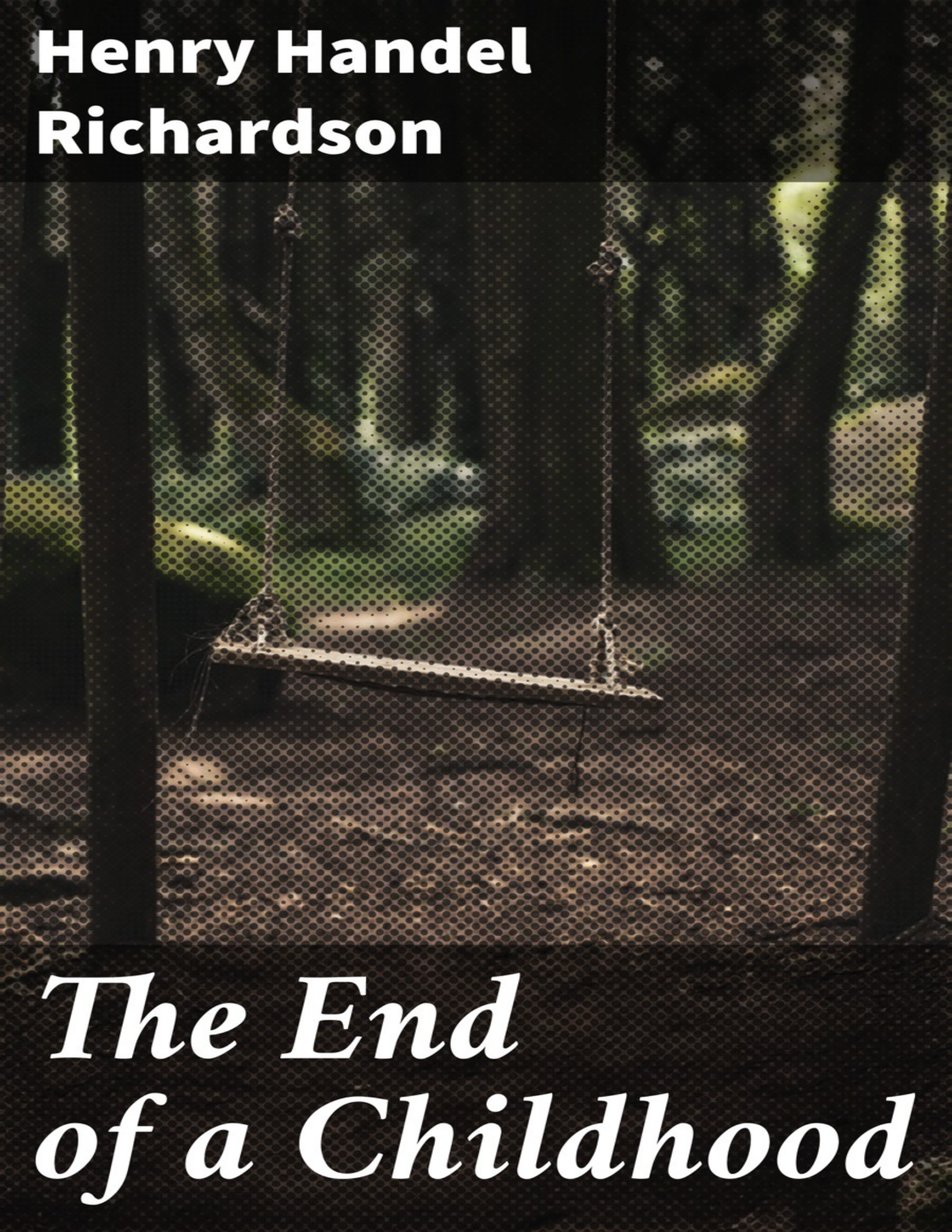
Henry Handel Richardson



The End of a Childhood

Henry Handel Richardson

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The End Of a Childhood
Four Further Chapters In The Life Of Cuffy Mahony

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Twelve months almost to a day after her husband's death, Mary Mahony received a letter that greatly perturbed her.

It was handed to her straight from the sorting table. Recognising the writing, she put on her spectacles and unthinkingly slit it open. But she had not read far before her colour rose, and with a covert glance at her two subordinates—the telegraph operator, who sat lazily picking his nose, had a sly and roving eye—she hastily refolded it and thrust it in her pocket.

There it remained; and all day long she was conscious of it, as of something hot or heavy. Not until evening, when the office was closed and the children lay asleep, did she draw it forth again. Then, alone in her little parlour, she pulled the kerosene-lamp to her and prepared to face the contents.

