

OUIDA

BÉBÉE; OR, TWO LITTLE
WOODEN SHOES

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Bébé; Or, Two Little Wooden Shoes

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Ouida

Bébée; Or, Two Little Wooden Shoes

CHAPTER I

Bébée sprang out of bed at daybreak. She was sixteen.

It seemed a very wonderful thing to be as much as that—sixteen—a woman quite.

A cock was crowing under her lattice. He said how old you are!—how old you are! every time that he sounded his clarion.

She opened the lattice and wished him good day, with a laugh. It was so pleasant to be woke by him, and to think that no one in all the world could ever call one a child any more.

There was a kid bleating in the shed. There was a thrush singing in the dusk of the sycamore leaves. There was a calf lowing to its mother away there beyond the fence. There were dreamy muffled bells ringing in the distance from many steeples and belfries where the city was; they all said one thing, "How good it is to be so old as that—how good, how very good!"

Bébée was very pretty.

No one in all Brabant ever denied that. To look at her it seemed as if she had so lived among the flowers that she had grown like them, and only looked a bigger blossom—that was all.

She wore two little wooden shoes and a little cotton cap, and a gray kirtle—linen in summer, serge in winter; but the little feet in the shoes were like rose leaves, and the cap was as white as a lily, and the gray kirtle was like the bark of the bough that the apple-blossom parts, and peeps out of, to blush in the sun.

The flowers had been the only godmothers that she had ever had, and fairy godmothers too.

The marigolds and the sunflowers had given her their ripe, rich gold to tint her hair; the lupins and irises had lent their azure to her eyes; the moss-rosebuds had made her pretty mouth; the arum lilies had uncurled their softness for her skin; and the lime-blossoms had given her their frank, fresh, innocent fragrance.

The winds had blown, and the rains had rained, and the sun had shone on her, indeed, and had warmed the whiteness of her limbs, but they had only given to her body and her soul a hardy, breeze-blown freshness like that of a field cowslip.

She had never been called anything but Bébée.

One summer day Antoine Mäes—a French subject, but a Belgian by adoption and habit, an old man who got his meagre living by tilling the garden plot about his hut and selling flowers in the city squares—Antoine, going into Brussels for his day's trade, had seen a gray bundle floating among the water-lilies in the bit of water near his hut and had hooked it out to land, and found a year-old child in it, left to drown, no doubt, but saved by the lilies, and laughing gleefully at fate.

Some lace-worker, blind with the pain of toil, or some peasant woman harder of heart than the oxen in her yoke, had left it there to drift away to death, not reckoning for the inward ripple of the current or the toughness of the lily leaves and stems.

Old Antoine took it to his wife, and the wife, a childless and aged soul, begged leave to keep it; and the two poor lonely, simple folks grew to care for the homeless, motherless thing, and they and the people about all called it Bébée—only Bébée.

The church got at it and added to it a saint's name; but for all its little world it remained Bébée—Bébée when it trotted no higher than the red carnation heads;—Bébée when its yellow curls touched as high as the lavender-bush;—Bébée on this proud day when the thrush's song and the cock's crow found her sixteen years old.

Old Antoine's hut stood in a little patch of garden ground with a brier hedge all round it, in that byway which lies between Laeken and Brussels, in the heart of flat, green Brabant, where there are beautiful meadows and tall, flowering hedges, and forest trees, and fern-filled ditches, and a little piece of water, deep and cool, where the swans sail all day long, and the silvery willows dip and sway with the wind.

Turn aside from the highway, and there it lies to-day, and all the place brims over with grass, and boughs, and blossoms, and flowering beans, and wild dog-roses; and there are a few cottages and cabins there near the pretty water, and farther there is an old church, sacred to St. Guido; and beyond go the green level country and the endless wheat-fields, and the old mills with their red sails against the sun; and beyond all these the pale blue, sea-like horizon of the plains of Flanders.

It was a pretty little hut, pink all over like a sea-shell, in the fashion that the Netherlands love; and its two little square lattices were dark with creeping plants and big rose-bushes, and its roof, so low that you could touch it, was golden and green with all the lichens and stoneworts that are known on earth.

Here Bébée grew from year to year; and soon learned to be big enough and hardy enough to tie up bunches of stocks and pinks for the market, and then to carry a basket for herself, trotting by Antoine's side along the green roadway and into the white, wide streets; and in the market the buyers—most often of all when they were young mothers—would seek out the little golden head and the beautiful frank blue eyes, and buy Bébée's lilies and carnations whether they wanted them or not. So that old Mäes used to cross himself and say that, thanks to Our Lady, trade was thrice as stirring since the little one had stretched out her rosy fingers with the flowers.

All the same, however stirring trade might be in summer, when the long winters came and the Montagne de la Cour was a sharp slope of ice, and the pinnacles of St. Gudule were all frosted white with snow, and the hot-house flowers alone could fill the market, and the country gardens were bitter black wind-swept desolations where the chilly roots huddled themselves together underground like homeless children in a cellar,—then the money gained in the time of leaf and blossom was all needed to buy a black loaf and fagot of wood; and many a day in the little pink hut Bébée rolled herself up in her bed like a dormouse, to forget in sleep that she was supperless and as cold as a frozen robin.

So that when Antoine Mäes grew sick and died, more from age and weakness than any real disease, there were only a few silver crowns in the brown jug hidden in the thatch; and the hut itself, with its patch of ground, was all that he could leave to Bébée.

"Live in it, little one, and take nobody in it to worry you, and be good to the bird and the goat, and be sure to keep the flowers blowing," said the old man with his last breath; and sobbing her heart out by his bedside, Bébée vowed to do his bidding.

She was not quite fourteen then, and when she had laid her old friend to rest in the rough green graveyard about St. Guido, she was very sorrowful and lonely, poor little, bright Bébée, who had never hardly known a worse woe than to run the thorns of the roses into her fingers, or to cry because a thrush was found starved to death in the snow.

Bébée went home, and sat down in a corner and thought.

The hut was her own, and her own the little green triangle just then crowded with its Mayday blossom in all the colors of the rainbow. She was to live in it, and never let the flowers die, so he had said; good, rough old ugly Antoine Mäes, who had been to her as father, mother, country, king, and law.

The sun was shining.

Through the little square of the lattice she could see the great tulips opening in the grass and a bough of the apple-tree swaying in the wind. A chaffinch clung to the bough, and swung to and fro singing. The door stood open, with the broad, bright day beaming through; and Bébée's little world came streaming in with it,—the world which dwelt in the half-dozen cottages that fringed this green lane of hers like beavers' nests pushed out under the leaves on to the water's edge.

They came in, six or eight of them, all women; trim, clean, plain Brabant peasants, hard-working, kindly of nature, and shrewd in their own simple matters; people who labored in the fields all the day long, or worked themselves blind over the lace pillows in the city.

"You are too young to live alone, Bébée," said the first of them. "My old mother shall come and keep house for you."

"Nay, better come and live with me, Bébée," said the second. "I will give you bit and drop, and clothing, too, for the right to your plot of ground."

"That is to cheat her," said the third. "Hark, here, Bébée: my sister, who is a lone woman, as you know well, shall come and bide with you, and ask you nothing—nothing at all—only you shall just give her a crust, perhaps, and a few flowers to sell sometimes."

