

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

BESSIE FORREST.

(By David Lyall.)

Bessie Forrest was a typist employed by a syndicate which had offices in Queen Victoria street. She earned thirty shillings per week, on which she lived with a moderate degree of comfort, in a small lodging in the Bloomsbury district. Bessie had tried various boarding-houses and so-called "homes from home," but the lack of privacy in them was hateful to the reserve of her nature, which was Scotch to the core. She had the reputation, among the few who knew her well, of keeping herself to herself. Thus it happened, when a crisis arose in her life, she had to meet it and fight it alone. Bessie was not pretty in the accepted sense; she had none of the meretricious charms which she saw in hundreds of other working girls she used to meet of a morning hurrying towards their respective places of business. And she did not know how to enhance the few she possessed. She was now about twenty-six years of age, and had been living in London for five. Being an orphan, she had come up to be near her brother, who was also employed in the city, but within the last year he had been advanced by his firm to a post in their foreign house, and she had not seen him since. It was only after he was gone that she fully realized what a great, forlorn, empty place London can be to the solitary unit earning her daily bread. Perhaps Bessie's outstanding characteristics were unflinching cheerfulness and common sense. She had realized quite early in her working life what a mistake it is for the woman worker to trade upon the disabilities of her sex. She had often seen it done, and classed it as both unwise and unfair. She realized that a business man cannot stem the tide of his day's work because his typist has a headache. Bessie had an occasional headache, and a good deal of heartache, but nobody in Queen Victoria street, least of all her immediate employer, ever suspected it. Neither was she intrusive. She never volunteered remarks, and certainly abstained wholly from comment on anything, unless she were asked for it. This characteristic, unusual in her sex, naturally interested her employer, and while causing him the greatest satisfaction, also awakened some wonder in his mind.

In a word, he began to be interested. Bessie was not aware of this. She thought nothing of her looks, and even if they had been twice as alluring as they were, would not have exploited them. She had nothing but contempt for half the girls of her acquaintance, who regarded such looks as they possessed as their chief stock-in-trade, and trusted to them to cover up deficiencies in other directions, lack of capacity, and, what is more prevalent, lack of interest and honest responsibility.

Holding such views, it need not be wondered at that Bessie Forrest had not made many friends in London. By many she was feared for her caustic tongue. She was not unhappy, however. She had purposely chosen her later lodging near the British Museum, in fact, in Museum street itself, because she was an insatiable reader, and liked congenial surroundings in which to spend her leisure. She often said to herself and others, that no person need be lonely nor feel cheated of the good things of life who had the privilege of wandering in that lordly treasure-house, and of taking possession of its incomparable gifts. But in spite of all this, and of her cheerfulness, her optimism, her store of common sense, the years began to look a little grey to Bessie Forrest, and her heart some-

times shrank appalled from the prospect unrolled before her mental vision. She saw herself working at precisely the same desk, under the same conditions, perhaps for another ten years, and then awaking one morning, to find the fate of the middle-aged woman hers, to know herself supplanted by another and a younger woman. And in the interval she would not have been able to make any provision for the latter stage of the journey, and as Walter was contemplating matrimony at the earliest possible moment, on a not very elastic salary, she could not expect any help from him. The days of their comradeship indeed were over.

It was at this juncture that a crisis arose, with which she found herself unable to grapple.

She ought to have been able, by reason of her stern upbringing, and the long line of integrity behind her; the fact that she hesitated a moment proved that she had suffered something from her London experience, and that her moral fibre was weakened. We shall see how she fared in the forefront of the battle. It was a Saturday afternoon, and she left the office at the usual hour, about three o'clock. The month was only February, but it was very dry and fine, and out in the country you would find everywhere a hint of spring. Bessie had a bicycle stored in a lumber-room of an obliging landlady's house; she made some haste to get it out that afternoon, gave it a hasty clean-up, and sallied forth, wheeling it into the traffic of New Oxford street. She was a good cyclist, and had a cool nerve and a steady hand; the traffic, therefore, did not trouble her. She quickly left it behind, and by way of Regent's Park came in a very short space within measurable distance of the green fields and spreading uplands stretching northwards. Perhaps the idea as she turned north was to get a little nearer Scotland; anyhow, the thought comforted her. She rode hard, and scarcely slackened speed until she had passed through Finchley, and turned down the lane towards Elstree. She got off at a little inn she knew well there, and asked for a cup of tea. The woman of the inn knew her, and gave her a pleasant greeting. Of all the hundreds and thousands of cyclists who entered her house for rest and refreshment in the course of the year, it was astonishing that she remembered this one. It pleased Bessie, and she showed it in her face.

