mood this morning to sit here and write to you; but not to give you news. There is a great stir of life, in a quiet, almost country fashion, all about us here. Some one is hammering a beef-steak in the *rez-de-chaussée*: there is a great clink of pitchers and noise of the pump-handle at the public well in the little square-kin round the corner. The children, all seemingly within a month, and certainly none above five, that always go halting and stumbling up and down the roadway, are ordinarily very quiet, and sit sedately puddling in the gutter, trying, I suppose, poor little devils! to understand their *Muttersprache*; but they, too, make themselves heard from time to time in little incomprehensible antiphonies, about the drift that comes down to them by their rivers from the strange lands higher up the Gasse. Above all, there is here such a twittering of canaries (I can see twelve out of our window), and such continual visitation of grey doves and big-nosed sparrows, as make our little bye-street into a perfect aviary.

I look across the Gasse at our opposite neighbour, as he dandles his baby about, and occasionally takes a spoonful or two of some pale slimy nastiness that looks like *dead porridge*, if you can take the conception. These two are his only occupations. All day long you can hear him singing over the brat when he is not eating; or see him eating when he is not keeping baby. Besides which, there comes into his house a continual round of visitors that puts me in mind of the luncheon hour at home. As he has thus no ostensible avocation, we have named him “the W.S.” to give a flavour of respectability to the street.

Enough of the Gasse. The weather is here much colder. It rained a good deal yesterday; and though it is fair and sunshiny again to-day, and we can still sit, of course, with our windows open, yet there is no more excuse for the siesta; and the bathe in the river, except for cleanliness, is no longer a necessity of life. The Main is very swift. In one part of the baths it is next door to impossible to swim against it, and I suspect that, out in the open, it would be quite impossible. – Adieu, my dear mother, and believe me, ever your affectionate son,

*Robert Louis Stevenson*  
(*Rentier*).

## To Charles Baxter

On the way home with Sir Walter Simpson from Germany. The L.J.R. herein mentioned was a short-lived Essay Club of only six members; its meetings were held in a public-house in Advocate’s Close; the meaning of its initials (as recently divulged by Mr. Baxter) was Liberty, Justice, Reverence; no doubt understood by the members in some fresh and esoteric sense of their own.

*Boulogne Sur Mer, Wednesday, 3rd or 4th September 1872.*

Blame me not that this epistle  
Is the first you have from me.  
Idleness has held me fettered,  
But at last the times are bettered  
And once more I wet my whistle  
Here, in France beside the sea.

All the green and idle weather  
I have had in sun and shower,  
Such an easy warm subsistence,  
Such an indolent existence  
I should find it hard to sever

Day from day and hour from hour.

Many a tract-provided ranter  
May upbraid me, dark and sour,  
Many a bland Utilitarian  
Or excited Millenarian,  
– “*Pereunt et imputantur*  
You must speak to every hour.”

But (the very term’s deceptive)  
You at least, my friend, will see,  
That in sunny grassy meadows  
Trailed across by moving shadows  
To be actively receptive  
Is as much as man can be.

He that all the winter grapples  
Difficulties, thrust and ward —  
Needs to cheer him thro’ his duty  
Memories of sun and beauty  
Orchards with the russet apples  
Lying scattered on the sward.

Many such I keep in prison,  
Keep them here at heart unseen,  
Till my muse again rehearses  
Long years hence, and in my verses  
You shall meet them rearisen  
Ever comely, ever green.

You know how they never perish,  
How, in time of later art,  
Memories consecrate and sweeten  
These defaced and tempest-beaten  
Flowers of former years we cherish,  
Half a life, against our heart.

Most, those love-fruits withered greenly,  
Those frail, sickly amourettes,  
How they brighten with the distance  
Take new strength and new existence  
Till we see them sitting queenly  
Crowned and courted by regrets!

All that loveliest and best is,  
Aureole-fashion round their head,  
They that looked in life but plainly,  
How they stir our spirits vainly  
When they come to us Alcestis-

like returning from the dead!

Not the old love but another,  
Bright she comes at Memory's call  
Our forgotten vows reviving  
To a newer, livelier living,  
As the dead child to the mother  
Seems the fairest child of all.

Thus our Goethe, sacred master,  
Travelling backward thro' his youth,  
Surely wandered wrong in trying  
To renew the old, undying  
Loves that cling in memory faster  
Than they ever lived in truth.

