The teller of tales presents *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is widely regarded as one of the best books written by an Australian, although it is worth remembering that its author left for Europe when she was eighteen, after which, apart from a six week visit to check details of the huge work she had in progress, she never saw the country again. Yet Australia fills the masterpiece which HHR has given us, though it is Richard Mahony who is the book's principal subject, not the country he adopted, as a young man, in the hope of leaving with an easily-gotten fortune. Mahony – and his wife, Polly, later known as Mary, without whom he was always incomplete – Mahony's fortunes are what we follow, somewhat like the miners in the early pages, pursuing a lead in hope of striking riches, only to find it petering out in dull earth, yielding nothing. Mahony is the subject, and even Ireland, his homeland, and England, though powerfully presented when the narrative reaches them, are background, stage-setting, to the lengthy, indeed epic, tale.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is HHR's highest achievement, yet, in the presentation that I wish to make, it rests on a prior, less obvious achievement internal to the writer: I mean the almost statuesque objectivity, wide, even vast, in its scale, which she brings to her subject. If we look at HHR's writings apart from the famous trilogy we will be able to pick out a few suggestions, not much more than that, of how this objectivity was gained – gained, because it had not always been there.

First, however – and forgive me, dear reader, if the taking of these early steps is frustrating, making you wonder where and how to find the entry point of this essay – first, let us go to the opening Proem to *Australia Felix*, the first book of the trilogy. If we begin at the very beginning, we find that a tunnel has collapsed on a digger, he can't be got out in time to save him, so his mates head off for the nearest grog-shop 'to wet their throats to the memory of the dead, and to discuss future plans'. Among them is Long Jim, the mate of the dead man, who sits, pannikin of spirit in hand, and eyes full of tears, to think about the dying of his own fortunes. His thoughts go back to London, where he was a lamplighter, and his illiterate wife, whom he never expects to see again, and he senses that he will end his days where he is. 'Well, they wouldn't be many; this was not a place that made old bones.'

Long Jim, in his desperation, resembles the later Richard Mahony (whom we've not yet encountered) as he sits, brooding on his life in London, 'all the hatred of the unwilling exile for the land that gives him house-room burning in his breast.'

Unwilling exile? Unwilling? This is the feeling of a man whose venture to the southern continent hasn't rewarded him as he had hoped. And in this regard Long Jim and Richard Mahony are alike, each of them dreaming that the new country might give them what their homeland would not.

> Now that deep sinking was in vogue, gold-digging no longer served as a play-game for the gentleman and the amateur;

> the greater number of those who toiled at it were work-tried, seasoned men. And yet, although it had now sunk to the level of any other arduous and uncertain occupation, and the magic prizes of the early days were seldom found, something of the old, romantic glamour still clung to this most famous gold-field, dazzling the eyes and confounding the judgement. Elsewhere, the horse was in use at the puddling-trough, and machines for crushing quartz were under discussion. But the Ballarat digger resisted the introduction of machinery, fearing the capitalist machinery would bring in its train. He remained the dreamer, the jealous individualist; he hovered for ever on the brink of a stupendous discovery.

In that last sentence we feel HHR reaching for her central figure, readying him like a chess piece for the moves to follow. In the lines that I have quoted, one feels that Long Jim is the precursor of Richard Mahony, and that the incident of the mine's collapse, the soon-to-be-forgotten tragedy of Long Jim's mate, has been a foretaste of what will be worked out, watched in all its pain, throughout the next three volumes. Having brought the reader to this point, HHR launches her book with a tremendous burst, a page of rhetoric beginning 'This dream it was, of vast wealth got without exertion' and leading to the fierce paragraph wherein she characterises Australia as it had never been shown before.

> Such were the fates of those who succumbed to the "unholy hunger". It was like a form of revenge taken on them, for their loveless schemes of robbing and fleeing; a revenge contrived by the ancient, barbaric country they had so lightly invaded. Now, she held them captive – without chains, ensorcelled – without witchcraft; and, lying stretched like some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts freely bared, she watched, with a malignant eye, the efforts made by these puny mortals to tear their lips away.