It was from her old friend Henry Ocock, and ran:

Wendouree House,
Ballarat.

My dear Mrs. Mahony,

My prolonged silence has not, I trust, led you to infer me

grown in any way indifferent to your welfare. Far from it, you have, if I may say so, seldom been absent from my thoughts. But I have hesitated to intrude, without due cause, on a grief that I regarded as sacred. Now, however, when it may be assumed that Time, the great Healer, has assuaged the first bitterness of your irreparable loss, I venture to take up my pen on a subject of to me vital importance.

What I am going to say may, no doubt will surprise you. But the wish, the fond hope, I am about to express, is, believe me, no new one—I have cherished it longer than I should dare to tell you. Dear friend, I cannot but think you have always been aware how much I admired, how highly esteemed you—though doubtless still appraising you below your true worth. It would be impossible to minimise the heroism you have shown in battling with a concatenation of circumstances that would have crushed a lesser spirit. In my estimation, few women are worthy to be compared with you, and of this esteem and veneration I now offer you tangible proof, by asking you if you will do me the honour to become my wife.

I will not, in this connection—and I think you will understand me—make use of such terms as love and passion. We are neither of us in our first youth, and have each had our full share of Life's Trials. But my appreciation of your many excellent qualities of mind and heart have only increased with the years; and should you, dear friend, consider that these sentiments suffice, that you could, without trepidation, lay your fate in my hands, I assure you you should never have reason to regret it.—There are, besides, others than ourselves to think of. My children sadly need a mother's care, yours a father's guiding hand.

Let me entreat you not to reply too hastily. Take your own time—as long as you will—to consider my proposal.

Until then, believe me,
Truly and devotedly yours,
Henry Ocock.

For a moment Mary continued to sit with this letter in her hand, staring a little stupidly over the top of it. Then she dropped it, even gave it a slight push away from her. In reading, she had grown more and more uncomfortable. Till she came to the bit about the children. At that, a kind of stiffening ran through her. What? *Her* children?—Richard's children?—to need the guidance of...of Henry Ocock? "Well, upon my world!"

But, no, you couldn't...she mustn't...look at it that way.

Taking off her spectacles—they were the cheap, ugly, steel-rimmed kind—she settled herself squarely in her seat, mouth and chin gripped fast in the hollow of one hand: an attitude she often fell into when unpleasant things had to be faced—bills for the mending of the children's boots, complaints from Head Office, the contrariness of columns of figures that would *not* tally.

Yes, unpleasant was the word: her first feeling was one of utter repugnance. The thought of marrying again had never occurred to her. She wasn't that sort. And now came Henry Ocock...*Sir* Henry Ocock...for the fraction of a second her mind lingered on the prefix. But in the next minute she heard Richard's voice saying: "Confound his impudence!" and with so much of the familiar Irish over-emphasis that she simply had to smile. Oh! she could just imagine how angry Richard would be. *His* wife.... Henry Ocock!

This violent personal antipathy she had never shared. She had even been given to standing up for Mr. Henry, preferring as she did to think that there was *some* good in everybody. And if Richard could now come back and see what a friend Ocock had proved, he'd have to admit she was right. Though of course if, all the time, Mr. Henry—Sir Henry—had had *this* up his sleeve...But there! why go poking and prying into people's motives? (That was Richard again—not her.) Let her stick to facts. Where would she and the children be to-day, if Ocock had not come to their aid? Why, in the gutter...or the Benevolent Asylum. Certainly not together; and that would have hit her harder than anything. Then again her transfer, six months ago, from that dreadful Gyrngurra, to this more civilised place, with a forty-pound rise in salary, a decent *brick* house, and a large garden for the children to play in: all this she owed to Mr. Henry's influence. (Of course, that he had feelings just like anyone else, *she* had known since the day when she saw him...made him...cry.)

No, the truth had to be faced: Richard was gone and she couldn't go on for ever letting herself be swayed and prejudiced by what he had thought, by his likes and dislikes. Times changed, and you changed with them. Looked at in this light, Ocock's letter was nobody's business but her own. For who else knew the circumstances that had led up to it? (Certainly not Richard.) And so, compressing her lips, she began by admitting—a little doggedly—that, in spite of its stiffness and pomposity, its "estimations" and "venerations" where he might have said "like" and "respect," ("concatenation" she'd never seen or heard of before)—in

spite of everything, Ocock's letter was a generous one. Considering the—well, she wouldn't say "the snob he was"—but considering the enormous value he set on money and connections and social prestige; remembering, too, the nobody he had been to start with, and the way he had climbed (and over *what* obstacles!) to the top of the tree; she thought it, now, more than generous of him, to put his pride in his pocket and stoop to a poor little up-country post-mistress. (And not at all patronisingly: his wordiness, his difficulty in coming to the point, struck her as rather pathetic.) Yet to say "stoop" wasn't being quite honest either. For every one knew who *she* was...or had been. Richard's name still counted for something. And if this affair had happened a few years earlier, she would have been the one to stoop, not he.

