

BESSIE GILBERT.

By ALICE KING.



HERE are some lives which are coloured by their surroundings; there are some lives which give colour to the things around them. Bessie Gilbert was one of these latter. God laid upon her a heavy infirmity to bear throughout her earthly journey, but at the same time He gifted her with a strength of will, and energy of purpose, which enabled her to become a blessing to thousands, and to paint with brightness many and many existences, which, in all human probability, would otherwise have remained, as far as this world was concerned, wrapped in densest shadow.

One day in August, 1826, a new baby, the third that hitherto had been added to the family, was carried into the nursery of the house of Mr. Gilbert, the principal of Brasenose College at Oxford. The cradle of the tiny maiden was rocked in grave scholastic shadows, but as soon as she was able to spring out of it, she began to laugh and gambol in a way more suggestive of the woodland fairies than of the demure classic sprites who glide hither and thither through academic cloisters. No merrier, more winsome, more tricky elf ever played on a nursery floor than little Bessie; and above all the other features which twinkled, and danced, and sparkled in that little rosebud of a face, everyone who approached her noticed the beauty and expression of the large, dark, shining eyes.

Not for long, however, were parents and loving relations and household friends to rejoice in the radiance of those twin pair of stars; not for long were those intelligent eyes to bring news of the outer world to the young mind which was waking with such bright promise. Bessie was, in truth, to be always a child of light, but the light was not to come from the sun, or even from loving faces looking down upon her. She was but three years old when she caught the scarlet fever; the disease grew rapidly worse, until it declared itself in a most malignant form. Day by day the sad parents watched beside the bed of their darling, and day by day the lamp of hope flickered more and more faintly. It seemed, at length, as if they must resign themselves to their loss; medical skill had done its utmost, but without result; they bowed their heads and whispered, "Thy will be done." The child would soon, they thought, be the happy companion of the angels.

But Bessie was not yet to go up into the Better Land. The disease took one of those sudden turns for the better which, in such cases, sometimes astonish the most watchful and experienced medical care, and the house rang with a hymn of thanksgiving from end to end as the glad news went forth through it that the child would live.

At first no one had an idea of anything but that their Bessie would be restored to them just as she was before; restored to go her way brightly and bravely through life, following the ordinary course of woman's story; but they were soon to learn, that though, in truth, she was to go on her earthly road in courage and strength, hers was to be no commonplace history. A crushing calamity was to come upon her, but just that calamity was to make her a woman whose story would be worth writing; she was to be enveloped in darkness, and yet out of that darkness she was to shed forth much light. Had a prophet stood by the bed of the child lying there slowly shaking

off the burning hand of the deadly fever, and predicted these strange paradoxes concerning her future, he would have been listened to by the watchers there with about as much attention as they had lately paid to the delirious babblings of the little patient herself; and yet these strange, apparently impossible, words were literally to come true in the life of Bessie Gilbert.

The child's eyes had suffered considerably throughout the illness; but this is not unusual in scarlet fever, and it was hoped that they would completely recover as her bodily health improved. Her throat must, they knew, be permanently affected by the complaint; she would always have to drink in sips; the lining of the throat was so much injured she would never again be able to swallow liquids with rapidity; but her eyes, they surely, by-and-by, would completely be restored. As the days went on, however, the faces of the kind doctors, as they bent over the little bed and examined the young eyes just opening on the world, grew more and more doubtful and sad, until at length the word "blind" began to be whispered mournfully among them, began to reach the loving parents' ears. They strove for a little while to hope against hope; but soon the innocent little one herself confirmed their worst fears, as from her lips came the piteous request, "Oh, nurse, if I am very good, will you promise to light a candle to-morrow, and let me see my doll?"

Yes, there was no more any use in trying to avoid the knowledge of the sad truth—the child was blind for life. The cleverest oculists of the day were powerless in the case; the sight was gone irrecoverably. It was an agonised certainty at first for Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert; but they were brave, Christian people, and they resigned both themselves and their child humbly to an Almighty Father's will, and resolved to meet the trouble bravely and cheerfully. The child should suffer as little as possible from her loss; and first of all she should not, on account of her infirmity, be condemned to live an isolated, separate life; she should be brought up with her sisters just as they were, and should, as far as possible, be kept from the knowledge that blindness is regarded as a terrible misfortune by the generality of mankind.

These principles, laid down by Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert for the bringing up of their blind daughter, were fully carried out throughout Bessie's whole childhood and girlhood. With her sisters she was taught music and languages, and her correct musical ear, and retentive memory and quickness of apprehension, made her able entirely to keep pace with them, and even sometimes outstrip them in these studies. She ran about and played with the other children as merrily as the rest, for her faculties of hearing and touch had been so delicately sharpened that they took the place of sight, and she appeared not in the least to miss the loss of her eyes. She was taught to read with her fingers, and at family prayers, when all the children read a verse of scripture in turn, little Bessie's verse rang out in the holy chime, which went round the household circle from the young voices, as steadily and clearly as the verses of any of the rest. She did exactly what her sisters did, and friends who came to the house quite forgot that Bessie was blind. So full of warm, bright vitality, indeed, was she at this period that her pet name in the family was "Little Blossom."

