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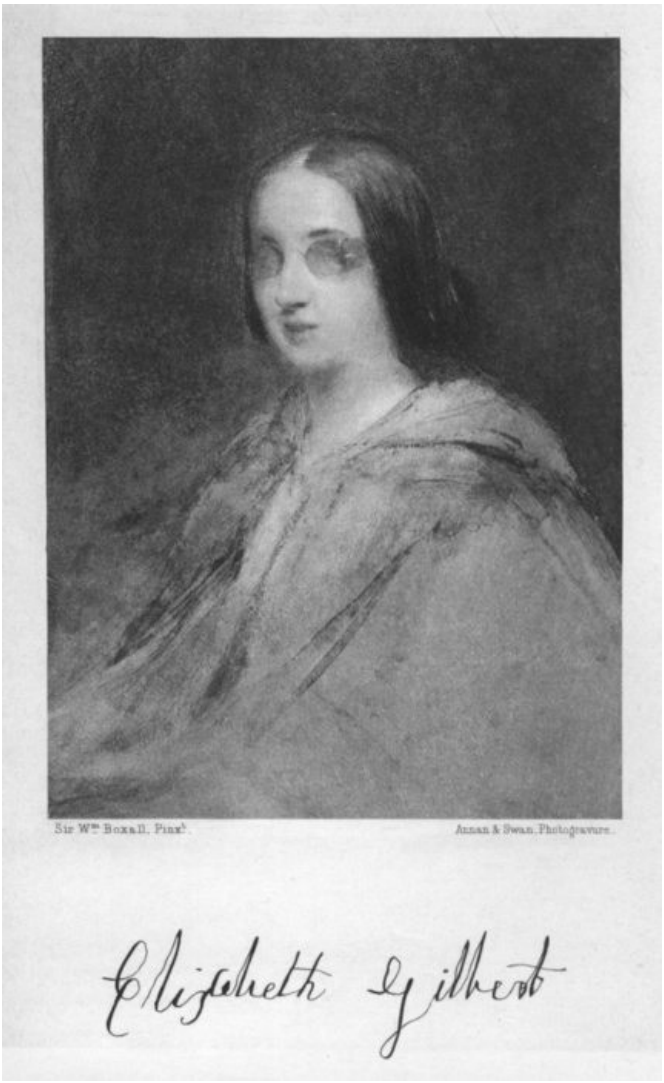

ELIZABETH GILBERT

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AND

HER WORK FOR THE BLIND

BY

FRANCES MARTIN

AUTHOR OF 'ANGÉLIQUE ARNAULD,' ETC. ETC.

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1887

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INTRODUCTION

There is a sacred privacy in the life of a blind person. It is led apart from much of the ordinary work of the world, and is unaffected by many external incidents which help to make up the important events of other lives. It is passed in the shade and not in the open sunlight of eager activity. At first we should be disposed to say that such a life, with its inevitable restrictions and compulsory isolation, could offer little of public interest, and might well remain unchronicled. But in the rare cases where blindness, feeble health, and suffering form scarcely any bar to activity; where they are not only borne with patience, but by heroic effort are compelled to minister to great aims, we are eager to learn the secret of such a life. No details connected with it are devoid of interest; and we are stimulated, encouraged, and strengthened by seeing obstacles overcome which appeared insurmountable, and watching triumph where we dreaded defeat.

Elizabeth Gilbert was born at a time when kindly and intelligent men and women could gravely implore "the Almighty" to "take away" a child merely because it was blind; when they could argue that to teach the blind to read, or to attempt to teach them to work, was to fly in the face of Providence. And her whole life was given to the endeavour to overcome prejudice and superstition; to show that blindness, though a great privation, is not a disqualification. Blind men and women can learn, labour, and fulfil all the duties of life if their fellow-men are merciful and helpful, and God is on the side of all those who work honestly for themselves and others. [Pg viii]

The life of Elizabeth Gilbert and her work for the blind are so inextricably interwoven, that it is impossible to tell one without constant reference to the other.

A small cellar in Holborn at a rent of eighteen-pence a week was enough for a beginning. But before her death she could point to large and well-appointed workshops in almost every city of England, where blind men and women are employed, where tools have been invented by or modified for them, where agencies have been established for the sale of their work.

Her example has encouraged, her influence has promoted the work which she never relinquished throughout life. [Pg ix]

Nothing was too great for her to attempt on behalf of the blind, nothing seemed impossible of achievement. One success suggested a new endeavour, one achievement opened a door for fresh effort.

Free from any taint of selfishness or self-seeking, all her thought was for others, for the helpless, the poor, the friendless. Her pity was boundless. There was nothing she could not forgive the blind, no error, no ignorance, no crime. She knew the desolation of their lives, their friendless condition, and understood how they might sink down and down in the darkness because no friendly hand was held out to them.

And yet she was unsparing to herself, and a rigid censor of her own motive and conduct. This she could not fail to be, because she believed in her vocation as from God. She never doubted that her work had been appointed for her; she never wavered in her belief that strength given by God, supported her. She knew that she was the servant of God, sent by Him to minister to others. This knowledge was joy; but it made her inexorable and inflexible towards herself.

There are but few incidents in her peaceful life. It was torn by no doubt, distracted by no apprehensions, it reached none of the heights of human happiness, and sounded none of the depths of despair. If there were unfulfilled hopes, aspirations, affections, they left no bitterness, no sense of disappointment. A beautiful life and helpful; for who need despair where she overcame and gained so great a victory? [Pg x]

The materials for recording the history of Elizabeth Gilbert are scanty, but all that were possessed by her sisters and friends have been placed at my disposal. My love for her, and our long friendship, have enabled me, I hope, to interpret them aright.

FRANCES MARTIN.

October 1887.

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CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD

"Moving about in worlds not realised."—WORDSWORTH.

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Elizabeth Margaretta Maria, born on the 7th of August 1826, was the second daughter and third of the eleven children of Ashhurst Turner Gilbert, Principal of Brasenose College, Oxford, afterwards Bishop of Chichester, and of Mary Ann his wife, only surviving child of the Rev. Robert Wintle, Vicar of Culham, near Abingdon.

The little girl, Bessie, as she was always called, was christened at St. Mary's Church, which is close to the old-fashioned house in High Street known as the Principal's Lodgings, in which Dr. Gilbert lived.

"A fine handsome child, with flashing black eyes," she is said to have been; and then for three years we hear nothing more. There was a nest of little children in the nursery, and in the spring of 1829 a fifth baby was to be added to them. In the diary of the grandfather, Mr. Wintle, we find the following entries:— [Pg 2]

1829.—April 6.	Little Elizabeth alarmingly ill with scarlet fever.
" 7.	Child very ill.
" 8.	Child somewhat better.
" 18.	Letter from Mary Ann [Mrs. Gilbert], stating that little Elizabeth had lost one eye.
" 21.	Went to Oxford. Little girl blind.
July 9.	Dr. Farre and Mr. Alexander say there is no chance of little Bessie seeing.

And so the "flashing black eyes," scarcely opened upon the world, were closed for ever, and all memory of sight was very speedily obliterated. Mrs. Gilbert had not been allowed to nurse or even to see her little girl, who had been removed from the nursery to a north wing, stretching back and away from the house. It was the father who watched over and scarcely left her. Mrs. Gilbert believed that the child's recovery was owing to his unremitting care. Dr. Gilbert's common sense seems to have been in advance of the medical treatment of that period; and he insisted on open windows, change of bedding and clothing to suit the exigencies of the case. When the child was thought to be sinking, he took upon himself the responsibility of administering port wine; this may or may not have saved her life, it is certain she struggled through and survived a dangerous, almost fatal attack.

But the handsome, healthy baby was sightless; one eye was entirely and the other partly destroyed, the throat ragged and certain to be always delicate, ears and nose also affected. A childhood of much suffering was inevitable—and then? [Pg 3]

It was the father who bore the first brunt of this sorrow. It was he who listened to the pathetic appeal of the little one, "Oh, nursie, light a candle," to her entreaty to be taken "out of the dark room," to the softly-whispered question, "If I am a *very* good 'ittle girl may I see my dolly to-morrow?" He had been full of courage, hope, and resource at the most critical times, but he was broken-hearted now, and would rush weeping from the child's bedside.

It was not until July, by that time a fifth baby was in the nursery, that the parents took their little Bessie to London, and there, as Mr. Wintle's diary tells, the case was pronounced to be hopeless. The renowned oculist of that day, Mr. Alexander, told them that there was no possibility of sight; the eyes were destroyed, the child was blind. Dr. Farre, whom they also consulted, showed much sympathy with the parents in their affliction, and they looked upon him as a friend raised up to advise and comfort them. Many years later they appealed to him on behalf of their blind child, and reminded him of the encouragement and help he had given them. It was doubtless he who suggested that blindness should be made as little as possible of a disability to the child, what other help could he give in such a case?—that she should be trained, educated, and treated like the other children; that she should share their pleasures and their experience, and should not be kept apart from the mistaken notion of shielding her from injury. [Pg 4]

It was with these views that the parents returned to Oxford, and it was these that they consistently carried out henceforward. There was no invention, no educational help for the blind which they did not inquire into and procure; but these were only used in the same way that one child might have one kind of pencil and another child another pencil.

The sisters who were nearest her own age speak of Bessie as gay and happy, "so like the others that it is difficult to pick her out from them." Surviving friends who remember the Gilbert children, the *sisterhood*, as the eight little girls came ultimately to be called, say that the group is ineffaceably stamped upon the memory, but that there was nothing special to attract attention to

the individual members of it. And yet the figure of the blind child does emerge, distinct and apart, and the reminiscences of youth and childhood are numerous enough to manifest the interest with which every part of her career was followed in her own family.

The parents had decided that she was to be treated exactly like her sisters. When she came into a room they were not to give her a chair; she was to find one for herself. Dr. Gilbert specially could not endure to have it suggested that she could not do what the others did. "Let her try," he would [Pg 5] say. So Bessie tried, and, ordinarily, succeeded. He was specially anxious that she should behave like the others at table, should be as particular in eating and drinking as they were, and should manage the food on her plate without offence to others. He encouraged her in ready repartee and swift intellectual insight. When the father joined his children in their walks it was always Bessie who took his hand. She invariably sat by him at breakfast, and when the children went in to dessert it was Bessie who sat by his side and poured out his glass of wine. "How do you know when it is full?" some one asked. "By the weight," she replied. The father, we may be sure, was training her in the transfer of the work of one sense to another, and helping her to supplement the lost eyesight by touch and sound, raising her up to the level of other children; and his initiative was followed in the family.

A special tie between the father and his blind child was always recognised. If any favour was to be asked it was Bessie who was sent to the father, and also if any difficulty arose amongst the children they would say, "We will tell Bessie," "We will ask Bessie."

There seems to have been no jealousy of her influence, no opposition to it. The sisters thought it her right to be first, and looked upon it as a great distinction, honour, and privilege to have a blind sister. It was their part to make her feel as little as possible the difference between herself [Pg 6] and them, and to help her to be as independent as they were. She was taught to dress herself unaided as early as the other children. She was full of fun, and enjoyed a romping game; she would much rather risk being knocked over than allow any one to lead her by the hand when they were all at play. She was passionate as a child, liable to sudden violent outbursts of anger; and as there were a good many passionate children together, she was quite as often mixed up in a quarrel as any of the others.

One incident remembered against her was that at seven or eight years old she seized one of the high schoolroom chairs and hurled it, or intended to do so, at a governess who had offended her. Another was that when she was somewhat younger, at the close of their daily walk, she and a little sister hurried on to enjoy the luxury of ringing the front door bell. It was just out of reach, and the little girls on tiptoe were straining to get at it. An undergraduate, passing by, thought to do them a kindness and pulled the bell. Bessie stamped with anger, and turned upon him a little blind passionate face: "Why did you do it? You knew I wanted to ring."

"A most affectionate nature, unselfish, generous, but passionate and obstinate; so obstinate no one could turn her from the thing she had resolved on," says one of the sisters.

In after life we find a temper under perfect control, and a will developed and trained to sweet firmness and unwavering endurance; but these showed themselves in the fitful irregularity of a [Pg 7] somewhat wilful childhood.

In accordance with the precept of her father, Bessie wanted to do everything that other children did. She *would* try, and nothing but her own individual experience would convince her of the limitations of her powers. The fire and the kettle were great temptations to her. One day in the nursery at Oxford she tried to reach the kettle, slipped and fell in front of the fire, tried to save herself by grasping the hot bars of the grate, and the poor little hands were badly burnt. We may be sure how the parents would suffer with their blind child in such an accident, and yet they would not encourage a panic, or allow any unnecessary restrictions to be put upon her actions.

A few years after scarlet fever the Gilbert children had measles. All memory of the occurrence would have faded out had it not been for Bessie. Her throat, as we have said, was ragged and impeded, and throughout life the only way in which she could swallow any liquid was in very small sips and with a curious little twist of nose and mouth. In after life she used to compare herself to Pascal, saying how much better her own case was, for Pascal was obliged to have his medicine warmed before he could sip it, whilst she could take hers cold.

There are some who still remember how they pitied her when they saw Bessie sitting up in bed sipping a black draught, and they can recall the resolution with which she did it, and the conscientiousness with which she took all, to the last drop. [Pg 8]

Some twenty years later she was walking in the garden at Eversley with Charles Kingsley, and he said to her, "When you take medicine you drink it all up. I spill some on my frock, and then I have to take it over again." It was one of those swift intuitive glances of his; he saw in the delicate woman the same patient courage that had characterised the child. She had much suffering from her throat throughout life, and as a little girl was nearly choked by a lozenge. The noteworthy point of the incident is that in the wildest tumult of alarm of those around her, the child was quite calm.

There was so little sense of her inferiority to others in early youth that it was only as the sisters grew up that they realised how much Bessie knew, and how much she could do, in spite of her blindness. As a child they all looked upon her as very clever. One of their Sunday amusements was to play at Sunday school, and Bessie was invariably made the mistress.

For a long time she and her sister Fanny, little more than a year younger, were companions in their lessons, which were in every respect alike. Bessie's were read aloud to her; she learnt easily, her memory was good, and she made rapid progress. In French and German the grammar was read to her, and she worked the exercises verbally. The governess, Miss Lander, was devoted to her pupils, and specially interested in Bessie, so that she turned to account every hint and suggestion as to special methods for the blind. She drew threads across a piece of paper, which was fixed to a frame, and taught the child to write in the ordinary way. There was a box of raised letters which could be used for spelling lessons, and there was leaden type with raised figures for arithmetic lessons. The letters were arranged on an ordinary board; but the figures were placed in a grooved board. Now arithmetic was the most difficult and distasteful of all Bessie's lessons; the placing of the figures correctly was a very perplexing task, and the working of sums an intricate problem. But she did her duty and made her way steadily to compound division, a stage beyond which no woman was expected to advance fifty years ago. Miss Lander did her best to explain the various processes, but the sums, alas, were only too often wrong, and a passionate outburst would succeed the announcement of failure. That little episode of the chair was probably not unconnected with arithmetic. She was keenly interested in astronomical lessons, and the home-made orrery, which explained the relative position of sun, moon, and planets, was a source of unfailing interest. The little fingers fluttered over the planets and followed their movements with great delight.

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An eager, intelligent child, with parents and teachers all anxious to smoothe her way and remove difficulties, we need not wonder that youth was a happy time for her: "the brightest and happiest of all the children," she is said to have been.

"The Principal's Lodgings," as the old-fashioned, rambling house in High Street, Oxford, was called, has no garden whatever. The front door opens into a dark hall; spacious cupboards to the right; to the left the dining-room; in front of you passages, doors, and two difficult staircases. There was no one, we are told, who had not fallen up or down these dark winding stairs except Bessie. On the first floor to the front, with five windows looking into High Street, is the drawing-room. This was divided, and one part of it was converted into a schoolroom. The Principal's study was on the same floor at the back of the house. What is known as the north wing stretches back, and has two or three small rooms which can easily be isolated. It was in them that Bessie was nursed through scarlet fever.

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There is also a south wing with excellent kitchens and good servants' rooms.

On the second floor the space above the drawing-room and schoolroom was occupied by Mrs. Gilbert's room and the two nurseries; whilst a large bedroom at the back, away from the street and over the study, the spare room, was that in which all the children saw the light, and from which eleven of them successively emerged. The second and ninth were boys, and there were nine daughters. A little girl died in 1834, and is buried in the adjacent churchyard of St. Mary's. Bessie, who was eight years old, was taken into the room to bid farewell to her sister Gertrude, and laid her little hand upon her. She never forgot it; and would say in after years in a low tone of awe: "She was so cold." The impression produced on a sensitive organisation was so painful that she was never again taken into the chamber of death.

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There is a large "flat" or leaden roof above this "spare" room over the study, to which there is access from an adjacent passage; but this roof is too dangerous a place for a playground, and the children had none in or near the house. The south windows in the front look into High Street; an east window high up in the nursery looks out upon St. Mary's; and all the windows to the north at the back of the house look over walls, and houses, and chimney pots, and brick and mortar. The children played at home in ordinary times, but in the long vacation they played in the quadrangle, a grassy, treeless enclosure, but a very garden of delight to them. The favourite part of it was near the figures called "Cain and Abel," long since removed, and long since known not to have represented Cain and Abel, but to have been a copy of antique sculpture. There were grand games of hide and seek around "Cain and Abel," in which Bessie always joined.

Sometimes the children dined in the College Hall during vacation, and were joined after dinner in the quadrangle by their friends amongst the Fellows of Brasenose, who all had a kind word for the little blind girl. She was also a special favourite with the College servants, and led, as it were, a charmed life, watched over by every one, and unconscious of their care.

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All memory of vision seems to have faded from her before she left the sick-room; but, taught by those around her, she soon began to take an imaginary interest in colour, and a very real one in form and texture. An old nurse is still alive who remembers making a pink frock for her when she was a child, her delight at its being pink, and her pleasure in stroking down the folds. In 1835 or 1836 the young Princess Victoria, with her mother the Duchess of Kent, visited Oxford. Bessie was amongst those who went to "see" them enter the city. Returning home she exclaimed, "Oh, mamma, I have seen the Duchess of Kent, and she had on a brown silk dress." The language is startling; but how else could the blind child express the impression she had received except by saying "I have seen." Throughout life she continued to say, "I have seen," and throughout life the words continued to represent a reality as clear and true to the blind as the facts of sight are to those who have eyes.

Very early Bessie knew the songs of birds and delighted in them. Very early also she learned to love flowers. She liked to have them described, and to hear the minutest particulars about them. Nothing made her so happy as to gather them for herself. There were fields near Hincksey which the Gilberts called "The Happy Valley." Thither they resorted in the spring with baskets to gather

forget-me-nots, the flowering rush, and other blossoms, which they prized highly. In all these expeditions Bessie was happy, and a source of happiness to others. The tender and reverent way in which she examined a flower, the little fluttering fingers touching every petal and bruising none, was a lesson never to be forgotten. [Pg 13]

Her youthful admiration of Wordsworth was chiefly based upon his love of flowers, but also upon personal knowledge. When she was about ten years old, Wordsworth went to Oxford to receive the honorary degree of D.C.L. from the University. He stayed with the Principal, in that large spare room we know of, and won Bessie's heart the first day by telling at the dinner-table how he had almost leapt off the coach in Bagley Wood to gather the little blue veronica. But she had a better reason for remembering that visit. One day she was in the drawing-room alone, and Wordsworth entered. For a moment he stood silent before the blind child. The little sensitive face, with its wondering, inquiring look, turned towards him. Then he gravely said, "Madam, I hope I do not disturb you." She never forgot that "Madam," grave, solemn, almost reverential.

CHAPTER II [Pg 14]

IN THE DARK

"Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to endless night."—BLAKE.

The Gilbert children had a very happy home. In Oxford they were constantly under the eyes of parents who loved them tenderly, and loved to have them at hand. The schoolroom was between drawing-room and study, the nurseries adjacent to the parents' bedroom.

Mrs. Gilbert, a very handsome, large-hearted, attractive woman, was devoted to her husband, and gave him constant and loving care so long as she lived. She dearly loved her children; but she thought, though perhaps she was mistaken, that she liked boys better than girls; and she had so few boys! Husband and children were all the world to her; she was happy in their midst, full of plans for them, greatly preoccupied with their future, and looked up to and beloved by all.

Dr. Gilbert was a schoolfellow of De Quincey, and in his *Confessions*[1] De Quincey thus speaks of him: "At this point, when the cause of Grotius seemed desperate, G——[2] (a boy whom subsequently I had reason to admire as equally courageous, truthful, and far-seeing) suddenly changed the whole field of view." [Pg 15]

And again referring to his leaving school, De Quincey writes: "To three inferior servants I found that I ought not to give less than one guinea each; so much therefore I left in the hands of G ——[2], the most honourable and upright of boys."

