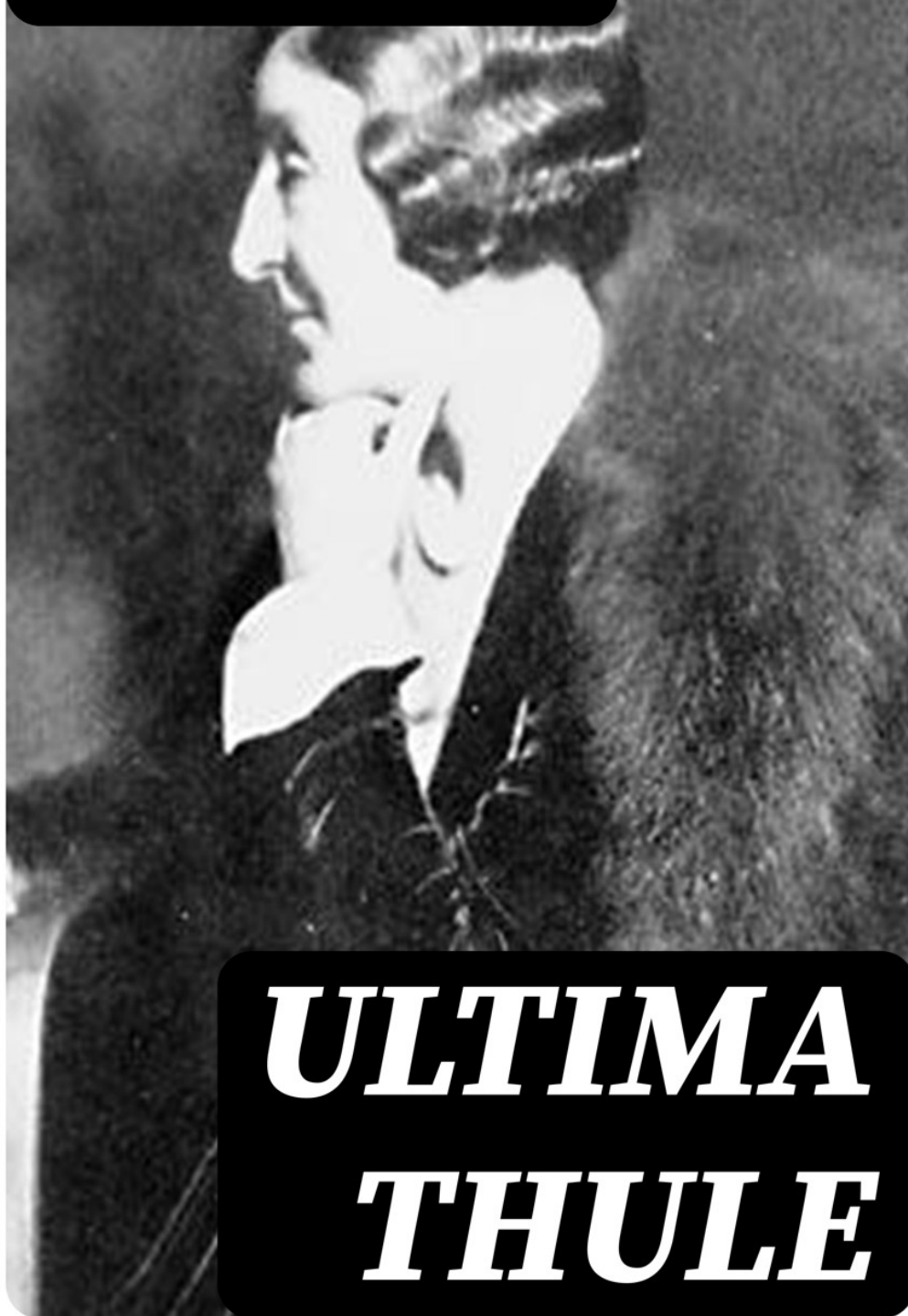


***HENRY HANDEL
RICHARDSON***



***ULTIMA
THULE***

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***ULTIMA
THULE***

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Ultima Thule

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DigiCat, 2022

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Part I](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Part II](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Part III](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[THE END](#)

Part I

[Table of Contents](#)

Chapter I

[Table of Contents](#)

When for the third time, Richard Mahony set foot in Australia, it was to find that the fortune with which that country but some six years back had so airily invested him no longer existed. He was a ruined man; and at the age of forty-nine, with a wife and children dependent on him, must needs start life over again.