But while they thus carefully guarded their blind daughter from leading a life apart, Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert spared no trouble in enquiring far and near with regard to everything that was invented for the instruction of the blind. In this they were ably seconded by a very intellectual governess, who had the warmest affection for Bessie, and took a real pride in the development of her mind. In those days, however, the education of the blind had not been made the object of thought and invention that it has of late years, and with the best will in the world for the task, parents and governess could not find out much to do for Bessie in this direction. She was taught to write by means of a frame invented by a Frenchman called Foucault, but this invention fell immeasurably short of the beautiful American type-writer, by means of which the blind can now compete with those who have sight in rapidity as writers, and can far excel most people with eyes in clearness and distinctness of handwriting. However, Bessie did learn to write in this manner on her French frame, and was thus enabled to correspond with her many friends.

Best of all, Bessie received from her parents the highest, most precious gift that can be bestowed upon a child in the daily education of a Christian home, where right doing and feeling and thinking came to the children with the very air they breathed. Such a bringing up was, in truth, a priceless treasure for the blind girl, and became for her a staff of life throughout all future years of suffering and difficulty.

Bessie Gilbert was just stepping into early womanhood when her father was made Bishop of Chichester, an event which brought her into closer contact with the great world than she had been before. Her figure stands out very distinctly before us at this period. A graceful, girlish form, with a refined face peculiarly remarkable for April-like mobility of expression; a laugh that rings out joyous as a bird's spring note; a sympathy ready as a harp-string to thrill at every touch of gladness or of sorrow from those around her; an intellect that made her able to float down deep currents of thought, or to sparkle into witty fun as she talked with the men of mind who frequented the Principal's home at Oxford or the Bishop's Palace at Chichester; a talent for music that made her equally proficient with piano, or harp, or guitar, while her flexible voice ran on from operatic air to old ballad with swift facility. These things, blended into a fair, harmonious whole, formed the Bessie Gilbert of the period of which we are now speaking.

Before long, however, there was to come a grey cloud over the brightness. When the girl began to mix with the great world of London, there came over her, for the first time, a feeling that her blindness placed her at a certain disadvantage. It was a morbid idea that, in reality, had very little truth in it, but perhaps it was a natural one at her age and with her surroundings. She was also further saddened by her favourite sister leaving her for a new home at a husband's side. Thus it came to pass that the blind girl fell into a state of despondency, and that, for a time, it seemed likely that her existence would be spent in gliding along a stream of listless apathy. Those who loved her grieved over her, yet saw no help for her: but she was soon to find help for herself, and for many another besides.

Bessie Gilbert was a Christian woman in the highest, noblest, fullest sense of the word; and, moreover, Bessie Gilbert was a woman who

had in her character vast stores of energy and will and strength. One day, when she sat alone, there flashed into her mind a thought of the hundreds upon hundreds of blind people who had not had her education and advantages. That thought grew rapidly into a great purpose, a firm, brave resolve. In those days of which we are writing not a single effort had, as yet, been made either to educate the blind or to make them helpful to themselves. Some people said that to struggle with such a disability as blindness was useless and impossible, and like trying to manufacture sunbeams out of darkness. Some people took what they were pleased to consider higher ground, and said blindness was a judgment of God, and that it was absolutely wrong to do anything to mitigate its effects. Some people—and these were the larger part of the community—never troubled themselves with thinking or speaking about the blind at all. But this blind woman, Bessie Gilbert, determined that, God helping her, these things should no longer be; blind men and women should be enabled to take a reasonable, active place in the community, and to live by the work of their own brains or hands. The higher classes, the moneyed classes, should hear of such an effort, and should be made to co-operate in it. Men of intellect should be enlisted in the cause. It seemed, in truth, an overwhelming, a chimerical undertaking for a blind girl; but she had hope and steadfast energy; she had a vast capital of Christian love and of deepest human sympathy; and she went forward boldly and calmly to the work for which God had raised her up. From her godmother she had inherited a fortune which made her independent, and placed her in a different position from most young women at her age; and here at once was a point of vantage ground to start upon. She did not, however, separate herself from her family when she set about what she believed to be her mission. The love of her parents, and more especially of her father, followed her approvingly in her course, and throughout her career her brothers and sisters were always her sympathizing, appreciative friends. This feature in Bessie Gilbert's story should be noted and remembered by girls who undertake any special work in life.

Bessie Gilbert's work for the blind sprang into being and vitality with what seems almost fabulous rapidity, showing what sustained energy of purpose, even in a single woman, may do. A blind association was formed; institutions for the blind started up as if by magic; blind men and women were taught different handicrafts, and were enabled to gain their own livelihood, and to hold their own in the social system instead of being a dead weight upon it. Such names as those of Bishop Wilberforce and William Gladstone were on the roll-call of those who came forward to champion the cause the courageous blind lady had taken in hand, and royalty itself set a seal of gracious sanction upon her noble, self-devoted work.