"No, no," said the fourth; "that will not do. You let me have the garden and the hut, Bébée, and my sons shall till the place for you; and I will live with you myself, and leave the boys the cabin, so you will have all the gain, do you not see, dear little one?"

"Pooh!" said the fifth, stouter and better clothed than the rest. "You are all eager for your own good, not for hers. Now I—Father Francis says we should all do as we would be done by—I will take Bébée to live with me, all for nothing; and we will root the flowers up and plant it with good cabbages and potatoes and salad plants. And I will stable my cows in the hut to sweeten it after a dead man, and I will take my chance of making money out of it, and no one can speak more fair than that when one sees what weather is, and thinks what insects do; and all the year round, winter and summer, Bébée here will want for nothing, and have to take no care for herself whatever."

She who spoke, Mère Krebs, was the best-to-do woman in the little lane, having two cows of her own and ear-rings of solid silver, and a green cart, and a big dog that took the milk into Brussels. She was heard, therefore, with respect, and a short silence followed her words.

But it was very short; and a hubbub of voices crossed each other after it as the speakers grew hotter against one another and more eager to convince each other of the disinterestedness and delicacy of their offers of aid.

Through it all Bébée sat quite quiet on the edge of the little truckle-bed, with her eyes fixed on the apple bough and the singing chaffinch.

She heard them all patiently.

They were all her good friends, friends old and true. This one had given her cherries for many a summer. That other had bought her a little waxen Jesus at the Kermesse. The old woman in the blue linen skirt had taken her to her first communion. She who wanted her sister to have the crust and the flowers, had brought her a beautiful painted book of hours that had cost a whole franc. Another had given her the solitary wonder, travel, and foreign feast of her whole life,—a day fifteen miles away at the fair at Mechlin. The last speaker of all had danced her on her knee a hundred times in babyhood, and told her legends, and let her ride in the green cart behind big curly-coated Tambour.

Bébée did not doubt that these trusty old friends meant well by her, and yet a certain heavy sense fell on her that in all these counsels there was not the same whole-hearted and frank goodness that had prompted the gifts to her of the waxen Jesus, and the Kermesse of Mechlin.

Bébée did not reason, because she was too little a thing and too trustful; but she felt, in a vague, sorrowful fashion, that they were all of them trying to make some benefit out of her poor little heritage, with small regard for herself at the root of their speculations.

Bébée was a child, wholly a child; body and soul were both as fresh in her as a golden crocus just born out of the snows. But she was not a little fool, though people sometimes called her so because she would sit in the moments of her leisure with her blue eyes on the far-away clouds like a thing in a dream.

She heard them patiently till the cackle of shrill voices had exhausted itself, and the six women stood on the sunny mud floor of the hut eyeing each other with venomous glances; for though they were good neighbors at all times, each, in this matter, was hungry for the advantages to be got out

of old Antoine's plot of ground. They were very poor; they toiled in the scorched or frozen fields all weathers, or spent from dawn to nightfall poring over their cobweb lace; and to save a son or gain a cabbage was of moment to them only second to the keeping of their souls secure of heaven by Lenten mass and Easter psalm.

Bébée listened to them all, and the tears dried on her cheeks, and her pretty rosebud lips curled close in one another.

"You are very good, no doubt, all of you," she said at last. "But I cannot tell you that I am thankful, for my heart is like a stone, and I think it is not so very much for me as it is for the hut that you are speaking. Perhaps it is wrong in me to say so; yes, I am wrong, I am sure,—you are all kind, and I am only Bébée. But you see he told me to live here and take care of the flowers, and I must do it, that is certain. I will ask Father Francis, if you wish: but if he tells me I am wrong, as you do. I shall stay here all the same."

And in answer to their expostulations and condemnation, she only said the same thing over again always, in different words, but to the same steadfast purpose. The women clamored about her for an hour in reproach and rebuke; she was a baby indeed, she was a little fool, she was a naughty, obstinate child, she was an ungrateful, wilful little creature, who ought to be beaten till she was blue, if only there was anybody that had the right to do it!

"But there is nobody that has the right," said Bébée, getting angry and standing upright on the floor, with Antoine's old gray cat in her round arms. "He told me to stay here, and he would not have said so if it had been wrong; and I am old enough to do for myself, and I am not afraid, and who is there that would hurt me? Oh, yes; go and tell Father Francis, if you like! I do not believe he will blame me, but if he do, I must bear it. Even if he shut the church door on me, I will obey Antoine, and the flowers will know I am right, and they will let no evil spirits touch me, for the flowers are strong for that; they talk to the angels in the night."

What use was it to argue with a little idiot like this? Indeed, peasants never do argue; they use abuse.

It is their only form of logic.

They used it to Bébée, rating her soundly, as became people who were old enough to be her grandmothers, and who knew that she had been raked out of their own pond, and had no more real place in creation than a water rat, as one might say.

The women were kindly, and had never thrown this truth against her before, and in fact, to be a foundling was no sort of disgrace to their sight; but anger is like wine, and makes the depths of the mind shine clear, and all the mud that is in the depths stink in the light; and in their wrath at not sharing Antoine's legacy, the good souls said bitter things that in calm moments they would no more have uttered than they would have taken up a knife to slit her throat.

They talked themselves hoarse with impatience and chagrin, and went backwards over the threshold, their wooden shoes and their shrill voices keeping a clattering chorus. By this time it was evening; the sun had gone off the floor, and the bird had done singing.

Bébée stood in the same place, hardening her little heart, whilst big and bitter tears swelled into her eyes, and fell on the soft fur of the sleeping cat.

She only very vaguely understood why it was in any sense shameful to have been raked out of the water-lilies like a drowning field mouse, as they had said it was.

She and Antoine had often talked of that summer morning when he had found her there among the leaves, and Bébée and he had laughed over it gayly, and she had been quite proud in her innocent fashion that she had had a fairy and the flowers for her mother and godmothers, which Antoine always told her was the case beyond any manner of doubt. Even Father Francis, hearing the pretty harmless fiction, had never deemed it his duty to disturb her pleasure in it, being a good, cheerful old man, who thought that woe and wisdom both come soon enough to bow young shoulders and to silver young curls without his interference.

Bébée had always thought it quite a fine thing to have been born of water-lilies, with the sun for her father, and when people in Brussels had asked her of her parentage, seeing her stand in the market with a certain look on her that was not like other children, had always gravely answered in the purest good faith,—

"My mother was a flower."

"You are a flower, at any rate," they would say in return; and Bébée had been always quite content.

But now she was doubtful; she was rather perplexed than sorrowful.

These good friends of hers seemed to see some new sin about her. Perhaps, after all, thought Bébée, it might have been better to have had a human mother who would have taken care of her now that old Antoine was dead, instead of those beautiful, gleaming, cold water-lilies which went to sleep on their green velvet beds, and did not certainly care when the thorns ran into her fingers, or the pebbles got in her wooden shoes.

In some vague way, disgrace and envy—the twin Discords of the world—touched her innocent cheek with their hot breath, and as the evening fell, Bébée felt very lonely and a little wistful.