What weeks and months of anguish must have been passed by these parents, when the bright little three-year-old child was struck down into darkness, and the light of the "handsome black eyes" extinguished for ever. She was smitten into the ranks of the blind; and of the blind nearly sixty years ago, when their privation was a stigma, an affliction, "a punishment sent by the Almighty;" when even good and merciful people looked upon it as "rebellion" to endeavour to mitigate and alleviate the lot of those who lived in the dark. Bessie's parents did not and could not accept this view. They saw their child rise from her bed of sickness unchanged, though grievously maimed; but she was the same little Bessie who had been given to them bright and clever and happy, and by God's grace they resolved that she should never lose her appointed place in the family circle. From the very first they were, as we have seen, advised to educate her with her sisters. This advice they followed; and at the same time inquired in all directions as to the methods and material and implements which might give special help to their blind child. Packets of letters yellow with age, long paragraphs copied from old newspapers by Mrs. Gilbert and sent to people living in distant parts, accounts of apparatus, lists of inventions and suggestions bear constant and touching tribute to the loving care of a mother upon whose time and strength in that large young family there must have been so many demands. The surviving members of the family do not even remember by name many of those whose letters have been preserved; letters now valuable, not in themselves, but as showing that if Bessie Gilbert lived to do a great work on behalf of the blind, and did it, undaunted by obstacles and difficulty that might well have seemed beyond her strength, she did but inherit the strong will and indomitable courage, the power of endurance and devotion which characterised her parents. [Pg 16]

These letters throw much light upon the condition of the blind at the beginning of this century. One packet is specially interesting as the story of the successful effort of a person unknown, and without influence, to effect an improvement in a public institution. It may, probably it must, have been told in later years to Bessie herself; it would encourage her, and may encourage others, to persevere in efforts on behalf of those who are helpless and afflicted. [Pg 17]

Mrs. Wood, wife of the Rev. Peter Wood, Broadwater Rectory, Worthing, was interested in the condition of the blind. She had visited institutions in Zurich, in Paris, had heard of work being done on their behalf in Edinburgh, and was acquainted with the condition of the School for the

Indigent Blind, St. George's Fields, London.

She wrote in 1831 to Mr. Henry V. Lynes, Mr. Gaussen, Mr. Dodd, Mr. Pigou, Mr. Capel Cure, and other members of the Committee of the St. George's Fields School, begging them to inquire into the methods for teaching the blind to read, recently discovered, and at that time attracting attention. With her letter she sent specimens of books and other data to be submitted to the Committee.

Mr. Gaussen, writing from the Temple, 12th March 1831, replies that he will have much pleasure in forwarding her excellent views, and that Mr. Vynes has secured the reference of her plan to the Committee; that it will be well considered, but for his own part he is bound to express the greatest doubt as to the result. He suggests that instead of teaching the blind to read there should be more reading aloud to them, "so as to stimulate their minds to more exertion, which in many cases is the source of the kind treatment they meet with."

A brother of the Secretary, Mr. Dodd, writes that he also will do what he can, although he has [Pg 18] heard that the benefit of the plan "is so limited that quite as much good may be accomplished by teaching the pupils to commit portions of Scripture to memory as by teaching them to read."

Mr. Vynes informs Mrs. Wood that he has, at her request, attended the meeting of the Committee, that only two of the other gentlemen she had written to were present, Mr. Pigou and Mr. Gaussen. "The latter is not favourable to the plan, neither is Mr. Dodd, the Secretary." The gentlemen present who spoke were all "well satisfied with the amount of religious knowledge which their blind pupils already possess, so that I much fear they will take little trouble to increase it." He refers to a "rumour" that the "art of reading" has been introduced into the Edinburgh School for the Blind, but adds that the "Meeting did not seem inclined to give any credit to it;" and suggests that, if it is true, Mrs. Wood might let them hear more about it, as he had secured a reference of the whole matter to the consideration of the House Committee.

Now Mrs. Wood was nothing daunted by these successive splashes of cold water. She wrote afresh to members of the Committee. She obtained facts from Edinburgh, and she wisely limited her appeal to a petition that the blind should be enabled to read the Scriptures for themselves. But whether at that time she recognised the fact or not, there can be no doubt that the whole [Pg 19] question of what the blind could do *themselves* would be opened by this step, and must be decided.

Mr. Vynes writes to her again on the 29th March, and it is interesting to observe that a Committee in 1831 was very much the same sort of thing that it is now.

> Among the seven or eight gentlemen present I found Mr. Jackman, the Chaplain of the Institution, being the first time I had ever the pleasure of meeting him. Both Mr. Jackman and Mr. Dodd [the Secretary] affirm that these poor blind pupils are already as well instructed as it is possible they should be, under their afflicting circumstances. They are correctly moral in their general conduct, influenced by religious feelings and principles, with contented and pious minds. Mr. Jackman mentioned as a proof that they do think beyond the present moment, the average number who now participate at every celebration of the Lord's Supper is one or two and twenty, though formerly there had been but three or four. They can repeat a large portion of the Psalms, not merely the singing Psalms, but take the alternate verse of the reading version without requiring any prompting. And all the pupils have a variety of the most important texts strongly impressed upon their memories. Their memories are generally good, and they assure me they are fully exercised upon sound truths. These gentlemen are of opinion that more is to be learned by the ear than ever can be acquired by the fingers, and therefore see no advantage attending the new plan which can at all compensate the trouble and expense of introducing it.
>
> Two of the gentlemen present, Mr. Capel Cure and Mr. Meller, very handsomely supported your view of the subject, and recommended a trial to be made. At the same [Pg 20] time they candidly confessed themselves quite unable to point out the best way, or indeed any way, to set about it; upon which the Committee very naturally threw the burthen upon me, or, my dear madam, you must allow me to say, rather upon you. I read to them the plan which you had sketched out, which, however, the Committee do not think very practicable. They will not seek out an idle linguist as you recommend; but if you will bring a qualified man to their door, with all appliances to boot—that is, all the books requisite for introducing the system, then they will be ready to treat with him. And here the matter rests for the present.

"Here" probably the Committee expected it to rest. But not so Mrs. Wood, who reconsidered and amended her suggestion as to "an idle linguist."

The next letter from Mr. Vynes, 15th April 1831, announces that Mr. Gall of Edinburgh "has offered to come to London to put our Committee in more complete possession of his plan, and to instruct some of our teachers gratuitously." The Sub-committee recommended that this offer should be accepted; the General Committee had resolved to adopt the recommendation. "They have also very properly," he continues, "agreed to reimburse Mr. Gall the expenses of his journey and of his necessary residence in London. The account which Mr. Gall has given of his invention is doubtless overcharged; it exhibits all the enthusiasm which generally attends all new discoveries. His estimate of the expense is somewhat vague. He requires very little *time* to enable

his poor blind pupils to read and to write as correctly, and almost as quickly, as the more fortunate poor who have the blessing of sight. However, if Mr. G. does but accomplish one-half of what he has promised, our Committee will be quite satisfied. [Pg 21]

"Thus far, then, I may congratulate you, my dear madam, on the successful result of your active and persevering exertions."

After this there is a long pause; and the next letter from Mr. Vynes is dated Clapton, 24th August 1831. We can picture to ourselves the feelings with which Mrs. Wood would read it in the far-off Broadwater rectory.

> DEAR MADAM—I have now the pleasure of returning to you the various books and papers which you so kindly sent up for the inspection of the Committee of our Blind School, and have to give you our best thanks for the use of them. You will be pleased to hear this new system of reading and writing is making some progress in the London school. As a proof that the General Committee are satisfied, I will report to you the results of their meeting on the 13th of this month. They first voted fifty guineas to Mr. Gall as a compliment for the service he has already done to the Institution. But when Mr. G. was called in and acquainted with their vote, he at once, respectfully, but very positively, declined to accept of any remuneration for what he had done, saying his object was to introduce the new system to serve the poor blind and not himself.
>
> The Committee then elected Mr. Gall as Honorary Member of the Corporation, and requested the House Committee to find out (if possible) something acceptable to Mrs. Gall, and empowered them to present it to her. I mention all this in justice to Mr. Gall. It is indeed highly creditable to him, for we are told that he is by no means in affluent circumstances. Mr. Gall continues in almost daily attendance at the school, and will remain some short time longer, so anxious is he to establish his system permanently in this school. On the female side he has already pretty well succeeded; Miss Grove, the sub-matron, and also one of the blind inmates having qualified themselves to become teachers. [Pg 22]
>
> On the male side, Mr. G. has hitherto been baffled, and therefore has asked the Committee for some extra aid. This matter is still under consideration.... On the whole, then, I think I may now venture to congratulate you, my dear madam, on the attainment of the object you have so much at heart—that these poor blind shall be enabled to read those oracles which will give them comfort in this world and lead them to perfect happiness hereafter.

And thus cautiously and quietly, with the inevitable resistance of officials to any change, and the caution of a Committee on their guard against enthusiasm, and not sanguine as to results, an important change was inaugurated. Henceforward the blind were no longer to be treated as incurables in a hospital, capable of no instruction and able to do no more than commit to memory moral precepts and religious truths. They were to learn reading and writing, a door was set open that would never again be closed. Education was shown to be possible, and work would follow.

In August 1832 Mrs. Gilbert received the copy of a letter written by Mr. Edward Lang, teacher of mathematics, St. Andrew Square, Edinburgh, to a Mr. Alexander Hay. Mr. Lang had invented a system of printing for the use of the blind, with simplifications of letters and the introduction of single signs for many "redundant sounds." He is in favour of these modifications, and adds: [Pg 23]

> Were not the prejudice so strong in favour of ordinary spellings of words, I would, had I been engaged in the formation of such an alphabet, have innovated much more extensively. But words, like men, must carry their genealogy, not their qualifications, on their coats-of-arms; and though this arrangement conceals many obliquities of descent, and more than many real characters, it must be acquiesced in, since the law of prescription in this, as in many other cases, prevents the exercise of reason. He concludes: Most warmly do I recommend your whole system to the attention of all who feel interested in the diffusion of knowledge; and I trust that its advantages will soon be felt by those who were once consigned by barbarous laws, or by dark superstition, to destruction or to neglect, but who now are re-elevated to their own station through the light of a milder and nobler humanity.

At the close of this year, 1832, a Mrs. Wingfield sent to Mrs. Gilbert a newspaper paragraph giving an account of a meeting of the Managers of the Blind Asylum, Edinburgh. After some routine business these managers had proceeded to examine the "nature and efficiency" of the books lately printed for the use of the blind. Some of the blind boys in the Asylum, who had been using the books for "only a few weeks," picked out words and letters and read "slowly but correctly." By repeated trials, and by varying the exercises, the directors were of opinion that the art promised to be of "the greatest practical utility to the blind." Mr. Gall also stated that the apparatus for writing to and by the blind was in a state of considerable forwardness. This paragraph Mrs. Gilbert copied and sent, on the 10th of January 1833, to her father's cousin, Mr. J. Wintle of Lincoln's Inn Fields, who had, as she learnt, a friend in Edinburgh. To this friend, Mr. Ellis, application was duly made, and he set about instituting inquiries which resulted, on the 13th of April 1833, in the despatch of a portentous epistle, such a letter as at that time was considered worthy of heavy postage. He had obtained for Mr. Wintle every possible scrap of information on the subject in question. Letters follow from him direct to Mrs. Gilbert, and on the [Pg 24]

2d of November 1833 Mr. Ellis "presents his compliments, and, after many delays, is happy in being able at last to forward the articles he was commissioned to procure for Mrs. Gilbert's little girl."

The following list shows how much had been done in two years:—

1. Gall's First Book. Three other Lesson Books and the Gospel of St. John.

2. Hay's Alphabet and Lessons (Mr. Lang's friend), with outline sketch of Map.

3. The string alphabet, with a printed statement of its invention and use.

4. Seven brass types constructed on the principles of the string alphabet.

5. Several packets of metallic pieces representing the notes in music.

Another letter preserved by Mrs. Gilbert was from a Mr. Richardson, of 11 Lothian Street, Edinburgh, to her uncle, Mr. Morrell, at that time staying in Edinburgh, dated 14th January 1837. It gives an account of the globes, maps, boards, etc., in use in the Edinburgh Asylum, and shows what rapid advance has been made since the little boys were examined by the managers in 1833. [Pg 25]

Mrs. Gilbert would learn not so much from the account of the things done, as the manner of doing them; from the explanation of the method of adapting ordinary maps and globes to the use of the blind, and of employing gum and sand and string and pieces of cork; the little holes in the map instead of the names of cities, and the movable pegs. All these hints were very valuable to her; and every one of them was turned to good account in the schoolroom at Oxford.

In 1839 Mr. J. Wintle sends raised books from London. In 1840 he has gone, out of health, on a visit to his friend Mr. Ellis, Inverleith Row, Edinburgh. One of his first visits was to the Edinburgh Asylum, and he writes an account of it to Mrs. Gilbert, "in the hope of being useful to your daughter Bessie." He promises further information from Glasgow, which is, so he learns, "the fountain-head of all works for the blind, save those published in America," and he announces a copy of the New Testament as almost ready, price £2: 2s. It was ultimately procured by Mrs. Gilbert and presented to Bessie.

And now we may lay aside the time-worn, yellow paper, the large and copious letters, the anxious inquiries and the willing replies. They did not, however, end at this period, they went on throughout the whole life of these good parents. There was no new invention, no new system into which they did not at once inquire, nothing that could be procured which they did not obtain for their child. [Pg 26]

But they never swerved from their original intention to educate Bessie at home in the schoolroom with her sisters. The apparatus which replaced pen and pencil and slate might differ, as slate differs from paper. She had to put her fingers on the globe upon which her sisters cast their eyes, and to feel the movements of the planets around the sun, in the orrery which gave her so much pleasure; but her lessons were given and learnt at the same time, and she lost none of the happiness and stimulating effect of companionship in work and play.

There can be no doubt that she was influenced throughout life by her own early training, which had made it impossible for her to believe in the numerous so-called "disabilities" of the blind. Some of her friends thought that she had not an adequate notion of what these really were. Perhaps those who are born blind, or who have lost sight at so early an age that no memory of it remains, do not adequately realise their privation. Sight is to them a "fourth dimension," a something that it is absolutely impossible to realise. They can talk about it, but it is impossible for them to understand it.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, pp. 48 and 73, by Thomas de Quincey. Edinburgh, 1862.

[2] Gilbert.

CHAPTER III [Pg 27]

LITTLE BLOSSOM

"What, were ye born to be
An hour or half's delight,
And so to bid good-night?"—Herrick.

Mr. Wintle gave his little grand-daughter a new name after her loss of sight. He called her "Little Blossom." She was never to develop into flower or fruit, he said, on account of her great affliction, and the limitations that it must entail. Miss Trotwood may have had a similar theory as to David Copperfield's Dora, but these were days before Dickens had written of Little Blossom. The theory was by no means adopted by Bessie's parents; and the name of Blossom was used by

Mr. Wintle only.

Dr. Kynaston, in lines addressed "to Bessie," in 1835, tells how his "soul" reproved

"That friend, as once I heard him say,
Oh, may it please Almighty God
To take that child away!"

We do not know who "that friend" was, who prayed for the removal, at nine years old, of a singularly happy and engaging child; but the prayer is indicative of the condition of the blind, the probable outlook for the child, and the point of view from which blindness was regarded even by people of culture and means. If such a one could pray for the death of a blind child, what would the poor do? [Pg 28]

Despite the "Blossom" theory, or perhaps because of it, Bessie was a great favourite with her grandfather. He liked to have her with him at Culham Vicarage. She often stayed there for weeks together, and would learn more about flowers and birds than she could do in Oxford. There was also a delightful companion and friend at Culham, the black pony, Toby. Bessie was a fearless little rider, and delighted in a gallop round the field. But Mr. Wintle would not trust her alone with Toby, and there was always a servant to walk or run by his side. The grandfather makes an entry in his diary as to Bessie's first ride, and adds that he "was much pleased with Blossom."

It was at Culham that she was introduced to *Robinson Crusoe*. Mr. Wintle gave it to the servant who was to walk out with her, and who read aloud as she walked. Bessie was deeply interested, and would allow of no pause in the reading: "She kept her going all the time:" says a sister. Sometimes there were three or four little girls at Culham, and then in the evening, grandpapa read aloud to them James's *Naval History*. It was very little to their taste, and all but one paid little attention, or if attending, could remember or understand but little. When, however, the reading was ended, and grandpapa began to ask questions, it was Bessie who knew how the vessels were manned and rigged, the complement of men and guns, and all the details connected with the fitting out of a man-of-war. And again Mr. Wintle had good reason to be "much pleased with Blossom." [Pg 29]

The little girl learnt needlework with her sisters. She could hem and sew, but never liked doing either. A very neatly hemmed duster, done before she was ten years old, and presented to an aunt, is still preserved in the family. Knitting and crochet she liked better, and a knitted purse in bands of very bright colours has been kept unused by the friend to whom she gave it as a child. Her favourite occupation of this kind was the making of slender watch chains with fine silk on a little ivory frame. All her friends will remember these chains, which in many cases were an annual present.

But needlework of any kind was always "against the grain." She liked any other occupation better.

Perhaps the chief characteristic of early youth was her love of poetry and music. Wordsworth's poems, especially those that referred to flowers; Mary Howitt, Mrs. Hemans, these were her favourites. A sister says she cannot remember the time when Bessie was not in the habit of sitting down to the piano to improvise. She set Mary Howitt's "Sea Gull" to her own music before she was twelve years old. It was published at the time of the Irish famine, and realised £20, which she gave to the Famine Fund. [Pg 30]

Bessie's first music-mistress was the widow of an organist in Oxford, but when her talent for music was more pronounced she had lessons from Dr. Elvey, the brother of Sir George Elvey. Whilst she was learning a new piece, a sister would sit by her side and read the notes aloud. She quickly discovered if a single one had been omitted; and, as with *Robinson Crusoe*, she kept her reader "going all the time." But her enthusiasm and pleasure kindled the interest of those who certainly had a dry part of the work.

Bessie was not the only blind child in Oxford. Dr. Hampden, afterwards Bishop of Hereford, had two blind daughters. The three blind children used often to meet and walk together; but Bessie preferred the companionship of the merry girls at home, in whose games she always shared. She did not bowl a hoop, however, and in formal walks she was the companion of the governess.

Children's parties in Oxford were a source of much pleasure; she danced with girls, she was very fond of dancing, but seldom with boys. She wanted a little guiding, and the boys were possibly too shy to undertake this; certainly very few of them were disposed to try.

Bessie's birthday was, for the Gilbert children, the festival of the year. This was owing partly to the fact that it fell in August, during the long vacation, the time associated with out-door games in the grassy quadrangle, whispered conferences near the mysterious and awe-inspiring Cain and Abel, with dinners in the Hall and visits in the schoolroom from friendly dons. There were three birthdays in August: a younger sister and a brother were also born in that month; all three were celebrated on the 7th, and Bessie was the "lady of the day." There was always a water party to Nuneham in the house-boat or the barge. On landing, the children would run to the top of a grassy slope and then slide and roll down the slippery grass. Bessie joined in this game with keen delight, untroubled by the silent watchfulness of a father, ever alert to protect her from danger, and ever anxious that she should be ignorant of special precautions on her behalf. [Pg 31]

Dr. Kynaston, "High Master of St. Paul's," and former Philological Lecturer of Christ Church,

Oxford, was nearly always included in the birthday party, and was very fond of Bessie. When she was a very little child she was leaning far out of the window of the boat so as to put her hands in the water, and her father was alarmed. "I am holding her tight by the frock," said Dr. Kynaston. "Yes," replied the father, "but I must have something more solid than that held by."

[Pg 32]

Of all these birthday parties, the most memorable to the blind child was that on which she was ten years old. The day was fine, every one was very good to her. Her special favourites, Dr. Kynaston and Mr. Bazely (father of Mr. Henry Bazely, of whom a short biography has recently appeared), were both present. A vase with a bouquet of the flowers she loved, mignonette, heliotrope, roses, geraniums, was presented to her. All her life she treasured those dried flowers and the little vase. But the thing that made this birthday memorable was that not only her music but her poems were beginning to receive consideration, and one written at this time was considered worthy of being copied and sent to her godmother, Miss Hales. A copy in her mother's writing is still extant, and may be read with interest:

LINES WRITTEN AT TEN YEARS OLD.

When morning appears, and night melts away,
Then comes the bright, dull, or enlivening day;
The dewdrops like pearls on the flowers are shining,
But the sunbeams to dry them are quickly inclining.
The sun now red peeps through the trees,
And now there springs up a freshening breeze.
The flowers which are by the sunbeams extended,
Droop no more o'er their green stalks bended.
All is cheerful and gay, at the dawn of the day,
And March's high winds are flying away.
A shower of rain now darkens the skies,
A few people begin to open their eyes;
It is early, 'tis dawn, 'tis the dawn of the day,
And the darkness of night is fast gliding away.

[Pg 33]

The child's verses are neither better nor worse than those of many a little versifier of her age, but they are remarkable because they are obviously untouched by elders, who could so easily have corrected rhythm and metre; they are genuine, and they are written by a child who had apparently forgotten that she had ever seen the light. She had learnt to love it for some occult and mysterious reason which she could not explain, perhaps for the physical effect which light exercises upon the human organism. She loved light, she loved nature, and from early childhood she loved beautiful scenery. Dreams were always a source of delight to her, and her dreams were a feature in her life. She would say that she constantly dreamt about beautiful landscapes. Did some memory of sight revisit her in dreams? "There were beautiful intuitions in her music," we are told. Had she "beautiful intuitions" as to sight? Had she, in her dreams, visions of the scenes that passed before her in those three first years of which she retained not the slightest recollection in her waking hours? Beautiful scenery gave her pleasure; there was always a response to any description of it. Once when a sister was describing mountains she said: "I don't want to know how high they are, how many hours it takes to climb them, and what they are made of. I want you to tell me if they make you afraid, if they make you happy, or," drawing herself up, "if they give you a kind of a proud feeling."

[Pg 34]

In the April before this tenth birthday she had attempted to express in verse her feeling as to the light; and on this day three sonnets were addressed to her by Dr. Kynaston.

What little girl would not be proud of such homage from a "High Master of St. Paul's," and so dear a friend?

The sonnets appear in *Miscellaneous Poetry*, by Rev. Herbert Kynaston, M.A.,[3] and two of them are here given:—

TO BESSIE ON HER BIRTHDAY.

