

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	ix
Prelude and Acknowledgements	xi
Chapter One: This Something Come into my Life (1875-1877)	1
Chapter Two: Shadows of the Past (1877-1881)	27
Chapter Three: After All a Lifetime (1882-1885)	52
Chapter Four: The Lights of the Hills (1886-1889)	73
Chapter Five: My Little Dream of an Edition (1890-1893)	103
Chapter Six: That History Has Lasted On (1894-1895)	132
Chapter Seven: That Divided Life (1896-1899)	152
Chapter Eight: The Continuance of Love (1900-1909)	180
Chapter Nine: Such a Little Time for Me (1910-1914)	204
Chapter Ten: The End of a Long Day's Work (1915-1919)	229

Notes	259
Thackeray and Ritchie Family Tree	278
Abbreviations and Sources	281
Select Bibliography	285
Index	287

One

THIS SOMETHING
COME INTO MY LIFE
(1875-1877)

One sees those who suffer enveloped in a sort of invisible cloud through which nothing human can pass but it loses all meaning & force: & all the goodwill & sympathy in the world are ineffectual to help. I learnt this lesson when still a boy when I used to be with Annie after Minnie died. And thus though it has not been my fate to lose part of my life by another's death I seem in a fashion to understand what sorrow is.

Richmond Ritchie to his Sister, Gussie Freshfield
May 1891

When her sister Minny Stephen died at the end of November 1875 in the agonies of premature labour, Annie Thackeray was staying overnight with Margaret Oliphant in Windsor. Summoned by a telegraph to return to London, the intensity of her grief was fed by feelings of guilt. She had been lost in this dark tunnel once before, after her father had suffered his fatal seizure at Christmas 1863. The loneliness this time was acute. She knew that her duty was to support Minny's husband and child, and the pathos of five-year-old Laura's uncomprehending utterances was heart-breaking – 'Why does not my mommee come?' Annie told Emily Tennyson something of Leslie Stephen's tender courage. '[He] thinks of me & of little Laura & is so gentle & noble. I think she w^d. be proud of him – as she always was.'¹ She and Leslie were never closer than in these bleak days, but she felt isolated and despairing at times. Months later, writing about Annie to Charles Eliot Norton, Leslie reflected that 'She is left alone of her family, though her mother – strange as it sounds to me – still lives & is apparently likely to outlive many of us.'²

And yet, retreating with Leslie to Brighton after the funeral at Kensal Green, Annie was able to experience a strange calm at times, wanting to believe that the healing had begun. ‘I have had one or two little nervous attacks but nothing to speak of & Leslie mopes about but nothing to speak of. I think it will take a long time & every minute is a long time now. But I could never never have believed that one could have borne it so well.’ She took comfort in traditional faith, imagining Minny joined with her father’s dead cousin, Jane Ritchie, ‘so plainly walking in the sunshine’. She mapped out an immediate future for herself, planning to return to Brighton for a more sustained period of recovery. And then she turned back to her father’s death, persuaded that Minny’s illness during her last weeks had some kind of genetic link to the poor health of his own final months, rather than being solely a crisis in her pregnancy. ‘I believe it is true that my darling had some illness like Papa’s. What should I do now if I had not those she loved.’³

When she returned to Brighton, she was accompanied by Richmond Ritchie, the second cousin seventeen years her junior. She continued to be pursued by the same feelings of guilt that followed Thackeray’s death, for in both instances she had failed to be present during the final moments. She wrote to her father’s American friend, Mrs Baxter, that ‘it is my Fate – & she was dead when I came back next day, with tender closed eyes and a face so radiant. It was Papis illness killed her not her little baby, w^h never was born, some convulsion – We had no parting only she had been so very tender – like a mother.’⁴ Brighton seemed dreary once Richmond had returned to Cambridge, where he was a Trinity College undergraduate, but Annie strove to believe that her life would continue to be rich by virtue of her good fortune. ‘What suddenly cheered me up just now about everything – was thinking what prizes I have drawn in Life – what dear dear prizes – no one ever had such a life as mine or such love in it.’⁵

Back in London, Annie and Leslie spent the rest of the winter at Southwell Gardens, but before long were planning to move, wanting to escape the sadness of a house in which Minny’s influence was everywhere. There seemed no question but that they would continue together under one roof. Minny would have wanted this, and just then it was what both needed. During March and April of 1876 some of the pain eased, and Annie employed her normal strategy at times of loss – she converted the sadnesses into blessings. A sequence of short notes to Jeanie Senior, the social campaigner and sister of author Thomas Hughes, give an insight into her feelings.

I like much [the] best to be treated as usual for now that time has passed & I have had a little silent time to face the truth I can only feel still that I & my Minny cant be separated death cant be wicked it doesnt undo her faithful tender love of years....

I think you know what I mean when I say how overawed I feel at my own blessings, at the thought of Minnys love & tender trust in her old sister. I can only say in my heart to her Darling we can't be not together & then it seems to me as if we were heart to heart somehow. O pray God death is not death there, any more than it is here.⁶

And there was Richmond to divert her. Through that long winter and into the spring, his mix of maturity and youth could always lighten her, and he would come at a moment's notice from Cambridge, 'like new life in the darkness of gloom'.⁷ Unfortunately, what she regarded as a delightful tendency to turn up unexpectedly tended to irritate Leslie, who never really took to Richmond. He always resisted the clannishness of the Ritchies, and probably would have preferred the Thackeray sisters to have lived less in their cousins' pockets.

Money was a worry, for since completing *Miss Angel* in mid-1875, her *roman à clef* about the painter Angelica Kauffmann, Annie had not earned much from her writing, and this new crisis left her in no condition to work freely. There was nothing in progress, and no major project planned. She found herself envying both George Eliot and George Sand for their ability to 'strike up & begin to tune their instruments, specially G. Sand who seems to me to boom & echo all through her prefaces & sweep one into her stupid books so that it doesnt matter how stupid they are'.⁸ During February she noted that there was just £35 in the bank, of which £27 had to be set aside for her maid's wages. Well-intentioned measures to control her outgoings did not survive long, including a resolve to reduce the costs of correspondence by taking advantage of the lower postal rate for postcards. She also tried to make savings by planning inexpensive little treats. She told Richmond that 'we will only do nice cheap things no nasty expensive ones.... We will go & see Whistlers pictures too when you come, that is also cheap & within a walk.'⁹

Leslie Stephen was supporting her to a degree that Annie simply did not realise and which, despite his reputation for financial caution, he never thought of denying her. In marrying Minny he had taken on a household which included not just Annie, but on occasion the two little girls to whom the Thackeray sisters acted as honorary step-aunts,

Margie and Anny, the daughters from the marriage of their father's cousin, Edward Thackeray, to their former companion, Amy Crowe. Much later, Leslie described the financial arrangements in the private memoir he wrote for the children of his second marriage. He may be forgiven the tone of self-congratulation, for ever since his marriage to Minny, and until Annie's own marriage, he had met her household costs.

I found it rather unpleasant to tell her of her debts to me. She did not quite approve of this practice. She thought or took for granted that I ought to be as careless as she was herself; and somehow it is not easy to present oneself as a creditor without appearing to be a curmudgeon. Here comes in my boast. I gave up reminding Anny of her debts, and was content to take upon myself much the largest share of the expenses – more, that is, than my proper share. I am always glad of this. From something which Anny said to me the other day, I find that she is still completely ignorant of the fact. She remembered and spoke with more than abundant gratitude of a present which I was afterwards able to give her. I gave her £500 to enable her to buy a house upon her marriage; and she talked about repaying this some day or of her children repaying mine. I mention this here, partly because I wish you to understand that should such a repayment be offered – which, I confess, strikes me as improbable – it is not to be accepted. I am too proud, I hope, to turn any gifts of mine into loans. But I wish chiefly to say that I have no cause of regret for any of my pecuniary relations with Anny. I avoided – I am thankful to say – that rock of offence: and though I may regret faults of temper, I cannot charge myself with a want of liberality.¹⁰

Yet, as Leslie conceded in a note added in July 1898, Annie would eventually refund him from the proceeds of the Biographical Edition of her father's works. She wanted to give him £800 (which perhaps indicated that she was rather more conscious of her indebtedness than Leslie supposed), but he would only take £400, and only then because Annie insisted upon it.

Late in October 1876 they sold 8 Southwell Gardens for £4,100, having by then moved to a house in Hyde Park Gate South which had been left jointly to Annie and Minny as a legacy from Thackeray's mother, Mrs Carmichael-Smyth. In acknowledgment of his portion of the Thackeray inheritance which came to him through Minny, Leslie

now spent about £900 on the purchase of a house in Lingfield Road, close to Wimbledon Common, with the intention that Annie's mother might be placed there. Isabella Thackeray had lived with carers ever since the severe postnatal depression which followed Minny's birth in 1840, but for how long this Wimbledon house was used for her needs is unclear, for during most of her remaining years she lived with a married couple, Mr and Mrs Thompson, at Leigh-on-Sea, near Southend. It was a curious regime for Leslie, responsible not just for Annie but, when Edward Thackeray was away, for Margie and Anny too, now aged thirteen and eleven. Annie noted that when the girls were with them, 'Leslie used to take them to school every morning'.¹¹ Ten years later, after Margie had married Gerald Ritchie, Richmond's elder brother, Leslie settled 'quite a sum of money' on the younger sister, a generous gesture which caused Annie to 'cry with pleasure'.¹²

The domestic routine which Leslie and Annie now established together offered her – indeed, offered both of them – a framework of stabilising normality. In the end though, it was Richmond's support and love which saved her, once she saw that only he could supply the conditions for her renewal. The devotion which Annie had formerly lavished on her sister would be transferred to him, for she increasingly had come to value Richmond's family links, a year earlier sending him one of her father's letters to read. 'Do you know the last time I ever saw his dear face he sent me away. I just remember going back & standing by his bedside not thinking him ill, but looking at him & you see after eleven years I find you my dear to talk to about him & to be yourself too.'¹³ Flattered, he succumbed to the intoxicating Thackeray genius worn so lightly and yet so authentically by Annie. He was quietly proud of being able to sign his schoolboy letters from Eton as 'Richmond Thackeray Ritchie', and he would have been pleased to realise that his own father had been Thackeray's favourite cousin. The trauma of Minny's death made any embarrassment about how others might view his and Annie's relationship seem trivial, yet there remained the discrepancy between their ages. When they married in August 1877, Annie was forty and Richmond a few days away from being twenty-three. Contemporary proprieties were undeniably shocked.

As the youngest of the four Ritchie brothers, Richmond was adored by his family. He was clever and handsome, reserved and thoughtful, but perhaps underneath it all a little too confidently assured in his views, suggesting complacency sometimes, character traits which resurfaced through his adult life. A formal manner hid real wit and a winning comedic gift, and Annie's droll self-mockery appealed to him. When he was a schoolboy she treated him as a young adult, and Edward

Lyttelton remembered him at Eton as a boy ‘old before his years’,¹⁴ something which his school photographs tend to confirm. There was every reason to expect a brilliant future for him. He had been only eight when he won a King’s Scholarship to Eton in July 1863, and was awarded the coveted Newcastle Medal in his final school year. His family called him Witz or Wizz, as did his own children later. President of the Eton Literary Society and a member of ‘Pop’ – the membership of which was determined by the boys themselves – Richmond went on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he joined Hallam and Lionel Tennyson in their father’s and Thackeray’s old college. The expectations were great.

Howard Sturgis, his Eton and Cambridge contemporary, would remember Richmond as being ‘endowed from boyhood with the strength, the self-reliance, the maturity of taste and judgment which the rest of us hardly acquire with wrinkles and grey hairs. Nothing ripens the intelligence so early as that terrible ironic perception of the tears and laughter in things, which is called a sense of humour. Richmond Ritchie possessed that in an eminent degree, and had, moreover, one of the surest and most brilliant minds I have ever known.’¹⁵ Sturgis was highly susceptible to Richmond’s charm, though as Richmond’s star rose his admiration was offered from a distance. When his ultimate appointment as Permanent Under Secretary at the India Office came through in 1909, Sturgis shyly offered congratulations. ‘I follow your career from afar, like a little astronomer watching a comet through a telescope, but with a much warmer & more personal interest.... I should like to think that my little fluttered handkerchief, or thrown up hat has given you pleasure.’¹⁶ He never forgot the affection of their undergraduate days, and Richmond’s capacity ‘to make me laugh, helplessly, rolling on the floor & begging him not to be so funny. Can you fancy that?’¹⁷

Thackeray had once been much amused to discover the boy of eight engrossed in *The Great Hoggarty Diamond*. But he was not just intellectually precocious. In September 1869, aged fifteen, and accompanied by his slightly older brother Gerald, he became the youngest person to climb to the summit of Mont Blanc – a feat recorded by the Alpine Club and which even Leslie must have admired. But in later life, the enormous demands of the India Office meant that his time for leisure was limited, though he was a successful golfer and keen bicyclist. He became a victim of Ménière’s disease – probably many of the flu-like symptoms which plagued him derived from this debilitating condition which affects balance – and the constant stress of his work took its toll.