Richard Mahony does get away. He, unlike Long Jim, makes money enough to take him home, and his return, described as Part 1 of the trilogy, 'Australia Felix' ends and Part 2, 'The Way Home' begins, puts a lift into the prose of HHR such as only the ending of a voyage, or a long flight these days, can give:

> At sight of (the English shore) Mahony had a shock of surprise – that thrilled surprise that England holds for those of her sons who journey back, no matter whence, across the bleak and windy desert of the seas. Quite so lovely as this, one had not dared to remember the homeland. There it lay, stretched like an emerald belt against its drab background, and was as grateful to sun-tired eyes as a draught of mountain water to a climber's parched throat. Not a rood of this earth looked barren or unkempt: veritable lawns ran down to the brink of the cliffs; hedges ruled bosky lines about the meadows; the villages were bowers of trees – English trees. Even the rain had favoured him: his first glimpse of all this beauty was caught at its freshest, grass and foliage having emerged from the clouds as if new painted in greenness.

Mankind, this English scene seems to promise, can renew itself; it's a welcome thought to Mahony, but in his mind there lurk memories of the land at the other end of the long journey which his life, unbeknown to him perhaps, is on its way to becoming – that land brought so passionately, fiercely, to life in the opening Proem. The British Isles, in all their loveliness, and Australia, so different in almost every way, are not only ‘backgrounds’ for Mahony’s story, they are on their way to becoming alternatives, choices for him to decide between – he thinks.

By the end of ‘Ultima Thule’, the third book, Mahony is helpless, has no choice, is utterly dependent on Mary, his wife, to sustain him as he declines into madness and dies. In another magnificent page, HHR describes his funeral.

> Amid these wavy downs Mahony was laid to rest. It would have been after his own heart that his last bed was within sound of what he had perhaps loved best on earth – the open sea. A quarter of a mile off, behind a sandy ridge, the surf, driving in from the Bight, breaks and booms eternally on the barren shore. Thence, too, come the fierce winds, which, in stormy weather, hurl themselves over the land, where not a tree, not a bush, not even a fence stands to break their force. Or to limit the outlook. On all sides the eye can range, unhindered, to where the vast earth meets the infinitely vaster sky. And, under blazing summer suns, or when a full moon floods the night, no shadow falls on the sun-baked or moon-blanched plains, but those cast by the few little stones set up in human remembrance.

HHR has almost finished her greatest tale. It only remains for her to re-join the duality of central character and the settings that he occupies, and continually opposes:

> And, thereafter, his resting place was indistinguishable from the common ground. The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit.

A vagrant is a wanderer, and a wanderer has no home. Thus Richard Mahony who, when he is in Australia, remembers the virtues, the certainties, of ‘home’ and when he is in the British Isles, and Europe, remembers the virtues of his country at the bottom of the world. Australia is necessary in Richard Mahony’s feelings of displacement, dispossession, when he is in Europe, and Europe’s virtues are necessary to his feelings of displacement, of dispossession, when he is in his adopted land. HHR applies the word ‘vagrant’ a number of times to the man based on the father she knew only towards the end of his long and sad decline, and in a way this word is the summation of her sadness as she contemplates him, because there is a home for him, at either end of the world, if he could only come to terms with, accept, what a home could offer. Millions of others live happily enough, or acceptingly, in Europe, or in Australia, but Richard Mahony … no. He wanders from one to the other, always dreaming of a situation which will satisfy him, never finding peace, and losing the admiration and public position which once was his … in the colonial city, much despised by him, of Ballarat.

So we are back where we began, and it is time to return to my other theme, the development of HHR’s art from being a teller of tales to the novelist of epic span which she was to become. Once again, let us begin at the beginning. Here is the opening of The Getting of Wisdom:

> The four children were lying on the grass.
>
> ‘… and the Prince went further and further into the forest,’ said the elder girl, ‘till he came to a beautiful glade – a glade,

> you know, is a place in the forest that is green and lovely. And there he saw a lady, a beautiful lady, in a long white dress that hung down to her ankles, with a golden belt and a golden crown. She was lying on the sward – a sward, you know, is grass as smooth as velvet, just like green velvet – and the Prince saw the marks of travel on her garments. The bottom of the lovely silk dress was all dirty – '
>
> 'Wondrous Fair, if you don't mind you'll make that sheet dirty, too,' said Pin.
>
> 'Shut up, will you!' answered her sister who, carried away by her narrative, had approached her boots to some linen that was bleaching.

