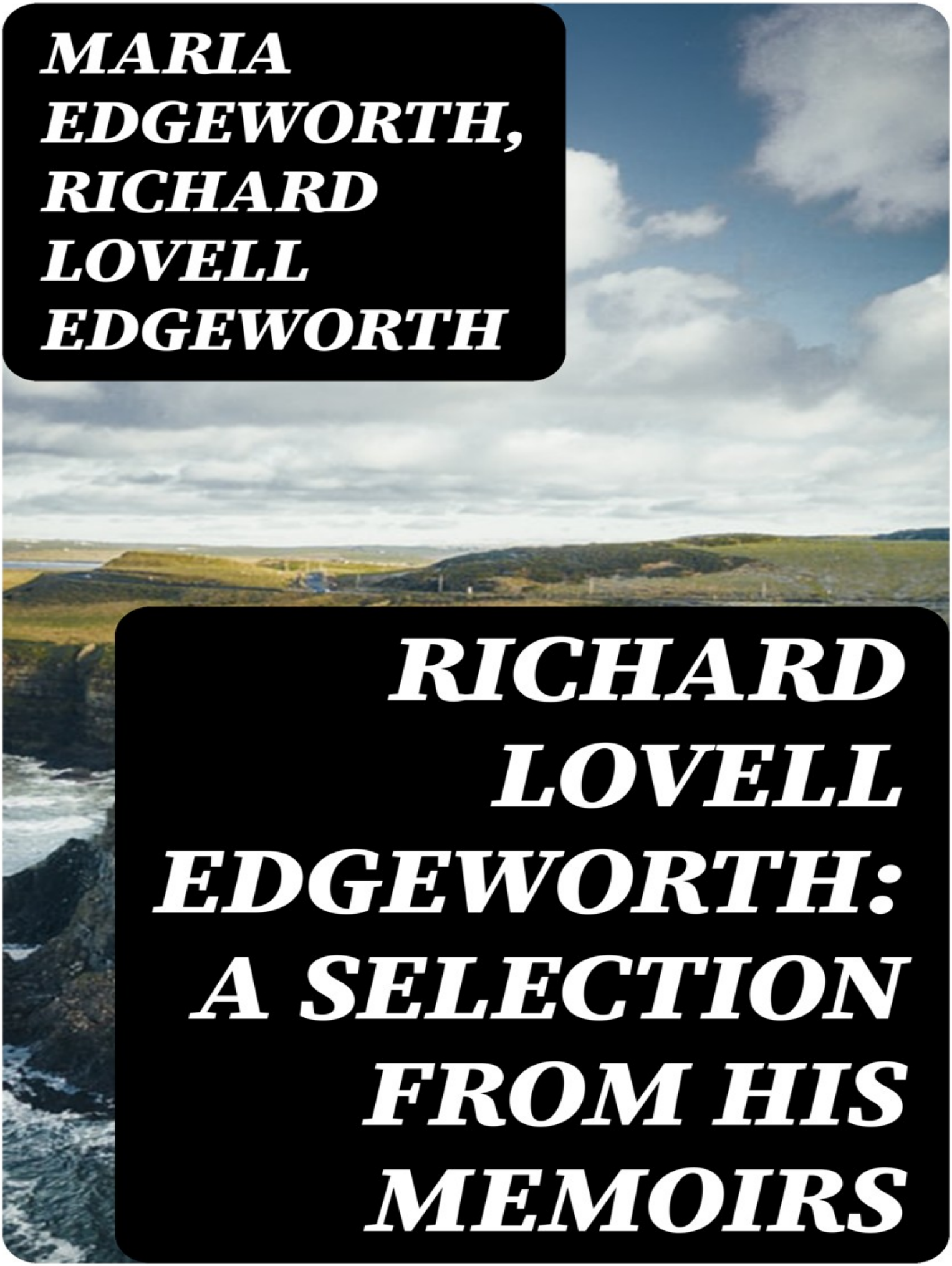

MARIA EDGEWORTH, RICHARD LOVELL EDGEWORTH

RICHARD LOVELL EDGEWORTH: A SELECTION FROM HIS MEMOIRS

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Richard Lovell Edgeworth: A Selection From His Memoirs

EAN 8596547356509

DigiCat, 2022
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CHAPTER 1

Some years ago, I came across the Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth in a second-hand bookshop, and found it so full of interest and amusement, that I am tempted to draw the attention of other readers to it. As the volumes are out of print, I have not hesitated to make long extracts from them. The first volume is autobiographical, and the narrative is continued in the second volume by Edgeworth's daughter Maria, who was her father's constant companion, and was well fitted to carry out his wish that she should complete the Memoirs.

