

VII

On the following Sunday morning, Mr. Mordaunt had a large congregation. Indeed, he could scarcely remember any Sunday on which the church had been so crowded. People appeared upon the scene who seldom did him the honor of coming to hear his sermons.

There were even people from Hazelton, which was the next parish. There were hearty, sunburned farmers, stout, comfortable, apple-cheeked wives in their best bonnets and most gorgeous shawls, and half a dozen children or so to each family. The doctor's wife was there, with her four daughters. Mrs. Kimsey and Mr. Kimsey, who kept the druggist's shop, and made pills, and did up powders for everybody within ten miles, sat in their pew; Mrs. Dibble in hers; Miss Smiff, the village dressmaker, and her friend Miss Perkins, the milliner, sat in theirs; the doctor's young man was present, and the druggist's apprentice; in fact, almost every family on the county side was represented, in one way or another.

In the course of the preceding week, many wonderful stories had been told of little Lord Fauntleroy. Mrs. Dibble had been kept so busy attending to customers who came in to buy a pennyworth of needles or a ha'porth of tape and to hear what she had to relate, that the little shop bell over the door had nearly tinkled itself to death over the coming and going. Mrs. Dibble knew exactly how his small lordship's rooms had been furnished for him, what expensive toys had been bought,

how there was a beautiful brown pony awaiting him, and a small groom to attend it, and a little dog-cart, with silver-mounted harness. And she could tell, too, what all the servants had said when they had caught glimpses of the child on the night of his arrival; and how every female below stairs had said it was a shame, so it was, to part the poor pretty dear from his mother; and had all declared their hearts came into their mouths when he went alone into the library to see his grandfather, for "there was no knowing how he'd be treated, and his lordship's temper was enough to fluster them with old heads on their shoulders, let alone a child."

"But if you'll believe me, Mrs. Jennifer, mum," Mrs. Dibble had said, "fear that child does not know--so Mr. Thomas hisself says; an' set an' smile he did, an' talked to his lordship as if they'd been friends ever since his first hour. An' the Earl so took aback, Mr. Thomas says, that he couldn't do nothing but listen and stare from under his eyebrows. An' it's Mr. Thomas's opinion, Mrs. Bates, mum, that bad as he is, he was pleased in his secret soul, an' proud, too; for a handsomer little fellow, or with better manners, though so old-fashioned, Mr. Thomas says he'd never wish to see."

And then there had come the story of Higgins. The Reverend Mr. Mordaunt had told it at his own dinner table, and the servants who had heard it had told it in the kitchen, and from there it had spread like wildfire.

And on market-day, when Higgins had appeared in town, he had been

questioned on every side, and Newick had been questioned too, and in response had shown to two or three people the note signed "Fauntleroy."

And so the farmers' wives had found plenty to talk of over their tea and their shopping, and they had done the subject full justice and made the most of it. And on Sunday they had either walked to church or had been driven in their gigs by their husbands, who were perhaps a trifle curious themselves about the new little lord who was to be in time the owner of the soil.

It was by no means the Earl's habit to attend church, but he chose to appear on this first Sunday--it was his whim to present himself in the huge family pew, with Fauntleroy at his side.

There were many loiterers in the churchyard, and many lingerers in the lane that morning. There were groups at the gates and in the porch, and there had been much discussion as to whether my lord would really appear or not. When this discussion was at its height, one good woman suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Eh," she said, "that must be the mother, pretty young thing." All who heard turned and looked at the slender figure in black coming up the path. The veil was thrown back from her face and they could see how fair and sweet it was, and how the bright hair curled as softly as a child's under the little widow's cap.

She was not thinking of the people about; she was thinking of Cedric, and of his visits to her, and his joy over his new pony, on which he had actually ridden to her door the day before, sitting very straight and looking very proud and happy. But soon she could not help being attracted by the fact that she was being looked at and that her arrival had created some sort of sensation. She first noticed it because an old woman in a red cloak made a bobbing courtesy to her, and then another did the same thing and said, "God bless you, my lady!" and one man after another took off his hat as she passed. For a moment she did not understand, and then she realized that it was because she was little Lord Fauntleroy's mother that they did so, and she flushed rather shyly and smiled and bowed too, and said, "Thank you," in a gentle voice to the old woman who had blessed her. To a person who had always lived in a bustling, crowded American city this simple deference was very novel, and at first just a little embarrassing; but after all, she could not help liking and being touched by the friendly warm-heartedness of which it seemed to speak. She had scarcely passed through the stone porch into the church before the great event of the day happened. The carriage from the Castle, with its handsome horses and tall liveried servants, bowed around the corner and down the green lane.

"Here they come!" went from one looker-on to another.

And then the carriage drew up, and Thomas stepped down and opened the door, and a little boy, dressed in black velvet, and with a splendid mop of bright waving hair, jumped out.

Every man, woman, and child looked curiously upon him.

"He's the Captain over again!" said those of the on-lookers who remembered his father. "He's the Captain's self, to the life!"

He stood there in the sunlight looking up at the Earl, as Thomas helped that nobleman out, with the most affectionate interest that could be imagined. The instant he could help, he put out his hand and offered his shoulder as if he had been seven feet high. It was plain enough to every one that however it might be with other people, the Earl of Dorincourt struck no terror into the breast of his grandson.

"Just lean on me," they heard him say. "How glad the people are to see you, and how well they all seem to know you!"

"Take off your cap, Fauntleroy," said the Earl. "They are bowing to you."