'Wondrous Fair' is the name given to herself by Laura Tweedle Rambotham, whose story we are reading. Many years later, the then-famous HHR wrote sharply about her own name.

> Though my mother had her own beautiful Mary, or the Elizabeth or Sarah or Grace of her sisters to choose from, I was beplastered with Ethel Florence, on top of the Lindesay, and my sister was in much the same boat. Ethel was bad enough, but the Florence I sheerly detested; and it has never figured but as an initial in my signature. Nor did anyone make use of the Ethel. At home I answered to Et or Ettie, at school here and there to Etta. I have often thought, revengefully, that if on growing up we feel thus strongly, our parents ought to be made to take over the silly names inflicted upon us helpless infants.

The gap between Et or Ettie and Wondrous Fair is as wide as the gap between reality and imagination, and it is the closing of this gap that I hope to explore in this essay. The gap I speak of is not so obvious in *Maurice Guest*, though it is there, in the obsessive passion that Maurice focuses on Louise Dufrayer, the young woman whose brother has a station in Queensland (see the first essay in this series). The gap is much more clearly visible in *The Getting of Wisdom*; it is arguable, in my view, that Laura gains no particular wisdom within the pages of this small book, but is simply forced to realise that she must conform if she is to free herself of the scorn felt for her by more 'normal' girls. Laura is an outsider, and the school she attends, based on Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies College, is sternly directed to turning young ladies into the sort of women that society believes it needs. Late in the book, HHR gives us a passage about square pegs and round holes, a passage which offers Laura almost the only absolution she's given in this book, but the school itself is in no doubt that its girls must be made to fit whatever spaces have been allocated to them. This means that the schooling is not only strict, but confining, and it is in the imaginative lives of the girls that the confinement is most closely felt.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the need for romance which brings four girls to hang on Laura's lips when she tells them about her visit to the household of Mr Shepherd, a curate whose services are attended by girls from Laura's school.

> A pantomime of knowing smiles and interrogatory grimaces greeted her, when, having brushed the cake-crumbs from her mouth, she joined her class. For the twinkling of an eye, Laura hesitated, being unprepared. Then, however, as little able as a comic actor to resist pandering to the taste of the public, she yielded to this hunger for spicy happenings,

> and did what was expected of her: clapped her hands, one over the other, to her breast, and cast her eyes heavenwards. Curiosity and anticipation reached a high pitch; while Laura, by tragically shaking her head, gave it to be understood that no signs could transmit what she had been through, since seeing her friends last.

Laura knows only too well what the girls would like to hear, and knows, too, that if all she gives them are her own very sharp perceptions of the curate's household, two sisters doting on a querulous, ambitious man, her opportunity to gain status by taking control of her classmates' imaginations will be lost. So she gives them what they want.

> For, crass realists though these young colonials were, and bluntly as they faced facts, they were none the less just as hungry for romance as the most insatiable novel-reader. Romance in any guise was hailed by them, and swallowed uncritically, though it was no more permitted to interfere with the practical conduct of their lives than it is in the case of just that novel-reader, who puts untruth and unreality from him, when he lays his book aside. Another and weightier reason was, their slower brains could not conceive the possibility of such extraordinarily detailed lying as that to which Laura now subjected them. Its very elaboration stood for its truth.

