

THE TWO ACTS; OR, "THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD."

"No, indeed! I shall do no such thing," said Mrs. Lionel to her husband, who had come home with the intelligence that a cousin of his, a widow, had died suddenly, and left a little girl, three years old, whom he proposed that his wife should adopt and bring up as her own—they having no children. But she gave a decided negative on the spot.

"She is a sweet, interesting child," urged Mr. Lionel. "You will soon get attached to her, and be more than repaid, in the new affection awakened in your heart, for all the care and trouble she may occasion."

"It is of no use to talk to me, Mr. Lionel," returned the lady, in a positive tone of voice. "I know all about the care and trouble, and am not willing to take it upon myself. As I have no children of my own, I am not disposed to take the burden of other people's. So it is useless for you to press this subject; for I will never consent to what you propose."

"If you feel in that way, I shall certainly not urge the matter," said her husband. "Though, as far as I am concerned, it would give me great pleasure to adopt Aggie, who is a charming little creature. I wish you could see her."

"I have no particular desire. All children are alike to me. As to beauty, that is a poor compensation for the trouble. So I must beg to be excused."

Mr. Lionel said no more on the subject. He was exceedingly fond of children, and never ceased to regret that he had none of his own.

In two or three instances before, he had endeavoured to prevail upon his wife to adopt a child; but she had, each time, firmly declined. She had very little affection for children herself, and was not willing to take the care and trouble that she saw would necessarily be involved in the adoption of a child. The little girl who, by the death of his cousin, had been left homeless and apparently friendless, was a sweet young creature, whom to look upon was to love. Mr. Lionel had never seen her without a warming of his heart toward her, and a secret wish that she were his own instead of another's. The moment he heard of his cousin's death he determined to adopt Agnes, or Aggie, as she was called, provided his wife were willing. But Mrs. Lionel was not willing. She was too selfish to love anything out of herself. A thought of the child's good—of giving a home to the homeless—of being a mother to the motherless—never crossed her mind. She only thought of the trouble the little orphan would give.

The insuperable difficulty in the way of adopting Aggie as his own did not destroy the interest which Mr. Lionel felt in her. He considered it his duty to see that she was provided with a good home, and was willing to be at the cost of her maintenance, if necessary. His first thought had been to adopt the child, and until that was understood to be out of the question, he had thought of nothing else in regard to her. How she was to be disposed of, now that his wife had definitely settled the matter against him, became a new subject of reflection. After due deliberation, he determined to see a distant relative on the subject, with whom, since his marriage, he had held but little familiar intercourse, although he entertained for her a high respect. The reason of this was the cold, proud, unsocial temper of his wife, who rather looked down upon his relatives, because their standing in society was not as high as hers had been, and still was. Necessarily, such a disposition in his wife could prevent intimate social intercourse between Mr. Lionel and his relatives.

The relative to whom reference has just been made was a lady whose husband, a very estimable man, was in moderately good circumstances. They had three children of their own, the youngest of which was nearly ten years of age. From his appreciation of Mrs. Wellford's character, Mr. Lionel, who, from thinking of Aggie as his adopted child, began to love her almost as much as if she were really his own, felt a strong desire that she should take the orphan. He had not seen her for a couple of years when he called upon her to talk about the matter. A little to his surprise, Mrs. Wellford, when she met him in the parlour, entered leading Aggie by the hand.

"Dear little creature!" said he, taking the child in his arms and kissing her, as soon as he had shaken hands with Mrs. Wellford. "I am glad to see you in such good hands. It is about this very child, Mary," he added, "that I have come to talk with you. What is to be done with her?"

"I don't know," returned Mrs. Wellford. "She must have a home somewhere among us. The dear child! Anybody could love her. Have you thought of taking her?"

"If I were to consult my own feelings and wishes, I should adopt her as my own child immediately. But I am not at liberty to do this, and therefore must not think about it. I am willing, however, to be at the entire cost of her maintenance and education, if you will undertake the care of her. What I can do, I will do with all my heart."

"We have already talked seriously about adding Aggie to our little household," replied Mrs. Wellford. "And if no one else offers to do so, we will keep her, and do for her the same as if she were our own. It will bring more care and anxiety to me, which, as my health is not good, will be my duty to take the place of her mother, and I shall assume the office cheerfully."

"But at my charge," said Mr. Lionel.

