Europa and The Author

Elizabeth Langhorne
ELIZABETH LANGHORNE

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The famous, the distinguished, author wore khaki pants and a faded blue shirt open at the neck. His hair was gray, his eyes black and his face thin and tense; a face usually, but not always, good natured. He was engaged in cutting a lawn that was, if possible, a little more informal than he was. At fifty he carried only the slightest paunch, but on the upgrades he panted a little. On the last upgrade he stopped the mower and stood for a moment regarding his daughter Phyllis, who lolled on the long gallery that ran the length of the old fashioned house. She was dressed in clothes much like his own, but with an indefinable neatness about her that she certainly didn’t get from him: Her hair was blonde, brushed to a lovely clean shine. He thought for a moment of hollering at her. Hump yourself out of that hammock and get the rake. He might even let her use the mower a little and get hot like he was. But he observed that she was reading. If they have a mind, he thought, you have to let them use it.

As a child, he knew, she had had a good one. Quick, impressionable, and thank God, not sensitive. But now she was fifteen and for the last two or three years she had clammed up. He was able, now, to send her to a very good school. She had been carefully brought up by her mother. She was clean, good mannered and obedient, and that was about all he knew. For the last two or three years Richard Cunningham himself had lived in a storm of writing, producing the best of his at long last enormously successful novels. His relations with his daughter had been casual, almost non-existent. Naturally an easy tempered man he had

Married, with three children, Elizabeth Langhorne lives on a large dairy farm in Scottsville, Virginia. She has published articles, and was at one time a regular contributor to the Junior League Magazine, “a real boon to amateur writers.” The Virginia Churchman published the script for her “Pageant for Epiphany,” in verse.
inherited a conviction, and a tradition, from his own father: children and dogs obeyed you instantly, or they weren't worth a damn. On the few occasions of her childhood when Phyllis had disobeyed him to his face he had slapped her, hard enough so that it had not happened often. If he had called her now, for instance, she would have come at once, and with a good grace. But it wouldn't be through fear, he thought, just by habit originally induced through fear, which is the correct distinction.

He walked over and sat down on the broad shallow steps, taking a cigarette from his pocket without removing the pack.

“What are you reading?”

She looked at him from limpid gray eyes. “My homework.” It was a reasonable answer, but she seemed to him oddly conscious of something outside the reasonableness.

“All right. Your homework.” He felt for his matches. “What is it?”

“Daddy, are young girls bad?”

He stopped with a match half o'f it. “Are young girls bad?” he said. “It doesn’t make sense. Young girls are bad, middle-aged men, old women are bad. Everybody’s bad. But,” he struck his match, “most of them have it under control.”

“But you say, it says here, that girls are bad without even knowing it, so of course they don’t have it under control.”

“What is that book?”

He sprang up and turned it over; she, almost, holding it out to him: The Collected Short Stories of Richard Cunningham. He felt the knot in his stomach that meant trouble, unconsciously he was balancing on the balls of his feet. He could see the color slowly rising her face, but she did not look down.

“I told you. Not until you were twenty-one.”

“It’s my homework,” she said.

“So you have told me.”

There was a silence.

“They gave us three of your stories to write an essay on. If I hadn’t read them I would have gotten an F in English this month. I was going to be punished anyway.” She smiled at him, tentatively. “So I thought I might take a chance with you.”

“You did.” He had not smiled, yet. “Which of my stories were they?”


He felt his stomach relax. “A nice choice. Suitable for the adolescent
mind. But those particular phrases you were reading aren't in any of them."

"No, sir. I haven't read those yet."

"What else of mine have you read?"

She took a deep breath. "To Victory', 'Smoke and Fire'." She named his best known novels, his very best.

"And did you find them suited to the adolescent mind?"

"No, sir. Only they were wonderful. They were something rolling up out of chaos."

