

From Tait's Magazine.

WEDDING SLIPPERS.*

BY MISS MITFORD.

While he stood admiring the scene, he was overtaken by the old man whom he had heard, a short while previously, crying "Shoes! shoes!" under the window of his father's shop; and whom he had passed just before, whilst engaged in chaffering for some of his commodities with an orange-woman, whose barrow was stationed at the end of the bridge.

This itinerant shoe-merchant was, as I have said, well-known to the inhabitants of Belford by the name of Old Isaac; and, from his name, his calling, his keenness at a bargain, as well as from his quick, black eye, aquiline nose, and a greater proportion of beard than is usually suffered to adorn a Christian countenance, was commonly reputed to be a Jew. He was a spare old man, of the middle height, somewhat stooping, but with a picturesque and richly coloured head, surmounted by an old slouched hat. His patched and faded garments were well nigh hidden by two enormous bags in which he carried the old shoes which he bought, and the new ones, or *soi-disant* new—for he was a great man at a *rafacimento*, and had the art to "gar auld shoons look 'maist as guid's the new"—which he sold.

"Buy a pair of warm slippers, master, this cold night?" quoth Isaac. "Wedding slippers, fine enough for a lord."

"Nothing, this evening," said Edward.

"Have 'em a bargain, master," persisted the man of shoes.

"I am not in want of any," rejoined Edward, moving on.

"Wedding shoes, then?—wedding boots? Must buy something," continued the vender, pertinaciously keeping up with our friend's rapid steps, and thrusting before his eyes the articles which he named.

"I tell you that I want neither wedding slippers nor wedding shoes, nor any of your commodities," answered Edward, with some humour, endeavouring to escape from his pursuer.

"Don't ye!" exclaimed Isaac, with a knowing twinkle of his keen black eye. "Dont ye! Well, then, buy for the want's to come. I've set my heart upon having a bit of a deal with ye to-night, and shan't mind bating a penny or two, rather than balk my fancy. You shall have 'em under cost," continued Isaac, coaxingly; "you shall have 'em for next to nothing. Do ye have 'em? We must have a deal. You'll see that you'll be married sooner than you think for. Your time's coming. So you may as well buy the wedding slippers at once. What do ye bid for 'em? Make an offer."

"Not a farthing, Jew. I am in haste. You need not untie the bag. You have nothing that I would take if you would give it me. Let me pass on. I am not going to be married. I want nothing of you."

"Don't be too sure of that, Master Edward Morris. You and I may come to a deal yet. Jew, quotha! No more a Jew than yourself. If your eyes were not turned another way, you might see me in the aisle of St. Michael's Church every Sunday morning and afternoon, as regular as yourself. Jew! 'Tis an extraordinary compliment you idle folk pay to that tramping race, that, whenever you meet a body who takes care of the main chance, and turns an honest penny, you call him a Jew. Well, Master Edward, you'll see that you'll come to me for your wedding slippers." And, so saying, Isaac shouldered his bag again, and left the path free.

At another moment, Edward would have smiled at the old man's acute observation of the direction of his glances in church, and at his persevering endeavour to attract a customer, founded upon that observation; but his thoughts were too painfully divided between his father and his mistress—his duty and his love; and, during his rapid walk to St. Michael's rectory, he could only resolve to be guided in all things by the judgment and the feeling of Elizabeth.

She received her lover with the gentle self-possession, the calm and serious sweetness, which characterised her manner, and which had been partly, perhaps, the cause, partly the result of the confidence placed in her by Mr. Sumner. His father had, to suit his purpose, forced himself to advert to her situation and her origin in his conversation with his son; but Edward felt proudly that there was no trace of the charity school or of the servant's hall in the lovely woman who stood before him with a simple and unaffected propriety—in a higher rank it would have been termed dignity—that would have besecmed a palace. His distress was immediately visible to her, and her anxious inquiries served to introduce his story.

"We must part, Edward; as to that there can be neither doubt nor question," said she, in a low, steady voice, whilst the tears trembled on the long fringes of her large black eyes, and the rich colour went and came on the finely-turned cheeks and lips, which a sculptor would have been proud to model. "We must part. I have always known that it would be so—always felt, without suspecting or dreaming of this obstacle, that Mr. Morris would find an insuperable objection to receiving me into his family. I ought, perhaps, knowing that, to have forbidden your visits. But I was encouraged in my attachment by one whom I am

bound to obey, and by whose orders I have acted in this business; and my own feelings led me but too readily into the error. Oh! if it were only for ourselves, this poverty would be nothing! Young, active, accustomed to exertion, it would be delightful to labor with you and for you—delightful to feel that there was no superiority on your side, except that of your respectable connexions, and your manly and vigorous character. But your father—your kind and excellent father!—to tear him from his home, to send him in his old age to serve as an hireling—he so long accustomed to respect and consideration!—to banish him from his friends, his neighbours, his native town! We must not think of it. The sacrifice must be made. And you will find your happiness, dear Edward—we shall find our happiness—in his restored comfort, and in the consciousness of having done our duty."