She had been always used to run out in the pleasant twilight-time among the flowers and water them, Antoine filling the can from the well; and the neighbors would come and lean against the little low wall, knitting and gossiping; and the big dogs, released from harness, would poke their heads through the wicket for a crust; and the children would dance and play Colin Maillard on the green by the water; and she, when the flowers were no longer thirsted, would join them, and romp and dance and sing the gayest of them all.

But now the buckets hung at the bottom of the well, and the flowers hungered in vain, and the neighbors held aloof, and she shut to the hut door and listened to the rain which began to fall, and cried herself to sleep all alone in her tiny kingdom.

When the dawn came the sun rose red and warm; the grass and boughs sparkled; a lark sang; Bébée awoke sad in heart, indeed, for her lost old friend, but brighter and braver.

"Each of them wants to get something out of me," thought the child. "Well, I will live alone, then, and do my duty, just as he said. The flowers will never let any real harm come, though they do look so indifferent and smiling sometimes, and though not one of them hung their heads when his coffin was carried through them yesterday."

That want of sympathy in the flower troubled her.

The old man had loved them so well; and they had all looked as glad as ever, and had laughed saucily in the sun, and not even a rosebud turned the paler as the poor still stiffened limbs went by in the wooden shell.

"I suppose God cares; but I wish they did," said Bébée, to whom the garden was more intelligible than Providence.

"Why do you not care?" she asked the pinks, shaking the raindrops off their curled rosy petals.

The pinks leaned lazily against their sticks, and seemed to say, "Why should we care for anything, unless a slug be eating us?—*that* is real woe, if you like."

Bébée, without her sabots on, wandered thoughtfully among the sweet wet sunlightened labyrinths of blossom, her pretty bare feet treading the narrow grassy paths with pleasure in their coolness.

"He was so good to you!" she said reproachfully to the great gaudy gillyflowers and the painted sweet-peas. "He never let you know heat or cold, he never let the worm gnaw or the snail harm you; he would get up in the dark to see after your wants; and when the ice froze over you, he was there to loosen your chains. Why do you not care, anyone of you?"

"How silly you are!" said the flowers. "You must be a butterfly or a poet, Bébée, to be as foolish as that. Some one will do all he did. We are of market value, you know. Care, indeed! when the sun is so warm, and there is not an earwig in the place to trouble us."

The flowers were not always so selfish as this; and perhaps the sorrow in Bébée's heart made their callousness seem harder than it really was.

When we suffer very much ourselves, anything that smiles in the sun seems cruel—a child, a bird, a dragon-fly—nay, even a fluttering ribbon, or a spear-grass that waves in the wind.

There was a little shrine at the corner of the garden, set into the wall; a niche with a bit of glass and a picture of the Virgin, so battered that no one could trace any feature of it.

It had been there for centuries, and was held in great veneration; and old Antoine had always cut the choicest buds of his roses and set them in a delf pot in front of it, every other morning all the summer long. Bébée, whose religion was the sweetest, vaguest mingling of Pagan and Christian myths, and whose faith in fairies and in saints was exactly equal in strength and in ignorance,—Bébée filled the delf pot anew carefully, then knelt down on the turf in that little green corner, and prayed in devout hopeful childish good faith to the awful unknown Powers who were to her only as gentle guides and kindly playmates.

Was she too familiar with the Holy Mother?

She was almost fearful that she was; but then the Holy Mother loved flowers so well, Bébée would not feel aloof from her, nor be afraid.

"When one cuts the best blossoms for her, and tries to be good, and never tells a lie," thought Bébée, "I am quite sure, as she loves the lilies, that she will never altogether forget me."

So she said to the Mother of Christ fearlessly, and nothing doubting; and then rose for her daily work of cutting the flowers for the market in Brussels.

By the time her baskets were full, her fowls fed, her goat foddered, her starling's cage cleaned, her hut door locked, and her wooden shoes clattering on the sunny road into the city, Bébée was almost content again, though ever and again, as she trod the familiar ways, the tears dimmed her eyes as she remembered that old Antoine would never again hobble over the stones beside her.

"You are a little wilful one, and too young to live alone," said Father Francis, meeting her in the lane.

But he did not scold her seriously, and she kept to her resolve; and the women, who were good at heart, took her back into favor again; and so Bébée had her own way, and the fairies, or the saints, or both together, took care of her; and so it came to pass that all alone she heard the cock crow whilst it was dark, and woke to the grand and amazing truth that this warm, fragrant, dusky June morning found her full sixteen years old.

CHAPTER II

The two years had not been all playtime any more than they had been all summer.

When one has not father, or mother, or brother, and all one's friends have barely bread enough for themselves, life cannot be very easy, nor its crusts very many at any time.

Bébée had a cherub's mouth, and a dreamer's eyes, and a poet's thoughts sometimes in her own untaught and unconscious fashion.

But all the same she was a little hard-working Brabant peasant girl; up whilst the birds twittered in the dark; to bed when the red sun sank beyond the far blue line of the plains; she hoed, and dug, and watered, and planted her little plot; she kept her cabin as clean as a fresh-blossomed primrose; she milked her goat and swept her floor; she sat, all the warm days, in the town, selling her flowers, and in the winter time, when her garden yielded her nothing, she strained her sight over lace-making in the city to get the small bit of food that stood between her and that hunger which to the poor means death.

A hard life; very hard when hail and snow made the streets of Brussels like slopes of ice; a little hard even in the gay summer time when she sat under the awning fronting the Maison du Roi; but all the time the child thrived on it, and was happy, and dreamed of many graceful and gracious things whilst she was weeding among her lilies, or tracing the threads to and fro on her lace pillow.

Now—when she woke to the full sense of her wonderful sixteen years—Bébée, standing barefoot on the mud floor, was as pretty a sight as was to be seen betwixt Scheldt and Rhine.

The sun had only left a soft warmth like an apricot's on her white skin. Her limbs, though strong as a mountain pony's, were slender and well shaped. Her hair curled in shiny crumpled masses, and tumbled about her shoulders. Her pretty round plump little breast was white as the lilies in the grass without, and in this blooming time of her little life, Bébée, in her way, was beautiful as a peach-bloom is beautiful, and her innocent, courageous, happy eyes had dreams in them underneath their laughter, dreams that went farther than the green woods of Laeken, farther even than the white clouds of summer.

She could not move among them idly as poets and girls love to do; she had to be active amidst them, else drought and rain, and worm and snail, and blight and frost, would have made havoc of their fairest hopes.

The loveliest love is that which dreams high above all storms, unsoiled by all burdens; but perhaps the strongest love is that which, whilst it adores, drags its feet through mire, and burns its brow in heat, for the thing beloved.

So Bébée dreamed in her garden; but all the time for sake of it hoed and dug, and hurt her hands, and tired her limbs, and bowed her shoulders under the great metal pails from the well.

This wondrous morning, with the bright burden of her sixteen years upon her, she dressed herself quickly and fed her fowls, and, happy as a bird, went to sit on her little wooden stool in the doorway.

There had been fresh rain in the night: the garden was radiant; the smell of the wet earth was sweeter than all perfumes that are burned in palaces.

The dripping rosebuds nodded against her hair as she went out; the starling called to her, "Bébée, Bébée—bonjour, bonjour." These were all the words it knew. It said the same words a thousand times a week. But to Bébée it seemed that the starling most certainly knew that she was sixteen years old that day.

Breaking her bread into the milk, she sat in the dawn and thought, without knowing that she thought it, "How good it is to live when one is young!"