So; *en voilà assez de mauvais vers*. Let us finish with a word or two in honest prose, tho' indeed I shall so soon be back again and, if you be in town as I hope, so soon get linked again down the Lothian road by a cigar or two and a liquor, that it is perhaps scarce worth the postage to send my letter on before me. I have just been long enough away to be satisfied and even anxious to get home again and talk the matter over with my friends. I shall have plenty to tell you; and principally plenty that I do not care to write; and I daresay, you, too, will have a lot of gossip. What about Ferrier? Is the L.J.R. think you to go naked and unashamed this winter? He with his charming idiosyncrasy was in my eyes the vine-leaf that preserved our self-respect. All the rest of us are such shadows, compared to his full-flavoured personality; but I must not spoil my own *début*. I am trenching upon one of the essayettes which I propose to introduce as a novelty this year before that august assembly. For we must not let it die. It is a sickly baby, but what with nursing, and pap, and the like, I do not see why it should not have a stout manhood after all, and perhaps a green old age. Eh! when we are old (if we ever should be) that too will be one of those cherished memories I have been so rhapsodizing over. We must consecrate our room. We must make it a museum of bright recollections; so that we may go back there white-headed, and say "Vixi." After all, new countries, sun, music, and all the rest can never take down our gusty, rainy, smoky, grim old city out of the first place that it has been making for itself in the bottom of my soul, by all pleasant and hard things that have befallen me for these past twenty years or so. My heart is buried there – say, in Advocate's Close!

Simpson and I got on very well together, and made a very suitable pair. I like him much better than I did when I started which was almost more than I hoped for.

If you should chance to see Bob, give him my news or if you have the letter about you, let him see it. – Ever your Affct. friend,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## **To Charles Baxter**

Through the jesting tenor of this letter is to be discerned a vein of more than half serious thinking very characteristic of R. L. S. alike as youth and man.

*17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, October 1872.*

MY DEAR BAXTER, – I am gum-boiled and face swollen to an unprecedented degree. It is very depressing to suffer from gibber that cannot be brought to a head. I cannot speak it, because my face is so swollen and stiff that enunciation must be deliberate – a thing your true gibberer cannot hold

up his head under; and writ gibber is somehow not gibber at all, it does not come forth, does not *flow*, with that fine irrational freedom that it loves in speech – it does not afford relief to the packed bosom.

Hence I am suffering from *suppressed gibber*– an uneasy complaint; and like all cases of suppressed humours, this hath a nasty tendency to the brain. Therefore (the more confused I get, the more I lean on Thus’s and Hences and Therefore) you must not be down upon me, most noble Festus, altho’ this letter should smack of some infirmity of judgment. I speak the words of soberness and truth; and would you were not almost but altogether as I am, except this swelling. Lord, Lord, if we could change personalities how we should hate it. How I should rebel at the office, repugn under the Ulster coat, and repudiate your monkish humours thus unjustly and suddenly thrust upon poor, infidel me! And as for you – why, my dear Charles, “a mouse that hath its lodging in a cat’s ear” would not be so uneasy as you in your new conditions. I do not see how your temperament would come thro’ the feverish longings to do things that cannot then (or perhaps ever) be accomplished, the feverish unrests and damnable indecisions, that it takes all my easy-going spirits to come through. A vane can live out anything in the shape of a wind; and that is how I can be, and am, a more serious person than you. Just as the light French seemed very serious to Sterne, light L. Stevenson can afford to bob about over the top of any deep sea of prospect or retrospect, where ironclad C. Baxter would incontinently go down with all hands. A fool is generally the wisest person out. The wise man must shut his eyes to all the perils and horrors that lie round him; but the cap and bells can go bobbing along the most slippery ledges and the bauble will not stir up sleeping lions. Hurray! for motley, for a good sound *insouciance*, for a healthy philosophic carelessness!

My dear Baxter, a word in your ear – “DON’T YOU WISH YOU WERE A FOOL?” How easy the world would go on with you – literally on castors. The only reason a wise man can assign for getting drunk is that he wishes to enjoy for a while the blessed immunities and sunshiny weather of the land of fooldom. But a fool, who dwells ever there, has no excuse at all. *That* is a happy land, if you like – and not so far away either. Take a fool’s advice and let us strive without ceasing to get into it. Hark in your ear again: “THEY ALLOW PEOPLE TO REASON IN THAT LAND.” I wish I could take you by the hand and lead you away into its pleasant boundaries. There is no custom-house on the frontier, and you may take in what books you will. There are no manners and customs; but men and women grow up, like trees in a still, well-walled garden, “at their own sweet will.” There is no prescribed or customary folly – no motley, cap, or bauble: out of the well of each one’s own innate absurdity he is allowed and encouraged freely to draw and to communicate; and it is a strange thing how this natural fooling comes so nigh to one’s better thoughts of wisdom; and stranger still, that all this discord of people speaking in their own natural moods and keys, masses itself into a far more perfect harmony than all the dismal, official unison in which they sing in other countries. Part-singing seems best all the world over.

I who live in England must wear the hackneyed symbols of the profession, to show that I have (at least) consular immunities, coming as I do out of another land, where they are not so wise as they are here, but fancy that God likes what he makes and is not best pleased with us when we deface and dissemble all that he has given us and put about us to one common standard of – Highty-Tighty! – when was a jester obliged to finish his sentence? I cut so strong a pirouette that all my bells jingle, and come down in an attitude, with one hand upon my hip. The evening’s entertainment is over, – “and if our kyind friends – “

Hurrah! I feel relieved. I have put out my gibber, and if you have read thus far, you will have taken it in. I wonder if you will ever come this length. I shall try a trap for you, and insult you here, on this last page. “O Baxter what a damned humbug you are!” There, – shall this insult bloom and die unseen, or will you come toward me, when next we meet, with a face deformed with anger and demand speedy and bloody satisfaction. *Nous verrons*, which is French.