'Its very elaboration stood for its truth.' There's a statement we will need to revisit, later in this essay, to see how it affects our reading of the trilogy. For the moment, though, let us return to the Ladies College, where a young creator of fictions which her listeners need is learning her trade. Every story-teller knows the power of a secret kiss:

> … the more the girls heard, the more they wished to hear. She had early turned Miss Isabella into a staunch ally of her own, in the dissension she had introduced into the curate's household; and one day she arrived at a hasty kiss, stolen in the vestry after evening service, while Mr Shepherd was taking off his surplice. The puzzle had been to get herself into the vestry; but, once there, she saw what followed as if it had actually happened. She saw Mr Shepherd's arm slipped with diffident alacrity around her waist, and her own virtuous recoil …

Laura's friends are taken in; they want to know more. Her imagination works overtime, and for a brief period she holds sway over them, as she wants to do. She is smaller than the other girls, poorer, neither so well-dressed nor so well-connected. Some of the girls can see their futures radiantly, if conventionally, before them; Laura is unsure. She has nothing to go back to, so what does the future hold? Little enough, yet she feels inside herself the power of incantation, imagination, story. The girls, who have not yet been possessed by love, though they feel it lies ahead of them, waiting, turn to Laura …

… until it becomes clear to them that she's been lying, as they say, savagely, viciously, to her, dragging her into misery and despair. They reject her, rejecting a part of themselves as they do so. Laura remains an isolate for many weeks, until she is asked to be the room-mate of a beautiful older girl called Evelyn. Laura can hardly believe her luck, but even so she is surprised when

Evelyn gets her to tell the story of her visit to the Shepherds' home and the deception of her friends that followed.

Evelyn, to Laura's amazement, thinks that what she did was funny. She laughs till tears run down her cheeks. 'It's the best joke I've heard for an age. Tell us again – from the very beginning.' Laura repeats the story, with a little fresh embroidery, and Evelyn – lovely Evelyn – laughs again. The later pages of The Getting of Wisdom are full of Evelyn's calm, her beauty and good humour, and of Laura's obsession with her, a greedy desire to possess the impossible. Evelyn leaves the school, and Laura loses her, despite, we discover by reading the late, indeed posthumous memoir, Myself When Young (1948), Evelyn's best efforts to add Laura to the circles she moves in when school is behind her.

> She went to considerable lengths to keep things going. But I felt myself an interloper in her family-circle, a sort of pariah dog among her new and stylish friends, I poor, and unsuitably dressed, and always on the watch for slights or patronage. Besides, it was small joy to me to share her. I wanted to have her to myself, and if I couldn't, then I didn't want her at all. And so we gradually drifted apart.

Even so, Evelyn is on the pier when HHR, her mother and sister leave for Europe. They meet again in London, 'but an Evelyn married, and living in a whirl, bore little likeness to the girl I had loved. If I wanted to recover her, I had to fish out one of the old photographs and see her as I then knew her, with her laughing, provocative eyes – dark, velvety eyes under a thatch of sunlit hair – and altogether so lovely that she could pass nowhere unnoticed.' One of the salient features of Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson is the fact that by the time she left Australia for England and then Leipzig, she had twice been consumed by passion, once for the beautiful Evelyn, and once for a man. The man, of whom more in a moment, was the twenty-eight year old curate at Maldon, Victoria, and Ettie Richardson 'fell in love, desperately, hopelessly in love, with a man fifteen years my senior.'

The reader may feel that this essay has by now descended into prying, but I am searching for the steps along the way from the young Laura (in The Getting of Wisdom) to the mature and far-sighted artist who gave us the famous trilogy. We are compelled to speculate because HHR herself is unlikely to give much away. Here is how she opens Myself When Young:

> It has never been my way to say much about my private life. Rightly or wrongly, I believed this only concerned myself. And I trusted my husband to supply, on my death, any further information that might be asked for. Now that he is gone, however, there is no one to take his place, and so I propose to jot down a few facts about myself, and memories of my childhood, which may possibly be of interest to some who have read my books.

Not much given away there! But she does tell us that Evelyn tried to maintain a link between the two girls who had shared a room at school, and that it was Ettie, HHR herself, who had preferred the gap to remain.

The twenty-eight year old curate was Jack Stretch, and he took over his father's parish at Maldon, where Mary Richardson, HHR's mother, was postmistress.