Richard Lovell Edgeworth was born at Bath in 1744. He was a shining example of what a good landlord can do for his tenants, and how an active mind will always find objects of interest without constantly requiring what are called amusements; for the leisure class should be like Sundays in a week, and as the ideal Sunday should be a day when we can store up good and beautiful thoughts to refresh us during the week, a day when there is no hurry, no urgent business to trouble us, a day when we have time to rise above the sordid details of life and enjoy its beauties; so it seems to me that those who are not obliged to work for their living should do their part in the world by adding to its store of good and wise thoughts, by cultivating the arts and raising the standard of excellence in them, and by bringing to light truths which had been forgotten, or which had been hidden from our forefathers.

Richard Edgeworth was eminently a practical man, impulsive, as we learn from his imprudent marriage at

nineteen, but with a strong sense of duty. His mother, who was Welsh, brought him up in habits of thrift and industry very unlike those of his ancestors, which he records in the early pages of his Memoirs. His great-grandmother seems to have been a woman of strong character and courage in spite of her belief in fairies and her dread of them, for he writes that 'while she was living at Liscard, she was, on some sudden alarm, obliged to go at night to a garret at the top of the house for some gunpowder, which was kept there in a barrel. She was followed upstairs by an ignorant servant girl, who carried a bit of candle without a candlestick between her fingers. When Lady Edgeworth had taken what gunpowder she wanted, had locked the door, and was halfway downstairs again, she observed that the girl had not her candle, and asked what she had done with it; the girl recollected, and answered that she had left it "stuck in the barrel of black salt." Lady Edgeworth bid her stand still, and instantly returned by herself to the room where the gunpowder was, found the candle as the girl had described, put her hand carefully underneath it, carried it safely out, and when she got to the bottom of the stairs dropped on her knees, and thanked God for their deliverance'

When we remember that it was Richard Edgeworth, the father of Maria, who trained and encouraged her first efforts in literature, we feel that we owe him a debt of gratitude; but our interest is increased when we read his Memoirs, for we then find ourselves brought into close contact with a very intelligent and vigorous mind, keen to take part in the scientific experiments of the day, while his upright moral character and earnest and well-directed efforts to improve

his Irish property win our admiration; and when we remember that he married in succession four wives, and preserved harmony among the numerous members of his household, our admiration becomes wonder, and we would fain learn the secret of his success. One element in his success doubtless was that he kept every one around him usefully employed, and in the manner most suited to each. He knew how to develop innate talent, and did not crush or overpower those around him. He owed much to the early training of a sensible mother, and he gives an anecdote of his early childhood, which I will quote:—

'My mother was not blind to my faults. She saw the danger of my passionate temper. It was a difficult task to correct it; though perfectly submissive to her, I was with others rebellious and outrageous in my anger. My mother heard continual complaints of me; yet she wisely forbore to lecture or punish me for every trifling misdemeanour; she seized proper occasions to make a strong impression upon my mind.

'One day my elder brother Tom, who, as I have said, was almost a man when I was a little child, came into the nursery where I was playing, and where the maids were ironing. Upon some slight provocation or contradiction from him, I flew into a violent passion; and, snatching up one of the boxirons which the maid had just laid down, I flung it across the table at my brother. He stooped instantly; and, thank God! it missed him. There was a redhot heater in it, of which I knew nothing until I saw it thrown out, and until I heard the scream from the maids. They seized me, and dragged me downstairs to my mother. Knowing that she was

