

THE NINTH DAY.

A LITTLE change in the weather. The rain still continues, but the wind is not quite so high. Have I any reason to believe, because it is calmer on land, that it is also calmer at sea? Perhaps not. But my mind is scarcely so uneasy to-day, nevertheless.

I had looked over the newspaper with the usual result, and had laid it down with the customary sense of disappointment, when Jessie handed me a letter which she had received that morning. It was written by her aunt, and it upbraided her in the highly exaggerated terms which ladies love to employ, where any tender interests of their own are concerned, for her long silence and her long absence from home. Home! I thought of my poor boy and of the one hope on which all his happiness rested, and I felt jealous of the word when I saw it used persuasively in a letter to our guest. What right had any one to mention "home" to her until George had spoken first?

"I must answer it by return of post," said Jessie, with a tone of sorrow in her voice for which my heart warmed to her. "You have been very kind to me; you have taken more pains to interest and amuse me than I am worth. I can laugh about most things, but I can't laugh about going away. I am honestly and sincerely too grateful for that."

She paused, came round to where I was sitting, perched herself on the end of the table, and, resting her hands on my shoulders, added gently:

"It must be the day after to-morrow, must it not?"

I could not trust myself to answer. If I had spoken, I should have betrayed George's secret in spite of myself.

"To-morrow is the tenth day," she went on, softly. "It looks so selfish and so ungrateful to go the moment I have heard the last of the stories, that I am quite distressed at being obliged to enter on the subject at all. And yet, what choice is left me? what can I do when my aunt writes to me in that way?"

She took up the letter again, and looked at it so ruefully that I drew her head a little nearer to me, and gratefully kissed the smooth white forehead.

"If your aunt is only half as anxious to see you again, my love, as I am to see my son, I must forgive her for taking you away from us." The words came from me without premeditation. It was not calculation this time, but sheer instinct that impelled me to test her in this way, once more, by a direct reference to George. She was so close to me that I felt her breath quiver on my cheek. Her eyes had been fixed on my face a moment before, but they now wandered away from it constrainedly. One of her hands trembled a little on my shoulder, and she took it off.

"Thank you for trying to make our parting easier to me," she said, quickly, and in a lower tone than she had spoken in yet. I made no answer, but still looked her anxiously in the face. For a few seconds her nimble delicate fingers nervously folded and refolded the letter from her aunt, then she abruptly changed her position.

"The sooner I write, the sooner it will be over," she said, and hurriedly turned away to the paper-case on the side-table.

How was the change in her manner to be rightly interpreted? Was she hurt by what I had said, or was she secretly so much affected by it, in the impressionable state of her mind at that moment, as to be incapable of exerting a young girl's customary self-control? Her looks, actions, and language might bear either interpretation. One striking omission had marked her conduct when I had referred to George's return. She had not inquired when I expected him back. Was this indifference? Surely not. Surely indifference would have led her to ask the conventionally civil question which ninety-nine persons out of a hundred would have addressed to me as a matter of

course. Was she, on her side, afraid to trust herself to speak of George at a time when an unusual tenderness was aroused in her by the near prospect of saying farewell? It might be—it might not be—it might be. My feeble reason took the side of my inclination; and, after vibrating between Yes and No, I stopped where I had begun—at Yes.

She finished the letter in a few minutes, and dropped it into the post-bag the moment it was done.

“Not a word more,” she said, returning to me with a sigh of relief—“not a word about my aunt or my going away till the time comes. We have two more days; let us make the most of them.”

Two more days! Eight-and-forty hours still to pass; sixty minutes in each of those hours; and every minute long enough to bring with it an event fatal to George’s future! The bare thought kept my mind in a fever. For the remainder of the day I was as desultory and as restless as our Queen of Hearts herself. Owen affectionately did his best to quiet me, but in vain. Even Morgan, who whiled away the time by smoking incessantly, was struck by the wretched spectacle of nervous anxiety that I presented to him, and pitied me openly for being unable to compose myself with a pipe. Wearily and uselessly the hours wore on till the sun set. The clouds in the western heaven wore wild and tortured shapes when I looked out at them; and, as the gathering darkness fell on us, the fatal fearful wind rose once more.

