

RICHARD FARQUHARSON:

A Chapter of Childhood.

Human life is a fragment, at best. . . . And that moment of childhood when, in one signal flash like the uncapping of the camera, character is fixed, is surely rather the record than the prophecy of a life afterwards lived?

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Thrown upon his own resources, practically, at four years old, Richard Farquharson, at ten, was older in many ways than other boys of his age.

His memories grouped themselves into scenes; one was his nightmare.

That dreadful day! Did he really remember it, I wonder, or was it merely an imaginary landmark in that valley of vision which kept alive in him a spark of tenderness amidst the universal harshness and austerity of his life at Glune? He thought of it sometimes with that strange sort of pride which naturally brave children feel in recalling from a safe distance something which at the time was infinitely terrifying.

A cold bleak day, the first of days which were all bleak and cold: a line of dark shapes clustering close in the gloomy hall, grouped, circle-wise, about one central shadow deeper than the rest, over which heavy drapery was thrown. Upon this unknown object, the eyes of all were fixed; child as he was, Richard shrank back from it instinctively. And presently strange men appeared, a long line of figures formed up, led by one which for the first time struck utter terror into his soul—his mother's. And then they were no more, and Richard was left alone, forgotten, in a silence that frightened him so greatly that he could neither cry out nor move—a silence that seemed to catch hold of him with invisible fingers and tighten its grip upon his throat, as the outer door clanged upon him and left the four year old child in the room where a dishonoured death had lately held grim revel.

His nurse remembered him and ran back, perhaps five minutes later. But that five minutes of solitary anguish had done its work, spelling eternity to Richard, an eternity which the weekly sermons of the Forbeggie minister, dilating under fifteen or sixteen headings, on "The God of Wrath," and the torments of sinners, such as "The worm of the damned that dieth not," and "The fire that shall never be quenched," continually kept alive in him, but scarcely made more palatable.

But the years that followed brought Richard his compensations. "Fide et Fortitudine" was the motto of his race; he had learned its lessons early. He loved the lash of his inheritance, nor grudged one of the supperless occasions which

helped to retain the few splendours of a clan which derived from Macduff's-Thane of Fife. Indeed, he positively thrived on austerities that would have broken the spirit of a less hardy lad.

His taste for solitude was fostered by his enforced loneliness. The days went swiftly. To be more or less alone in the world, except for a collie dog, is not necessarily to be self-centred when every bird knows your call, when stoats and ferrets, even, are your familiar friends. Richard's mind—dependent upon nature for its amusements—was seldom called upon to translate the word "disappointment." The loneliness which wrapped him round became his dear possession, and was peopled with invisible companions. There was a hut in the park near the river, about three miles from the house, where Dan, the collie, and he played the part of settlers in a land full of enemies. He knew the range of every object within view; he altered its defences day after day, laying down wire entanglements, building rough stockades, or elementary trenches with look-holes and head-cover, in all of which Dan took deep interest. He was his own stern critic and yesterday's work was pulled down on the morrow, until the day came when he found it good. Covered with dirt, growing in experience, could the heart of boy ask more?

Nature is a jealous mistress, but she gives openly of her best to the lover who lives with her whole-heartedly as did Richard. His eye and ear became presently so well-trained, that from quite far he could detect a moving object, and, with

the wind blowing gently towards him and his ear to the ground, could distinguish a single footfall on a path nearly a mile away. Blindfold, or in the dark, he could make his way across his beloved land without a slip. Books of travels in far countries had taught him to destroy the tracks of his incoming and out-going, so every step of the way to this special place of concealment, had in it the thrill, the enchantment of an adventure. To him who has never been to a theatre, a country life becomes a beautiful play of birth and death; things move and have their being, that he may see them pass to their appointed end. The green earth is the stage, Nature the playwright, and God Himself the Great Scene-painter.

Richard's tutor, a half-blind village schoolmaster who came for three hours daily when Mrs. Farquharson could afford to pay his meagre fees, was the only "outside" person whom he ever saw. Between the boy and his mother there was neither communion nor confidence. Morning and evening he went to her dutifully, obeying the custom of his childhood, to find her sitting in her accustomed place, a high-backed chair in the library where his father's papers and diaries were collected. Her frozen lips—lips tightened into a line so hard that he always thought it must hurt her to move them—would meet his stiffly, with neither pressure nor lingering, and he would go from her presence with a sense of relief at a hard task fulfilled. That her eyes watched for him hungrily all day when he was least aware, that the tense figure was inwardly shaken and stirred with all the mother's passionate longing to

bend to him, to hold close to her own the slender limbs that had once lain warm and quiet beneath her heart, he never knew.