Twice in the past he had plucked up his roots from this soil, to which neither gratitude nor affection bound him. Now, fresh from foreign travel, from a wider knowledge of the beauties of the old world, he felt doubly alien; and, with his eyes still full of greenery and lushness, he could see less beauty than ever in its dun and and landscape.—It was left to a later generation to discover this: to those who, with their mother's milk, drank in a love of sunlight and space; of inimitable blue distances and gentian-blue skies. To them, the country's very shortcomings were, in time, to grow dear: the scanty, ragged foliage; the unearthly stillness of the bush; the long, red roads, running inflexible as ruled lines towards a steadily receding horizon...and engendering in him who travelled them a lifelong impatience with hedge-bound twists and turns. To their eyes, too, quickened by emotion, it was left to descry the colours in the apparent colourlessness: the upturned earth that showed red, white,

puce, gamboge; the blue in the grey of the new leafage; the geranium red of young scrub; the purple-blue depths of the shadows. To know, too, in exile, a rank nostalgia for the scent of the aromatic foliage; for the honey fragrance of the wattle; the perfume that rises hot and heavy as steam from vast paddocks of sweet, flowering lucerne—even for the sting and tang of countless miles of bush ablaze.

Of ties such as these, which end by drawing a man home, Richard Mahony knew nothing. He returned to the colony at heart the stranger he had always been.

Landing in Melbourne one cold spring day in the early seventies, he tossed his belongings into a hansom, and without pausing to reflect drove straight to his old club at the top of Collins Street. But his stay there was short. For no sooner did he learn the full extent of his losses, than he was ripe to detect a marked reserve, not to say coolness, in the manner of his former friends and acquaintances. More than one, he fancied, deliberately shunned him. Bitterly he regretted his overhasty intrusion on this, the most exclusive club in the city; to which wealth alone was the passport. (He had forgotten, over his great wanderings, how small a world he had here come back to. Within the narrow clique of Melbourne society, anything that happened to one of its members was quickly known to all; and the news of his crash had plainly preceded him.) Well! if this was a foretaste of what he had to expect—snubs and slights from men who would once have been honoured by his notice—the sooner he got out of people's way the better. And bundling his clothes back into his trunk, he drove off again, choosing, characteristically enough, not a quiet hotel in a good

neighbourhood, but a second-class boarding-house on the farther side of the Victoria Parade. Here, there was no earthly chance of meeting any one he knew. Or, for that matter, of meeting any one at all! For these outlying streets, planned originally for a traffic without compare—the seething mob of men, horses, vehicles that had once flowed, like a living river, to the goldfields—now lay as bare as they had then been thronged. By day an occasional spindly buggy might amble along their vast width, or a solitary bullock-wagon take its tortoise way; but after dark, feebly lit by ill-trimmed lamps set at enormous distances one from another, they turned into mere desolate, wind-swept spaces. On which no creature moved but himself.

It was here that he took his decisions, laid his plans. His days resembled a blurred nightmare, in which he sped from one dingy office to the next, or sat through interviews with lawyers and bankers—humiliating interviews, in the course of which his unbusiness-like conduct, his want of *nous* in money matters was mercilessly dragged to light. But in the evening he was free: and then he would pace by the hour round these deserted streets, with the collar of his greatcoat turned up to his ears, his hands clasped at his back, his head bent against the icy south winds; or, caught by a stinging hail-shower, would seek shelter under the lee of an old, half dismantled "Horse, Cow and Pig-Market," of which the wild wind rattled and shook the loose timbers as if to carry them sky-high.

Of the large fortune he had amassed—the fortune so happily invested, so carefully husbanded—he had been able to recover a bare three thousand pounds. The unprincipled

scoundrel in whose charge he had left it—on Purdy's equally unprincipled advice—had fleeced him of all else. On this pitiful sum, and a handful of second-rate shares which might bring him in the equivalent of what he had formerly spent in the year on books, or Mary on her servants and the running of the nurseries, he had now to start life anew: to provide a home, to feed, clothe, educate his children, pay his way. One thing was clear: he must set up his plate again with all dispatch; resume the profession he had once been so heartily glad to retire from. And his first bitterness and resentment over, he was only too thankful to have this to fall back on.

The moot question was, where to make the start; and in the course of the several anxious debates he had with himself on this subject, he became ever more relieved that Mary was not with him. Her absence gave him a freer hand. For, if he knew her, she would be all in favour of his settling up-country, dead against his trying to get a footing in Melbourne. Now he was as ready as any man could be, to atone to her for the straits to which he had brought her. But—he must be allowed to meet the emergency in his own way. It might not be the wisest or the best way; but it was the only one he felt equal to.