Richmond Ritchie as a boy

The months from about mid-1876 shaped the future relationship of Richmond and Annie, though at first she regarded her own feelings as having the kind of purity with which a mother loves her child. She wrote to him that ‘loving people is the one thing of all things that seems to prove something beyond us in life – If anything is true, it is true that sincere & unselfish love does belong to the best & holiest of the impulses of life. I daresay to us both sometimes my foolish maternal



Richmond Ritchie at Eton. He is standing in the front, on the right.

sort of sentiment may have seemed absurd.¹⁸ Margaret Oliphant thought that by the beginning of May Annie was at last ‘looking very much herself’.¹⁹ All through the late spring and early summer, simple, everyday activities could in a moment sweep her back into the comforting safeties of the past. Out shopping for hats with Laura, Annie gazed into the milliner’s looking-glass. ‘It was like some extraordinary dream suddenly to see myself in a glass with a crown of pink roses, for an instant it seemed as if everything had gone back years & years. Its just like one of the dreams I have.’²⁰ Richmond pronounced on her health with all the wisdom of his twenty-one years. ‘Of course you must try to get into a habit of seeing other people and helping them as you did before; only you must take care and not overdo yourself.’²¹

Before accompanying Leslie to Kensal Green to see Minny’s headstone put in position, Annie wrote to Pinkie Ritchie, her favourite amongst Richmond’s sisters, picturing a free spirit happy near the Tennysons’ Farringford home at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight. Were the horrors of the last months merely an illusion? The practical business required at the cemetery reminded her that it was all too real. ‘I can

imagine you quite well in the kind dear green glades. It seems to me as if there somehow my Minnie was still alive to me & all seems like a dream when I fly off in my mind to Ff^l & the big window & my dear Lady [Tennyson] in her corner. Give her my kiss.... I am now going to see my dear stone laid & to speak to the gardener about the ivy.²² She was even managing a little work now. Her constant concern for Leslie's comfort is touching, for when she planned a short visit away she asked Mrs Oliphant whether Laura and her father might go to her in Windsor during her own absence. 'I shall be so much happier if I think he is in y^f. kind keeping that it will make all the difference in my pleasure.' In this same letter she refers to Margaret Oliphant's current serialisation in the *Cornhill*, clearly finding meaningful associations in the story. 'I read Carita last night – O how well you write. There is not one vestige of us in it but it haunted me & haunted me.'²³

In early June Annie visited the Elton family home at Clevedon, near Bristol, the location where many years before Thackeray had realised what Jane Brookfield meant to him. The wife of one of his oldest friends from Cambridge days, Jane had provided a focus for Thackeray's emotional outpourings until William Brookfield summarily put an end to the friendship. Annie first sought out her aunt Jane Shawe in Clifton, for her behaviour was beginning to cause concern. Clevedon was like a magic place, the pleasure which she experienced there on the terrace having an almost visionary intensity. She yearned for her father and her sister, but they were gone. The thought of Richmond offered a more immediate reality.

Aunt Jane [Shawe] had got some mysterious fancy that I had said she had £70 in the savings bank & that I was counting on it – poor dear its distracting to think of such a waste of life & generous feeling & power of affection. She is exactly like L^y Sarah Francis in Old Kensington only much more dreary – But this isnt what I wanted to tell you about but something Oh! so lovely, a rainbow sort of Tennyson poem starting into life – w^h. is the terrace at Clevedon Court – the sweetest quaintest most exquisite thing with a fountain dropping into a marble basin with long rows of pink drowsy poppy heads, with a sight of all the summer in the valley & all the silver in the sea & the old grey ivy gables tumbling & piling in the hollow (Excuse the authoress). Darling, I longed for you & I wished so I had come with Papa & Minnie.²⁴

She and Richmond were now exchanging love letters, though neither might have recognised them to be such. But there was something

decidedly clandestine about their behaviour. Richmond was treating her letters secretively, preserving them carefully in a bureau bought from a pawnbroker for £3, and discreetly destroying envelopes, perhaps fearing his relatives' irritation at the evidence of their on-going correspondence. In one letter, he conjures up conventional lovers' images on returning to Cambridge from a country visit –

all your letters are comfortably installed in an absurdly small receptacle which has got a special key and if you are alarmed you may have it in your keeping. However I did resolutely burn a pile of envelopes and the ashes are still reproaching me in the little grate with little sparks running about like fairy good wishes.... [W]e drove back through the sunset and the stars blazed and a little crescent moon hung ever so high up; and I had only just time to rush to my school; and after that I thought of you and went to bed and to a sound sound sleep instead of writing.²⁵

Annie, Leslie and Laura spent most of July at Coniston, in the Lake District, staying near Leslie's old friend Victor Marshall from where Annie paid more than one visit to Ruskin. She admired the simplicity of Ruskin's style of life, and his 'lovely little aesthetic encampment here. They are all as kind as they can be in fits of delight over scraps, not the lake & the mountains but a gooseberry or a feather off a chicken's head or something of the sort...., Ruskin has beautiful old bibles & missals & above all such nice strawberries at his house. He says if you can draw a strawberry you can draw anything.'²⁶

The tranquillity of the surroundings made her feel Minny's absence acutely. 'It would have made Minny O so happy to be here and every little flower & cloud & tint seemed to ache for her.'²⁷ She was also missing Richmond, and made arrangements for a number of his family to come to Coniston to take summer lodgings. 'I think I shall wait till you come to feel it all tho' I see how sweet & fair & fresh & exquisite everything is.' Mrs Ritchie and Richmond eventually joined them, together with his unmarried sisters Pinkie and Elinor. In sending birthday greetings to another of Richmond's sisters, Blanche Warre Cornish, she admitted to having been suddenly struck by Laura's resemblance to Thackeray, a consoling sign of heredity and what Thomas Hardy calls 'the family face'. 'This morning as I was looking at her asleep she made a little face that was so like Papa, it came over me with a happy sort of ache to think that the children carry about some positive real true identity of the dear still dearer ones whose life they live & still are. No children can ever ever be to

me what their parents are & have been, but how much Ah how much, I never knew till now. I am very glad I had a little talk with my Min about it once.’²⁸

She sent a note to Ruskin at Brantwood during the morning of 28 July, inviting him to call. Later came his reply, which Annie carefully kept and pasted into a leather-bound book which in 1890 she presented to Richmond to remind him of that precious time. The original diary entry for that same day she would later cut out and paste in her journal, its record of another vivid dream the reason for its preservation. ‘Last night I dreamt that it was Papa’s funeral over again. There was a strange clanging music. I stood by the grave & people came & shook me by the hand, & somehow they took his hand too. I mean to think no more of Death till it comes. If I die I hope L: will marry somebody – Julia Marshall perhaps.’²⁹ She did not die, but she would leave Leslie and he would get married again, though not to Julia Marshall.

Annie also kept another small portion of her diary for the end of November, when Richmond came to be with her for the anniversary of Minny’s death. It was always going to be an important time, and it seems that they moved towards a common understanding of what their future might be.

27 November Went to the station and waited ½ an hour for R who was very very very glad to see me. Caroline dined. and then R. & I had a long and most interesting conversation.

28 November R basely deserted me and went to Eton to play football. I trolled over the S.K.M with Miss Willis protégés and was very ill and had to go to bed. R payed me a little visit [*This was the anniversary of Minny’s death*]

29 November On the sofa but very happy. R spending the day out. He went to the play in the evening leaving me again stranded.

30 November R went and was very very very sorry to go away. He enjoyed his visit very much and so did I.

Through the course of this first sad year, the endearments in their letters had grown ever more affectionate; ‘dearest’ becomes ‘darling’, and by December he is addressing Annie as ‘sweetheart’. The year ended far more calmly than Annie can ever have felt possible at its start. On New Year’s Day she went with Leslie and Laura to stay for a week with Dr and Mrs Jackson, Julia Duckworth’s parents, at Frant, near Tunbridge Wells. Saxonbury was a lovely house, surrounded by woodland. Annie was much taken with Julia’s mother, ill though she was, for she ‘seemed to be much more alive than anyone else [and]

inspired one with new interest in ones own life & belief in goodness'. Her instinctive and unsophisticated sympathies, together with a love of friends and family, chimed happily with Annie's views about what was important. 'She loved her children passionately & she loved her friends fervently & Poets & the Past & she was not religious but Religion somehow was so intense so tender & merry & unworldly. M^{rs}. Jackson would be carried down of an evening & we would all dine by lamplight & go into the dark morning room where we all sat round & talked & she quoted Poetry & Leslie responded.'³⁰ The next day came exciting news that Fitzjames Stephen, Leslie's brother, had been given a baronetcy, followed on 3 January by a letter from Richmond 'about what Willy said'. Presumably, Richmond had discussed his possible future with his eldest brother, but we do not learn what advice he received. Later that day, Leslie, on good form, recited Thackeray's poem 'The Chronicle of the Drum' to them all. It had been a happy visit. Back in London, Annie took time to have 'a long talk with Leslie'; again, this must have been about her future, and how Richmond might feature in it. It is impossible to know whether marriage was yet part of their plans.

At the end of a fortnight in the Alps, where he always found solace and refreshment, Leslie urged Annie to keep to a measured regime, knowing how easily she could overreach herself. 'Never on any account whatever go out before luncheon & never allow anybody to come in – just sit at home & be idle. Always take a short walk after lunch, whoever comes to see you & don't go out to dinner. If you will stick to that (making no exceptions) for the next six months, you will thank me for the advice.'³¹ During this month, Richmond prepared for an examination at Trinity, and once it was over came to London and took Annie for a walk in the dark. Leslie returned from the Alps on 30 January, and just two days after Annie and Richmond's night-time walk, he witnessed the 'catastrophe' of them kissing in the drawing-room at Hyde Park Gate South. Accounts of this event and its aftermath have always drawn on Leslie's highly partial recollections, where, as he freely admits, his principal concerns were selfish ones, tinged by jealousy. He hated the idea of Annie marrying 'perhaps, as Julia suggested to me, partly because all men are jealous and I might feel that I was being put at a lower level in Anny's affections; I certainly thought that it would make a widening gulf between us; I hated it because men at least always hate a marriage between a young man and a much older woman; and I hated it because the most obvious result would be the breaking up of my own household'.³² But what upset him most was a feeling that he had been compromised: he had seen the

kiss and felt bound to insist upon a resolution to the situation. Leslie's distaste also reveals an underlying prudishness, for the overt affection which this particular relationship had reached made him require Annie 'to make up her mind one way or other'. Perhaps he expected a different outcome, but his ultimatum resulted in Annie telling him that same afternoon that she and Richmond were engaged. On 31 January, Leslie and Julia Duckworth talked to Richmond, presumably exploring his prospects if marriage was to be a realistic proposition in the near future. Leslie was now determined that the marriage should advance quickly, Annie's age meaning that time was not on her side. 'Soon afterwards I read in the paper that there was to be a competition for certain public offices. I wrote to Richmond, suggesting that this was a good chance for obtaining something to marry upon. He entered accordingly and won a clerkship in the India Office.'

