BEBEE;

OR,

TWO LITTLE WOODEN SHOES.

By "OUIDA."

CHAPTER V.

"If I could save a centime a day, I could buy a pair of stockings this time next year," thought Bebee, 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 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 lace makers 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 Bebee, 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 mold, 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.

Bebee 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 quarreling 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!"—Bebee 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!

Bebee 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 small clothes. 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. Bebee'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?"

Bebee 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 today?" 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 Bebee, 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 Annemie 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 today. 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, while the traffic went around them. He was very many years older than she; handsome, with a dark, and changeful, 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.

Bebee, 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.

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.

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 Bebee'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 they can do? It is the same with the saints, is it not?"

"Yes," said Bebee, 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."

Bebee laughed happily and took another peep at the cosy rose lined 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 Bebee, 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."

"Could you not?"

The smile in his eyes dazzled her a little; it was so strange, and yet had so much light in it; but she did not understand him one whit.

"No, how could I?" she said earnestly. "If I were to save for two years, I could not get francs enough to buy anything worth giving back; and I should be so unhappy, thinking of the debt of it always. Do tell me if you put those stockings there?"

"No;" he looked at her, and the trivial lie faltered and died away; the eyes, clear as crystal, questioned him so innocently.

"Well, if I did?" he said frankly, "you wished for them; what harm was there? Will you be so cruel as to refuse them from me?"

The tears sprang into Bebee's eyes. She was sorry to lose the beautiful box, but more sorry he had lied to her.

"It was very kind and good," she said, regretfully. "But I cannot think why you should have done it, as you had never known me at all. And, indeed, I could not take them, because Antoine would not let me if he were alive; and if I gave you a flower every day all the year round I should not pay you the worth of them—it would be quite impossible; and why should you tell me falsehoods about such a thing? A falsehood is never a thing for a man."

"A falsehood is never a thing for a man."

She shut the box and pushed it towards him and turned to the selling of her bouquets. Her voice shook a little as she tied up a bunch of mignonette and told the price of it.

Those beautiful stockings! why had she ever seen them, and why had he told her a lie?

It made her heart heavy. For the first time in her brief life the Broodhuis seemed to frown between her and the sun.

Undisturbed, he painted on and did not look at her.

The day was nearly done. The people began to scatter. The shadows grew very long. He painted, not glancing once elsewhere than at his study. Bebee's baskets were quite empty.

She rose, and lingered, and regarded him wistfully, he was angered, perhaps she had been rude? Her little heart failed her.

If he would only look up!

But he did not look up, he kept his handsome dark face studiously over the canvas of the Broodhuis. She would have seen a smile in his eyes if he had lifted them, but he never raised his lids.

Bebee hesitated; take the stockings she would not; but perhaps she had refused him too roughly. She wished so that he would look up and save her speaking first, but he knew what he was about too warily and well to help her thus.

She waited awhile, then took one little red moss rose bud that she had saved all day in a corner of her basket, and held it out to him frankly, shyly, as a peace offering.

"Was I rude? I did not mean to be, but I cannot take the stockings, and why did you tell me that falsehood?"

He took the rose bud and rose too, and smiled, but he did not meet her eyes.

"Let us forget the whole matter. It is not worth a sou. If you do not take the box leave it; it is of no use to me."

"I cannot take it."

She knew she was doing right. How was it that he could make her feel as though she were acting wrongly?

"Leave it, then, I say. You are not the first woman, my dear, who has quarreled with a wish fulfilled. It is a way your sex has of rewarding gods and men. Here, you old witch—here is a treasure trove for you. You can sell it for ten francs in the town anywhere."

As he spoke he tossed the casket and the stockings in it to an old decrepit woman, who was passing by with a baker's cart drawn by a dog; and, not staying to heed her astonishment, gathered his colors and easel together.

The tears swam in Bebee's eyes as she saw the box whirled through the air.

She had done right—she was sure she had done right.

He was a stranger; and she could never have repaid him; but he made her feel herself wayward and ungrateful, and it was hard to see the beautiful fairy gift borne away forever by the chuckling, hobbling, greedy old baker's woman. If he had only taken it himself she would have been glad then to have been brave and to have done her duty.

But it was not in his design that she should be glad.

He saw her tears, but he seemed not to see them.