When we assembled at eight, the drawing of the lots had no longer any interest or suspense, so far as I was concerned. I had read my last story, and it now only remained for chance to decide the question of precedency between Owen and Morgan. Of the two numbers left in the bowl, the one drawn was Nine. This made it Morgan’s turn to read, and left it appropriately to Owen, as our eldest brother, to close the proceedings on the next night.

Morgan looked round the table when he had spread out his manuscript, and seemed half inclined to open fire, as usual, with a little preliminary sarcasm; but his eyes met mine; he saw the anxiety I was suffering; and his natural kindness, perversely as he might strive to hide it, got the better of him. He looked down on his paper; growled out briefly, “No need for a preface; my little bit of writing explains itself; let’s go on and have done with it,” and so began to read without another word from himself or from any of us.

BROTHER MORGAN’S STORY of FAUNTLEROY.

IT was certainly a dull little dinner-party. Of the four guests, two of us were men between fifty and sixty, and two of us were youths between eighteen and twenty, and we had no subjects in common. We were all intimate with our host, but were only slightly acquainted with each other. Perhaps we should have got on better if there had been some ladies among us; but the master of the house was a bachelor, and, except the parlor-maids who assisted in waiting on us at dinner, no daughter of Eve was present to brighten the dreary scene.

We tried all sorts of subjects, but they dropped one after the other. The elder gentlemen seemed to be afraid of committing themselves by talking too freely within hearing of us juniors, and we, on our side, restrained our youthful flow of spirits and youthful freedom of conversation out of deference to our host, who seemed once or twice to be feeling a little nervous about the continued propriety of our behavior in the presence of his respectable guests. To make matters worse, we had dined at a sensible hour. When the bottles made their first round at dessert, the clock on the mantel-piece only struck eight. I counted the strokes, and felt certain, from the

expression of his face, that the other junior guest, who sat on one side of me at the round table, was counting them also. When we came to the final eight, we exchanged looks of despair. "Two hours more of this! What on earth is to become of us?" In the language of the eyes, that was exactly what we said to each other.

The wine was excellent, and I think we all came separately and secretly to the same conclusion—that our chance of getting through the evening was intimately connected with our resolution in getting through the bottles.

As a matter of course, we talked wine. No company of Englishmen can assemble together for an evening without doing that. Every man in this country who is rich enough to pay income-tax has at one time or other in his life effected a very remarkable transaction in wine. Sometimes he has made such a bargain as he never expects to make again. Sometimes he is the only man in England, not a peer of the realm, who has got a single drop of a certain famous vintage which has perished from the face of the earth. Sometimes he has purchased, with a friend, a few last left dozens from the cellar of a deceased potentate, at a price so exorbitant that he can only wag his head and decline mentioning it; and, if you ask his friend, that friend will wag his head, and decline mentioning it also. Sometimes he has been at an out-of-the-way country inn; has found the sherry not drinkable; has asked if there is no other wine in the house; has been informed that there is some "sourish foreign stuff that nobody ever drinks"; has called for a bottle of it; has found it Burgundy, such as all France cannot now produce, has cunningly kept his own counsel with the widowed landlady, and has bought the whole stock for "an old song." Sometimes he knows the proprietor of a famous tavern in London, and he recommends his one or two particular friends, the next time they are passing that way, to go in and dine, and give his compliments to the landlord, and ask for a bottle of the brown sherry, with the light blue—as distinguished from the dark blue—seal. Thousands of people dine there every year, and think they have got the famous sherry when they get the dark blue seal; but the real wine, the famous wine, is the light blue seal, and nobody in England knows it but the landlord and his friends. In all these wine-conversations, whatever variety there may be in the various experiences related, one of two great first principles is invariably assumed by each speaker in succession. Either he knows more about it than any one else, or he has got better wine of his own even than the excellent wine he is now drinking. Men can get together sometimes without talking of women, without talking of horses, without talking of politics, but they cannot assemble to eat a meal together without talking of wine, and they cannot talk of wine without assuming to each one of themselves an absolute infallibility in connection with that single subject which they would shrink from asserting in relation to any other topic under the sun.