In fact, things did not move quite as fast as this suggests. Nothing was made public for some months, and the engagement – if it really was as formal as that – was not widely known within the family. Richmond's mother and Jane Brookfield called, and they were probably told. Annie admitted to feeling 'quite overdone'. After so many months of uncertain feelings the sudden change in her prospects seemed to bring her close to breakdown again. It was convenient that Julia Duckworth was Annie and Leslie's immediate neighbour, and only too ready to minister to Annie who moved in with her for some weeks. It was all very comforting. 'Came to sofa, tea, jelly care.'³³ A stay of a few days extended itself from early February until the beginning of April, and Annie was able to work once more. It was the decisive period of recuperation, at the end of which she could tell Mrs Oliphant of her return to normal life, and of the good health of Leslie and Laura – 'she is very well & so is Leslie, & so am I at last. I came home really yesterday for I had been staying on at Julia Duckworths & it is so nice to be free again & able to walk & talk & come & go without always thinking about my health.'³⁴

Annie lost another old friend when Jeanie Senior died on 24 March after a long illness. There had been sickbed visits, and Jeanie's courage was inspirational. 'Seeing her did me good for it was all sunset & gentle & I could cry & sit by her bed in the window. She has a grey room full of Azaleas & all her hair shines & her face looks like an angels & little Harry Hughes was deep in an arm chair reading Vanity Fair.'³⁵ Annie was deeply affected to observe an alternative means of dying, so unlike the cruel suddenness of Minny's going. 'She died at 7 o'clock on Saturday as she lived, loving them sparing them – no crepe she said for me no mourning only flowers. Carry me away on Monday.'³⁶

In April she spent some days with the Rothschilds at Mentmore Towers in Bedfordshire, and wrote to Richmond on notepaper borrowed from Hannah Rothschild, having removed what she could of the black-edged border. 'The more I think of it the more I feel as if a day might come when people will think of death with love & blessing & gratitude for the past & with less sorrow & gloom.' She gloried in the signs of the burgeoning spring when she walked out. And at night, she found it an easy transition from thinking about Minny to contemplation of Richmond, for there he was, mystically transfigured in the heavens and the flashing stars. He was looking out from his Cambridge window at just that same moment, surely?

There was a great field full of lambs & hares yesterday & chestnut trees in bud w^h. put me more in mind of Minnie than all the gloom that ever was massed together... I did like it so – & then last night, when the day was over I woke up about one o'clock & my room was full of smoke & I got up & opened the window wide & then it was you I seemed to see for all the stars were lighted up & a silver crescent was dropping & a sort of faint flame seemed to come from the horizon... It was so lovely & you do like starlight nights dont you – Oh I hope you looked out of window last night.³⁷

Duty cut short her visit, and she returned to London having been told by Jane Brookfield that Laura was unwell and Leslie 'very low'. The needs of others would always come first.

Much as the prospect of the change to his own circumstances distressed him, once Annie had made her decision Leslie fought her corner, for several of the Ritchies were implacably opposed to Richmond's marrying a woman so much older than himself. Mrs Ritchie had a different concern, for although she loved Annie dearly she feared for her son's glittering Cambridge prospects. Annie removed herself to Freshwater, Richmond returned to Cambridge, and Leslie worked on the Ritchies. This was perhaps the most unhappy part of the business for him, finding himself accused of precipitating the engagement and of encouraging Richmond to give up Cambridge for a civil service position. 'They complained of me for ruining his degree by suggesting the public office: though if he had neglected the chance the marriage might have been indefinitely postponed greatly to Anny's injury. The fact was that if they hated the marriage, I positively loathed it. I could not speak of it to Julia without exploding in denunciations.' He might easily have stood aside and let the relationship drift towards collapse; his refusal to do so speaks well of his commitment to Annie's best

interests. Julia doubtless softened his views, for having Annie as a house guest for two months had shown her that Minny's death was not the real source of Annie's present malaise. This very different emotional crisis required a different solution.

The best of Leslie emerges in the surviving correspondence. If his personal objections to the marriage remained, not least to Richmond as a suitable husband for Annie – 'I would do anything in the world for her, but I cannot and shall not feel close to her after she has taken up with that boy'³⁸ – the painful honesty of his letters to Annie show him disinterestedly advising on her own best actions. The news came through on 1 May that Richmond had been successful in the civil service examinations, and Annie and Jane Brookfield sought Sir Henry Cole's advice about which office Richmond might try for. Until she heard his views, Annie was un-persuaded that work of this kind was the right thing for a man of Richmond's talents, but Cole convinced her both as to its value and social standing. He did not favour the Post Office – 'tiresome humdrum drudgery'; he felt that the Record Office certainly had its attractions for a studious, serious man with its interesting documents offering opportunities for literary work; but for someone of Richmond's capabilities 'he should unhesitatingly recommend the India Office or the Home Office. In the India Office there are all sorts of wide interests stirring, a man can make his own mark in a little time.'³⁹ Once he had pointed out that it was answerable to a senior government member – for it was responsible for the administration of the most powerful regions within the Empire – Annie registered its 'different social standing'.

Richmond required no further prompting, and three days later sent a telegram to Freshwater announcing an opening at the India Office. Mrs Ritchie's agreement that he should give up Cambridge for this opportunity was essential if the marriage was to proceed. Having already argued so strongly for this course of action, Leslie maintained his resolve, prompting his conflict with the Ritchies. There was still a part of Annie which contemplated delay, doubtless because she was conscious of Richmond leaving Cambridge for her, but Leslie was adamant.

I have an extreme repugnance to talking about R. with you, because I hate all talk about such feelings & because in this case my sympathy is so imperfect that I am afraid of being hurried into some remark wh. would shock you. It is useless to ask what you & he ought to have done & I wont think more about it than I can help. But as matters are, I do urge you in spite of all your protestations to the contrary, to be married as soon as possible.

I say so first, because a year hence you will be in no better position than you are now, or at least the difference in your position will be infinitesimal, & quite useless to take into account. Assuming that you are to marry at all, I can see no shadow of a reason for putting it off.

But 2ndly, the intervening time would be most trying. You would have all the Ritchies at you, worrying & pestering & talking nonsense & piling up scenes. You will always be proposing to unsettle everything that has been settled, & in short, it will be a year of worry & excitement – than wh. nothing can be worse for you. Why prolong anything so unpleasant? If you could give it up altogether, well & good – I should be delighted; but short of that I would do it at once.⁴⁰

He also disabused her of any thoughts of delaying her departure on his account, or of establishing a joint home. ‘I really dread the strain upon my temper, if I am to have Richmond always about the house & Ritchies buzzing in & out & ranting interviews & thrilling explanations & all the rest of it. The sort of divided allegiance wh. you will owe to R. & to me would be really irritating.... It is very awkward to be always a third person, & especially an unsympathetic 3d person.’ He might have expressed it better, especially as Annie had been the third person during all the years of his marriage to Minny, but that was not in his thoughts when he wrote so frankly about Richmond, who was quite a different proposition. Then he played his trump card. ‘I wish you to do whatever will make you happy & I should think myself unfaithful to Minny if your happiness were not one of my first objects in life.’

Annie took his objection to Richmond’s presence rather to heart, feeling that she ought to look at once for her own house, for she had not grasped that Leslie had been looking ahead and imagining the married couple living with him into some indeterminate future. The idea of her immediate departure was almost worse.

You seem to fancy that I expect to be so much bored by R & you, that I would rather have you out of the house. At least, that is the only way in wh. I can account for your plan of taking a house. I object to the plan altogether, because I entirely deny the truth of your assumption. I should be deeply annoyed at your leaving me before your marriage.... I really could not bear it. No, you must stay with me till you marry. I ask it of you as a special favour & I will be as



William, Blanche, and Gussie Ritchie, about 1860.

good as I can in regard to Richmond. The separation would vex me far more than his presence. I would rather even that he lodged with us till his marriage than that you went away from me.... I implore you not to think of parting from me till the parting is necessary. That would really make me feel as if I were not fulfilling my duty to Minny.⁴¹

She felt thankful, having no wish to upset Leslie any more than her decision to marry had already distressed him. What cheered her most was the knowledge that people were at last speaking the truth to each other. Whether others approved of it or not was almost a secondary matter. 'I feel suddenly quite relieved & sleepy & peaceful & the sea has begun to flow & the hedges to give pleasure & your ladyship to realise the blessing w^h. is hers.'⁴²

Meanwhile, Leslie was fighting their battle, and eventually triumphed on 11 May, a long day producing two letters and resulting in a noble victory which could only have given him considerable personal anguish. In the longer first letter, written during the morning, he assured Annie that she must ignore the objections of other people, including his own. 'You ought to decide it entirely upon the considerations of your own happiness & Richmond's & to leave my fancies out of sight altogether & also the fancies of R's family.' He was concerned that some of the Ritchies, principally Richmond's sisters Gussie and Blanche, were urging delay, for he feared that Annie's health would not withstand 'a year more of uncertainty & vexation with the Ritchies.... They are young & talk as if years were of no importance. They delight in making scenes, wh. is a simple torture of your nerves.' Leslie insisted that Annie should remain objective.

Make up your mind, of course, but leave us to give it effect & to deal with Mrs R. & Gussie & Blanche & the whole kit of them. What you & R decide upon will be accepted by me as fine. I will then do all the fighting for you & the sentimentalizing & the discussion of ways & means & all the rest of it. Dearest Anny, I ask this as a right. I feel that I have inherited Minny's position & your father's. I wish that I had their power of making you happy; but at least you must let me do what they would have done had they been with us still.

He could not have come up with words that were more persuasive.

Later that day he talked to Mrs Ritchie, and his idea that Richmond might continue to work for his degree away from Cambridge seemed to clinch things for her, prompting his second letter of quiet triumph.

[M]atters have much changed since I wrote. I have seen Mrs Ritchie, who is incomparably the most sensible of the lot. She talked pleasantly about you & will do everything that is wanted. I have no doubt that she will consent to anything that you & Richmond may determine. She said that she

should allow him his £200 a year & was otherwise perfectly judicious in her remarks.... I shall only say that I think he had better go in for his degree or, at least, promise to consider it, because it will please his mother & might be useful.⁴³

Annie was sitting quietly in Watts's Freshwater studio listening to Thoby Prinsep talking of his early life in India when the clinching telegram arrived from Richmond – 'Mother consents I am appointed to the India Office'.⁴⁴ She went to share her news with Jane Senior's mother in her cottage at Colwell Bay, and with the Tennysons at Farringford – 'they were all very kind'. The effectiveness of Leslie's work behind the scenes is borne out by Mrs Ritchie's own letter, which was wholly loving and generous towards Annie. If lingering anxieties remained, there could be no doubt but that Annie's happiness was assured by this particular endorsement.

Well darling I suppose it is all settled. I am sure you know by y^r. self that I have many conflicting feelings but this is certain & uppermost that I love you most dearly and that I know you will be the dearest & most loving wife my Richmond could have won for himself – & that I most earnestly pray & hope that your love for each other which has certainly been well tested will keep you as it has now brought you to the same level as it were. The dear fellow has been two days with us and is very happy & radiant – I had a talk with Leslie yesterday and he was very kind & full of love for you and solicitude for y^r. welfare.... We have not yet heard when R. will have to begin at the India Office but I am sure I can get him leave to finish this term at Cambridge & he will then have resided long enough to take his degree.... Of course he cant take such a good place as I hoped he would when he began his College career but he says himself that if he is able to go on reading he ought to be in the 1st. class.... This will hardly bring you nearer to us than you are already, and have been for many years that you have been like a sister to the girls and a daughter to me.⁴⁵

Even Leslie mellowed, and later in the month he gave a more considered assessment of Richmond's virtues to Charles Eliot Norton, who had been a regular correspondent ever since Leslie's first trip to America in 1863.

He is many years her junior – a fact wh. is the only objection to the marriage, for he is a thoroughly able & honourable

man & devotedly attached to her. The story of their affection is a long one, and I have seen this coming for many months, though it is only of late that I saw it to be inevitable

People will of course be surprised & probably some will be displeased. Women are not allowed to do such unusual things without criticism. On the other hand, the unusualness is in itself a proof of the strength of the feelings wh. have brought it about; & upon that side I have no fears. I am as certain as I can be of anything that the marriage will be as happy as mutual affection can make it. That is of course the great thing – almost the only thing.⁴⁶

News of the engagement spread quickly – it was probably already a poorly-kept secret – and within days letters arrived in great numbers. Some people had to be told in person, and once Annie left Freshwater she went to explain things to Margie and Anny. It would have been a poignant meeting, as was her visit to Wimbledon to her mother on 26 May. And then Richmond arrived, Annie recording in her journal for 29 May ‘1st HAPPY DAY’. She meant two things by this. Recent uncertainties were behind her, and her lonely vigil since Minny’s death was at last ending.