Even as it was, the favours wouldn't be all on Ocock's side. Nobody was more experienced than she in running a big establishment—the scale of living at "Ultima Thule" would have made Ocock himself open his eyes—how to keep it up to the nines, yet without undue extravagance. She would even undertake to manage him, too, if necessary; after Richard, no other man would prove difficult. And it would surely be worth a great deal to Mr. Henry, for once in his life to have some one to club with him and support him. His nearest relations—his damaging old father, his dissolute brothers, poor little Agnes with her fatal weakness—one and all, in their separate ways, had been weights to drag him down. With a different family at his back, he might have ended as Prime Minister.—She would even guarantee to get on with Agnes's children; though these were now in their

teens, of an age bitterly to resent the coming of a stepmother.

Yes! had that been all. In any of these ways she could have made herself useful...even indispensable. (Indeed, the idea of showing what she *could* do, in this line, made a kind of insidious appeal to her.) But it wasn't all; and it wasn't enough. He didn't want a housekeeper or a business companion; he wanted a wife. And it was here her courage failed her. She had been so essentially, so emphatically, a one-man woman; never had her inclination strayed; having Richard, she had everything she needed. Of course, he had caught her *very* young, very innocent. Perhaps, had she been just a little older, with more knowledge of life...more *nous*...For really, by nature...yes...well..."Well, you know what I mean," said Mary to herself, a series of half-formed images, which she would have shrunk from completing, chasing one another across her mind. And at the thought of now having to begin all over again—at *her* age—with a stranger; at the thought of once more yielding her freedom, (which she had learned to value) of an invaded privacy, the intimacies of the bedroom—no! it was not to be contemplated, not for an instant: it simply could not be done.

And there was another thing. If she married, she might still have children—*his* children. And this was surely the crucial test. For the unloved man's embraces might be borne: they concerned yourself alone. But what must that mother feel, who had to see appearing in the children she loved—and that you could help caring for the little things you carried about with you for nine long months was

unthinkable—uglinesses of face and character belonging to the father? Eyes set too close together, or shifty eyes, or thin, cruel lips. Foxy ways...unscrupulousness—double dealing. She could imagine nothing, nothing more horrible.

But here she broke off, with an impatient click of the tongue. For this string of faults and blemishes, whose were they but Henry Ocock's as seen by Richard? Oh, it was hopeless, quite hopeless: Richard would have her under his thumb to the end; and even more than during his lifetime, when she could at least stand up to him and fight for her own opinions. Well, one thing she had to be thankful for: in *his* children there was nothing she need fear to see develop. No ugliness of face or disposition there!—And as she now sat and thought of them, and of what they meant to her, she saw that all this arguing and disputing, this palaver about what *she* could or could not put up with, was a mere foolish beating of the air. In matters that affected the children, she simply did not count. The sole query was, would they benefit? Did they stand to gain by her re-marrying?

She felt a sudden need of being near them, of having them before her eyes. Getting up she fetched a candlestick from the kitchen, lit the candle, and went into the bedroom. But, in passing the dressing-table, she caught a glimpse of her own shadowy figure; and yielding to an impulse she crossed to the glass, holding the light above her head.

There she stood and looked at herself: not as a mother, or a wage-earner, but a woman—and a woman somebody still thought worth marrying! On the wrong side of forty now, middle-aged, and for all the world to see—since she

had never a moment left in which to care for her appearance. Her hair had worn best: it was still glossy and fairly thick, nor had the straight white centre parting spread. But it had gone very grey round the temples; and these, and her forehead, were furrowed with lines; while wrinkles fine as spiders' webs teased her lids, and ran out, fan-shaped, from the corners of her eyes. The sharp steel of the glasses, too, had cut a permanent red line on the bridge of her nose. The big dark eyes, which had once been her chief feature, might still, if freed from the disfiguring spectacles, have passed muster; but that was all. Of the lower part of the face the less said the better: the nose was pinched, the mouth thin-lipped and elderly; and all sorts of odd twists and creases were forming on her once smooth cheeks and chin.