How long the inevitable wine-talk lasted on the particular social occasion of which I am now writing is more than I can undertake to say. I had heard so many other conversations of the same sort at so many other tables that my attention wandered away wearily, and I began to forget all about the dull little dinner-party and the badly-assorted company of guests of whom I formed one. How long I remained in this not over-courteous condition of mental oblivion is more than I can tell; but when my attention was recalled, in due course of time, to the little world around me, I found that the good wine had begun to do its good office.

The stream of talk on either side of the host's chair was now beginning to flow cheerfully and continuously; the wine-conversation had worn itself out; and one of the elder guests—Mr. Wendell—was occupied in telling the other guest—Mr. Trowbridge—of a small fraud which had lately been committed on him by a clerk in his employment. The first part of the story I missed

altogether. The last part, which alone caught my attention, followed the career of the clerk to the dock of the Old Bailey.

“So, as I was telling you,” continued Mr. Wendell, “I made up my mind to prosecute, and I did prosecute. Thoughtless people blamed me for sending the young man to prison, and said I might just as well have forgiven him, seeing that the trifling sum of money I had lost by his breach of trust was barely as much as ten pounds. Of course, personally speaking, I would much rather not have gone into court; but I considered that my duty to society in general, and to my brother merchants in particular, absolutely compelled me to prosecute for the sake of example. I acted on that principle, and I don’t regret that I did so. The circumstances under which the man robbed me were particularly disgraceful. He was a hardened reprobate, sir, if ever there was one yet; and I believe, in my conscience, that he wanted nothing but the opportunity to be as great a villain as Fauntleroy himself.”

At the moment when Mr. Wendell personified his idea of consummate villainy by quoting the example of Fauntleroy, I saw the other middle-aged gentleman—Mr. Trowbridge—color up on a sudden, and begin to fidget in his chair.

“The next time you want to produce an instance of a villain, sir,” said Mr. Trowbridge, “I wish you could contrive to quote some other example than Fauntleroy.”

Mr. Wendell naturally enough looked excessively astonished when he heard these words, which were very firmly and, at the same time, very politely addressed to him.

“May I inquire why you object to my example?” he asked.

“I object to it, sir,” said Mr. Trowbridge, “because it makes me very uncomfortable to hear Fauntleroy called a villain.”

“Good heavens above!” exclaimed Mr. Wendell, utterly bewildered. “Uncomfortable!—you, a mercantile man like myself—you, whose character stands so high everywhere—you uncomfortable when you hear a man who was hanged for forgery called a villain! In the name of wonder, why?”

“Because,” answered Mr. Trowbridge, with perfect composure, “Fauntleroy was a friend of mine.”

“Excuse me, my dear sir,” retorted Mr. Wendell, in as polished a tone of sarcasm as he could command; “but of all the friends whom you have made in the course of your useful and honorable career, I should have thought the friend you have just mentioned would have been the very last to whom you were likely to refer in respectable society, at least by name.”

“Fauntleroy committed an unpardonable crime, and died a disgraceful death,” said Mr. Trowbridge. “But, for all that, Fauntleroy was a friend of mine, and in that character I shall always acknowledge him boldly to my dying day. I have a tenderness for his memory, though he violated a sacred trust, and died for it on the gallows. Don’t look shocked, Mr. Wendell. I will tell you, and our other friends here, if they will let me, why I feel that tenderness, which looks so strange and so discreditable in your eyes. It is rather a curious anecdote, sir, and has an interest, I think, for all observers of human nature quite apart from its connection with the unhappy man of whom we have been talking. You young gentlemen,” continued Mr. Trowbridge, addressing himself to us juniors, “have heard of Fauntleroy, though he sinned and suffered, and shocked all England long before your time?”