"Good night, Bebee," he said, carelessly, as he sauntered aside from her. "Good night, my dear. To-morrow I will finish my painting, but I will not offend you by any more gifts."

Bebee lifted her drooped head and looked him in the eyes eagerly, with a certain sturdy resolve and timid wistfulness intermingled in her look.

"Sir—see, you speak to me quite wrongly," she said with a quick accent, that had pride as well as pain in it. "Say it was kind to bring me what I wished for—yes, it was kind, I know; but you never saw me till last night, and I cannot tell even your name; and it is very wrong to lie to any one, even to a little thing like me; and I am only Bebee, and cannot give you anything back, because I have only just enough to feed myself and the starling, and not always that in winter. I thank you very much for what you wish to do, but if I had taken those things I think you would have thought me very mean, and full of greed; and Antoine always said, 'Do not take what you cannot pay—not ever what you cannot pay—that is the way to walk with pure feet.' Perhaps I spoke ill, because they spoil me and they say I am too swift to say my mind. But I am not thankless—not thankless, indeed—it is only I could not take what I cannot pay. That is all. You are angry still—not now—no?"

There was anxiety in the pleading. What did it matter to her what a stranger thought?

And yet Bebee's heart was heavy as he laughed a little coldly, and bade her good day, and left her alone to go out of the city homewards. A sense of having done wrong weighed on her; of having been rude and ungrateful.

She had no heart for the children that evening. Mere Krebs was sitting out before her door shelling peas, and called to her to come in and have a drop of coffee. Krebs had come in from Vilvoorde fair and brought a stock of rare good berries with him. But Bebee thanked her and went on to her own garden to work.

She had always liked to sit out on the quaint wooden steps of the mill and under the red shadow of the sails, watching the swallows flutter to and fro in the sunset and hearing the green frogs croak in the rushes, while the old people told her tales of the time of how in their babyhood they had run out, fearful yet fascinated, to see the beautiful Scots Grays flash by in the murky night, and the endless line of guns and caissons crawl back as a snake through the summer dust and the trampled corn, going out past the woods to Waterloo.

But to-night she had no fancy for it; she wanted to be alone with the flowers.

Though, to be sure, they had been very heartless when Antoine's coffin had gone past them, still they had sympathy; the daisies smiled at her with their golden eyes and the roses dropped tears on her hand, just as her mood might be; the flowers were closer friends after all than any human souls, and besides she could say so much to them!

Flowers belong to fairy land; the flowers and the birds, and the butterflies, are all that the world has kept its golden Age; the only perfectly beautiful things on earth, joyous, innocent, half divine, useless, say they who are wiser than God.

Bebee went home and worked among her flowers.

A little laborious figure, with her petticoats twisted high, and her feet wet with the night dews, and her back bowed to the hoeing and clipping and raking among the blossoming plants.

"How late you are working to-night, Bebee!" one or two called out as they passed the gate. She looked up and smiled; but went on working while the white moon rose.

She did not know what ailed her.

She went to bed without supper, leaving her bit of bread and bowl of goat's milk to make a meal for the fowls in the morning.

"Little ugly, shameful, naked feet!" she said to them, sitting on the edge of her mattress, and looking at them in the moonlight. They were very pretty feet, and would not have been half so pretty in silk hose and satin shoes; but she did not know that; he had told her she wanted those vanities.

She sat still a long while, her rosy feet swaying to and fro like two roses that grow on one stalk and hang down in the wind. The little lattice was open; the sweet and dusky garden was beyond; there was a hand's breadth of sky, in which a single star was shining; the leaves of the vine hid all the rest.

But for once she saw none of it.

She only saw the black Broodhuis; the red and gold sunset overhead; the gray stones, with the fallen rose leaves and crushed fruits; and in the shadow two dark, reproachful eyes, that looked at hers.

Had she been ungrateful?

The little tender, honest heart of her was troubled and oppressed. For once that night she slept ill.

CHAPTER VI.

All the next day she sat under the yellow awning, but she sat alone.

It was market day; there were many strangers. Flowers were in demand. The copper pieces were ringing against one another all the hours through in her leathern bag. The cobbler was in such good humor that he forgot to quarrel with his wife. The fruit was in such plenty that they gave her a leaf full of white and red currants for her noonday dinner. And the people split their sides at the Cheap John's jokes; he was so droll. No one saw the leaks in his kettles or the hole in his bellows, or the leg that was lacking in his milking stool.