And art thou ten years old? one half the time
Is spent—oh say, thou heavenly-gifted child,
How hast thou, then, those weary years beguiled—
That fills thy budding years to woman's prime.
Thou stand'st midway, as on a height sublime,
Sweet record here, sweet promise there as mild
Of childish days, of girlhood undefiled,
To lure thee on; heaven help thee now to climb
With fairest hope, as erst, the onward part
Of life's sad upland course that still is thine!
Had I one wish, fresh gathered from the heart,
To hang with votive sweets at friendship's shrine,
I'd pray—and yet, methinks, if thou wert mine,
I would not have thee other than thou art.

THE SAME SUBJECT.

Forgive the thought, but I have learnt to love
What others deem privation; I have seen
How more than recompensed thy loss has been,
Dear gentle child! by Him who from above
Guides thy dark steps; and I have yearned to prove
The blessed influence, the joy serene,
The store of heavenly peace, that thou dost glean
From angels' steps, unseen, who round thee move.
Yea, I have owed thee much; thou art a thing [Pg 35]
For sharpest grief to gather round, and grow
To mellowness; where sorrow loves to cling,
And tune to gospel strains the tears that flow
In harshest discord, sullen murmuring,
That will not learn the blessedness of woe.

In this same year, 1836, Bessie took her first long journey away from home. Her father and mother had arranged to pay visits to some old friends, and they took with them the two eldest girls, Mary and Bessie. They stayed with the Bishop of Lincoln, Dr. Kaye, with an old college friend, Mr. Stephens, at Belgrave, Leicester, and with several other old college friends of the Principal's. They visited Matlock; and on her return Bessie described to the younger sisters the excitement of going into the caves, of crossing the Styx, and of listening to the blasting of rocks. It is recorded of her at this time that she never hesitated or shrank from anything required of her. She sat down in the boat, or stood up, or bent her head just as she was told to do. The loving care of the parents was not in vain, they saw their blind child fearless and happy, and well able to take the place due to her as second daughter. It is recorded that at Liverpool she was present for the first time at a really good concert, and that the music she then heard was a great stimulus to her, as well as a keen delight.

Dr. Gilbert preached at Liverpool, and from Liverpool they went to Stockport. In the church at the latter place there was a brass band, the sudden braying of which was a shock to her nerves [Pg 36] which Bessie never forgot. She was too young to dine or spend much time downstairs in the houses where they stayed, but she always remembered the kindness with which she was treated in schoolrooms and nurseries, and looked back upon these early visits with great pleasure.

The family hurried back to Oxford on account of the unexpected death of Dr. Rowley before his term of office had expired, and Dr. Gilbert at once entered upon the duties of Vice-Chancellor of the University.

Many little incidents connected with her father's tenure of office were a source of amusement to Bessie throughout life.

The University marshal made daily reports to the Vice-Chancellor, and informed him of any disturbance. One morning he stated that he had found two men fighting near Wadham College and separated them. Some time afterwards he came upon them in another place and did not interfere. "And pray, why not?" asked the Vice-Chancellor. "Well, sir, you see, they were very comfortably at it."

This story was repeated at the breakfast table and made a great impression upon Bessie. She told it and laughed over it throughout life. If she was seated near a table when telling it, she would push herself away with her two hands as if she wanted more room to laugh, a way she had when very much amused.

It was also about the same time that the butler, standing one day by the open door, saw a freshman pursued by the proctor coming at full speed down the street. Seeing the open door the [Pg 37] young man darted in, and rushed up the staircase. Silence for a few moments, and then peeping over the banisters the youth said in an urgent whisper, "Is he gone, is he gone?"

Now, the humour of the situation was that whilst he was so eager to escape from the proctor, nothing but a thin partition separated him from the Vice-Chancellor in his study.

We can picture to ourselves the butler's "Do you wish to see the Vice-Chancellor, sir?" and the hasty exit!

Meanwhile the child Bessie returned to her poems, her songs, her improvisings at the piano, to lessons in the schoolroom, to that terrible frame and the leaden type and raised figures, and the sums which would not "come right"; to the brothers and sisters and the happy home life. But she too had seen something of the great world lying on the outside of Oxford, and could refer back to "my visit to the North."

An old friend of the family remembers the first sight of Bessie as a girl of about twelve years old. She was in the Magdalen Gardens with a nurse and the little brother Tom, the youngest boy, of whom she was always very fond. She was standing apart on the grass; standing peaceful, motionless, with a sweet still face, and all the sad suggestion of the large darkened glasses that encased her eyes. The little boy picked daisies and took them to her and showed her the gold in [Pg 38] the centre. She smiled as she took them, and her slender fingers fluttered about them. And the children, the flowers, the sunlight, and those beautiful gardens in the early summer, made a picture in which this friend always loved to enshrine her memory of "Little Blossom."

FOOTNOTE:

[3] Published by B. Fellowes, Ludgate Street, 1841.

CHAPTER IV

[Pg 39]

WHAT THE PROPHETESS FORESAW

"Cette loi sainte, il faut s'y conformer
Et la voici, toute âme y peut atteindre:
Ne rien haïr, mon enfant; tout aimer
Ou tout plaindre."—VICTOR HUGO.

The early summer of 1838 was spent by the Vice-Chancellor and his family at Malvern. Bessie greatly enjoyed long walks on the hills, but either from over fatigue, or because the air was too keen for her, she began to suffer at that time from what she always spoke of as "my long headache." It was a headache that lasted many months and caused the parents almost as much suffering as the child. On their return to Oxford the family doctor was called in and promptly applied a blister to the back of the ears.

The blister did no good; the child was often quite prostrate with pain, probably neuralgia, but the doctor was a man of resource. The diary of Mrs. Gilbert is instructive as to the treatment of such a case fifty years ago. The entry "Gave Bessie two grains of calomel," begins in August and is [Pg 40] continued at short intervals throughout the month. "Blisters behind the ears, to be kept open," are added to the calomel in September. In October we have reached the more advanced stage of calomel blisters, black draught (to be sipped, poor child), and leeches. The treatment was continued, with additions, throughout November, and on the 21st of December Mrs. Gilbert makes the not very surprising entry, "Bessie was worse this evening."

The parents were by this time alarmed; and the doctor acknowledged that he could do no more. Casting about for help, they bethought them of the physician whom they had seen in London some years previously, of his tenderness and sympathy.

The rough draft of a letter written to him by Mrs. Gilbert still remains to testify to the grave consideration given by the parents to the adequate statement of the case, to their endeavour to recall it to his mind and to their acknowledgment of his previous kindness and courtesy. One point in their letter may be mentioned. "She is very fond of, and has good talents for music," writes the mother, "but her pain is so much increased by it that her music has had to be discontinued."

Poor little girl! No privation could be greater.

Of the answer sent by Dr. Farre there is no trace. But all drugs disappear from the records, and there is an account of "veratrine ointment," "a preparation of Hellebore known to Hippocrates," sent down from London, and needing so much care in the application that the Oxford doctor [Pg 41] himself came every night to rub it on the child's brow.

Early in 1839 she had quite recovered not only from the headache but from the effects of the remedies.

The music lessons were resumed, and before long she began the study of the harp. A younger sister remembers sitting by her to teach the pieces note by note. Bessie found it also very easy to play by ear and learnt much in this way; but the harp was a difficult instrument, and the management of it always fatigued her.

During her childhood, Cardinal, then the Rev. J. H. Newman was incumbent of St. Mary's, the church close to the house in High Street, and that which the family attended. Even up to the last days of her life Bessie used to say that she could not listen to a chapter in Isaiah, especially any of those read in Advent, without hearing the sound of his voice.

Cardinal Newman mentions in his *Apologia* that, on account of his doctrine and teaching, the Vice-Chancellor threatened no longer to allow his children to attend St. Mary's. But the children knew nothing of the proposed prohibition.[4]

Augustus Short, afterwards Bishop of Adelaide, was one of Mr. Wintle's curates at Culham. He [Pg 42] remembers Bessie as a child, and visited her for the last time when he was in England in 1884. Mr. Coxe, the late Librarian of the Bodleian, was another of the Culham curates, the friend of a lifetime, whose farewell letter to Bessie was written shortly before his own death in 1881. He lived in Oxford, and went over to Culham every Sunday. At first he was accompanied by his young wife, but Mrs. Coxe was speedily overtaken by the cares of a family and could not go with him. Mrs. Gilbert, with her warm, kind heart, took pity upon the lonely wife, and invited her to spend the Sundays with them. In this way she saw much of the *sisterhood*, the pretty name by which the eight girls were known.

They generally walked out on Sunday afternoons, and when they reached a certain spot in Christ

Church Meadows, Bessie would stop and say, "Here you have the best view of Christ Church Towers." Other friends of this and later times were Bishop Gray of Cape Town, Bishop Mackenzie, and Dr. Barnes, Canon of Christ Church. The Provost of Oriel, Dr. Hawkins, and Dr. Gilbert were great friends, and it was possibly on this account that Bessie was a special favourite with the Provost. Mrs. Gilbert's uncle, Mr. Wintle, was a fellow of St. John's. He was a wealthy bachelor, had a fine voice, sang well, and was very fond of the society of his great-nieces. The Gilberts were acquainted with nearly all the families of the heads of colleges in Oxford, and the [Pg 43] handsome, clever little girls were favourites and were "made much of." When there was a dinner party at home they came in to dessert, and accompanied the ladies to the drawing-room, where Bessie would play and sing. She lived thus not merely in a world of ideas, but in the external world of facts, of things. When a friend once spoke of another lady as handsome, Bessie exclaimed, "Oh, Mrs. ——, with such a nose!"

Many of the fellows of Brasenose College were frequent visitors at the Vice-Chancellor's Lodgings, and the old friends, Dr. Kynaston and Mr. Bazely, were constant as ever. They joined the girls in their walks, and paid frequent visits to the schoolroom, where the younger ones would hide their caps to prevent them from leaving.

Bessie used to delight in these visits, and looked back upon them as the very sunshine of life at Oxford. Her poetry and music gained her much sympathy. At this time, when she was about fourteen, she wrote a poem on the violet which was much praised. At fifteen her intellectual activity was the most remarkable point in her character, whilst at the same time there was an equally remarkable absence of that rebellion against authority which marks an epoch in so many young lives. Boys and girls of that age begin to fret against the restrictions of childhood and youth; they endeavour to cast aside laws and restraints; they are eager to "live their own life" and to enjoy a freedom which they are all unfit to use. Bessie knew nothing of this, or rather, she knew it in a very modified, even attenuated form. The one extravagant desire which marked her [Pg 44] adolescence, was to be allowed the privilege of pouring out tea!

It was urged in vain that she would not know if cups were full or half full, that she could not give to each one what they wanted of tea or water, milk or sugar. Her reply was always the same, she would know by the weight. The decision of the parents, however, went against her, and she had her one small grievance. She did not "take turns" in making tea.

In the summer of 1841 Bessie, with a sister of nearly her own age, and one of the little ones, went on a long visit to Culham. They took the harp with them and practised diligently. They read history together. Bessie gave daily lessons to her young sister, reading with her Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*, and teaching the child to love them as she herself did. Whenever she had charge of a younger sister, poetry entered largely into her scheme of education, and the "little sister" still remembers the Scott, Wordsworth, and Mrs. Hemans, "Hymns for Childhood" which she learnt at this time.

Bessie loved romantic ballads and stories. She was more imaginative than any of "the others;" and "the others" thought that the loss of sight acted upon her like the want of a drag upon a wheel, when the coach goes down hill. During this visit Bessie had such a constant craving and eager desire for books, that even in their walks she induced her sister to read aloud. They thus [Pg 45] read Southey's *Curse of Kehama*, and she was so much excited by it that somewhat to the alarm of younger persons she went about repeating aloud "the words of that awful curse."

There were plenty of books at Culham. Mr. Wintle interdicted two or three, but amongst the rest his grandchildren were at liberty to select. They picked out all that promised to be "most exciting," and this free pasture made the visit memorable. Bessie was still "Blossom" to her grandfather, a Blossom that he admired and loved, but Blossom only. Never was a Blossom whose words and deeds have been treasured in such loving hearts.

"We looked upon her as a sort of prophetess;" and this view was confirmed by incidents that occurred in 1842. The sisters were walking together, and first one and then another suggested strange things that might happen. "Why, who knows," said Bessie, "in less than a month our house may be burnt down and we may be living in a palace!" Now within a month it is recorded that a rocket let off in the street, and badly aimed, went through the windows of the nursery in which several children were asleep. The governess happened to be in the room, and with great presence of mind seized the rocket and threw it back into the street. Now here was at any rate the possibility of a fire. Still more impressive was the fact that within the month Dr. Gilbert was appointed to the See of Chichester. They would really live in a palace.

Much excitement and no little awe in the nursery, not so much because the father was a bishop [Pg 46] as because Bessie was a prophetess. The bishop would be comparatively innocuous in the nursery, but who could tell what a prophetess might foresee!

And so the pleasant Oxford life came to an end; and in spite of a prospective palace, the *sisterhood* thought the change a calamity. Bessie specially disliked leaving her old friends, and her regret at parting from them did not diminish but increased with time. Doubtless in later years the inevitable restraint of her life lent an additional charm to the memory of her youth in Oxford. The constant solicitude of parents, friends, and sisters had kept from her in early days the knowledge of limitations; but in the time that was at hand she was to go forth to face the world and to learn more of the meaning of the mysterious word blind. Canon Melville, who knew her in Oxford, writes to one of her sisters as follows:—

> I have a very clear memory of the person and character of your sister Bessie; it is a pleasure to me to recall them.
>
> The natural gifts and graces of her mind and disposition were only heightened by the loss of her eyesight. That wonderful compensating power which often makes amends for loss of faculty in one sense by corresponding intensity in another, her moral and spiritual sensitiveness with that inward joyfulness recording itself in outward expression of a pleased and happy countenance, were remarkably evident. Out of many little traits indicative of this and her quiet intuition of what favourably or otherwise might strike her moral sense, I remember once when the appearance of some one she personally, for some unknown reason, disliked, was being remarked upon, and I had pronounced my admiration of it, she turned quite gravely to me, and with deep earnestness, as if she was then seeing or had recently seen the form and figure of him of whom we were talking, exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. Melville, I cannot agree with you! How can you admire him!" Something that had jarred with her moral perceptions having made her transfer her judgment on the character to the form and features of the person, as though she had seen the analogy she felt there must be between the outward and the inward. [Pg 47]
>
> Of the history of her self-devotion to the personal and industrial improvement of those under like affliction with herself her whole life was an illustration. Of that many must have much to tell.

During the removal from Oxford the Bishop and Mrs. Gilbert were in London with two daughters, of whom Bessie was one; Fanny and the younger ones were left under the charge of the faithful governess, Miss Lander, and in bright and copious epistles they inform Bessie of all that is going on in the old home. They tell how they had heard Adelaide Kemble in Oxford, whom Bessie is shortly to hear at Covent Garden; how they met many friends at the concert; how one gentleman told them that Adelaide Kemble sang better than Catalani; and how three who had not heard Catalani said she was equal to Grisi. How some of the "Fellows" went home to supper with them, and how they all stayed up till twelve o'clock, a great event for the little girls and their governess, who all send "love and duty to papa and mamma." [Pg 48]

There is another letter to Bessie, still in London, though the parents have returned to Oxford, which gives a happy picture of last days there. Bessie sends as farewell presents some of the little chains which she makes, and the sisters sew them together for her. The father receives a farewell presentation of plate, the elder girls darn rents in the gowns of their friends, the Fellows of Brasenose, and so on it runs:—

> MY DEAR BESSIE—I write to you now in a great hurry to tell you to send Mr. Melville's chain to-morrow by Mr. ——, as I expect we shall see him some time to-morrow, and I could sew it for him. I sent the mat on Tuesday, and when he came to tea in the evening he said he must come to thank you for it to-day; but as I told him he would not be able to see Sarah and Henrietta after this week, he seemed to say that he should wait till next week to see you, which I hope you will think quite fair. The plate was presented to papa yesterday. The address was short, but a very nice one, and I suspect chiefly written by Mr. ——. Papa's answer I have not seen, as he had only one copy, which he left with the Vice-Principal. We were none of us there, which I am almost sorry for, although it would very likely have been too much for us. Papa is delighted beyond measure with it.... We went last night to drink tea at aunt's, and then went to sleep at the Barnes's. We are going to dinner there to-night and sleep, for there is not a bed here. The glasses and all the pictures are gone, and that has made the house more deplorable than ever. Miss A. is here now, and seems pretty well. You know that Mary and I have been mending Mr. A.'s gown for him.
>
> He came this morning for it and stayed some time. He said he could not have got it done anywhere else so nicely; that is a long darn that Mary did for him. The B.'s have told Mr. W. that they will keep their acquaintance with him for our sakes, so that he will not be quite deserted; are not you glad of it? Will you ask Miss Lander to send word where she left her Punch and Judy? If she doesn't remember, I daresay it will be found; but we have not seen it. There is a chance, I believe, of Mr. A.'s taking Selham, but you must not say anything about it. All send love to everybody.—Believe me to be your affectionate sister, F. H. L. G. [Pg 49]

Whilst the parents were in London this year, Bessie paid one visit which produced a great and lasting effect upon her. She accompanied her mother to the blind school in the Avenue Road; and this seems to have been the first time that the blind, as a class of the community, apart from the majority, and separated by a great loss and privation, came under her notice. The experience could not fail to be painful. She contrasted the lot of these young people with her own in her happy home, and shrank back in pain from institutions in which the afflicted are herded together, the one common bond that of the fetters of a hopeless fate. The matron of the girls' school, afterwards Mrs. Levy, remembers this visit, and says the impression produced on her by the bishop's daughter was that she was "delightful, beautiful, full of sympathy for the blind." She remembers also that the Bishop preached in Marylebone Church in aid of the blind school, taking as his text words that must often have comforted and strengthened his own heart, "Who hath [Pg 50]

made the blind and deaf, but I the Lord?"

This year, 1842, was altogether a memorable one. Bessie's grandfather, as a young man, had a living or curacy at Acton, where his chief friend, the squire of the parish, was a Mr. Wegg. Another friend of whom he saw much at this time was Mr. Bathurst, afterwards General Sir James Bathurst, aide-de-camp to the Duke of Wellington. A third was Miss Hales, companion and friend of Mrs. Wegg. The Gilberts and the Bathursts were Miss Hales's dearest friends; and she had a god-daughter in each family, they were Catherine, younger daughter of Sir James Bathurst, and Bessie, the blind grand-daughter of Mr. Wintle. Mrs. Gilbert always corresponded with Miss Hales, sent her copies of Bessie's verses, and information as to the health and progress of the child. Miss Hales died in 1842, and by will divided her fortune between her two god-daughters.

Bessie was thus placed in a different position from that of any of her sisters; she alone when she attained her majority would have an independent income during her father's lifetime. The Bishop was relieved from anxiety as to the future of his blind daughter, and the necessity of ample provision for her; but he felt strongly, and wished her also to feel, that the possession of money brings with it duties and responsibilities.

FOOTNOTE:

[4] "Added to this the authorities of the University, the appointed guardians of those who form great part of the attendants on my sermons, have shown a dislike to my preaching. One dissuades men from coming, the late Vice-Chancellor threatens to take his own children away from the church."—*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, p. 133. John Henry Newman, D.D. Longmans, 1879.

CHAPTER V

[Pg 51]

THE PALACE GARDEN

"Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine."—BLAKE.

By the autumn of 1842 the removal from Oxford to Chichester had been accomplished. The Bishop and his family were installed in the palace, which was to be their home for twenty-eight years. A new life was beginning for Bessie, and one which, when the inevitable pain of parting from old friends was over, she learnt to love very dearly. She had a keen imaginative delight in the beauties of nature. She loved to hear of clouds and sunset; of sunrise and the dawn, of green fields, of hills and valleys. She loved the outer air, flowers, and the song of birds; and she had passed the first sixteen years of her life in a house in the High Street, Oxford. She was very proud of the architectural beauty of Oxford, and always thought it a distinction to belong to Oxford; but her whole heart was soon in the home at Chichester.

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The Bishop's palace has a beautiful old-fashioned garden, of which the city wall forms the west and part of the southern boundary. A sloping mound leads from the garden to within a few feet of the top of the wall, and there is a green walk around the summit. There are grassy plots, umbrageous trees, flowering shrubs, roses, roses everywhere; and there are birds that sing all the long day in the spring-time. The black-cap was a special favourite of Bessie's and of the Bishop's. A garden door in the palace opens upon a straight gravel walk, with a southern aspect, leading towards the western boundary wall. On the southern side of the walk lies the garden, on the north a bank of lilacs, laburnums, and shrubs. Here Bessie could walk alone; she needed no companion, no guide. It was a new pleasure to her, and one of which she never grew weary. The song of birds, the hum of insects, the rustle of the trees, all made the garden a fairy palace of delight. A sister remembers how one summer morning at three o'clock she found Bessie standing at her bedside begging her to get up and dress, and go with her to the garden "to hear the birds waking up." Her father always gave a shilling to whoever saw the first swallow, and Bessie was delighted when the shilling had been earned.

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The hall of the palace is a confusing place; there are many doors, passages, rooms opening into and leading from it There was always a moment of hesitation before Bessie opened the garden door or found the turning which she wanted; but she quickly accommodated herself to all other eccentricities in one of the most puzzling of old-fashioned houses.