We answered that we had certainly heard of him as one of the famous criminals of his day. We knew that he had been a partner in a great London banking-house; that he had not led a very virtuous life; that he had possessed himself, by forgery, of trust-moneys which he was doubly bound to respect; and that he had been hanged for his offense, in the year eighteen hundred and

twenty-four, when the gallows was still set up for other crimes than murder, and when Jack Ketch was in fashion as one of the hard-working reformers of the age.

“Very good,” said Mr. Trowbridge. “You both of you know quite enough of Fauntleroy to be interested in what I am going to tell you. When the bottles have been round the table, I will start with my story.”

The bottles went round—claret for the degenerate youngsters; port for the sterling, steady-headed, middle-aged gentlemen. Mr. Trowbridge sipped his wine—meditated a little—sipped again—and started with the promised anecdote in these terms:

CHAPTER II.

WHAT I am going to tell you, gentlemen, happened when I was a very young man, and when I was just setting up in business on my own account.

My father had been well acquainted for many years with Mr. Fauntleroy, of the famous London banking firm of Marsh, Stracey, Fauntleroy & Graham. Thinking it might be of some future service to me to make my position known to a great man in the commercial world, my father mentioned to his highly-respected friend that I was about to start in business for myself in a very small way, and with very little money. Mr. Fauntleroy received the intimation with a kind appearance of interest, and said that he would have his eye on me. I expected from this that he would wait to see if I could keep on my legs at starting, and that, if he found I succeeded pretty well, he would then help me forward if it lay in his power. As events turned out, he proved to be a far better friend than that, and he soon showed me that I had very much underrated the hearty and generous interest which he had felt in my welfare from the first.

While I was still fighting with the difficulties of setting up my office, and recommending myself to my connection, and so forth, I got a message from Mr. Fauntleroy telling me to call on him, at the banking-house, the first time I was passing that way. As you may easily imagine, I contrived to be passing that way on a particularly early occasion, and, on presenting myself at the bank, I was shown at once into Mr. Fauntleroy’s private room.

He was as pleasant a man to speak to as ever I met with—bright, and gay, and companionable in his manner—with a sort of easy, hearty, jovial bluntness about him that attracted everybody. The clerks all liked him—and that is something to say of a partner in a banking-house, I can tell you!

“Well, young Trowbridge,” says he, giving his papers on the table a brisk push away from him, “so you are going to set up in business for yourself, are you? I have a great regard for your father, and a great wish to see you succeed. Have you started yet? No? Just on the point of beginning, eh? Very good. You will have your difficulties, my friend, and I mean to smooth one of them away for you at the outset. A word of advice for your private ear—Bank with us.”

“You are very kind, sir,” I answered, “and I should ask nothing better than to profit by your suggestion, if I could. But my expenses are heavy at starting, and when they are all paid I am afraid I shall have very little left to put by for the first year. I doubt if I shall be able to muster much more than three hundred pounds of surplus cash in the world after paying what I must pay before I set up my office, and I should be ashamed to trouble your house, sir, to open an account for such a trifle as that.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” says Mr. Fauntleroy. “Are *you* a banker? What business have you to offer an opinion on the matter? Do as I tell you—leave it to me—bank with us—and draw for what you like. Stop! I haven’t done yet. When you open the account, speak to the head cashier.

Perhaps you may find he has got something to tell you. There! there! go away—don't interrupt me—good-by—God bless you!"

That was his way—ah! poor fellow, that was his way.

I went to the head cashier the next morning when I opened my little modicum of an account. He had received orders to pay my drafts without reference to my balance. My checks, when I had overdrawn, were to be privately shown to Mr. Fauntleroy. Do many young men who start in business find their prosperous superiors ready to help them in that way?