Even her anxiety about others’ prejudices was dissipating, and she told Pinkie Ritchie, whose support had always been strongest, that

I had a horrid bout of purgatory & doubt but the moment I saw him a sort of conviction of blessed peace & reality came over me & he too said that he had been afraid I meant to put off & off & so slide away for ever.... Dear my worst doubts were for him. For me I never could pretend to have any except indeed some very insignificant ones as to what people may think.

She had already sent Pinkie the briefest of notes from Freshwater, on this one occasion permitting herself a selfish thought. ‘O my darling I can only cry because I am so happy.... O my dearest it ought to be you not me – no I wont say that but only God bless you my own Pinnie & give you the love and happiness you give to others.’⁴⁷ To Nina Lehmann she quietly rejoiced at ‘this something come into my life w^h. seems to make it full of gratitude & reality’, even as she wondered at the sacrifice that Richmond was making for her. ‘I do feel so sorry for Richmond sometimes yet I cant when I see him, he is so happy & singleminded & it does seem such a miracle.’⁴⁸ She wrote to

Browning's friend, Joseph Milsand, just days after the engagement was made public. 'When my sister died I had no more courage left to refuse the familiar comfort & help of his presence & most youthful affection I do not think Richmond will care less for an old wife than he has done for his old cousin & in that case I think he will be happy. I am sure I am.'⁴⁹ Perhaps she was right to be sensitive, for when the news spread into the gossip columns the one thing that was stressed was their ages. One regional paper was unable to resist malice. 'The chief fault of the gentleman is that he is twenty years [*sic*] the junior of the lady, and all London is shaking its head at the alliance and talking of the blunders of love in consequence.'⁵⁰

Annie knew that it would be difficult to win the blessing of Charlotte Ritchie, whose attachment to her Ritchie nephews and nieces stretched back to the time when they had been sent in turn from India to her charge in Paris. In 1874 she had scolded Annie in Florence for monopolising Richmond's attentions, voicing the family doubts which only now were being resolved. Knowing that news of the engagement would be bitter-sweet for Charlotte, Annie nevertheless yearned for her approval. 'It seems like a sunrise after the long darkness & my heart is very full of him & of all that I have here & there too. Dearest you will write & say god bless us and when I die I think it will seem as if no one had been so blessed as I with such wonderful love – indeed he looks happy & says he is happier than he has ever been and people do not seem so shocked as I expected but on the contrary every one is kind & full of sympathy.'⁵¹ Richmond sent Charlotte his own eloquent testimony to the saving power of Annie's love, compared with which the difference in their ages – so much a matter of concern for others – was of no importance. In that she was able to offer him 'a real life', Richmond had felt himself as much in need of rescue as did Annie herself.

I am sure that if at Florence you had known our hearts, you would not have wished for any alteration in them, and now I am equally sure that when you see our happiness, if without seeing you cannot believe, you will rejoice as much as anybody in our happiness. How anyone who knows Annie can fail to envy me in my blessed fortune I cannot see. Willie the other night said 'You are going to marry the most charming creature alive, and you cant expect to have everything'. But for Annie it is different – I can quite understand and even sympathise with people who fear for her; all I can say in answer to their doubts is that myself I

have such entire faith in our mutual love that my heart is quite secure from all apprehension....

For myself I can only say that for the first time for years my heart is perfectly light. I may have for a while sometimes forgotten, but the anxiety was always there waiting. It is all over however, thank God, and I can begin to think of leading a real life. Annie is as happy as I am, if not happier as her anxiety was far worse than mine: but she cannot help having misgivings of the opinion of the world at large. As for the happiness of those who really love her and her happiness, I tell her that it is doubting their love if she thinks it possible they should not rejoice with her rejoicing.⁵²

In the years to come, as they both grew older, he may have reflected on this blithe confidence. The difficulties would inevitably come, and the marriage was tested. As Annie moved towards old age, he found himself enjoying the company of other, younger women. But as he sets out on the journey there are no doubts, and after a morning in the gardens of Kings College he candidly confronts the matter of her age. '[E]ven when I am bothered about you most, the blessing is still there; and the feeling that there is nothing to hold on to and cling by has gone right away out of my life – and my blessing goes on till you die. There is no reason to think that if you live to be as old as Methuselah, my feeling for you will alter; or as far as altering goes, if you die.'⁵³

As the letters of congratulation arrived, many people expressed delight that at last Annie had someone to care for her, and some made a point of saying that Minny would have wished it. Richmond's youngest sister Elinor was enthusiastic, feeling that it was 'rather glorious' that he was able to do this. Meta Gaskell, elder daughter of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, wittily likened him to the most doting of Thackeray's creations, though Richmond might not have found the allusion flattering. 'You will make the very dearest, sweetest, tenderest wife possible; and Mr. Ritchie is indeed a happy and lucky man. As for tales that I have heard of him: if I did not count it blasphemy, I should liken his devotion to Dobbin's!'⁵⁴ Annie told her father's old friend, William Synge, that Richmond 'is years & years younger than I am but who has cared [for] me so long & with such wonderful fidelity & unchangeableness that I have no courage to say no to the happiness it will be to us both to belong to each other.... I have wondered & wondered what my Father would have said – I think perhaps – if he had known all – he might have agreed.'⁵⁵ Fitzjames Stephen rejoiced that Annie had come to know 'the greatest happiness of life. I think

that to see you happily married would have been the one thing which could have increased dear Minnie's happiness if she had been spared to us all.⁵⁶ To Mrs Oliphant, Annie managed to compress all of the troubled history of the last months and years into a few lines, with just a hint that this joyful outcome might not protect Richmond from some regret in the years to come. 'That night as I sat by the fire with you I thought shall I speak about it & I couldnt & then you know what his wonderful tender fidelity has been all this time & now that it is settled – I dont quite know how by Richmond himself & Leslie & dearest most generous M^{rs}. Ritchie who has only thought of him & of me in all this – Now that it is settled I can only pray that he may never be sorry. He is so happy now & I am too thankful for words. My Minnie would have understood how it has come about.'⁵⁷

Annie came finally to believe that it was the right choice for Richmond, reflecting on something which Charles Eliot Norton had written to Leslie, 'how a happy marriage could make life again & bind all that was shaken together once more, & dearest I do indeed feel this & as if for Richmond too there had been so much reality in his love for me that if he had left me & married someone else, what he might have gained in youth he might have lost in truth of feeling'.⁵⁸ But Leslie himself remained a worry for her. Though their common and established bonds could not be broken, she felt as if she was deserting him, and that inevitably she was hurting him. And there was Julia too, whose care had helped Annie towards recovery. Since Herbert Duckworth's death in 1870, Julia had devoted herself to her young children and guarded the dignity of her widowhood. Her friendship with Leslie had grown in recent months, to the extent that at the beginning of February, having startled himself with the sudden recognition that he loved her, Leslie made a declaration to Julia, though it took a year for her to agree to marry him. At one level Annie and Leslie were oddly similar, each uncertain about the likely outcome of a wished-for relationship, the possibility of happiness seeming so elusive and fragile. Shortly before her engagement was at last made public, it was of Leslie and Julia that Annie thought first, almost as if she feared that her own happiness was to be gained at their expense.

Darling I went to see Julia after you went away – I ended by crying this time not for us – but because it is so sad for her & Leslie & she doesnt know what to do – She said they envied us so this morning, & Leslie said that isnt parting & that we both looked so happy.... Im afraid Leslie is very very unhappy he says Julia has healed his wound but she cannot

put back the blood.... Dearest as I think of you my heart overflows with thankful happiness. There is Leslie more lonely than I was & his happiness seems so precarious, there is Julia not knowing how to help him.⁵⁹

As wedding presents began to arrive and 'that horrible bugbear of parting' with Leslie began to approach, she found that she was not alone in dreading the separation. They had shared a house for ten years, and there had developed between them deep bonds of trust founded in the honesty of their friendship. Living apart would not weaken this loyalty, but they must have feared that something of what Minny had meant to them would become ever more impalpable if they were not together to share in the common memories. When he had told Norton of Annie's engagement, Leslie was frank about his own position. 'So long as Anny lived with me, I seemed to preserve part at least of the new element wh. came into my life with my marriage. When she goes, I shall have a terrible gap between me & the past.'⁶⁰ A fortnight before the wedding, Norton wrote to Annie with his good wishes, regretting only 'the new loneliness that it would bring to Leslie'.⁶¹

Leslie spent his summer holiday that year at Coniston with Laura and his sister, but as he prepared to interrupt it to be alone with Annie for a last few days before she started her new life he feared that even this time would be denied him. There is something childishly wilful about his clinging for as long as possible to the mood of melancholy content in which he and Annie had learned to rub along since Minny's death.

I hear rumours from Julia that Mrs R & Pinkie are to come to stay with us from Tuesday. Now I do object most strongly & it is the last time I shall be able to object to anybody coming to see you. Therefore I think my wishes ought to be respected. I object selfishly because their presence will effectively keep me away from Julia, whom I am longing to see. I object on your account & my own, because I really think these days ought to be as quiet as possible. You should not be flurried & hurried & over emotioned by wellmeaning friends. I should like to have a chance of talking to you occasionally in peace & comfort & I cannot do it when P. is sighing in the background & Mrs R. talking affectionate platitudes all over the house.

Surely they might just as well go to Stanhope Gardens instead of pigging together in our back-cupboards. If you can possibly get rid of them, I shall be most grateful.⁶²

In the next breath petulance is swept aside as he presses £500 on her in order to buy a property, 'if not for the house, then towards expenses at starting'.

Annie and Richmond were married at Kensington's ancient parish church, St Mary Abbot's, early in the morning on 2 August, 'one of the many bank holiday couples'.⁶³ Lionel Tennyson was best man. It was a simple, happy affair with a deliberate absence of fuss, about which Annie herself tells us hardly anything at all. Fortunately, there are accounts by Henry Bradshaw and Pinkie to give a flavour of the occasion. A week or so later Bradshaw wrote to George Smith, the friend and publisher of both Thackerays, father and daughter. 'The bride looked more charming than ever (you must know that she won my heart the very first moment I ever saw her). There was no ceremony, no wedding breakfast, and the result was that instead of being a very dull and miserable affair, as weddings too often are, it was one of the liveliest I have ever known.'⁶⁴ Pinkie found an appropriate lightness of touch to capture the mix of informality and intimacy which reflected Annie's own personality and her capacity for giving simple happiness to others. Mrs Brookfield arrived too late, Leslie embodied gloomy resignation and Julia made few concessions to her customary severe mourning, but Annie was oblivious of anything but the mystery of this moment which had been given to her.

It was a dear little wedding, with just the amount of true friends that ought to have been there. Annie and Richmond seemed as utterly lost in each other and unconscious of anybody listening to them as if they had gone off by themselves, but then, the Service did barely last four minutes. Was it an omen that Annie, for the first time in her life, was before her time? It was hard on Mrs. Brookfield to find the Service just over.... Annie looked delightful and quite calm, I thought. Her gown was very becoming, made all in one sweep and tight-fitting, but her bonnet of muslin and lace rather trying. Richmond looked to me a perfect bridegroom, strong and tender, and when they joined hands they seemed to enjoy a long romantic 'shake hands!' One thing struck me, the contrast between Richmond's best man at the right hand, and Annie's supporters on the left – poor Leslie, who looked very deplorable, and Julia Duckworth, who wore the thickest black velvet dress and heavy black veil, and gave the gloomiest, most tragic aspect to her side of the chancel.... I placed myself as Annie's bridesmaid at the side of the children, who were most pathetically upset at the

emotional scene; dear Margie's teeth chattering, little Annie sucking lozenges to stifle her sobs, Stella Duckworth with her mother's tragic mask, and Margaret Cornish with tears streaming down her cheeks. However they all became happy on being given champagne by Richmond.⁶⁵

There would be a more extended wedding tour later in the year, but for now the only time that could be spared for a honeymoon was a few days at Newlands Corner, near Guildford. Then Richmond began to travel daily up to Waterloo to the India Office, while Annie stayed for another week or two in the Surrey countryside, revisiting places which had become familiar during Leslie and Minny's marriage. They also managed a few days in Sussex staying near Julia's parents at Frant, Richmond still commuting. Leslie returned from Coniston, and they all met up. Annie could not help but register how, by Richmond's side and in comparison with Leslie and Julia's kind but serious manner, she began to feel what being a young married person might be like. 'Leslie came to the station to meet us.... It seemed so strange to watch him & Julia flitting down the little street together, & then I looked round & there was my dear young Richmond in absurd tender delightful spirits.'⁶⁶ Towards the end of the Surrey leg of their stay she had heard from a Godalming neighbour, George Eliot, who asked Annie to visit her when she was back in town again, 'for I have been long wishing that some sign of remembrance from you would fall to my share. No one has thought of your twofold self with more sympathy than "meine Kleinigkeit" or with more earnest desire that you may have the best sort of happiness.'⁶⁷

About three weeks after the wedding, and shortly before Annie left for town to look at a possible house in Young Street which Jane Brookfield had discovered, she had one of the vivid dreams which came to her at the important moments in her life. She wrote of it to Gussie Freshfield, Richmond's eldest sister, reflecting on these first days of marriage, confident at last that she had done the right thing.

