

**THE LIFE OF ROBERT
LOUIS STEVENSON. IN
TWO VOLUMES, VOL. I**

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The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson. In Two Volumes, Vol. I by Graham Balfour

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GRAHAM BALFOUR

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ROBERT LOUIS
STEVENSON

BY
GRAHAM BALFOUR

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME I

WITH PORTRAITS



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HIS ANCESTORS

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

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

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

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

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

HIS ANCESTORS

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

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

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

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