Mary Farquharson's pride in her son went hand in hand with a doubt so ceaseless, so torturing, that now it threatened to become a mania. Not everyone is strong enough to endure the strain of a great shame and sorrow with no outside help.

Richard's fatal likeness to her dead first-born—dearer even than Richard because the child of her early wifehood—was an image which ever tore her heart and left it bleeding. Would history repeat itself? What if Richard, too, had been born only to add to his brother's legacy of dishonour? If so, how welcome were death did he but come while her boy's heart was unstained!

Eyes that had looked as pure as his had been the caskets of a living lie; lips curved like his had betrayed her in her day. She would not willingly look upon the one, nor suffer the others to caress her.

In Douglas Farquharson's case there had been that sudden lapse towards a former vicious type which sometimes happens in a family that as a whole has bred fine men and fair women. Douglas' career was infamous even at school. When, page by page, the records of his life were spelled out by his mother even she could urge no better plea for him than that the selfishness of her love—given to man rather than to God—had worked the evil, marring and mutilating by its very passion.

In his mother's heart, Douglas lived ever, an image burnt

upon her flesh, a constant retribution. She longed to pass her days in scourges, in penance, but her religion forbade her even to pray for her dead. In the blindness of her despair, she invented for herself a species of soul crucifixion, laying her sacrifices of love and pride in Richard upon God's altar, never seeing how, in punishing herself, she wrought infinite harm upon an innocent child.

One morning, drawn early to the cool solitude of the river after a sleepless night, she saw Richard bathing : a slim white figure without an ounce of superfluous flesh on its bones, but with every muscle developed, and skin like satin shining white against the deep banks of copper bracken and undergrowth ; a picture framed by pines, through which the light of an autumn dawn came slow and chill. Hidden from him, she watched, with look wide and tender, with eyes as moist as the limbs from which he shook the water of the pool, as he stood strong and upright, breathing quickly after his swim. Bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, she had given to the world a male being in which any human mother must take pride. . . His sudden gesture, the impatient pushing of his wet hair from his forehead, recalled her to herself with a sudden pang of bitter self-distrust, and she fled to the house as though the Spirit of Evil were pursuing her, trembling and ashamed.

It was after this that she instituted a new and more terrible rule of discipline, both for herself and for the boy. Richard came to her daily, as before, but now the conventional kiss was denied him, and a three hours study of the most

complicated points of Presbyterian doctrine took its place. The fate of sinners was the prevailing theme, the penalty of sins of whose very existence he was unaware. In the narrow hot room he stood rebellious, till sometimes his senses swayed. Outside the bees hummed and the birds sang, and the world he loved stretched in its infinite fairness—God's world that had hitherto raised his thoughts to its Maker. But now—this God of punishment, this God of the Old Law Who raised His Hand so often but to smite—he felt something almost approaching hatred of the Book from whose pages he was allowed to read nothing but words of denunciation and judgment.

Night after night, prone upon the bare floor of her bedroom, Mrs. Farquharson would kneel, praying with tears of abject contrition that her boy might be kept pure. And night after night, far away in his separate wing, Richard would await the stroke of midnight to run to a tryst which alone kept alive in him a germ of that natural feeling which his mother had crushed as utterly in him as she had sought to crush it in herself.

Eight—nine—ten—eleven—Midnight at last!

Richard, with a start, shook himself free from his dreams and woke to full and immediate consciousness of his surroundings. Much thinking, much loneliness, had made him older than his years. To-night, on the eve of his twelfth birthday, he felt that it was time to put away childish things. Amongst those childish things he numbered the habit of years—his nightly tryst with a portrait in the Picture Gallery which he had adopted as his “own” at six years old.

One has one’s favourites, even amongst ancestors. It was a certain Margaret Cunningham, daughter of that Earl of Glencairn who, being of the Privy Council of James V., was taken prisoner by the English in the year 1542 at the Battle of Solway, who had won Richard’s heart. Marrying a Farquharson, she died six months later, “whereat,” said tradition, “she waxed exceedingly joyful, since her love had been given since childhood to her cousin of Kilmaurs.”

True to his sex, Richard had been vanquished by the most tender, the most loveable little face in the whole gallery. It was to this portrait alone that he confided his dreams, his ambitions; and it was to this one of all others that he found it so infinitely hard to say farewell.