Old people say the same thing often, but they sigh when they say it. Bébée smiled.

Mère Krebs opened her door in the next cottage, and nodded over the wall.

"What a fine thing to be sixteen!—a merry year, Bébée."

Marthe, the carpenter's wife, came out from her gate, broom in hand.

"The Holy Saints keep you, Bébée; why, you are quite a woman now!"

The little children of Varnhart, the charcoal-burner, who were as poor as any mouse in the old churches, rushed out of their little home up the lane, bringing with them a cake stuck full of sugar and seeds, and tied round with a blue ribbon, that their mother had made that very week, all in her honor.

"Only see, Bébée! Such a grand cake!" they shouted, dancing down the lane. "Jules picked the plums, and Jeanne washed the almonds, and Christine took the ribbon off her own communion cap, all for you—all for you; but you will let us come and eat it too?"

Old Gran'mère Bishot, who was the oldest woman about Laeken, hobbled through the grass on her crutches and nodded her white shaking head, and smiled at Bébée.

"I have nothing to give you, little one, except my blessing, if you care for that."

Bébée ran out, breaking from the children, and knelt down in the wet grass, and bent her pretty sunny head to the benediction.

Trine, the miller's wife, the richest woman of them all, called to the child from the steps of the mill,—

"A merry year, and the blessing of Heaven, Bébée! Come up, and here is my first dish of cherries for you; not tasted one myself; they will make you a feast with Varnhart's cake, though she should have known better, so poor as she is. Charity begins at home, and these children's stomachs are empty."

Bébée ran up and then down again gleefully, with her lapful of big black cherries; Tambour, the old white dog, who had used to drag her about in his milk cart, leaping on her in sympathy and congratulation.

"What a supper we will have!" she cried to the charcoal-burner's children, who were turning somersaults in the dock leaves, while the swans stared and hissed.

When one is sixteen, cherries and a cake have a flavor of Paradise still, especially when they are tasted twice, or thrice at most, in all the year.

An old man called to her as she went by his door. All these little cabins lie close together, with only their apple-trees, or their tall beans, or their hedges of thorn between them; you may ride by and never notice them if you do not look for them under the leaves closely, as you would for thrushes' nests.

He, too, was very old; a lifelong neighbor and gossip of Antoine's; he had been a day laborer in these same fields all his years, and had never travelled farther than where the red mill-sails turned among the colza and the corn.

"Come in, my pretty one, for a second," he whispered, with an air of mystery that made Bébée's heart quicken with expectancy. "Come in; I have something for you. They were my dead daughter's—you have heard me talk of her—Lisette, who died forty year or more ago, they say; for me I think it was yesterday. Mère Krebs—she is a hard woman—heard me talking of my girl. She burst out laughing, 'Lord's sake, fool, why, your girl would be sixty now an she had lived.' Well, so it may be; you see, the new mill was put up the week she died, and you call the new mill old; but, my girl, she is young to me. Always young. Come here, Bébée."

Bébée went after him a little awed, into the dusky interior, that smelt of stored apples and of dried herbs that hung from the roof. There was a walnut-wood press, such as the peasants of France and the low countries keep their homespun linen in and their old lace that serves for the nuptials and baptisms of half a score of generations.

The old man unlocked it with a trembling hand, and there came from it an odor of dead lavender and of withered rose leaves.

On the shelves there were a girl's set of clothes, and a girl's sabots, and a girl's communion veil and wreath.

"They are all hers," he whispered,— "all hers. And sometimes in the evening time I see her coming along the lane for them—do you not know? There is nothing changed; nothing changed; the grass, and the trees, and the huts, and the pond are all here; why should she only be gone away?"

"Antoine is gone."

"Yes. But he was old; my girl is young."

He stood a moment, with the press door open, a perplexed trouble in his dim eyes; the divine faith of love and the mule-like stupidity of ignorance made him cling to this one thought without power of judgment in it.

"They say she would be sixty," he said, with a little dreary smile. "But that is absurd, you know. Why, she had cheeks like yours, and she would run—no lapwing could fly faster over corn. These are her things, you see; yes—all of them. That is the sprig of sweetbrier she wore in her belt the day before the wagon knocked her down and killed her. I have never touched the things. But look here, Bébée, you are a good child and true, and like her just a little. I mean to give you her silver clasps. They were her great-great-grandmother's before her. God knows how old they are not. And a girl should have some little wealth of that sort; and for Antoine's sake—"

The old man stayed behind, closing the press door upon the lavender-scented clothes, and sitting down in the dull shadow of the hut to think of his daughter, dead forty summers and more.

Bébée went out with the brave broad silver clasps about her waist, and the tears wet on her cheeks for a grief not her own.

To be killed just when one was young, and was loved liked that, and all the world was in its May-day flower! The silver felt cold to her touch—as cold as though it were the dead girl's hands that held her.

The garlands that the children strung of daisies and hung about her had never chilled her so.

But little Jeanne, the youngest of the charcoal-burner's little tribe, running to meet her, screamed with glee, and danced in the gay morning.

"Oh, Bébée! how you glitter! Did the Virgin send you that off her own altar? Let me see—let me touch! Is it made of the stars or of the sun?"

And Bébée danced with the child, and the silver gleamed and sparkled, and all the people came running out to see, and the milk carts were half an hour later for town, and the hens cackled loud unfed, and the men even stopped on their way to the fields and paused, with their scythes on their shoulders, to stare at the splendid gift.

"There is not such another set of clasps in Brabant; old work you could make a fortune of in the curiosity shops in the Montagne," said Trine Krebs, going up the steps of her mill house. "But, all the same, you know, Bébée, things off a dead body bring mischance sometimes."

But Bébée danced with the child, and did not hear.

Whose fête day had ever begun like this one of hers?

She was a little poet at heart, and should not have cared for such vanities; but when one is only sixteen, and has only a little rough woollen frock, and sits in the market place or the lace-room, with other girls around, how should one be altogether indifferent to a broad, embossed, beautiful shield of silver that sparkled with each step one took?

A quarter of an hour idle thus was all, however, that Bébée or her friends could spare at five o'clock on a summer morning, when the city was waiting for its eggs, its honey, its flowers, its cream, and its butter, and Tambour was shaking his leather harness in impatience to be off with his milk-cans.

So Bébée, all holiday though it was, and heroine though she felt herself, ran indoors, put up her cakes and cherries, cut her two basketfuls out of the garden, locked her hut, and went on her quick and happy little feet along the grassy paths toward the city.

The sorting and tying up of the flowers she always left until she was sitting under the awning in front of the Broodhuis; the same awning, tawny as an autumn pear and weather-blown as an old sail, which had served to shelter Antoine Mäes from heat and rain through all the years of his life.

"Go to the Madeleine; you will make money there, with your pretty blue eyes, Bébée," people had said to her of late; but Bébée had shaken her head.

Where she had sat in her babyhood at Antoine's feet, she would sit so long as she sold flowers in Brussels,—here, underneath the shadow of the Gothic towers that saw Egmont die.

Old Antoine had never gone into the grand market that is fashioned after the Madeleine of Paris, and where in the cool, wet, sweet-smelling halls, all the flowers of Brabant are spread in bouquets fit for the bridal of Una, and large as the shield of the Red-Cross Knight.