Everybody was gay and merry that day. But Bebee's blue eyes looked wistfully over the throng, and did not find what they sought. Somehow the day seemed dull, and the square empty.

When the day was done Bebee gave a quick sigh as she looked across the square. She had so wanted to tell him that she was not ungrateful, and she had a little moss rose ready, with a sprig of sweetbrier, and a tiny spray of maiden hair fern that grew under the willows, which she had kept covered up with a leaf of sycamore all the day long.

No one would have it now.

The child went out of the place sadly, as the carillon rang. There was only the moss rose in her basket, and the red and white currants that had been given her for her dinner.

She went along the twisting, many colored, quaintly fashioned streets, till she came to the water side.

Bebee was fond of watching the brigs and barges, that looked so big to her, with their national flags flying, and their tall masts standing thick as grass, and their tawny sails flapping in the wind, and about them the sweet, strong smell of that strange, unknown thing, the sea.

But this dull day Bebee did not go down upon the wharf; she did not want the sailors' tales; she saw the masts and bits of bunting that streamed from them, and they made her restless, which they had never done before.

Instead she went in at a dark old door and climbed up a steep staircase that went up and up, as though she were mounting St. Gudule's belfry towers; and at the top of it entered a little chamber in the roof, where one square unglazed hole that served for light looked out upon the canal, with all its crowded craft, from the dainty schooner yacht, fresh as gilding and holystone could make her, that was running for pleasure to the Scheldt, to the rude, clumsy coal barge, black as night, that bore the rough diamonds of Belgium to the snow buried roofs of Christiania and Stromstad.

In the little dark attic there was a very old woman in a red petticoat and a high cap, who sat against the window, and pricked out lace patterns with a pin on thick paper. She was 85 years old, and could hardly keep body and soul together.

Bebee, running to her, kissed her.

"Oh, mother Annemie, look here! Beautiful red and white currants, and a roll; I saved them for you. They are the first currants we have seen this year. Me! oh, for me, I have eaten more than are good! You know I pick fruit like a sparrow, always. Dear mother Annemie, are you better? Are you quite sure you are better today?"

The little old withered woman, brown as a walnut and meager as a rush, took the currants, and smiled with a childish glee, and began to eat them, blessing the child with each crumb she broke off the bread.

"Why had you not a grandmother of your own, my little one?" she mumbled. "How good you would have been to her, Bebee!"

"Yes," said Bebee, seriously, but her mind could not grasp the idea. It was easier for her to believe the fanciful lily parentage of Antoine's stories. "How much work have you done, Annemie? Oh, all that! All that! But there is enough for a week. You work too early and too late, you dear Annemie."

"Nay, Bebee, when one has to get one's bread that cannot be. But I am afraid my eyes are failing. That rose, now, is it well done?"

"Beautifully done. Would the Baes take take them if they were not? You know he is one that cuts every centime in four pieces."

"Ah! sharp enough, sharp enough—that is true. But I am always afraid of my eyes. I do not see the flags out there so well as I used to do."

"Because the sun is so bright, Annemie, that is all. I myself, when I have been sitting all day in the Place in the light, the flowers look pale to me. And you know it is not age with me, Annemie."

The old woman and the young girl laughed together at that droll idea.

"You have a merry heart, dear little one," said old Annemie. "The saints keep it to you always."

"May I tidy the room a little?"

"To be sure, dear, and thank you too. I have not much time, you see; and somehow my back aches badly when I stoop."

"And it is so damp here for you, over all that water!" said Bebee as she swept and dusted and set to rights the tiny place, and put in a little broken pot a few sprays of honeysuckle and rosemary that she had brought with her. "It is so damp here. You should have come and lived in my hut with me, Annemie, and sat out under the vine all day, and looked after the chickens for me when I was in the town. They are such mischievous little souls, as soon as my back is turned one or other is sure to push through the roof, and get out among the flowerbeds. Will you never change your mind, and live with me, Annemie? I am sure you would be happy, and the starling says your name quite plain, and he is such a funny bird to talk to, you never would tire of him. Will you never come? It is so bright there, and green and sweet smelling, and to think you never even have seen it!—and the swans and all—it is a shame."