R. L. Stevenson.

## To Charles Baxter

In the winter of 1872-73 Stevenson was out of health again; and by the beginning of spring there began the trouble which for the next twelve months clouded his home life. The following shows exactly in what spirit he took it: —  
*17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, Sunday, February 2, 1873.*

MY DEAR BAXTER, – The thunderbolt has fallen with a vengeance now. On Friday night after leaving you, in the course of conversation, my father put me one or two questions as to beliefs, which I candidly answered. I really hate all lying so much now – a new found honesty that has somehow come out of my late illness – that I could not so much as hesitate at the time; but if I had foreseen the real hell of everything since, I think I should have lied, as I have done so often before. I so far thought of my father, but I had forgotten my mother. And now! they are both ill, both silent, both as down in the mouth as if – I can find no simile. You may fancy how happy it is for me. If it were not too late, I think I could almost find it in my heart to retract, but it is too late; and again, am I to live my whole life as one falsehood? Of course, it is rougher than hell upon my father, but can I help it? They don't see either that my game is not the light-hearted scoffer; that I am not (as they call me) a careless infidel. I believe as much as they do, only generally in the inverse ratio: I am, I think, as honest as they can be in what I hold. I have not come hastily to my views. I reserve (as I told them) many points until I acquire fuller information, and do not think I am thus justly to be called "horrible atheist."

Now, what is to take place? What a curse I am to my parents! O Lord, what a pleasant thing it is to have just *damned* the happiness of (probably) the only two people who care a damn about you in the world.

What is my life to be at this rate? What, you rascal? Answer – I have a pistol at your throat. If all that I hold true and most desire to spread is to be such death, and worse than death, in the eyes of my father and mother, what the *devil* am I to do?

Here is a good heavy cross with a vengeance, and all rough with rusty nails that tear your fingers, only it is not I that have to carry it alone; I hold the light end, but the heavy burden falls on these two.

Don't – I don't know what I was going to say. I am an abject idiot, which, all things considered, is not remarkable. – Ever your affectionate and horrible atheist,

*R. L. Stevenson.*

## II STUDENT DAYS — *Continued*

### NEW FRIENDSHIPS – ORDERED SOUTH

July 1873-May 1874

The year 1873 was a critical one in Stevenson's life. Late in July he went for the second time to pay a visit to Cockfield Rectory, the pleasant Suffolk home of his cousin Mrs. Churchill Babington and her husband. Another guest at the same time was Mrs. Sitwell – now my wife – an intimate friend and connection by marriage of the hostess. I was shortly due to join the party, when Mrs. Sitwell wrote telling me of the "fine young spirit" she had found under her friend's roof, and suggesting that I should hasten my visit so as to make his acquaintance before he left. I came accordingly, and from that time on the fine young spirit became a leading interest both in her life and mine. He had thrown himself on her sympathies, in that troubled hour of his youth, with entire dependence almost from the first, and clung to her devotedly for the next two years as to an inspirer, consoler, and guide. Under her influence he began for the first time to see his way in life, and to believe hopefully and manfully in his own powers and future. To encourage such hopes further, and to lend what hand one could towards their fulfilment, became quickly one of the first of cares and pleasures. It was impossible not to recognise, in this very un-academical type of Scottish youth, a spirit the most interesting and full of promise. His social charm was already at its height, and quite irresistible; but inwardly he was full of trouble and self-doubt. If he could steer himself or be steered safely through the difficulties of youth, and if he could learn to write with half the charm and genius that shone from his presence and conversation, there seemed room to hope for the highest from him. He went back to Edinburgh in the beginning of September full of new hope and heart. It had been agreed that while still reading, as his parents desired, for the bar, he should try seriously to get ready for publication some essays which he had already on hand – one on Walt Whitman, one on John Knox, one on Roads and the Spirit of the Road – and should so far as possible avoid topics of dispute in the home circle.

But after a while the news of him was not favourable. Those differences with his father, which had been weighing almost morbidly upon his high-strung nature, were renewed. By mid-October his letters told of failing health. He came to London, and instead of presenting himself, as had been proposed, to be examined for admission to one of the London Inns of Court, he was forced to consult the late Sir Andrew Clark, who found him suffering from acute nerve exhaustion, with some threat of danger to the lungs. He was ordered to break at once with Edinburgh for a time, and to spend the winter in a more soothing climate and surroundings. He went accordingly to Mentone, a place he had delighted in as a boy ten years before, and during a stay of six months made a slow, but for the time being a pretty complete, recovery. I visited him twice during the winter, and the second time found him coming fairly to himself again in the southern peace and sunshine. He was busy with the essay *Ordered South*, and with that on *Victor Hugo's Romances*, which was afterwards his first contribution to the *Cornhill Magazine*; was full of a thousand dreams and projects for future work; and was passing his invalid days pleasantly meanwhile in the companionship of two kind and accomplished Russian ladies, who took to him warmly, and of their children. The following record of the time is drawn from his correspondence partly with his parents and partly with myself, but chiefly from the journal-letters, containing a full and intimate record of his daily moods and doings, which he was accustomed to send off weekly or oftener to Mrs. Sitwell.