Antoine could not compete with all those treasures of greenhouse and stove. He had always had his little stall among those which spread their tawny awnings and their merry hardy blossoms under the shadow of the Hôtel de Ville, in the midst of the buyings and sellings, the games and the quarrels, the auctions and the Cheap Johns, the mountebank and the marriage parties, that daily and hourly throng the Grande Place.

Here Bébée, from three years old, had been used to sit beside him. By nature she was as gay as a lark. The people always heard her singing as they passed the garden. The children never found their games so merry as when she danced their rounds with them; and though she dreamed so much out there in the air among the carnations and the roses, or in the long, low workroom in the town, high against the crocketed pinnacles of the cathedral, yet her dreams, if vaguely wistful, were all bright of hue and sunny in their fantasies. Still, Bébée had one sad unsatisfied desire: she wanted to know so much, and she knew nothing.

She did not care for the grand gay people.

When the band played, and the park filled, and the bright little cafés were thronged with pleasure seekers, and the crowds flocked hither and thither to the woods, to the theatres, to the galleries, to the guinguettes, Bébée, going gravely along with her emptied baskets homeward, envied none of these.

When at Noël the little children hugged their loads of puppets and sugar-plums; when at the Fête Dieu the whole people flocked out be-ribboned and vari-colored like any bed of spring anemones; when in the merry midsummer the chars-a-bancs trundled away into the forest with laughing loads of students and maidens; when in the rough winters the carriages left furred and jewelled women at the doors of the operas or the palaces,—Bébée, going and coming through the city to her flower stall or lace work, looked at them all, and never thought of envy or desire.

She had her little hut: she could get her bread; she lived with the flowers; the neighbors were good to her, and now and then, on a saint's day, she too got her day in the woods; it never occurred to her that her lot could be better.

But sometimes sitting, looking at the dark old beauty of the Broodhuis, or at the wondrous carven fronts of other Spanish houses, or at the painted stories of the cathedral windows, or at the quaint colors of the shipping on the quay, or at the long dark aisles of trees that went away through the forest, where her steps had never wandered,—sometimes Bébée would get pondering on all this unknown world that lay before and behind and around her, and a sense of her own utter ignorance would steal on her; and she would say to herself, "If only I knew a little—just a very little!"

But it is not easy to know even a very little when you have to work for your bread from sunrise to nightfall, and when none of your friends know how to read or write, and even your old priest is one of a family of peasants, and can just teach you the alphabet, and that is all. For Father Francis could do no more than this; and all his spare time was taken up in digging his cabbage plot and seeing to his beehives; and the only books that Bébée ever beheld were a few tattered lives of saints that lay moth-eaten on a shelf of his cottage.

But Brussels has stones that are sermons, or rather that are quaint, touching, illuminated legends of the Middle Ages, which those who run may read.

Brussels is a gay little city that lies as bright within its girdle of woodland as any butterfly that rests upon moss.

The city has its ways and wiles of Paris. It decks itself with white and gold. It has music under its trees and soldiers in its streets, and troops marching and countermarching along its sunny avenues. It has blue and pink, and yellow and green, on its awnings and on its house fronts. It has a merry open-air life on its pavements at little marble tables before little gay-colored cafés. It has gilded balconies, and tossing flags, and comic operas, and leisurely pleasure seekers, and tries always to believe and make the world believe that it is Paris in very truth.

But this is only the Brussels of the noblesse and the foreigners.

There is a Brussels that is better than this—a Brussels that belongs to the old burgher life, to the artists and the craftsmen, to the master-masons of the *Moyen-âge*, to the same spirit and soul that once filled the free men of Ghent and the citizens of Bruges and the besieged of Leyden, and the blood of Egmont and of Horn.

Down there by the water-side, where the old quaint walls lean over the yellow sluggish stream, and the green barrels of the Antwerp barges swing against the dusky piles of the crumbling bridges.

In the gray square desolate courts of the old palaces, where in cobwebbed galleries and silent chambers the Flemish tapestries drop to pieces.

In the great populous square, where, above the clamorous and rushing crowds, the majestic front of the *Maison du Roi* frowns against the sun, and the spires and pinnacles of the burgomaster's gathering-halls tower into the sky in all the fantastic luxuriance of Gothic fancy.

Under the vast shadowy wings of angels in the stillness of the cathedral, across whose sunny aisles some little child goes slowly all alone, laden with lilies for the Feast of the Assumption, till their white glory hides its curly head.

In all strange quaint old-world niches withdrawn from men in silent grass-grown corners, where a twelfth-century corbel holds a pot of roses, or a Gothic arch yawns beneath a wool warehouse, or a waterspout with a grinning faun's head laughs in the grim humor of the *Moyen-âge* above the bent head of a young lace-worker.

In all these, Brussels, though more worldly than her sisters of Ghent and Bruges, and far more worldly yet than her Teuton cousins of Freiburg and Nürnberg, is still in her own way like as a monkish story mixed up with the *Romaunt of the Rose*; or rather like some gay French vaudeville, all fashion and jest, illustrated in old Missal manner with helm and hauberk, cope and cowl, praying knights and fighting priests, winged griffins and nimbused saints, flame-breathing dragons and enamoured princes, all mingled together in the illuminated colors and the heroical grotesque romance of the Middle Ages.

And it was this side of the city that Bébée knew; and she loved it well, and would not leave it for the market of the Madeleine.

She had no one to tell her anything, and all Antoine had ever been able to say to her concerning the Broodhuis was that it had been there in his father's time; and regarding St. Gudule, that his mother had burned many a candle before its altars for a dead brother who had been drowned off the dunes.

But the child's mind, unled, but not misled, had pondered on these things, and her heart had grown to love them; and perhaps no student of Spanish architecture, no antiquary of *Moyen-âge* relics, loved St. Gudule and the Broodhuis as little ignorant Bébée did.

There had been a time when great dark, fierce men had builded these things, and made the place beautiful. So much she knew; and the little wistful, untaught brain tried to project itself into those unknown times, and failed, and yet found pleasure in the effort. And Bébée would say to herself as she walked the streets, "Perhaps some one will come some day who will tell me all those things."

Meanwhile, there were the flowers, and she was quite content.

Besides, she knew all the people: the old cobbler, who sat next her, and chattered all day long like a magpie; the tinker, who had come up many a summer night to drink a-glass with Antoine; the Cheap John, who cheated everybody else, but who had always given her a toy or a trinket at every Fête Dieu all the summers she had known; the little old woman, sour as a crab, who sold rosaries and

pictures of saints, and little waxen Christs upon a tray; the big dogs who pulled the carts in, and lay panting all day under the rush-bottomed chairs on which the egg-wives and the fruit sellers sat, and knitted, and chattered; nay, even the gorgeous huissier and the frowning gendarme, who marshalled the folks into order as they went up for municipal registries, or for town misdemeanors,—she knew them all; had known them all ever since she had first trotted in like a little dog at Antoine's heels.

So Bébée stayed there.

It is, perhaps, the most beautiful square in all Northern Europe, with its black timbers, and gilded carvings, and blazoned windows, and majestic scutcheons, and fantastic pinnacles. That Bébée did not know, but she loved it, and she sat resolutely in front of the Broodhuis, selling her flowers, smiling, chatting, helping the old woman, counting her little gains, eating her bit of bread at noonday like any other market girl, but at times glancing up to the stately towers and the blue sky, with a look on her face that made the old tinker and cobbler whisper together, "What does she see there?—the dead people or the angels?"