"No dear," said old Annemie, eating her last bunch of currants. "You have said so so often, and you are good and mean it, that I know. But I could not leave the water. It would kill me. Out of this window, you know, I saw my Jeannot's brig go away—away—away—till the masts were lost in the mists among what iron to Norway; the Fleur d'Epine of this town, a good ship, and a sure, and her mate, and as proud as might be, and with a little blest Mary in lead round his throat. She was to be back in port in eight months, bringing timber. Eight months—that brought Easter time. But she never came. Never, never, never, you know. I sat here watching them come and go, and my child sickened and died, and the summer passed, and the autumn, and all the while I looked—looked—looked; for the brigs are all much alike; and only her I always saw as soon as she hove in sight because he tied a bank of flax to her mizzen mast; and when he was home safe and sound I spun the bank into hose for him; that was a fancy of his, and for sleepy voyages, one on another, he had never missed to tie the flax nor I to spin the hose. But the bank of flax I never saw this time; nor the brave brig; nor my good man with his sunny blue eyes. Only one day in winter, when the great blocks of ice were smashing hither and thither, a coaster came in and brought tidings of how off in the Danish waters they had come on a waterlogged brig, and her hull riven in two and her crew all drowned and dead beyond any manner of doubt. And on her stern there was her name painted white, the Fleur d'Epine, of Brussels, as plain as name could be, and that was all we ever knew; what evil had struck her, or how they had perished, nobody ever told. Only the coaster brought that bit of beam away, with the Fleur d'Epine writ clear upon it. But you see I never know my man is dead. Any day—who can say?—any one of those ships may bring him aboard of her, and he may leap out on the wharf there, and come running up the stairs as he used to do, and cry, in his merry voice, 'Annemie, Annemie, here is more flax to spin, here is more hose to weave!' For that was always his homeward word; no matter whether he had had fair weather or foul, he always knotted the flax to his masthead. So you see, dear, I could not leave here. For what if he came and found me away? He would say it was an odd fashion of mourning for him. And I could not do without the window, you know. I can watch all the brigs come in, and I can smell the shipping smell that I have loved all the days of my life; and I can see the lads heaving, and climbing, and furling, and mending these bits of canvas, and hauling their flags up and down. And then who can say?—the sea never took him, I think—I think I shall hear his voice before I die. For they do say that God is good."

Bebee, sweeping very noiselessly, listened, and her eyes grew wistful and wondering. She had heard the story a thousand times; always in different words, but always the same little tale, and she knew how old Annemie was deaf to all the bells that tolled the time, and blind to all the whiteness of her hair and all the wrinkles of her face, and only thought of her sea slain lover as he had been in the days of her youth.

She did not speak at all as she finished sweeping the bricks, and went down stairs for a metal cruche full of water, and set over a little charcoal on the stove the old woman's brass soup kettle with her supper of stewing cabbage.

Annemie did not hear or notice; she was still looking out of the whole in the wall on to the masts, and the sails, and the water.

It was twilight.

From the barges and brigs there came the smell of the sea. The sailors were shouting to each other. The craft were crowded close, and lost in the growing darkness. On the other side of the canal the belfries were ringing for vespers.

"Eleven voyages one and another, and he never forgot to tie the flax to the mast," Annemie murmured, with her old wrinkled face leaning out into the gray air. "It used to fly there; one could see it coming up half a mile off—just a pale yellow flake on the wind, like a tress of my hair, he would say. No, no, I could not go away; he may come to-night, to-morrow, any time; he is not drowned, not my man; he was all I had, and God is good, they say."

"He was all I had, and God is good, they say."

Bebee listened and looked, then kissed the old shaking hand and took up the lace patterns and went softly out of the room without speaking.

When old Annemie watched at the window it was useless to seek for any word or sign of her; people said that she had never been quite right in her brain since that fatal winter noon sixty years before, when the coaster had brought into port the broken beam of the good brig Fleur d'Epine.

Bebee did not know about that, nor heed whether her wits were right or not.