Various scenes of Bessie Gilbert's history rise up before us in quick succession. We see her walking round the sunny garden of a country vicarage leaning on the arm of a man from whose face, so radiant with mind, so instinct with power, we cannot turn away our eyes. We listen in rapt eagerness as sentences of deep earnestness or flashes of fun leave his lips; and no wonder, for we are looking at and listening to Charles Kingsley.

Next we see Bessie in a little back parlour of a house in a narrow London street. What a strange living picture here meets our view. A man, with the most intense eagerness written upon every speaking feature, though no light of sight is there, is sitting motionless as a carved figure, while a little girl stands by his side with a newspaper before her, making with her hands what seem to be the uninitiated the most extraordinary cabalistic signs round and round his head. This is one of Miss Gilbert's favourite *protégées*—a blind and deaf man whom she has put in the way of earning his own living, and to whom she has taught the deaf and dumb alphabet, by means of which his little girl is now communicating to him what she reads in the newspaper through letting him feel the letters formed by her fingers. Another time we find Bessie listening to a wonderful blind north-country lad, who worked exactly as well as if he had had eyes—leading horses on the farm, or going about with his pony and cart, or walking from field to field in the fulfilment of his duties, as

swiftly as if he beheld the sunlight guiding his steps.

Bessie Gilbert's work for the blind became very widely known, and letters from distant lands often reached her concerning it. Blind men and women blessed her in America; institutions for the blind in various European cities were founded on her plan. She occasionally wrote short practical papers on the same subject. But her life was too busy a one for her thoughts to get often on to a printed page. She also wrote a little poetry; but the verses would never have made a mark upon her generation.

Bessie Gilbert was not to spend her whole life in active work. It was her Heavenly Father's will that she should learn the full, blessed meaning of the words, "They also serve who only stand and wait."

Her health, which was always delicate, began very much to flag as she approached middle age. Spells of rest grew of necessity more frequent, and had to be longer and longer in duration. Her powers of walking became less, and she had gradually to give up all physical exertion. The doctors at first attributed the weakness to overwork, but, at length, the real cause of it was discovered to be what is called medically "degeneration of the spinal cord." It was believed that this disease had originated in the deadly fever which had cost her her eyes, and that it had been secretly sapping her vital powers ever since. Bessie was told that her days of work were over, and that from henceforth her life must be spent upon an invalid couch.

It was a heavy trial, but she bent her head meekly under it. Her life was further darkened by the loss of her father, her favourite sister, and other dear friends; but she was always cheerful, always resigned. As much as she could she still thought and planned for her blind people, and when she could do nothing else she suffered to the glory of God. She was watched by much love and care, and it was with the music of earthly affection ringing in her ears that Bessie Gilbert went up to have her eyes opened in Heaven. She has left a bright picture of brave struggling with difficulties, of the force of steadfast will leaning on prayer and faith, of radiant Christian resignation, for us to copy.

A LONELY LASSIE.

By SARAH TYTLER, Author of "A Young Oxford Maid," etc.

CHAPTER VI. IN THE LAP OF LUXURY.



R. and Mrs. Herbert Bennet were fortunate in being exceedingly well off in their worldly circumstances; in fact,

they had rather a larger income than they knew well what to do with, even with a son at Oxford, daughters grown and growing up, and an expensive, luxurious establishment fitting in with the requirements of the expensive, luxurious circle in which they figured.

But even this halcyon state of matters had its disadvantages. It had developed in Mr. Bennet, who was other-

wise estimable, a certain fancifulness and discontent, bred partly of satiety and partly of a natural inclination to covet what he had not got; and it had fostered in Mrs. Bennet a high-vaulting ambition of a not particularly lofty order.

Mr. Bennet was a sleeping partner in an old-established wealthy firm of wine merchants. Never having had to encounter any difficulty in making his way in the world, or to struggle for the possession of its tangible good things, he set himself to undervalue them, and succeeded in persuading himself that he was the wrong man in the wrong place.

His eyes failed to be opened to the fallacy of this belief by what was otherwise the satisfactory circumstance, honourable to the man, that though he was to all intents and purposes a sleeping partner, when any trouble arose—and even the most successful and wealthy mercantile houses have their

troubles—he woke up instantly, and did not delay a moment in coming to the front, and showing himself, under his languid manner, a keen and capable man of business. In ordinary times he took refuge in cultivating, in a *dilettante* manner, a few antiquarian and literary tastes, and in broadly stating to himself, and in mildly hinting to others that if fortune had not been against him he might have "witched the world" by his performances as a great historian or essayist.

It was in accordance with his proclivities that the family were settled at Kensington, and in *the square par excellence* instead of in Belgravia. Happily for all connected with him, his delusion with regard to the unkindness of destiny had not soured him, or rendered him morose or tyrannical: it had simply lent him a dash of not inelegant or unattractive melancholy.

In the slang of the careless world Mr.