

A BOOTBLACK'S LUCK.



"Black you boots, sir?"

It was a childish voice, sweet and pleading, most unlike the usual shrill, half impudent tone of the boot-black army, and George Meredith looked down to see the speaker. Being a tall man, over six feet, and somewhat portly, with fifty-five years of life, mostly of prosperity, he looked quite a distance downward before he saw the little fellow who spoke. Such a very little fellow! He did not look more than six years old, and had close clustering curls of fair hair, and big blue eyes like a baby. But the small face was pale and thin, the limbs, but scantily clad, were far too slender, and the low, sweet voice had an unchildlike pathos in its tone.

"No," said Mr. Meredith, before the look. "Well, yes, you may!" he added afterwards. "What's your name?" he asked presently.

"George Scott."

"H'm. Orphan?"

"No, sir. Mother is living, but she slipped on the ice about two weeks ago and broke her arm. She did not think I was big enough to work before that, but she had to let me try then. I don't make out very well. Gentlemen think I'm too little. But I can make boots shine, can't I?"

"You have certainly made that one shine," was the reply, while Mr. Meredith thought: "Here is something rare, indeed, a boot-black who talks correct English. Has he stepped out of a novel?"

In a moment he spoke again.

"What work did your mother do?" he asked.

"Embroider for a fancy store. She couldn't work very fast, because she isn't very strong; but we don't eat a great deal; that's one comfort."

"Sorry comfort!" muttered the gentleman. "Any brothers or sisters?"

"All dead, sir. Mamie was the last 'cept me, and she died in consumption. She was sixteen and helped mamma sew and keep the rooms in order. Oh, dear!"

It was just a child's sigh, coming from a full heart to answer the look of interest and sympathy in the gentleman's face.

"Do you like blacking boots?" was the next question.

"No, sir."

"Would you like to run errands?"

"I think I should."

"How much can you make a day now?"

"The most I ever made was forty cents. This is my first job to-day."

"Can you read?"

"Why yes, sir. I am ten years old!"

"You come to-morrow-morning to the address on this card, and I will try you for an errand boy."

Then giving the lad a fifty-cent piece and refusing to wait until he went to get change for it, George Meredith strolled off to his hotel, his solitary dinner and bachelor apartments.

"Odd," he thought, "how much that boy reminds me of some one, I can't think why it is. Some one who had just such big blue eyes, at once shy and frank, drooping most of the time, but candid and truthful when they did meet your own. H'm; it is very vague, but somebody I once knew had just such eyes. Poor little chap! I'll give him a decent suit of clothes, and pay him enough to live on until his mother gets well. It won't ruin me!"

And considering that the speaker counted his money by hundreds of thousands, it seemed likely it would not.

The little, eager lad who walked into the rich lawyer's office the next day was an improved edition of the boot-black of the night before. He had on his "best" suit, well worn, but whole, and his linen was white, his hair nicely brushed, and his boots shining.

"Mother better?" asked Mr. Meredith.

"No, sir," was the sad, quiet answer, "she couldn't get over to the dispensary this morning to have her arm dressed. She was so dizzy she had to lie down."

"That's bad! Suppose you tell me when you live?"

"No, 17 Merriam Court, sir, back of street."

"H'm! Well, I'll give you your first errand."

He wrote a note, directed it to "Dr. James Turner," added the address, and gave it to the boy.

"Am I to wait for an answer, sir?"

"No! Leave it, if the doctor is not at home."

"Now," he thought, "I shall know if he is an impostor, at any rate. By Jove!" he exclaimed aloud, "it's Agnes Wellden!"

Then clients and friends came in, and business of the day commenced. But the boy was not forgotten. Errand that were not too far away to tax his strength were provided, a hearty dinner at a restaurant was given him, and he went home with a steady engagement at five dollars a week promised him.

In that home a sad-eyed woman, in a shabby widow's dress, her face lined with sorrow, but with a sweet, tender face, had been all the weary day living her life again. She saw herself a child in her father's pleasant home, where there was never great wealth, but every comfort and an atmosphere of love around them all. She saw herself a young, pretty girl, with many friends, and some lovers. One of these was a man older by fifteen years than herself; grave and tender, but who seemed in her girlish eyes too old and solemn to think of love. When her father told her that George Meredith had asked her to be his wife, she was frightened. It seemed as if it would destroy her youth, take all joyousness from her life, to marry this stately, reserved man, already a lawyer of standing.

So she refused him, never appreciating the value of the heart that had been taken captive by her brightness and sweet girlishness. How could she know that it would have made the happiness of the grave, lonely man's life to surround her with all that could keep her as joyous and free as a butterfly?

He left his old home after his love-dream faded, but he left pleasant memories. Even after William Scott wooed and won the woman he had lost, she could not quite forget the grave man who had loved her.