## To Mrs. Thomas Stevenson

This is from his cousin's house in Suffolk. Some of the impressions then received of the contrasts between Scotland and England were later worked out in the essay *The Foreigner at Home*, printed at the head of *Memories and Portraits*: —  
*Cockfield Rectory, Sudbury, Suffolk, Tuesday, July 28, 1873.*

MY DEAR MOTHER, – I am too happy to be much of a correspondent. Yesterday we were away to Melford and Lavenham, both exceptionally placid, beautiful old English towns. Melford scattered all round a big green, with an Elizabethan Hall and Park, great screens of trees that seem twice as high as trees should seem, and everything else like what ought to be in a novel, and what one never expects to see in reality, made me cry out how good we were to live in Scotland, for the many hundredth time. I cannot get over my astonishment – indeed, it increases every day – at the hopeless gulf that there is between England and Scotland, and English and Scotch. Nothing is the same; and I feel as strange and outlandish here as I do in France or Germany. Everything by the wayside, in the houses, or about the people, strikes me with an unexpected unfamiliarity: I walk among surprises, for just where you think you have them, something wrong turns up.

I got a little Law read yesterday, and some German this morning, but on the whole there are too many amusements going for much work; as for correspondence, I have neither heart nor time for it to-day.

R. L. S.

## To Mrs. Sitwell

After leaving Cockfield Stevenson spent a few days in London and a few with me in a cottage I then had at Norwood. This and the following letters were written in the next days after his return home. “Bob” in the last paragraph is Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson, an elder cousin to whom Louis had been from boyhood devotedly attached: afterwards known as the brilliant painter-critic and author of *Velasquez*, etc.

*17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, Monday, September 1st, 1873.*

I have arrived, as you see, without accident; but I never had a more wretched journey in my life. I could not settle to read anything; I bought Darwin's last book in despair, for I knew I could generally read Darwin, but it was a failure. However, the book served me in good stead; for when a couple of children got in at Newcastle, I struck up a great friendship with them on the strength of the illustrations. These two children (a girl of nine and a boy of six) had never before travelled in a railway, so that everything was a glory to them, and they were never tired of watching the telegraph posts and trees and hedges go racing past us to the tail of the train; and the girl I found quite entered into the most daring personifications that I could make. A little way on, about Alnmouth, they had their first sight of the sea; and it was wonderful how loath they were to believe that what they saw was water; indeed it was very still and grey and solid-looking under a sky to match. It was worth the fare, yet a little farther on, to see the delight of the girl when she passed into “another country,” with the black Tweed under our feet, crossed by the lamps of the passenger bridge. I remember the first time I had gone into “another country,” over the same river from the other side.

Bob was not at the station when I arrived; but a friend of his brought me a letter; and he is to be in the first thing to-morrow. Do you know, I think yesterday and the day before were the two happiest days of my life? I would not have missed last month for eternity. – Ever yours,

R. L. S.

## To Mrs. Sitwell

The paper on *Roads* herein mentioned had been planned during walks at Cockfield; was offered to and rejected by the Saturday Review and ultimately accepted by Mr. Hamerton for the Portfolio; and was the first regular or paid contribution of Stevenson to periodical literature.

17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, Saturday, September 6, 1873.

I have been to-day a very long walk with my father through some of the most beautiful ways hereabouts; the day was cold with an iron, windy sky, and only glorified now and then with autumn sunlight. For it is fully autumn with us, with a blight already over the greens, and a keen wind in the morning that makes one rather timid of one's tub when it finds its way indoors.

I was out this evening to call on a friend, and, coming back through the wet, crowded, lamp-lit streets, was singing after my own fashion, "*Du hast Diamanten und Perlen,*" when I heard a poor cripple man in the gutter wailing over a pitiful Scotch air, his club-foot supported on the other knee, and his whole weebegone body propped sideways against a crutch. The nearest lamp threw a strong light on his worn, sordid face and the three boxes of lucifer matches that he held for sale. My own false notes stuck in my chest. How well off I am! is the burthen of my songs all day long – "*Drum ist so wohl mir in der Welt!*" and the ugly reality of the cripple man was an intrusion on the beautiful world in which I was walking. He could no more sing than I could; and his voice was cracked and rusty, and altogether perished. To think that that wreck may have walked the streets some night years ago, as glad at heart as I was, and promising himself a future as golden and honourable!

*Sunday, 11.20 a. m.* – I wonder what you are doing now? – in church likely, at the *Te Deum*. Everything here is utterly silent. I can hear men's footfalls streets away; the whole life of Edinburgh has been sucked into sundry pious edifices; the gardens below my windows are steeped in a diffused sunlight, and every tree seems standing on tiptoes, strained and silent, as though to get its head above its neighbour's and *listen*. You know what I mean, don't you? How trees do seem silently to assert themselves on an occasion! I have been trying to write *Roads* until I feel as if I were standing on my head; but I mean *Roads*, and shall do something to them.