She had known the old creature in the lace room where Annemie pricked out designs, and she had conceived a great regard and sorrow for her; and when Annemie had become too ailing and aged to go herself any longer to the lace maker's place, Bebee had begged leave for her to have the patterns at home, and had carried them to and fro for her for the last three or four years, doing many other little useful services for the lone old soul as well—services which Annemie hardly perceived, she had grown so used to them, and her feeble intelligence was so sunk in the one absorbing idea that she must watch all the days through and all the years through for the coming of the dead man and the lost brig.

Bebee put the lace patterns in her basket, and trotted home, her sabots clattering on the stones.

"What it must be to care for any one like that!" she thought, and by some vague association of thought that she could not have pursued, she lifted the leaves and looked at the moss rose bud.

It was quite dead.

CHAPTER VII.

As she got clear of the city and out on her country road, a shadow fell across her in the evening light.

"Have you had a good day, little one?" asked a voice that made her stop with a curious vague expectancy and pleasure.

"It is you!" she said, with a little cry, as she saw her friend of the silk stockings leaning on a gate midway in the green and solitary road that leads to Laeken.

"Yes, it is I," he answered as he joined her. "Have you forgiven me, Bebee?"

She looked at him with frank, appealing eyes, like those of a child in fault.

"Oh, I did not sleep all night," she said, simply. "I thought I had been rude and ungrateful, and I could not be sure I had done right, though to have done otherwise would certainly have been wrong."

He laughed.

"Well, that is a clearer deduction than is to be drawn from most moral uncertainties. Do not think twice about the matter, my dear. I have not, I assure you."

"No?"

She was a little disappointed. It seemed such an immense thing to her; and she had lain awake all the night, turning it about in her little brain, and appealing vainly for help in it to the sixteen sleep angels.

"No, indeed. And where are you going so fast, as if those wooden shoes of yours were sandals of Mercury?"

"Mercury—is that a shoemaker?"

"No, my dear. He did a terrible bit of cobbling once, when he made woman. But he did not shoe her feet with swiftness that I know of; she only runs away to be run after, and if you do not pursue her, she comes back—always."

Bebee did not understand at all.

"I thought God made woman," she said, a little awe stricken.

"You call it God. People three thousand years ago called it Mercury or Hermes. Both mean the same thing—mere words to designate an unknown quality. Where are you going? Does your home lie here?"

"Yes, onward, quite far onward," said Bebee, wondering that he had forgotten all she had told him the day before about her out, her garden, and her neighbors. "You did not come and finish your picture today; why was that? I had a rosebud for you, but it is dead now."

"I went to Anvers. You looked for me a little, then?"

"Oh, all day long, for I was so afraid I had been ungrateful."

"That is very pretty of you. Women are never grateful, my dear, except when they are very ill treated. Mercury, whom we were talking of, gave them, among other gifts, a dog's heart."

Bebee felt bewildered; she did not reason about it, but the idle, shallow, cynical tone pained her by its levity and its unlikeness to the sweet, still, gray summer evening.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" he pursued. "The night is cool, and it is only 7 o'clock. I will walk part of the way with you."

"I am in a hurry because I have Annemie's patterns to do," said Bebee, glad that he spoke of a thing that she knew how to answer. "You see, Annemie's hand shakes, and her eyes are dim, and she pricks the pattern all awry and never perceives it; it would break her heart if one showed her so, but the Baes would not take them as they are; they are of no use at all. So I prick them out myself on fresh paper, and the Baes thinks it is all her doing, and pays her the same money, and she is quite content. And as I carry the patterns to and fro for her, because she cannot walk, it is easy to cheat her like that, and it is no harm to cheat so, you know." He was silent.

"You are a good little girl, Bebee, I can see," he said at last, with a graver sound in his voice. "And who is this Annemie for whom you do so much—an old woman, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, quite old; incredibly old. Her man was drowned at sea sixty years ago, and she watches for his brig still, night and morning."

"The dog's heart! No doubt he beat her, and had a wife in fifty other ports."

"Oh, no," said Bebee, with a little cry, as though the word against the dead man hurt her. "She has told me so much of him. He was as good as good could be, and loved her so, and between the voyages they were so happy. Surely that must have been sixty years now, and she is so sorry still, and still will not believe that he was drowned."

He looked down on her with a smile that had a certain pity in it.