"I can't think how you've remembered me, Mrs. Greensleeves. You must see thousands in a year."

"So I does, Miss, but some one remembers, and some one doesn't. It all depends on the person."

This was obvious.

"Why did you remember me, then?"
"Well, because you was always so clean, an quick, and whole some, Miss, never in a hurry nor worried, and always a pleasant word. Some of 'em comin' in 'ere ain't got no time for nuthin' but to gee to their bangs."

Bessie laughed.

"Bangs are very important, Mrs. Greensleeves. I sometimes wish I had cultivated them myself."

"No, no, Miss, your 'air is lovely. It's got the gold on it this minnit, like—like the sun."

"No!" said Bessie, in surprise, and walking across to the somewhat damaged glass above the mantel-piece gazed critically at herself. She saw a pleasant face, a little flushed with the long ride, a pair of keen straight, clear eyes, and a strong yet very sweet

mouth. For the first time in her life Bessie Forrest appraised herself.

"I'm getting old, Mrs. Greensleeves. There are some grey hairs, and—and other things," she said quietly. "And what's worse, I'm getting grey inside, heartsick."

"Deary, deary, no, Miss; trouble at home, perhaps?"

"I haven't got any home, that's what's the matter with me," answered Bessie soberly. "But—but I've had a chance."

"He do mean it, then?" said Mrs. Greensleeves, with a little smile; "I was sure it would come. I mean I don't where the men's eyes are 'arf the time. I often says that to Greensleeves, seel'n' the minxes wot come in 'ere, wiv their devoted slaves."

"The slaves don't amount to much half the time, Mrs. Greensleeves," said Bessie rather trenchantly; "I've seen them. Hardly men at all; wouldn't make a good all-round human being among them."

Mrs. Greensleeves laughed.

"And why isn't he wiv yer this arternoon, Miss?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm considering things, that's why; but he doesn't belong to the devoted slave brigade, Mrs. Greensleeves. He's—he's different."

Something in the girl's voice arrested the landlady of the capacious heart, and she looked at the girl rather keenly; then she saw that her sweet mouth trembled.

"Ain't all goin' smooth, deary! but it will, oh yes, it will," she said.

"No, Mrs. Greensleeves, it'll never come right. It would be wrong from the very beginning; but—but I got a little tired of the treadmill, and it offered a way out, don't you know, that was all. Now get me my tea, there's a good soul, and don't let's talk any more about it. You've got your own troubles, I don't doubt. A nice thing if your chance customers are going to add to them."

Mrs. Greensleeves quietly retired. There was something compelling about Bessie, and when her clear eyes covered you somehow, it was impossible to say another word.

When they came to say good-bye at the porch, Bessie offered her hand.

"I don't suppose you know what a perspective is, Mrs. Greensleeves, but I've got it here. I see clearly, of course, because I'm out of the London smoke. Good-bye."

"And it won't ever come right, Miss? I'd like it to," said the good soul as she pressed the girl's hand between her kindly palms.

"It won't ever come right—it's—it's altogether outside the pale."

She rode away, looking back only once, to wave her hand. The landlady of the "Cap and Bells" never saw her again.

Next morning Bessie Forrest rose a little earlier than usual and went to church.

This of late years had become rather unusual, and all the efforts of those at the little Scotch church in Covent Garden, that had been interested in her, had proved unavailing to keep Bessie in the fold. She had drifted out, and while no fault could be found with her daily life, she had become indifferent regarding the things that matter. She was now one to be remembered unceasingly in their prayers. She arrived early, but was not the first. It would have been impossible for any but the initiated to find that historic building, tightly wedged in among the labyrinth of mean streets lying like a network about old Drury lane, but Bessie was very familiar with the