

B E B E E, OR TWO LITTLE WOODEN SHOES.

BY OUIDA.

Continued from last week.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was dark. The May days are short in the north land of the Scheldt.

She had her little winter cloak of frieze and her wooden shoes and her little white cap, with the sunny curls rippling out of it in their pretty rebellion. She had her little larkins, too, and her bundle, and she had paws for fresh eggs in her basket with some sweet herbs and the palm sheet that Father Francis had blessed last Easter—for who could tell, she thought, how ill he might not be, or how poor!

She hardly gave a look to the hut as she ran by the garden gate, all her heart was on the front, in the vague far off country where he lay sick unto death.

She was fast through the familiar lanes into the city. She was not very sure where Paris was, but she had the sun clear and firm, and she knew that people were always coming and going there and thither, so that she could find her road if she did not find it.

The forest was still all around her, with its exquisite life of bough and blossom, and murmur of insects and of bird. She told her hands, praying as she went, and was almost happy.

God would not let him die. Oh, no, not till she had kissed him once more, and could die with him.

The horses ran across the path, and the blue butterflies flew above head. There was purple gloom of pinewood, and sparkling verdure of aspen and elm. There were distant church carillons ringing, and straight golden shafts of sunlight.

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She often felt tired, and her wooden shoes were worn so thin that the hot dust of the road at noonday burnt her feet through them. Sometimes, too, she felt a curious brief faintness such as she had never known, for the lack of food and the long fatigues began to tell even on her hardy little body.

But she went on bravely, rarely doing less than twenty miles a day, and sometimes walking often in the night to save time and living on corn shells or under haystacks in the daytime.

So she walked until she reached the frontier of France. She began to see the blue sky and the green level always swirling round her as if some one were spinning them to right her, but still she would not be afraid, she went on, and on, and on, till she set her last step on the soil of Flanders.

Here a new, strange, terrible, incomprehensible obstacle opposed her; she had no money, and had never thought of money; she had forgotten that youth and strength and love and willing feet and piteous prayers—all went for nothing as this world is made.

A hope flashed over her, and a glad thought.

"I have the silver buckles and headband of my father."

"Would you take these? They are worth much more."

There was a derisive laughter; some one had her with an ugly begone; rough shoulders jostled her away. She stretched her arms out pitifully.

"Take me—oh, pray take me! I will go with the sheep with the cattle—only, take me!"

Then the red and raw nose bled her; she clutch'd at the silver buckles on her head, and made off with them and was lost in the throng; a great iron beast rushed by her, snorting flames and bellowing roar; there was a roll like thunder, and all was dark; the night express had passed on its way to Paris.

Bebe stood still, crushed for a moment with the noise and the cruelty and the sense of absolute desolation; she scarcely noticed that the buckles were stolen; she had only one thought—to get to Paris.

"Can I ever go without money?" she asked of the wretched man whom she glanced a moment, with a touch of pity, at the little wifelike face.

"The least is twenty francs—surely you must know that?" he said, and shut his grating with a clang.

Bebe turned away and went out of the great, cruel, tumultuous place, her heart ached and her breath came in sharp gusts of hoarse sobs too loud.

"There is now not at all to go without money to Paris, I suppose?" she asked of an old woman whom she knew, a little who sold nuts and little pictures of saints and wooden playthings under the trees in the avenue hard by.

The old woman shook her head.

"Eh—no, dear. There is nothing to be done anywhere in the world without money. Look, I cannot get a litre of nuts to sell unless I pay beforehand."

"Would it be far to walk?"

She stopped and whispered to her ear:

"Oh, help me!" she cried to him. "Oh, pray help me! I have walked all the way from Brussels; that is my country, and now they will not let me go back to it where the lions are. They say I have no money."

What papa should I have! I do not know. When she has done on barn, and does not even a cent anywhere, and has walked all the way—in fact that they want! I have none, and now they take my silver clasp in Brussels; and if I do not get to Paris I must die—without seeing him again—ever again! Dear God!"

The old brother looked at her thoughtfully. He had seen men of all kinds, and knew truth from counterfeit, and he was moved by the child's agony.

He stooped and whispered to her ear:

"Get up quick, and I will pass you. It is against law to let you go to prison for it. Never mind, come with me for a scented drink."

The boy looked at her with a smile, and joked the bavarian on her pretty face, took the papers over, and let her through, believing her the child of the chum-chum of the Brats. Some lies are blessed as truth.

The old man made a little comedy at the barrier, and wished her as though she were his daughter for letting her way as she came to meet him, and was laughing like a baby.

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"And he walked into Paris!"

"Yes, ten years ago. He had nothing but a few sous and an ash stick, and he had a fancy to try his luck there. And after all our feet were given us to travel with. If you go there and you see him, tell him to send me something—I am tired of hearing people never write."

He did not notice, but went on her road; since there was no other way but to walk she would take that way; the distance and the hardship did not appeal two little feet that were used to traverse so many miles of sun-baked summer dust and of frozen winter mud unlimberingly year after year.

The time it would take made her heart sick, indeed. He was a God, I know what might happen to me if I went to Paris, the length of legs, nor the fatigue of body daunted her. She only saw his eyes dim with pain and his lips burned with fever.

She would walk twenty miles a day, and then, perhaps, she might get lifts here and there on hay wagons or in peddler's carts; people and always used to kind to her. Anyhow she counted she might reach Paris well in fifteen days.

The boy turned aside in a by-street a narrow road and entered the copper places she had on her; they were few, and the poor pretty bangles that she might have sold to get money were stolen.

She has some twenty sous and a dozen eggs; she thought she might live on that; she had wanted to take the eggs to him, but after all, to keep life in her until she could reach Paris was one great thing.

"What a blessing it is to have been born poor; and have lived hardly—one wants little!" she thought to herself.

Then she up the sous in the linen boxes; she had not tried little leather bags and knapsacks down there were more music and laughter, and horses with brass bells, and bright colors on high in the wooden balconies, and below among the blossoming hawthorn hedges. She had to go through it all, and she shuddered a little as she ran, thinking of that one princess, deathless forest day when he had clasped her first.

After all God was very good, and by the sixteenth or seventeenth day she would be in the city of Paris.

She had been resting in times from mid-night to early morning especially after the sun had set, when the stars made in unnumbered millions.

"To be continued."

ten cent and twice, yet did not dare to knock at any one of the closed house doors—she had no money.

She walked on her first ten unknown miles, meeting a few people only, and being altogether unimpealed—a small gray figure through the wide world.

They thought her a peasant going to fair or a live bull, and no one did her more harm than to wish her good night in rough Flemish.

When the dawn began to white above the plains of the east, she saw an empty cow slided with hay; she was a little tired, and lay down and rested an hour or two, as a young lamb might have lain on the dried clover, for she knew that she must keep her strength, husband her power, or never reach across the dreary length of the foreign land to Paris.

But by full sunrise she was on her way again, bathing her face in a brick and buying a soul's worth of bread and dot galls at the first cottage that she passed to brighten her bowed Hoesthaert.

The forest was still all around her, with its exquisite life of bough and blossom, and murmur of insects and of bird. She told her hands, praying as she went, and was almost happy.

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