The truth was that even Bébée herself did not know very surely what she saw—something that was still nearer to her than even this kindly crowd that loved her. That was all she could have said had anybody asked her.

But none did.

No one wanted to hear what the dead said; and for the angels, the tinker and the cobbler were of opinion that one had only too much of them sculptured about everywhere, and shining on all the casements—in reverence be it spoken, of course.

CHAPTER III

"I remembered it was your name-day, child Here are half a dozen eggs," said one of the hen wives; and the little cross woman with the pedler's tray added a waxen St. Agnes, colored red and yellow to the very life no doubt; and the old Cheap John had saved her a cage for the starling; and the tinker had a cream cheese for her in a vine-leaf, and the sweetmeat seller brought her a beautiful gilded horn of sugarplums, and the cobbler had made her actually a pair of shoes—red shoes, beautiful shoes to go to mass in and be a wonder in to all the neighborhood. And they thronged round her, and adored the silver waist buckles; and when Bébée got fairly to her stall, and traffic began, she thought once more that nobody's feast day had ever dawned like hers.

When the chimes began to ring all over the city, she could hardly believe that the carillon was not saying its "Laus Deo" with some special meaning in its bells of her.

The morning went by as usual; the noise of the throngs about her like a driving of angry winds, but no more hurting her than the angels on the roof of St. Gudule are hurt by the storm when it breaks.

Hard words, fierce passions, low thoughts, evil deeds, passed by the child without resting on her; her heart was in her flowers, and was like one of them with the dew of daybreak on it.

There were many strangers in the city, and such are always sure to loiter in the Spanish square; and she sold fast and well her lilacs and her roses, and her knots of thyme and sweetbrier.

She was always a little sorry to see them go, her kindly pretty playmates that, nine times out of ten no doubt, only drooped and died in the hands that purchased them, as human souls soil and shrivel in the grasp of the passions that woo them.

The day was a busy one, and brought in good profit. Bébée had no less than fifty sous in her leather pouch when it was over,—a sum of magnitude in the green lane by Laeken.

A few of her moss-roses were still unsold, that was all, when the Ave Maria began ringing over the town and the people dispersed to their homes or their pleasuring.

It was a warm gray evening: the streets were full; there were blossoms in all the balconies, and gay colors in all the dresses. The old tinker put his tools together, and whispered to her,—

"Bébée, as it is your feast day, come and stroll in St. Hubert's gallery, and I will buy you a little gilt heart, or a sugar-apple stick, or a ribbon, and we can see the puppet show afterwards, eh?"

But the children were waiting at home: she would not spend the evening in the city; she only thought she would just kneel a moment in the cathedral and say a little prayer or two for a minute—the saints were so good in giving her so many friends.

There is something very touching in the Flemish peasant's relation with his Deity. It is all very vague to him: a jumble of veneration and familiarity, of sanctity and profanity, without any thought of being familiar, or any idea of being profane.

There is a homely poetry, an innocent affectionateness in it, characteristic of the people. He talks to his good angel Michael, and to his friend that dear little Jesus, much as he would talk to the shoemaker over the way, or the cooper's child in the doorway.

It is a very unreasonable, foolish, clumsy sort of religion, this theology in wooden shoes; it is half grotesque, half pathetic; the grandmothers pass it on to the grandchildren as they pass the bowl of potatoes round the stove in the long winter nights; it is as silly as possible, but it comforts them as they carry fagots over the frozen canals or wear their eyes blind over the squares of lace; and it has in it the supreme pathos of any perfect confidence, of any utterly childlike and undoubting trust.

This had been taught to Bébée, and she went to sleep every night in the firm belief that the sixteen little angels of the Flemish prayer kept watch and ward over her bed. For the rest, being poetical, as these north folks are not, and having in her—wherever it came from, poor little soul—a warmth of fancy and a spirituality of vision not at all northern, she had mixed up her religion with the fairies of Antoine's stories, and the demons in which the Flemish folks are profound believers, and

the flowers into which she put all manner of sentient life, until her religion was a fantastic medley, so entangled that poor Father Francis had given up in despair any attempt to arrange it more correctly. Indeed, being of the peasantry himself, he was not so very full sure in his own mind that demons were not bodily presences, quite as real and often much more tangible than saints. Anyway, he let her alone; and she believed in the goodness of God as she believed in the shining of the sun.

People looked after her as she went through the twisting, picture-like streets, where sunlight fell still between the peaked high roofs, and lamps were here and there lit in the bric-à-brac shops and the fruit stalls.

Her little muslin cap blew back like the wings of a white butterfly. Her sunny hair caught the last sun-rays. Her feet were fair in the brown wooden shoes. Under the short woollen skirts the grace of her pretty limbs moved freely. Her broad silver clasps shone like a shield, and she was utterly unconscious that any one looked; she was simply and gravely intent on reaching St. Gudule to say her one prayer and not keep the children waiting.

Some one leaning idly over a balcony in the street that is named after Mary of Burgundy saw her going thus. He left the balcony and went down his stairs and followed her.

The sun-dazzle on the silver had first caught his sight; and then he had looked downward at the pretty feet.

These are the chances women call Fate.

Bébée entered the cathedral. It was quite empty. Far away at the west end there was an old custodian asleep on a bench, and a woman kneeling. That was all.

Bébée made her salutations to the high altar, and stole on into the chapel of the Saint Sacrament; it was the one that she loved best.

She said her prayer and thanked the saints for all their gifts and goodness, her clasped hand against her silver shield, her basket on the pavement by her, abovehead the sunset rays streaming purple and crimson and golden through the painted windows that are the wonder of the world.

When her prayer was done she still kneeled there; her head thrown back to watch the light, her hands clasped still, and on her upturned face the look that made the people say, "What does she see?—the angels or the dead?"

She forgot everything. She forgot the cherries at home, and the children even. She was looking upward at the stories of the painted panes; she was listening to the message of the dying sun-rays; she was feeling vaguely, wistfully, unutterably the tender beauty of the sacred place and the awful wonder of the world in which she with her sixteen years was all alone, like a little blue corn-flower among the wheat that goes for grist and the barley that makes men drunk.

For she was alone, though she had so many friends. Quite alone sometimes; for God had been cruel to her, and had made her a lark without song.

When the sun faded and the beautiful casements lost all glow and meaning, Bébée rose with a startled look—had she been dreaming?—was it night?—would the children be sorry, and go supperless to bed?

"Have you a rosebud left to sell to me?" a man's voice said not far off; it was low and sweet, as became the Sacrament Chapel.

Bébée looked up; she did not quite know what she saw: only dark eyes smiling into hers.

By the instinct of habit she sought in her basket and found three moss-roses. She held them out to him.

"I do not sell flowers here, but I will *give* them to you," she said, in her pretty grave childish fashion.

"I often want flowers," said the stranger, as he took the buds. "Where do you sell yours?—in the market?"

"In the Grande Place."

"Will you tell me your name, pretty one?"

"I am Bébée."

