

**A BATTLE
AND A BOY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649119011

A battle and a boy by Blanche Willis Howard

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BLANCHE WILLIS HOWARD

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AND A BOY**

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BY
BLANCHE WILLIS HOWARD

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"TONY THE MAID," "THE HUMMING TOP," ETC.



NEW YORK
STREET & SMITH
PUBLISHERS

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A BATTLE AND A BOY.

I.

THE cattle-market occupied the town common. The child-market was round the corner in the Bach Strasse. Burly peasants in long coats, red waist-coats, and high boots, tramped with a weighty air from one to the other, and it would be difficult to say which was the noisier—where the children's shrill tones were continually raised in eager bargaining, or where the poor beasts, unable to make terms for themselves, yet lifted up their voices in loud but futile protest against such indignities as thumps in the ribs, having their jaws stretched to the verge of dislocation, and their legs pulled about in attitudes at variance with the laws of their anatomy.

Down the very middle of the long, rambling street, a mere thread of a brook came rushing and

leaping impetuously, trying to overflow its rough board barriers. It was strong, and swollen with spring rains and the melting of ice and snow in the mountains, and made as much noise as if it thought itself a river. Franzl Reiner, kneeling by the swift water, sailed chip-boats—some with masts and some without—as diligently as if he had come to the Ravensburg child-market for this sole purpose, and as if his future bread and butter would depend exclusively upon his skill in this branch of industry. His back turned to the crowd, he watched his boats bob and whirl, capsize, disappear, or go gayly on past the people, and tall high-gabled houses, with upper stories projecting each over each, and sail out of sight; but he was proudly conscious they must in time reach the great watch-tower, through whose antique, arched portals the street ran away from the town and out among the fields. In all his eleven years he had never seen so many men and women together, so many cattle, and heard so many voices as that day at Ravensburg. At first he had been bewildered by the uproar and strangeness. The animals indeed looked familiar and homelike, and diffused a warm, barn-yard smell which he found comforting. He felt strongly inclined to remain near an affable

cow that manifested a certain placid pleasure in his society. But the people and children were pushing on to the Bach Strasse, in front of the Golden Lamb Inn, and a horse-dealer had sent him along with a slap on the shoulder and a rough—

“Colts sold here, good-for-nothing boys down there!”

The children formed in a compact little army until their ranks were broken by people pressing in with sharp questions and scrutiny. Franzl stood for a while on the outskirts of the crowd, uncertain of his course. Feeling shy, he looked sullen and defiant, and scowled at everyone whose glance he met, not in the least from ill-will, but rather from a vague instinct of self-defence. Nudging with a prompt elbow every mortal who by chance, or with intention, nudged him, returning with liberal measure all the amenities of childhood, and the methods by which the unregenerate small boy makes the acquaintance of his peer—grimaces, motiveless blows, inconsequent efforts to trip up and knock down—he listened a while to the others, and heard the old hands among the children glibly boasting what they could do, and where they had been, how they had kept cows and sheep on the hill-slopes, how they could scour and run and dig.

"Buy me! Buy me!" they cried, shrilly. But it was all rather confusing, and as nobody happened to inquire what his special accomplishments were, or seemed to desire his services, he gradually withdrew from the greed and turmoil of the market-place, and finally forgot it, devoting his energies to the navigation of chips, for it was really a splendid brook.

Meanwhile if Franzl was oblivious of his duty to secure a good situation, to "sell" himself, as they say in Ravensburg—for the child-market has its queer idioms as well as Wall Street—the din behind the careless little mountaineer proved that others were less indifferent to their worldly advantage. The swarm of boys and girls was of all ages and sizes, and though some were pale and sickly, for the most part they looked as rosy and clear-eyed as if the Pied Piper himself had led them, dancing to the tunes of his magic pipe, over the hills and far away from their mountain homes in Switzerland and the Tyrol. The truth is they had been regaled by nothing so merry and melodious. They had patiently trudged many a weary mile to the Ravensburg spring-fair. Those of them who had had the occasional privilege of dangling their heels from the back of some jolting cart had

deemed themselves lucky. They had been glad of every crust of coarse bread given them on the way, had regarded a few cold potatoes as a feast, and a swallow of bitter beer as a rare boon.

Timid little girls of eight or nine were making their first ventures in the great world—a somewhat immature age, it must be confessed, for gaining an independent livelihood and establishing one's self permanently. But nothing makes an experienced maid-of-all-work of a baby of nine quicker than seven or eight younger brothers and sisters, and it is astonishing how motherly and painstaking even a boy becomes, when necessity compels from him unceasing domestic ministrations. Where mouths are many and pence are few, the senior infant acquires a goodly amount of routine, and when Number Two becomes nearly as expert, Number One is sent to trade her experience and accomplishments at the child-market. Here the smallest human mite is in demand, for perhaps some childless woman—inspired by practical, not sentimental, motives—has come to hire a little girl, or some hardworking young mother wants a child to tend the baby while she looks after the farm, her husband, and the men.

Large, bold boys and girls of fourteen or fif-