She spent less time in the schoolroom at Chichester than she had done at Oxford; she was indeed soon emancipated from the schoolroom altogether. She was much with her mother in the pleasant morning-room adjoining the bed and dressing rooms used by her parents. A steep spiral staircase, without a rail of any kind, with half a stair cut away at intervals for convenience of access to a cupboard or a small room, led from her father's dressing-room to rooms above. One of these with a western window so darkened by trees that no sunlight and very little daylight entered, was assigned to Bessie and one sister, whilst another sister was close at hand in another small room. The Bishop made a window to the south in Bessie's room, which greatly improved it, admitting light and air and all the sweet garden sounds and scents. The drawing-room is on the first floor near the morning-room. You ascend to it by a few broad stairs. A passage on the same floor leads to the private chapel attached to the palace, where Bessie knelt daily in prayer. The

dining-room on the ground floor, the best room in the house, with its oak panels and fine painted ceiling, was a great pleasure to her. Some years later, when her work made it necessary that she should have a private sitting-room, two rooms were assigned to her in the centre of the house, [Pg 54] one of which had been the schoolroom. Access to these is gained by a long passage barely high enough to allow a full-grown person to stand erect at the highest part, near the bedroom door; and sloping on the other side to the floor and outer wall of the palace. Windows in the steep roof look north into West Street. Bessie's rooms were close to the angle formed by the centre and west wing of the palace, and had windows facing south.

Up and down the narrow steep stairs and along the passages to the drawing-room, the morning-room, the dining-room, the chapel, the fragile form of the blind girl was seen to pass with unerring accuracy. She never stumbled or fell at Chichester any more than she had done at Oxford. Indeed, Oxford was useful throughout life, as no difficulties could be greater than those she had learnt to surmount in her childhood.

Scarce a stone's throw from the palace is the cathedral, where the seat of the Bishop's blind daughter is still pointed out. Bessie had a personal pleasure, a pride and delight in the beauty of the cathedral, spoke of it, as she did of any venerated object, with lowered tones; knew its history and form, the plan of the building, the salient architectural features, and all the best points of view.

The Rev. Carey H. Borrer, Rector of Hurst Pierpoint, and Treasurer of Chichester Cathedral, writes as follows of the impression produced at this time:

> [Pg 55] My first introduction to Bessie Gilbert was when the Bishop had just taken possession of the palace at Chichester. I had been staying at Lavington with Archdeacon Manning (now the Cardinal), and we went together to sleep at the deanery (Dean Chandler's), and we all went to dine at the palace. Bessie was then very young, very slight and fragile looking, dressed as usual in white muslin, and with her dark spectacles immediately attracted my attention. In the evening she went to the piano, and sang very sweetly and with much pathos several familiar Scotch songs. I asked her if she knew certain others, mostly Jacobite songs, with which I was familiar from hearing my very dear friend William Harris (fellow of All Souls', a devoted lover of Prince Charlie) sing them. She at once warmed up and sang some of them. Others she did not know, and was glad to hear something about them. Under that gentle aspect there came out a heart full of fire and earnestness, which showed itself in her interest for suffering and heroism, and afterwards found field for its energy in her untiring efforts for the blind.
>
> Whenever we met there was always a warm shaking of the hand, and a feeling of sympathy of tastes between us.
>
> I had not seen much of persons suffering from blindness, and I was struck by her simple way of saying "I have not *seen* him," or "I should like to *see* it"—something like Zacharias "*asking*" for a writing-table.
>
> No one could be with Bessie Gilbert without feeling chastened by the presence of a true, pure, warm-hearted, earnest Christian girl.
>
> I breakfasted at the palace the next morning after service at the private chapel, and I was delighted at the Bishop's calling on one of the younger girls to say grace. Mrs. Gilbert told me they took it in turns. I should like to have heard Bessie's grace to her Heavenly Father.

[Pg 56] Very soon new friends gathered round the *sisterhood*; but at first the change, so far as society was concerned, was keenly felt by them. There were no Fellows of B.N.C. to come in with torn gowns to be mended, and talk of Catalani and Grisi; no more dinners in the Hall, none of the intellectual activity of university life. They had also far less of the company of a father greatly beloved by all his children. Official business at Chichester was much heavier than it had been at Oxford, and absorbed more of his time.

The Archdeacon of Chichester at that time was the Rev. E. H. (now Cardinal) Manning. He was a frequent visitor at the palace, where a room was set apart for him. As years passed on, the anxiety of his friends with regard to his views increased. At last there came a day in 1851 when he and Bishop Gilbert had a long talk with Bishop Wilberforce at Lavington, and Archdeacon Manning returned to pay his last visit to the palace. He wrote a day or two later to announce his decision to join the Church of Rome. As he stood in the hall on this last visit he saw Bessie enter from her favourite garden walk. She was as usual puzzled by the doors, and hesitated a moment before coming to a decision. The archdeacon saw this, and stepping forward took her by the hand: "I believe you cannot find the way," he said. In speaking of this she would add, in that gentle, solemn manner she had when she was deeply moved, "I only said 'thank you,' but I thought is it I that cannot find my way?"

[Pg 57] In 1844 an event of great interest to girls in and out of the schoolroom took place. A German governess, Fraülein D., replaced the English lady who had for so long been a member of the household. German became at once the most fascinating of all subjects of study for young and old; and the Fraülein, with her open mind and, from the point of view of those days, her advanced views, speedily acquired great influence over Bessie.

Fraülein D. describes the charm of the family circle at the palace, in which the two prominent

figures were the Bishop and his blind daughter. Bessie had at this time a very tenacious memory. No matter how long the reading of a book had been suspended, she could always repeat every word of the last sentence. She was easily affected by any sad events that were narrated, and would weep over them. Her parents, sisters, and brothers had taken such pains to include her in all that was going forward, and to make her and keep her one of themselves, that she would say, "Oh yes, I see," and "How beautiful," when you talked to her.

She was very particular about her dress, quite as much so as any of her sisters, and specially scrupulous in the matter of gloves. Her hands were small, white, delicately beautiful, and very feeble. She liked to have such accurately fitting gloves that the time she took to put them on was a joke in the family.

Three of the sisters were at Culham when the Fraülein arrived, and many bright letters passed between Bessie at Chichester and her own "special" sister Mary at Culham. Bessie tells Mary how her brother Robert had returned from the Continent, having learnt "a great many German words and some French;" how he had grown fonder of music, and could allow "that it is an art capable of giving a great deal of pleasure." She gives all the little gossip of home, describes the new German governess "a pretty figure, black hair, rather a large mouth, an animated countenance, very lady-like and lively.... They (the younger ones) like Miss D. very much, and so we do, all of us, I think." Bessie has read *Don Carlos*, the *Bride of Messina*, and a play by Halm. Her reading time is from four to five; but there are reading and needlework from three to four, which all the elders try to join, and from which, we may be sure, Bessie would not be absent. Then there is a dinner party at the Palace: "She (the Fraülein) dined, and so did I." [Pg 58]

"As to the dinner part I managed very well. I had it all by heart. What I was to have was all settled in the morning, so that I had very little else to do but to talk, and that I did so much that I was really almost ashamed. Mr. —— took me down, and pleased mamma uncommonly by praising me to her in the evening. I cannot think why."

A little later Bessie is at Culham, and writes to Mary at Chichester.

> Now don't make any more excuses about not writing. For my part I have forgiven you, at least since this delicious weather, for we have been out almost all day lately. Yesterday we walked to Abingdon, did some shopping, and came back before breakfast. [Inquiries about friends follow, and then:] Question upon question; but no matter, answer another, who sent me the violets? though I think my guess is right. If it was Mr. Ashworth it was very kind, for I think they were the first he had found this spring. Take care what you put in your letters to grandpapa. The last but one was pronounced by a judge whose opinion I am sure you will agree with, because you will think it right, to be very dignified and a perfect specimen of epistolography. There were cries of "It won't do" all through the letter. Do you think you shall come here soon? I begin to want to see some of you. [Pg 59]

Bessie, as usual, had charge of one of the little girls. She writes: "I think Katie is improved since we have been here, but I cannot get her to get up; so please ask mamma to say what time she is to get up, for now it is not much before eight and often some time after."

Now to an elder sister who wants to do her shopping at Abingdon before breakfast, Miss Katie must have been a trial. But Bessie herself was by no means perfect in this respect. Some years later she and a sister about her own age paid a visit to an old lady, cousin of their father's, in Yorkshire. This cousin rose early, was very punctual, and expected her guests to be the same; but, "Say what I would," writes her sister, "I could not get Bessie up in the morning, not even though I represented that it made me appear to disregard Miss Dawson's wishes as well as herself, and was not fair. The only answer I could get was, 'I say nothing;' and the next morning she was as late as ever." Whether Mrs. Gilbert was in this case also appealed to "to fix the hour" we are not told. [Pg 60]

In the autumn Bessie is at home again, and, writing to her faithful Mary, she says: "The week after next our house must stretch a slight degree. There will be the Halls, the Churtons, the Woods from Broadwater (it was Mrs. Wood who fought for the teaching of reading in St. George's Schools thirteen years previously), the two Archdeacons, Mr. Garbett, Mr. Simpson, and another gentleman, all in the house; and Mr. Wagner, if he comes, will have a room at the inn. This will be something like—won't it? I think mamma liked her visit to——."

The Bishop, his wife, and one daughter, had been paying short visits to influential people in the county. The young lady sends home letters which show close and minute powers of observation and no small insight into character. The rooms, the pictures, the plate and china, all are described, and she ends by saying:

> I suppose you will expect a comparison of the two families. The gentlemen are far superior at A——; and though B—— is more fascinating, and makes one feel for her as if one could do anything, yet A—— seems to me to be superior to her in strength of mind and also in acquirements. Lady C. is much younger than Lady D., much more in awe of her mother, and being plain, has not the appearance of being used to the homage of all around her like Lady D. So ends my long story of a short but pleasant time, and if it has tired your patience, at least you cannot complain of my not having given you a full account. [Pg 61]

Looking over these letters, taken back into the past by the yellow paper, the faded ink, the old-fashioned writing, all angular and sloping, letters fresh and vivid with youth, intelligence, and goodness, one cannot but wonder if those written by a girl of seventeen, in these days of high pressure, will be such pleasant reading forty years hence.

Bessie was greatly interested in these visits, and she writes to Mary at Culham: "Mamma saw some beautiful miniatures of the Pretender, the Cardinal York and their sister the Princess Louisa. They were very small, and set in turquoises and diamonds. I believe that princess married the King of Sardinia."

The Rev. T. Lowe, Vicar of Willingdon, who left Chichester thirty-five years ago, says that he often met Bessie at the palace and in general society at Chichester; that he made use of every opportunity he had to cultivate her acquaintance. She liked to talk of music, and he "remembers well the sweet expression of her mobile features, declaring the peace and resignation that dwelt within. These, no doubt, made her so alive to all pleasures within her reach. It was a touching sight to see her joining, with evident enjoyment, in a quadrille at an evening party at home or elsewhere."

Mr. Lowe saw her occasionally after he left Chichester. She was interested in some blind persons [Pg 62] in his parish. One she rescued from "the uncongenial life of the workhouse;" another acted as an agent for her society; and she was specially interested in a third, both blind and deaf, now dead. "Her sympathy with these sufferers was full of comfort to them; and as to them, so to all to whom it is known, the history of her long, patient suffering; of her submission to the heavy trial laid upon her; of her thankful enjoyment of the blessings granted her; of her loving endeavours to alleviate like suffering in others—will, I doubt not, bring forth good fruit in other hearts and other lives."

Mr. Wintle at Culham was now an aged man, and his infirm health gave much anxiety to Mrs. Gilbert. After she had left Oxford one or two of her daughters were nearly always with their grandfather. One of his latest letters, written from his Oxford lodgings, was to his favourite Blossom.

27th November 1845.

> My dear Blossom—As I have gained the reputation of not caring for what I do or say, why may I not scribble a scrawl to you containing what is found uppermost in my memorandum box? Not having been admitted a member of the Abingdon Literary and Scientific Society, you must look rather for trifles from a bagatelle warehouse than for graver subjects culled from the repository of useful and entertaining knowledge. But previous to opening my budget let me express a wish that I may soon hear from one of the numerous palace scribes of your mother's faceache having left her, and that you are all as well as the damps of November will permit of your being. As you probably knew nothing of my opposite neighbour Chaundy, hair-dresser and perfumer, perhaps you [Pg 63] will nothing grieve at hearing that he is moving from the Corn Market to the High Street, nor will you be much interested in hearing that Mr. —— tells his Oxford tradesmen that as he deals with them, he expects they will come to his shop and buy a pig of him. Possibly you may be amused by hearing that Mr. A. and Dr. B. have nominated five select preachers, all ultra low church, of whom Mr. C. is one, who takes an annuity of £500 from his parishioners in Holy Well, in preference to a living from his college. So would not I. [And so on through three pages of gossip ending:] And now with love to you all, affectionately am I yours, R. W.

In the spring of 1846 the Bishop and Mrs. Gilbert, with many but not all the daughters, were in the Isle of Wight. Mary was again at Culham with her grandfather, who was recovering from a serious illness, and had been out "in a sedan chair." Bessie writes full accounts: "You should have heard Nora begging to go. She has gained her point, you see;" and then follows a description of the little house at Ryde, of their visitors and friends, the books they were to read, etc. During this visit Bessie once walked from Ryde to Shanklin, and was proud of the achievement.

The Bishop's house in London at this time was in Green Street, Grosvenor Square. He and Mrs. Gilbert with some daughters were there in the early part of the year 1846, and Bessie was left in the post of honour, at home. The father writes to her without making any allowance for blindness. She is to give orders and arrange for their return just as Mary would have done.

> My dear Bessie—I write to you as Mrs. House, Mrs. Pomona, Mrs. Flora, *i.e.* as having, [Pg 64] under your aunt and Miss Deiss, sovereign rule in the domestic, horticultural, and floral departments at Chichester, but not as Mrs. Ceres, as with respect to the farm I reserve the rule therein to John and Symonds, and Smoker and myself, which may account for the bad condition things in that department are in.... Now, in your domestic department let me suggest to you to order preparations for the return of the veritable heads of the family, possibly on Friday next, to dinner, but you may expect to hear again. Then, in the horticultural, know that a tub of regent potatoes, and eke a tub of blues, containing each about a sack, may daily be expected. They are to be used as seed at your and Holmes's discretion. Those which are not so used you may direct to be put from time to time into a pot and saved for dinner. In your floral department I do not presume to give any hint; the greater will be your responsibility if either violets are drooping or snowdrops and crocuses not in sufficient abundance. Poor me! I am afraid they are all

over, blossomed and gone while I have been smoke-dried here. But mind you show me something when I come, or I may prove a rat without a tail. Pray, why do none of you little pusses write to me? I desire I may have an olla podrida, a bit of something from every one, without delay. How do you think I am to get on here all by myself? Yes, indeed! Pray, look to it, Mrs. House, and mind your P's and Q's, and do not laugh, but let me have my letter from all in a cluster, and I daresay in a clatter too forthwith. So no more at present from your and their fond parent and most loving father,

A. T. CHICHESTER.

I suppose you know poor aunt E. M. has left you her piano. If your grandpapa does not think it too large and would let it go to Culham, should you object?

In August 1846 Bessie completed a long poem founded on a belief "which prevails in parts of Burgundy, that the first flower which blossoms on the grave of a departed friend links the soul of the departed in eternal love to that of the person who gathers it." The verses are moderately smooth and pretty, but give no great promise of excellence in that department. [Pg 65]

It is, however, characteristic of the writer that she represents the "departed friend" not as a lover, but as the father of the girl who has gathered the first blossom, and that she concludes:

And strength was given to her through prayer
In patience all her woe to bear,
Clearly her duty to discern,
And never more her life to spurn.
She lived, not wrapt in selfish grief;
Wherever she could give relief—
In poverty, sickness, or despair,
A spirit of comfort, she was there;
One of that heavenly sisterhood
Who only live for others' good.

Such words are like a feather thrown up in the air, they show the direction of the prevailing current.

For two years longer the visits to Culham and Oxford recur at frequent intervals, and there is repeated mention of the names of old friends. Every event of interest that affects them—births, deaths, marriages, arrivals, departures, promotions, bridesmaids' dresses—all are duly chronicled. Once we are told of two merry girls shut up with some of his pet MSS. by Mr. Coxe, the librarian of the Bodleian, who was too busy to join them. They emerged from his den in a state of enthusiasm which satisfied even his requirements; but they had to undergo a severe brushing from "his own clothes-brush and at his own hands," for, "learned dust as it was, we could not carry it through Oxford." [Pg 66]

In 1847 the youngest brother, Tom, met with an alarming accident at Westminster School. By some means when preparing to act in a play his cloak caught fire, and he was almost burnt to death. Bessie used to tell how the little fellow was found kneeling with raised hands, and praying aloud, in the midst of a crowd of terrified boys, whilst the flames leapt up above his head. He was so much injured that it was more than a year before he recovered. His first letter, written with the left hand and the greater part of it unintelligible, is to Bessie. He is the little boy who was pulling daisies for her in Magdalen Gardens, and telling of their golden centres.

In 1848 Mr. Wintle died at Culham. Mrs. Gilbert was staying with him, and the Bishop with some of his daughters started at once for Oxford when he heard how serious the case had become. Mr. Wintle had expressed a special desire to see Bessie, but he was almost unconscious when she arrived. He was told that "Little Blossom" had come. "Where is she?" he asked, and with a last effort stretched out his hand towards her.

The pleasant home was henceforth closed to them, all silent and empty.

The great-uncle also passed away in 1855, and though many friends remained, yet from this time Oxford recedes, and is no longer a second home. [Pg 67]

At this period Martin Tupper resided at Brighton; and Bessie, who seems to have sent him a copy of "The Sea Gull," received from him a letter which she valued, and a copy of "A Hymn and a Chant for the Harvest Home of 1847, by the author of *Proverbial Philosophy*." He wrote as follows:

FURZE HILL, BRIGHTON, *23d August 1848*.

MY DEAR MISS BESSIE—An autograph of such affecting interest as that with which you have this morning so kindly favoured me, gives me the privilege of a letter of thanks in reply. And thank you I do very cordially; especially for having so soon and so amiably fulfilled your intention of honouring my verses with your melodious tones. When they are quite ready, I shall look forward with much interest to a manuscript copy; and I am not sure but that, some day or other, I shall run over and pay my respects at the palace, very much with the self-interested object of hearing you do justice to your own music. I am sure you will not refuse me this, especially as here we have no piano; not but that I will go *toute suite* to ask Miss Wagner or the Fraülein to give me an idea of your "Sea

Gull," so as not to be altogether ignorant of the "sweet sounds" which you have married to Mary Howitt's "immortal verse." I have nothing here to offer you in return for your musical authorship, unless you might be pleased to accept "from the author" the enclosed. Pray make my best respects acceptable to your father and mother and sisters, and believe me, my dear Miss Bessie, your obliged and faithful friend,

MARTIN J. TUPPER.

Miss Bessie Gilbert.

In 1849 Bessie, with two sisters and a brother, paid visits in Ireland. One of her chief pleasures was in listening to the echoes at Killarney. Wherever she went the young blind lady called out warm sympathy. On the way from Glengariffe to Cork they stopped at Gougon Barra to see the famous "Healing Well." The guide besought Bessie in the most earnest and pathetic manner to try the water, saying that he was sure it would restore her sight, and entreating her brother and sisters to urge her to make use of it. [Pg 68]

This was the first time, since the visit to Liverpool, that she had been far from home, and she enjoyed her journey. She liked staying at hotels; the novelty was refreshing, and she liked the feeling that she also could travel and "see" the world.

The Bishop writes to Bessie on the 11th September 1849 from the "Old Ship private house," Brighton, as follows:—

Now I doubt not that you enjoyed the mountain scheme as well as any of them, and, with the aid of the mountain air, the potatoes too and milk of the cottagers, not omitting, however, I daresay, the more substantial viands which accompanied you from the Hospitable Hall. As for the wetting and all that, of course you treat that as heroines are bound to do—that is as trifles, where it is not convenient to exalt them above their true character.

The "Hospitable Hall" is that of Lismore, Archdeacon Cotton's house, where the travellers stayed for some time. Bessie's eldest brother married Archdeacon Cotton's daughter the following year, so that the visit was one of special interest.

The Bishop had now a house in London, 31 Queen Anne Street, and the family life was divided between London and Chichester. When she was twenty-one Bessie had the command of her own income. One of her first acts was to subscribe to the Philharmonic concerts. The daughter of an old friend of her parents, Mrs. Denison (now Lady Grimthorpe), lived in the same street, and also subscribed; she used to call for and take Bessie with her. The impression which Lady Grimthorpe received at that time was, first of all, "How merry she is:" and next, what an intense appreciation she had of beautiful music, and what a happy, trustful confidence in those about her. One night at the concert the gas suddenly went out, fears of an explosion were whispered about, and many persons left the room. Bessie put her hand in Lady Grimthorpe's and said: "I have no fear whatever, with you. Go or stay as you think best;" and they stayed. [Pg 69]

She would return from these concerts so bright and beaming, and give such pleasure to her father by her animated accounts of them, that he learnt to associate her enjoyment with a scarlet cloak she then wore. He said he would have her portrait taken, and in that cloak, for she never looked so well in anything else. Some time later this was done by Sir W. Boxall, and the frontispiece to this volume represents a picture which gives as much of the spiritual beauty and delicacy of Bessie's youthful face as the painter's art can render.

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 70]

A SENSE OF LOSS

"When the fire is strong, it soon appropriates to itself the matter which is heaped on it, and consumes it, and rises higher by means of this very material."—MARCUS AURELIUS.