There were people coming into the church. The bells were booming abovehead for vespers. There was a shuffle of chairs and a stir of feet. Boys in white went to and fro, lighting the candles. Great clouds of shadow drifted up into the roof and hid the angels.

She nodded her little head to him.

"Good night; I cannot stay. I have a cake at home to-night, and the children are waiting."

"Ah! that is important, no doubt, indeed. Will you buy some more cakes for the children from me?"

He slid a gold piece in her hand. She looked at it in amaze. In the green lanes by Laeken no one ever saw gold. Then she gave it him back.

"I will not take money in church, nor anywhere, except what the flowers are worth. Good night."

He followed her, and held back the heavy oak door for her, and went out into the air with her.

It was dark already, but in the square there was still the cool bright primrose-colored evening light.

Bébée's wooden shoes went pattering down the sloping and uneven stones. Her little gray figure ran quickly through the deep shade cast from the towers and walls. Her dreams had drifted away. She was thinking of the children and the cake.

"You are in such a hurry because of the cake?" said her new customer, as he followed her.

Bébée looked back at him with a smile in her blue eyes.

"Yes, they will be waiting, you know, and there are cherries too."

"It is a grand day with you, then?"

"It is my fête day: I am sixteen."

She was proud of this. She told it to the very dogs in the street.

"Ah, you feel old, I dare say?"

"Oh, quite old! They cannot call me a child any more."

"Of course not, it would be ridiculous. Are those presents in your basket?"

"Yes, every one of them." She paused a moment to lift the dead vine-leaves, and show him the beautiful shining red shoes. "Look! old Gringoire gave me these. I shall wear them at mass next Sunday. I never had a pair of shoes in my life."

"But how will you wear shoes without stockings?"

It was a snake cast into her Eden.

She had never thought of it.

"Perhaps I can save money and buy some," she answered after a sad little pause. "But that I could not do till next year. They would cost several francs, I suppose."

"Unless a good fairy gives them to you?"

Bébée smiled; fairies were real things to her—relations indeed. She did not imagine that he spoke in jest.

"Sometimes I pray very much and things come," she said softly. "When the Gloire de Dijon was cut back too soon one summer, and never blossomed, and we all thought it was dead, I prayed all day long for it, and never thought of anything else; and by autumn it was all in new leaf, and now its flowers are finer than ever."

"But you watered it whilst you prayed, I suppose?"

The sarcasm escaped her.

She was wondering to herself whether it would be vain and wicked to pray for a pair of stockings: she thought she would go and ask Father Francis.

By this time they were in the Rue Royale, and half-way down it. The lamps were lighted. A regiment was marching up it with a band playing. The windows were open, and people were laughing and singing in some of them. The light caught the white and gilded fronts of the houses. The pleasure-seeking crowds loitered along in the warmth of the evening.

Bébé, suddenly roused from her thoughts by the loud challenge of the military music, looked round on the stranger, and motioned him back.

"Sir,—I do not know you,—why should you come with me? Do not do it, please. You make me talk, and that makes me late."

And she pushed her basket farther on her arm, and nodded to him and ran off—as fleetly as a hare through fern—among the press of the people.

"To-morrow, little one," he answered her with a careless smile, and let her go unpursued. Above, from the open casement of a café, some young men and some painted women leaned out, and threw sweetmeats at him, as in carnival time.

"A new model,—that pretty peasant?" they asked him.

He laughed in answer, and went up the steps to join them; he dropped the moss-roses as he went, and trod on them, and did not wait.

CHAPTER IV

Bébée ran home as fast as her feet would take her.

The children were all gathered about her gate in the dusky dewy evening; they met her with shouts of welcome and reproach intermingled; they had been watching for her since first the sun had grown low and red, and now the moon was risen.

But they forgave her when they saw the splendor of her presents, and she showered out among them Père Melchior's horn of comfits.

They dashed into the hut; they dragged the one little table out among the flowers; the cherries and cake were spread on it; and the miller's wife had given a big jug of milk, and Father Francis himself had sent some honeycomb.

The early roses were full of scent in the dew; the great gillyflowers breathed out fragrance in the dusk; the goat came and nibbled the sweetbrier unrebuked; the children repeated the Flemish bread-grace, with clasped hands and reverent eyes, "Oh, dear little Jesus, come and sup with us, and bring your beautiful Mother, too; we will not forget you are God." Then, that said, they ate, and drank, and laughed, and picked cherries from each other's mouths like little blackbirds; the big white dog gnawed a crust at their feet; old Krebs who had a fiddle, and could play it, came out and trilled them rude and ready Flemish tunes, such as Teniers or Mieris might have jumped to before an alehouse at the Kermesse; Bébée and the children joined hands, and danced round together in the broad white moonlight, on the grass by the water-side; the idlers came and sat about, the women netting or spinning, and the men smoking a pipe before bedtime; the rough hearty Flemish bubbled like a brook in gossip, or rung like a horn over a jest; Bébée and the children, tired of their play, grew quiet, and chanted together the "Ave Maria Stella Virginis"; a nightingale among the willows sang to the sleeping swans.

All was happy, quiet, homely; lovely also in its simple way.

They went early to their beds, as people must do who rise at dawn.

Bébée leaned out a moment from her own little casement ere she too went to rest.

Through an open lattice there sounded the murmur of some little child's prayer; the wind sighed among the willows; the nightingales sang on in the dark—all was still.

Hard work awaited her on the morrow, and on all the other days of the year.

She was only a little peasant—she must sweep, and spin, and dig, and delve, to get daily her bit of black bread,—but that night she was as happy as a little princess in a fairy tale; happy in her playmates, in her flowers, in her sixteen years, in her red shoes, in her silver buckles, because she was half a woman; happy in the dewy leaves, in the singing birds, in the hush of the night, in the sense of rest, in the fragrance of flowers, in the drifting changes of moon and cloud; happy because she was half a woman, because she was half a poet, because she was wholly a poet.

"Oh, dear swans, how good it is to be sixteen!—how good it is to live at all!—do you not tell the willows so?" said Bébée to the gleam of silver under the dark leaves by the water's side, which showed her where her friends were sleeping, with their snowy wings closed over their stately heads, and the veiled gold and ruby of their eyes.

The swans did not awake to answer.

Only the nightingale answered from the willows, with Desdemona's song.

But Bébée had never heard of Desdemona, and the willows had no sigh for her.

"Good night!" she said, softly, to all the green dewy sleeping world, and then she lay down and slept herself.—The nightingale sang on, and the willows trembled.

CHAPTER V

"If I could save a centime a day, I could buy a pair of stockings this time next year," thought Bébé, locking her shoes with her other treasures in her drawer the next morning, and taking her broom and pail to wash down her little palace.

But a centime a day is a great deal in Brabant, when one has not always enough for bare bread, and when, in the long chill winter, one must weave thread lace all through the short daylight for next to nothing at all; for there are so many women in Brabant, and every one of them, young or old, can make lace, and if one do not like the pitiful wage, one may leave it and go and die, for what the master lacemakers care or know; there will always be enough, many more than enough, to twist the thread round the bobbins, and weave the bridal veils, and the trains for the courts.

"And besides, if I can save a centime, the Varnhart children ought to have it," thought Bébé, as she swept the dust together. It was so selfish of her to be dreaming about a pair of stockings, when those little things often went for days on a stew of nettles.

