

## XII

A very few days after the dinner party at the Castle, almost everybody in England who read the newspapers at all knew the romantic story of what had happened at Dorincourt. It made a very interesting story when it was told with all the details. There was the little American boy who had been brought to England to be Lord Fauntleroy, and who was said to be so fine and handsome a little fellow, and to have already made people fond of him; there was the old Earl, his grandfather, who was so proud of his heir; there was the pretty young mother who had never been forgiven for marrying Captain Errol; and there was the strange marriage of Bevis, the dead Lord Fauntleroy, and the strange wife, of whom no one knew anything, suddenly appearing with her son, and saying that he was the real Lord Fauntleroy and must have his rights. All these things were talked about and written about, and caused a tremendous sensation. And then there came the rumor that the Earl of Dorincourt was not satisfied with the turn affairs had taken, and would perhaps contest the claim by law, and the matter might end with a wonderful trial.

There never had been such excitement before in the county in which Erleboro was situated. On market-days, people stood in groups and talked and wondered what would be done; the farmers' wives invited one another to tea that they might tell one another all they had heard and all they thought and all they thought other people thought. They related wonderful anecdotes about the Earl's rage and his determination not to

acknowledge the new Lord Fauntleroy, and his hatred of the woman who was

the claimant's mother. But, of course, it was Mrs. Dibble who could tell the most, and who was more in demand than ever.

"An' a bad lookout it is," she said. "An' if you were to ask me, ma'am, I should say as it was a judgment on him for the way he's treated that sweet young cre'tur' as he parted from her child,--for he's got that fond of him an' that set on him an' that proud of him as he's a'most drove mad by what's happened. An' what's more, this new one's no lady, as his little lordship's ma is. She's a bold-faced, black-eyed thing, as Mr. Thomas says no gentleman in livery 'u'd bemean hisself to be gave orders by; and let her come into the house, he says, an' he goes out of it. An' the boy don't no more compare with the other one than nothin' you could mention. An' mercy knows what's goin' to come of it all, an' where it's to end, an' you might have knocked me down with a feather when Jane brought the news."

In fact there was excitement everywhere at the Castle: in the library, where the Earl and Mr. Havisham sat and talked; in the servants' hall, where Mr. Thomas and the butler and the other men and women servants gossiped and exclaimed at all times of the day; and in the stables, where Wilkins went about his work in a quite depressed state of mind, and groomed the brown pony more beautifully than ever, and said mournfully to the coachman that he "never taught a young gen'leman to ride as took to it more nat'ral, or was a better-plucked one than he

was. He was a one as it were some pleasure to ride behind."

But in the midst of all the disturbance there was one person who was quite calm and untroubled. That person was the little Lord Fauntleroy who was said not to be Lord Fauntleroy at all. When first the state of affairs had been explained to him, he had felt some little anxiousness and perplexity, it is true, but its foundation was not in baffled ambition.

While the Earl told him what had happened, he had sat on a stool holding on to his knee, as he so often did when he was listening to anything interesting; and by the time the story was finished he looked quite sober.

"It makes me feel very queer," he said; "it makes me feel--queer!"

The Earl looked at the boy in silence. It made him feel queer, too--queerer than he had ever felt in his whole life. And he felt more queer still when he saw that there was a troubled expression on the small face which was usually so happy.

"Will they take Dearest's house from her--and her carriage?" Cedric asked in a rather unsteady, anxious little voice.

"NO!" said the Earl decidedly--in quite a loud voice, in fact. "They can take nothing from her."

"Ah!" said Cedric, with evident relief. "Can't they?"

Then he looked up at his grandfather, and there was a wistful shade in his eyes, and they looked very big and soft.

"That other boy," he said rather tremulously--"he will have to--to be your boy now--as I was--won't he?"

"NO!" answered the Earl--and he said it so fiercely and loudly that Cedric quite jumped.

"No?" he exclaimed, in wonderment. "Won't he? I thought----"

He stood up from his stool quite suddenly.

"Shall I be your boy, even if I'm not going to be an earl?" he said.

"Shall I be your boy, just as I was before?" And his flushed little face was all alight with eagerness.

How the old Earl did look at him from head to foot, to be sure! How his great shaggy brows did draw themselves together, and how queerly his deep eyes shone under them--how very queerly!

