XI

When Mr. Hobbs's young friend left him to go to Dorincourt Castle and become Lord Fauntleroy, and the grocery-man had time to realize that the Atlantic Ocean lay between himself and the small companion who had spent so many agreeable hours in his society, he really began to feel very lonely indeed. The fact was, Mr. Hobbs was not a clever man nor even a bright one; he was, indeed, rather a slow and heavy person, and he had never made many acquaintances. He was not mentally energetic enough to know how to amuse himself, and in truth he never did anything of an entertaining nature but read the newspapers and add up his accounts. It was not very easy for him to add up his accounts, and sometimes it took him a long time to bring them out right; and in the old days, little Lord Fauntleroy, who had learned how to add up quite nicely with his fingers and a slate and pencil, had sometimes even gone to the length of trying to help him; and, then too, he had been so good a listener and had taken such an interest in what the newspaper said, and he and Mr. Hobbs had held such long conversations about the Revolution and the British and the elections and the Republican party, that it was no wonder his going left a blank in the grocery store. At first it seemed to Mr. Hobbs that Cedric was not really far away, and would come back again; that some day he would look up from his paper and see the little lad standing in the door-way, in his white suit and red stockings, and with his straw hat on the back of his head, and would hear him say in his cheerful little voice: "Hello, Mr. Hobbs! This is a hot day--isn't it?" But as the days passed on and this did not happen, Mr. Hobbs felt

very dull and uneasy. He did not even enjoy his newspaper as much as he used to. He would put the paper down on his knee after reading it, and sit and stare at the high stool for a long time. There were some marks on the long legs which made him feel quite dejected and melancholy. They were marks made by the heels of the next Earl of Dorincourt, when he kicked and talked at the same time. It seems that even youthful earls kick the legs of things they sit on;--noble blood and lofty lineage do not prevent it. After looking at those marks, Mr. Hobbs would take out his gold watch and open it and stare at the inscription: "From his oldest friend, Lord Fauntleroy, to Mr. Hobbs. When this you see, remember me." And after staring at it awhile, he would shut it up with a loud snap, and sigh and get up and go and stand in the door-way--between the box of potatoes and the barrel of apples--and look up the street. At night, when the store was closed, he would light his pipe and walk slowly along the pavement until he reached the house where Cedric had lived, on which there was a sign that read, "This House to Let"; and he would stop near it and look up and shake his head, and puff at his pipe very hard, and after a while walk mournfully back again.

This went on for two or three weeks before any new idea came to him. Being slow and ponderous, it always took him a long time to reach a new idea. As a rule, he did not like new ideas, but preferred old ones. After two or three weeks, however, during which, instead of getting better, matters really grew worse, a novel plan slowly and deliberately dawned upon him. He would go to see Dick. He smoked a great many pipes before he arrived at the conclusion, but finally he did arrive at it. He

would go to see Dick. He knew all about Dick. Cedric had told him, and his idea was that perhaps Dick might be some comfort to him in the way of talking things over.

So one day when Dick was very hard at work blacking a customer's boots, a short, stout man with a heavy face and a bald head stopped on the pavement and stared for two or three minutes at the bootblack's sign, which read:

"PROFESSOR DICK TIPTON CAN'T BE BEAT."

He stared at it so long that Dick began to take a lively interest in him, and when he had put the finishing touch to his customer's boots, he said:

"Want a shine, sir?"

The stout man came forward deliberately and put his foot on the rest.

"Yes," he said.

Then when Dick fell to work, the stout man looked from Dick to the sign and from the sign to Dick.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"From a friend o' mine," said Dick,--"a little feller. He guv' me the whole outfit. He was the best little feller ye ever saw. He's in England now. Gone to be one o' them lords."

"Lord--Lord--" asked Mr. Hobbs, with ponderous slowness, "Lord Fauntleroy--Goin' to be Earl of Dorincourt?"

Dick almost dropped his brush.

"Why, boss!" he exclaimed, "d' ye know him yerself?"

"I've known him," answered Mr. Hobbs, wiping his warm forehead, "ever since he was born. We was lifetime acquaintances--that's what WE was."

It really made him feel quite agitated to speak of it. He pulled the splendid gold watch out of his pocket and opened it, and showed the inside of the case to Dick.