> As long as (my father) lived, Mother made a practice of

> going to church and taking us with her; she looked on it as a duty she owed to his position. After his death, to the best of my recollection, she never attended a church again, being work-weary and glad of her Seventh-day's rest, and at heart one of the least religious of women. In her daily life a model for many a professing Christian, she acted solely by her own lights, and believed only in what she could see and hear for herself. As for us, she took care that we said our prayers night and morning; but that was all, it wasn't in her to lead us further; and our childish petitions were pattered off without thinking. The result of this spiritual starvation was that, when I did "get" religion, I got it fanatically, and as befitted a very impressionable age. But there was more to it than this. My new ardour coincided and became mixed up with an emotional experience, so strange and so shattering, that it compelled me to seek help, and comfort from a power outside myself. For now I fell in love, desperately, hopelessly in love, with a man fifteen years my senior.

She goes on:

> In Brighton, rumour credited him with leaving behind a "trail of broken hearts." Yes, Jack Stretch was famed for his good looks. Small wonder that a child so susceptible to personal beauty should share the general infatuation. What was remarkable was its power of endurance. For this proved no short-lived fancy, of the here to-day and gone to-morrow kind. It overshadowed my whole girlhood; and I had still not succeeded in stamping it out when I left Australia, some six years afterwards.

So the boat that took the Richardsons to Europe took a little of Jack Stretch and of Evelyn too. When she boarded their boat, Ettie found that Evelyn had put a 'princely box' of powder in her cabin 'to help you through the voyage.' Ettie used it for years, spinning 'a sort of invisible thread between us; for at any time a fresh whiff of the scent was enough to bring her back, together with the gloriously happy and gloriously unhappy memories of the old days.' So Ettie had loved Evelyn at school, and Laura, while still a schoolgirl, had told the other girls a fantasy-romance based on something that had happened to Ettie at Maldon. Her books were not yet written, but two of the major events of her life were behind her, still being considered, digested, within her psyche.

She travelled to Europe, she studied piano at Leipzig, then she gave up her musical ambitions and married. She turned, naturally enough, but only after a time, to writing. Years later, she found herself stuck, when working on her trilogy; she describes herself as 'cross, tired and generally disgruntled.'

> And one day I vented my irritation by flinging out: "I don't know I'm sure how I ever came to write Maurice Guest – a poor ignorant little colonial like me!"
>
> My husband glanced up from his writing-table, and said in his wise, quiet way: "But emotionally very experienced."
>
> At the moment I rather blinked the idea, being unprepared for it, then went away to my own room to think it over. And the more I thought the more I saw how true it was – though, till now, the connexion had never occurred to me. That is to say, I had written Maurice quite unaware of what I was drawing on. Later events had naturally had a certain share in his story. But his most flagrant emotions – his dreams, hopes and fears, his jealousy and despair, his sufferings

> under rejection and desertion – could all be traced back to my own unhappy experience.

I invite the reader to look closely at the above lines; the teller of tales as a schoolgirl, the writer of tales as a young woman in Europe, where she feels very much at home, is brought to realise, by a remark of her husband's, whom she trusts deeply, that there is an important, a necessary link between her own nature, her experiences, the sort of woman she is, and the writings – the tales – she produces. I do not think it any exaggeration to say that in the moment HHR is describing we can see something of her development towards the objectivity which allowed her to produce the trilogy. She continues:

> No wonder the book had come easy to write. I had just to magnify and re-dress the old pangs. But the light thrown by my husband's words did not stop there. It cleared up other knots and tangles in my life, which at the time of their happening had seemed stupidly purposeless. Now I began to sense a meaning in these too, to see them as threads in a general pattern. And gradually the conviction deepened that, to a writer, experience was the only thing that mattered. Hard and bitter as it might seem, it was to be welcomed rather than shrunk from, reckoned as a gain not a loss. Since then, I think I may say that the natural rebel in me has been considerably less to the fore.

