



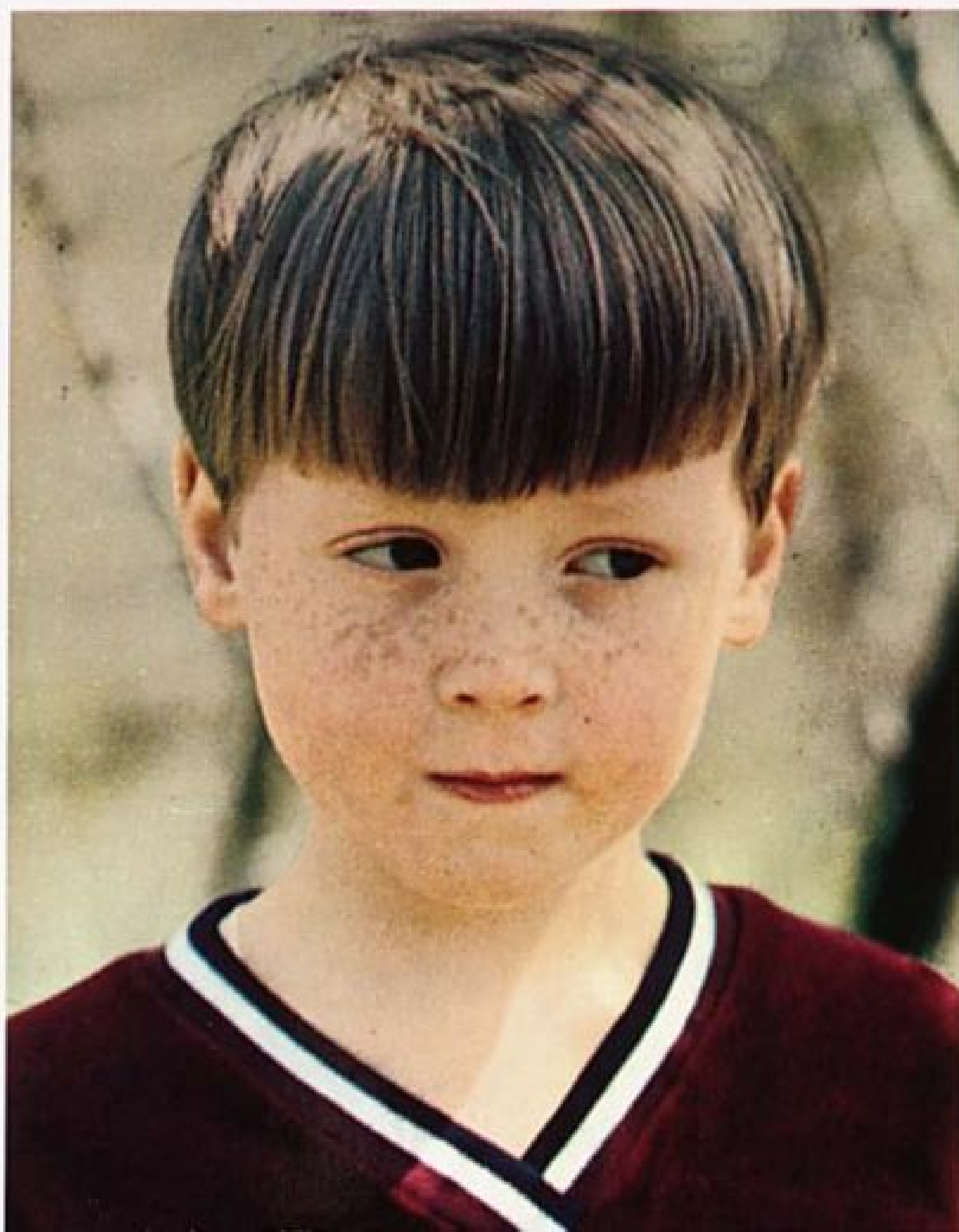
Ballantine Books 0-345-33925-8

The renowned, deeply moving
story of an emotionally lost child
who found his way back.

THE
CHILD
THERAPY
CLASSIC

DIBS IN SEARCH OF SELF

VIRGINIA M. AXLINE



Sometimes he sat mute and unmoving all morning or crawled about the schoolroom floor oblivious to the other children or to his teacher. At times he had violent temper tantrums. No one knew whether he was retarded or had suffered brain damage at birth. His own parents had judged him mentally defective.