"'When this you see, remember me,'" he read. "That was his parting keepsake to me 'I don't want you to forget me'--those was his words--I'd ha' remembered him," he went on, shaking his head, "if he hadn't given me a thing an' I hadn't seen hide nor hair on him again. He was a companion as ANY man would remember."

"He was the nicest little feller I ever see," said Dick. "An' as to

sand--I never seen so much sand to a little feller. I thought a heap o' him, I did,--an' we was friends, too--we was sort o' chums from the fust, that little young un an' me. I grabbed his ball from under a stage fur him, an' he never forgot it; an' he'd come down here, he would, with his mother or his nuss and he'd holler: 'Hello, Dick!' at me, as friendly as if he was six feet high, when he warn't knee high to a grasshopper, and was dressed in gal's clo'es. He was a gay little chap, and when you was down on your luck, it did you good to talk to him."

"That's so," said Mr. Hobbs. "It was a pity to make a earl out of HIM. He would have SHONE in the grocery business--or dry goods either; he would have SHONE!" And he shook his head with deeper regret than ever.

It proved that they had so much to say to each other that it was not possible to say it all at one time, and so it was agreed that the next night Dick should make a visit to the store and keep Mr. Hobbs company. The plan pleased Dick well enough. He had been a street waif nearly all his life, but he had never been a bad boy, and he had always had a private yearning for a more respectable kind of existence. Since he had been in business for himself, he had made enough money to enable him to sleep under a roof instead of out in the streets, and he had begun to hope he might reach even a higher plane, in time. So, to be invited to call on a stout, respectable man who owned a corner store, and even had a horse and wagon, seemed to him quite an event.

"Do you know anything about earls and castles?" Mr. Hobbs inquired. "I'd

like to know more of the particklars."

"There's a story about some on 'em in the Penny Story Gazette," said Dick. "It's called the 'Crime of a Coronet; or, The Revenge of the Countess May.' It's a boss thing, too. Some of us boys 're takin' it to read."

"Bring it up when you come," said Mr. Hobbs, "an' I'll pay for it. Bring all you can find that have any earls in 'em. If there are n't earls, markises'll do, or dooks--though HE never made mention of any dooks or markises. We did go over coronets a little, but I never happened to see any. I guess they don't keep 'em 'round here."

"Tiffany 'd have 'em if anybody did," said Dick, "but I don't know as I'd know one if I saw it."

Mr. Hobbs did not explain that he would not have known one if he saw it. He merely shook his head ponderously.

"I s'pose there is very little call for 'em," he said, and that ended the matter.

This was the beginning of quite a substantial friendship. When Dick went up to the store, Mr. Hobbs received him with great hospitality. He gave him a chair tilted against the door, near a barrel of apples, and after his young visitor was seated, he made a jerk at them with the hand in

which he held his pipe, saying:

"Help yerself."

Then he looked at the story papers, and after that they read and discussed the British aristocracy; and Mr. Hobbs smoked his pipe very hard and shook his head a great deal. He shook it most when he pointed out the high stool with the marks on its legs.

"There's his very kicks," he said impressively; "his very kicks. I sit and look at 'em by the hour. This is a world of ups an' it's a world of downs. Why, he'd set there, an' eat crackers out of a box, an' apples out of a barrel, an' pitch his cores into the street; an' now he's a lord a-livin' in a castle. Them's a lord's kicks; they'll be a earl's kicks some day. Sometimes I says to myself, says I, 'Well, I'll be jiggered!'"

He seemed to derive a great deal of comfort from his reflections and Dick's visit. Before Dick went home, they had a supper in the small back-room; they had crackers and cheese and sardines, and other canned things out of the store, and Mr. Hobbs solemnly opened two bottles of ginger ale, and pouring out two glasses, proposed a toast.

"Here's to HIM!" he said, lifting his glass, "an' may he teach 'em a lesson--earls an' markises an' dooks an' all!"

After that night, the two saw each other often, and Mr. Hobbs was much more comfortable and less desolate. They read the Penny Story Gazette, and many other interesting things, and gained a knowledge of the habits of the nobility and gentry which would have surprised those despised classes if they had realized it. One day Mr. Hobbs made a pilgrimage to a book store down town, for the express purpose of adding to their library. He went to the clerk and leaned over the counter to speak to him.

"I want," he said, "a book about earls."

"What!" exclaimed the clerk.

"A book," repeated the grocery-man, "about earls."