extremely fond of my brother, and that she was of a warm indignant temper, they expected that signal vengeance would burst upon me. They all spoke at once. When my mother heard what I had done, I saw she was struck with horror, but she said not one word in anger to me. She ordered everybody out of the room except myself, and then drawing me near her, she spoke to me in a mild voice, but in a most serious manner. First, she explained to me the nature of the crime which I had run the hazard of committing; she told me she was sure that I had no intention seriously to hurt my brother, and did not know that if the iron had hit my brother, it must have killed him. While I felt this first shock, and whilst the horror of murder was upon me, my mother seized the moment to conjure me to try in future to command my passions. I remember her telling me that I had an uncle by the mother's side who had such a violent temper, that in a fit of passion one of his eyes actually started out of its socket. "You," said my mother to me, "have naturally a violent temper; if you grow up to be a man without learning to govern it, it will be impossible for you then to command yourself; and there is no knowing what crime you may in a fit of passion commit, and how miserable you may, in consequence of it, become. You are but a very young child, yet I think you can understand me. Instead of speaking to you as I do at this moment, I might punish you severely; but I think it better to treat you like a reasonable creature. My wish is to teach you to command your temper—nobody can do that for you so well as you can do it for yourself."

'As nearly as I can recollect, these were my mother's words; I am certain this was the sense of what she then said to me. The impression made by the earnest solemnity with which she spoke never, during the whole course of my life, was effaced from my mind. From that moment I determined to govern my temper.'

Acting upon the old adage that example is better than precept, his mother taught him at an early age to observe the good and bad qualities of the persons he met. The study of character she justly felt to be most important, and yet it is not one of the subjects taught in schools except by personal collision with other boys, and incidentally in reading history. When sent to school at Warwick, he learned not only the first rudiments of grammar, but 'also the rudiments of that knowledge which leads us to observe the difference of tempers and characters in our fellow-creatures. The marking how widely they differ, and by what minute varieties they are distinguished, continues, to the end of life, an inexhaustible subject of discrimination.'

May not Maria have gained much valuable training in the art of novel-writing from a father who was so impressed with the value of the study of character?

The Gospel precept which we read as 'Judge not,' should surely be translated 'Condemn not,' and does not forbid a mental exercise which is necessary in our intercourse with others.

Among the circumstances which had considerable influence on his character, he mentions: 'My mother was reading to me some passages from Shakespeare's plays, marking the characters of Coriolanus and of Julius Caesar,

which she admired. The contempt which Coriolanus expresses for the opinion and applause of the vulgar, for "the voices of the greasyheaded multitude," suited well with that disdain for low company with which I had been first inspired by the fable of the Lion and the Cub.* It is probable that I understood the speeches of Coriolanus but imperfectly; yet I know that I sympathised with my mother's admiration, my young spirit was touched by his noble character, by his generosity, and, above all, by his filial piety and his gratitude to his mother.' He mentions also that 'some traits in the history of Cyrus, which was read to me, seized my imagination, and, next to Joseph in the Old Testament, Cyrus became the favourite of my childhood. My sister and I used to amuse ourselves with playing Cyrus at the court of his grandfather Astyages. At the great Persian feasts, I was, like young Cyrus, to set an example of temperance, to eat nothing but watercresses, to drink nothing but water, and to reprove the cupbearer for making the king, my grandfather, drunk. To this day I remember the taste of those water-cresses; and for those who love to trace the characters of men in the sports of children, I may mention that my character for sobriety, if not for water-drinking, has continued through life.'

* In Gay's Fables.

When Richard Edgeworth encouraged his daughter Maria's literary tastes, he was doubtless mindful how much pleasure and support his own mother had derived from studying the best authors; and when we read later of the affectionate terms on which Maria stood with her various stepmothers and their families, we cannot help thinking that

she must have inherited at least one of the beautiful traits in her grandmother's character which Richard Edgeworth especially dwells on: 'She had the most generous disposition that I ever met with; not only that common generosity, which parts with money, or money's worth, freely, and almost without the right hand knowing what the left hand doeth; but she had also an entire absence of selfish consideration. Her own wishes or opinions were never pursued merely because they were her own; the ease and comfort of everybody about her were necessary for her well-being. Every distress, as far as her fortune, or her knowledge, or her wit or eloquence could reach, was alleviated or removed; and, above all, she could forgive, and sometimes even forget injuries.'