And yet...and yet...such a store of energy still existed in her, that, give her but half a chance to recuperate, a spell, say, of nights unbroken by the rat-tat-tat of the night-mail, and the consequent shivering of her sleep to atoms: give her these, and she believed she would rise a different woman. Then, too, there would be no more knitting and screwing up of the brows, or biting of the lips, or straining of the eyes, over infinitesimal dots and dashes, or dizzy rows of figures. No more denying herself in order that the children should not go short; or pinching and scraping in order to make a pittance of a hundred-and-twenty a year stretch to twice its size. No more twelve-hour days on her feet—these hot, tired, throbbing feet—or hands rough and red with rough work. No more quailing before her subordinates—never, never again, anything to do with

young men of their class!—a telegraphist who subtly, a postman who openly flouted her authority, both knowing their jobs much better than she knew hers. Oh! what it would mean to be rid of them, to retire into private life again, did not bear thinking about. Seized by a sudden fear, she turned from the glass.

In the dimity-hung double bed that stood against the wall, little Lucie, her bed-fellow, slept the drunken sleep of childhood. Bending over her, she was lying face downwards, Mary turned her on one side, then, passing a finger under the fair thick mass of curls, lifted them, for coolness' sake, and spread them out over the pillow. It was a very hot night; and on his little stretcher-bed in an adjoining cubbyhole, Cuffy lay drenched in perspiration. Here, his mother's first act was to take a clean little nightshirt from a drawer, sit him up, slip off the wet one and pop the dry over his head, he opening his eyes for a second, unseeingly, making a kind of growly noise in his throat, and dropping back fast asleep, before she had finished with the buttons. And, as she did this, other nights rose before her, scores of them, on which she, or Nannan—even Richard himself—had made the change. The habit dated from Cuffy's babyhood.

It was only a trifle, but it seemed to unlock the flood-gates; and sitting down beside him, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands, remembering and remembering, she put the question that mothers have asked themselves since the world began: who would do these things for my children if I were not there?—But no, that sounded too like being dead. What she meant was, if I were prevented, belonged to some one else who had first

claim on me, or the right to object. Some one, too, who, from what she knew of him, might easily turn jealous of her children and the love she bore them. Who might not even like them. And indeed, he and Richard having had such different natures, could she reasonably *expect* him to like Richard's children? The probability was, he wouldn't; and they would be pushed into the background, kept down: as mere stepchildren made to play second fiddle to his own.

But here, her mind taking a sudden leap, she came face to face with the bug-bear that stalked her wakeful nights—the problem of Cuffy's education. For the present, he went every morning for a couple of hours' lessons to Mr. Burroughs, the clergyman; and it was enough: Richard had always been against forcing him. But after this?—say, a couple of years hence? Oh, when she thought of all the plans and ambitions they had nursed for their first-born...now blown to the four winds. Yet, even still, there was something in her, something obstinate, irrational, which refused to believe that Cuffy would be done out of public school and university. And now, as always when she reached this point, she declared to herself: "Well!...if the worst comes to the worst!"—and with such emphasis that her lips moved to the unspoken words. What she meant was: though I have never for myself borrowed or owed a farthing, yet...when it's a case of my children...And then once more she went over in thought those it would be least galling to apply to for aid. Old Lady Devine, who was for ever making them presents; Tilly, childless now herself; and—yes, as long as he had been content to remain a friend, the list had also included Henry Ocock. Now, Ocock had put himself out of

court. But, even if she married him, could she expect him to share her ambitions and aspirations for a child that was not his own? Or even understand them? He was none too fond of untying his purse-strings. In all probability he would want to put Cuffy into business, or thrust him, half-grown, half-educated, into a Bank.

And there were other things, too, that he might not, would not, understand.

The children had thriven in the past half-year; even Cuffy having at last begun to fill out and grow. This was partly due to them having a garden again to play in; they had always been used to gardens. But the chief reason, no good shirking it, was that an ugly shadow had been lifted from their lives. Children were not built to stand what hers had been through. And, her first grief over, she could not but feel glad for their sakes that Richard was gone. Whether she had really done right, in taking him away from the asylum, she sometimes wondered; when she saw how they had blossomed out since his death. And yet...and yet...