But Dibs was none of these. He was a brilliant, lonely child trapped in a prison of fear and rage, a prison from which only he could release himself. And through psychotherapy and love, he did.

His courageous emergence into reality is a celebration of the true miracle of birth. Written from life, from the deepest human longings and loftiest human dreams, his story is for us all. . . .

Also by Virginia M. Axline
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

PLAY THERAPY

DIBS
IN SEARCH OF SELF

Virginia M. Axline

with an introduction by
Leonard Carmichael

THE RANDOM HOUSE PUBLISHING GROUP • NEW YORK

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized.
If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the
publisher as “unsold or destroyed” and neither the author
nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1964 by Virginia M. Axline

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an
imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division
of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in
Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of
Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

ISBN 0-345-33925-8

This edition published by arrangement with
Houghton Mifflin Company

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: December 1967

OPM 84 83 82 81

To the memory of my mother

HELEN GRACE AXLINE

Introduction

THIS IS THE STORY of the emergence of a strong, healthy personality in a previously deeply disturbed child.

When the story starts, Dibs had been in school for almost two years. At first, he would not talk at all. Sometimes he sat mute and unmoving all morning or crawled about the schoolroom floor oblivious to the other children or to his teacher. At times he had violent temper tantrums. Teachers, the school psychologist and the school pediatrician were painfully puzzled by him. Was he mentally retarded? Did he suffer from a deep-seated mental illness? Had his brain been damaged at birth? No one knew.

The book gives an account of what the author well calls "the search for self" on the part of this, at first, pathetically ill little human being. In the end he emerges, as a result of Dr. Axline's subtle and superlatively skillful clinical help, as a brilliant and able person—a true leader.

The author is already famous throughout the psychological world for her contributions to the theory and practice of play therapy with children. Her book, *Play Therapy: The Inner Dynamics of Childhood*, has deservedly won wide acclaim and acceptance.

Dibs is an interesting and exciting book for the general reader. It can be read with pleasure and especial profit by all parents who are interested in the marvels of the mental development of their children. It can also be read advantageously by professional students of childhood and of the nature of normal and abnormal mental life.

The child described in this book is indeed at first most unusual, but students of psychology and psychiatry have long recognized that many new insights into normal and typical mental processes and into healthy mental development can be gained from the study of the different and

exaggerated forms of behavior that appear in atypical individuals. It may also be noted that historically modern psychology owes much to the detailed analysis of single cases. In this connection the early work of Freud and of Morton Prince may be mentioned.

There can be no doubt that one of the great problems of our crowded and technological age is the proper understanding of techniques by means of which lasting changes in personality and behavior can be brought about. *Dibs*, as a study in mental organization and behavior change, is important in this context. No one who reads this book with understanding can ever again think that human psychological growth, success in a schoolroom, or the acquisition of a complex skill can be achieved merely by overt repetition or by the reinforcement of simple patterns of response.

Another new idea emphasized in this book is that the truly deep and effective healing of a disturbed child may help in a very real way the mental hygiene of the child's parents. This is a novel reversal of the old truism that the successful clinical treatment of a child's parents is often the best form of therapy for a disturbed child.

But above all, *Dibs* is good reading! For me it is as exciting as a first-class detective story!

LEONARD CARMICHAEL
Washington, D.C.

Prologue

This is the story of a child in search of self through the process of psychotherapy. It was created out of the experience of a living person—a little boy named Dibs. As this child came forth to meet the abrupt forces of life, there grew within him a new awareness of a selfhood, and a breathless discovery that he had within himself a stature and wisdom that expanded and contracted even as do the shadows that are influenced by the sun and clouds.

Dibs experienced profoundly the complex process of growing up, of reaching out for the precious gifts of life, of drenching himself in the sunshine of his hopes and in the rain of his sorrows. Slowly, tentatively, he discovered that the security of his world was not wholly outside himself, but that the stabilizing center he searched for with such intensity was deep down inside that self.

Because Dibs speaks in a language that challenges the complacency of so many of us, and because he yearns to achieve a selfhood that can proudly acknowledge his name and place in the world, his story becomes everybody's story. Through his experiences in the playroom, at home, and at school, his personality gradually unfolds and enhances, in some gentle way, the lives of others who were privileged to know him.

DIBS IN SEARCH OF SELF

Chapter One

IT WAS LUNCH TIME, going-home time, and the children were milling around in their usual noisy, dawdling way getting into their coats and hats. But not Dibs. He had backed into a corner of the room and crouched there, head down, arms folded tightly across his chest, ignoring the fact that it was time to go home. The teachers waited. He always behaved this way when it was time to go home. Miss Jane and Hedda gave a helping hand to the other children when it was needed. They watched Dibs surreptitiously.