Affectionate son as Edward was, and determined as he had professed himself to abide by the decision of his mistress, he could not forbear combating this resolution. She listened to him with sweet and mournful attention, as if willing to hear all that he had to say; but her determination was unshaken. She had just asked—

"Since we must part, dearest Edward, were it not wiser to shorten this pain?" when an odd-looking little note was delivered to her.

Elizabeth read the contents once, twice, thrice, and remained silent and perplexed, as if hardly comprehending the meaning.

"It is very strange!" exclaimed she, thinking aloud, and forgetting that she was not alone; "very strange! What can he want at this hour?"

"He!" exclaimed Edward, jealous (so strange a thing is a lover's heart) of her whom he was upon the very point of resigning. "He!—what he? From whom comes that note?"

"From one who must be apprised of this event."

"Not, surely, from Mr. Sumner? No; from him it cannot be. But from whom? Who can have the power so to absorb your attention at such a moment?"

Elizabeth paused an instant and then said, gently—"Come with me, and you shall know. Although we are doomed to part to meet no more, you must always be amongst the most valued, the most cherished of my friends. I cannot afford to lose your good opinion. Come with me, and you shall know all."

She tied on her bonnet, wrapped herself in a large cloak, and they passed through the rectory garden into the churchyard. The fine old Gothic building, with its grey cloisters, its graceful porch, its towers, and its steeple, rose in sombre grandeur from the graveyard, covered with snow, by which it was surrounded, the summit almost lost in the frosty mists of the air: so that the imagination added to the actual height, gave a cathedral-like grandeur to the edifice. A few yews and cypresses were clustered in one corner, and a row of stately limes, their larger limbs partially covered with snow, which lay in long intersecting lines, defining the forms of the branches, led to an iron gate, which opened into a narrow lane, leading to one of the poorest and least populous suburbs of the town. Along this lane Elizabeth passed, sedulously attended by Edward.

"I ought to have told you before," said she, in a low voice—"only he whom it most concerns forbade the disclosure, and Mr. Sumner, I hardly know why, coincided in his desire—that, although a charity girl, I am not, as you have thought, an orphan. I have a father, a most fond and affectionate father, one whom I love dearly, and who dearly loves me. He is a poor but industrious man, following a mean occupation; not so poor but that he makes me frequent presents, and is most kind and generous to the widow in whose cottage he lives, and whom he mainly supports. Still, I have always felt that he was not fit to be your father, nor to be connected so closely with a man so intelligent, so well educated, and so respectable in station as Mr. Morris. I always felt that something would prevent our union. And so, alas! it has turned out."

By this time the clouds had so far cleared away as to admit glimpses of a keen and frosty moon, which shed a cold, pale, desolate light upon every object; dwelling with tenfold desolation on a small hovel, whose rugged thatch and windows stuffed with rags, as well as the broken-down state of the little gate, (ajar perforce, since, hanging by one hinge, it would neither shut nor open,) which led into the narrow front court, betokened the most sordid poverty.

Up this court Elizabeth passed; and, knocking, with, as it seemed, a forced resolution, at a low door, in little better condition than the gate which formed the outer barricade, was immediately admitted by an infirm old woman into a dark and dismal kitchen.

"I look for your father every minute, Miss Betsey," quoth the tottering crone, "for 'tis past his time o' coming in; and, if ye'll wait till I strike a light, ye may walk into his room, and I'll kindle ye a bit o' fire; for you tender lasses, that live in grand houses, can't abear the cold like us poor folk that be used to nothing better."

And, so saying, she fumbled out an old tinder-box, and having, with some difficulty, cherished a spark into a flame—for her old and withered hands, and feeble breath, seemed numbed and chilled by the cold which she defied so manfully—she lighted a

wretched candle, led the way into the next apartment—and endeavoured, with a little damp straw, and a few dirty chips, that had evidently been long trodden under foot in some carpenter's yard, to produce, in a small rusty grate, from which the brick-work was breaking away, something as nearly approaching to a blaze as the state of the fireplace and the nature of the fuel would allow.

