

VIII

Lord Dorincourt had occasion to wear his grim smile many a time as the days passed by. Indeed, as his acquaintance with his grandson progressed, he wore the smile so often that there were moments when it almost lost its grimness. There is no denying that before Lord Fauntleroy had appeared on the scene, the old man had been growing very tired of his loneliness and his gout and his seventy years. After so long a life of excitement and amusement, it was not agreeable to sit alone even in the most splendid room, with one foot on a gout-stool, and with no other diversion than flying into a rage, and shouting at a frightened footman who hated the sight of him. The old Earl was too clever a man not to know perfectly well that his servants detested him, and that even if he had visitors, they did not come for love of him--though some found a sort of amusement in his sharp, sarcastic talk, which spared no one. So long as he had been strong and well, he had gone from one place to another, pretending to amuse himself, though he had not really enjoyed it; and when his health began to fail, he felt tired of everything and shut himself up at Dorincourt, with his gout and his newspapers and his books. But he could not read all the time, and he became more and more "bored," as he called it. He hated the long nights and days, and he grew more and more savage and irritable. And then Fauntleroy came; and when the Earl saw him, fortunately for the little fellow, the secret pride of the grandfather was gratified at the outset. If Cedric had been a less handsome little fellow, the old man might have taken so strong a dislike to him that he would not have given himself

the chance to see his grandson's finer qualities. But he chose to think that Cedric's beauty and fearless spirit were the results of the Dorincourt blood and a credit to the Dorincourt rank. And then when he heard the lad talk, and saw what a well-bred little fellow he was, notwithstanding his boyish ignorance of all that his new position meant, the old Earl liked his grandson more, and actually began to find himself rather entertained. It had amused him to give into those childish hands the power to bestow a benefit on poor Higgins. My lord cared nothing for poor Higgins, but it pleased him a little to think that his grandson would be talked about by the country people and would begin to be popular with the tenantry, even in his childhood. Then it had gratified him to drive to church with Cedric and to see the excitement and interest caused by the arrival. He knew how the people would speak of the beauty of the little lad; of his fine, strong, straight body; of his erect bearing, his handsome face, and his bright hair, and how they would say (as the Earl had heard one woman exclaim to another) that the boy was "every inch a lord." My lord of Dorincourt was an arrogant old man, proud of his name, proud of his rank, and therefore proud to show the world that at last the House of Dorincourt had an heir who was worthy of the position he was to fill.

The morning the new pony had been tried, the Earl had been so pleased that he had almost forgotten his gout. When the groom had brought out the pretty creature, which arched its brown, glossy neck and tossed its fine head in the sun, the Earl had sat at the open window of the library and had looked on while Fauntleroy took his first riding lesson. He

wondered if the boy would show signs of timidity. It was not a very small pony, and he had often seen children lose courage in making their first essay at riding.

Fauntleroy mounted in great delight. He had never been on a pony before, and he was in the highest spirits. Wilkins, the groom, led the animal by the bridle up and down before the library window.

"He's a well plucked un, he is," Wilkins remarked in the stable afterward with many grins. "It weren't no trouble to put HIM up. An' a old un wouldn't ha' sat any straighter when he WERE up. He ses--ses he to me, 'Wilkins,' he ses, 'am I sitting up straight? They sit up straight at the circus,' ses he. An' I ses, 'As straight as a arrer, your lordship!--an' he laughs, as pleased as could be, an' he ses, 'That's right,' he ses, 'you tell me if I don't sit up straight, Wilkins!'"

But sitting up straight and being led at a walk were not altogether and completely satisfactory. After a few minutes, Fauntleroy spoke to his grandfather--watching him from the window:

"Can't I go by myself?" he asked; "and can't I go faster? The boy on Fifth Avenue used to trot and canter!"

"Do you think you could trot and canter?" said the Earl.

"I should like to try," answered Fauntleroy.

His lordship made a sign to Wilkins, who at the signal brought up his own horse and mounted it and took Fauntleroy's pony by the leading-rein.

"Now," said the Earl, "let him trot."

The next few minutes were rather exciting to the small equestrian. He found that trotting was not so easy as walking, and the faster the pony trotted, the less easy it was.

"It j-jolts a g-goo-good deal--do-doesn't it?" he said to Wilkins.

"D-does it j-jolt y-you?"

"No, my lord," answered Wilkins. "You'll get used to it in time. Rise in your stirrups."

"I'm ri-rising all the t-time," said Fauntleroy.

He was both rising and falling rather uncomfortably and with many shakes and bounces. He was out of breath and his face grew red, but he held on with all his might, and sat as straight as he could. The Earl could see that from his window. When the riders came back within speaking distance, after they had been hidden by the trees a few minutes, Fauntleroy's hat was off, his cheeks were like poppies, and his lips were set, but he was still trotting manfully.