Well, I got on—got on very fairly and steadily, being careful not to venture out of my depth, and not to forget that small beginnings may lead in time to great ends. A prospect of one of those great ends—great, I mean, to such a small trader as I was at that period—showed itself to me when I had been some little time in business. In plain terms, I had a chance of joining in a first-rate transaction, which would give me profit, and position, and everything I wanted, provided I could qualify myself for engaging in it by getting good security beforehand for a very large amount.

In this emergency, I thought of my kind friend, Mr. Fauntleroy, and went to the bank, and saw him once more in his private room.

There he was at the same table, with the same heaps of papers about him, and the same hearty, easy way of speaking his mind to you at once, in the fewest possible words. I explained the business I came upon with some little hesitation and nervousness, for I was afraid he might think I was taking an unfair advantage of his former kindness to me. When I had done, he just nodded his head, snatched up a blank sheet of paper, scribbled a few lines on it in his rapid way, handed the writing to me, and pushed me out of the room by the two shoulders before I could say a single word. I looked at the paper in the outer office. It was my security from the great banking-house for the whole amount, and for more, if more was wanted.

I could not express my gratitude then, and I don't know that I can describe it now. I can only say that it has outlived the crime, the disgrace, and the awful death on the scaffold. I am grieved to speak of that death at all; but I have no other alternative. The course of my story must now lead me straight on to the later time, and to the terrible discovery which exposed my benefactor and my friend to all England as the forger Fauntleroy.

I must ask you to suppose a lapse of some time after the occurrence of the events that I have just been relating. During this interval, thanks to the kind assistance I had received at the outset, my position as a man of business had greatly improved. Imagine me now, if you please, on the high road to prosperity, with good large offices and a respectable staff of clerks, and picture me to yourselves sitting alone in my private room between four and five o'clock on a certain Saturday afternoon.

All my letters had been written, all the people who had appointments with me had been received. I was looking carelessly over the newspaper, and thinking about going home, when one of my clerks came in, and said that a stranger wished to see me immediately on very important business.

"Did he mention his name?" I inquired.

"No, sir."

"Did you not ask him for it?"

"Yes, sir. And he said you would be none the wiser if he told me what it was."

"Does he look like a begging-letter writer?"

“He looks a little shabby, sir, but he doesn’t talk at all like a begging-letter writer. He spoke sharp and decided, sir, and said it was in your interests that he came, and that you would deeply regret it afterward if you refused to see him.”

“He said that, did he? Show him in at once, then.”

He was shown in immediately: a middling-sized man, with a sharp, unwholesome-looking face, and with a flippant, reckless manner, dressed in a style of shabby smartness, eyeing me with a bold look, and not so overburdened with politeness as to trouble himself about taking off his hat when he came in. I had never seen him before in my life, and I could not form the slightest conjecture from his appearance to guide me toward guessing his position in the world. He was not a gentleman, evidently; but as to fixing his whereabouts in the infinite downward gradations of vagabond existence in London, that was a mystery which I was totally incompetent to solve.

“Is your name Trowbridge?” he began.

“Yes,” I answered, dryly enough.

“Do you bank with Marsh, Stracey, Fauntleroy & Graham?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Answer my question, and you will know.”

“Very well, I *do* bank with Marsh, Stracey, Fauntleroy & Graham—and what then?”

“Draw out every farthing of balance you have got before the bank closes at five to-day.”

I stared at him in speechless amazement. The words, for an instant, absolutely petrified me.

“Stare as much as you like,” he proceeded, coolly, “I mean what I say. Look at your clock there. In twenty minutes it will strike five, and the bank will be shut. Draw out every farthing, I tell you again, and look sharp about it.”

“Draw out my money!” I exclaimed, partially recovering myself. “Are you in your right senses? Do you know that the firm I bank with represents one of the first houses in the world? What do you mean—you, who are a total stranger to me—by taking this extraordinary interest in my affairs? If you want me to act on your advice, why don’t you explain yourself?”