"Well, yes; there are women like that, I believe. But be very sure, my dear, he beat her. Of the two, one always holds the whip and uses it—the other crouches."

"I do not understand," said Bebee.

"No—but you will."

"I will? When?"

He smiled again.

"Oh—to-morrow, perhaps, or next year—or when Fate fancies."

"Or rather—when I choose," he thought to himself, and let his eyes rest with a certain pleasure on the little feet, that went beside him in the grass, and the pretty fair bosom that showed ever and again, as the frills of her linen bodice were blown back by the wind and her own quick motion.

Bebee looked also up at him; he was very handsome, and looked so to her, after the broad blunt characterless faces of the Walloon peasantry around her. He walked with an easy grace, he was clad in picture like velvets, he had a beautiful poetic head, and eyes like deep-brown waters, and a face like one of Jordaen's or Rembrandt's cavaliers in the galleries where she used to steal in of a Sunday, and look up at the paintings, and dream of what that world could be in which those people had lived.

"You are of the people of Rubes' country, are you not?" she asked him.

"Of what country, my dear?"

"Of the people that live in the gold frames," said Bebee, quite seriously. "In the galleries, you know. I know a charwoman that scrubs the floors of the Arenberg palace, and she lets me in sometimes to look; and you are just like those great gentlemen in the gold frames, only you have not a hawk and a sword, and they always have. I used to wonder where they came from, for they are not like any of us one bit, and the charwoman—she is Lisa Drodel, and lives in the street of the Pot d'Etain—always said, 'Dear heart, they all belong to Rubes' land—we never see their like nowadays.' But you must come out of Rubes' land, at least, I think so, do you not?"

He caught her meaning; he knew that Rubes was the homely abbreviation of Rubens that all the Netherlanders used, and he guessed the idea that was reality to this little lonely, fanciful mind.

"Perhaps I do," he answered her with a smile, for it was not worth his while to disabuse her thoughts of any imagination that glorified him to her. "Do you not want to see Rubes' world, little one? To see the gold and the grandeur, and the glitter of it all?—never to toil or get tired?—always to move in a pageant?—always to live like the hawks in the paintings you talk of, with silver bells hung round you, and a hood all sewn with pearls?"

"No," said Bebee, simply. "I should like to see it—just to see it, as one looks through a grating into the king's grape houses here. But I should not like to live in it. I love my hut and the starling, and the chickens, and what would the garden do without me?—and the children, and the old Annemie? I could not anyhow, anywhere be any happier than I am. There is only one thing I wish."

"And what is that?"

"To know something; not to be so ignorant. Just look! I can read a little, it is true; my Hours, and the letters, and when Krebs brings in a newspaper I can read a little of it—not much. I know French well, because Antoine was French himself and never did talk Flemish to me; and they, being Netherlanders, cannot, of course, read the newspapers at all, and so think it very wonderful indeed in me. But what I want is to know things, to know all about what was before ever I was living. St. Gudule, now—they say it was built hundreds of years before; and Rubes, again—they say he was a painter king in Antwerpen before the oldest, oldest woman like Annemie ever began to count time. I am sure books will tell you all those things, because I see the students coming and going with them; and when I saw once the millions of books in the Rue du Musee I asked the keeper what use they were for, and he said, 'To make men wise, my dear.' But Gringoire Bac, the cobbler, who was with me—it was a fete day—Bac, he said, 'Do not you believe that, Bebee; they only muddle folks' brains; for one book tells them one thing and another book another, and so on till they are dazed with all the contrary lying; and if you see a bookish man, be sure you see a very poor creature, who could not hoe a patch, or kill a pig, or stitch an upper leather were it ever so.' But I do not believe that Bac said right. Did he?"

"I am not sure. On the whole, I think it is the truest remark on literature I have ever heard, and one that shows great judgment in Bac. Well?"