Bury himself alive up-country, he could and would not!...not if she talked till all was blue. He saw her points, of course: they were like herself...entirely practical. There were, she would argue, for every opening in Melbourne ten to be found in the bush, where doctors were scarce, and twice and three times the money to be made there. Living-expenses would be less, nor would he need to keep up any

style. Which was true enough...as far as it went. What, womanlike, she would overlook, or treat as of slight importance, was the fact that he had also his professional pride to consider. He with his past to condemn himself to the backwoods! Frankly, he thought he would be doing not only himself, but his children after him, an injury, did he agree to anything of the kind. No! he was too good for the bush.

But the truth had still another facet. Constrained, at his age, to buckle to again, he could only, he believed, find the necessary courage under conditions that were not too direly repellent. And since, strive as he might, he could not break down Mary's imagined disapproval, he threw himself headlong into the attempt to get things settled—irrevocably settled—before she arrived; took to scouring the city and its environs, tramping the inner and outer suburbs, walking the soles off his boots and himself to a shadow, to find a likely place. Ruefully he turned his back on the sea at St. Kilda and Elsternwick, the pleasant spot of earth in which he once believed he had found a resting place; gave the green gardens of Toorak a wide berth—no room there for an elderly interloper!—and, stifling his distaste, explored the outer darkness of Footscray, Essendon, Moonee Ponds. But it was always the same. If he found what he thought a suitable opening, there was certain not to be a house within coo-ee fit for them to live in.

What finally decided him on the pretty little suburb of Hawthorn—after he had thoroughly prowled and nosed round, to make sure he would have the field to himself—was not alone the good country air, but the fact that, at the

junction of two main streets—or what would some day be main streets, the place being still in the making—he lit on a capital building lot, for sale dirt-cheap. For a doctor no finer position could be imagined—and in fancy he ran up the house that was to stand there. Of brick, two storeys high, towering above its neighbours, it would face both ways, be visible to all comers. The purchase of the land was easily effected—truth to tell, only too easily! He rather let himself be blarneyed into it. The house formed the stumbling-block. He sped from firm to firm; none would touch the job under a couple of thousand. In vain he tried to cut down his requirements. Less than two sitting-rooms they could not possibly do with, besides a surgery and a waiting-room. Four bedrooms, a dressing-room or two, a couple of bathrooms were equally necessary; while no house of this size but had verandah and balcony to keep the sun off, and to serve as an outdoor playroom for the children.

There was nothing for it, in the long run, but to put his pride in his pocket and take the advice given him on every hand: to build, as ninety-nine out of a hundred did here, through one of the numerous Building Societies that existed to aid those short of ready money. But it was a bitter pill for a man of his former wealth to swallow. Nor did it, on closer acquaintance, prove by any means the simple affair he had been led to believe. In the beginning, a thousand was the utmost he felt justified in laying down. But when he saw all that was involved he contrived, after much anxious deliberation, to stretch the thousand to twelve hundred, taking out a mortgage at ten per cent, with regular repayment of capital.

It was at this crisis that he felt most thankful Mary was not with him. *How* she would have got on his nerves!...with her doubts and hesitations, her aversion to taking risks, her fears lest he should land them all in Queer Street. Women paid dearly for their inexperience: when it came to a matter of business, even the most practical could not see beyond the tips of their noses. And, humiliating though the present step might be, there was absolutely no cause for alarm. These things were done—done on every hand—his eye had been opened to that, in his recent wanderings. By men, too, less favourably placed than he. But even suppose, for supposing's sake, that he did not succeed to the top of his expectations—get, that was, the mortgage paid off within a reasonable time—where would be the hardship in treating the interest on the loan as a rental, in place of living rent-free? (And a very moderate rent, too, for a suitable house!) But Mary would never manage to forget the debt that lay behind. And it was here the temptation beset him to hold his tongue, to say nothing to her about the means he had been forced to employ. Let her believe he had built out of the resources left to him. For peace' sake, in the first place; to avoid the bother of explanation and recrimination. (What a drag, too, to know that somebody was eternally on the *qui vive* to see whether or no you were able to come up to the mark!) Yet again, by keeping his own counsel, he would spare her many an hour's anxiety—a sheerly needless anxiety. For any doubts he might have had himself, at the start, vanished like fog before a lifting breeze as he watched the house go up. Daily his conviction strengthened that he had done the right thing.

It became a matter of vital importance to him that the walls should be standing and the roof on, before Mary saw it: Mary needed the evidence of her senses: could grasp only what she had before her eyes. Then, pleasure at getting so fine a house might help to reconcile her to his scheme...God alone knew what the poor soul would be expecting. And so, in the belief that his presence stimulated the workpeople, he spent many an hour in the months that followed watching brick laid to brick, and the hodmen lumber to and fro; or pottering about among clay and mortar heaps: an elderly gentleman in a long surtout, carrying gloves and a cane; with greyish hair and whiskers, and a thin, pointed face.