"My boy!" he said--and, if you'll believe it, his very voice was queer, almost shaky and a little broken and hoarse, not at all what you

would expect an Earl's voice to be, though he spoke more decidedly and peremptorily even than before,--"Yes, you'll be my boy as long as I live; and, by George, sometimes I feel as if you were the only boy I had ever had."

Cedric's face turned red to the roots of his hair; it turned red with relief and pleasure. He put both his hands deep into his pockets and looked squarely into his noble relative's eyes.

"Do you?" he said. "Well, then, I don't care about the earl part at all. I don't care whether I'm an earl or not. I thought--you see, I thought the one that was going to be the Earl would have to be your boy, too, and--and I couldn't be. That was what made me feel so queer."

The Earl put his hand on his shoulder and drew him nearer.

"They shall take nothing from you that I can hold for you," he said, drawing his breath hard. "I won't believe yet that they can take anything from you. You were made for the place, and--well, you may fill it still. But whatever comes, you shall have all that I can give you--all!"

It scarcely seemed as if he were speaking to a child, there was such determination in his face and voice; it was more as if he were making a promise to himself--and perhaps he was.

He had never before known how deep a hold upon him his fondness for the boy and his pride in him had taken. He had never seen his strength and good qualities and beauty as he seemed to see them now. To his obstinate nature it seemed impossible--more than impossible--to give up what he had so set his heart upon. And he had determined that he would not give it up without a fierce struggle.

Within a few days after she had seen Mr. Havisham, the woman who claimed

to be Lady Fauntleroy presented herself at the Castle, and brought her child with her. She was sent away. The Earl would not see her, she was told by the footman at the door; his lawyer would attend to her case.

It was Thomas who gave the message, and who expressed his opinion of her freely afterward, in the servants' hall. He "hoped," he said, "as he had wore livery in 'igh famblies long enough to know a lady when he see one, an' if that was a lady he was no judge o' females."

"The one at the Lodge," added Thomas loftily, "'Merican or no 'Merican, she's one o' the right sort, as any gentleman 'u'd reckonize with all a heye. I remarked it myself to Henery when fust we called there."

The woman drove away; the look on her handsome, common face half frightened, half fierce. Mr. Havisham had noticed, during his interviews with her, that though she had a passionate temper, and a coarse, insolent manner, she was neither so clever nor so bold as she meant to be; she seemed sometimes to be almost overwhelmed by the position in

which she had placed herself. It was as if she had not expected to meet with such opposition.

"She is evidently," the lawyer said to Mrs. Errol, "a person from the lower walks of life. She is uneducated and untrained in everything, and quite unused to meeting people like ourselves on any terms of equality. She does not know what to do. Her visit to the Castle quite cowed her. She was infuriated, but she was cowed. The Earl would not receive her, but I advised him to go with me to the Dorincourt Arms, where she is staying. When she saw him enter the room, she turned white, though she flew into a rage at once, and threatened and demanded in one breath."

The fact was that the Earl had stalked into the room and stood, looking like a venerable aristocratic giant, staring at the woman from under his beetling brows, and not condescending a word. He simply stared at her, taking her in from head to foot as if she were some repulsive curiosity. He let her talk and demand until she was tired, without himself uttering a word, and then he said:

"You say you are my eldest son's wife. If that is true, and if the proof you offer is too much for us, the law is on your side. In that case, your boy is Lord Fauntleroy. The matter will be sifted to the bottom, you may rest assured. If your claims are proved, you will be provided for. I want to see nothing of either you or the child so long as I live. The place will unfortunately have enough of you after my death. You are exactly the kind of person I should have expected my son Bevis to

choose."

And then he turned his back upon her and stalked out of the room as he had stalked into it.

Not many days after that, a visitor was announced to Mrs. Errol, who was writing in her little morning room. The maid, who brought the message, looked rather excited; her eyes were quite round with amazement, in fact, and being young and inexperienced, she regarded her mistress with nervous sympathy.

"It's the Earl hisself, ma'am!" she said in tremulous awe.

When Mrs. Errol entered the drawing-room, a very tall, majestic-looking old man was standing on the tiger-skin rug. He had a handsome, grim old face, with an aquiline profile, a long white mustache, and an obstinate look.

"Mrs. Errol, I believe?" he said.

"Mrs. Errol," she answered.

"I am the Earl of Dorincourt," he said.

He paused a moment, almost unconsciously, to look into her uplifted eyes. They were so like the big, affectionate, childish eyes he had seen



uplifted to his own so often every day during the last few months, that they gave him a quite curious sensation.

"The boy is very like you," he said abruptly.