These lines were written late in HHR's life, but the experience she is describing occurred many years earlier. Notice that HHR, in her secretive, guarded way, tells us that she was stuck at some point in her writing of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* but she does not confide in the reader what part of the trilogy gave her this difficulty. Perhaps it doesn't matter. If I had to guess – and it would be no more than a guess, made on the basis of no information, merely the suggestion of a hunch – it would have something to do with the introduction of the little boy Cuffy, quite late in the trilogy. Cuffy is the first child of Richard and Mary Mahony, a late and unexpected arrival, and he's precious to them both. The reader senses that Cuffy, a boy, represents the writer as a child. He clings desperately to his mother as his father loses his grip – always a loose one – on the world around him, and he resents his father for creating so many problems and difficulties. In his querulousness the reader feels the writer's complaint at having to set out so much suffering, at having to accept with understanding that her own existence arises from these difficulties she finds hard to bear. The presence of Cuffy in the trilogy is something like a protest at the need for objectivity which the writer in HHR has imposed, and it is also, paradoxically, an assertion that objectivity will be maintained – at whatever cost.

The cost is high, and I don't think it is, as it seems, the loss of music. No, it is the loss of the ability to be so subjective that one must be accounted as mad. That is a loss? Yes. HHR establishes this, I believe, in Part I, Chapter 9 of *Ultima Thule*, when the Mahony household is visited by Baron von Krause, and the Baron invites the young Cuffy to listen to him play the piano, and sing a little. It is easy for the reader to say that von Krause is a walk-on part for someone resembling Ferdinand von Mueller the botanist, but what is he doing there? What effect is he having on the young Cuffy's personality, and what is the reader to make of him? Indeed, when his visit is over, and his offer to pay for Cuffy's musical education has been rejected by the boy's parents, with Mary strongly against his scheme, one has to ask why this section, this incident, found a place in the trilogy.

I think one can read the von Krause section of the book without being entirely sure of any answers to these questions, so let us interrogate the section a little. What happens? Von Krause makes a point of visiting the Mahonys on his way from Sydney to Melbourne, but his interaction with Cuffy is more important than his contact with the boy's parents. Von Krause plays and sings for the boy, but is unimpressed by the boy's mechanical efforts at the keyboard. He makes the boy identify the notes he plays, after telling him to turn away. This Cuffy does. The visitor talks about the music he's played: the composer was capable of being marvellously, lyrically, sane, and just as capable of expressing the disturbance that made him mad. (Cuffy's father, well on the way to madness, listens at the edge of proceedings.) The visitor, von Krause – Baron von Mueller in fictive form – takes the boy for a walk in the bush he knows better than any European on earth, and, as the two of them sit on a log, he tells Cuffy that the composer whose music they have heard was Schumann.

> Mark that, my little one … mark it well!

Cuffy pronounces the word as best he can, and asks a question:

> 'Shooh man. What's mad?'

Von Krause replies:

> Ach! Break not the little head over such as this. Have no care. The knowledge will soon enough come of pain and suffering.

The little boy makes a bold claim about the life that lies ahead of him.

> Sliding down from the log, he jumped and danced, feeling now somehow all glad inside. "I will say music too, when I am big."

Von Krause – Baron von Mueller turned into a fiction that needs to happen - replies:

> "*Ja ja!* But so easy it is not to shake the music out of the sleeve. Man must study hard. It belongs a whole lifetime thereto … and much, much courage. But this I will tell you, my little ambitious one! Here is lying" – and the Baron waved his arm all round him – "a great new music hid."

We cannot know for sure, but this passage would seem to have been written in the mid-nineteen twenties, when HHR had been absent from Australia – I dare not call it her homeland, for that was nowhere but in her mind – for three and a half decades. 'A great new music hid!' Von Krause goes on.

> He who makes it, he will put into it the thousand feelings awoken in him by this emptiness and space, this desolation; with always the serene blue heaven above, and these pale, sad, so grotesque trees that weep and rave. He puts the golden wattle in it when it blooms and reeks, and this melancholy bush, oh, so old, so old, and this silence as of death that nothing stirs. No birdleins will sing in his Musik. But will you be that one, my son, you must first have given

> up all else for it … all the joys and pleasures that make the life glad. These will be for the others not for you, my dear … you must only go wizout … renounce … look on. But come, let us now home, and I will speak … yes I shall speak of it to the good Mamma and Papa!

The Baron writes to Richard and Mary Mahony, offering to take charge of the boy and his musical education, but Mary, though Richard has some sympathy for the idea, will have none of it. 'If Cuffy goes, I go too!' In the games of her children, Schumann becomes 'Shooh-man' and then 'Shooh, woman!' HHR closes the matter, and the chapter, with: 'And this phrase, which remained in use long after its origin was forgotten, was the sole trace left on Cuffy's life by the Baron's visit.'