"To me!" cried Fauntleroy, whipping off his cap in a moment, baring his bright head to the crowd and turning shining, puzzled eyes on them as he tried to bow to every one at once.

"God bless your lordship!" said the courtesying, red-cloaked old woman who had spoken to his mother; "long life to you!"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Fauntleroy. And then they went into the church, and were looked at there, on their way up the aisle to the square, red-cushioned and curtained pew. When Fauntleroy was fairly seated, he made two discoveries which pleased him: the first that, across the church where he could look at her, his mother sat and smiled at him; the second, that at one end of the pew, against the wall, knelt two quaint figures carven in stone, facing each other as they kneeled on either side of a pillar supporting two stone missals, their pointed hands folded as if in prayer, their dress very antique and strange. On the tablet by them was written something of which he could only read the curious words:

"Here lyeth ye bodye of Gregorye Arthure Fyrst Earle of Dorincourt
Allsoe of Alisone Hildegarde hys wyfe."

"May I whisper?" inquired his lordship, devoured by curiosity.

"What is it?" said his grandfather.

"Who are they?"

"Some of your ancestors," answered the Earl, "who lived a few hundred years ago."

"Perhaps," said Lord Fauntleroy, regarding them with respect, "perhaps I got my spelling from them." And then he proceeded to find his place in

the church service. When the music began, he stood up and looked across at his mother, smiling. He was very fond of music, and his mother and he often sang together, so he joined in with the rest, his pure, sweet, high voice rising as clear as the song of a bird. He quite forgot himself in his pleasure in it. The Earl forgot himself a little too, as he sat in his curtain-shielded corner of the pew and watched the boy. Cedric stood with the big psalter open in his hands, singing with all his childish might, his face a little uplifted, happily; and as he sang, a long ray of sunshine crept in and, slanting through a golden pane of a stained glass window, brightened the falling hair about his young head. His mother, as she looked at him across the church, felt a thrill pass through her heart, and a prayer rose in it too,--a prayer that the pure, simple happiness of his childish soul might last, and that the strange, great fortune which had fallen to him might bring no wrong or evil with it. There were many soft, anxious thoughts in her tender heart in those new days.

"Oh, Ceddie!" she had said to him the evening before, as she hung over him in saying good-night, before he went away; "oh, Ceddie, dear, I wish for your sake I was very clever and could say a great many wise things! But only be good, dear, only be brave, only be kind and true always, and then you will never hurt any one, so long as you live, and you may help many, and the big world may be better because my little child was born. And that is best of all, Ceddie,--it is better than everything else, that the world should be a little better because a man has lived--even ever so little better, dearest."

And on his return to the Castle, Fauntleroy had repeated her words to his grandfather.

"And I thought about you when she said that," he ended; "and I told her that was the way the world was because you had lived, and I was going to try if I could be like you."

"And what did she say to that?" asked his lordship, a trifle uneasily.

"She said that was right, and we must always look for good in people and try to be like it."

Perhaps it was this the old man remembered as he glanced through the divided folds of the red curtain of his pew. Many times he looked over the people's heads to where his son's wife sat alone, and he saw the fair face the unforgiven dead had loved, and the eyes which were so like those of the child at his side; but what his thoughts were, and whether they were hard and bitter, or softened a little, it would have been hard to discover.

As they came out of church, many of those who had attended the service stood waiting to see them pass. As they neared the gate, a man who stood with his hat in his hand made a step forward and then hesitated. He was a middle-aged farmer, with a careworn face.

"Well, Higgins," said the Earl.

Fauntleroy turned quickly to look at him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "is it Mr. Higgins?"

"Yes," answered the Earl dryly; "and I suppose he came to take a look at his new landlord."

"Yes, my lord," said the man, his sunburned face reddening. "Mr. Newick told me his young lordship was kind enough to speak for me, and I thought I'd like to say a word of thanks, if I might be allowed."

Perhaps he felt some wonder when he saw what a little fellow it was who had innocently done so much for him, and who stood there looking up just as one of his own less fortunate children might have done--apparently not realizing his own importance in the least.

"I've a great deal to thank your lordship for," he said; "a great deal.

I----"

"Oh," said Fauntleroy; "I only wrote the letter. It was my grandfather who did it. But you know how he is about always being good to everybody. Is Mrs. Higgins well now?"

Higgins looked a trifle taken aback. He also was somewhat startled at

hearing his noble landlord presented in the character of a benevolent being, full of engaging qualities.

"I--well, yes, your lordship," he stammered, "the missus is better since the trouble was took off her mind. It was worrying broke her down."

"I'm glad of that," said Fauntleroy. "My grandfather was very sorry about your children having the scarlet fever, and so was I. He has had children himself. I'm his son's little boy, you know."

Higgins was on the verge of being panic-stricken. He felt it would be the safer and more discreet plan not to look at the Earl, as it had been well known that his fatherly affection for his sons had been such that he had seen them about twice a year, and that when they had been ill, he had promptly departed for London, because he would not be bored with doctors and nurses. It was a little trying, therefore, to his lordship's nerves to be told, while he looked on, his eyes gleaming from under his shaggy eyebrows, that he felt an interest in scarlet fever.

"You see, Higgins," broke in the Earl with a fine grim smile, "you people have been mistaken in me. Lord Fauntleroy understands me. When you want reliable information on the subject of my character, apply to him. Get into the carriage, Fauntleroy."

And Fauntleroy jumped in, and the carriage rolled away down the green lane, and even when it turned the corner into the high road, the Earl

was still grimly smiling.