

# **Only a Child.**

Edith Wharton



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"The Press of May 27 publishes an account of the suicide in the House of Refuge at Philadelphia of a boy who was only twelve years old. He was locked up in solitary confinement. They found him hanging by the neck dead and cold. Tired of wait-ing for the release that never came, he had at last escaped — from that House of Refuge!" — THE WORLD.

They found him hanging dead, you know,  
In the cell where he had lain  
Through many a day of restless woe  
And night of sleepless pain.  
The heart had ceased its beating,  
The little hands were numb,  
And the piteous voice entreating  
In death at last was dumb.

No doubt it was a painful fact  
For them to contemplate;  
They felt the horror of the act,  
But felt it rather late.  
There was none to lay the blame to —  
That, each one understands;  
And the jury found — he came to  
His death by his own hands!

Poor little hands! that should have known  
No subtler arts than these —  
To seek for violets newly blown  
Beneath the April breeze,  
Or gaily bind unchidden  
The daisies into sheaves,  
Or reach the bird's nest hidden  
Among the budding leaves.

Poor little hands! And little heart  
That ached so long alone,  
With none to ease its secret smart  
And none to hear its moan;  
As he lay where they had cast him

Only a Child.

In the dark upon the floor,  
And heard the feet go past him  
Outside his prison door.

Think of him, you whose children lie  
Soft sleeping overhead;  
All day he could not see the sky,  
All night he had no bed.  
Your walls of brick and mortar  
To shut the child's soul in,  
And starving on bread and water  
For — some little childish sin!

So in the darkness there he lay  
While the hours crawled along,  
And thought of the woodlands far away  
Awake with the robin's song;  
And thought of the green grass growing  
And the boys at play outside,  
And the breath of heaven blowing  
O'er the country far and wide.

Perhaps he saw his mother's face  
Bend o'er him in the gloom;  
But when he leaned to catch her dress  
She vanished from the room;  
And though he tried to remember  
The prayer he used to say,  
In a pitiful, broken stammer  
On his lips it died away.

His little hands had nought to do  
But beat against the wall,  
Until at last too tired they grew —  
Poor little hands — so small!  
And so he lay there voiceless,  
Alone upon the ground;  
If he wept, his tears were noiseless,  
For he feared to hear their sound.

At last perhaps the silence grew  
Too deep — it dazed his head —  
And his little hands had naught to do;  
And so — they found him dead!  
In a Christian town it happened,  
In a home for children built,

Only a Child.

And God knows whose soul shall answer  
For the burden of this guilt!

But He who bade the children come  
And not be turned away,  
Has surely taken the homeless home,  
And we need not mourn to-day;  
For our lives are all God-given,  
The poorest to him is dear,  
And the Father has room in heaven  
For the children we don't want here!

New York, May 29 EADGYTH.