"Stop a minute!" said his grandfather. "Where's your hat?"

Wilkins touched his. "It fell off, your lordship," he said, with evident enjoyment. "Wouldn't let me stop to pick it up, my lord."

"Not much afraid, is he?" asked the Earl dryly.

"Him, your lordship!" exclaimed Wilkins. "I shouldn't say as he knowed what it meant. I've taught young gen'lemen to ride afore, an' I never see one stick on more deterrinder."

"Tired?" said the Earl to Fauntleroy. "Want to get off?"

"It jolts you more than you think it will," admitted his young lordship frankly. "And it tires you a little, too; but I don't want to get off. I want to learn how. As soon as I've got my breath I want to go back for the hat."

The cleverest person in the world, if he had undertaken to teach Fauntleroy how to please the old man who watched him, could not have taught him anything which would have succeeded better. As the pony trotted off again toward the avenue, a faint color crept up in the fierce old face, and the eyes, under the shaggy brows, gleamed with a pleasure such as his lordship had scarcely expected to know again. And he sat and watched quite eagerly until the sound of the horses' hoofs

returned. When they did come, which was after some time, they came at a faster pace. Fauntleroy's hat was still off; Wilkins was carrying it for him; his cheeks were redder than before, and his hair was flying about his ears, but he came at quite a brisk canter.

"There!" he panted, as they drew up, "I c-cantered. I didn't do it as well as the boy on Fifth Avenue, but I did it, and I staid on!"

He and Wilkins and the pony were close friends after that. Scarcely a day passed in which the country people did not see them out together, cantering gayly on the highroad or through the green lanes. The children in the cottages would run to the door to look at the proud little brown pony with the gallant little figure sitting so straight in the saddle, and the young lord would snatch off his cap and swing it at them, and shout, "Hullo! Good-morning!" in a very unlordly manner, though with great heartiness. Sometimes he would stop and talk with the children, and once Wilkins came back to the castle with a story of how Fauntleroy had insisted on dismounting near the village school, so that a boy who was lame and tired might ride home on his pony.

"An' I'm blessed," said Wilkins, in telling the story at the stables,--"I'm blessed if he'd hear of anything else! He would n't let me get down, because he said the boy mightn't feel comfortable on a big horse. An' ses he, 'Wilkins,' ses he, 'that boy's lame and I'm not, and I want to talk to him, too.' And up the lad has to get, and my lord trudges alongside of him with his hands in his pockets, and his cap on

the back of his head, a-whistling and talking as easy as you please!
And when we come to the cottage, an' the boy's mother come out all in a taking to see what's up, he whips off his cap an' ses he, 'I've brought your son home, ma'am,' ses he, 'because his leg hurt him, and I don't think that stick is enough for him to lean on; and I'm going to ask my grandfather to have a pair of crutches made for him.' An' I'm blessed if the woman wasn't struck all of a heap, as well she might be! I thought I should 'a' hex-plodid, myself!"

When the Earl heard the story he was not angry, as Wilkins had been half afraid that he would be; on the contrary, he laughed outright, and called Fauntleroy up to him, and made him tell all about the matter from beginning to end, and then he laughed again. And actually, a few days later, the Dorincourt carriage stopped in the green lane before the cottage where the lame boy lived, and Fauntleroy jumped out and walked up to the door, carrying a pair of strong, light, new crutches shouldered like a gun, and presented them to Mrs. Hartle (the lame boy's name was Hartle) with these words: "My grandfather's compliments, and if you please, these are for your boy, and we hope he will get better."

"I said your compliments," he explained to the Earl when he returned to the carriage. "You didn't tell me to, but I thought perhaps you forgot. That was right, wasn't it?"

And the Earl laughed again, and did not say it was not. In fact, the two were becoming more intimate every day, and every day Fauntleroy's faith

in his lordship's benevolence and virtue increased. He had no doubt whatever that his grandfather was the most amiable and generous of elderly gentlemen. Certainly, he himself found his wishes gratified almost before they were uttered; and such gifts and pleasures were lavished upon him, that he was sometimes almost bewildered by his own possessions. Apparently, he was to have everything he wanted, and to do everything he wished to do. And though this would certainly not have been a very wise plan to pursue with all small boys, his young lordship bore it amazingly well. Perhaps, notwithstanding his sweet nature, he might have been somewhat spoiled by it, if it had not been for the hours he spent with his mother at Court Lodge. That "best friend" of his watched over him over closely and tenderly. The two had many long talks together, and he never went back to the Castle with her kisses on his cheeks without carrying in his heart some simple, pure words worth remembering.