I wish I could make you feel the hush that is over everything, only made the more perfect by rare interruptions; and the rich, placid light, and the still autumnal foliage. Houses, you know, stand all about our gardens: solid, steady blocks of houses; all look empty and asleep.

*Monday night.* – The drums and fifes up in the castle are sounding the guard-call through the dark, and there is a great rattle of carriages without. I have had (I must tell you) my bed taken out of this room, so that I am alone in it with my books and two tables, and two chairs, and a coal-skuttle (or *scuttle*) (?) and a *débris* of broken pipes in a corner, and my old school play-box, so full of papers and books that the lid will not shut down, standing reproachfully in the midst. There is something in it that is still a little gaunt and vacant; it needs a little populous disorder over it to give it the feel of homeliness, and perhaps a bit more furniture, just to take the edge off the sense of illimitable space, eternity, and a future state, and the like, that is brought home to one, even in this small attic, by the wide, empty floor.

You would require to know, what only I can ever know, many grim and many maudlin passages out of my past life to feel how great a change has been made for me by this past summer. Let me be ever so poor and thread-paper a soul, I am going to try for the best.

These good booksellers of mine have at last got a *Werther* without illustrations. I want you to like Charlotte. Werther himself has every feebleness and vice that could tend to make his suicide a most virtuous and commendable action; and yet I like Werther too – I don't know why, except that

he has written the most delightful letters in the world. Note, by the way, the passage under date June 21st not far from the beginning; it finds a voice for a great deal of dumb, uneasy, pleasurable longing that we have all had, times without number. I looked that up the other day for *Roads*, so I know the reference; but you will find it a garden of flowers from beginning to end. All through the passion keeps steadily rising, from the thunderstorm at the country-house – there was thunder in that story too – up to the last wild delirious interview; either Lotte was no good at all, or else Werther should have remained alive after that; either he knew his woman too well, or else he was precipitate. But an idiot like that is hopeless; and yet, he wasn't an idiot – I make reparation, and will offer eighteen pounds of best wax at his tomb. Poor devil! he was only the weakest – or, at least, a very weak strong man.

R. L. S.

## To Mrs. Sitwell

*17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, Friday, September 12, 1873.*

... I was over last night, contrary to my own wish, in Leven, Fife; and this morning I had a conversation of which, I think, some account might interest you. I was up with a cousin who was fishing in a mill-lade, and a shower of rain drove me for shelter into a tumble-down steading attached to the mill. There I found a labourer cleaning a byre, with whom I fell into talk. The man was to all appearance as heavy, as *hébété*, as any English clodhopper; but I knew I was in Scotland, and launched out forthright into Education and Politics and the aims of one's life. I told him how I had found the peasantry in Suffolk, and added that their state had made me feel quite pained and down-hearted. "It but to do that," he said, "to onybody that thinks at a'!" Then, again, he said that he could not conceive how anything could daunt or cast down a man who had an aim in life. "They that have had a guid schoolin' and do nae mair, whatever they do, they have done; but him that has aye something ayont need never be weary." I have had to mutilate the dialect much, so that it might be comprehensible to you; but I think the sentiment will keep, even through a change of words, something of the heartsome ring of encouragement that it had for me: and that from a man cleaning a byre! You see what John Knox and his schools have done.

*Saturday.*— This has been a charming day for me from morning to now (5 p. m.). First, I found your letter, and went down and read it on a seat in those Public Gardens of which you have heard already. After lunch, my father and I went down to the coast and walked a little way along the shore between Granton and Cramond. This has always been with me a very favourite walk. The Firth closes gradually together before you, the coast runs in a series of the most beautifully moulded bays, hill after hill, wooded and softly outlined, trends away in front till the two shores join together. When the tide is out there are great, gleaming flats of wet sand, over which the gulls go flying and crying; and every cape runs down into them with its little spit of wall and trees. We lay together a long time on the beach; the sea just babbled among the stones; and at one time we heard the hollow, sturdy beat of the paddles of an unseen steamer somewhere round the cape. I am glad to say that the peace of the day and scenery was not marred by any unpleasantness between us two.

I am, unhappily, off my style, and can do nothing well; indeed, I fear I have marred *Roads* finally by patching at it when I was out of the humour. Only, I am beginning to see something great about John Knox and Queen Mary; I like them both so much, that I feel as if I could write the history fairly.

*Sunday.*— It has rained and blown chilly out of the East all day. This was my first visit to church since the last Sunday at Cockfield. I was alone, and read the minor prophets and thought of the past all the time; a sentimental Calvinist preached – a very odd animal, as you may fancy – and to him I did not attend very closely. All afternoon I worked until half-past four, when I went out under an umbrella, and cruised about the empty, wet, glimmering streets until near dinner time.