So she looked at her own pretty feet,—pretty and slender, and arched, rosy, and fair, and uncramped by the pressure of leather,—and resigned her day-dream with a brave heart, as she put up her broom and went out to weed, and hoe, and trim, and prune the garden that had been for once neglected the night before.

"One could not move half so easily in stockings," she thought with true philosophy as she worked among the black, fresh, sweet-smelling mould, and kissed a rose now and then as she passed one.

When she got into the city that day, her rush-bottomed chair, which was always left upside down in case rain should fall in the night, was set ready for her, and on its seat was a gay, gilded box, such as rich people give away full of bonbons.

Bébé stood and looked from the box to the Broodhuis, from the Broodhuis to the box; she glanced around, but no one had come there so early as she, except the tinker, who was busy quarrelling with his wife and letting his smelting fire burn a hole in his breeches.

"The box was certainly for her, since it was set upon her chair?"—Bébé pondered a moment; then little by little opened the lid.

Within, on a nest of rose-satin, were two pair of silk stockings!—real silk!—with the prettiest clocks worked up their sides in color!

Bébé gave a little scream, and stood still, the blood hot in her cheeks; no one heard her, the tinker's wife, who alone was near, having just wished Heaven to send a judgment on her husband, was busy putting out his smoking smallclothes. It is a way that women and wives have, and they never see the bathos of it.

The place filled gradually.

The customary crowds gathered. The business of the day began underneath the multitudinous tones of the chiming bells. Bébé's business began too; she put the box behind her with a beating heart, and tied up her flowers.

It was the fairies, of course! but they had never set a rush-bottomed chair on its legs before, and this action of theirs frightened her.

It was rather an empty morning. She sold little, and there was the more time to think.

About an hour after noon a voice addressed her,—

"Have you more moss-roses for me?"

Bébé looked up with a smile, and found some. It was her companion of the cathedral. She had thought much of the red shoes and the silver clasps, but she had thought nothing at all of him.

"You are not too proud to be paid to-day?" he said, giving her a silver franc; he would not alarm her with any more gold; she thanked him, and slipped it in her little leathern pouch, and went on sorting some clove-pinks.

"You do not seem to remember me?" he said, with a little sadness.

"Oh, I remember you," said Bébée, lifting her frank eyes. "But you know I speak to so many people, and they are all nothing to me."

"Who is anything to you?" It was softly and insidiously spoken, but it awoke no echo.

"Varnhart's children," she answered him, instantly. "And old Annémie by the wharfside—and Tambour—and Antoine's grave—and the starling—and, of course, above all, the flowers."

"And the fairies, I suppose?—though they do nothing for you."

She looked at him eagerly,—

"They have done something to-day. I have found a box, and some stockings—such beautiful stockings! Silk ones! Is it not very odd?"

"It is more odd they should have forgotten you so long. May I see them?"

"I cannot show them to you now. Those ladies are going to buy. But you can see them later—if you wait."

"I will wait and paint the Broodhuis."

"So many people do that; you are a painter then?"

"Yes—in a way."

He sat down on an edge of the stall, and spread his things there, and sketched, whilst the traffic went on around them. He was very many years older than she; handsome, with a dark, and changeable, and listless face; he wore brown velvet, and had a red ribbon at his throat; he looked a little as Egmont might have done when wooing Claire.

Bébée, as she sold the flowers and took the change fifty times in the hour, glanced at him now and then, and watched the movements of his hands, she could not have told why.

Always among men and women, always in the crowds of the streets, people were nothing to her; she went through them as through a field of standing corn,—only in the field she would have tarried for poppies, and in the town she tarried for no one.

She dealt with men as with women, simply, truthfully, frankly, with the innocent fearlessness of a child. When they told her she was pretty, she smiled; it was just as they said that her flowers were sweet.

But this man's hands moved so swiftly; and as she saw her Broodhuis growing into color and form beneath them, she could not choose but look now and then, and twice she gave her change wrong.

He spoke to her rarely, and sketched on and on in rapid bold strokes the quaint graces and massive richness of the Maison du Roi.

There is no crowd so busy in Brabant that it will not find leisure to stare. The Fleming or the Walloon has nothing of the Frenchman's courtesy; he is rough and rude; he remains a peasant even when town bred, and the surly insolence of the "Gueux" is in him still. He is kindly to his fellows, though not to beasts; he is shrewd, patient, thrifty, industrious, and good in very many ways, but civil never.

A good score of them left off their occupations and clustered round the painter, staring, chattering, pushing, pointing, as though a brush had never been seen in all the land of Rubens.

Bébée, ashamed of her people, got up from her chair and rebuked them.

"Oh, men of Brussels; fie then for shame!" she called to them as clearly as a robin sings. "Did never you see a drawing before? and are there not saints and martyrs enough to look at in the galleries? and have you never some better thing to do than to gape wide-mouthed at a stranger? What laziness—ah! Just worthy of a people who sleep and smoke while their dogs work for them! Go away, all of you; look, there comes the gendarme—it will be the worse for you. Sir, sit under my stall; they will not dare trouble you then."

He moved under the awning, thanking her with a smile; and the people, laughing, shuffled unwillingly aside and let him paint on in peace. It was only little Bébée, but they had spoilt the child from her infancy, and were used to obey her.

The painter took a long time. He set about it with the bold ease of one used to all the intricacies of form and color, and he had the skill of a master. But he spent more than half the time looking idly at the humors of the populace or watching how the treasures of Bébée's garden went away one by one in the hands of strangers.

Meanwhile, ever and again, sitting on the edge of her stall, with his colors and brushes tossed out on the board, he talked to her, and, with the soft imperceptible skill of long practice in those arts, he drew out the details of her little simple life.

There were not always people to buy, and whilst she rested and sheltered the flowers from the sun, she answered him willingly, and in one of her longer rests showed him the wonderful stockings.

"Do you think it *could* be the fairies?" she asked him a little doubtfully.

It was easy to make her believe any fantastical nonsense; but her fairies were ethereal divinities. She could scarcely believe that they had laid that box on her chair.

"Impossible to doubt it!" he replied, unhesitatingly. "Given a belief in fairies at all, why should there be any limit to what they can do? It is the same with the saints, is it not?"

"Yes," said Bébée, thoughtfully.

The saints were mixed up in her imagination with the fairies in an intricacy that would have defied the best reasonings of Father Francis.

"Well, then, you will wear the stockings, will you not? Only, believe me, your feet are far prettier without them."

Bébée laughed happily, and took another peep in the cosy rose-satin nest.

But her little face had a certain perplexity. Suddenly she turned on him.

"Did not *you* put them there?"

"I?—never!"

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite; but why ask?"

"Because," said Bébée, shutting the box resolutely and pushing it a little away,—"because I would not take it if you did. You are a stranger, and a present is a debt, so Antoine always said."

"Why take a present then from the Varnhart children, or your old friend who gave you the clasps?"

"Ah, that is very different. When people are very, very poor, equally poor, the one with the other, little presents that they save for and make with such a difficulty are just things that are a pleasure; sacrifices; like your sitting up with a sick person at night, and then she sits up with you another year when you want it. Do you not know?"

"I know you talk very prettily. But why should you not take any one else's present, though he may not be poor?"

"Because I could not return it."

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