Last night I dreamt that we hadnt been married & that I said to Minnie – no I wont do it Im afraid of what people will say, its too great a responsibility, Ill go & you must tell Richmond Im gone & you mustnt tell anyone & then I went away with a curious ache & scorn, it was so strange & vivid. Dearest Gussie I woke up & I went to the window & looked out at the dawn & felt this much – that even if ever we are less happy w^h. I don't expect for one instant – we shan't ever love each other less or feel that we were not honest people.⁶⁸

Two

SHADOWS OF THE PAST (1877-1881)

There is no greater happiness in the world, and no one who could appreciate it so much perhaps as you dear Annie, who have so much love to give.

Kate Perugini to Annie
5 June 1878, on the birth of her daughter

Leslie's wedding present to Annie was a new portrait of Minny, and in October she called on George Frederic Watts's studio to collect 'the dear picture'¹ which succeeded in capturing the tranquil, introspective side of her sister's temperament. Three months after the wedding, Leslie was still finding it hard to adjust to his 'hermitage'. His sister, Caroline, was out of town, whereas Julia was 'well enough but has anxieties & worries – as usual'. The old comfortable certainties had gone, and in his melancholy he pondered on his memories of lost content. 'I only know that one has got to hold on – pleasant or unpleasant – & that I have no right to complain of life, even if I never have another happy day. The days go quickly now & the slow ones were very happy.'²

Annie and Richmond now took a delayed wedding trip to the West country, starting at Exeter and travelling as far as Lands End before returning via Bristol and ending at Haslemere. They were uncharacteristically careful with their money, logging the costs of accommodation, meals and fares. In early November they rented 'a happy little house' in Gloucester Road, a base until they moved in the spring to Young Street, where Leslie's £500 bought them No. 27, opposite the house where Annie had lived with her father and Minny thirty years before. Although the end of another year brought the sad associations that could never wholly leave her, Annie was entitled to feel hopeful. 'We are so thankful and somehow the very thought of all the sorrow & desolation w^h belongs to this time of year makes

all the blessing of tender love seem even more great & more dear to me.³ She was expecting her first child, having become pregnant very soon after the wedding.

Mindful of the history of Minny's difficult pregnancies, Annie decided that she had to stay in London rather than accompany Richmond to Paris where Charlotte Ritchie's life was drawing to its close. At the end of January 1878, her nephews and nieces gathered round her, and Richmond was touched at his dying aunt's concern that Annie should stay strong. '[Mrs Brookfield] told me that she had been talking to herself about the little baby that was coming, & saying she must take great care. It is a very beautiful thing that the minds instinct can change from selfishness to unselfishness, & that in the most entirely natural state conceivable, possessed by disease, can disregard the suffering unassisted by will & turn to entirely external objects, as being the really important ones.'⁴ Annie wrote regularly to Pinkie and Blanche as they maintained their vigil, keeping them up-to-date with happier news, for early in the new year Julia Duckworth, the long-term friend of the Thackeray sisters and a widow since 1870, had at last agreed to marry Leslie. If Annie was left with pangs of regret as Leslie's memories of Minny began to retreat, all she articulated were genuine expressions of pleasure at the new possibilities of happiness for her dear friends and for Minny's child.

My hope is for Leslie & Julia's happiness & for sweet Memekins. I think it very noble & generous of Julia to give up her liberty & her prestige & her money & everything to comfort & cheer up Leslie. I am very very thankful she has agreed at last after all her natural long hesitation. Leslie is very grave & very dear – He seems to turn to me & Richmond – He has never urged Julia, but matters have evolved themselves the governess question brought it about. He says it would be very painful to them both to get presents or to have it treated as a first marriage but do write to him a word of sympathy. He had held an interview with D^r. Jackson at the thought of which I cant help laughing.⁵

Charlotte Ritchie died on 29 January, and Annie was saddened to lose this close family link with her father, of whom she had dreamt once more during the night. 'I wish I was with you, I fear it is so lonely & silent for you & yet what a speaking voice Chatties will ever be.... All last night while you were in such anxiousness I was dreaming of Papa & talking to him just as if 13 years had not gone.'⁶ In describing Charlotte's last moments as being like a child falling asleep, Pinkie

was struck by the devotion of those Parisians amongst whom her aunt had worked selflessly for years – ‘it seemed such a perfect summary of her glorious life, to see her with that radiant calm in the room where she has suffered and loved and lived in her heroic loneliness’.⁷

Leslie and Julia married on 26 March. Annie found the occasion exhausting, for reasons that are not hard to imagine. ‘I seemed to be so utterly done up after the marriage w^h. was as you may think very trying with all the blessing it brings in that I went to bed at nine & fast asleep, for I had been awake the night before. Julia looked marvellously beautiful in her lovely grey & Leslie very happy & I think they are all quite happy about it now.’⁸ Leslie simply moved next door to Julia’s at 13 Hyde Park Gate South, and Annie and Richmond lived briefly at No 11 until Young Street became available.

In these early months of marriage Annie worked her contacts, writing to the influential Lord Houghton – formerly Richard Monckton Milnes – aware that Richmond had surrendered his Cambridge career for her. Changes at the India Office made her grasp at possible openings.

L^d. Salisbury is going & L^d. George Hamilton is going & new private Secretaries are being appointed – Do you happen to know who will be L^d. George Hamiltons successor. Dear Lord Houghton you help so many people in so many different ways, could you make Richmond a private Secretary? I know I am writing nonsense, but when I think of all he has given up for me & of the blessing of faithful tender affection & happiness I owe to him after all my bitter troubles, it seems to me that if others only knew him as I do, & his steadfastness & quiet grasp of mind & determination of character they would not think it unnatural that I should long for him to be trusted & promoted in the career he has chosen.⁹

It was rare for her to seek preferment, and in this instance she was thinking of Richmond’s career and not of herself. In turn, she reached out a helping hand to a friend who had been a rock of support at the time of Minny’s death. Aware that the novelist Margaret Oliphant was distressed by the illness of her son Cecco and having to write to meet pressing family expenses, Annie proposed lifting some of the burden from her shoulders. She offered to write for Mrs Oliphant, not by filling the role of a copyist but by undertaking some of the creative process itself. It was an act of exceptional generosity and a candid revelation that this was something which Minny had once done for her. ‘Do please tell us if ever ever we can go anywhere or get anything that c^d. save you in any way. Sometimes writing does not

do as well as sending people for things – once when I was distracted about other things Minnie did a chapter or two for me. It seems too preposterous but if you were hard driven & sent me any rough notes I'm sure I could at least put them together.'¹⁰ It is a reminder of Minny's own early writing ambitions, quietly put aside when she married, but surviving as a small collection of notes and odd pages from incomplete stories. The occasion when Minny helped her out is not known, nor whether Mrs Oliphant now took up Annie's offer. But it shows that neither writer had any pretensions about her craft, regarding it (like Thackeray) as essentially a technical process. Annie's own writing had still not emerged from the virtual silence which had fallen in the two years since Minny's death. Apart from a few short magazine pieces, the period saw only the republication of her earlier 1868-9 *Cornhill* novella *From an Island* in a collection of other reprints.¹¹

The couple took possession of 27 Young Street just before Easter, left carpet-fitters and a gardener at work, and went off to the Hand and Sceptre Hotel in Tunbridge Wells for the holiday period. By the time they returned they were able to move into the house which would come to have many happy associations as the family home where Hester and Billy were born. Now demolished and replaced by a multi-storey car park, the house adjoined the old Greyhound Inn. Across the road Annie could look out on her childhood home and remember the scenes of thirty years before. Some former neighbours, including their family doctor, John Jones Merriman, were still residents in adjacent Kensington Square, as was the expert in public health, Sir John Simon and his wife. The community retained something of the genteel village atmosphere of its 'Old Kensington' past, and for Annie it was the happiest of locations. They became residents in time for the traditional local May Day celebrations, and Annie was once again able to delight in the Jack in the Greens dancing past the window down Young Street. Theirs was a comfortable house, with a long garden at the rear and 'an ancient medlar tree with a hole in it. There was also a lovely tall acacia tree. In those days before Kensington Court there were other gardens full of birds & trees beyond the walls & the tall spire of the church.'¹² Just a month later, at 4.30 in the morning of 1 June, Hester Helena Makepeace Thackeray Ritchie was born, a healthy child whose birth caused her mother, shortly to be forty-one, no distress at all. A midwife was there to assist, and Mrs Brookfield brought the baby to Annie to hold, pointing out the 'beautiful brown eyes like Richmond'.

Friends sent their congratulations. Dickens's daughter, Kate Perugini (remarried since the death of her first husband, Charles Collins) was delighted that at last Annie was experiencing 'all the wonder and

delight of having a dear little creature of your own to love and watch over'.¹³ Pinkie, who would be a godmother, anticipated great things from this unique combination of Thackeray and Ritchie genes – 'it is very nice to think she must be a Thackeray there is so much more of that in her composition than in all the other children'.¹⁴

A rare correspondent was the reclusive George Crowe, the younger brother of Amy and Eyre Crowe, who ended his days in an asylum. Urging Annie to maintain her own writing despite the new responsibilities of motherhood, he remembered Thackeray's pride in her first published efforts. His linking of the writing of father and daughter would have resonated with her, though she was always modest about her own achievements. He warned her that

it is all very well giving "Richmond" dear little daughters & sons, but this won't excuse you from going on with your & our other family – How delightful they are! I never read them without his voice heavy in my ear – you are the daughter of his mind. How proud he was of that paper in the Cornhill.... Is it not a comfort to see how secure his place is now?¹⁵

Hester was christened in St Mary Abbot's at the end of June, her godparents (in addition to Pinkie) being Lady Martin (the actress Helena Faucit, wife of Theodore Martin) and George Smith. 'At the last moment by Lady Martins request we called her Hester Helena. The Martins drove us to the church & Hester had a tremendous fit of crying just before she started, wh. delayed the ceremony a little'.¹⁶ They walked across Kensington High Street for tea in Young Street and later still, when the guests had all gone, Hester's nurse reported the appearance of an unknown lady who had dropped a white shawl over the baby. Annie realised at once that it came from 'my dear Mrs Cameron'. On a visit from Ceylon, Julia Margaret Cameron's return had coincided with the birth, leading to one of her heartfelt notes. 'That inestimable precious gift of yr little Hester will be one more of those glorious gifts which fill the soul of us poor Mortals with Gratitude. It is a trembling joy is it not this sacred possession of children of one's own'.¹⁷ During that summer, they saw a lot of her at Young Street, and also of the newly-married Lionel Tennyson and his wife Eleanor Locker. Whilst the Tennysons looked for a house, Annie and Richmond put them up. She told Pinkie of her fondness for Eleanor, although it was wonderful when they had the house to themselves again. 'I cant tell you how nice Eleanor has been. She puts me very much in mind of her mother in a certain courteousness of mind & general human kindness and it is delightful to hear her laugh.... Last night as I went

up to say goodnight to Eleanor in the little attic room I thought for a moment somehow that I sh^d. find you there tucked up in the little old bed. It was rather scimmagy for Eleanor, & I sometimes wonder whether we shall ever be in order quite.¹⁸

These summer meetings were the last with Mrs Cameron, who returned to Ceylon in October and died three months later, the news reaching Annie in the middle of February. Poignant reminders of this imaginative spirit came with the arrival in Young Street of yet more gifts, sent from Ceylon.

Annie and Richmond eventually mastered the right feeding regime for the baby, but only through a lengthy process of trial and error.