Again, he cooled his heels there because he had nothing better to do. Once bitten, twice shy, was his motto; and he continued rigidly to give friends and relatives the go-by: time enough to pick up the threads when he could step out once more in his true colours. Besides, the relatives were Mary's; the friends as well. The consequence was, he now fell into a solitariness beyond compare: got the habit of solitude, and neither missed nor wanted the company of his fellows.

Since, however, every man who still stands upright needs some star to go by, he kept his eyes steadfastly fixed on the coming of wife and children. This was to be his panacea for every ill. And as the six months' separation drew to an end, he could hardly contain himself for anxiety and impatience. Everything was ready for them: he had taken a comfortably furnished house in which to instal them till their own was built; had engaged a servant, moved in himself. Feverishly

he scanned the shipping-lists. Other boats made port which had left England at the same time...and even later...despite gales, and calms, and contrary winds. But it was not till the middle of December that the good ship *Sobraon*, ninety odd days out, was sighted off Cape Otway; and he could take train to Queenscliffe for a surprise meeting with his dear ones, and to sail with them up the Bay.

In his hand he carried a basket of strawberries—the first to come on the market.

Standing pointing out to the children familiar landmarks on the shores of their new-old home, Mary suddenly stopped in what she was saying and rubbed her eyes.

"Why! I do declare...if it's not—Look, children, *look*, there's your Papa! He's waving his handkerchief to you. Wave back! Nod your heads! Throw him a kiss!"

"Papa!...dere's Papa!" the twins told each other, and obediently set to wagging like a pair of china mandarins; the while with their pudgy hands they wafted kisses in the direction of an approaching boat-load of men.

"Where's he? I don't see!" opposed Cuffy, in a spirit to which the oneness of his sisters—still more, of sisters and mother—often provoked him. But this time he had a grievance as well. Throughout the voyage there had been ever such lots of laughing and talking and guessing, about who would reckonise Papa first: and he, as the eldest, had felt quite safe. Now Mamma, who had joined in the game and guessed with them, had spoilt everything, not played fair.

But for once his mother did not heed his pouting. She was gazing with her heart in her eyes at the Health Officer's

boat, in which, by the side of the doctor coming to board the ship, sat Richard in a set of borrowed oilskins, ducking his head to avoid the spray, and waving and shouting like an excited schoolboy. In a very few minutes now the long, slow torture of the voyage would be over, and she would know the worst.

Here he came, scrambling up the ladder, leaping to the deck.

"Richard!...my dear! Is it really you? But *oh*, how thin you've got!"

"Yes, here I am, safe and sound! But you, wife...how are you?—*and* the darlings? Come to Papa, who has missed you more than he can say!—Good day, good day, Eliza! I hope I see you well!—But *how* they've grown, Mary! Why, I hardly know them."

The Dumplings, pink and drooping with shyness but docile as ever, dutifully held up their bud mouths to be kissed; then, smiling adorably, wriggled back to Mamma's side, crook'd finger to lip. But Cuffy did not smile as his father swung him aloft, and went pale instead of pink. For, at sight of the person who came jumping over, he had been seized by one of his panicky fears. The Dumplings, of course, didn't remember Papa, they couldn't, they were only four; but he did...and somehow he remembered him *diffrunt*. Could it be a mistake? Not that it wasn't him...he didn't mean that...he only meant...well, he wasn't sure what he did mean. But when this new-old Papa asked: "And how's my big boy?" a fresh spasm of distrust shot through him. Didn't he know that everybody always said "small for his age"?

But, dumped down on the deck again, he was forgotten, while over his head the quick, clipped voice went on: "Perfectly well!...and with nothing in the world to complain of, now I've got you again. I thought you'd *never* come. Yes, I've been through an infernally anxious time, but that's over now, and things aren't as bad as they might be. You've no need to worry. But let's go below where we can talk in peace." And with his arm round her shoulders he made to draw Mary with him...followed by the extreme silent wonder of three pairs of eyes, whose owners were not used any more to seeing Mamma taken away like this without asking. Or anybody's arm put round her either. When she belonged to them.

But at the head of the companion-way Mahony paused and slapped his brow.

"Ha!...but wait a minute...Papa was forgetting. See here!" and from a side pocket of the capacious oilskins he drew forth the basket of strawberries. These had suffered in transit, were bruised and crushed.

"What, strawberries?—already?" exclaimed Mary, and eyed the berries dubiously. They were but faintly tinged.

"The very first to be had, my dear! I spied them on my way to the train.—Come, children!"