Richard's taste for science early showed itself, when at seven years old his curiosity was excited by an electric battery which was applied to his mother's paralysed side. He says:—

'At this time electricity was but little known in Ireland, and its fame as a cure for palsy had been considerably magnified. It, as usual, excited some sensation in the paralytic limbs on the first trials. One of the experiments on my mother failed of producing a shock, and Mr. Deane seemed at a loss to account for it. I had observed that the wire which was used to conduct the electric fluid, had, as it hung in a curve from the instrument to my mother's arm, touched the hinge of a table which was in the way, and I had the courage to mention this circumstance, which was the real cause of failure.'

It was when he was eight years old, and while travelling with his father, that his attention was caught by 'a man carrying a machine five or six feet in diameter, of an oval form, and composed of slender ribs of steel. I begged my father to inquire what it was. We were told that it was the skeleton of a lady's hoop. It was furnished with hinges, which permitted it to fold together in a small compass, so that more than two persons might sit on one seat of a coach —a feat not easily performed, when ladies were encompassed with whalebone hoops of six feet extent. My curiosity was excited by the first sight of this machine, probably more than another child's might have been, because previous agreeable associations had given me some taste for mechanics, which was still a little further increased by the pleasure I took in examining this glittering contrivance. Thus even the most trivial incidents in childhood act reciprocally as cause and effect in forming our tastes.'

It was in 1754 that Mrs. Edgeworth, continuing much out of health, resolved to consult a certain Lord Trimblestone, who had been very successful in curing various complaints. Lord Trimblestone received Mr. and Mrs. Edgeworth most cordially and hospitably, and though he could not hope to cure her, recommended some palliatives. He had more success with another lady whose disorder was purely nervous. His treatment of her was so original that I must quote it at length:

'Instead of a grave and forbidding physician, her host, she found, was a man of most agreeable manners. Lady Trimblestone did everything in her power to entertain her

guest, and for two or three days the demon of ennui was banished. At length the lady's vapours returned; everything appeared changed. Melancholy brought on a return of alarming nervous complaints—convulsions of the limbs — perversion of the understanding—a horror of society; in short, all the complaints that are to be met with in an advertisement enumerating the miseries of a nervous patient. In the midst of one of her most violent fits, four mutes, dressed in white, entered her apartment; slowly approaching her, they took her without violence in their arms, and without giving her time to recollect herself, conveyed her into a distant chamber hung with black and lighted with green tapers. From the ceiling, which was of a considerable height, a swing was suspended, in which she was placed by the mutes, so as to be seated at some distance from the ground. One of the mutes set the swing in motion; and as it approached one end of the room, she was opposed by a grim menacing figure armed with a huge rod of birch. When she looked behind her, she saw a similar figure at the other end of the room, armed in the same manner. The terror, notwithstanding the strange circumstances which surrounded her, was not of that sort which threatens life; but every instant there was an immediate hazard of bodily pain. After some time, the mutes appeared again, with great composure took the lady out of the swing, and conducted her to her apartment. When she had reposed some time, a servant came to inform her that tea was ready. Fear of what might be the consequence of a refusal prevented her from declining to appear. No notice was taken of what had happened, and the

evening and the next day passed without any attack of her disorder. On the third day the vapours returned—the mutes reappeared—the menacing flagellants again affrighted her, and again she enjoyed a remission of her complaints. By degrees the fits of her disorder became less frequent, the ministration of her tormentors less necessary, and in time the habits of hypochondriacism were so often interrupted, and such a new series of ideas was introduced into her mind, that she recovered perfect health, and preserved to the end of her life sincere gratitude for her adventurous physician.'

Three years were spent by Richard at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, while his vacations were often passed at Bath by the wish of his father, who was anxious that his son should be introduced to good society at an early age. It was there that Richard saw Beau Nash,' the popular monarch of Bath,' and also 'the remains of the celebrated Lord Chesterfield. I looked in vain for that fire, which we expect to see in the eye of a man of wit and genius. He was obviously unhappy, and a melancholy spectacle.' Of the young ladies he says: 'I soon perceived that those who made the best figure in the ballroom were not always qualified to please in conversation; I saw that beauty and grace were sometimes accompanied by a frivolous character, by disgusting envy, or despicable vanity. All this I had read of in poetry and prose, but there is a wide difference, especially among young people, between what is read and related, and what is actually seen. Books and advice make much more impression in proportion as we grow older. We find by degrees that those who lived before