So why was the Baron brought into the story, if his effects were to be nil? The questions I raised before present themselves again. To answer them, I think we must concede that the master-narrator controlling the Richard Mahony trilogy has for a moment – half a dozen pages – reverted to Laura Tweedle Rambotham, or even Wondrous Fair. The whole incident is a fabrication to bring into the story the vision, the lifelong purpose, which the Baron expresses. Why the Baron? Because he is the colony's most noted, and admired – though he is laughed at on every hand – outsider. Baron von Mueller, with his medals, orders and honours, belongs to, has the recognition of, the noble and best educated classes of Europe. It must be assumed, therefore, that in some way not available to the rough and ready colonials, he knows. He offers his imprimatur to the Mahonys' little boy, but more importantly he sees, and expresses, what someone will do, one day, for the country when those who have been born in it give it their hearts, and their lives, in turning it into …

… music. The art of HHR was writing, and I think we can re-write the Baron's speech in our minds so that it is addressed to artists of any sort, not only musicians, though it is natural for a German to put music as the highest of the arts and was also, I suppose, a natural thing for HHR to do, since she studied at Leipzig, the city of J.S. Bach. What a challenge the Baron puts before the boy, and then before his parents. The Baron will see to his training, the Baron will take charge of him, the Baron will make him what – perhaps! – he has it in him to be! I think HHR, in introducing the Baron at this late stage in the trilogy, is doing many things. First, she is reasserting her own importance. If she is telling the story of her father and her mother, she is telling the story of herself. Wondrous Fair and Laura Tweedle Rambotham have their rights too! This is not as self-centred as it might appear. She can only heal herself if she understands where her problems came from. To heal herself, she must forgive, and it is impossible to forgive unless first one understands. This means that intense subjectivity must give way to that statuesque objectivity I referred to at the start of this essay. Arriving at this state is no simple matter. Everything about HHR's origins and her potential have to be uncovered and explored. Potential? The trilogy is far advanced when Baron von Krause visits Cuffy's home. In the book, his visit comes to nothing, but in the life that Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson lived, she, the writer, is challenged every day by what the Baron puts before the boy, the writer, and her readers, every one of them, one generation after another, as long as the book is read.

Earlier in this essay, I drew attention to HHR's observation on Laura's detailed lying: 'Its very elaboration stood for its truth.' The visit of Baron von Krause is perhaps the most striking of the numerous elaborations and devices used by HHR to give life and variety to the third part of her book: does it stand for its truth?

It's a question I find hard to deal with because 'truth' is such a variable quantity, and it changes in nature and appearance according to the angle from which it is approached. 'Truth' is a good example of the difficulties we encounter when we use one word as the name for many things. 'Truth' is perhaps little more than an ideal, realised at times, in its more easily stated forms, but for the most part a thing difficult to define, and most easily understood when placed a little beyond the edges of the mind, in storage, as it were, rather than in use; to be drawn on, and referred to, rather than held in hand every minute of the day. Truth? Is it an idea, within the control of reason; a feeling, within the control of what we like to call 'the heart'; or something elusive in our imaginations, influencing us in ways beyond prediction?

The latter, the dedicated story-teller has to say; all three, the idealists among us would prefer. Henry Handel Richardson understood better than most the illusory nature of truth, and the ways by which those who would discover it, and then present it, have to re-position themselves continually in order to create a reflection of reality that others will be prepared to accept. 'But will you be that one, my son, you must first have given up all else for it … you must only go wizout … renounce … look on.' I think we can find that this is what Ettie Richardson did in making herself a writer, in turning herself into HHR, a woman with her husband placed carefully between her and the world, and when her husband died, with her secretary, Olga Roncoroni in the same, protective, position. I think she set herself to understand a little more than she could handle in a conventional, every-day fashion: she could rise to the Baron's challenge on the page, in her writing, that is, but day to day reality, when it hadn't been turned into story, or wasn't on the way to being presented as such, was a little more than she cared to deal with.