But Mary barred the way...stretched out a preventing hand. "Not just now, Richard. Later on, perhaps...when they've had their dinners. Give them to me, dear."

Jocularly he eluded her, holding the basket high, out of her reach. "No, this is *my* treat!—Now who remembers the old game? 'Open your mouths and shut your eyes and see what Jacko will send you!'"

The children closed in, the twins displaying rosy throats, their eyes faithfully glued to.

But Mary peremptorily interposed. "No, no, they mustn't! I should have them ill. The things are not half ripe."

"What? Not let them eat them?...after the trouble I've been to, to buy them and lug them here? Not to speak of what I paid for them."

"I'm sorry, Richard, but—ssh, dear! surely you must see..." Mary spoke in a low, persuasive voice, at the same time frowning and making other wifely signals to him to lower his. (And thus engrossed did not feel a pull at her sleeve, or hear Cuffy's thin pipe: "*I'll* eat them, Mamma. I'd *like* to!" Now he knew it was Papa all right.) For several of their fellow passengers were watching and listening, and there stood Richard looking supremely foolish, holding aloft a single strawberry.

But he was too put out to care who saw or heard. "Well and good then, if they're not fit to eat—not even *after* dinner!—there's only one thing to be done with them. Overboard they go!" And picking up the basket he tossed it and its contents into the sea. Before the children...Eliza...everybody.

With her arm through his, Mary got him below, to the privacy and seclusion of the cabin. The same old Richard! touchy and irascible...wounded by any trifle. But she knew how to manage him; and, by appealing to his common sense and good feelings, soon talked him round. Besides, on this particular day he was much too happy to see them all again, long to remain in dudgeon. Still, his first mood of pleasure and elation had fizzled out and was not to be

recaptured. The result was, the account he finally gave her of the state of his finances, and their future prospects, was not the rose-coloured one he had intended and prepared. What she now got to hear bore more relation to sober fact.

Chapter II

[Table of Contents](#)

A neighbour's cocks and hens wakened him before daybreak. The insensate creatures crew and cackled, cackled and crew; and, did they pause for breath, the sparrows took up the tale. He could not sleep again. Lying stiff as a log so as not to disturb Mary, he hailed each fresh streak of light that crept in at the sides of the blinds or over the tops of the valances; while any bagatelle was welcome that served to divert his thoughts and to bridge the gap till rising-time. The great mahogany wardrobe, for instance. This began as an integral part of the darkness, gradually to emerge, a shade heavier than the surrounding gloom, as a ponderous mass; only little by little, line by line, assuming its true shape. Faithfully the toilet-glass gave back each change in the room's visibility. Later on there were bars to count, formed by unevenness in the slats of the venetians, and falling golden on the whitewashed walls.

Yes, whitewash was, so far, the only covering the walls knew. The papering of them had had to be indefinitely postponed. And gaunt indeed was the effect of their cold whiteness on eyes used to rich, dark hangings. This was one reason why he preferred the penance of immobility, to getting up and prowling about downstairs. Never did the

house look more cheerless than on an early morning, before the blinds were raised, the rooms in order. One realised then, only too plainly, what a bare barn it was; and how the task of rendering it cosy and homelike had baffled even Mary. He would not forget her consternation on first seeing it; her cry of: "But Richard!...how shall we *ever* fill it?" Himself he stood by dumbfounded, as he watched her busy with tape and measure: truly, he had never thought of this. She had toiled, dear soul, for weeks on end, stitching at curtains and draperies to try to clothe the nakedness—in vain. If they had not had his books to fall back on, the place would have been uninhabitable. But he had emptied the whole of his library into it, with the result that books were everywhere: on the stair-landings, in the bedrooms; wherever they could with decency stop a gap. Another incongruity was the collection of curios and bric-a-brac garnered on their travels. This included some rare and costly objects, which looked odd, to say the least of it, in a room where there were hardly chairs enough to go round. For he had had everything to buy, down to the last kitchen fork and spoon. And by the time he had paid for a sideboard that did not make too sorry a show in the big dining-room; a dinner-table that had some relation to the floor-space; a piano, a desk for his surgery and so on, he was bled dry. Nor did he see the smallest prospect, in the meantime, of finishing the job. They had just to live on in this half-baked condition, which blazoned the fact that funds had given out; that he had put up a house it was beyond his means to furnish. How he writhed when strangers ran an appraising glance over it!

No: unrested, and without so much as a cup of tea in him, he could not bring himself to descend and contemplate the evidences of his folly. Instead, the daylight by now being come, he lay and totted up pound to pound until, for sheer weariness, he was ready to drop asleep again. But eight o'clock had struck, there could be no lapsing back into unconsciousness. He rose and went down to breakfast.