"I'm afraid," said the clerk, looking rather queer, "that we haven't what you want."

"Haven't?" said Mr. Hobbs, anxiously. "Well, say markises then--or dooks."

"I know of no such book," answered the clerk.

Mr. Hobbs was much disturbed. He looked down on the floor,--then he looked up.

"None about female earls?" he inquired.

"I'm afraid not," said the clerk with a smile.

"Well," exclaimed Mr. Hobbs, "I'll be jiggered!"

He was just going out of the store, when the clerk called him back and asked him if a story in which the nobility were chief characters would do. Mr. Hobbs said it would--if he could not get an entire volume devoted to earls. So the clerk sold him a book called "The Tower of London," written by Mr. Harrison Ainsworth, and he carried it home.

When Dick came they began to read it. It was a very wonderful and exciting book, and the scene was laid in the reign of the famous English queen who is called by some people Bloody Mary. And as Mr. Hobbs heard of Queen Mary's deeds and the habit she had of chopping people's heads off, putting them to the torture, and burning them alive, he became very much excited. He took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at Dick, and at last he was obliged to mop the perspiration from his brow with his red pocket handkerchief.

"Why, he ain't safe!" he said. "He ain't safe! If the women folks can sit up on their thrones an' give the word for things like that to be done, who's to know what's happening to him this very minute? He's no more safe than nothing! Just let a woman like that get mad, an' no one's safe!"

"Well," said Dick, though he looked rather anxious himself; "ye see this 'ere un isn't the one that's bossin' things now. I know her name's Victory, an' this un here in the book, her name's Mary."

"So it is," said Mr. Hobbs, still mopping his forehead; "so it is. An' the newspapers are not sayin' anything about any racks, thumb-screws, or stake-burnin's,--but still it doesn't seem as if 't was safe for him over there with those queer folks. Why, they tell me they don't keep the Fourth o' July!"

He was privately uneasy for several days; and it was not until he received Fauntleroy's letter and had read it several times, both to himself and to Dick, and had also read the letter Dick got about the same time, that he became composed again.

But they both found great pleasure in their letters. They read and re-read them, and talked them over and enjoyed every word of them. And they spent days over the answers they sent and read them over almost as often as the letters they had received.

It was rather a labor for Dick to write his. All his knowledge of reading and writing he had gained during a few months, when he had lived with his elder brother, and had gone to a night-school; but, being a sharp boy, he had made the most of that brief education, and had spelled out things in newspapers since then, and practiced writing with bits of

chalk on pavements or walls or fences. He told Mr. Hobbs all about his life and about his elder brother, who had been rather good to him after their mother died, when Dick was quite a little fellow. Their father had died some time before. The brother's name was Ben, and he had taken care of Dick as well as he could, until the boy was old enough to sell newspapers and run errands. They had lived together, and as he grew older Ben had managed to get along until he had quite a decent place in a store.

"And then," exclaimed Dick with disgust, "blest if he didn't go an' marry a gal! Just went and got spoony an' hadn't any more sense left! Married her, an' set up housekeepin' in two back rooms. An' a hefty un she was,--a regular tiger-cat. She'd tear things to pieces when she got mad,--and she was mad ALL the time. Had a baby just like her,--yell day 'n' night! An' if I didn't have to 'tend it! an' when it screamed, she'd fire things at me. She fired a plate at me one day, an' hit the baby--cut its chin. Doctor said he'd carry the mark till he died. A nice mother she was! Crackey! but didn't we have a time--Ben 'n' mehself 'n' the young un. She was mad at Ben because he didn't make money faster; 'n' at last he went out West with a man to set up a cattle ranch. An' hadn't been gone a week 'fore one night, I got home from sellin' my papers, 'n' the rooms wus locked up 'n' empty, 'n' the woman o' the house, she told me Minna 'd gone--shown a clean pair o' heels. Some un else said she'd gone across the water to be nuss to a lady as had a little baby, too. Never heard a word of her since--nuther has Ben. If I'd ha' bin him, I wouldn't ha' fretted a bit--'n' I guess he didn't.

But he thought a heap o' her at the start. Tell you, he was spoons on her. She was a daisy-lookin' gal, too, when she was dressed up 'n' not mad. She'd big black eyes 'n' black hair down to her knees; she'd make it into a rope as big as your arm, and twist it 'round 'n' 'round her head; 'n' I tell you her eyes 'd snap! Folks used to say she was part Itali-un--said her mother or father 'd come from there, 'n' it made her queer. I tell ye, she was one of 'em--she was!"