That they had not got off scot-free she realised when it was too late. For it was all very well to plume herself on them being their father's children, in good looks and nice feelings. That wasn't the whole truth. They had inherited other, less desirable traits as well: Richard's ultra-sensitiveness, his finickiness (what they would and would not eat, what they chose or did not choose to wear) his Irish uppishness. In other words, they were both very highly strung; and, in consequence, the strain of his illness, and the unhappy years preceding it, had told on them more severely than if they had been ordinary children. Look at

Lucie. In her seven short years Lucie had seen so many changes—the death of her little twin sister, the racketing from place to place, the collapse of one home after another, and, worse still, the collapse—of the father who should have been her mainstay—that she, too, had broken down, and was now little better than a bundle of nerves. Having lost so much, the child lived in a constant fear lest her last and dearest should also be snatched away. It was Mamma here, Mamma there; and on those rare evenings when she, Mary, stepped across the road for a chat with the Bank Manager's wife, she knew that on her return, no matter at what hour, she would find the child sitting bolt upright in bed, with frightened eyes and perspiring hands, convinced that Mamma had gone away, or was dead, and would never come back. Neither scoldings nor pettings took any effect.

Cuffy, always excitable, had shortly after his father's death developed a convulsive twitching and blinking of face and eyes that was distressing to see. The doctor said the habit was purely nervous, and would pass as he grew older. Meanwhile, there was nothing to be done; except sometimes hold up a glass to show him how ugly or how silly he looked. But did she think of him, of either of them, going among strangers thus handicapped, to be made fun of, or found fault with—perhaps even *punished*—for failings they had done nothing to deserve: at the mere thought of it, all her protective tenderness was up in arms. No; Richard's children they were, for good or for ill; and Richard's children they should remain. No one but the father they were so like would be capable of understanding them.

And here, as if to brace her in her decision, words she had once heard, and which her memory had as it were stored up for use in this crisis, came floating into her mind. "Henry Ocock is harsh with children...is harsh with children."

That did it: now she knew where she stood. Well, he shouldn't—she wouldn't give him the chance to be—with hers. On no one but herself should their lives and happiness depend.

Picking up the candle, she went back into the sitting-room where the letter lay, just as she had left it, open on the table. Without giving it a second glance, she took out pen and paper, and sat down to frame her reply.

Oh yes, she knew quite well what she was doing when she wrote: *deeply as I appreciate your kindness, I cannot marry you*. Besides condemning herself to poverty, she was cutting herself adrift from the friend who had most power to make things easier for her. (Stung in his vanity, Ocock would hardly be big-minded enough to go on pulling strings on her behalf.) She was also, in a sense, taking leave of her womanhood. Many a year must elapse before either of the children could come to her aid. By then she would be old in earnest, and long past desiring. But she did not waver. Once more it had been brought home to her where her heart really lay. And then, with the ink still wet on her name, she smiled to herself—a grim, amused little smile. In all this pro-ing and con-ing, this weighing of profit and loss, she had taken no count of the children's own inclinations: Richard's children, blessed (or cursed) with Richard's faculty for pronounced likes and dislikes, with his mercilessly critical eyes. Now, it was with almost a feeling of compensation

that she thought to herself: I wonder what *they* would have had to say of HIM...as a father!

II

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Cuffy would soon be nine now; and very proud he felt of it. Not quite so proud as if it was ten: ten was like a little platform, where you stood and looked at a row of steps going down to one (what were you before that?) and up to twenty. It was twenty he thought of when he said: "When I'm a man." Twenty was awfully old; any time after that you might die. Oh well, he knew people did go on being older. Mamma and Bowey both had grey hairs on their heads, and'd been alive so many years they didn't like to tell, but pretended they'd forgotten. But he didn't think he would. Specially not since he'd heard the text: who the God loves dies young. For if you loved God, as you *had* to, and God loved you back, then...

Another proud thing was his satchel; that he carried his school-books in. This was a present from the same old Lady Devine who'd given them their piano, so that they could go on practising. Not *exactly* a present; she'd sent the money for it; and he'd been allowed to go by himself and buy it, at the shop down the town where they sold pens and paper. It was brown, and had two straps with buckles on them. He always let Luce fasten one, to make up for having to stop alone while he went to lessons. She came across the road with him, and stood and waved; and when he'd run along the rightaway and climbed the embankment to the top road, she was still there. And her pinny was always dirty, from

falling down, and her socks hung over her shoes. Every time Mamma saw her she said: "For goodness' sake, child, pull up your socks!" (Yet wouldn't let her wear garters, because of spoiling the shape of her legs.) And when he came home at eleven she was dirtier still. He tore down the hill and she tore to meet him, and he kept her on the other side of him because of the dam, which Mamma was afraid she'd fall into and be drowned.