They had the children with them at table now. And good as the little things were by nature, yet they rose from ten hours' sound sleep lively as the sparrows: their tongues wagged without a stop. And though he came down with the best intentions, he soon found his nerves jarred. Altering the position of his newspaper for the tenth time, he was pettishly moved to complain: "Impossible! *How* can I read in such a racket?"

"Oh, come, you can't expect children to sit and never say a word."

But she hushed them, with frowns and headshakes, to a bout of whispering, or the loud, hissing noise children make in its stead; under fire of which it was still harder to fix his thoughts.

Retired to the surgery he was no better off; for now the thrumming of five-finger exercises began to issue from the drawing-room, where the children were having their music-lessons. This was unavoidable. With the arrival of the patients all noise had to cease; later on, Mary was too busy with domestic duties to sit by the piano; and that the youngsters must learn music went without saying. But the walls of the house had proved mere lath-and-plaster; and the tinkle of the piano, the sound of childish voices and

Mary's deeper tones, raised in one-two-threes and one-two-three-fours, so distracted him that it took him all his time to turn up and make notes on his cases for the day. By rights, this should have been his hour for reading, for refreshing his memory of things medical. But not only silence failed him; equally essential was a quiet mind; and as long as his affairs remained in their present uncertain state, that, too, was beyond his reach. Before he got to the foot of a page, he would find himself adding up columns of figures.

The truth was, his brain had reverted to its ancient and familiar employment with a kind of malicious glee. He was powerless to control it. Cark and care bestrode him; rode him to death; and yet got him nowhere; for all the calculations in the world would not change hard facts. Reckon as he might, he could not make his dividends for the past six months amount to more than a hundred and fifty pounds: a hundred and fifty! Nor was this wretched sum a certainty. It came from shares that were to the last degree unstable—in old days he had never given them a thought. And against this stood the sum of eight hundred pounds. Oh! he had grossly over-estimated his faculty for self-deception. Now that he was in the thick of things, it went beyond him to get this debt out of his mind. Suppose anything should happen to him before he had paid it off? What a legacy to leave Mary! Out and away his sorest regret was that, in the good old days now gone for ever, he had failed to insure his life. Thanks to his habitual dilatoriness he had put it off from year to year, always nursing the intention, shirking the effort. Now, the premium demanded would be sheerly unpayable.

At present everything depended on how the practice panned out. The practice...Truth to tell, after close on a six months' trial, he did not himself know what to make of it. Had he been less pressed for time and money, he might have described it as not unpromising. As matters stood, he could only say that what there *was* of it was good: the patients of a superior class, and so on. But from the first it had been slow to move—there seemed no sickness about—the fees slower still to come in. If, by the end of the year, things did not look up, he would have to write down his settling there as a bad job. It was an acute disappointment that he had only managed to secure two paltry lodges. Every general practitioner knew what *that* meant. He had built on lodge-work: not only for the income it assured, but also to give a fillip to the private practice. Again, not expecting what work there was to be so scattered, he had omitted to budget for horse hire, or the hire of a buggy. This made a real hole in his takings. He walked wherever he could; but calls came from places as far afield as Kew and Camberwell, which were not to be reached on foot. Besides, the last thing in the world he could afford to do was to knock himself up. Even as it was, he got back from his morning round tired out; and after lunch would find himself dozing in his chair. Of an evening, he was glad to turn in soon after ten o'clock; the one bright side to the general slackness being the absence of night-work. Of course, such early hours meant giving the go-by to all social pleasures. But truly he was in no trim for company, either at home or abroad. How he was beginning to rue the day when he had burdened himself with a house of this size, merely that he

might continue to make a show among his fellow-men. When the plain truth was, he would not turn a hair if he never saw one of them again.

Yes, his present feeling of unsociableness went deeper than mere fatigue: it was a kind of deliberate turning-in on himself. Mary no doubt hit the mark, when she blamed the months of morbid solitude to which he had condemned himself on reaching Melbourne. He had, declared she, never been the same man since.

"I ought to have known better than to let you come out alone."

She spoke heartily; but doubts beset her. It was one thing to put your finger on the root of an ill; another to cure it. Yet a failure to do so might cost them dear. Here was Richard with his way and his name to make, a practice to build up, connections to form; and, instead of taking every hand that offered, he kept up his "Ultima Thule" habits of refusing invitations, shirking introductions; and declined into this "let me alone and don't bother me" state, than which, for a doctor, she could imagine none more fatal.