"No," replied Mrs. Wellford. "A mother accepts no pay for her duty. It is a labour of love, and brings its own reward. Though Providence has not given us wealth, yet we have enough, and I think as much to spare as this dear child will need. For your kind wishes and intentions for Aggie, I will thank you in her stead. I thought, perhaps, as you had no children, that you might wish to adopt her; but as this cannot be, it will doubtless fall to our lot."

Mr. Lionel went home feeling less satisfied with his wife's spirit and temper—so strongly contrasted as it was with that of Mrs. Wellford—than he had felt for a long time.

"She will have her reward," he murmured to himself; "and, as she said, justly, it will be sweet." This was an allusion to Mrs. Wellford, who had called the mother's duty she was about to assume, a labour of love.

Little Aggie scarcely felt the loss of her parent. The love she had borne her mother was transferred to her aunt, as Mrs. Wellford was called, so early that no void was left in her heart. It took but a little while for each member of the family to feel that Aggie had a right to be among them, and for Mr. and Mrs. Wellford to love her as their own child.

Years rolled by, and brought many unlooked-for changes both to Mrs. Lionel and Mrs. Wellford. Both had been subjected to afflictions and reverses—the severest, perhaps, that ordinarily fall to the lot of any—for both were widows, and both friendless and poor. As for Mrs. Wellford, she had not only lost her husband, but all her children were taken, and she was left alone in the world with the orphan Aggie. But she, grown into a lovely young woman, nestled closer to her side and into her very bosom; though not with a helpless, but in a sustaining spirit. Death, though he had robbed Mrs. Wellford of much, had still left her much. Bereaved as she had been, she was neither lonely nor sad. How different was the case of Mrs. Lionel! After the death of her husband, and the total loss of her property, she fell back at once from her high position in the social scale, into neglect, obscurity, and want. For the very means of subsistence, exertion became necessary. But what could she do for a living, who had, in her whole life, done scarcely a useful thing—who had been little better than a drone in the social hive? Nothing! And if there was small ability, there was pride enough besides to prevent its exercise.

At the time of her husband's death, which followed shortly after the reverses that stripped him of all worldly possessions, Mrs. Lionel retired into the family of a poor relative, who had been little thought of in brighter days, and who, although she did not wish to receive her, could not close her door in her face. A sad spectacle she was. Shut up in the little chamber that was assigned, she never went out, and only met

the family she was hurrying with her presence at the table, and then with an aspect so gloomy and reserved, as to throw a chill over the feelings of all.

For a short period Mrs. Lionel paid a small sum for her board, but not very long time passed before all her money was exhausted, and she became absolutely dependent upon a poor woman distantly related to her, whose only means of support was her own and her daughter's personal labour.

After the death of her husband and children, Mrs. Wellford, who was left quite as poor as Mrs. Lionel, began to look around her for some means of securing an income for herself and Agnes, whom she loved, now that all the rest were gone, with a tenderness that equalled the sum of her love for all. But what to do was a difficult thing to determine. When a young girl, her education had been very plain; she could not, therefore, resort to teaching in any branch, for she had not the requisite ability. Sewing always gave her a severe pain in the chest and side, so that whatever might be her skill in needlework, she was precluded from resorting to it as a means of obtaining money.

"I think," said she to Agnes, after looking at the subject in every possible light, "that there is but one thing left for me to do."

"What is that, aunt?" inquired Agnes.

"Taking a few boarders. I could attend to them."

"It will be very hard work," suggested the niece, "too hard for you. No, no, aunt, that will not do; look what a slave's life Mrs. Minnion has. Don't think of it."

"I must do something, you know, Aggie dear; in a little while, all our money will be gone. I have thought of everything, but my mind comes back to this at last. I don't like the thought of it, but it is right for me to exert myself, and I must do so without a murmur."

"Haven't you yet thought of anything that I can do?" asked Agnes, in a cheerful voice. "I am sure that I can do something," she added, confidently; "and I am younger, and have better health than you have."

"I cannot think, my dear child," said Mrs. Wellford, with much earnestness in her voice, "of your being exposed to the world's rough contact; you are too young."

"The contact you seem so to dread cannot hurt me, aunt," returned Agnes, "for I have given myself to Jesus, and I know he will enable me to overcome the world."

"But I cannot bear the thought of seeing you, in the very spring-time of life, when all along your path should grow up flowers to fill the air with perfume, chained like a slave to the car of Labour. No, no, Aggie, it must not be; I can do all that is required. If I fail, then it will be time enough to call upon you for aid."