"Well—sometimes, you know," said Bebee, not understanding his answer, but pursuing her thoughts confidentially; "sometimes I talk like this to the neighbors, and they laugh at me. Because Mere Krebs says that when one knows how to spin and sweep and make bread and say one's prayers and milk a goat or a cow it is all a woman wants to know this side of heaven. But for me, I cannot help it—when I look at those windows in the cathedral, or at those beautiful twisted little spires that are all over our Hotel de Ville, I want to know who the men were that made them—what they did and thought—how they looked and spoke—how they learned to shape stone into leaves and grasses like that—how they could image all those angel faces on the glass. When I go alone in the quite early morning or at night when it is still—sometimes in winter I have to stay till it is dark over the lace—I hear their feet come after me and they whisper to me close, 'Look what beautiful things we have done, Bebee, and you all forget us quite. We did what never will die, but our names are as dead as the stones.' And then I am so sorry for them and ashamed. And I want to know more. Can you tell me?"

He looked at her earnestly; her eyes were shining, her cheeks were warm, her little mouth was tremulous with eagerness.

"Did any one ever speak to you in that way?" he asked her.

"No," she answered him. "It comes into my head of itself. Sometimes I think the cathedral angels put it there. For the angels must be tired, you know; always pointing to God and always seeing men turn away. I used to tell Antoine sometimes. But he used to shake his head and say that it was no use thinking; most likely St. Gudule and St. Michael had set the church down in the night all ready made, why not? God made the trees, and they were more wonderful, he thought, for his part. And so perhaps, they are, but that is no answer. And I do want to know. I want some one who will tell me—and if you come out of Rubes' country as I think, no doubt you know everything, or remember it."

He smiled.

"The free pass to Rubes' country lies in books, pretty one. Shall I give you some?—nay, lend them, I mean, since giving you are too willful to hear of without offense. You can read, you said?"

Bebee's eyes glowed as they lifted themselves to his.

"I can read—not very fast, but that would come with doing it more and more, I think, just as spinning does—one knots the thread and breaks it about a million times before one learns to spin as fine as cobwebs. I have read the stories of St. Anne, and of St. Catherine, and of St Luven fifty times, but they are all the books that Father Francis has and no one else has any among us."

"Very well. You shall have books of mine, easy ones first; and then those that are more serious. But what time will you have? You do so much; you are like a little golden bee."

Bebee laughed happily.

"Oh! give me the books and I will find the time. It is light so early now. That gives one so many hours. In winter one has so few one must lie in bed, because to buy a candle you know one cannot afford except of course a taper now and then, as one's duty is, for our Lady or for the dead. And you will really, really, lend me books?"

"Really—I will. Yes. I will bring you one to the Grande Place to-morrow, or meet you on your road there with it. Do you know what poetry is, Bebee?"

"No."

"But your flowers talk to you?"

"Ah! always. But then no one else hears them ever but me; and so no one else ever believes."

"Well—poets are folks who hear the flowers talk as you do, and the trees, and the seas, and the beasts, and even the stones; but no one else ever hears these things, and so, when the poets write them out, the rest of the world say, 'That is very fine, no doubt, but only good for dreamers; it will bake no bread.' I will give you some poetry—for I think you care more about dreams than about bread."

"I do not know," said Bebee; and she did not know, for her dreams, like her youth, and her innocence, and her simplicity, and her strength, were all unconscious of themselves, as such things must be to be pure and true at all.

Bebee had grown up straight, and clean, and fragrant, and joyous as one of her own carnations, but she knew herself no more than the carnation knows its color and its root.

"No, you do not know," said he, with a sort of pity; and thought within himself, was it worth while to let her know?

If she did not know, these vague aspirations and imaginations would drop off from her with the years of her early youth, as the lime flowers drop downward with the summer heats. She would forget them. They would linger a little in her head, and perhaps, always wake at some sunset hour or some angelus chime, but not to trouble her. Only to make her cradle song a little sadder and softer than most women's was. Unfed, they would sink away and bear no blossom.

She would grow into a simple, hardy, hard working, God fearing Flemish woman like the rest. She would marry, no doubt, some time, and rear her children honestly and well; and sit in the market stall every day, and spin and sew, and dig and wash, and sweep, and brave bad weather, and be content with poor food to the end of her harmless and laborious days—poor little Bebee!

He saw her so clearly as she would be—if he let her alone.

A little taller, a little broader, a little browner, less sweet of voice, less soft of skin, less flower like in face; having learned to think only as her neighbors thought, of price of wood and cost of bread; laboring cheerily but hardly from daybreak to nightfall to fill hungry mouths; forgetting all things except the little curly heads clustered round her soup pot, and the year-old lips sucking at her breasts.