Damn. That was what actually did happen. The most accurate description anyone had hit on yet of how it happened. But what it was in the end, what it amounted to, the best of him, she couldn't have come anywhere near that.

"For what you have done," he said, without heat, "the Lord put Adam and Eve out of that garden."

She said nothing. But she knows the danger is over, he thought. I am leaving her punishment to the Lord.

"Go to your room," he said, "and read those three stories. I will send your lunch up and get the book. Then you write the essay. And then," he smiled, "I will exercise the privilege you have already assumed. I shall read your work."

"But you didn't know I was going to read it."

He knew that he was descending to trading with her, but he traded anyway. "I know about the three stories."

That stopped her.

"All right." She rose unemotionally, carrying the book.

"Give me your word that you will read only those three."

"Yes, Father."

Cunningham went back to the yard. He cut the rest of the grass. On coming in, although this was not his habit in the middle of the day, he took a stiff shot of bourbon, straight. When he joined his wife for lunch he was feeling fairly good.

As he had anticipated she asked, almost at once, "Where is Phyllis?"

"I sent her to her room."

"Oh."

"She had some work to do. I sent her to her room to do it."

A pause.

"Is she to have lunch?"

"Yes. Verona," he spoke to the cook, "carry Miss Phyllis a tray. And while you're up there she'll have a book to send down to me."

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When Verona had left the room his wife said, "A book?"
He smiled, a tight lipped smile, almost, one might have thought, a smile of triumph. "Yes," he said, "a book. The Collected Short Stories of Richard Cunningham."
"Oh Richard, you haven't . . ."
"No good reason," he said, "to shut the barn door after the horse has been stolen."
"You mean, she has been reading . . .?"
"It's her homework," he explained patiently. "They gave her three of my stories to write an essay on. Jesus," he helped himself to a biscuit, "what a contribution to world literature that will be!"
"Are you going to read it?"
"You're damn right, I'm going to read it."
"Does she know you're going to read it?"
"Yes. What is this?" He looked at her and thought that he saw relief in her face. "It's not all that important, Emily."
His wife was silent, but he knew, as though she had spoken, that she deprecated the stupidity of man.
"I want you to keep out of this," he said, "entirely."
"Yes," she said.
"I just wanted to be sure."

After lunch, because he had already started and because he would have found it impossible to work anyway, he had two or three more drinks. When he decided it was time to go up to her room he was in high good humor, the kind that both his wife and daughter knew to be dangerous, and only a little more dangerous, perhaps, when he had been drinking.

Phyllis was stretched at full length on the bed. He came in without knocking, and, without addressing her at all, looked around the room. The loose leaf notebook lay open on her desk, so that he only had to take it and fling himself down in the one chintz-covered armchair. It was too small for him, but quite comfortable. He looked at her now for the first time, not as a father, but with the awakened senses of the novelist. She had been waggling one sneakered foot, but now lay on her back, quite still. What was she feeling? Resentment? God, of course she was. This was her room, wasn't it? But contempt? Unwilling admiration? He spoke in a tone that he knew was offensive, but which he had no desire to modify.
"You can go now, if you want to."
Phyllis rose. If she felt any resentment she did not show it.

"May I go where I like, until supper time?"

He nodded. She slipped from the room, and, alone once more with the written page, he began to read:

Phyllis Cunningham
English Ia
Miss Clapper

THREE STORIES by Richard Cunningham

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries critics could be and sometimes were challenged to a duel by the author. As a critic I am in a more delicate position than this; I could get a whipping from the author. This whipping, moreover, would be perfectly legal and not entirely without precedent, as the author is my father and, as a father, he is (there was a sort of break here) very severe. The reader will understand that I am not always using my own vocabulary, but am choosing words that seem to me to be least disrespectful to my father. (What would she have used there, "a tough cookie"? First down, he thought grimly.)