“I have explained myself. Act on my advice or not, just as you like. It doesn’t matter to me. I have done what I promised, and there’s an end of it.”

He turned to the door. The minute-hand of the clock was getting on from the twenty minutes to the quarter.

“Done what you promised?” I repeated, getting up to stop him.

“Yes,” he said, with his hand on the lock. “I have given my message. Whatever happens, remember that. Good-afternoon.”

He was gone before I could speak again.

I tried to call after him, but my speech suddenly failed me. It was very foolish, it was very unaccountable, but there was something in the man’s last words which had more than half frightened me. I looked at the clock. The minute-hand was on the quarter.

My office was just far enough from the bank to make it necessary for me to decide on the instant. If I had had time to think, I am perfectly certain that I should not have profited by the extraordinary warning that had just been addressed to me. The suspicious appearance and manners of the stranger; the outrageous improbability of the inference against the credit of the bank toward which his words pointed; the chance that some underhand attempt was being made, by some enemy of mine, to frighten me into embroiling myself with one of my best friends, through showing an ignorant distrust of the firm with which he was associated as partner—all these considerations would unquestionably have occurred to me if I could have found time for

reflection; and, as a necessary consequence, not one farthing of my balance would have been taken from the keeping of the bank on that memorable day.

As it was, I had just time enough to act, and not a spare moment for thinking. Some heavy payments made at the beginning of the week had so far decreased my balance that the sum to my credit in the banking-book barely reached fifteen hundred pounds. I snatched up my check-book, wrote a draft for the whole amount, and ordered one of my clerks to run to the bank and get it cashed before the doors closed. What impulse urged me on, except the blind impulse of hurry and bewilderment, I can't say. I acted mechanically, under the influence of the vague inexplicable fear which the man's extraordinary parting words had aroused in me, without stopping to analyze my own sensations—almost without knowing what I was about. In three minutes from the time when the stranger had closed my door the clerk had started for the bank, and I was alone again in my room, with my hands as cold as ice and my head all in a whirl.

I did not recover my control over myself until the clerk came back with the notes in his hand. He had just got to the bank in the nick of time. As the cash for my draft was handed to him over the counter, the clock struck five, and he heard the order given to close the doors.

When I had counted the bank-notes and had locked them up in the safe, my better sense seemed to come back to me on a sudden. Never have I reproached myself before or since as I reproached myself at that moment. What sort of return had I made for Mr. Fauntleroy's fatherly kindness to me? I had insulted him by the meanest, the grossest distrust of the honor and the credit of his house, and that on the word of an absolute stranger, of a vagabond, if ever there was one yet. It was madness—downright madness in any man to have acted as I had done. I could not account for my own inconceivably thoughtless proceeding. I could hardly believe in it myself. I opened the safe and looked at the bank-notes again. I locked it once more, and flung the key down on the table in a fury of vexation against myself. There the money was, upbraiding me with my own inconceivable folly, telling me in the plainest terms that I had risked depriving myself of my best and kindest friend henceforth and forever.

It was necessary to do something at once toward making all the atonement that lay in my power. I felt that, as soon as I began to cool down a little. There was but one plain, straightforward way left now out of the scrape in which I had been mad enough to involve myself. I took my hat, and, without stopping an instant to hesitate, hurried off to the bank to make a clean breast of it to Mr. Fauntleroy.

When I knocked at the private door and asked for him, I was told that he had not been at the bank for the last two days. One of the other partners was there, however, and was working at that moment in his own room.

I sent in my name at once, and asked to see him. He and I were little better than strangers to each other, and the interview was likely to be, on that account, unspeakably embarrassing and humiliating on my side. Still, I could not go home. I could not endure the inaction of the next day, the Sunday, without having done my best on the spot to repair the error into which my own folly had led me. Uncomfortable as I felt at the prospect of the approaching interview, I should have been far more uneasy in my mind if the partner had declined to see me.

To my relief, the bank porter returned with a message requesting me to walk in.