"It has been often said so, my lord," she replied, "but I have been glad to think him like his father also."

As Lady Lorrindaile had told him, her voice was very sweet, and her manner was very simple and dignified. She did not seem in the least troubled by his sudden coming.

"Yes," said the Earl, "he is like--my son--too." He put his hand up to his big white mustache and pulled it fiercely. "Do you know," he said, "why I have come here?"

"I have seen Mr. Havisham," Mrs. Errol began, "and he has told me of the claims which have been made----"

"I have come to tell you," said the Earl, "that they will be investigated and contested, if a contest can be made. I have come to tell you that the boy shall be defended with all the power of the law. His rights----"

The soft voice interrupted him.

"He must have nothing that is NOT his by right, even if the law can give it to him," she said.

"Unfortunately the law can not," said the Earl. "If it could, it should. This outrageous woman and her child----"

"Perhaps she cares for him as much as I care for Cedric, my lord," said little Mrs. Errol. "And if she was your eldest son's wife, her son is Lord Fauntleroy, and mine is not."

She was no more afraid of him than Cedric had been, and she looked at him just as Cedric would have looked, and he, having been an old tyrant all his life, was privately pleased by it. People so seldom dared to differ from him that there was an entertaining novelty in it.

"I suppose," he said, scowling slightly, "that you would much prefer that he should not be the Earl of Dorincourt."

Her fair young face flushed.

"It is a very magnificent thing to be the Earl of Dorincourt, my lord," she said. "I know that, but I care most that he should be what his father was--brave and just and true always."

"In striking contrast to what his grandfather was, eh?" said his lordship sardonically.

"I have not had the pleasure of knowing his grandfather," replied Mrs. Errol, "but I know my little boy believes----" She stopped short a moment, looking quietly into his face, and then she added, "I know that Cedric loves you."

"Would he have loved me," said the Earl dryly, "if you had told him why I did not receive you at the Castle?"

"No," answered Mrs. Errol, "I think not. That was why I did not wish him to know."

"Well," said my lord brusquely, "there are few women who would not have told him."

He suddenly began to walk up and down the room, pulling his great mustache more violently than ever.

"Yes, he is fond of me," he said, "and I am fond of him. I can't say I ever was fond of anything before. I am fond of him. He pleased me from the first. I am an old man, and was tired of my life. He has given me something to live for. I am proud of him. I was satisfied to think of his taking his place some day as the head of the family."

He came back and stood before Mrs. Errol.

"I am miserable," he said. "Miserable!"

He looked as if he was. Even his pride could not keep his voice steady or his hands from shaking. For a moment it almost seemed as if his deep, fierce eyes had tears in them. "Perhaps it is because I am miserable that I have come to you," he said, quite glaring down at her. "I used to hate you; I have been jealous of you. This wretched, disgraceful business has changed that. After seeing that repulsive woman who calls herself the wife of my son Bevis, I actually felt it would be a relief to look at you. I have been an obstinate old fool, and I suppose I have treated you badly. You are like the boy, and the boy is the first object in my life. I am miserable, and I came to you merely because you are like the boy, and he cares for you, and I care for him. Treat me as well as you can, for the boy's sake."

He said it all in his harsh voice, and almost roughly, but somehow he seemed so broken down for the time that Mrs. Errol was touched to the heart. She got up and moved an arm-chair a little forward.

"I wish you would sit down," she said in a soft, pretty, sympathetic way. "You have been so much troubled that you are very tired, and you need all your strength."

It was just as new to him to be spoken to and cared for in that gentle, simple way as it was to be contradicted. He was reminded of "the boy" again, and he actually did as she asked him. Perhaps his disappointment

and wretchedness were good discipline for him; if he had not been wretched he might have continued to hate her, but just at present he found her a little soothing. Almost anything would have seemed pleasant by contrast with Lady Fauntleroy; and this one had so sweet a face and voice, and a pretty dignity when she spoke or moved. Very soon, through the quiet magic of these influences, he began to feel less gloomy, and then he talked still more.

"Whatever happens," he said, "the boy shall be provided for. He shall be taken care of, now and in the future."

Before he went away, he glanced around the room.

"Do you like the house?" he demanded.

"Very much," she answered.

"This is a cheerful room," he said. "May I come here again and talk this matter over?"

"As often as you wish, my lord," she replied.

And then he went out to his carriage and drove away, Thomas and Henry almost stricken dumb upon the box at the turn affairs had taken.