The other children left the school when their mothers called for them. When the teachers were alone with Dibs they exchanged glances and looked at Dibs huddled against the wall. "Your turn," Miss Jane said and walked quietly out of the room.

"Come on, Dibs. It's time to go home now. It's time for lunch." Hedda spoke patiently. Dibs did not move. His resistance was tense and unwavering. "I'll help you with your coat," Hedda said, approaching him slowly, taking his coat to him. He did not look up. He pressed back against the wall, his head buried in his arms.

"Please, Dibs. Your mother will be here soon." She always came late, probably hoping the battle of hat and coat would be over by the time she arrived and that Dibs would go with her quietly.

Hedda was close to Dibs now. She reached down and patted his shoulder. "Come, Dibs," she said, gently. "You know it's time to go."

Like a small fury Dibs was at her, his small fists

striking out at her, scratching, trying to bite, screaming. "No go home! No go home! No go home!" It was the same cry every day.

"I know," Hedda said. "But you have to go home for lunch. You want to be big and strong, don't you?"

Suddenly Dibs went limp. He stopped fighting Hedda. He let her push his arms into his coat sleeves and button his coat.

"You'll come back tomorrow," Hedda said.

When his mother called for him, Dibs went with her, his expression blank, his face tear-stained.

Sometimes the battle lasted longer and was not over when his mother arrived. When that happened, his mother would send the chauffeur in to get Dibs. The man was very tall and strong. He would walk in, scoop Dibs up in his arms, and carry him out to the car without a word to anyone. Sometimes Dibs screamed all the way out to the car and beat his fists against the driver. Other times, he would suddenly become silent—limp and defeated. The man never spoke to Dibs. It seemed not to matter to him whether Dibs fought and screamed or was suddenly passive and quiet.

Dibs had been in this private school for almost two years. The teachers had tried their best to establish a relationship with him, to get a response from him. But it had been touch and go. Dibs seemed determined to keep all people at bay. At least, that's what Hedda thought. He had made some progress in the school. When he started school, he did not talk and he never ventured off his chair. He sat there mute and unmoving all morning. After many weeks he began to leave his chair and to crawl around the room, seeming to look at some of the things about him. When anyone approached him, he would huddle up in a ball on the floor and not move. He never looked directly into anyone's eyes. He never answered when anyone spoke to him.

Dibs' attendance record was perfect. Every day his mother brought him to school in the car. Either she led him in, grim and silent, or the chauffeur carried him in

and put him down just inside the door. He never screamed or cried on his way into the school. Left just inside the door, Dibs would stand there, whimpering, waiting until someone came to him and led him into his classroom. When he wore a coat he made no move to take it off. One of the teachers would greet him, take off his coat, and then he was on his own. The other children would soon be busily occupied with some group activity or an individual task. Dibs spent his time crawling around the edge of the room, hiding under tables, or in back of the piano, looking at books by the hour.

There was something about Dibs' behavior that defied the teachers to categorize him, glibly and routinely, and send him on his way. His behavior was so uneven. At one time, he seemed to be extremely retarded mentally. Another time he would quickly and quietly do something that indicated he might even have superior intelligence. If he thought anyone was watching him, he quickly withdrew into his shell. Most of the time he crawled around the edge of the room, lurking under tables, rocking back and forth, chewing on the side of his hand, sucking his thumb, lying prone and rigid on the floor when any of the teachers or children tried to involve him in some activity. He was a lone child in what must have seemed to him to be a cold, unfriendly world.

He had temper tantrums sometimes when it was time to go home, or when someone tried to force him to do something he did not want to do. The teachers had long ago decided that they would always invite him to join the group, but never try to force him to do anything unless it was absolutely necessary. They offered him books, toys, puzzles, all kinds of materials that might interest him. He would never take anything directly from anyone. If the object was placed on a table or on the floor near him, later he would pick it up and examine it carefully. He never failed to accept a book. He pored over the printed pages "as though he could read," as Hedda so often said.