Somewhere about this time Hester was ordered a bottle by the D^r. We dined at the Trevelyans & when we came home the baby was awake & crying & the moment seemed come. I tried to mix it. Richmond it was who tackled the problem, cooked the water on the stove & mixed Hesters first draught. She liked it. We had no end of adventures goats donkies bottles & mixtures before we hit upon Nestles food which suited her – It half poisoned Billy afterwards – One can never tell exactly.¹⁹

Although they had domestic staff, the Ritchies were less dependent on nursery-maids than might have been expected. Annie did not complain, finding motherhood wonderful in almost every way, but physically exhausting, especially when coupled with the neuralgia attacks and headaches which plagued her throughout her adult life. Important events in Hester's progress came to be recorded with pride – 'Friday 7 [March] 1879. Baby stood up by her little chair all alone.'

Annie encouraged Richmond to consider other kinds of work, perhaps not convinced that his temperament suited an office job. Matthew Arnold, the poet and prominent cultural critic, was brought by his own experience of drudgery to disparage thoughts of a school inspectorship, 'which your husband is mad enough to desire'. Instead, Arnold endeavoured to press one of his reviews of her, and flatteringly linked her with the infamous French female novelist George Sand. 'One gifted woman should see what is said of another; I think, if I find when we next meet that you have not read me on George Sand, I must ask you to let me give you the new volume which contains my notice of her.'²⁰ It is unlikely that Annie would have taken his praise too seriously.

She had now fully resumed her former social life, abandoned since Minny's death. Within the course of a few days in January 1879, she attended the christening of Lionel and Eleanor Tennyson's first child

(called Alfred after his grandfather), was at home to Anthony Trollope (who probably called about the short book on Thackeray which he was about to write for Macmillan's *English Men of Letters* series), and entertained Robert Browning to dinner 'rather successfully', as well as herself being a guest of the George Smiths where Browning recited a new poem to the company. The novelist Rhoda Broughton became a new acquaintance, despite Richmond's inauspicious first encounter with her as fellow dinner guests. 'He was sitting next her on the opposite side of the table to me, & when I introduced him she paid no attention. He – I believe we are being introduced. She – How very disagreeable.'²¹

Henry James's presence at this same dinner, hosted by fellow writer Hamilton Aidé, went unrecorded by Annie. Their friendship was embryonic, and on his side ambivalent as yet. He was initially uncomfortable in the presence of this 'boy-husband', with his apparent mix of diffidence and arrogance. 'Miss Thackeray is at any rate very happy and satisfied in her queer little marriage. Her husband is, superficially, an ill-mannered and taciturn youth; but he improves much on acquaintance.'²² Nor could he quite fathom Annie herself. A year earlier, shortly after Julia had agreed to marry Leslie and become 'the receptacle of his ineffable and impossible taciturnity and dreariness', James dined with Leslie, Julia and the Ritchies, Richmond 'even out-silencing Stephen', whereas he judged Annie to be 'the very foolishest talker (as well as most perfectly amiable, and plainest, woman) I have lately encountered. Compared with her conversation, *Miss Angel* is Baconian!'²³ A few weeks later, a full two months before Hester's birth, James was discomfited at meeting Annie 'further advanced towards confinement ... than I have ever seen a lady at a dinner party'.²⁴ There are few hints here of the subsequent close and sustained friendship which would lead James to write of Annie in 1906 that 'I cherish the thought of being so with her – she's one of the women in the world whom I've most loved'.²⁵

Annie's attempts to write met with mixed results, for Hester's needs came first. 'I think if Richmond were to beat me I might begin to write again but I don't think Goethe himself could have written while Wolfgang was a baby.'²⁶ But she worked when she could, finally completing a short book on Madame de Sévigné, the seventeenth-century letter-writer whose correspondence had appeared in editions since the mid-eighteenth century. Annie was already an admirer before agreeing to contribute a biographical study to Blackwood's 'Foreign Classics for English Readers', edited by Margaret Oliphant, flippantly claiming in 1875 that 'I think Minnys letters are quite as good as

M^{me} de Sévigné that [St Beuve] praises so'.²⁷ Leslie did his best to dissuade her from the task, not because the subject was unworthy, but because he thought Annie ill-equipped to undertake it. Fearing that she would fall short, he wanted her to dedicate herself to the fiction with which her name was properly associated. He did not mince his words, exposing a professional suspicion of genteel lady writers who, without a university background, lacked the required scholarly discipline.

Do pray leave Mme de Sévigné alone. I cant bear you to do things that you cannot do thoroughly well. Rd ought to make you understand the difference between cram & real knowledge. Why should you do what will put you on the level of every wretched scribbler who can remember dates & facts? To write about Mme. de S. you ought to be a thorough critic....

The one thing that vexes me about your work is that you haven't enough respect for [your] talents & your calling & are content to put in bits of sham & stucco alongside of really honest work.

You profess to believe me to be a critic, this is the very ABC of the doctrine. I feel it very strongly. It doesn't matter if people like me do a bit of penny-a-lining sometimes for bread & butter; but you artistic people ought to stick to your strong points.²⁸

Annie was not so discouraged as to set the idea aside, although the book would not be finished until 1881. Its successful completion would shape her future direction as an author, giving her the taste for biography and memoir which increasingly preoccupied her and led to two fine editions of her father's works. It is not hard to see why the personality of Madame de Sévigné should have appealed to Annie so directly and sympathetically. In describing the qualities of the Frenchwoman's letter-writing, the unnamed author of an old encyclopaedia article might just as well have been writing of Annie, so closely does his account of Madame de Sévigné touch on her too. 'She had an all-observant eye for trifles and the keenest possible appreciation of the ludicrous, together with a hearty relish for all sorts of amusements, pageants and diversions, and a deep though not voluble or over-sensitive sense of the beauties of nature. But with all this she had an understanding as solid as her temper was gay.'²⁹

In the early summer of 1879, Annie and Richmond stole away to visit Dutch picture galleries for two weeks, leaving Hester in the care of grandmother and unmarried aunts at Mrs Ritchie's Bracknell house,

Brock Hill. They were absent for Hester's first birthday, returning on 6 June. They revelled in Rubens, van Dyke and Rembrandt – 'so fine, so disjointed', and enjoyed the railway travel, as it permitted 'a sight of a hundred spotless interiors & their 10,000 windmills & cows'. The Franz Hals pictures at Haarlem put Annie in mind of Millais, 'such kindred spirits'.³⁰

Later in the summer she left Richmond in London and took Hester to Devon, to the Lynton summer house of her cousin Blanche and husband Frank Warre Cornish. The day after her arrival it poured with rain so she sat by the fire and 'read for M.^{me} de Sevigné'.³¹ She also read James's *The Europeans*, 'w^h. is pretty but very slight & not nearly so good as his later things', and 'a wonderfully good story of G. Eliots Behind the Veil & a very stupid one called Brother Jacob'.³² But just as she seemed ready for serious work she was told to rest, for at the age of forty-two she found that she was pregnant again, and she was now suffering from crippling headaches. Her solution was to propose to Margaret Oliphant that she might undertake the Sévigné book collaboratively with Richmond, which also served her continuing hope of finding more creative outlets for him than those offered by the India Office.

[T]he D^r said I musnt write a word for a long time to come. I think, if you dont object (only this of course alters the whole case & might not for many reasons be convenient to you) the best chance both for the book itself & for me & M.^{me} de Sevigne w^d. be to announce it when it does come by M^r. & M^{rs}. R.T.R. or by R & A Thackeray Ritchie if that w^d. be more explanatory. He really writes capably & M^r. Greenwood has paid him some most delightful compliments. I could do the sentimental biographical & he c^d. do the resumé's & point the morals.³³

Mrs Oliphant must have gently turned down this suggestion, for it is not mentioned again, and the book continued to be largely a solo project.

It was from Lynton that Annie wrote to the former actress, Fanny Kemble, on hearing of the death of her sister, Adelaide Sartoris, herself once a celebrated operatic soprano. Both women had been good friends of Thackeray and subsequently of his daughters. 'When I look back almost to the very beginning of my life so much of it seems interwoven with her & all her goodness to us; all the voices of my dearest seem to sound again & it seems to me as if I had a sort of right to tell you how my heart is with you & how I long to know that you are made

able to bear this bitter hour... My little one is laughing & chattering as I write. May she have such dear & noble friends as her mother has had.³⁴ Mrs Kemble replied from France a few days later.

I suppose I believe the world is always full of finely & nobly endowed human beings – but in our lives we each of us gather but one harvest. Mine has been a very rich & full one – alas for this last fallen sheaf of very glorious good grain... I have just finished reading for the third time your father's book of Esmond & while I read it I often thought of his early friendship for my brother & us – & his great constant kindness to me – he was part of my harvest too – I have had a very rich life – its memories make me rich & very thankful still.³⁵

Annie shared her sadness about Mrs Sartoris with Henry James, and urged him to visit Lynton. 'Do think of it if it is at all possible & if the house full of children & babies doesn't frighten you.'³⁶ He did not come.

A continuing anxiety for Annie was how to deal with the public interest in her father's life. She was all too conscious of his injunction that there should be no biography, and the weight of responsibility pressed heavily on her. She disliked Anthony Trollope's *Thackeray*, which led to a coolness between them, although both she and Leslie appear to have felt that, if it had to be done at all, a short book in Macmillan's *English Men of Letters* series with Trollope as author seemed a good choice, in that his genuine admiration was as much for the man as for the writer. Trollope had told Frederick Chapman after Thackeray's death in 1863 that 'I loved him dearly'. But when it came to making material available, Annie was predictably reticent. She released none of her father's letters, and when Trollope submitted a list of questions she offered only sketchy answers.³⁷ It was less than helpful. He started work on 1 February and finished within two months, not a little puzzled by Annie's caution, telling John Blackwood that 'there is absolutely nothing to say, – except washed out criticism'. It was not helped when such a potentially useful source as Edward FitzGerald, the poet and translator and Thackeray's closest friend at Trinity College, Cambridge, claimed that he had destroyed all of his early letters from Thackeray, and had forgotten much of what he once knew. 'It had to be done (as Thackeray's inner circle intended) with almost no material',³⁸ and Trollope necessarily fell back on his own anecdotes. He dealt with personal matters delicately enough, skirting the problem of Isabella's mental collapse and ignoring the open secret of Thackeray's passion



Annie with Margie and Anny Thackeray, about 1867

for Mrs Brookfield. Yet he still managed to offend Annie, principally it would seem for mentioning the ‘comfortable income’ of £750 which Thackeray was able to leave to his children, a figure which Annie herself appears to have supplied. With heavy irony the *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewer castigated Trollope’s poor taste. ‘It must be a source of satisfaction to Thackeray’s children to be assured on Mr. Trollope’s

authority that “the comfortable income” – the precise figure is stated – which he left behind *was* “earned honestly, with the full approval of the world around him”.³⁹

A story was passed down from Trollope’s granddaughter that ‘Anne Thackeray or rather Ritchie went to Grandpa at Waltham House and besought him herself to write it as she said no one would do it better than he. He did not want to write it. But to Anne’s entreaties he finally yielded and then was cruelly abused by Richmond Ritchie in some article.’⁴⁰ Victoria Glendinning assigns this to family mythology, not least because ‘the review was most unlikely to have been by Anny’s husband’, but on those grounds at least the story may be accurate, for Richmond was indeed reviewing for the *Pall Mall Gazette* during these years, much to Annie’s satisfaction, and the reviewer’s traditional anonymity might well have been used as a disguise for his wife’s disapproval. It took three years for good relations to be restored. In the year of his death they met once more. ‘Anthony Trollope came & stood by the fireplace very big & kind & made it up. He said Billy was like his grandfather. I never saw dear M^r Trollope again. I said to him I’m so sorry I quarreled with you. He said so am I my dear.’⁴¹ Annie continued to feel that she had behaved badly, and eventually set the record straight in a short piece written for *The Illustrated London News* of 20 June 1891, ‘Thackeray and his Biographers’, recognising that although Trollope saw her father ‘from a very different point of view from mine... he writes with an affection which never varied, and which was ever constant to my father’s children, though not untried, I fear, by the present writer’.

This morbid sensitivity to things written about her father had very deep roots. In 1871, with the memory of his death that much fresher, she had taken offence even to James Fields’s affectionate essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*, urging him to make changes before republishing it in *Yesterdays with Authors*.