But he liked going to lessons; Mr. Burroughs was so nice. (The Reverend John Noel Burroughs his whole name was.) Mamma was in a dreadful hurry for him to get there punctually at nine; but once he was on the top road and she couldn't see him, he didn't run any more. For mostly Mr. Burroughs wasn't up yet; and he'd have time to spread out his books and maps and pencils on the table, and sometimes draw a whole ship, or a horse, before he came. And then he'd just have put on his overcoat on top of his pyjamas. And he'd laugh and say: "I *shall* have to pay another visit to the ant, shan't I?" (which meant he was a sluggard.) But he was *very* nice. He never made you feel you were only a little boy. He'd come and put his arm round you and say: "Now then, old chap, let's see what you've been up to!"—in your sums or parsing. And he didn't say: "That's wrong...or three mistakes," but only, ever so polite: "I think it would look better this way, sonny!"—Really, sometimes in church on Sunday, when you saw him come up the aisle in his black gown with the white one over, and the blue silk thing hanging down his back, and his head bent and carrying his sermon, it made you feel quite shy, to think

how *different* you knew him, sitting in his pyjamas with his arm round your neck.

Another nice thing about him was that he never laughed at you—no, not even when you "made your faces." Mostly, he'd pretend not to notice. But if they were very bad he'd say: "Let's take a breather, shall we?"—which was because the doctor had said you were to have lots and lots of play. And then they'd leave off doing lessons, and go out in the yard and play tipcat; or Mr. Burroughs would show him how to bowl. And when he got too hot he'd take off the overcoat and just be in his pyjamas.

Another time was when he'd asked that *silly* question about the book. Mr. Burroughs read books all through lessons, mostly with brown-paper covers on, to keep you from seeing what they were called; after one day he'd caught you trying to make the name out. Mamma said they were yellow-backs, and not proper books for little boys. But once there hadn't been a cover on, and it was such a funny name that he simply *had* to ask—Mr. Burroughs never minded you asking questions, *he* said they showed an intelligent mind. So he said: "But why is it spelt like that? In the Bible it's always 'goeth' when it says: 'He who goeth down to the sea to get on board a ship:'" (which wasn't a text at all, he just made it up, because he liked ships so much, and now they lived so far away from the sea.) And first Mr. Burroughs didn't know what he meant. But when he did, he didn't laugh, but just said, well, it hadn't got anything to do with "go," but was the name of a man—one of the wisest men that ever lived—and was called "Gertie." (But when he told them at home, feeling rather proud about

it, *they* laughed like anything and wouldn't believe him; for Mamma said no man had ever been called "Gertie," that was a little girl's name. And only after he'd found out that it was a "foreigner name," then they had to. Privately, he thought it was too funny for words, and that he'd rather not be wise than have to have it for his.)

Then there was the time Mamma told on him; which he didn't think she ought to have done. He had to learn Latin now: Mr. Burroughs said you couldn't begin Latin too young. So he took *Mensa*; and when Mr. Burroughs was surprised how quick he knew it, Mamma said it was because he'd made a tune to it, and sang it while he learned it. And Mr. Burroughs didn't even smile, but thought it was a "brilliant idea," and said they'd go on having it to music. So then he had to sing it when he said it, and Mr. Burroughs liked the tune so much that he went and fetched Miss Burroughs in—he didn't have a wife, only a sister—to hear it, too. And she clapped her hands and said it was wonderful; and then they talked together, and he heard them say something about a "natural moddleation to a dommy-something"—but it couldn't have been *Dominus*, for he had another tune for that: *Dominus* sounded so *strict*. And Miss Burroughs said soon he'd have to learn the organ and play for them in church, and Mr. Burroughs said he'd have him in the choir, and then he'd teach him a plain song.

Miss Burroughs was a lovely lady. As tall as her brother, who was *very* high, with yellow hair, and the most beautiful teeth when she smiled, and a neck like a swan. Well, people called it that; but *he* thought a swan had a neck like a snake, and hers was thick and round. She was so kind, too.

He never had to take any lunch with him; every morning she gave him a slice of bread and jelly to finish up with; and in all his life he thought he'd never eaten anything so delicious.—Mamma only made jam, not jelly.