I have finished *Roads* to-day, and send it off to you to see. The Lord knows whether it is worth anything! – some of it pleases me a good deal, but I fear it is quite unfit for any possible magazine. However, I wish you to see it, as you know the humour in which it was conceived, walking alone and very happily about the Suffolk highways and byeways on several splendid sunny afternoons. – Believe me, ever your faithful friend,

*Robert Louis Stevenson.*

*Monday.*– I have looked over *Roads* again, and I am aghast at its feebleness. It is the trial of a very “prentice hand” indeed. Shall I ever learn to do anything *well*? However, it shall go to you, for the reasons given above.

## To Mrs Sitwell

After an outpouring about difficulties at home.

*Edinburgh, Tuesday, September 16, 1873.*

... I must be very strong to have all this vexation and still to be well. I was weighed the other day, and the gross weight of my large person was eight stone six! Does it not seem surprising that I can keep the lamp alight, through all this gusty weather, in so frail a lantern? And yet it burns cheerily.

My mother is leaving for the country this morning, and my father and I will be alone for the best part of the week in this house. Then on Friday I go south to Dumfries till Monday. I must write small, or I shall have a tremendous budget by then.

7.20 *p. m.*– I must tell you a thing I saw to-day. I was going down to Portobello in the train, when there came into the next compartment (third class) an artisan, strongly marked with smallpox, and with sunken, heavy eyes – a face hard and unkind, and without anything lovely. There was a woman on the platform seeing him off. At first sight, with her one eye blind and the whole cast of her features strongly plebeian, and even vicious, she seemed as unpleasant as the man; but there was something beautifully soft, a sort of light of tenderness, as on some Dutch Madonna, that came over her face when she looked at the man. They talked for a while together through the window; the man seemed to have been asking money. “Ye ken the last time,” she said, “I gave ye two shillin’s for your ludgin’, and ye said – ” it died off into whisper. Plainly Falstaff and Dame Quickly over again. The man laughed unpleasantly, even cruelly, and said something; and the woman turned her back on the carriage and stood a long while so, and, do what I might, I could catch no glimpse of her expression, although I thought I saw the heave of a sob in her shoulders. At last, after the train was already in motion, she turned round and put two shillings into his hand. I saw her stand and look after us with a perfect heaven of love on her face – this poor one-eyed Madonna – until the train was out of sight; but the man, sordidly happy with his gains, did not put himself to the inconvenience of one glance to thank her for her ill-deserved kindness.

I have been up at the Spec. and looked out a reference I wanted. The whole town is drowned in white, wet vapour off the sea. Everything drips and soaks. The very statues seem wet to the skin. I cannot pretend to be very cheerful; I did not see one contented face in the streets; and the poor did look so helplessly chill and dripping, without a stitch to change, or so much as a fire to dry themselves at, or perhaps money to buy a meal, or perhaps even a bed. My heart shivers for them.

*Dumfries, Friday.*– All my thirst for a little warmth, a little sun, a little corner of blue sky avails nothing. Without, the rain falls with a long drawn *swish*, and the night is as dark as a vault. There is no wind indeed, and that is a blessed change after the unruly, bedlamite gusts that have been charging against one round street corners and utterly abolishing and destroying all that is peaceful in life. Nothing sours my temper like these coarse termagant winds. I hate practical joking; and your vulgarest practical joker is your flaw of wind.

I have tried to write some verses; but I find I have nothing to say that has not been already perfectly said and perfectly sung in *Adelaïde*. I have so perfect an idea out of that song! The great Alps, a wonder in the star-light – the river, strong from the hills, and turbulent, and loudly audible at night – the country, a scented *Frühlingsgarten* of orchards and deep wood where the nightingales harbour – a sort of German flavour over all – and this love-drunken man, wandering on by sleeping village and silent town, pours out of his full heart, *Einst, O Wunder, einst*, etc. I wonder if I am wrong about this being the most beautiful and perfect thing in the world – the only marriage of really accordant words and music – both drunk with the same poignant, unutterable sentiment.

To-day in Glasgow my father went off on some business, and my mother and I wandered about for two hours. We had lunch together, and were very merry over what the people at the restaurant would think of us – mother and son they could not suppose us to be.

*Saturday.* – And to-day it came – warmth, sunlight, and a strong, hearty living wind among the trees. I found myself a new being. My father and I went off a long walk, through a country most beautifully wooded and various, under a range of hills. You should have seen one place where the wood suddenly fell away in front of us down a long, steep hill between a double row of trees, with one small fair-haired child framed in shadow in the foreground; and when we got to the foot there was the little kirk and kirkyard of Irongray, among broken fields and woods by the side of the bright, rapid river. In the kirkyard there was a wonderful congregation of tombstones, upright and recumbent on four legs (after our Scotch fashion), and of flat-armed fir-trees. One gravestone was erected by Scott (at a cost, I learn, of £70) to the poor woman who served him as heroine in the *Heart of Midlothian*, and the inscription in its stiff, Jedediah Cleishbotham fashion is not without something touching.<sup>7</sup> We went up the stream a little further to where two Covenanters lie buried in an oak-wood; the tombstone (as the custom is) containing the details of their grim little tragedy in funnily bad rhyme, one verse of which sticks in my memory: —

“We died, their furious rage to stay,  
Near to the kirk of Iron-gray.”