Bessie Gilbert, when she was about twenty, differed but little from the sisters around her. She could read Italian, French, and German, and her mental culture had been an education of the true and best kind. She had an open mind, an ardent desire for knowledge, and a warm interest in all the ways and works of humanity. The one accomplishment possible to her was music, and from her childhood her singing and playing had given pleasure to herself and others. "She never could sing out of tune:" says a musical friend.

She readily gained friends, for she was sympathetic and kind, and inspired others with confidence. A lady, very young and shy at that time, remembers calling in Queen Anne Street, and feeling alarmed at every one except Bessie. Sitting by her side, and talking to her, the shyest were at their ease.

No hardships in her lot had up to this time come home to her. Indeed, it is very doubtful if the want of sight to those born blind or those who have lost the memory of sight, is in youth a greater [Pg 71]

conscious privation than the want of wings. By degrees a different condition is conceivable, because it is known in a certain way from description; but as no person born blind can exactly realise what sight is, or what it does, there is no conscious sense of loss. No person born blind can comprehend the nature of the impression that sight conveys. Red may be as "the sound of a trumpet," blue as the outer air, and green a something connected with the meadows and the delight of flowers and shade; but except to those who remember, the sense of sight is only a name for the incomprehensible.

Bessie did not remember, and therefore she did not know the special hardship of blindness and that sense of irreparable loss, of "wisdom at one entrance quite shut out," which is so heavy an affliction.

As the years wore on she was, however, to learn the privations that resulted from her loss of sight, although the loss itself was not, and could not be, intelligible to her.

Some day a gifted creature may tell us of the possession of an organ and a sense revealing a dimension absolutely incomprehensible. We may come to bewail our lower condition; but how without the organ or the sense will it be possible to realise the nature of the loss or the advantage of possession?

Bessie by means of fingers or ears could get at the meaning of a book. There is a third and quicker way, she is told, but how except through fingers and ears can she realise it? Up to a certain point she has gone hand in hand with sisters and brothers; if not indeed in advance of them. She reaches that point full of ardour and enthusiasm, eager to learn, to live, to work, and suddenly the way is barred. Blindness stands there as with a drawn sword, and she can go no farther. [Pg 72]

The limitations of her condition touched her first on the side of pleasure. She could join in a quadrille at Chichester, could dine at the palace when there was a party, and "what she was to take" had been arranged in the morning. But in London there were no balls for her, no dining out except with a few very old friends, no possibility of including her in the rapid whirl of London life. She had many disappointments, and tried hard to conceal them. Only once, says a sister, did she see a swift look of passing pain, when telling Bessie about a ball from which in the early morning she had returned. It was there for an instant, recognised by the loving and beloved sister, but at once thrust away, and Bessie threw herself with more than ordinary interest into the account of the pleasures of the evening. Another sister tells how about this time Bessie began "to want to do impossible things," to go out alone in London, to go alone in a cab, and if she might not go alone, she wished to give her own orders to the cabman.

Reading and writing depended largely on the time that others could give her. Writing was a slow and laborious process. She could write in the ordinary way, but to do so she had to remember not the form of a letter but the movements of her own hand. Such writing had to be looked over in case a word should be unintelligible, and she could therefore have no private correspondents. Girls in Oxford and at Chichester had plenty of spare time, but when the family was divided, and those in London or at Chichester had the duties of their position as well as its pleasures to attend to, there grew up almost insensibly a different order of things. In childhood and youth the blind daughter was the centre of all activity and pleasure; but the blind woman inevitably recedes more and more. She no longer leads; she can with difficulty follow; and at a distance which increases as the years go on. [Pg 73]

The five or ten years that elapse after she is twenty, form the turning point in the life of a woman, whether married or unmarried. During that period, when she begins to tire of mere pleasure, there will come either the earnest and serious view of life which shows it all golden with promise, as a gift to be used on behalf of others; or a settled drift towards the current of levity, frivolity, and self-seeking, which may carry her down to age, dishonoured and unloved.

That which caused Bessie the keenest grief at this time was the impossibility of achieving what she wished to make her life, and not the loss of its pleasures. But it was the loss of pleasure which preceded all other privations. Her tendency was, as it always had been, towards things that were noble, and high, and good. Without any fault of her own, without any change in her own condition, she discovered that blindness would be a permanent bar to activity. Sisters began to marry and be sought in marriage. A home of her very own, a beautiful life, independent of the family life, and yet united to it; fresh interests and added joy to all; the hope of this, which was her ideal of marriage, she had to renounce. [Pg 74]

Work in the world, even a place in the world, there seemed to be none for her. Blindness, which had been a name, was becoming a stern reality. She asked about the blind around her, those who had to earn their bread; and the same answer came from all. She saw them led up to the verge of manhood and womanhood, and then, as it were, abandoned. They were set apart by their calamity, even as she was. Their sufferings were not less, but greater than her own. Poverty was added to them, and the enforced indignity of a beggar's life.

She bore her grief alone. She could not speak of it even to those she loved most dearly, and entirely trusted. She could not consciously add to the pain she knew they felt for her. But in those early years she would often sit silent and apart in the drawing-room at Queen Anne Street, tears streaming from her eyes. Sometimes she would spend hours together upon her knees, always silent; but the flowing tears spoke for her, and with an eloquence which she little realised. The sense of want and suffering was to be for her as it is for many, the great instrument of education. [Pg 75]

Whilst so many around her were craving for something to set them above their neighbours, some gift of fortune, some distinction, she was learning the need of that which should place the poor blind on the same level as others, learning to renounce for herself and for them any higher ambition than that of being like the rest of mankind.

The distress of her parents, who could only stand apart, watch and pray for her, was very great. They did not see how help was to come, but they continued in the old course. There was no aid for the blind, no invention which they did not eagerly inquire into, since it might be the appointed means of deliverance. Their sympathy was doubtless a great comfort to Bessie in this time of trial. They may not have been able to meet her in words, but she knew their hearts, knew that they never despaired; that their past, present, and future, were alike irradiated by hope for her, and, if for her, then for all those under like affliction. There were many, doubtless, who at this time would have justified the assertion of Mr. Maurice:[5] "The first impulse of most is to say, in such circumstances, 'Hold your peace. We are very sorry for you; but in the press and bustle of the world we have really not time to think about you. We are very fortunate in possessing our [Pg 76] senses; we must use them. To be without them is no doubt a great calamity, but it has been appointed for you; you must make the best of it.' That appears to be a very natural and reasonable way of settling the question. If the votes of the majorities ruled the world, that would be the only way."

Bessie cannot have failed to meet and speak with many of the "majority," whose quiet acquiescence in a misfortune that did not come near them, would often "give her pause."

Social questions also attracted her attention at this time. A sister remembers reading Lord Ingestre's *Meliora* to her, and the intense interest she took in the question of bridging over the chasm between the rich and the poor. It was not a new question to her, this bridging over a chasm. It was that which, under another aspect, was engrossing so much of her attention. The discovery of a method, or even the suggestion of the possibility of such a discovery, would be a sign of hope.

The first ray of light, however, came through a very small chink, and not at all in heroic form.

During the Great Exhibition of 1851 her parents learnt that a Frenchman was showing a writing frame of his invention, and that by means of it the blind could write unaided. The inventor, M. Foucault, was invited to Queen Anne Street. Bessie learnt to use the frame, and soon found that it made her independent of supervision and assistance. She could write and address a letter [Pg 77] herself; and here at last she stood in one respect on an equal footing with those around her.

She used in later years to date from the time she had the Foucault frame. A medal was awarded to the inventor, but owing to some mistake it was not sent to him. Bessie was instrumental in procuring and having it forwarded to a man whom she looked upon as her benefactor.

Her friendship with Miss Isabella Law, which lasted throughout her life, was inaugurated over the Foucault frame. A correspondence was carried on between them with regard to it, and Miss Law, blind daughter of the Vicar of Northrepps, who was preparing a volume of poetry for the press, found it very helpful, and at the same time found a dear and valued friend.

Another use which Bessie made of the frame was to write, in 1851, to a young blind man named William Hanks Levy, of whom she had heard at the St. John's Wood School for the Blind. He was an assistant teacher there, and in 1852 married the matron of the girls' school, with whom Mrs. Gilbert had corresponded in Bessie's childhood, and who had sent embossed books to Oxford. Levy did all the printing for the St. John's Wood School, and Bessie wanted an explanation of the Lucas system in use there. She could read every kind of embossed printing, and when she heard of any new system, always inquired into it. She knew at this time the triangular Edinburgh in which the first books she possessed were printed, Moon, Braille, the American, and several [Pg 78] shorthand types. She could read Roman capitals and the mixed large and small hands. She always considered the Edinburgh type the simplest; but when she found how many adults lose their sight, and how slowly their sense of touch is developed, whilst in some it is not developed at all, she thought that, on the whole, it might be best to use Roman capitals for the blind, that this would offer greater facility than any other system for those who had previously learnt to read, and would present no greater difficulty to those born blind. She made no effort for the advancement of her view on this subject, and in later years always advocated the use of Moon's type for those who lose sight as adults.

Her own keenness of touch was marvellous, but then it had been carefully trained from the time that the little child sat beside her father at dessert, and poured out his glass of wine. She always knew the hands of her sisters, could tell them apart by touch, and though they would sometimes try, they were never able to deceive her. She also remembered by touch people whom she had not met for years. But she recognised that her power and that of some of the born blind was exceptional, and the development of it due to careful training.

And so her letter written to inquire into a system which she did not understand, turned her thought for a time to a question which always interested, though it never engrossed her, that of [Pg 79] deciding upon a uniform type for embossed printing.

All paths are right that lead to the mountain top, provided we remember that we are going up the hill and keep ascending.

Bessie had taken this very humble path of typewriting, and it led her upwards and onwards,

showing her the possibility of giving aid to others through experiments and trials of her own.

It has already been mentioned that General Sir James Bathurst was an old friend of the family; and in London his children and the Gilberts saw much of each other. Sir James's eldest daughter, Caroline Bathurst, was one of the little band of so-called "advanced" women who, about this time, 1850, were interested in every movement having for its object the development and intellectual culture of women, and the throwing open to them of some career other than that of matrimony; since matrimony was seen to be not possible or even desirable for some women, such, for example, as Bessie Gilbert.

Miss Bathurst had taken part in the opening in 1848 of Queen's College for Women, Harley Street, by the Rev. F. D. Maurice and the Professors of King's College, London. She also gave hearty assistance and furtherance to the opening of a similar institution in Bedford Square by the Professors of the University College, Gower Street. She was one of those who gave earnest and deep thought to the difficult problems of life, who was willing to work to the uttermost of her power, to give all that she had,—time, money, health, even life itself, if only she might aid in raising the condition of women and establishing them as "joint heirs of the grace of life." [Pg 80]

No one has ever worked more ardently, more enthusiastically than she did. Over women younger than herself she exercised an irresistible fascination. Her courage, her hopefulness, her high and lofty aims, carried others as by a mighty wave over obstacles that had seemed insurmountable. She was a few years older than Bessie, had full experience of all the best that life can give, and also of the deepest sorrows. Those who have seen her will recall the slight graceful figure, broad low brow, and eyes youthful and beautiful like a child's; eyes, with love and trust and happiness looking out from them. And at this very time she was suffering from an incurable malady, and enduring martyrdom with heroic fortitude and without one murmur.

Such a friend for Bessie and at such a time marks an epoch in her life. The dear sister Mary was now married, and Mary had also seen with heart-felt sorrow that the condition of her blind sister was inevitably and painfully changed. On a subsequent visit to her old home it was she who first suggested that Bessie should give her time and money for the benefit of the blind. She urged that instead of being laid aside as useless it might be that God was preparing her for a great work on behalf of others.

Miss Bathurst was at the same time laying before Bessie the duty and the privilege of a career of some kind, telling of her own labours amongst the poor, and doing all that was possible to loving sympathy in order to stimulate and encourage her. [Pg 81]

By degrees the dark cloud of depression passed away. It was to gather again and again during the course of her life, to blot out sun and sky and present happiness, but never to settle down into despairing incurable gloom.

Bessie heard from Miss Bathurst much of the poor in London, of their troubles, and of their poverty. Her own sympathies naturally led her to consider the condition of the blind poor. She began to make inquiry as to their number, the places they lived in, the work they did, their homes and social condition. Note-books full of facts and dates and numbers testify to the activity of this time. And then once again her attention was directed to the blind teacher in the Avenue Road School.

In the autumn of 1853, she was then twenty-seven years old, she wrote to ask Mr. W. Hanks Levy to call upon her in Queen Anne Street. She said she had been told that he could give her the information she wanted as to the condition and requirements of the blind.

FOOTNOTE:

[5] MS. Sermon on the Blind, Rev. F. D. Maurice.

CHAPTER VII [Pg 82]

THE BLIND MANAGER

"While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be
good."

MARCUS AURELIUS.

The interview in Queen Anne Street was one of the most important events in Bessie's life.

Her feeble health, her limited opportunities of ascertaining the condition of the poor, her imperfect knowledge of their requirements and their powers, made it imperative that she should find an ally with health and energy, with experience that might supplement her own, and with equal devotion to the cause she had at heart.

W. Hanks Levy, who called at her request to tell her about the blind poor, was one of whom she had often heard, and with whom she had already corresponded. He was an assistant teacher at the school in Avenue Road, married to the matron of the girls' department.

Levy was of humble origin and blind from early youth. His education, such as it was, had been received at the Avenue Road School, but he was essentially self-taught. Outside of the narrow routine of the school he had worked and striven to obtain knowledge, to find help for himself and others. He was a man of small stature and of slender build, with plentiful dark hair on head and face. He wore darkened spectacles, which covered the sightless eyes. His nose was large and well formed, and the mouth fairly good. All the features were marked by extreme mobility, a sensitive tremulousness often seen in the blind. It is as if they did their thinking outside. Bessie had this same tremulous mobility of feature; her soul fluttered as it were about a thought, and you saw hope, apprehension, joy, fear, or dismay when it was first presented to her. [Pg 83]

Levy was a man of eager intelligence and generous heart. He earnestly desired the amelioration of the condition of the blind. Their disabilities had pressed upon him from his youth upwards, and upon all around him.

Living in an institution, and able to measure himself by no higher standard than that which it offered, he had not, however, realised the actual limitations of blindness. It is doubtful whether he ever did realise them. He would, therefore, have been an unsafe guide, but he was an excellent follower. He would have resented interference from those whom he called "the sighted," but he submitted to the blind lady; her nurture, training, and delicate sense of the fitness of things gave her a strong hold over him. He accepted her judgment when it was opposed to his own will, and faithfully carried out her views and wishes.

During this first interview in Queen Anne Street he told her of the various institutions in Great Britain and their work, and especially of the work done in London. At her request he investigated carefully, and obtained dates, facts, and figures that were reliable. Bessie found that the institutions for the blind provided instruction for the young, and for them only. Statistics showed, however, that by far the greater number of blind persons lose their sight as adults, from such causes as fever, smallpox, and accidental injury. They lose sight when others are dependent upon them, and when blindness means either the life of a beggar or life in the workhouse. And again she learnt that the existing institutions dismiss young men and women who have been fairly educated and taught a trade, on the assumption that, as adults, they can practise their trade and earn a living. This conjecture tells cruelly upon the blind. They leave many of the institutions with an adequate stock of clothes, and either with tools or with money to purchase tools; and then begins a hopeless struggle. Private friends diminish in numbers, and are gradually lost. The blind men and women cannot go about from place to place in search of work, cannot work without special contrivances, which are not to be found in ordinary workshops, and have no market for their goods if they work at home. [Pg 84]

But do blind people wish to work, or would they not rather beg? asked many to whom Bessie spoke on this subject. To this she replied that she did not know; must try to find this out. For some months, at her request, Levy went into the streets and accosted every blind beggar whom he met, asking him or her to tell the story of life to a blind man. "Which would you rather do, work or beg?" he would ask when the speaker had finished. And in almost every case the answer was "Work." "Why, I'd rather work, but how can I get work; or, if I get it, how can I do it? And where can I sell it, if I work at home without orders?" [Pg 85]

These were the difficulties that experience brought to light, and after many months of close and patient investigation, Bessie at length saw a way open before her. "Don't work yourself to death," a friend said to her at this time. "Work to death," she said, with a happy laugh; "I am working to life."

She saw that some one must come forward to befriend the blind poor, some one who could supply material, give employment, or dispose of the articles manufactured.

Why should she not do this?

Her parents warmly approved of the course she proposed to take, and brothers, sisters, friends encouraged her. They saw that it would bring occupation and interest, which she sorely needed. They could not foresee how the little rill was to widen into a broad stream, and what far-reaching results it would have.

In May 1854 "Bessie's scheme" was started. Seven blind men were employed at their own homes, material was purchased for and supplied to them at cost price; the articles manufactured were to be disposed of on their account, and they were to receive the full selling price, minus the cost of material. [Pg 86]

A cellar was rented in New Turnstile, Holborn, at the cost of eighteen pence a week, and Levy was engaged as manager, with a salary of half a crown a week, and a percentage upon the sales. The cellar was to be a store-room for materials and goods, and as the basket-makers could not bleach their baskets at home, a binn was fixed so that this part of the work could be done in the cellar. Levy recommended a young man named Farrow to put up the bleaching binn. Farrow had lost his sight at eleven years old in consequence of a gun accident. He had been educated in the St. John's Wood School, was a very good carpenter and cabinetmaker, and a man who could readily turn his hand to anything. But like many others who had left the school, he was without work or prospect of work.

He fixed the bleaching binn and arranged the cellar as a store-room without any assistance, and from 1854 to the present time he has been employed by the institution which sprang from that small dark cellar in Holborn.

Levy's theory was that no man with sight should interfere with the blind; that an opportunity ought to be afforded them of showing that their work is thorough and complete, and that they can stand alone. It may, at that time, have been necessary to take such a step in order to convince the general public that blind men and women could do anything at all, but the theory involves a limitation which is to be regretted. [Pg 87]

Bessie's education, experience, and sympathy would naturally lead her to try to restore the blind to their place and their work in the world, to ameliorate their condition but not to alienate them, not to separate them from home and companions. Her own happy youth, her work in the schoolroom at Oxford, her enjoyment of the home at Chichester, all tended to prevent her from being drawn into the current with enthusiasts who looked upon the blind, less as afflicted, than as persecuted and oppressed. She had gradually learnt that blindness is a limitation which the most loving and tender care cannot entirely remove. To be blind, to be a woman, both imply considerable restrictions: but Bessie was not predisposed to consider one state any more the fault of society than the other. She would labour to remove the disabilities of either condition, but she always recognised that they were inherent, and did not arise from persecution or ill-will.

It is necessary to say so much at this time, because we shall see that in many points Bessie did yield to the judgment of one who took an extreme view; who, himself educated in an institution, surrounded only by blind people, often of a very feeble capacity, had learned to look upon himself more as a member of an oppressed and persecuted race than as an afflicted man. Levy wished to [Pg 88] show that the blind could do their work and manage their affairs in their own way, and that it was as good a way as any other. No "sighted" man was to interfere in the workshop. He invented a system of embossed writing, and he used to send to Chichester weekly accounts of the money paid for basket and brush material, and in wages. This money was remitted by Bessie, and when brushes and baskets were sold she was to receive the price paid for them. The liabilities that she undertook were rent, manager's salary, percentages on sale, incidental expenses, and losses. These, with only the cellar and seven blind men at work, would not be more than she could afford, and with the approval of her family she set to work bravely to sell her brushes.

The only point on which the Bishop gave advice was, that difference of creed should not be taken into consideration in selecting the workmen to be employed. He urged this very strongly, and Bessie carried out his wishes.

Levy's bills, in embossed writing, were copied by Bessie's mother and her sisters; the weekly accounts were kept by these ladies from May 1854, when the cellar was taken, until the end of the year.

In the earliest records comes the pathetic entry: "Man to see colour." This man, in spite of Levy's resolve to employ none except the blind, reappears pretty often as the "Viewer." He used to "view" the baskets and their colour.

On the 16th of August 1854 Levy's wages were raised to 10s. per week, and at that time the cost [Pg 89] of rent, postage, and porter for one week amounted to no more than two shillings and two pence.

The cellar was, however, found to be inadequate to the requirements of the undertaking, and it was decided that Levy should take a small house, No. 83 Cromer Street, Brunswick Square. Bessie rented one room from him at half a crown a week. It was to be used as a shop, and was known as the Repository. The cellar in Holborn was given up.

As the work of the seven blind men depended mainly upon orders, there was no great accumulation of stock, but some few specimens were on hand.

During the year 1854 Levy's accounts were copied sometimes by Mrs. Gilbert, sometimes by Bessie's sisters or her sister-in-law. They were quite clear to the two principals, but outsiders found them confused and confusing. Bessie's younger brother took them in hand and tried to reduce them to order, but the task was a hopeless one. Some bills were entered more than once, whilst others were not entered at all. To Bessie, who kept these accounts with unfailing accuracy in her head, the difficulties with regard to entries must have seemed one of the disabilities of sight. We learn some particulars as to the original plan from a statement by Mrs. Gilbert; for each amanuensis kept her own special copy of accounts.

"As much is to come back from the men for material as has been originally expended by Bessie [Pg 90] for material.

"The men take material weighed out by Mr. Levy one week and pay for it the next week.

"This, with the value of the stock of material on hand, should tally with what has been originally paid for materials of mats or baskets."

Some light is thrown on the view of all concerned with regard to these pecuniary details by a letter from Levy, dated 5th December 1854, and written from

W. H. Levy's
Repository for Articles
Manufactured by the Blind
Books and apparatus for their use
83 Cromer Street
Brunswick Square.