A blameless life, an eventless life, a life as clear as the dewdrop, and as colorless; a life opening, passing, ending in the little green wooded lane, by the bit of water where the swans made their nests under the willows; a life like the life of millions; a little purer, a little brighter, a little more tender, perhaps, than those lives usually are, but otherwise as like them as one ear of barley is like another as it rises from the soil, and blows in the wind, and turns brown in the strong summer sun, and then goes down to the sod again under the sickle.

He saw her just as she would be—if he let her alone.

But should he leave her alone?

He cared nothing, only her eyes had such a pretty, frank, innocent look like a bird's in them, and she had been so brave and bold with him about those silken stockings; and this little ignorant, dreamful mind of hers was so like a blush rosebud, which looks so close shut, and so sweet smelling, and so tempting fold within fold, that a child will pull it open, forgetful that he will spoil it forever from being a full grown rose, and that he will let the dust, and the sun, and the bee into its tender bosom—and men are true children, and women are their rosebuds.

Thinking only of keeping well with this strange and beautiful wayfarer from that unknown paradise of Rubes' country, Bebee lifted up the vine leaves of her basket.

"I took a flower for you today, but it is dead. Look—to-morrow, if you will be there, you shall have the best in all the garden."

"You wish to see me again then?" he asked her. Bebee looked at him with troubled eyes, but with a sweet, frank faith that had no hesitation in it.

"Yes! you are not like anything I ever knew, and if you will only help me to learn a little. Sometimes I think I am not stupid, only ignorant—but I cannot be s[illegible] less I try."

He smiled; he was listlessly amused; the day before he had tempted the child merely because she was pretty, and to tempt her in that way seemed the natural course of things, but now there was something in her that touched him differently; the end would be the same, but he would change the means.

The sun had set. There was a low, dull red glow still on the far edge of the plains—that was all. In the distant cottages little lights were twinkling. The path grew dark.

"I will go away and let her alone," he thought. "Poor little soul! it would give itself lavishly, it would never be bought. I will let it alone; the mind will go to sleep and the body will keep healthy and strong and pure, as people call it. It would be a pity to play with both a day, and then throw them away, as the boy threw the pear blossom. She is a little clod of earth that has field flowers growing in it. I will let her alone, the flowers under the plow in due course will die, and she will be content among the other clods—if I let her alone."

At that moment there went across the dark fields, against the dusky red sky, a young man with a pile of brushwood on his back, and a hatchet in his hand.

"You are late, Bebee," he called to her in Flemish, and scowled at the stranger by her side.

"A good looking lad—who is it?" said her companion.

"That is Jeannot, the son of old Sophie," she answered him. "He is so good—oh, so good, you cannot think; he keeps his mother and three little sisters, and works so very, very hard in the forest, and yet he often finds time to dig my garden for me, and he chops all my wood in the winter."

They had come to where the road goes up by the king's summer palace. They were under great hanging beeches and limes. There was a high gray wall, and over it the blossoming fruit boughs hung. In a ditch full of long grass little kids bleated by their mothers. Away on the left went the green fields of colza, and beetroot, and trefoil, with big forest trees here and there in the midst, and, against the blue low line of the far horizon, red mill sails, and gray church spires, dreamy plaintive bells far away somewhere were ringing the sad Flemish carillon.

He paused and looked at her.

"I must bid you good night, Bebee—you are near your home now."

She paused too and looked at him.

"But I shall see you to-morrow?"

There was the wistful, eager, anxious unconsciousness of appeal as when the night before she had asked him if he were angry.

He hesitated a moment. If he said no, and went away out of the city wherever his listless and changeful whim called him, he knew how it would be with her; he knew what her life would be as surely as he knew the much would come out of the peach flower rosy on the wall there, life in the little hut; among the neighbors; sleepy and safe and soulless—if he let her alone.

If he stayed and saw her on the morrow he knew, too, the end as surely as he knew that the branch of white pear blossom which in carelessness he had knocked down with a stone on the grass yonder, would fade in the night and would never bring forth its sweet, simple fruit in the sunshine.

To leave the peach flower to come to maturity and be plucked by a peasant—or to pull down the pear blossom and rifle the buds?

Carelessly and languidly he balanced the question with himself, whilst Bebee, forgetful of the lace