Yes, going to lessons was *most* int'resting: there was always something new that you didn't know yet. How many masts a ship could have, f'r instance, and what ships were called because of them, and how they were rigged—Mr. Burroughs, he liked ships, too. And how to draw a circle so that it was eszackly round, with arms that went out from its middle, and what *they* were called. And all about the Greeks and Romans, and what funny people they were. The Greeks wore short dresses and bare legs—like Luce—and the Romans rode on elephants when they went to war. Goodness! *that* must have been exciting. Nowadays, if you wanted to see an elephant at all, you had to go to the circus.

A funny thing happened about these Romans; he thought of it directly he began to learn them; and it had to do with their noses. And that was because every one in Yerambah said about Mr. Burroughs that he had a Roman nose. This was so awfully interesting that it did something to him inside, and wouldn't give him any peace till he'd shown he knew (even though it sounded a little rude), and asked: "What does it mean when you say a'Roman nose?' When the Romans are all dead and gone?"

This time Mr. Burroughs did laugh—not to offend you, though, he just sort of looked mischievous and half-shut one eye. "It refers to the shape, my boy! If you want to see a good Roman nose, look at mine. And then go home and look

in the glass, and you'll see another!" Which made him turn all hot and funny-feeling; first to think *he* had one (when he was just beginning to learn about the Romans) and then because he'd got something the same as Mr. Burroughs, who everybody said was so handsome.—And home he went to the glass in Mamma's bedroom, and swung it low and examined himself. But his nose didn't show properly against his face, and he couldn't look sideways because Mamma hadn't got a hand-glass any more. And while he was there, she came into the room and found him and said: "What on *earth* are you doing, Cuffy?—staring at yourself like that! Looking to see how ugly you are?"—But he didn't tell her, for fear she'd tell again. He kept it as a secret with Mr. Burroughs.

He didn't tell Luce either; for hers was little and fat; and she mightn't have liked it—or like him having something Mr. Burroughs had, when she hadn't. She didn't enjoy him being away so long in the morning, and watched for him ever such a time, and was dreadfully glad to see him come back. But so was he. For though lessons were jolly, the rest of the day was jollier, when they had nothing to do but play. And play they did...oh, how they played! Mostly just him and Luce. They knew some other children in Yerambah, and sometimes went to parties; but their best games were alone, by their two selves. Luce was quite happy as long as every now and then she could go and look at Mamma; and she always played what he liked: it was him who said what the game should be. Mamma thought they were "the queerest children," because they never wanted variety, but went on with one till they were finished with it. When it was

cool it had been hopscotch, and they'd played till Luce's legs almost broke in two, and their boot-soles had holes in them. In hot weather it was "knuckle-bones," which they collected themselves, going down to the butcher to beg them. Then they sat all day long on the back verandah, at an old table Mamma made them out of a packing-case and some lids, and tossed the little bones up in the air, catching and scooping and driving them home, as pigs to market or horses to stall—till their own finger-bones were sore.

There was a swing in this garden; and it wasn't like the swings other children had, but was hung between two tall telegraph-posts, so that you could go ever so high. And the most lovely thing about it was that it was *dangerous*; for the seat was loose, not fastened on, but just with two notches in it to fit the rope. *He* wasn't a bit afraid of it coming off, and stood to swing, working himself up so far that he almost turned over, and Luce got frightened and fetched Mamma, and Mamma came and called out: "Stop it, Cuffy! Stop it at once!" Luce, she sat to swing, and felt seasick when she went the least little bit high. He'd never been seasick, not in his whole life, Mamma said so; but had always walked about a ship asking for his dinner.

Oh, yes, there were exciting things to do from the moment you waked, about six, and jumped out of the hot, crumply bed straight into the bath; which you could fill as full as you liked here, for there was plenty of water, even though it was red. And for breakfast, if you wanted to, you could take your bread and butter in your hand and eat it running round the garden, with peaches or figs or nectarines to it (when they were ripe); for there was lots and lots of

fruit, and you were allowed it all—except almonds, which was because Mamma said Lallie had once died of eating them. There was a 'normous long hose to water the garden with; and sometimes, when it was very hot, they would play it was a rainy day, and put on something very old, and umbrellas, and turn the hose over each other, to make them cool. Mamma didn't like this very much; she was afraid people would look through the fence and see you and call you "those queer children" again, and whatever were you doing? Besides, it made the verandah in such a mess.

But mostly Mamma was *very* nice now, and never cross—or hardly ever: only if the Inspector was coming; or when she was bothered about her "statement"; or if you broke a plate; or climbed up on the roof and walked about on it, making a noise on the iron like thunder. Then she thought you might fall off and kill yourself.