There are passing words & actions w^h. cannot help seeming different when they are told alone with emphasis & without all that may have led up to them & varied ever so slightly by the impress of a different mind. My Father was so much in the habit of trusting his friends & of laughing at himself that many persons may have taken words as seriously meant w^h. were only sarcastic or they would never have been spoken by the person, who of all those I have ever known had the justest & manliest mind & the greatest dislike to over-speaking & exaggeration. Leslie Stephen said some time ago he thought I may have been over sensitive in regard to some of the things

that have been said about my Father. It is so painful to me to discuss him in any way that I avoid doing so when I can & I would not trouble you now with this letter if it were not that perhaps you would rather that I write it than not.⁴²

But the Trollope episode made Annie see that future requests for information would become increasingly hard to resist. However much she felt bound to honour Thackeray's own veto on potential biographers, the only certainty was that her privileged access to his papers combined with a unique knowledge of her own family history would die with her, and that his memory might be served better by some kind of authorised account which could both protect and shape his reputation. According to FitzGerald, when Trollope had been seeking out materials, Annie had 'misinformed him in many ways'.⁴³ She was beginning to see the attractions of managing rather than suppressing the story, and that could only be done by writing it herself. It took a long time for the specific idea of the Biographical Edition to surface, but this was one of a number of defining moments which prompted it.

Four years had passed since Minny's death, but Annie never stopped regretting her decision to be away from home that fateful night. She reflected on the changes in her own life since then – marriage, motherhood, and a second child expected. Pregnancy had always been a dangerous time for Minny, yet Annie was remarkably untroubled by it, despite her age. Already cautioned by her doctor during the summer, she would have been realistic about the risks as her own pregnancy advanced. Death was not something to be feared – Thackeray had taught her that – though she knew only too well the permanent sadness for those left behind. She feared for Hester, though knew that many would love her, and probably believed that Richmond would re-marry in time. At the turn of midnight on Minny's anniversary, she wrote a letter to be put aside for the day when Hester might wish to learn of the mother only dimly remembered.

This is the first letter I have ever written to you my darling child & I can hardly find words to tell you what a blessing & happiness you have been to your old mama. My sweetheart may God keep you safe & good all your life. I think you will grow up ready to love & trust & you have your dearest Father to shield you & love you even if I am gone –

Dont be afraid if troubles come.

My little darling if you are hurt or lonely in life, make your heart large & take in all the love that comes your way & all its comfort.

If you want a woman to go to – I think you will best understand what y^r. aunt Magdalene w^d. advise & there are Margie & Annie who will love you always & Aunt Minnies Laura & your own aunts. Be occupied my darling & may you be blessed my sweet sweet delight – & make your Daddy happy for your loving

Mother.⁴⁴

In fact, Annie grew more robust as the weeks went by and was able to work quite steadily at Madame de Sévigné, noting less than a month before her confinement that she had written six chapters. Mrs Oliphant was warmly approving. ‘The beginning reads charmingly, and I am sure it will make a delightful volume.’⁴⁵ Annie maintained the same full social life which had raised Henry James’s eyebrows before Hester’s birth. She attended the christening in Westminster Abbey of her godson Charles – Lionel and Eleanor Tennyson’s second son and the future biographer of his grandfather – the next day going to dinner with the Holman Hunts, and a week later called on Watts and Frederic Leighton and lunched with the Tennysons.⁴⁶

There was a final excitement the day before she gave birth, when the Young Street chimney caught fire and ‘the fire engines came thundering up’. The midwife arrived a few days before a boy was born in the early hours of 18 March, and Annie proudly noted her approval of him as ‘a very observant child.... He put the cloth away from his little face & looked round the room, taking everything in.’ Richmond provided a more matter-of-fact account of the uncomplicated birth for his sister, Blanche. ‘A little boy was born this morning about 4 after a very short struggle. Annie is perfectly happy & well, and the child is very big, very ugly, and with big eyebrows.’⁴⁷ Catching up with her correspondence a few weeks later, Annie was still enchanted by

my sweet little son ... I like him quite as much as a daughter. He is so good & so close up to one. I think he will be rather dreamy & easygoing with a grateful imaginative little heart, & Hester will settle things, & Billy will back her up.... Thank God for inventing little children & big ones. How I wish everybody had children, I feel quite ashamed now when I see those who have not got my blessings.⁴⁸

On 31 May she went to a grocer’s shop on Camden Hill to register the baby’s name, and until the last moment was undecided as to its exact format. The registrar was patient – ‘Take your time Mum’ – and then she confirmed the entry as William Thackeray Denis Ritchie.

‘William’ was somehow inevitable, and the addition of Denis – a name which in his teenage years the boy sometimes preferred to use, but later abandoned – nicely suggested a completion to the imaginative work which his grandfather had left unfinished, *Denis Duval*. But from the start he was known in the family as Bill or Billy, never by the more formal William. As the children grew, their parents had various pet names for them – Codge or Coak for Hester, Bung or Billiki for Billy, and a collective term for the pair, ‘the Cobungo’. From the beginning there was a delightful informality about this family group, and both Richmond and Annie had great fun as parents, spending as much time as possible playing with the children who were not abandoned to the care of their nurses, but grew up informally and uncomplicatedly, surrounded by love. The Thackeray model for living, honestly and without pretensions, was their grandfather’s greatest gift to them. His example was not something that Annie was ever likely to forget, but she was always happy to have unexpected reminders of it, such as the occasion a couple of years later when she met a lady who remembered Thackeray’s attentiveness to his daughters. ‘This old lady says Papa was so proud of us that he always took us both when he went anywhere – could you imagine another Papa doing the same thing?’⁴⁹

A month before Billy’s christening, there was much chatter amongst George Eliot’s acquaintances at her marriage to the banker John Cross on 6 May, George Lewes having died in 1878. Annie was sensitive to her parallel situation insofar as she too had married a much younger husband. Contemptuous of those who had gushed over George Eliot’s writing whilst judging her harshly for living openly with Lewes, and who now professed horror at the supposed irregularity of her marriage choice, Annie told Pinkie about meeting George Lewes’s daughter-in-law.

She said M^r Locker says it is the clique who always treated her as a Royal Supernatural gigantic illuminated being who are now so furious with G.E. all except Herbert Spencer who hasnt turned & rended her to shreds as all the rest of her old devotees have done. M^{rs} Charles [Lewes] said with her eyes all full of tears remember that she is an Englishwoman of the middle classes imbued with English prejudice, & perhaps to her the name of wife may have seemed a refuge from all the agony of years. She told me that she used to tremble when she met anyone alone she felt it all so bitterly. She had given up everything good position respectability for M^r Lewes....

I wish it was otherwise but those people who were so silly in their raptures have no business to be so pitiless now. We may say what we like – at least you may darling as for me my only excuse was that I did love Richmond & he did love me & didnt shirk the price – but I musnt talk of poor G.E. except at home. Only I always forget & begin.⁵⁰

The christening was set for 7 June at St Mary Abbots. His godparents were Sir John Simon, Pinkie, Jane Brookfield and Herbert Stephen, and at the very last minute Annie pleaded a special favour.

My beloved M^{rs} Tennyson. After a good deal of uncertainty we have been obliged to settle tomorrow for the Christening & now I am going to do a very audacious thing & ask you if when Billy grows up some day I may tell him that he had you & M^r Tennyson for Godparents. I should like to think my little son had some link with you and I think & believe as he is his mothers son he will – if you say yes – love & be proud of it: & of all your long goodness to her. He has a godfathers gift to come to him already, so that all that will have to be done will be for dear King Alfred someday to write little Billys name under ours in the beautiful golden books....

He is such a beloved little man, quite grey eyed & he laughs into my face & right thro' ones old heart.⁵¹

She cannot have been expecting the Tennysons to turn up at the church at such short notice, but sought to commemorate her own affectionate link with the poet's family by adding the talisman of their names to her son's list of supporters. The ceremony itself was thoroughly down to earth, and Billy had an early introduction to the mix of informality and confusion which was typical of the Ritchies' way of doing things, for during the service Hester decided to run off, pursued by Annie up the altar steps to the far end of the church. The service continued in their absence, 'and when at last we came back the Christening was over!'⁵²

Later in the year, after Tennyson had sent her his new collection of poems which included a dedication to his grandson, Lionel's two-year-old boy, she thanked him and asked for one more privilege. 'I dont exactly read but I seem to live into these noble poems & to read them all with my old selves as well as my new self, & nothing else that I know of could bring my Fathers & my sisters dear faces before me so vividly as the sound of your voice does speaking here & stirring my

old heart & everyone elses. The dedication is so dear and, please my dearest M^r Tennyson will you write my little W^m Thackeray Denis's name on the book for him for he too is a little poet – Will you write it on a bit of paper for me to paste it in & for him to know what a Godfather & Mother are his.⁷⁵³

During this summer of 1880, Richmond thought hard about his career. He was willing to contemplate exchanging the India Office for more creative challenges, for something which felt more like 'real work', but if he was to make it through his writing he knew that he needed to devote himself in a more committed way than hitherto. He had undertaken reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, including a rather cool assessment of James's *The Europeans* in 1878, but he was pulled up short when an article was turned down. He wrote to Annie from Paris.

Of subjects which are really within my reach I suppose I can manage as well as the ordinary penny-a-liner. But I haven't got the facility of expression or the inventiveness of a real writer; and when those gifts are not present by nature, their place can only be supplied by tough work, & the substitution of knowledge for inventiveness. My own private belief is that nobody who has not written bad poetry in his youth is worth a damn. But I think I've enough talent to get on in a respectable way, if I work sufficiently hard, which hitherto I've never done. I don't know why I write you this rigmarole, but I've been devoting a good deal of serious thought to the charming subject of myself & my prospects in life. You see my fault has been to let things slide & to take it easy. For years when my character was forming, I was in love with an old pong of my acquaintance & thought of nothing but how I could make her & myself happy. Circumstances were at first so unfavourable that it was only in daydreams that our happiness was possible; and then they became so difficult that they absorbed me entirely; and when I got what I wanted, I was content to remain quiet & enjoy what I had got. In most cases, I suppose, when things go easy, a man has time & liberty to get a second object in life; so that even when happiest, he has a profession or occupation before him. But I've not got that & my nominal profession is not a real one. So the time has come, I see, when I must take a definite path for myself – dont think it unkind of me to say this. If it were not that I was so completely happy with you, I would not be

in danger of letting my life slide away in the happiness of each succeeding moment. I would be perfectly happy going to the office & coming back to you. But then there's a beastly little grain of energy or ambition or something which does not let me be content with that only – & that's the real rub of a profession like a Public Office which occupies your time & tires you without satisfying the desire of doing something real, which everybody has who is worth a straw. I do hope & trust that the Coak & Billyboy may find real work to do.⁵⁴

He took the family to Coniston in mid-June, staying with his friends the Spring Rices at Patterdale and the Deverells at Bossington, 'a lovely summer baked place with garden & trout streams & animals for Hester to play with'.⁵⁵ They saw something of Ruskin, though his first meeting with Richmond misfired. 'I had not the least idea who it was, – but thought it was some one probably staying with M^r Marshall – and I think you ought to scold him a little for going away in his lovely boat like the captain of the Phantom ship, in that solemn manner!'⁵⁶ Richmond returned to London before the rest of the family, and at the end of July told Annie of one article in progress and of plans for others. It was frustrating that Lionel Tennyson, his charmingly dilettantish India Office colleague, was reviewing books for the *Nineteenth Century*, work which was not arduous but moderately lucrative, and it raised Richmond's hopes for something similar. 'I am writing a rather good article, with translations from Saint Simon about an idiotic story in one of those many 3 volumes – and have got my ideas about 3 more articles into very good working order. The 19th Century has given Lionel £15 for his choice of reviews in this month's number. It seems to me very easily earned for 7½ pages, and the reviews very stupid.'⁵⁷ In wanting to develop in the direction of literary journalism, his model was likely to have been Leslie rather than Annie.