Sunny days of wedded happiness followed her happy girlhood. Children came to bless her, and when her parents died, her husband her sons and daughters consoled her. She was past thirty years old when troubles came, thick, fast, overwhelming. Two children died on the same day of a prevailing fever, and before the month was over her husband followed them to the grave. He had been a clerk, on a moderate salary, and the nest egg in bank was very small, yet the widow looked at the little ones left her and strove to face her future bravely. It was the pitiful story to be heard every day—irregular work, sickness, death! The removal from a country home to a crowded city, in the hope of better work and wages, proved a failure, and the air of a crowded tenement house dwarfed and injured the children, who died one by one, till only her baby, George Meredith Scott, was left to console the widow.

While she mused and wept over this panorama of her life, wondering a little that some long past memory had made her name the boy for her old friend, never hoping to meet him again, Dr. Turner called.

He explained very courteously that Mr. Meredith had requested him to see if his professional services would not help her, and examined the arm. His directions were brief, and he left her to wonder if indeed her old friend was the gentleman who was helping her boy, and whose card lay between the leaves of the Bible.

Dr. Turner's report to Mr. Meredith was:

"Delicate woman, evidently a lady. Arm doing very well, but general health at the lowest ebb. Wants good food, better air, and, above all, mental quiet. Fretting herself to death."

George Meredith being one of those rare philanthropists whose left hand knew not the good deeds of his right hand, made no parade of his generosity. If Mrs. Scott guessed, she never knew whence came an envelope with a generous gift of bank notes. It enabled her to make George neat, to add to her own scanty attire, and to provide the medicines and food Dr. Turner no longer hesitated to order.

In these weeks that followed George's engagement as errand boy to Mr. Meredith, the boy won his way far into the heart of the bachelor lawyer. For years, after his rejection by Agnes Wellden, he had lived a busy life, trying to forget the pain of his broken love dream in his ambition. A man always reserved, caring nothing for society, he had given to his old friend's child the one love of his life, never striving to replace her image in his heart, never seeking to add family joy to his scheme of life. It would be too much to say that he had not recovered, in the years that followed his disappointment, from its sting. As time rolled on there were often months when he never thought of his old love; and when he took George Scott into his employ, her image was entirely buried under the varied interests of his career of professional usefulness and political interest.

But the boy stirred new well springs in his heart, of love and gentleness. He was a quiet, gentle child, with an active brain, but delicate constitution, one of the frail little ones who seem utterly unfit to cope with the trials and sorrows of this hard world. Willing, respected and gentlemanly, he was trusted with many errands that Mr. Meredith would have hesitated to give to a boy of less refinement and intelligence, and his gratitude made him ever eager to do his best to please his kind friend.

Winter was over, and April winds sweeping over the city, when one day Mr. Meredith sat waiting an answer to

a note, in a state of mounting impatience. It was something altogether new for George to loiter on the way, or to neglect any detail of an errand. Yet he had been sent on a mission that need not occupy twenty minutes, and three hours had elapsed without his return.

Impatience was giving way to uneasiness, when a policeman presented himself.

"Lad employed here name of Scott?" he asked.

"Yes, what has happened?"

"Knocked down by a runaway team; badly hurt. We took him home, and he wanted me to let you know why he was away."

"Thanks. I will go to him."

He took up his hat as he spoke, wondering himself at the thrill of pain at his heart. He knew then that he loved the boy as he had not loved any one for many years. The lad's own sweetness, with the eyes that were a memory of his mother, had endeared him to the world-worn lawyer, till it was with positive pain he bent over the bed and saw the little face white and drawn with agony.

"My poor boy!" he said, tenderly, "what can I do for you?"

"Did mother go away?" the child whispered. "She said I might see you alone."

"There is no one here but ourselves."

"Maybe I'm wicked," the child said, "because mother told me not to tell you what I am going to tell you now. No, please; don't stop me. I'm badly hurt, sir, and I may die, and mother will be all alone; and so I want to tell you that she knew you once, many years ago, and that my name was George Meredith Scott. I was named for you, sir; and mother's told me so much about you, and how good you always were, that I am sure you will be kind to her if I die."

"You may be sure, George, that while I live your mother will never want a friend."

Presently she came in, a pale shadow of his brilliant young love, and yet when they greeted each other the voices of both were unsteady, and in each heart was a memory that made the meeting at once a pain and a joy.

Over the little bed where George lay for weeks in patient suffering, George Meredith once more let his heart expand to new hope; loving with deep, protecting affection his love of long ago.

And the woman who had once thought life was to be all brightness, and who had shrunk from even a shadow on her path, knew at last what a heart she had once rejected. That he could love her again, with her beauty faded, her life broken by sorrow, did not occur to her, though she knew that her passionate gratitude to him had long been love, deep, sincere love, such as she had thought buried forever in her husband's grave.

It was in their first grateful joy over Dr. Turner's assurance that George was out of danger and would entirely recover, that these two long separated hearts met at last.

They scarcely could have told themselves in what words they exchanged vows of fidelity and love, but in Mrs. Scott's heart there was not one thought of the worldly gain that would follow her marriage, and George Meredith knew that for love, and by love alone, his wife was won at last.

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