Of course, having to start work again at his age was no light matter, and he undoubtedly felt the strain; found it hard also, after all the go-as-you-please latter years, to nail himself down to fixed hours and live by the clock. He complained, too, that his memory wasn't what it used to be. Names, now. If he didn't write down a name the moment he heard it, it was bound to escape him; and then he could waste the better part of a morning in struggling to recapture it.

"You're out of the way of it, dear, that's all," she resolutely strove to cheer him, as she brushed his hat and hunted for his gloves. "Now have you your case-book? And is everything in your bag?" More than once he had been obliged to tramp the whole way home again, for a forgotten article.

The reminder annoyed him. "Yes, yes, of course. But my thermometer...now where the dickens have I put that?" And testily he tapped pocket after pocket.

"Here...you've left it lying. Oh, by the way, Richard, I wonder if you'd mind leaving an order at the butcher's as you go past?"

But at this he flared up. "Now, Mary, *is* it fair to bother me with that kind of thing, when I've so much else to think of?"

"Well, it's only...the shop's so far off, and I can't spare cook. You've just to hand in a note as you pass the door."

"Yes, yes. A thousand and one reasons!"

"Oh well, never mind. Eliza and the children must go that way for their walk—though it does take them down among the shops."

"And why not? Are the children everlastingly to be spared at my expense?"

He went off, banging the gate behind him. The latch did not hold; Mary stepped out to secure it. And the sight of him trudging down the road brought back her chief grievance against him. This was his obstinate refusal to keep a horse and trap. It stood to reason: if he would only consent to drive on his rounds, instead of walking, he would save himself much of the fatigue he now endured; and she be

spared his perpetual grumbles. Besides, it was not the thing for a man of his age and appearance to be seen tramping the streets, bag in hand. But she might as well have talked to a post. The only answer she got was that he couldn't afford it. Now this was surely imagination. She flattered herself she knew something about a practice, and could tell pretty well what the present one was likely to throw off...if properly nursed. To the approximate three hundred a year which Richard admitted to drawing from his dividends, it should add another three; and on six, with her careful management, they could very well pull through to begin with. It left no margin for extravagances, of course; but the husbanding of Richard's strength could hardly be put down under that head. Since, however, he continued obdurate, she went her own way to work; with the result that, out of the money he allowed her to keep house on, she contrived at the end of three months to hand him back a tidy sum.

"Now if you don't feel you want to *buy* a horse and buggy, you can at least give a three months' order at the livery-stable."

But not a bit of it! More, he was even angry. "Tch! *Do*, for goodness' sake, leave me to manage my own affairs! I don't want a horse and trap, I tell you. I prefer to go on as I am." And, with that, her economics just passed into and were swallowed up in the general fund. She wouldn't do it again.

"Mamma!"

This was Cuffy, who had followed her out and climbed the gate at her side. He spoke in a coaxy voice; for as likely as not Mamma would say: "Run away, darling, and don't bother me. I've no time." But Cuffy badly wanted to know

something. And, since Nannan left, there had never been any one he could ask his questions of: Mamma was always busy, Papa not at home.

"Mamma! Why does Papa poke his head out so when he walks?"

"That's stooping. People do it as they grow older." Even the child, it seemed, could see how tiresome Richard found walking.

"What's it mean growing old—really, truly?"

"Why, losing your hair and your teeth, and not being able to get about as well as you used to."

"Does it hurt?"

"Of course not, little silly!"

"Does Papa lose his teeth? Does Eliza? And why has he always got a bag in his hand now?"

"*What* an inquisitive little boy! He carries things in it to make people well with."

"Why does he want to make them well?"

"To get money to buy you little folks pretty clothes and good things to eat. But come...jump down! And run and tell Eliza to get you ready for your walk."

"I don't *like* going walks with Eliza," said Cuffy and, one hand in his mother's, reluctantly dragged and shuffled a foot in the gravel. "Oh, I do wis' I had my little pony again."

"So do I, my darling," said Mary heartily, and squeezed his hand. "I'm afraid you'll be forgetting how to ride. I must talk to Papa. Then perhaps Santa Claus...or on your birthday..."

"Ooh! Really, truly, Mamma?"

"We'll see."—At which Cuffy hopped from side to side up the length of the path.

And Mary meant what she said. It was unthinkable that *her* children should come short in any of the advantages other children enjoyed. And not to be able to ride, and ride well, too, in a country like this, might prove a real drawback to them in after life. Now she had pinched and screwed for Richard's sake, to no purpose whatever. The next lump sum she managed to get together should go to buying a pony.