Sometimes a teacher would sit near him and read a story or talk about something while Dibs lay face down on

the floor, never moving away—but never looking up or showing any overt interest. Miss Jane had often spent time with Dibs in this way. She talked about many things as she held the materials in her hand, demonstrating what she was explaining. Once her subject was magnets and the principles of magnetic attraction. Another time it was an interesting rock she held. She talked about anything she hoped might spark an interest. She said she often felt like a fool—as though she were sitting there talking to herself, but something about his prone position gave her the impression that he was listening. Besides, she often asked, what did she have to lose?

The teachers were completely baffled by Dibs. The school psychologist had observed him and tried several times to test him, but Dibs was not ready to be tested. The school pediatrician had looked in on him several times and later threw up his hands in despair. Dibs was wary of the white-coated physician and would not let him come near. He would back up against the wall and put his hands up “ready to scratch,” ready to fight if anyone came too close.

“He’s a strange one,” the pediatrician had said. “Who knows? Mentally retarded? Psychotic? Brain-damaged? Who can get close enough to find out what makes him tick?”

This was not a school for mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed children. It was a very exclusive private school for children aged three to seven, in a beautiful old mansion on the upper East Side. It had a tradition that appealed to parents of very bright, sociable children.

Dibs’ mother had prevailed upon the headmistress to accept him. She had used influence through the board of trustees to have him admitted. Dibs’ great-aunt contributed generously to the support of the school. Because of these pressures he had been admitted to the nursery school group.

The teachers had suggested several times that Dibs needed professional help. His mother’s response had been repetitive: “Give him more time!”

Almost two years had gone by and even though he had made some progress, the teachers felt that it was not enough. They thought it was unfair to Dibs to let the situation drag on and on. They could only hope that he might come out of his shell. When they discussed Dibs—and not a day went by that they did not—they always ended up just as baffled and challenged by the child. After all, he was only five years old. Could he really be aware of everything around him and keep everything locked inside? He seemed to read the books he pored over. This, they told themselves, was ridiculous. How could a child read if he could not express himself verbally? Could such a complex child be mentally retarded? His behavior did not seem to be that of a mentally retarded child. Was he living in a world of his own creation? Was he autistic? Was he out of contact with reality? More often it seemed that his world was a bruising reality—a torment of unhappiness.

Dibs' father was a well-known scientist—brilliant, everyone said, but no one at the school had ever met him. Dibs had a younger sister. Her mother claimed that Dorothy was "very bright" and a "perfect child." She did not attend this school. Hedda had met Dorothy once with her mother in Central Park. Dibs was not with them. Hedda told the other teachers that she thought "perfect Dorothy" was "a spoiled brat." Hedda was sympathetically interested in Dibs and admitted she was prejudiced in her evaluation of Dorothy. She had faith in Dibs and believed that someday, somehow, Dibs would come out of his prison of fear and anger.

The staff had finally decided that something must be done about Dibs. Some of the other parents were complaining about his presence in the school—especially after he had scratched or bitten some other child.

It was at this point that I was invited to attend a case conference devoted to Dibs' problems. I am a clinical psychologist, and I have specialized in working with children and parents. I first heard about Dibs at this conference, and what I have written here was related by the

teachers, the school psychologist, and the pediatrician. They asked me if I would see Dibs and his mother and then give the staff my opinion before they decided to dismiss him from school and write him off as one of their failures.

The meeting was held in the school. I listened with interest to all the remarks. I was impressed by the impact of Dibs' personality on these people. They felt frustrated and continually challenged by his uneven behavior. He was consistent only in his antagonistic, hostile rejection of all who would come too close to him. His obvious unhappiness troubled these sensitive people who felt its desolate chill.

"I had a conference with his mother last week," Miss Jane said to me. "I told her that in all probability we might have to drop him from school because we feel we have done all we can to help him and our best is not enough. She was very upset. But she is such a difficult person to figure out. She agreed to let us call in a consultant and try one more time to evaluate him. I told her about you. She agreed to have a talk with you about Dibs, and to let you observe him here. Then she said if we couldn't keep him here she would like us to give her the name of a private boarding school for mentally retarded children. She said that she and her husband have accepted the fact that he is probably mentally retarded or brain-damaged."

This remark brought forth an explosion from Hedda. "She'd rather believe he is mentally retarded than admit that maybe he is emotionally disturbed and maybe she is responsible for it!" she exclaimed.

"We don't seem to be able to be very objective about him," Miss Jane said. "I think that's why we have kept him as long as we have and made so much of the little progress he *has* made. We couldn't bear to turn him away and not have some hand in defending him. We've never been able to discuss Dibs without getting involved in emotional reactions of our own about him and the atti-