He writes with regard to a description of mat which only one man, Burr, can make, so that it will take him two or three weeks to execute an order from Brighton, wanted immediately. He asks Miss Gilbert to have the kindness to advise him concerning this matter, and says he has enclosed last week's accounts, but is "fearful through the multiplicity of business that the items, although correct in general, are somewhat confused in detail." Then follows a lengthy superscription—

I remain
Dr. Madam with
Gratitude and Respect
Your obedient
Humble S^{t}.
W. H. Levy.

The "confusion in detail" seems to have been considerable, and Mr. Gilbert's summary for 1854 was as follows:— [Pg 91]

Total of disbursements on Levy's account	£159	11	0
Total of Mandeville's bills not entered	60	5	8
	£219	16	8
Total of receipts for material (presumably from workmen)	£54	4	11
Total of other receipts (presumably sales)	32	8	9
Total receipts	£86	13	8
Loss	133	3	0

To this are added the following remarks:—

> This account is only approximate. To the disbursement should certainly be added about £6 paid to Levy for himself and not entered, and one lost bill of Mandeville's (£4: 18: 6), if not more than one. The receipts also are probably imperfect.

The word *loss* is one that would not approve itself to either of those chiefly concerned. Bessie was *giving* freely of her income, Levy was spending economically and carefully. Each knew that there was no error, though there might be irregularities which seemed considerable to those who were not primarily concerned in the great cause.

For three months in 1855 there follow a most bewildering series of accounts. Disbursements, receipts, sales, and a few donations are all entered on one page. Such a course probably induced further remonstrance from *the sighted*, and in March 1855 a more orderly system is adopted. [Pg 92] Receipts and disbursements are neatly kept on separate pages, and confusion henceforth ceases.

We may recall that Bessie always hated "sums," and found them bewildering. She was, however, very accurate in mental calculation. She knew what money she had advanced, on what occasions and to whom. No amount was omitted or entered twice over in her memory. It was only by slow degrees that she learnt the value of written records, the nature of them, and the necessity of absolute accuracy in matters of business. Ledgers and cash books and journals at first indicated merely a certain incapacity in *the sighted*; but time and experience taught her that they were indispensable.

The work of the Repository had engrossed much of her time, but in the summer she accompanied her parents and other members of the family on a tour in Scotland. She was in very good health, and walked with a brother and sister from Stirling to Bannockburn and back. Her love of early Scottish history gave her a special interest in the places visited. As they drove through Glencoe it was carefully described to her. Inverness, as being near Culloden, was specially attractive. At Oban she heard of the taking of Sebastopol, and this recalled her to the interests and anxieties of that time. She enjoyed staying at Scotch hotels; but on the whole she had derived less pleasure from the Scotch than from the Irish tour. She found nothing so beautiful as the Killarney echoes, and missed the warm-hearted sympathy and genuine interest of the Irish peasantry and guides. [Pg 93]

The one point that stood out pre-eminent as the outcome of her visit to Scotland was her inspection of the School for the Blind in Edinburgh. The work done there gave her many ideas, inspired many hopes and plans. But she saw more clearly than ever that her scheme was a new departure, and returned with confidence in her own power, and that of her blind workmen, to carry it forward.

CHAPTER VIII [Pg 94]

ROYAL BOUNTY

... "From the cheerful ways of men

Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
Presented with a universal blank
Of nature's works."...—MILTON.

We must remember that Bessie's scheme was at first a private matter, and that there is no reason why a blind lady's accounts should be kept like a tradesman's books. Bessie Gilbert had arranged that her weekly bills should be copied by members of her family rather for their information than for her own. So far as she was concerned she could remember what she gave, and had only to take care not to exceed her income. This seemed at first a simple matter, but before long the increased expenditure in connection with "the Repository" began to be a source of anxiety. The sale of goods entailed very serious loss. The workmen received the full selling price of articles minus the cost of material, and Bessie bore all charges and expenses, so that any considerable development of the trade would have left the promoter of it penniless.

Moreover, it was inexpedient to pay workmen as wages what was in reality a gift. If they had [Pg 95] received trade prices they could not have lived on what they earned. Their work was much slower than that of the sighted, and they had less of it. These conditions made the scheme an experiment; and in the meantime the difficulty of the workmen was surmounted by giving them everything.

They executed an order for the trade or for an individual when it was obtained, lived on the money, and waited for another order. This seemed inevitable at the time; but the mistake was that for many years the men considered the large sums paid as wages to be really their due. Now if wages had from the first been fixed on the ordinary scale, and an additional sum given as bonus, many subsequent difficulties might have been avoided.

About five-sixths of the articles produced by the seven workmen were sold in the trade at a discount of from 25 to 40 per cent, the latter being the ordinary sum demanded and allowed. A further discount of 25 per cent was allowed to the blind salesman. Thus a deficiency of from 50 to 65 per cent had to be made up on all articles sold to the trade, to which must be added the cost of rent, manager's salary, printing, porters, etc.

To the blind lady and her assistant the only method that suggested itself for the reduction of expenses was, that the articles manufactured should be sold to the public and not to the trade. [Pg 96] They must have, not a repository but a shop, and a shop in a public thoroughfare. They must make appeals for *custom*, and then income would suffice for the expenses of management. It is doubtful whether Bessie ever wrote a letter after 1855, save to members of the family, without an allusion to the urgent need of customers.

The work of the institution grew steadily, the number of applicants for work increased. In reply to appeals for custom, donations were beginning to come in, offers of subscription also, and it was evident that the enterprise, begun in the cellar, was to grow and develop. Bessie found that to make provision for supplying work, only in the homes of the blind, would seriously restrict the industries to be carried on, some of which required a special workshop. She saw that much more would be done for the blind in a shop or factory, where they would find the requisite material, often bulky as well as costly, and the requisite appliances. These could not be provided in the single room of a blind man with a wife and family. There was also a daily increasing demand amongst the blind, not for charity but for work. It was not men only who applied. Poor, respectable women, condemned by blindness and poverty either to beggary or the workhouse, began to turn to her, to implore her to save them also, to teach them a trade, and enable them to earn an honest living. The opportunity for the employment of women was not to come for a year or two, but the appeal issued on the behalf of work for blind *men* was changed to one on behalf of [Pg 97] blind *persons*.

After six months in the Holborn cellars and eight months in the little room in Cromer Street, it was decided that Levy should take a house and shop at 21 South Row, New Road (now Euston Road), and that in the first instance four rooms should be rented by Bessie at £26 a year. Levy was henceforward to receive 12s. 6d. a week as manager, and his wife was to serve behind the counter and to have, as a temporary arrangement, 25 per cent on all articles sold in the shop.

This increase in the expenses made it necessary that Bessie should obtain help from the outside public; and the change of her work from a private to a public undertaking was anxiously discussed in her own home.

The Bishop urged that there should be a Committee of Management as soon as subscriptions were asked for; and pointed out to his daughter the responsibility of administering money belonging to others. Having done this he left the matter in her hands, and she, like a dutiful child, submits her case when she has come to a decision. She writes on her Foucault frame in July 1855, from 31 Queen Anne Street:—

> MY DEAR PAPA—I wanted to have spoken to you about what I am now going to write, but had no good opportunity before you went. The situation of the shop in Cromer Street stands very much in the way of the sale of my mats and baskets. No one goes into that street unless they go on purpose, therefore I am sure it would be better to move into a [Pg 98] really good situation, which I cannot do without subscriptions.
>
> Mr. Taylor has said a good deal about the situation being a great hindrance to the sale of the work, so have several people, so now what I wish to tell you is that if you see

nothing to the contrary in the meantime, I shall begin on Monday to ask for subscriptions. I have three promises, four rather, and I know I should soon get more.... I remain, ever your dutiful and loving child,

BESSIE GILBERT.

You see I have taken rather for granted that you would have no objection, and so as there is not much time now before we go, I said Monday; as I thought it would be better to begin as soon as I could.

To this the Bishop replied:

PALACE, CHICHESTER, *6th July 1855*.

MY DEAR BESSIE—Your letter was nicely written, and I read it for myself very fluently. If it must be so, it must; indeed you could not launch into a high-rented house without subscribers. You may put me down low in the list for five pounds [£5] a year. I do not think you will do very much now until next spring, but you may make a beginning. It will grow under God's blessing. You must let me know, before I go into the North, what sum must be left accessible at Hoare's for the wants of E. M. M. G. Levi and Co.—I am, my dearest Bessie, yr. ever affectionate father,

R. T. CICEST[R].

On the 13th July Bessie writes again from Queen Anne Street:

MY DEAR PAPA—I would not be troublesome if I could help it, but I cannot help it. I do think it would be well for my undertaking to form a Society, and I want to know if I may set to work to do whatever I can towards it. I send you a list of the people Henrietta [a sister] and I have thought of for the Committee. Would you mention any you think advisable? Of course I cannot tell that any named in this list will agree to the proposal, so that it will be well to be prepared with a good choice. Mr. Green and Mr. Futvoye I am sure of, and Mr. Green will subscribe five guineas a year. I am very anxious to get all this settled before leaving this year, and as people will be leaving town soon, when once I have your sanction I shall write to the people thought of, to ask them whether they will undertake it. Of course there will only be a few who will really work, but we must have names besides. I send you a copy of the proposed rules. My notion is not to have a public meeting this year, but only to let the Committee meet, and to hire a room for this purpose. Levy suggested that Mr. Taylor should visit the workmen at their homes. I think he would do this well. Our love to mamma. We hope she is better.—Your loving, dutiful child, [Pg 99]

BESSIE GILBERT.

The Bishop's reply has not been preserved; but as the first Committee consists of persons selected from the list furnished, he probably had few changes to suggest, and in forming a committee Bessie was carrying out advice he had previously given.

An appeal to the public was drawn up by her, of which the following is a copy. On the reverse was a list of goods made by the blind, with prices. The public was informed that these articles were superior in durability and equal in price to those ordinarily offered. It was hoped that the circumstance of their being entirely made by blind men would induce purchasers to encourage the industry of those who labour under peculiar disadvantages in obtaining employment. [Pg 100]

ASSOCIATION FOR PROMOTING
THE GENERAL WELFARE OF THE BLIND.

In addition to the many difficulties which the loss of sight imposes on all blind persons, those whose livelihood depends upon their own exertions labour under three great disadvantages.

1. Comparatively few have an opportunity of acquiring a trade.

2. The trades taught are very few in number.

3. Those who have acquired an industrial art rarely obtain constant employment or a market for their manufactures.

In consequence of these difficulties great numbers are reduced to a state of beggary and degradation. These would, as a class, be only too thankful to be enabled practically to refute the prevailing idea that a life of pauperism, or at best of dependence upon almsgiving, is an inevitable necessity of their condition. It is surely the duty of the community at large to afford them an opportunity of so doing, and thus enable them to take their right position as active and useful members of society.

An undertaking was set on foot in May 1854 by a blind lady to ensure regular employment to blind working men. This has been gradually extended, so that the number now employed is fourteen; and a department for teaching new trades has been added, at which there are six pupils, particular attention being paid to the instruction of those who, on account of age, are ineligible for admission to other institutions. The

mental and religious welfare of the blind is also sought; and a circulating library of books in relief type has been established, to which the indigent are admitted free of charge. [Pg 101]

To secure the continuance of the above undertaking, and in the hope of its becoming, under God's blessing, gradually enlarged, and eventually to a great extent a self-supporting National Institution, an Association is now formed under the above title, whose Committee, including the original promoter of the undertaking, earnestly solicit the active support of all who acknowledge its claims on the sympathy of the public.

Then follow the names of the first Committee.

The Treasurer, Henry Sykes Thornton, Esq., 20 Birchin Lane.

COMMITTEE.

Adams, James, Esq., 2 College Villas, Upper Finchley Road.
Anson, Sir John, Bart., 55 Portland Place.
Dale, Rev. Thomas, Canon of St. Paul's, 31 Gordon Square.
Dixon, James, Esq., 1 Portman Square.
Dyke, Charles, Esq., R.N., 6 Eaton Square.
Elmsley, William, Esq., Q.C., 46 Harley Street.
Futvoye, Edward, Esq., 8 Acacia Road, St. John's Wood.
Gilbert, Miss, 43 Queen Anne Street, and Palace, Chichester.
Glennie, Rev. John D., junr., 51 Green Street, Grosvenor Square.
Green, Frederic, Esq., West Lodge, Avenue Road, Regent's Park.
Hollond, Mrs. Robert, Stanmore Hall, near Harrow, and 63 Portland Place.
Johnson, George, Esq., M.D., 3 Woburn Square.
King, Henry, Esq., 8 Lowndes Street.
Kynaston, Rev. H., D.D., St. Paul's Churchyard.
Powell, Mrs., 2 Palace Gardens, Kensington.
Summers, William, Esq., 10 Great Marlborough Street, Regent Street. [Pg 102]
Bathurst, Henry A., Esq., 101 Baker Street, Portman Square, and 12 and 13 Great Knightrider Street, } Auditors.
Wintle, R. W., Esq., 10 Tavistock Square, and 22 Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, } Auditors.
Fyers, Captain, R.A., 3 Westbourne Place, Paddington, Hon. Sec.
Superintendent and Collector, Mr. William Hanks Levy, 21 South Row, New Road.

The projected Committee seems not to have acted in 1855, as at the end of the year the account-book shows no sign of the supervision of auditors.

The disbursements for the year had been	£159	1	1
The receipts stand as	141	5	4
No balance is drawn, but the sum contributed by Bessie must have been	£181	14	9

Her efforts on behalf of the blind met with grateful recognition. Amongst the letters which she valued and preserved is one which belongs to this period; it was probably written in the winter of 1855-56. The paper is old and ragged, doubtless the letter has often been read aloud to her and to others. It is undated, and for obvious reasons unsigned, the blind workmen could not write their names; orthography and punctuation are uncertain, and capital letters scattered at random. The scribe employed wrote badly and spelt imperfectly, but no doubt the letter was a genuine one, the outcome of warm though somewhat incoherent feelings of gratitude and affection. She to whom it was addressed knew this, and prized the poor letter accordingly. The spelling is now corrected, and some punctuation attempted in order not too greatly to bewilder the reader. [Pg 103]

The humble address of Blind Workmen employed by their benefactor Miss Gilbert to the Same.

MADAM—We the recipients of your bounty beg permission to be allowed to express our gratitude collectively for the benefits we have received from the Society instituted and under your governance. With the deepest feelings of gratitude we have to thank you for the great assistance during the last severe winter and the constant support we have when no other work was to be procured. We look upon this society as a time arrived in which our Heavenly Father has placed in your hands the deliverance of the blind from the worst of their afflictions, namely the Sting of Poverty. Madam, we are assured it is a difficult undertaking and must be a great trouble to contend with Tradesmen and to show forth our capabilities. We must acknowledge that it is moved by God's influence. It is what has been wanted since England has been a nation, for a country so great not

to employ their own blind in a permanent manner appears to be a thing which no one till the present ever attempted. We have considered that the truest manner to show our gratitude and Satisfaction for the benefits received would be allowed to present a small permanent testimonial which shall impress on all minds the great blessing conferred upon us, and how thankfully it is received by your humble Servants.

There is nothing to indicate the nature of the "permanent testimonial," nor that it was ever presented; but the wish to make some return for benefits received, and the gratitude for work done on their behalf, could not fail to encourage the blind lady. [Pg 104]

She had now the moral support of her Committee, but there was at this time no Association, properly so called. No rules had been drawn up, there were no Committee Meetings, and Bessie had not only to "contend with tradesmen," but to conduct in the best way she could "the sale of my mats and baskets."

Levy was strongly impressed with the necessity of showing the capacity of the blind, their power as well as their desire to work. It was necessary to ascertain what trades it was possible for them to follow, what trades were open to them, and under what conditions. He had found by his own inquiry that the greater number of the blind poor were willing to work; he now occupied himself, with Bessie's approval, in making experiments in various handicrafts.

She had acquiesced in his wish that none but blind persons should be employed in the Institution, and that no trades should be carried on there except such as the blind could work at unaided. Her own experience, as well as the theory of her parents, had shown that more can be done for the blind by including them with, than by separating them from the sighted. But the argument to which she yielded was one often urged by Levy: that it would be impossible to interest the public in the scheme, unless the blind worked unaided, and it was made clear that they were capable of following a trade. He also urged, and with more reason, that the teacher of the blind should be a blind man, who knows from his own experience the difficulties and the limitations of blindness, and who has overcome them; for the teacher who knows these only from theory will not have so intelligent an appreciation of them, nor be so likely to discover the aids required by the blind. [Pg 105]

No one could have worked with more enthusiasm or energy than Levy himself. He learnt trades and tried experiments with tools, introduced brush-making, and prepared the way for the great development which he and Bessie now foresaw. She also was not idle; the possibility of employing women was always before her, and she made experiments with regard to occupations that might be suitable for them.

Her private scheme was now about to expand into an Association managed by a Committee. Before the final step was taken she wished to secure all the objects for which she had hitherto laboured, and to prepare for the changes which were imminent. She endeavoured to obtain friends and allies, and the success which attended her efforts was no doubt in part owing to the fact that she was the daughter of a bishop and was herself blind. She was spared the long and weary search for patrons and support to which many are condemned. Her name, her position, her privation, secured immediate attention from those who were able to give both money and influence. So great was her success, that in the winter of 1855 she decided, all the necessary preliminaries having been arranged, to appeal to the Queen. [Pg 106]

In January 1856 she sent to the Queen an autograph letter, written on her Foucault frame, and with the consent of Her Majesty the correspondence is now reproduced:

> Madam—The loving care ever shown by your Majesty for the welfare of your subjects, together with the benevolent interest which your Majesty and your Royal Consort are so well known to take in works of mercy, have emboldened me most humbly to pray for the gracious condescension of your Majesty and your Royal Consort towards an undertaking for employing the blind which has been carried on during the past year and a half, on so limited a scale that but very few have derived benefit from it. Being myself blind, I have been led to take a deep interest in the blind, of whom there are stated to be twenty-seven thousand in Great Britain and Ireland, out of which number but a small proportion can be received into the existing institutions, on leaving which many even of this number are reduced to beggary from the difficulty they find in obtaining employment. Could the endeavour to remedy this evil become truly national, the condition of the blind, as a class, would, with the blessing of God, be materially raised and improved, and this nothing could so effectually ensure as the sanction and gracious patronage of your Majesty and of your Royal Consort. The plan of the undertaking for which I have ventured humbly to plead with your most gracious Majesty, is to ensure to the blind workman a fixed sum weekly, in remuneration for his labour; and also to teach those too old for admission into institutions, some trade. Should your Majesty be pleased of your gracious condescension to grant this request, the hearts of your Majesty's blind subjects will be ever bound to your Majesty in love and gratitude.—Your Majesty's most dutiful, loyal, devoted, humble servant, [Pg 107]
>
> E. M. Gilbert.

Perhaps at this point one may venture to call attention to the fact that a person born blind or blind in early life can seldom spell quite correctly. The training of the eye tells for much in the English language, and the unaided memory cannot be relied upon. Bessie's autograph letters are rarely free from defects; and the letter here copied may have been discarded when it was found

on supervision to contain *admition* for admission, *Concert* for Consort, and one or two other trifling inaccuracies. Some of her intuitions in spelling—only think in how many cases a blind person's spelling must be intuitive—are delightful. She gives instruction for a letter to be written to the Rector of Marlbourne, our old friend Marylebone, and speaks of a statement she remembers in De Feau.

The autograph letter to the Queen was duly corrected, no doubt, and despatched. It elicited the following reply from Colonel Phipps:

To Miss Gilbert.

Windsor Castle, *15th January 1856*.

Madam—I have received the commands of Her Majesty the Queen to inform you in reply to your application, dated the 11th instant, that that paper does not contain sufficient intelligence with regard to the institution which you advocate, to enable Her Majesty to form any judgment upon it.

I am therefore directed to request that you will have the goodness to forward to me the prospectus of the institution in question, containing the particulars of its objects, locality, and mode of management, and also an account of its financial position, including a balance-sheet of its income and expenditure. I shall have then an opportunity of bringing the question fully under the consideration of Her Majesty.—I have the honour to be, Madam, your obed. humble servt., [Pg 108]

C. B. Phipps.

This letter was the most valuable contribution yet received, and the suggestion of a balance-sheet the most practical thing done on behalf of the scheme.

There was immediate and anxious effort to comply with the suggestions made, and on the 1st of February the details, dignified by the title of "a Report" with such balance-sheet as could be produced, was forwarded to Her Majesty. The reply of Colonel Phipps was again prompt, and as Bessie justly considered it, "very gracious."

To Miss Gilbert.

Windsor Castle, *4th February 1856*.

Colonel Phipps presents his compliments to Miss Gilbert. He has laid the papers relative to her scheme for the employment of the blind before Her Majesty the Queen, and has received Her Majesty's commands to forward to her the accompanying cheque for £50 towards the funds of this establishment, which promises to be so useful to persons labouring under privation which particularly entitles them to compassion.

Should the plan prove successful, as Her Majesty hopes it may, and have the appearance of becoming permanent, Colonel Phipps is commanded to request that a further report may be made through him to Her Majesty. [Pg 109]

The kindly hand thus held out by the Queen to her blind subjects gave a great and valuable impetus to the work. The Duchess of Gloucester sent a donation through Colonel Liddell. Subscribers and donors came forward in sufficient numbers to show that if blind men wanted work, both work and wages would be provided.

CHAPTER IX [Pg 110]

REMOVING STUMBLING-BLOCKS

"Give unto me, made lowly wise,
The spirit of self-sacrifice."—Wordsworth.