Pride as well as affection reigned in the breast of Mrs. Wellford. She could not bear the thought of seeing Agnes engaged in any kind of labour for money. She was fully capable of giving instruction in many things, and of securing thereby a fair income; but her aunt would not hear of her seeking for employment.

"Aunt is wrong," said Agnes to herself, when alone, soon after the interview, in which Mrs. Wellford declared it as her belief that the only thing left for her to do was to take a few boarders. "I ought not to see her do this." She sat thoughtfully for a few moments, and then added aloud—"And I will not see her do it. I have received everything from her, and now is the time for me to make some return. But what shall I do? Where shall I seek for employment?"

Half an hour after she had asked herself these questions so earnestly, Agnes picked up a newspaper, and the first thing that met her eyes was an advertisement for a person to give lessons in music and one or two modern languages to three young ladies, for which a liberal compensation would be paid. Without saying a word to her aunt, Agnes dressed herself and went to the place mentioned in the advertisement. The house before which she paused was a very large one, in a fashionable part of the city; everything around it indicated a wealthy owner. For a few moments she felt timid, and hesitated about presenting herself; but she soon regained her self-possession, and made the application for which she had come.

A middle-aged woman, of mild and lady-like deportment, met her on being shown into one of the apartments.

"I believe you advertised for a teacher," said Agnes, speaking in a low trembling voice. She found herself more agitated than she had expected.

"We did," replied the lady, "and have already received several applications, though none of those who have answered the advertisement suit us in all respects. And I am afraid that we shall hardly find all that we desire in you."

There was nothing in the way this said to hurt the feelings of Agnes, but rather to make her feel more free to speak.

"Why do you think I shall not suit?" she asked, looking earnestly into the lady's face.

"Because you are too young. You cannot be over seventeen years of age."

"I am sixteen," returned Agnes.

"But even that is too young. We wish a person of some experience, and of the firm ability. I will not question your ability, but you certainly cannot have much experience in teaching. Have you ever given lessons in music?"

"Not yet; but I wish to do so, and believe that I could give satisfaction."

"Then you have never been engaged in teaching at all?"

"No, never."

"I hardly think you would suit us."

The countenance of Agnes fell so suddenly that the lady's sympathies were awakened, and she said, "Are you very desirous of securing a situation as teacher?"

"Desirous above all things," replied Agnes, with much earnestness.

The lady continued to ask question after question, until she understood fully what was in the young girl's mind. She then appreciated her more highly, although she did not believe her fully qualified to give instruction that was desired. Agnes, who gained confidence the more she conversed with the lady, at length urged that she might have a trial.

"But suppose, after we give you a trial, that you do not suit us; we shall find it hard to send you away."

The force of this objection was fully appreciated by the lady when she uttered it, for already she felt so drawn toward the young girl with whom she was holding the interview, that her feelings were fast getting the control of her judgment.

"I am sure I shall suit you," replied Agnes, "for I will give the most untiring attention to my duties."

The lady looked at her beautiful young face, lit up with the earnestness of a true purpose, and felt as she had never before felt for a stranger. She addressed a few words to her in French. Agnes replied in the same language.

"Your accent is certainly very correct. Now let me hear you perform something on the piano," she said.

Agnes went to the instrument, and, after selecting a piece of music, sat down and ran her fingers gracefully over the keys. The lady stood by to listen. Soon the young girl was in the midst of a beautiful but familiar composition, which she executed with unusual taste and brilliancy. Her touch was exquisite, and at the same time full and, where required, bold and confident.

"Admirable!" she heard uttered in a low voice just behind her, as she struck the last note in the piece. It was not the voice of a woman.

She started and turned quickly. More auditors than she had supposed were present. A young man and three beautiful young girls stood listening behind their mother, who had been attracted from an adjoining room by the music, so far superior to anything ordinarily heard. A drop crimson overspread the sweet young face of Agnes, heightening every native charm. The young man instantly retired, and the mother introduced her to her daughter, who were in love with so charming an instructress, and gave their voices at once to her favour. This but seconded the mother's propensities.

"Nothing has yet been said about compensation," remarked the lady to Agnes after she had requested the girls to leave them again alone. "We are willing to pay liberally, if we can get the person we want. At present I feel strongly in favour of giving you a trial. If, after thinking over the subject, it is concluded to do so, your salary will be eighty pounds. Do you think that will meet your wishes?"

"Fully," replied Agnes, with an emotion that she could scarcely conceal. The sum was larger than she had expected.

"Of course, I should like to be at home every night with my aunt," said she.

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