He often told Mr. Hobbs stories of her and of his brother Ben, who, since his going out West, had written once or twice to Dick.

Ben's luck had not been good, and he had wandered from place to place; but at last he had settled on a ranch in California, where he was at work at the time when Dick became acquainted with Mr Hobbs.

"That gal," said Dick one day, "she took all the grit out o' him. I couldn't help feelin' sorry for him sometimes."

They were sitting in the store door-way together, and Mr. Hobbs was filling his pipe.

"He oughtn't to 've married," he said solemnly, as he rose to get a match. "Women--I never could see any use in 'em myself."

As he took the match from its box, he stopped and looked down on the counter.

"Why!" he said, "if here isn't a letter! I didn't see it before. The postman must have laid it down when I wasn't noticin', or the newspaper slipped over it."

He picked it up and looked at it carefully.

"It's from HIM!" he exclaimed. "That's the very one it's from!"

He forgot his pipe altogether. He went back to his chair quite excited and took his pocket-knife and opened the envelope.

"I wonder what news there is this time," he said.

And then he unfolded the letter and read as follows:

"DORINCOURT CASTLE" My dear Mr. Hobbs

"I write this in a great hury becaus i have something curous to tell you i know you will be very mutch suprised my dear frend when i tel you. It is all a mistake and i am not a lord and i shall not have to be an earl there is a lady whitch was marid to my uncle bevis who is dead and she has a little boy and he is lord fauntleroy becaus that is the way it is in England the earls eldest sons little boy is the earl if every body else is dead i mean if his farther and grandfarther are dead my grandfarther is not dead but my uncle bevis is and so his boy is lord

Fauntleroy and i am not becaus my papa was the youngest son and my name

is Cedric Errol like it was when i was in New York and all the things

will belong to the other boy i thought at first i should have to give

him my pony and cart but my grandfarther says i need not my grandfarther

is very sorry and i think he does not like the lady but preaps he thinks

dearest and i are sorry because i shall not be an earl i would like to

be an earl now better than i thout i would at first becaus this is a

beautifle castle and i like every body so and when you are rich you can

do so many things i am not rich now becaus when your papa is only the

youngest son he is not very rich i am going to learn to work so that

i can take care of dearest i have been asking Wilkins about grooming

horses preaps i might be a groom or a coachman. The lady brought her

little boy to the castle and my grandfarther and Mr. Havisham talked to

her i think she was angry she talked loud and my grandfarther was angry

too i never saw him angry before i wish it did not make them all mad i

thort i would tell you and Dick right away becaus you would be intrusted

so no more at present with love from

"your old frend

"CEDRIC ERROL (Not lord Fauntleroy)."

Mr. Hobbs fell back in his chair, the letter dropped on his knee, his pen-knife slipped to the floor, and so did the envelope.

"Well!" he ejaculated, "I am jiggered!"

He was so dumfounded that he actually changed his exclamation. It had always been his habit to say, "I WILL be jiggered," but this time he said, "I AM jiggered." Perhaps he really WAS jiggered. There is no knowing.

"Well," said Dick, "the whole thing's bust up, hasn't it?"

"Bust!" said Mr. Hobbs. "It's my opinion it's a put-up job o' the British ristycrats to rob him of his rights because he's an American. They've had a spite agin us ever since the Revolution, an' they're takin' it out on him. I told you he wasn't safe, an' see what's happened! Like as not, the whole gover'ment's got together to rob him of his lawful ownin's."

He was very much agitated. He had not approved of the change in his young friend's circumstances at first, but lately he had become more reconciled to it, and after the receipt of Cedric's letter he had perhaps even felt some secret pride in his young friend's magnificence. He might not have a good opinion of earls, but he knew that even in America money was considered rather an agreeable thing, and if all the wealth and grandeur were to go with the title, it must be rather hard to lose it.

"They're trying to rob him!" he said, "that's what they're doing, and folks that have money ought to look after him."

And he kept Dick with him until quite a late hour to talk it over, and when that young man left, he went with him to the corner of the street; and on his way back he stopped opposite the empty house for some time, staring at the "To Let," and smoking his pipe, in much disturbance of mind.