Throughout 1856 Bessie was mainly occupied in writing letters to all and sundry. She wanted money, and more even than money, she wanted custom. From the very first she saw that customers were of greater importance to her than subscribers, for it was customers who could ensure the stability and permanence of her scheme. If the blind were to be employed, there must be a sale for the articles produced; and the greater the sale the larger would be the number of workmen required. Hence the sale of goods, the appointment of agents in country towns, and the sending out of price lists, were important matters.

She received help and encouragement from many friends. Letters, which came from those who had known and loved her as a child, gave her great pleasure, and were carefully preserved.

The following is from a former fellow of Brasenose, the Rev. J. Watson:

Oxford, *2d June 1856*. [Pg 111]

My dear Bessie—I fear I shall not quite respond to your wishes exactly in the way you

desire. But I will do something; I am not fond of annuals, I forget them; and arrears are discreditable. Nor indeed am I sure but that the enclosed (£10) may be more effectual than an annual £1. *Vita brevis.*

All nations have some prudential maxims about present possession. La Fontaine has a fable to the point, but I cannot call it up. There is our own famous English proverb, the very Magna Charta of prudential security. A bird actually in grip is worth the more abundant but doubtful contingencies of the distant bush. I am glad, however, of the opportunity of being able to do so much in the way of donation, following in a modest way the example of our most gracious Queen and governor.

Thankful too I hope that, being reduced myself to almost a state of helplessness by the same calamity, I am not obliged to appeal to the charity of others; and have even something to give to relieve the necessities of fellow-sufferers.

So much for request second. As to request first, I will do what I can. But I am a bad beggar, and people are not very easily persuaded (far from it); 6d. in the pound property tax, poor rates, champagne, lighting, anything will do to stop the mouth of a petitioner. I doubt not in the range of your philanthropical experience you have met with many a cold shoulder. I believe you might disperse a mob more effectually by the exhibition of a subscription list than by reading the Riot Act. It is very useful in clearing your room of officious visitors. Produce a list for the conversion of somebody to some thing which he was not before (to wit, the Pope to a coadjutor of Dr. Cumming or Lord John Russell to an honest statesman), and, presto! the whole scene changes. "Well, Watson," says one, "I must be off, I have several calls to make." "Bless me," says another, taking out his watch, "it's getting on to half-past five (the clock has just struck three) and it's my week to read in Chapel." Helter-skelter away they go, like Leonora pursued by the ghosts. [Pg 112]

Der Mond scheint hell,
Hurrah! die Todten reiten schnell.

Well, Bessie, you have called up old times. Merry days they were, and have left no sting. I sometimes see Mary. I go occasionally to Didcot, where there are nice children; but Milton Hill is just a mile and a half too far off. I can't walk as I could in those days when we used to saunter through the scented glades of the happy valley, or penetrate the mysterious horrors of Bagley. The last fragment of those excursions was with Fanny and Henrietta to Headington and round by Marston (as intended), but time was getting on, and your good uncle would be waiting for his dinner. So in an evil hour we made a short cut across the fields and verified the proverb,—Hedges without a gap; ditches without a plank; gates guarded with *chevaux de frise* of prickly thorns. It was then that Henrietta, madly pushing at an impracticable passage, uttered that famous parody:

I'll brave the scratching of the thorn,
But not a hungry uncle.

But I am spinning out a double-thrummed homily, and you have better things to attend to. My love to you all. Believe me, my dear Bessie, *vuestros hasta la muerte*,

J. Watson.

Bessie had sent as a Christmas present to Dr. Kynaston a silk watch-chain of her own make, a favourite gift of hers to dear friends. In his reply the doctor proposes to make an appeal to the public on behalf of the blind. He writes:

St. Paul's, *26th December 1856*. [Pg 113]

My dear Bessie—Your pleasing remembrance both of me and of old times was a happy and early beginning to me of yesterday's holy celebrations. I think you over-rate my love of flowers. Till we used to pick them together, I fear I was but a Peter Bellish sort of being, of whom it is said that

A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

I seldom look at wild flowers now but I think how you used then to take them in your hands and feel them, and exclaim, "How beautiful they are," admiring and loving them far more than any of us, I always believed.

The chain, too, is highly prized, and I am delighted to show it to my friends, and both to tell them that you could work it, and that it was worked for me.

I feel almost inclined to draw up a short account of your institution, with a little memoir of the foundress, appending some of the verses suggested in former years to my mind by your cheerful and happy contentedness in the midst of those sad privations which you now seek to alleviate in others.

Circulated together with the more official and, of course, less affectionate "statement"

which was lately sent about, a little memoir of this kind might do good to the cause. I should entitle it "God's Fondness to the Blind," and it need not exceed many pages.

If you approve I will set about it at once, and let you have the results of my labour of love in the shape of proof sheets in a few days.

We join heartily in wishing you and all your home party a happy Christmas, and with much affection, I am always, my dear Bessie, most truly yours,

H. Kynaston.

Miss Gilbert, Chichester.

Dr. Kynaston's suggestion was not carried out, it must have been most distasteful to Bessie. [Pg 114]

Just in proportion to her desire to make known the cause for which she worked was her dislike to personal notoriety. She felt keenly moreover, and at all times, the pain of becoming remarkable through a calamity or a defect. She could appreciate the writer's motive, and would answer kindly and gratefully; but the proposal was at once put firmly aside.

Her eldest brother, Mr. Wintle (he had taken his grandfather's name), gave her much valuable assistance during 1856. He and Mr. Henry Bathurst, brother of her friend Caroline Bathurst, acted somewhat informally as auditors during the year, compared vouchers, examined bills, and no doubt enlightened her as to the method of book-keeping which would have to be adopted so soon as the Committee was fairly established, and had taken over the management of the institution. This was not done until January 1857. Bessie was probably anxious to draw up rules for the institution which should embody her own views; but during the infancy of the scheme she saw that she had not adequate knowledge upon which to establish them. She had still much to learn as to the powers as well as the defects of the blind, and she shrank from legislation until she understood "her people."

Mr. Wintle opened an account at Drummond's, a "Fund for employing the Blind," to which donations and subscriptions were paid. In reply to her own appeals, as well as in consequence of newspaper accounts and sermons, she received many letters.

From all parts of the United Kingdom persons interested in the blind applied to her for advice, or [Pg 115]
wrote on behalf of men who professed a desire to learn a trade and earn their own living. Some of these were really in earnest, but many were not. When arrangements had been made to send them to work in London they drew back. Bessie was not discouraged. She became more than ever convinced that the life of a beggar is demoralising; but she knew that already, and had long seen that old people will not give up begging, and that all efforts to improve their condition must be made on behalf of the young. An extract from a single letter will suffice to show the frequent result of a prolonged correspondence and of final arrangements to receive a blind man as pupil:

> I was delighted to see Miss Gilbert's letter, and immediately had a talk with him [the blind man] which was not satisfactory, for he said that, even if we should succeed in getting him the employment, he is sure he could not support himself by work, as he was a much shorter time under instruction than is usually the case.... He seems to think he can do better by making a basket occasionally and carrying it about the streets for sale, and begging of the few people who know him. I am sorry it ends so for the present, for I think his case a very distressing one. He was born in New York, and has no parish in England; he has one tiny child here who leads him about. His wife, with, I think, two more children, is in the Bristol Union.

Many similar cases helped Bessie to understand those on whose behalf she laboured; but they never closed her heart to the appeal of a blind person who was in need. The area of her work was [Pg 116]
enlarged, as well as that of the aid which enabled her to carry it on. Not all those who clamoured for employment really wanted it. They meant *alms* when they said *wages*, and drew back in disgust from the offer to teach them a trade and make them self-supporting. They were often even more degraded and vicious than poor.

To see and know this, and yet not to lose heart, to "hold fast to that which is good" when evil abounds, is a difficult task. Bessie did not shrink from it, and she did not misunderstand her work. She was merciful and compassionate to those who had fallen, felt for them in the solitude, the poverty, the despair that had driven them to evil courses, would relieve them in actual want, but she soon learnt that nothing could be done with or for them in the workroom. They might be reached, and indeed must be reached by other agencies, but the *teacher* could do nothing.

The practical outcome of this experience was extreme care in selecting the persons to be taught and employed, and a very tender compassion in reference even to the hopeless and abandoned. Their lonely, sad condition was never overlooked.

Bessie was very cautious in the selection of members of the Committee who would henceforth govern the Institution, and a letter written about this time on her Foucault frame to an old Oxford friend will be read with interest. She not only wrote many of her own letters at this time, but [Pg 117]
addressed her own envelopes, and very puzzling the postman must have sometimes found them.

Palace, Chichester, *16th January 1857*.

My dear Mrs. B.—I hope you will not think this letter very troublesome, but I know not

in what other way I can gain the information I wish than by troubling you with these lines. I remember you have heard of my undertaking for employing blind workmen. I have now formed an Association under the title of "The Association for promoting the general welfare of the Blind," in order to extend its usefulness, and to place it upon a more permanent footing than it could have had when in the hands of one individual. Now my object in writing to you is to ask whether Mr. A., who is, I believe, a clergyman at C., knows or could find out anything about a Mr. D., living, I believe, at C. He is a very large fur dealer, very rich; he is blind, and I am anxious to have him on the Committee of the Association, but must know more about him before this can be done. He has a warehouse in the city, I think, in Cannon Street or Cannon Street West. I want all the information I can get with regard to his character and principles, etc. I thought perhaps you would be able to get this for me through Mr. A.'s family, or direct from himself if you would kindly write to him on the subject. I send you some of the present price lists. Brushes, hassocks, and servants' kneelers are now made, besides mats and baskets.

By far the greater number of the blind become so after the age at which they can be admitted into institutions, so that in most cases these have not even the opportunity of learning anything by which they can earn a living. I am anxious to have this want supplied, and six are now being taught trades who would not be admitted into other institutions, and this branch will, I hope, be gradually very much extended. Then there is a circulating library in raised books to which the poor can belong free of charge, and [Pg 118] others by paying the subscription required by the Committee. If you think it would be well, and will tell me so, I will write to Mr. A., but as I thought you knew him, or, at all events, his family, I thought perhaps you would be able, and would kindly undertake the matter, which is only one of inquiry. We are a large family party now. M. with her husband and three children, and E. with her two children, are all here. Robert is gone back to London and law. Papa and mamma are really very well, and would send kind messages did they know I was writing. I hope you can give a good account of Mr. B. With very kind New-Year greetings from us all to him and yourself—I am most sincerely yours,

BESSIE GILBERT.

During the whole of 1856 the possibility of giving employment to women as well as men had been occupying Bessie's close attention, and it was one of the things she wished to arrange whilst the management was in her own hands. She found that the ordinary work of blind women, knitting, crochet, etc., could not be relied upon as a means of livelihood.

Experiments had to be made in brush making, chair caning, basket work, wood chopping, and the trades that were being opened up for blind men. These unremunerative experiments might not be sanctioned by a Committee; and in fact the greater number of those made and the decision with regard to them date back to the time when Bessie was the supreme and ultimate authority; and they were made at her own cost.

By the close of 1856 she had drawn up a set of rules to be submitted to the Committee. One of [Pg 119] the most important of these was that a Sub-Committee should be appointed, whose duty it was to select the blind persons to be employed. She would not hear of giving votes to subscribers and enabling them to force upon the institution worthless and incompetent persons. Careful selection was essential to her scheme, and was one of the chief causes of its early success.

Another matter which she deemed of importance was a stipulation that the "present superintendent, William Hanks Levy, is to be continued in his office until he shall withdraw, or be removed by the General Committee."

The rules recapitulate the object and set forth the work of the Association. They were submitted to a general meeting of the subscribers, held on the 19th December 1856.

The meeting having first resolved itself into the Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind, unanimously approved of the rules, and adopted them as the laws of the Association. They are interesting as the outcome of Bessie's endeavours to ameliorate the condition of the blind, and are therefore given at the end of the chapter.

A Committee was appointed on the 1st of January 1857, and in May of the same year a report was issued, with a balance-sheet, showing subscriptions and donations to the amount of £435, £75 of which had been contributed by Bessie herself. Interesting tables were appended, giving the age, [Pg 120] address, cause of blindness, family, income, to what amount employed by the institution, and nature of trade of all men working for the Euston Road shop, together with similar lists of men and women desiring employment, of applicants at the institution, and of members of the circulating library.

The three months' report was a preliminary to a meeting held in Willis's Rooms on the 26th of May 1857. The Bishop of London was in the chair, the Bishop of Oxford spoke, and afterwards wrote to Mrs. Gilbert:

LAVINGTON HOUSE, PETWORTH, *30th May 1857*.

MY DEAR MRS. GILBERT—I must tell you with many thanks what pleasure your kind letter gave me, and how glad I was to be able to take part in *that* meeting. I did not at all

please myself in what I said, *because* I wanted to show in the instance of your own daughter how God brought good out of such suffering; how the inward character, intensifying and become sanctified by grace, made the sufferers as an angel in the house, do what otherwise they never would have done, by the example of her becoming the foundress of this institution—but she was present, and I could not trust myself to say all I felt. May God's blessing rest abundantly on this good work.—I am ever, most sincerely yours,

S. Oxon.

Mrs. Gilbert.

We have now the result of Bessie's three years of arduous labour. Her institution was fairly afloat. The Bishop of London had consented to act as president, and the Rev. Thomas Dale, Canon of St. Paul's, was the vice-president. Notices of the meeting appeared in the London papers, and [Pg 121] were copied in provincial papers. Donations, inquiries, and orders increased, and so did applications for employment from blind men and women. The Bishop of Chichester had written a prayer to be read before Committee meetings, and this prayer was used by Bessie until the last day of her life. She looked upon it as a solemn sign of her father's approval, and as sanctifying all her efforts on behalf of the blind.[6]

No period of her life was so rich and full as the few years that followed the first development of her scheme. She was surrounded by friends who were enthusiastic in the cause, ready to serve her, and willing that she should guide and control the work which she had initiated. Some of those who gathered round her in 1857 are still working for the institution. Captain, afterwards Colonel Fyers, who for a time filled the part of honorary secretary, was a faithful and generous friend to the blind from 1857 until his death in July 1886. Mr. Summers still sits on the Committee.

One of the first things done by the Committee was to take a lease of the house occupied by Levy, then known as 21 South Row, and subsequently as 127 Euston Road. It was prepared as a factory for the blind. Rooms were set apart for the various trades, and the requisite fittings and tools were supplied. A large front room on the first floor was assigned to women.

Many informalities and irregularities which had sprung up insensibly whilst the undertaking was [Pg 122] small and private had now to be abolished. The Committee directed that subscriptions and donations should no longer pass through the trade cash book, and we may assume that a strict method of book-keeping was adopted.

An initial difficulty there was, and always will be, in the management, by amateurs, of business which involves the purchase of material from foreign markets. Prices rise and fall, quality is open to deception, wages have also to be adjusted, and manufactured goods must be sold wholesale as well as retail. This is taken in hand by a Committee consisting of ladies and gentlemen, many of whom could probably not dispose of a basket of oranges on advantageous terms.

Bessie herself by this time had acquired considerable information in matters of business, and she knew the difficulties that surrounded her. Practical knowledge of this kind would have justly given her a prominent place on any Committee. Her own Committee placed her without hesitation in a position from which she was never deposed. They looked upon themselves as elected to carry out her aims and objects for the blind, and they believed her to be the best guide they could have. She on her side gave her whole time and attention to the mastery of all the intricacies of trade and mysteries of book-keeping. She was soon familiar with stock-book, ledger, cash-book, and banker's accounts. When she discovered that her wish would be law, she became doubly anxious and scrupulous. She had always treated every one around her with courtesy and [Pg 123] generous consideration, and now to the grace of nature was added a strong sense of the duty she owed to those who trusted her and relied upon her. She was careful to ascertain the wishes of her Committee upon every subject to be presented to them, and she never urged her own views until she saw that her friends were ready to receive them.

One further development of her work was of doubtful utility. Schools to teach reading to the blind were formed in different parts of London. Each scholar was paid threepence for his or her attendance, and guides were also paid for. It was found some years later that classes for the blind, under similar conditions, were rather extensively carried on, were indeed a favourite form of private benevolence, and that there were blind men and women who earned a living by going about as pupils.

RULES FOR GENERAL MANAGEMENT.

Title.

1. That this Society be denominated The British Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind.

Objects.

2. That the more immediate objects of this Association shall be to afford employment to those blind persons who, for want of work, have been compelled to solicit alms, or who may be likely to be tempted to do so. To cause those unacquainted with a trade to be instructed in some industrial art, and to introduce trades hitherto unpractised by the [Pg 124]

blind. To support a Circulating Library consisting of books in various systems of relief printing, to the advantages of which the indigent blind shall be admitted free of charge, and others by paying the subscription required by the Committee. To collect and disseminate information relative to the physical, mental, moral, and religious conditions of the blind. To promote amongst the supporters of the various institutions for their benefit, and among other friends of the blind, a reciprocal interchange of the results of their efforts for ameliorating their condition.

Members.

3. That donors of £5:5s. at one time shall be life members of the Association, and subscribers of half a guinea annually, members so long as they shall continue such subscriptions.

Committee.

4. That the management of the affairs of the Association be vested in a General Committee, to consist of the founder, Miss Gilbert, and two ladies chosen by her, a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and seven gentlemen, to be chosen annually by the members from among themselves; which General Committee shall meet on the first Wednesday in February, May, August, and November, or oftener if necessary; three to be a quorum.

4b. That out of the fourteen elected members of the Committee, Miss Gilbert shall nominate one to be Vice-President, who, together with herself, the two ladies chosen by her, and two gentlemen, elected from among their own number by the President, Treasurer, and gentlemen of the General Committee, shall be a Sub-Committee, whose business it shall be to select the blind persons to be employed by the Association, and to regulate the details, subject to the correction of the General Committee. This Sub-Committee to meet at least once a fortnight, and three to be a quorum. [Pg 125]

4bb. The President or Treasurer shall be capable of being nominated Vice-President, and Miss Gilbert shall have the privilege of introducing at the meetings of either the Committee or Sub-Committee, her mother, or one of her sisters, who may take part in the proceedings, but not vote.

Auditors.

5. That two subscribers be chosen annually, by the members of the Association, to audit the accounts of the ensuing year.

Treasurer.

6. The Treasurer shall be elected annually by the members of the Association, and shall present his accounts to the members, and also to the auditors or the Committee whenever required. All drafts upon the Treasurer shall be signed by two members of the Committee.

Annual Meeting of Members.

7. That a General Meeting of the members of the Association be held annually on the second Wednesday in May, notice thereof to be sent to each subscriber on the first of that month, to receive from the Committee a report of their proceedings, and to appoint the officers for the ensuing year. But should any vacancy occur in the offices of President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Auditors, or gentlemen of the Committee or Sub-Committee, the vacancy shall be supplied by the Committee or by Miss Gilbert, as the case may be, until the next general meeting.

Funded Property.

8. All monies directed by the Committee to be funded, shall be vested in the joint names of four Trustees, chosen by them, unless otherwise directed by the donors; the dividends arising therefrom shall be received by the Treasurer, and applied to the current expenditure of the Association. As often as any vacancy shall occur among the Trustees, or change appear necessary, the same shall be supplied or effected by the Committee. [Pg 126]

No general meeting shall have power to sell or appropriate any part of the capital funded property, until the order made by it for such purpose be confirmed by a subsequent annual or extraordinary general meeting, consisting of not less than twenty-four members of the Association, of whom three-fourths at least shall vote for such confirmation.

Auxiliaries.

9. The Committee shall be empowered to form or to receive into connection with the Association, upon terms to be agreed upon, Auxiliaries in various parts of the kingdom, for the purposes of increasing the funds and extending the utility of the Association.

Special Cases.

10. The Sub-Committee may in a special case require the patrons or friends of any

indigent blind person to pay a donation, or provide an annual subscription of such amount as they shall deem proper and suitable, before admitting the applicant to the benefits provided by the Association.

Secretary and Superintendent.

11. A Secretary, and likewise a Superintendent of the Repository, shall be appointed by the General Committee, each with a stipend, if necessary. These offices to be held together if the Committee shall so appoint. It shall be the Secretary's business to attend at every meeting of the Committee and Sub-Committee; register the proceedings, and keep the accounts of the Association. He must always be ready to produce the books and accounts fairly written out, to any member of the Committee. On his appointment [Pg 127] he shall give such security as shall be required by the Committee, for the performance of the duties of his office, and for the due accounting for such monies as may be paid him for the purposes of the Association. The Superintendent of the Repository shall also give security in like manner as the Secretary, and conduct the business of the Repository with zeal and assiduity. The present superintendent, William Hanks Levy, is to be continued in his office until he shall withdraw, or be removed by the General Committee. He must also be in attendance at each meeting of the Committee or Sub-Committee, and be ready to give information at other times also when required.

Visitor.

12. That a subscriber who is not a member of Committee be appointed by the Committee to visit the persons employed at their own homes and the Repository, and other premises of the Association, and present to them a quarterly report of the results of his observations.

BISHOP GILBERT'S PRAYER.

To be offered up at all Meetings of the Committee and Members.

O Lord Jesus Christ, Who, in Thy ministry upon earth, didst make the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, lepers to be cleansed, the dead to be raised up (Matt. xi. 5, Luke vii. 22), and by Thy holy apostle has commanded Thy followers, that we should bear one another's burdens (Gal. vi. 2), regard with Thy favour, we beseech Thee, and aid with Thy blessing, our humble endeavour to remove stumbling-blocks from before the feet of the blind, to smooth their difficulties, and to strengthen their steps.

Prosper our efforts, we humbly beseech Thee, O Father, to their worldly relief, and [Pg 128] sanctify them, by Thy Spirit, to the increase in us of humility, faith, thankfulness, and charity, and to the growth in our afflicted brethren and sisters of patience and resignation, of goodwill to those around them, and of love to all, with all other graces that adorn the Christian life. Of Thy mercy, O Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, one ever blessed Trinity in Unity, hear our prayer, and accept and bless the work of our hands. O prosper Thou our handiwork. Amen.