We then fetched a long compass round about through Holywood Kirk and Lincluden ruins to Dumfries. But the walk came sadly to grief as a pleasure excursion before our return...

*Sunday.* – Another beautiful day. My father and I walked into Dumfries to church. When the service was done I noted the two halberts laid against the pillar of the churchyard gate; and as I had not seen the little weekly pomp of civic dignitaries in our Scotch country towns for some years, I made my father wait. You should have seen the provost and three bailies going stately away down the sunlit street, and the two town servants strutting in front of them, in red coats and cocked hats, and with the halberts most conspicuously shouldered. We saw Burns’s house – a place that made me deeply sad – and spent the afternoon down the banks of the Nith. I had not spent a day by a river since we lunched in the meadows near Sudbury. The air was as pure and clear and sparkling as spring water; beautiful, graceful outlines of hill and wood shut us in on every side; and the swift, brown river fled smoothly away from before our eyes, rippled over with oily eddies and dimples. White gulls had come up from the sea to fish, and hovered and flew hither and thither among the loops of the stream. By good fortune, too, it was a dead calm between my father and me. Do you know, I find these rows harder on me than ever. I get a funny swimming in the head when they come on that I had not before – and the like when I think of them.

R. L. S.

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<sup>7</sup> See Scott himself, in the preface to the Author’s edition.

## To Mrs. Sitwell

[Edinburgh], Monday, 22nd September 1873.

I have just had another disagreeable to-night. It is difficult indeed to steer steady among the breakers: I am always touching ground; generally it is my own blame, for I cannot help getting friendly with my father (whom I *do* love), and so speaking foolishly with my mouth. I have yet to learn in ordinary conversation that reserve and silence that I must try to unlearn in the matter of the feelings.

The news that *Roads* would do reached me in good season; I had begun utterly to despair of doing anything. Certainly I do not think I should be in a hurry to commit myself about the Covenanters; the whole subject turns round about me and so branches out to this side and that, that I grow bewildered; and one cannot write discreetly about any one little corner of an historical period, until one has an organic view of the whole. I have, however – given life and health – great hope of my Covenanters; indeed, there is a lot of precious dust to be beaten out of that stack even by a very infirm hand.

*Much later.* – I can scarcely see to write just now; so please excuse. We have had an awful scene. All that my father had to say has been put forth – not that it was anything new; only it is the devil to hear. I don't know what to do – the world goes hopelessly round about me; there is no more possibility of doing, living, being anything but a *beast*, and there's the end of it.

It is eleven, I think, for a clock struck. O Lord, there has been a deal of time through our hands since I went down to supper! All this has come from my own folly; I somehow could not think the gulf so impassable, and I read him some notes on the Duke of Argyll<sup>8</sup> – I thought he would agree so far, and that we might have some rational discussion on the rest. And now – after some hours – he has told me that he is a weak man, and that I am driving him too far, and that I know not what I am doing. O dear God, this is bad work!

I have lit a pipe and feel calmer. I say, my dear friend, I am killing my father – he told me to-night (by the way) that I alienated utterly my mother – and this is the result of my attempt to start fair and fresh and to do my best for all of them.

I must wait till to-morrow ere I finish. I am to-night too excited.

*Tuesday.* – The sun is shining to-day, which is a great matter, and altogether the gale having blown off again, I live in a precarious lull. On the whole I am not displeased with last night; I kept my eyes open through it all, and, I think, not only avoided saying anything that could make matters worse in the future, but said something that *may* do good. But a little better or a little worse is a trifle. I lay in bed this morning awake, for I was tired and cold and in no special hurry to rise, and heard my father go out for the papers; and then I lay and wished – O, if he would only *whistle* when he comes in again! But of course he did not. I have stopped that pipe.

Now, you see, I have written to you this time and sent it off, for both of which God forgive me. – Ever your faithful friend,

R. L. S.

My father and I together can put about a year through in half an hour. Look here, you mustn't take this too much to heart. I shall be all right in a few hours. It's impossible to depress me. And of course, when you can't do anything, there's no need of being depressed. It's all waste tissue.

L.

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<sup>8</sup> *i. e.* on his book, *The Reign of Law*.

## To Mrs. Sitwell

[Edinburgh], Wednesday, September 24th 1873.

I have found another “flowering isle.” All this beautiful, quiet, sunlit day, I have been out in the country; down by the sea on my favourite coast between Granton and Queensferry. There was a delicate, delicious haze over the firth and sands on one side, and on the other was the shadow of the woods all riven with great golden rifts of sunshine. A little faint talk of waves upon the beach; the wild strange crying of seagulls over the sea; and the hoarse wood-pigeons and shrill, sweet robins full of their autumn love-making among the trees, made up a delectable concerto of peaceful noises. I spent the whole afternoon among these sights and sounds with Simpson. And we came home from Queensferry on the outside of the coach and four, along a beautiful way full of ups and downs among woody, uneven country, laid out (fifty years ago, I suppose) by my grandfather, on the notion of Hogarth’s line of beauty. You see my taste for roads is hereditary.