What particular form my explanations and apologies took when I tried to offer them is more than I can tell now. I was so confused and distressed that I hardly knew what I was talking about at the time. The one circumstance which I remember clearly is that I was ashamed to refer to my interview with the strange man, and that I tried to account for my sudden withdrawal of my balance by referring it to some inexplicable panic, caused by mischievous reports which I was

unable to trace to their source, and which, for anything I knew to the contrary, might, after all, have been only started in jest. Greatly to my surprise, the partner did not seem to notice the lamentable lameness of my excuses, and did not additionally confuse me by asking any questions. A weary, absent look, which I had observed on his face when I came in, remained on it while I was speaking. It seemed to be an effort to him even to keep up the appearance of listening to me; and when, at last, I fairly broke down in the middle of a sentence, and gave up the hope of getting any further, all the answer he gave me was comprised in these few civil commonplace words:

“Never mind, Mr. Trowbridge; pray don’t think of apologizing. We are all liable to make mistakes. Say nothing more about it, and bring the money back on Monday if you still honor us with your confidence.”

He looked down at his papers as if he was anxious to be alone again, and I had no alternative, of course, but to take my leave immediately. I went home, feeling a little easier in my mind now that I had paved the way for making the best practical atonement in my power by bringing my balance back the first thing on Monday morning. Still, I passed a weary day on Sunday, reflecting, sadly enough, that I had not yet made my peace with Mr. Fauntleroy. My anxiety to set myself right with my generous friend was so intense that I risked intruding myself on his privacy by calling at his town residence on the Sunday. He was not there, and his servant could tell me nothing of his whereabouts. There was no help for it now but to wait till his weekday duties brought him back to the bank.

I went to business on Monday morning half an hour earlier than usual, so great was my impatience to restore the amount of that unlucky draft to my account as soon as possible after the bank opened.

On entering my office, I stopped with a startled feeling just inside the door. Something serious had happened. The clerks, instead of being at their desks as usual, were all huddled together in a group, talking to each other with blank faces. When they saw me, they fell back behind my managing man, who stepped forward with a circular in his hand.

“Have you heard the news, sir?” he said.

“No. What is it?”

He handed me the circular. My heart gave one violent throb the instant I looked at it. I felt myself turn pale; I felt my knees trembling under me.

Marsh, Stracey, Fauntleroy & Graham had stopped payment.

“The circular has not been issued more than half an hour,” continued my managing clerk. “I have just come from the bank, sir. The doors are shut; there is no doubt about it. Marsh & Company have stopped this morning.”

I hardly heard him; I hardly knew who was talking to me. My strange visitor of the Saturday had taken instant possession of all my thoughts, and his words of warning seemed to be sounding once more in my ears. This man had known the true condition of the bank when not another soul outside the doors was aware of it! The last draft paid across the counter of that ruined house, when the doors closed on Saturday, was the draft that I had so bitterly reproached myself for drawing; the one balance saved from the wreck was my balance. Where had the stranger got the information that had saved me? and why had he brought it to my ears?

I was still groping, like a man in the dark, for an answer to those two questions—I was still bewildered by the unfathomable mystery of doubt into which they had plunged me—when the discovery of the stopping of the bank was followed almost immediately by a second shock, far more dreadful, far heavier to bear, so far as I was concerned, than the first.

While I and my clerks were still discussing the failure of the firm, two mercantile men, who were friends of mine, ran into the office, and overwhelmed us with the news that one of the partners had been arrested for forgery. Never shall I forget the terrible Monday morning when those tidings reached me, and when I knew that the partner was Mr. Fauntleroy.