But this was not all. Besides riding, the children ought to be having dancing-lessons. She did so want her chicks to move prettily and gracefully; to know what to do with their hands and feet; to be able to enter a room without awkwardness; and they were just at their most impressionable age: what they now took in they would never forget, what they missed, never make good. But she could hope for no help from Richard; manlike, he expected graces and accomplishments to spring up of themselves, like wild flowers from the soil. Everything depended on her. And she did not spare herself. Thanks to her skill with her needle, they were still, did they go to a party, the best-dressed children in the room; and the best-mannered, too, Nannan's strict upbringing still bearing fruit. None of her three ever grabbed, or gobbled, or drank with a full mouth; nor were they either lumpishly shy or over-forward, like the general ruck of colonial children.

But they were getting big; there would soon be more serious things to think of than manners and accomplishments. If only Richard did not prove too unreasonable! So far, except for music-lessons, they had

had no teaching at all, one of his odd ideas being that a child's brain should lie fallow till it was seven or eight years old. This meant that she had sometimes to suffer the mortification of seeing children younger than Cuffy and his sisters able to answer quite nicely at spelling and geography, while hers stood mutely by. In the Dumplings' case it did not greatly matter: they were still just Dumplings in every sense of the word; fat and merry play-babies. But Cuffy was sharp for his age; he could read his own books, and knew long pieces of poetry by heart. It seemed little short of absurd to hold such a child back; and, after she had once or twice seen him put publicly to shame, Mary took, of a morning, when she was working up a flake-crust or footing her treadle-machine, to setting him a copy to write, or giving him simple lessons in spelling and sums. (Which little incursions into knowledge were best, it was understood, not mentioned to Papa.)

Her thoughts were all for her children. Herself she needed little; and was really managing without difficulty to cut her coat to suit her cloth. In the matter of dress, for instance, she still had the rich furs, the sumptuous silks and satins she had brought with her from home—made over, these things would last her for years—had all her ivory and mother-o'-pearl ornaments and trifles. True, she walked where she had driven, hired less expensive servants, rose betimes of a morning, but who shall say whether these changes were wholly drawbacks in Mary's eyes, or whether the return to a more active mode of life did not, in great measure, outweigh them? It certainly gave her a feeling of satisfaction to which she had long been a stranger, to know

that not a particle of waste was going on in her kitchen; that she was once more absolute monarch in her own domain. Minor pleasures consisted in seeing how far she could economise the ingredients of pudding or cake and yet turn it out light and toothsome. Had Richard wished to entertain, she would have guaranteed to hold the floor with anyone, at half the cost.

But there was no question of this. They lived like a pair of hermit crabs; and, in spite of the size of the house, might just as well have been buried in the bush. For, having talked herself hoarse in pointing out the harm such a mode of life would do the practice, she had given way and made the best of things; as long, that was, as Richard's dislike of company had only to do with the forming of new acquaintances. When he began his old grumbles at the presence of her intimate friends and relatives, it was more than she could stand. In the heated argument that followed her perplexed: "Not ask Lizzie? Put off the Devines?" she discovered, to her amazement, that it was not alone his morbid craving for solitude that actuated him: the house, if you please, formed the stumbling-block! Because this was still unpapered and rather scantily furnished, he had got it into his head that it was not fit to ask people to; that he would be looked down on, because of it. Now did *anyone* ever hear such nonsense? Why, half the houses in Melbourne were just as bare, and nobody thought the worse of them. People surely came to see you, not your furniture! But he had evidently chafed so long in silence over what he called the "poverty-stricken aspect of the place," that there was now no talking him out of the notion. So Mary shrugged

and sighed; and, silently in her turn, took the sole way left her, which was an underground way; so contriving matters that her friends came to the house only when Richard was out of it...a little shift it was again wiser not to mention to Papa. She also grew adept at getting rid of people to the moment. By the time the gate clicked at Richard's return, all traces of the visit had been cleared away.

Chapter III

[Table of Contents](#)

Thus she bought peace.—But when the day came for putting up a guest in the house, for making use of the unused spare room, finesse did not avail; and a violent dispute broke out between them. To complicate matters, the guest in question was Richard's old bugbear, Tilly.

Tilly, whose dearest wish had been fulfilled some six months back by the birth of a child, but who since then had remained strangely silent, now wrote, almost beside herself with grief and anxiety, that she was bringing her infant, which would not thrive, to town, to consult the doctors there. And Mary straightway forgot all her schemes and contrivances, forgot everything but a friend in need, and wrote off by return begging Tilly, with babe and nurse, to make their house her own.

Mahony was speechless when he heard of it. He just gave her one look, then stalked out of the room and shut himself up in the surgery, where he stayed for the rest of the evening. While Mary sat bent over her needlework, with determined lips and stubborn eyes.