His hopes for a different future survived at least until 1881, when Pinkie praised his 'admirable review of Washington Square' in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.⁵⁸ And then the reviews seem to have faded away. Mentions of his writing disappear both from his own and from Annie's correspondence, and as the India Office began to turn into a real challenge and promotions followed, his true career became fixed. When in January 1883 Richmond was appointed Private Secretary to Kynaston Cross, MP and Under-Secretary of State for India, he put aside any ambition of achieving anything through writing. His energies became completely absorbed by the demands of his salaried position. Annie was in Worthing when Richmond telegraphed confirming his

promotion, and she went ‘& walked along by the sea with an overflowing heart’.⁵⁹ She took an almost motherly pride in a success achieved entirely on his own merits. ‘O my dear dearest. It is nice to think of you getting your steps & grades & I never leave off thinking of it all day long.... I’ve been drinking Hesters Port wine to pick myself up these last few days & I drink M^r Private Secretarys health and am his loving M^{rs} P S.’⁶⁰

The Thackerays and Ritchies had long become reconciled to the idea of their male relatives departing for extended periods of service in India, continuing an almost unbroken link since the time of the first William Makepeace Thackeray, the grandfather of the novelist, but there was a special pang for Annie when Pinkie, her dearest Ritchie sister-in-law, left to support her brother Gerald who was in low spirits at Gopalgunge in Bengal. She sailed in November 1880 and would not return until the spring of 1882, but she corresponded regularly with Annie and also with Hallam Tennyson. Knowing that she would miss her terribly, Annie wrote a last letter before Pinkie’s departure, but delayed its sending in order that it might reach India once the spirits of the traveller were reviving after the long journey out. ‘I think it will be less horrid for you when you get this than these days before and now only the joy of living joy is before you.’⁶¹ Two months later she would be telling Pinkie of George Eliot’s death, so soon after the marriage that had turned heads. But first there was her note of sympathy to John Cross to write, so encouraging and honest, in which she urged him to embrace the transforming power of love which drew its strength from sadness. ‘May I say it to you that death seems to lose its terrors when one has love to give hope. Before Richmond & I were married everything seemed hopeless & utterly miserable & now I seem to owe him something more even than the happiness he has given me.’⁶² George Eliot’s funeral was on 29 December, and although she had not been an intimate Annie was quite affected by her reflections on the occasion. She thought of attending, but the weather made it impossible for her. ‘It is absurd, but I do feel George Eliots death very much. There is nothing to be sorry for – all is at peace for her poor Soul but it haunts one somehow. She was buried in a great storm of wind & rain or I think I sh^d. have gone to the funeral.’⁶³ Some years later she discovered that her doctor and his wife had attended the funeral, and in the driving rain had seen another mourner nearly slide into the grave. ‘He was quite quite tipsy & so slippery from rain that he could hardly be raised up. I dont know why I tell you this dreary story but there is something friendly about it too.’⁶⁴

Scarcely a month after George Eliot, Thomas Carlyle too was dead, two mighty voices silenced. Asked to rank them, Annie saw that her regard for Carlyle set her a little in the past. 'Of course to my generation Carlyle is a far more powerful influence. George Eliot seems more to me like an expression & interpretation than an actual influence, but Richmond & Blanchie feel differently. Scribner sent to ask me to write about George Eliot but I didnt feel up to it & Fred Myers is to do it.'⁶⁵ Annie was brought up short when, on a visit with Billy to see Carlyle's great-nephew and namesake, she was suddenly struck by her own son's fleeting resemblance to her father, convincing her that the loved ones who have gone never quite leave us. She scribbled off a postcard to India. 'The little Carlyle baby is very like his g^d. Uncle. He gave a grunt exactly like him & Billy opened his eyes & laughed & looked like his grandfather for a moment. It was the oddest most affecting moment to me. There were the two babies in the dear old room & old me looking on & the new like a shadow of the past.' Pinkie appreciated the anecdote, but was perhaps more down-to-earth in her sympathy for the Carlyle child's inheritance – 'what a heavy mantle of a name for that little baby to bear!'⁶⁶

For a few years virtually nothing is heard of Laura Stephen, who of course was now living with Leslie and her stepmother, Julia. Just as Isabella Thackeray had slipped from the scene once she had been placed in safe care, so Laura's voice is silenced for a time. It was only after Minny's death that Leslie began to realise that things were not quite right, claiming that before then none of them had feared problems, 'though she was obviously a backward child'. In fact, Minny's frequent anxiety about Laura's slow physical growth and increasingly wilful behaviour may have given her a deep-seated concern about her 'normality'. Perhaps she never shared these fears with Leslie, nor ever quite understood them herself. It certainly comforted him to believe that Minny had never thought anything amiss. 'I can remember, though they are too sacred to repeat, little words of Laura's mother which prove to me conclusively that no suspicion of any worse incapacity had entered her mind. I am happy to remember them, for the maternal blindness saved her from a cruel pang.'⁶⁷ Even now, it took time for Leslie to accept that his vague concerns were beginning to be more serious than his usual tendency towards 'morbid anxiety'. A single telling reference in Annie's journal – 'Beginning to be very anxious about Laura'⁶⁸ – indicates that she, at least, accepted that something needed to be done, but for some time neither she nor Leslie could decide what this should be. He had many family responsibilities to preoccupy him. There were



Page from Annie's journal with sketch and some of Hester's hair, 1881

Julia's three young children to incorporate, Gerald, George and Stella Duckworth, and before long the children of their own marriage began to arrive. Annie feared that in time it would be difficult for Laura's special needs to be met, and that within the competing demands and complex dynamics of the Stephens' growing household it would become unclear how she would cope.

By contrast, the Ritchies' family life was remarkably ordinary, or at least it was in its early years. Hester was physically sturdy, resisting most childhood illnesses, though Billy was less fortunate. He had a ringworm infection as a baby, resulting in an elaborate Browning joke about 'the ring and the bookworm' which, seeing its funny side, Annie repeated to several people. He also contracted mumps – this time in company with Hester – and also the highly infectious scarlet fever, or 'scarlatina' as Annie always called it, remembering her own childhood attack in Naples. These diseases were always treated seriously by the Victorian middle-classes, usually leading to voluntary quarantine followed by house fumigation. When the children had mumps in May 1882, Annie stayed with them upstairs in Young Street, and Richmond – who presumably had managed to avoid the disease as a child – took temporary lodgings elsewhere; then Annie took Hester and Billy to convalesce in the country environment of Hampstead. Remembering the way in which her father used to divert Minny and herself as children, Annie conjured origami fishes and horses and carts from her morning paper and, in good weather, took them out for walks and encouraged their imaginations to range freely. 'I kept them in till lunch then after the storm & East wind suddenly came a lovely burst of sunshine & softness & we went to Italy & Switzerland & fed a goat & a donkey.'⁶⁹

Billy's scarlet fever was potentially more serious. Richmond took Hester to the safety of lodgings on Campden Hill, whilst Annie spent the Christmas of 1882 alone with Billy in Young Street, which at least allowed her to tidy up her biographical article about Tennyson. 'Billy was beginning to recover & we had a turkey & he had a little plum pudding all to himself... Later Richmond & Hester came & stood in the Street outside & we waved to them from the nursery windows. In the afternoon I sent off my proofs of the Tennyson article to Aldworth how well I remember the proofs all steeped in Carbolic.'⁷⁰ Before he was four, Billy had minor surgery, which she remembered later as being 'less severe than the Jewish ceremony but of the same nature',⁷¹ and shortly before his fifth birthday both he and Hester caught whooping cough, a common and not an especially dangerous childhood illness. Annie regarded him as a frail child, so that when the time came to send him away to school it caused her significant distress. In fact, he would prove to be remarkably resilient.

Madame de Sévigné was completed at last in February 1881. When she was told of Mrs Oliphant's delight at receiving the final manuscript, Pinkie said just the right thing, knowing what a struggle it had been for Annie. 'I think that is a triumph for the mother of

Hester & Billy to have accomplished.⁷² Pinkie had helped with some translations, though Annie had done most of her own from the popular Didot edition of Sévigné, getting Richmond to scrutinise her versions. The book is modest in size and ambition, but Annie was proud of this new venture, and must have felt vindicated after Leslie's discouraging words of some years before. 'It is a very small mouse out of a mountain but even small as it is there will be a thousand inaccuracies I fear, but it runs all the same that I do lay to my flattering unction.'⁷³ The dedication to Hester and Billy is dated 18 March, Billy's first birthday. Mrs Oliphant was generous in praising the manuscript to William Blackwood, believing it would sell well, and that it had found its ideal author. 'It is not only Madame de Sévigné, but it is thoroughly Sévigné-ish.'⁷⁴

This year saw something of a revival in Annie's published output, for *Miss Williamson's Divagations*, a collection of previous *Cornhill* pieces going back to 1876, appeared on 28 March. With the single exception of *Mrs Dymond*, published in 1885 but with origins going back ten years, there would be no further serious flirtations with fiction, virtually all future writings being memoirs or biographical studies of one kind or another. There is even something of the fictionalised memoir about the title piece. 'Miss Williamson's Divagations' is told in the first person, Young Street has become Old Street (where she lives), and the choice of the name 'Williamson' by the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray lends a kind of gender ambiguity to the narrative voice. But Annie cannot have been encouraged by the opinions of the *Times* reviewer, who though identifying many 'pretty little incidental touches' noted that the pieces 'have all the delicacy of gossamer as well as its flimsiness'. Credit is given for the subtle evocations of place, but as fiction the individual items lacked substance, scarcely sufficient to command the reader's attention, 'and the difficulty we found in following the author through the "Divagations" was to get up even a languid interest in them'.⁷⁵ Annie was never so confident about her talents that she could easily shrug off even relatively mild criticism like this. It would have rather dampened her pleasure in the praises of her friends, which, usually for one so modest about her successes, she trumpeted to Pinkie in India. 'Everybody is asking me to dinner & begging for copies. They didnt think there was so much life left in me.'⁷⁶ As for *Madame de Sévigné*, it took about a year for the *Times* to notice it, but it was pleasingly favourable. 'Darling did you see todays Times with a good column to Sevigné. I wonder if that will help the sale – It might have done so if it had come before.'⁷⁷

A change in Gerald Ritchie's fortunes brought great happiness. As Pinkie's Indian trip drew to its close, she became anxious about leaving her brother alone again, believing that a tendency towards depression would only be defeated once he was married. She was therefore overjoyed when he became engaged to the eighteen-year-old Margie Thackeray, who had travelled out to India in October 1881 with her father Edward Thackeray and his second wife, and by mid-December Pinkie was telling Hallam Tennyson about the match. It was an outcome that she had longed for – 'in a way wonderfully unlike most visions the vision has come true and as delightful, simple & straightforward a romance as could be imagined has come to pass'.⁷⁸ Understandably, Annie's reactions were almost those of a mother giving up a daughter, but she was deeply happy at the thought of the ties drawing the Thackerays and Ritchies ever closer. 'I thank God my darling Migsie is so blessed & Gerald indeed is fortunate & he will have a sweet young wife & Pinkies dear heart will be at ease for him. Richmond says he quite expected it – I had – I suppose – thought of it often but so vaguely that it never occurred to me as a thing to be thought about.'⁷⁹ Annie felt a little anxious for Margie's sister, 'little Anny', in the same way that she always had hopes for Pinkie herself, who had so faithfully watched as one after another her brothers and sisters married and left.

There was a strange episode when Pinkie did eventually get back to England, for she appeared almost by accident to have drifted into an engagement of her own, one from which she was too polite to detach herself. Charles Lutyens was the older brother of Edwin Lutyens, with whom Richmond later had many dealings relating to the architectural works in New Delhi. It is difficult to see how an attachment ever came about, as there was a marked lack of enthusiasm from all quarters. We only have Annie's later journal account to go on, but there seems every reason to suppose that Pinkie had had a fortunate escape.

After some weeks Pinkie arrived from India engaged to Charles Lutyens & we went to stay in the von Hügels house at Hampstead.... Charles Lutyens came to see us.

The wedding was fixed, but nobody was very happy about it. He was in financial difficulties, he did not like our family, he considered that most of us w^d. be damned among other classes. Also we were not sufficiently well dressed.

Within a week of the wedding Captain Lutyens came to Gussie & said, if it wont break her heart break it off break it off – He is not good enough for her tho' he is my son.

Poor R^d. had to take this message to Brock Hill. Pinkie who was reading started up not heart broken but more relieved than words can say.

On the evening of what sh^d. have been her wedding day R & I were sitting by the fire after dinner when we heard the cab drive to the door. It was Willy who was bringing Pinkie to stay with us, & she remained for some days quietly getting used to the new state of things & resuming her old life once more.