*Friday.*— I was wakened this morning by a long flourish of bugles and a roll upon the drums – the *réveillé* at the Castle. I went to the window; it was a grey, quiet dawn, a few people passed already up the street between the gardens, already I heard the noise of an early cab somewhere in the distance, most of the lamps had been extinguished but not all, and there were two or three lit windows in the opposite façade that showed where sick people and watchers had been awake all night and knew not yet of the new, cool day. This appealed to me with a special sadness: how often in the old times my nurse and I had looked across at these, and sympathised!

I wish you would read Michelet’s *Louis Quatorze et la Révocation de l’Édit de Nantes*. I read it out in the garden, and the autumnal trees and weather, and my own autumnal humour, and the pitiable prolonged tragedies of Madame and of Molière, as they look, darkling and sombre, out of their niches in the great gingerbread façade of the *Grand Âge*, go wonderfully hand in hand.

I wonder if my revised paper has pleased the Saturday? If it has not, I shall be rather sorry – no, very sorry indeed – but not surprised and certainly not hurt. It will be a great disappointment; but I am glad to say that, among all my queasy, troublesome feelings, I have not a sensitive vanity. Not that I am not as conceited as you know me to be; only I go easy over the coals in that matter.

I have been out reading Hallam in the garden; and have been talking with my old friend the gardener, a man of singularly hard favour and few teeth. He consulted me this afternoon on the choice of books, premising that his taste ran mainly on war and travel. On travel I had to own at once my ignorance. I suggested Kinglake, but he had read that; and so, finding myself here unhorsed, I turned about and at last recollected Southey’s *Lives of the Admirals*, and the volumes of Macaulay containing the wars of William. Can you think of any other for this worthy man? I believe him to hold me in as high an esteem as any one can do; and I reciprocate his respect, for he is quite an intelligent companion.

On Saturday morning I read Morley’s article aloud to Bob in one of the walks of the public garden. I was full of it and read most excitedly; and we were ever, as we went to and fro, passing a bench where a man sat reading the Bible aloud to a small circle of the devout. This man is well known to me, sits there all day, sometimes reading, sometimes singing, sometimes distributing tracts. Bob laughed much at the opposition preachers – I never noticed it till he called my attention to the other; but it did not seem to me like opposition – does it to you? – each in his way was teaching what he thought best.

Last night, after reading Walt Whitman a long while for my attempt to write about him, I got *tête-montée*, rushed out up to M. S., came in, took out *Leaves of Grass*, and without giving the poor unbeliever time to object, proceeded to wade into him with favourite passages. I had at least this triumph, that he swore he must read some more of him. – Ever your faithful friend,

*Louis Stevenson.*

## **To Mrs. Sitwell**

On the question of the authorship of the *Ode to the Cuckoo*, which Burke thought the most beautiful lyric in our language, the debate was between the claims of John Logan, minister of South Leith (1745-1785), and his friend and fellow-worker Michael Bruce. Those of Logan have, I believe, been now vindicated past doubt.

*[Edinburgh], Saturday, October 4, 1873.*

It is a little sharp to-day; but bright and sunny with a sparkle in the air, which is delightful after four days of unintermitting rain. In the streets I saw two men meet after a long separation, it was plain. They came forward with a little run and *leaped* at each other's hands. You never saw such bright eyes as they both had. It put one in a good humour to see it.

8 p.m.— I made a little more out of my work than I have made for a long while back; though even now I cannot make things fall into sentences — they only sprawl over the paper in bald orphan clauses. Then I was about in the afternoon with Baxter; and we had a good deal of fun, first rhyming on the names of all the shops we passed, and afterwards buying needles and quack drugs from open-air vendors, and taking much pleasure in their inexhaustible eloquence. Every now and then as we went, Arthur's Seat showed its head at the end of a street. Now, to-day the blue sky and the sunshine were both entirely wintry; and there was about the hill, in these glimpses, a sort of thin, unreal, crystalline distinctness that I have not often seen excelled. As the sun began to go down over the valley between the new town and the old, the evening grew resplendent; all the gardens and low-lying buildings sank back and became almost invisible in a mist of wonderful sun, and the Castle stood up against the sky, as thin and sharp in outline as a castle cut out of paper. Baxter made a good remark about Princes Street, that it was the most elastic street for length that he knew; sometimes it looks, as it looked to-night, interminable, a way leading right into the heart of the red sundown; sometimes, again, it shrinks together, as if for warmth, on one of the withering, clear east-windy days, until it seems to lie underneath your feet.

I want to let you see these verses from an *Ode to the Cuckoo* written by one of the ministers of Leith in the middle of last century — the palmy days of Edinburgh — who was a friend of Hume and Adam Smith and the whole constellation. The authorship of these beautiful verses has been most truculently fought about; but whoever wrote them (and it seems as if this Logan had) they are lovely —

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