And in the evening, when it was dark well, then he had a sort of secret with Mamma; one even Luce didn't know (like his nose with Mr. Burroughs.) It was when Bowey was giving Luce her bath to go to bed. After the office was shut and the sun had gone down, Mamma used to bring the rocking-chair out on the front verandah, where she never went and they weren't allowed to go in the daytime, because the office-window, where you asked for letters and stamps, opened off it. But at night it was quite private. And then, though he never, never did when it was light, he was much too big—well, then somehow, when nobody was looking, he'd find himself sitting on Mamma's knee; even though his legs were so long now that they hung over it right down to the ground.

And there they'd sit, just Mamma and him, nobody else knowing about it; and it was most awfully comfortable, when you were tired, quite the most comfy place, with a kind of shelf for your head, and Mamma's arms keeping you from falling off, and her chin against your hair. You just sat there and didn't talk, not at all...you wouldn't have liked to; it was too close for talking. Besides, there was nothing to say.

Really what you did was just to lie and stare at things. Sometimes the moon was up and sometimes it wasn't. But you could always see the dam and the top road and the hill. This was the hill the sun went down behind every night; and when there were thunder-storms they came up behind it. Then, half the sky would still be all blue—or starry—and half one 'normous black cloud that rushed along as if it had wings, and made Luce very afraid. Once, one of the little houses on top of the hill had been struck by lightning, and the fire-bell had rung after everybody had gone to bed, making such a terrific noise that everybody got up again; and the house had first been nothing but flames that stretched miles up into the sky, and then was burnt down. They went to see it next morning and it was just a black smoky mass, with nothing left: Mamma said that was the worst of wooden houses, they burnt like match boxes. But *she* believed the people in it had set fire to it themselves, to get money.

The time the comet came, too, it was over this hill. They were allowed to get up to see it. Bowey wakened them when it was ready, and put their ulsters on and brought them out; and they sat on the edge of the verandah and

looked...so long that Luce nearly went to sleep again. But he didn't; he stared and stared at it—tail and all—to make sure he'd never forget. But he wouldn't forget the rest of the stars either; the whole sky was chock-full of them. That was because there was no moon, and because it was right in the middle of the night. (When the moon was round and big, like a bladder hanging up at the butcher's, you couldn't see the stars, it put them out.)

Sure as sure, though, just as he was lying thinking all this, thinking, too, what they'd play at to-morrow, and what he'd ask Mr. Burroughs at lessons, and how pretty Miss Burroughs was; then, Bowey would call out from the back verandah, where the bathroom was: "Your bath's ready, Cuffy!"

But he didn't move; and Mamma, she mostly made a kind of sigh and said: "Oh dear! there she goes again. I really must call her over the coals."

And he, just to stay sitting: "But why should *she* say'Master Cuffy'...if she doesn't want to? Other children's servants don't."

But Mamma knew why he did it, and only said: "Don't ask silly questions. Off you go now! Or the water will be cold." And she tipped down her lap till he had to stand on his feet.

But still he hung back. "Why does Bowey always have to give me my bath? Why can't I do it myself?...why can't I? I'm nearly nine now, and I learn Latin, and...and you could look at my ears after!"

Mamma laughed. "There would be a great deal more of you than your ears I'd have to look at. But you know quite

well Bowey wouldn't like it. She's bath'd you both ever since she came. And it wouldn't do to offend her."

"Why not? We pay her money."

"There are some things all the money in the world wouldn't buy. And what Bowey did for me was one of them."

Cuffy knew quite well what Mamma meant. But not for anything would he have shown it. Papa and his illness were fast getting to seem like a dream, a nasty dream—being chased by a black horse, or trying to run with your legs in water-that you put far away from you, and did your best never, never to remember.

Back he whisked to his original theme.

"Well, can I when I'm *truly* nine? Mamma! Say yes!"—and he pumped her arm up and down.

"Oh well, perhaps. We'll see—now, *do* you want Bowey to have to come and fetch you?"

Grudgingly Cuffy dragged his feet to the door. There, however, he stood to finger and break a morsel from the edge of a damaged brick; went back to the verandah's edge to flip it into the roadway; then took aim with an imaginary ball down the length of the verandah (oh, *why* did children, no matter how tired, so hate to go to bed?) and only at a second, impatient shout from the bathroom disappeared into the house.

He left his mother deep in thought. What he said was true: very soon he would be a big boy, "little Cuffy" no more: the day of long legs and lankiness was at hand.

And together with an inevitable regret, at seeing the child she had fondled change and pass, came the baffling problem of his future. What should she do? How give him