There was one thing, it is true, which puzzled the little fellow very much. He thought over the mystery of it much oftener than any one supposed; even his mother did not know how often he pondered on it; the Earl for a long time never suspected that he did so at all. But, being quick to observe, the little boy could not help wondering why it was that his mother and grandfather never seemed to meet. He had noticed that they never did meet. When the Dorincourt carriage stopped at Court Lodge, the Earl never alighted, and on the rare occasions of his lordship's going to church, Fauntleroy was always left to speak to his mother in the porch alone, or perhaps to go home with her. And

yet, every day, fruit and flowers were sent to Court Lodge from the hot-houses at the Castle. But the one virtuous action of the Earl's which had set him upon the pinnacle of perfection in Cedric's eyes, was what he had done soon after that first Sunday when Mrs. Errol had walked home from church unattended. About a week later, when Cedric was going one day to visit his mother, he found at the door, instead of the large carriage and prancing pair, a pretty little brougham and a handsome bay horse.

"That is a present from you to your mother," the Earl said abruptly.

"She can not go walking about the country. She needs a carriage. The man who drives will take charge of it. It is a present from YOU."

Fauntleroy's delight could but feebly express itself. He could scarcely contain himself until he reached the lodge. His mother was gathering roses in the garden. He flung himself out of the little brougham and flew to her.

"Dearest!" he cried, "could you believe it? This is yours! He says it is a present from me. It is your own carriage to drive everywhere in!"

He was so happy that she did not know what to say. She could not have borne to spoil his pleasure by refusing to accept the gift even though it came from the man who chose to consider himself her enemy. She was obliged to step into the carriage, roses and all, and let herself be taken to drive, while Fauntleroy told her stories of his grandfather's

goodness and amiability. They were such innocent stories that sometimes she could not help laughing a little, and then she would draw her little boy closer to her side and kiss him, feeling glad that he could see only good in the old man, who had so few friends.

The very next day after that, Fauntleroy wrote to Mr. Hobbs. He wrote quite a long letter, and after the first copy was written, he brought it to his grandfather to be inspected.

"Because," he said, "it's so uncertain about the spelling. And if you'll tell me the mistakes, I'll write it out again."

This was what he had written:

"My dear mr hobbs i want to tell you about my granfarther he is the best earl you ever new it is a mistake about earls being tirents he is not a tirent at all i wish you new him you would be good friends i am sure you would he has the gout in his foot and is a grate sufrer but he is so pashent i love him more every day becaus no one could help loving an earl like that who is kind to every one in this world i wish you could talk to him he knows everything in the world you can ask him any question but he has never plaid base ball he has given me a pony and a cart and my mamma a bewtifle cariage and I have three rooms and toys of all kinds it would serprise you you would like the castle and the park it is such a large castle you could lose yourself wilkins tells me

wilkins is my groom he says there is a dungon under the castle it is so pretty everything in the park would serprise you there are such big trees and there are deers and rabbits and games flying about in the cover my granfarther is very rich but he is not proud and erty as you thought earls always were i like to be with him the people are so polite and kind they take of their hats to you and the women make curtsies and sometimes say god bless you i can ride now but at first it shook me when i troted my granfarther let a poor man stay on his farm when he could not pay his rent and mrs mellon went to take wine and things to his sick children i should like to see you and i wish dearest could live at the castle but i am very happy when i dont miss her too much and i love my granfarther every one does plees write soon

"your afechshnet old frend

"Cedric Errol

"p s no one is in the dungon my granfarfher never had any one langwishin in there.

"p s he is such a good earl he reminds me of you he is a unerversle favrit"

"Do you miss your mother very much?" asked the Earl when he had finished reading this.

"Yes," said Fauntleroy, "I miss her all the time."

He went and stood before the Earl and put his hand on his knee, looking up at him.

"YOU don't miss her, do you?" he said.

"I don't know her," answered his lordship rather crustily.

"I know that," said Fauntleroy, "and that's what makes me wonder. She told me not to ask you any questions, and--and I won't, but sometimes I can't help thinking, you know, and it makes me all puzzled. But I'm not going to ask any questions. And when I miss her very much, I go and look out of my window to where I see her light shine for me every night through an open place in the trees. It is a long way off, but she puts it in her window as soon as it is dark, and I can see it twinkle far away, and I know what it says."

"What does it say?" asked my lord.

"It says, 'Good-night, God keep you all the night!'--just what she used to say when we were together. Every night she used to say that to me, and every morning she said, 'God bless you all the day!' So you see I am quite safe all the time----"

"Quite, I have no doubt," said his lordship dryly. And he drew down his beetling eyebrows and looked at the little boy so fixedly and so long that Fauntleroy wondered what he could be thinking of.