But say farewell he would, notwithstanding, for the hardening process had already begun in him. In the future he must allow nothing, certainly not things trivial as mere womens’ portraits, to influence him. He had learned the

secrets of this life's success. A poor man must fight alone. Unhampered by ties of affection, alone can we hope to win the key of that secret cupboard in which the world hides her few prizes.

Past the King's Chamber, down the long corridor, beyond a row of rigid figures in armour, Richard sped, and at his accustomed place at the turn of the gallery his collie met him. Sometimes the boy might break faith; the dog, never.

Richard pushed the door of the picture gallery wide, and stood on the threshold for a moment, a changed expression on his fresh sunny face. The older faces seemed to turn to him, expectant. Through the stained glass windows with their emblazoned coats of arms, a steady stream of moonlight flowed triumphantly, taking the colour of the glass it came through—now rose, and now a pallid green. Not less steadfast the light in the painted eyes of some of the men he looked upon; martyrs in their way—men who had fought and died for a Cause—whose purposes, nor tears, nor smiles, nor force could turn.

He knew their histories, their records, man for man, woman for woman. Before some he paused longer than before others; had the veil between the world invisible and this been rent, and the familiar shades taken fleshly form and called to him, he would have had no fear. They were his friends and comrades; he passed before them as before a tribunal, with head erect.

The gallery was said to be haunted—who cared! In the

past, Richard himself had "made believe" that some day they should meet so earnestly, that more than once he had almost fancied that he heard the rustle of a silken skirt, or saw the flash of some dead soldier's dirk. . . . But usually, at the critical moment, a cold draught from an opening door would blow upon him suddenly bleak, like the wind in the heather on the moor; the door would open, and his frightened nurse would bring a light, and lock him in his room again, with a severe scolding, and the dream—like many another later dream—would break.

"Perhaps that is what dreams are made for, Dan," he said once to his collie; and Dan looked up with the pathetic eyes of a dog who knows more than his master.

With his hands clenched very firmly and an uncomfortable tightening of his throat, Richard looked at the portrait of his ancestress to-night, and thought again, as he had often thought before, that it was strange God did not make mothers in a mould like this. Unconsciously in that moment he committed every line of the portrait to memory, never to be erased—the oval face, the soft hair, a dark curtain, banded over the low white forehead; the grave eyes that followed him everywhere, and that had been painted with a hint of tears, a favourite trick in a certain school of art: the turn of the erect head, the white neck just shewing beneath a veil of white. The moonlight fell upon all these lovingly. One little beam of light travelled upwards, lingering in the shadows of the misty eyes.

But these were childish things, the kind of things a future empire-builder must infallibly renounce. "Good-bye," Richard said gravely, "Dan and I aren't ever coming to see you again. Not like this, I mean, not in the old way, at least. I'm growing up, you see, and when one grows up, one can't go on doing these silly things."

But he walked away from the picture very sadly all the same, and thought that Margaret's eyes that night were very misty because, unconsciously, he himself saw them through a mist of tears. . . . How cold it was! He must have been there far longer than he meant; his bare feet on the parquet floor were cold as death, and he called to Dan, who had, contrary to his usual custom, scampered away from him to snuffle anxiously at the closed door.

Outside through one light pane of glass, Richard could see the snow thick on the white stone balustrade; how silently and swiftly it must have fallen! When he came in there had been only a few flakes. At that moment there was a sound as of something falling, and Dan escaping from his master's hand with a whine, leapt forward again, scenting eagerly, then scratched at the door with a long whine of terror.

The snow fell softly; something else had fallen too. Something that pressed against the door that Richard strove to open, at first gently, then with a sudden dread that tore at his heart-strings, and taxed his self-control. As it gave way at last, it pressed the unknown obstacle back with it—the

unknown obstacle, at sight of which the boy fell on his knees with a sharp cry. For it was a woman's figure—his mother's—which lay there in the moonlight, with its thin arms stretched out towards him, giving way too late to the longing it had repressed for years.

Face to face with death for the second time, Richard found himself more wondering than pitiful, more perplexed than sad. How swiftly God's arrows struck—how unerringly! The terrified staring eyes seemed to challenge his with a question which death had failed to answer, a question which would now be answered only on the Hither Shore. He tried to close the staring eyes and failed; tried once again, but failed, and then rose, shuddering. His cry had awakened his old nurse, who came to him feebly, candle in hand, with Dan sniffing at her ankles. At sight of his master the dog ran forward, and then, aware of mourning, crouched quietly on the floor beside the dead. And Richard looking down upon his mother, and hearing nurse Ailsa's lamentation come to him as if from far away, recognised that this was indeed "the end," that he had "put away" "childish things" once and for all.

MAY BATEMAN.