Putting aside this handicap as best I can I may say that in these stories which we have to study Mr. Cunningham's genius does not have time to get rolling as it does in his novels. The power is there, though, only in a different degree. "After Sundown" seems to be the classic story of suspense, but in this case we find that the suspense is never to be resolved. By the end the physical menace has neither appeared or disappeared. We find that "After Sundown" is not a story about suspense. We have something very much more serious, just menace, that's all. (That's all, Cunningham, said Cunningham.)

"Fair Exchange" and "Attar of Roses" are examples of romanticism. "Fair Exchange" employs a sense of humor and a salute to courage. "Attar of Roses" is the most romantic of all, if you can accept the fact that romance isn't always pleasant. We observe here Mr. Cunningham's conviction that if you eat your cake greedily enough, you can have it too. His people are gigantically important because this he believes, in a fierce and violent sort of way.

If I have read my father right he will enjoy and perhaps even appreciate this essay. Then when I come in this evening he will beat the hell out of me.

N. B. There is another essay at the back of the book.
Cunningham turned to the back of the book. The pages there were correct and impersonal, using the necessary number of clichés.

Well I'll be God damned! Women! Even child women! Cunningham laughed aloud. And he had wondered if she had a mind! Hell, it wasn’t a mind. Just diabolical cleverness, that’s all. She had ticked him off at will, then made any punishment, any punishment at all, seem simply ludicrous. Woman’s special gift, he thought, finest flower of the slave mentality.

But it’s not going to be that easy. You forget, my girl, I chose the weapon, and there are a few tricks you haven’t heard of yet.

He ruffled over the pages and started under a fresh heading.

Europa: a Fable

As you so disarmingly put it, I did enjoy your essay. It was also appreciated, thoroughly. In return I am writing you a fable, which I expect you to read with the same sort of attention that I have given your essay.

Once in a meadow in Phoenicia by the sea there roamed a great bull of a man. Not, by Jupiter, that this man was a bull, but at times he uprooted the meadow flowers with his horns, and steam rose from his flanks, curled from his nostrils. He scored the green grass with his hooves. In the meadow too was a young girl. Pale, fair, ox-eyed. With the gray ox-eyes, the bound eyes of the maiden, she watched the bull. But the bull, charging to the very edge of the meadow, did not know that he was not alone by the sea.

When Europa saw this she came without fear and laid one white arm on the white shoulder of the bull, so that the bull trembled. Europa smiled. The bull gave a great snort, tossing her in the air. She slipped on to his shoulders, riding lightly, and, snorting again, he plunged into the tide. He carried her beyond the point where the sea meets and sky, and Europa smiled, because she could not have crossed the Hellespont alone. And if one word of this ever reaches the eyes of Miss Clapper I will skin you alive. Use the spare.

Richard Cunningham laid down his pen and went downstairs. He poured the remaining bourbon into a glass. The main thing about being a successful author, he thought, is that there is always, where that one came from, another bottle.
Later in the evening Phyllis came to his side.
"Is that what really happened, Daddy, about Europa?"
“That,” he said, “is what happened. Exactly.”
“I don’t suppose,” she said after awhile, “that Europa knew how to write.”
“God forbid,” said Richard Cunningham.

THE ASTERISK

Thought’s omega, footnote’s
Alpha of the unexpressed, it blooms—
Time’s planted daisy bomb gone boom.
Orion, wheeling, unerringly slingshots
It, bullseye, into winter nights,

Into our wonder’s giant, gawking, Polyphemec.
It winks the jaundiced world to tears
With such an itch for clarity, its moot is meteor.
Plopped into optic skepticism,
Pocking arid Arizonas of humdrum,

Its shock registers belief upon
A rudimentary graph. Lamaseries hymn
Its spin; upon its pin, compendiums
Of prayers glint. It heavens
Us (too easily a star) with light in Stygian

Dark. Yet, this will end
The world. No whimper, sigh, or groan
Will punctuate the finity; but this one
Flake upon the last hearth-hand
Will melt — obscurity explained.

—Marvin Solomon