

**STORIES OF IRELAND:
CASTLE RACKRENT
THE ABSENTEE**

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Stories of Ireland: Castle Rackrent the Absentee by Maria Edgeworth & Henry Morley

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STORIES OF IRELAND

CASTLE RACKRENT
THE ABSENTEE

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

MARIA EDGEWORTH was born in the year 1766, at Hare Hatch, in Berkshire. Her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, was then twenty-two years old.

The Edgeworth family had settled in Ireland in the reign of Elizabeth. Colonel Francis Edgeworth, the novelist's great-grandfather, had been an ardent gambler. One night, having staked and lost all that was his own to lose, he added his wife's diamond earrings, as one venture more for change of luck. He went into the next room, and asked her to lend them to him for an hour. She gave them, saying that she knew why they were wanted. He recovered all that he had just lost, and in effusion of gratitude promised his wife never again to gamble. Soon afterwards he was found in a strawyard with a few congenial friends, pulling straws out of a stack and betting upon whose straw should be longest. This gentleman had left his affairs much involved, when his eldest son, aged eight, succeeded to the remaining property. But that son had the advantage of a careful guardian: he studied law, and he recovered much that had been scattered. In one suit there was a deed brought forward against him, witnessed by a very old man, a servant of the family, who was brought into court. The old man said that he had seen reason to suspect a fraud in this deed, which went to disinherit the heir, and that he had privately put a new sixpence under the seal. The coin would be found if the seal were broken. The seal was broken in open court, and the sixpence found to be of a date five years later than the date upon the deed.

Miss Edgeworth's grandfather, having been thus released from difficulties, married, in 1732, Jane Lovell, the daughter of a Welsh judge, retired from law, and became a country gentleman. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, the novelist's father, was one of his eight children. He was born at Bath in 1744; was taught by a good mother; and was designed by his father for a merchant, until deaths made him an only son. Much care was then taken of his health; he had each spring and autumn a nine days' course of small beer and rhubarb. He was placed at a school near Edgeworthstown, under one who had been a schoolmaster of Goldsmith's. He was then sent to a school at Warwick, in which he was bullied for his Irish brogue, and transferred to a school at Drogheda, where he was bullied for his English accent. Through another school, at Longford, he passed on to Trinity College, Dublin, in April 1761. He was not seventeen, and was then a good shot and a ready rider to hounds. At his sister's wedding, not long before this time, one of the frolicsome young people, putting on a white cloak as surplice, married Master Edgeworth, in jest, to a young lady present, the door-key being taken for a wedding-ring. His anxious father, to make all sure, thereupon instituted a suit of jactitation of marriage in the Ecclesiastical Courts, and obtained a divorce.

After six months spent at Trinity College, Dublin, in idle dissipation, Richard Lovell Edgeworth entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford, as a gentleman commoner, in October 1761. His father introduced him to the house of an old friend, Mr. Paul Elers, living at Black Bourton, within fourteen miles of Oxford. There were four daughters at Black Bourton, one of whom the amorous youth married while he was yet at College. He had a son before he was twenty, and went with his wife to spend a year at Edgeworthstown, studying a little law, and amusing himself with mechanics. Soon after this he settled at Hare Hatch, between Reading and Maidenhead, continued to amuse himself with mechanical works, made experiments in telegraphy, and constructed a sailing carriage, also a wheel, which was a vague first idea of the bicycle. It was in the beginning of this residence at Hare Hatch that his daughter Maria was born, in 1766.

Rousseau's *Emile* had been published in 1762, and Richard Lovell Edgeworth was filled with its sentiments concerning education. He resolved, therefore, to educate his son on Rousseau's system. "My wife," he says, "complied with my wishes, and the body and mind of my son were to be left as much as possible to the education of Nature and accident." This experiment was tried on the son till he was eight years old.

At Hare Hatch also, Richard Edgeworth formed a close friendship with Thomas Day, author of *Sandford and Merton*, who lived not far away, at Bear Hill, in Berkshire. Day was grave, melancholy, doubtful about women, and tried the experiment of educating a child of Nature into his ideal of a wife. He settled afterwards with his pupil, whom he called Sabrina Sydney, at Stow Hill, near Lichfield, and was of the fellowship of the Swards and Dr. Darwin. Mr. Day gave up hope of his ideal in Sabrina, and proposed marriage to a young lady in the household of the Swards, Miss Honora Sneyd. The proposal covered many sheets of paper, with a scheme for the lady's future married life. It was to be calm and secluded. The lady replied with a disquisition on the rights of woman, and declined to marry into prison. Mr. Day helped Mr. Edgeworth, meanwhile, in the education of his son, little attention being then paid to the daughter, who was, happily, left to her mother's care.

Maria Edgeworth was twelve years old before she was taken to Edgeworthstown. Her mother had then died, after giving birth to another daughter, and her father, in 1773, had just married, at Lichfield, Miss Honora Sneyd, receiving his friend Day's congratulations. Honora Sneyd having died in a few years, leaving him one daughter, Mr. Edgeworth next married, on Christmas Day, 1780, his deceased wife's sister, Elizabeth Sneyd.

When finally settled in Ireland with his wife Elizabeth, Miss Edgeworth's father gave much attention to the improvement of Edgeworthstown and to the education of other children as well as of his own. Miss Edgeworth about 1791 or 1792 began to take notes of his lessons and of their results, and this was the beginning of a literary fellowship with him. About