Edward, in the meanwhile, took a mournful survey of the sordid abode, contrasting so strongly with the appearance, the mind, and the manners of the lovely and graceful woman who stood beside him, the beloved of his heart. The hearth and its appointments—the bit of old iron that served as a poker, the broken dustpan that officiated as shovel, the pipkin upon two legs, and the lipless pint cup which did duty as kettle, pot, and saucepan—this niggard and beggarly hearth was but a type of the rugged and scanty plenishing of the comfortless chamber. A joint stool, a rickety table, and two tumble-down chairs, one of them garnished with a cushion, darned, patched and mended, until mending was no longer possible, figured in the centre of the uneven, bricked floor; over the chimney was a mug without a handle, a teapot curtailed of its fair proportions by the loss of half a spout, a teacup and saucer of different patterns, and two or three plates and basins, all more or less cracked, and repaired, not very artistically, with putty and white paint. In one corner was the inmate's humble bed—a chaff mattress, with one or two rags or horse-clothes, much the worse for wear; in another, the little pile of straw and chips, and rotten sticks, from whence the fuel now smoking rather than burning in the chimney had been selected; and, in a third, a dingy heap of old shoes.

The old woman, satisfied with her labour, retired to her part of the dwelling. Elizabeth was the first to break the pause which succeeded her departure.

"This, Edward, is the abode of my father—of a father whom, in spite of all that surrounds us, I have good cause to love. Does not the sight of such misery serve to reconcile you to the destiny that parts us? Such at least, is the effect which it ought to have—which it has on me. I am not fit to belong to your family. Never should I have cherished such a thought. Strange that Mr. Sumner, knowing as he did the whole truth, should have encouraged our attachment! Strange, most strange, that till now the name and existence of my father should have remained a secret! Well! my presumption is fitly punished, and you will turn with a freer heart to one more worthy to share your home and possess your affections."

"Say not so, my own Elizabeth! Were it not for my paramount duty to my own most kind and excellent father, all that I see here would but supply a fresh motive for our union. All speak of poverty and industry, nothing of crime. And, next to the joy of offering you a comfortable home, should I reckon that of rescuing one so near and dear to you from penury and toil. Oh! that I were now the free agent that I thought myself yesterday! Not another night should your father spend beneath this roof. If my wretched uncle Arnott could but know the misery that his wild spirit of speculation has brought upon us all!"

"If he could, master Edward I am minded that he'd rather cry old shoes than gamble in the share market," quoth our friend Isaac, advancing into the room; depositing, with considerable care, his two bags of shoes in their appropriate corner, and emptying, with equal readiness, divers rotten sticks, fir apples, and stumps of gorse, gathered during his day's travel—for apparently he had wended countryward—from the several pockets of his nondescript garments. "If these Stock-Exchange gamblers could but tell the sore hearts they cause to their friends and kindred, mayhap it might go nigh to reform 'em," pursued Isaac. "So here you be, Master Edward, come to make a deal, as I prophesied; and ye ha' brought Bess wi' ye, to clinch the bargain. So much the better. Gie me a kiss, Bess. So thou be'st come to help Master Edward to choose his wedding slippers—eh, my girl?" and the old man nodded his head, with a knowing wink, and chuckled—"Come to choose the wedding slippers!"

"Alas, my dear father, you little know!" began Elizabeth.

"Alack and alack, wench! No alacks for me. I do know all the story; ay, and a great deal besides, that neither of you know, wise as ye think yourselves. Come, my good boy and girl, sit ye down here by the fire. Bess looks as white as the snow on the house-top; and thou, Master Edward, art not much better. Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. I'll tell you all about it." And the old shoe-merchant drew his chairs to either side of his little fire, seated himself upon a stool in the middle, flung on fresh fuel, breaking the sticks with his withered hands, and did the honours of his small apartment with much hospitality. "Well, Master Morris, for all I cry old shoes about the streets, and my Bess (heaven bless her sweet face!) was brought up at a charity school, it ain't altogether for want of a bit of money. Many a year have I been scraping and scraping, and hoarding and hoarding, to save her a portion; and I told her and Mr. Sumner not to let out that she had a father, just for the pleasure of the surprise like. So, in the meantime comes this affair of Master Arnott. Ay, better cry old shoes than go gambling in shares. So I happened to have the money, waiting for a good security—nothing like turning an honest penny—just when Master Byrne was wanting it