I was true to him—I can honestly say I was true to my belief in my generous friend—when that fearful news reached me. My fellow-merchants had got all the particulars of the arrest. They told me that two of Mr. Fauntleroy's fellow-trustees had come up to London to make arrangements about selling out some stock. On inquiring for Mr. Fauntleroy at the banking-house, they had been informed that he was not there; and, after leaving a message for him, they had gone into the City to make an appointment with their stockbroker for a future day, when their fellow-trustee might be able to attend. The stock-broker volunteered to make certain business inquiries on the spot, with a view to saving as much time as possible, and left them at his office to await his return. He came back, looking very much amazed, with the information that the stock had been sold out down to the last five hundred pounds. The affair was instantly investigated; the document authorizing the selling out was produced; and the two trustees saw on it, side by side with Mr. Fauntleroy's signature, the forged signatures of their own names. This happened on the Friday, and the trustees, without losing a moment, sent the officers of justice in pursuit of Mr. Fauntleroy. He was arrested, brought up before the magistrate, and remanded on the Saturday. On the Monday I heard from my friends the particulars which I have just narrated.

But the events of that one morning were not destined to end even yet. I had discovered the failure of the bank and the arrest of Mr. Fauntleroy. I was next to be enlightened, in the strangest and the saddest manner, on the difficult question of his innocence or his guilt.

Before my friends had left my office—before I had exhausted the arguments which my gratitude rather than my reason suggested to me in favor of the unhappy prisoner—a note, marked immediate, was placed in my hands, which silenced me the instant I looked at it. It was written from the prison by Mr. Fauntleroy, and it contained two lines only, entreating me to apply for the necessary order, and to go and see him immediately.

I shall not attempt to describe the flutter of expectation, the strange mixture of dread and hope that agitated me when I recognized his handwriting, and discovered what it was that he desired me to do. I obtained the order and went to the prison. The authorities, knowing the dreadful situation in which he stood, were afraid of his attempting to destroy himself, and had set two men to watch him. One came out as they opened his cell door. The other, who was bound not to leave him, very delicately and considerately affected to be looking out of window the moment I was shown in.

He was sitting on the side of his bed, with his head drooping and his hands hanging listlessly over his knees when I first caught sight of him. At the sound of my approach he started to his feet, and, without speaking a word, flung both his arms round my neck

My heart swelled up.

“Tell me it's not true, sir! For God's sake, tell me it's not true!” was all I could say to him.

He never answered—oh me! he never answered, and he turned away his face.

There was one dreadful moment of silence. He still held his arms round my neck, and on a sudden he put his lips close to my ear.

“Did you get your money out?” he whispered. “Were you in time on Saturday afternoon?”

I broke free from him in the astonishment of hearing those words.

“What!” I cried out loud, forgetting the third person at the window. “That man who brought the message—”

“Hush!” he said, putting his hand on my lips. “There was no better man to be found, after the officers had taken me—I know no more about him than you do—I paid him well as a chance messenger, and risked his cheating me of his errand.”

“*You* sent him, then!”

“I sent him.”

My story is over, gentlemen. There is no need for me to tell you that Mr. Fauntleroy was found guilty, and that he died by the hangman’s hand. It was in my power to soothe his last moments in this world by taking on myself the arrangement of some of his private affairs, which, while they remained unsettled, weighed heavily on his mind. They had no connection with the crimes he had committed, so I could do him the last little service he was ever to accept at my hands with a clear conscience.

I say nothing in defense of his character—nothing in palliation of the offense for which he suffered. But I cannot forget that in the time of his most fearful extremity, when the strong arm of the law had already seized him, he thought of the young man whose humble fortunes he had helped to build; whose heartfelt gratitude he had fairly won; whose simple faith he was resolved never to betray. I leave it to greater intellects than mine to reconcile the anomaly of his reckless falsehood toward others and his steadfast truth toward me. It is as certain as that we sit here that one of Fauntleroy’s last efforts in this world was the effort he made to preserve me from being a loser by the trust that I had placed in him. There is the secret of my strange tenderness for the memory of a felon; that is why the word villain does somehow still grate on my heart when I hear it associated with the name—the disgraced name, I grant you—of the forger Fauntleroy. Pass the bottles, young gentlemen, and pardon a man of the old school for having so long interrupted your conversation with a story of the old time.