FOOTNOTE:

[6] The prayer is inserted at the end of this chapter.

CHAPTER X [Pg 129]

TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS

"Boundless pity for those who are ignorant, misled, and out of the right way."—KINGSLEY.

Bessie was now thirty-two years old, and during 1857, 1858, and part of 1859 she was probably at the height of her power, physical and mental. The physical never amounted to very much. Her health was feeble. She was liable to long fits of depression, to long attacks of headache and prostration, to much suffering from nervous exhaustion. During the year 1857 the progress and development of her work, the encouragement and offers of help which she received, stimulated her to unusual activity. To a great extent she took her life into her own hands, and choosing a confidential maid to accompany her, she visited blind men and women, the institutions established for them, and her own friends, new and old, as well as many influential persons to whom she had received introductions. She made and carried out her own arrangements, and might fairly consider herself emancipated from control. The only restriction placed upon her by [Pg 130] her parents and not yet removed was that she should not travel alone. She submitted, but often wished to ascertain for herself, and by experience, if the prohibition was necessary.

On one occasion, when travelling from Chichester to London, she sent her maid into an adjacent

carriage. She wished to try the experiment of being alone in the train. At the last moment a gentleman rushed into the station, jumped into the first available carriage, that in which she was seated, and had just time to close the door when the train started. Bessie was a little disturbed by this incident. As her companion did not address her, she knew him to be a stranger. She soon found that he was reading a newspaper, and as it was an express train she remembered that she must have his company as far as London. Her companion was not aware that the train was express, and when it dashed through the station at which he had hoped to stop, he——

At this point, when she recounted the adventure, Bessie paused:

"What did he do?" was asked.

In an awe-struck voice she answered, "He swore——an *oath*."

The look of startled pain with which she must have heard that oath passed over her face, and the sensitive mouth quivered. She knew nothing about an oath; she had been told that sometimes there was bad language in a book or in a newspaper, but no one had ever said an oath to her, or read an oath. And now in the solitude of this railway carriage she was shut up with a man,— [Pg 131]
swearing.

"What did *you* do?" was asked.

"I held on tight to the arms of the seat. I was so frightened. I did not know what he might do next."

"What *did* he do?"

"He was very quiet; it seemed a long time; then he said 'I beg your pardon;' and after that he did not speak again, and he jumped out as soon as we reached London."

She referred to this as one of the most painful adventures of her life, and said she passed through an agony of apprehension and suspense until the train arrived at the terminus.

This journey took from her all desire to travel alone, and she made no further experiment in that direction.

The success of her efforts on behalf of the blind began now to be spread abroad, and institutions in many parts of England were disposed to consider the possibility of not only teaching but permanently employing the blind. Many inquiries were made of her, and she gave cordial encouragement to all who asked her advice. Levy was often sent to teach a trade, and to give information as to the best manner of carrying it on.

One letter from him may be given as a sample of many, and of the fresh interests that were being opened out:

127 Euston Road, N.W., *26th October 1857*.

Dear Madam—On Monday the 19th inst. I left home for Bath, where I continued till the following Thursday, when I went to Bristol, which I left on Saturday and returned [Pg 132]
home. My presence being required in London, I felt it prudent to defer my visit to Hereford, which I think you will approve when I have the pleasure of acquainting you with the details of the reasons which influenced me. The results of these visits are of the most satisfactory kind, being briefly the following: Commenced chair caning at the School Home, Bath, and suggested improvements in basket-making which the Committee approved, and the basket-makers showed every disposition to carry out; taught two pupils to write, that they might teach others to use the writing frame which they purchased; advised the introduction of a laundry and tuning pianos, and arranged for the sale of each other's manufactured goods. Before leaving Bath I received orders for nearly thirty brushes and brooms, and had the satisfaction of receiving from their Committee an offer to pay all my expenses, which the vote of £5 enabled me to decline. The master of the Bristol school promised to bring before his Committee the subject of employing men who are not connected with their institution. I have promised to send him some material, that he may commence brush-making there. Miss Stevens advances money to a workman which is regularly repaid; she complains much of the apathy of the people in Bristol. Capelin is succeeding; business is pressing and promising. Lady Byron's order will be forwarded this week; there is not any difference made to Mr. Moon's subscribers, but a grant might be obtained from the Bible Society, or the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; an arrangement with the shopkeeper would be advantageous. Hoping that you will excuse brevity, I am, dear madam, with gratitude and respect,

Wm. Hanks Levy.

P.S.—We are all quite well.

The blind throughout Great Britain were beginning to learn that they had a friend; and Bessie [Pg 133]
received numerous letters and appeals for help. The Rev. J. Burke, a blind clergyman, was elected in 1857 by the Mercers Company to a Lectureship at Huntingdon, and he writes to thank Bessie for efforts made on his behalf which had resulted in his appointment. The employment of women called forth a fresh burst of enthusiasm and gratitude from the blind. One of the first

workwomen was Martha Trant, subsequently employed for more than twenty years.

A copy of verses by "W. Heaton and Martha" probably belong to this early period. They were laid by with several similar testimonials, all yellow with age and worn by use, but carefully preserved as the "jewels" of the blind lady.

William Heaton had been trained as a teacher for the blind, and, poor fellow! his gratitude was far in excess of his poetical power:—

Yes, I for one have felt the good,
  And hope to feel it still;
For I a teacher soon shall be,
  Then do my best I will.

I thank you for the favour that
  You have conferred on me,
For thus admitting me to learn
  A teacher for to be.

Martha's verses are upon the same level as William's:—

Oh that we had the power to speak [Pg 134]
  The gratitude we feel,
But words are vain, and oh how weak,
  The feelings to reveal.

Dear lady, we most humbly hope,
  You kindly will accept
This token of our gratitude,
  Our love and deep respect.

And so on through several not very interesting pages. But to Bessie the value of these effusions was very great. They showed not only the gratitude but the happiness of her workpeople. They indicated a renewed life of the intellect and affections, and were received with encouraging sympathy. The composition of verses had given pleasure to herself from early childhood, and no doubt the form of expression chosen by the workpeople was influenced by her own example.

The time had now come when she was to learn more of the effects of blindness upon the character than had hitherto been revealed to her. She had inaugurated work on behalf of a special class, a course always beset by difficulties, and she was open to the influence of the fanatics of that class, of those who had been embittered by suffering and had allowed themselves to drift to the conclusion that they were set in the midst of cruel enemies.

There are some blind people who, when the full knowledge of all that their calamity entails is borne in upon them, have the courage, faith, and hope of a Christian to support them. They go [Pg 135] forward in the certainty that as this cross has been appointed, strength will be given to bear it.

There are others who resolve to live their life, to carry out their aims, to press forward along the lines laid down for them, and not allow a mere physical privation to reduce them to a condition below the high level to which they had resolved to attain. Christian faith animates and supports the former, physical and mental force will carry on the latter. In rare cases, Bessie's was one of them, the two are combined. But there is a third and perhaps a more numerous class—those who consider themselves as unjustly afflicted, and look upon mankind as enemies. Mankind is the majority, the blind are the minority. They speak of the attitude of "the majority," the neglect and selfishness of "the majority," the duty of "the majority." Their only outlook seems to be in restrictions to be applied to the more fortunate. They are the one-legged men who want to abolish foot races. They seek not so much to raise those that are cast down, as to abase those who stand erect. Bessie's knowledge of the blind would not have been complete if she had remained ignorant of this large class.

She had deep sympathy with those who were embittered by sorrow and loss. She could feel for the man upon whom blindness entails sudden collapse; all his prospects shattered; himself and those dependent on him plunged into poverty. He sees himself set aside and made of no account. He forgets the blind whom he has known and neglected without any thought of injuring, and [Pg 136] suspects every man who is indifferent to him of being a secret and cruel enemy.

Numerous letters addressed or submitted to her show that the morbid bitterness of many a heart had been revealed to her, and that she had been urged, again and again, to lead a forlorn hope, and storm the heights that were held by the sighted.

She knew what it was to hear her "humble work and low aims" spoken of with contempt, and to find that those whom she loved and honoured were objects of ridicule to the advanced thinkers amongst the blind. She could not work with men and women of such a type, but her sympathy gave her faultless intuitions with regard to them. Underneath a hard, aggressive exterior she felt the beating of a heart that was torn and bleeding. She could make allowance for wild words and angry exclamations, she could try to understand their meaning, but she was never dragged into the whirlpool of mere clamour, nor wrecked upon the hidden rocks of despair.

A few extracts will show the dangers to which she was exposed, dangers not unfamiliar to many

of those who read the story of her life.

> We are all of one opinion that the blind ought to be educated and restored to the privileges of social life and happiness from which they have been unjustly and selfishly excluded.... The present condition of my own private affairs and the desolate prospect of the future do not deter me from persevering, nor shall I desist so long as God gives me health of mind and one or two links by which I may communicate with the selfish [Pg 137] and insensible Levites of the sighted world.... No permanent success will be gained till the education of the blind and their reception into social life be recognised and insisted on as a Christian duty; till the old and selfish indifference of animalism, that is almost everywhere manifested, be superseded by a more earnest and generous anxiety for their wellbeing, something more worthy of the spirit of humanity.
>
> Until this real Christian sympathy be awakened to take the place of that evasive and reluctant sham, so offensively paraded, misleading the benevolent and deeply injuring us, we shall not be able to make any progress. It is to arouse this sense of duty that I direct all my efforts. I see plainly it is the only road to success. We must first look to the enlightened, conscientious, and humane of every creed, trade, profession, and rank, who believe in and practise that Catholic duty of individual effort. Next those who by official position ought to lead the way; and here we come first to the minister of religion, who basely deserts his duty if he attempts to snub into silence the just clamours of those who are hourly sinking into the wretchedness of conscious degradation and social exile, merely because the well-meaning sighted do not wish to be disturbed in their enjoyment of all the blessings of the visible world and social existence, by these melancholy and distressing subjects. If the ministers of religion do but their duty, it must then be taken up by the Board of Education, and public opinion will then call on men of science, especially the medical profession, to direct their physiological inquiries to higher subjects too long neglected. If but one hundredth part of the mental energy that has been of late years directed to the constitution and habits of the insect world and of shellfish, had been devoted to an inquiry into the means of restoring to healthy action the imprisoned, stagnant, and deteriorating mind of the blind, something long before now would have been done more worthy of the name of [Pg 138] philosophy.... As to gaining information from the teachers of schools, I do not expect you would be treated with much respect in our present degraded and unrecognised condition. With the exception of —— and ——, I never met with any one who treated me with the respect due to an educated man; the manner in which I have been treated by others connected with such institutions has almost universally been that off-hand supercilious disrespect, with which an imaginary superior treats one of a lower grade, such as a beadle will show to a workhouse child.... The reckless and unprincipled disregard of truth to which the supposed-to-be helpless, dependent, and incapable blind are so generally exposed, has long taught me to keep copies of my letters.... I could fill pages with many an act and their consequences, which have contributed to my present ruined position, the miserable desolation of my mother's old age, and the blasted prospects of those who must sink and degenerate into isolated poverty, who would otherwise have formed a happy, self-supporting, united, and self-elevating family. This would never have happened had not those who know well where to find when convenient those sacred texts, "Thou shalt not lead the blind out of their way! Thou shalt not put a stumbling-block before the blind," taken a foul advantage of my supposed incapacity to protect my own interests, and had they not practically ignored the *equally sacred obligation* that "the labourer is worthy of his hire." And when I have occasionally heard the Jesuits railed against for advancing the doctrine that the end sanctified the means, I have assured such, that those equally were to be dreaded who privately practised without openly advocating it.

Bessie's nature was too healthy, and her own experience had been too favourable to allow her to believe in the organised opposition of society to the afflicted. But she was deeply moved by these [Pg 139] cries out of the dark. They made her more than ever resolute to labour on behalf of the blind; they also showed her that she must stand aloof from plans and schemes which assume that the blind are struggling against their enemies, and that if they are successful, a time of subjection for the sighted will follow.

In May 1858 one of the earliest entries in her Common Place Book refers to this subject, and treats of the position of the blind in a world specially adapted for the sighted. The sensible, clear view, calm and dispassionate, is characteristic of one trained to look on all sides of a subject, and to recognise that which is just for all. The child's love of what was fair comes in to help the woman to see that a majority has rights as well as a minority. She had to learn that, amongst the blind workers, she stood almost alone in this recognition. She was surrounded by men, some of whom attributed their misfortunes and failures not so much to the loss of sight as to malignity and oppression, whilst others believed and endeavoured to persuade those around them that blindness induces an intellectual superiority, characteristic of the blind man. Many of these were predisposed by early experience to suspect intentional persecution, but Bessie never shared their views; and an exalted notion of her own conduct, merits, and powers was impossible to her.

> L. [Levy] asked me the other day [she writes] if I had ever thought that it was an additional hindrance to the blind that so much in the way of communication between [Pg 140] human beings was carried on by means of sight, that so much, in short, in the world

was adapted to the sense of sight, and that only: for instance, that all signals are addressed to sight, and not to any of the other senses. He thought that hearing and smell could be made much more available than they are at present. I have often thought this; but of course it is only natural that the intercourse of the world should be adapted to the senses of the majority of its inhabitants; indeed, it would not be well, either for the world in general or for any minority under any peculiar circumstances that this rule should be departed from, only there ought to be the possibility of training this minority in such a way as that it might avail itself as far as possible of the means in use for general intercourse, and where this is impracticable, of substituting other means which shall answer the end in view. For example, the senses of hearing, touch, and smell might, I believe, be very much more accurately educated, and more fully developed than they are for the most part; but I have much to find out on this point. I can now, however, quite understand that systems of signals might be made very intelligible to the senses of hearing and smell. I remember Dufeau thinks that these senses might be much more developed; but he does not think that the principles upon which this should be done are yet sufficiently understood to establish a system of accurate training of them.

From what I have seen, nothing does this so effectually as the necessity of using all the faculties in self-maintenance, though it is true sometimes that when this struggle is too hard the whole being seems so utterly depressed that all the faculties seem to be dormant.

I wish I had time for more personal intercourse with the blind. I have, however, had more this year. One of the women at the Repository, Jane Jones, strikes me very much as having a good deal of spiritual insight, for I know not what else to call it. It is [Pg 141] strange, for her other faculties seem to be below the average; perhaps, however, partly from the want of having been called out. Among the women there seems to be a great mutual kindliness. A. L., the most intelligent of them, is full of energy, and seems to have a strong desire for improvement in every way. She is only one and twenty, and more educated than the rest. She has much to contend with. I hope she may do much in teaching.

I have found the only two men I have as yet taken to teach, wonderfully patient, and most willing to learn. One has a very good notion of spelling, and is evidently really fond of arithmetic. The other has scarcely any idea whatever of spelling, and it is very difficult to give him a notion of the sound of the letters; but as far as his mind has been opened to different subjects he has, I suspect, a good deal of information and seems full of interest, especially in accounts of travels. The history of Egypt, so far as he knows it, seems to have seized upon his imagination in a way at which I was quite astonished. He is an Irishman.

CHAPTER XI [Pg 142]

REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

"Attempt the end, and never stand to doubt,
Nothing's so hard but search will find it out."
LOVELACE.

The entries in Bessie's Common Place Book are not numerous, but they are very valuable. They are the result of careful study, of long-continued and anxious thought, and they are the most important original work left by her. They will be read by all who have endeavoured to help the blind with no less interest than by the blind themselves.

Education of the Blind.

In the preface to a poem entitled Genius of the Blind, by E. H. White, a blind man, he speaks of the great amount of labour and money which have been spent in attempts to educate the blind; of the comparatively small result, and of the bad effects of bringing up the blind in asylums, and thus estranging them from their families. It seems to me, however, that some such plan is necessary for those who cannot be educated at home; though perhaps in the case of pupils whose homes are in the town in which the institution is situated, the evil complained of might in a measure be remedied by their being admitted as day scholars, as I once remember Mr. Bird suggesting. But even here [Pg 143] in London and other large towns, distance might be a great difficulty; and for those pupils not residing in the town itself, I see nothing to prevent this evil except holidays, and perhaps in many cases even this might not be practicable. There is also this to be said, that among the poor it is by no means the blind only who become estranged from their homes: I think this may be said of the majority with more or less truth; and it has often struck me that in all the different plans for improving the condition of the people, this very evil is too little thought of and guarded against. Indeed, I think that in all classes this is hardly recognised to be as great an evil as I believe it really to be. No

doubt it was always intended that families should separate and disperse; but much more might be done than is done, to keep the home affections fresh and living, in the hearts of their members. Certainly the blind have, if anything, greater need of receiving and exercising the social affections than others. And here I would lay particular stress on the necessity of their exercising those affections towards others, as I am sure that the necessity of their being the objects of affection is often too exclusively dwelt upon, and that sufficient opportunity for showing their gratitude towards their fellow-creatures is not afforded them. I believe this to be the cause of much apathy or irritability, as the case may be, among them. One remedy for this result of the school system would be the multiplying of schools; as then a greater number of the blind would have opportunities of attending as day scholars. From all I can learn from others, and from the little I have seen myself, I believe there is one great evil at the root of the system of education in blind schools, which is, that each institution wishes to take rank as the first in importance, and is therefore more bent on making such an appearance before the public as will secure its own reputation, than upon practically benefiting the pupils, so far as lies in its power. This is one reason of the pupils being taught to make [Pg 144] things for sale, which do not really help their progress in their trade, but which please and attract visitors, and are on that account often purchased, though in themselves utterly useless. Indeed I have heard it remarked what very useless things are made in blind asylums, and in other charitable institutions.

Anderson says that one prominent feature in institutions for the blind is, the desire to carry forward the pupil at any sacrifice, to accomplish such pieces of work as may call forth the mere surprise of the passing visitor. If this is bad in an asylum where it is very little practised, it is far worse in a school. The time of a pupil ought to be considered most sacred, and as much as possible appropriated to the acquirement of that which he will be able to perform and find a ready sale for, on his leaving the school.

There is, however, one thing to be urged in excuse of this practice in blind schools, viz., that the funds of most of them are not equal to their expenses, without the aid of the sale of the pupils' work. I believe that every such school, in order to be efficient, ought not to derive benefit from the work of the pupils; as when this is the case, the learners are often hurried over the different steps of their trade without due care being taken that they should each be able to take such steps securely when entirely unassisted. Thus on leaving the school the blind man often finds himself at fault when left to his own resources in practising the trade of which he was believed to be the master, in the acquiring of which much time, labour, and money have been spent, and from which far greater benefit might have been derived had it not been for the root-evil which has been mentioned. The aim of every school for the blind should be to fit them to fill their station in the world, be it what it may, as Christian men and women, and therefore to earn their own living, when this is necessary, as in far the majority of cases it is.

I hope and trust that one day the whole school system will be improved. I know that [Pg 145] Liverpool, which led the way in England, started with the best possible aims and intentions; although it has now greatly degenerated. Indeed, I believe all the first institutions to have been good, though the scope of many is, I suspect, very narrow. But it strikes me that all fall more or less below their first intentions, not only in their practice but even in their theory, and this I believe partly unconsciously. I do not see why it should be so, but I am afraid this is but too true. However, I can't help thinking that the rendering of such institutions independent of any gain from the labour of the pupils would go far towards improvement.

Much might be done in schools to prevent the blind from being isolated, by giving them an interest in the subjects of the day. For instance, in the Bristol School, a newspaper is read to them.

The older pupils should have opportunities for discussion not only with each other, but with visitors and friends. For instance, there might be an inexpensive entertainment once a week, or at some such stated time, for the purpose. I should think also lectures at Mechanics Institutes might be attended with advantage, as these are never given till the evening; and means such as these would open and enlarge the minds of the pupils, and would all tend to foster in them the sense of membership with the community at large. It should always be borne in mind that there is much in the condition of blindness, and indeed in any other exceptional state, to smother and weaken this feeling; and if not counteracted almost entirely to destroy it. This is the tendency of the gathering together of the blind into asylums as adults; and I am sorry to find from what I have read to-day that this is being increasingly done on the Continent. Many institutions there, seem to be rich in the different inventions for the blind; but as far as I can see, all seem to derive more or less profit from the manual labour of the pupils. It [Pg 146] has this moment occurred to me that the right use of this labour would be to realise thereby a fund which should be spent in some way for the benefit of each pupil when he or she should leave the institution; or, in cases where it should be deemed advisable, it should be made over to the pupil to be used at his or her own discretion. Perhaps it would be well always to allow the pupils to appropriate a certain portion of their earnings; this would teach them the value of money, and would educate them in the management of it. No doubt the answer to these suggestions would be, want of funds. I

should reply that much more real good would be done by lessening the number of pupils, so as to be able to effect it in proportion to the funds at command. I do believe such a system would go far towards giving the blind workmen a better start in the race for a livelihood than institutions have hitherto shown themselves able to give.

The importance of systematically training and developing the remaining senses of their pupils cannot be too strongly impressed on those who educate the blind. I am delighted to find that Monsieur K., the blind director of the institution at Breslau, has succeeded in obtaining permission for his pupils to *feel* the specimens of natural history contained in the Museum of that city. How glad I should be to hear of such permission being given in England. I think, as I have heard Mr. D. Littledale, a blind gentleman, say, that in schools there ought to be classes formed for the special object of exercising the touch. He himself has begun to form a Museum of objects with this view for the York School. But here I must say that I think the education of the blind will never attain the perfection of which I believe it is capable, unless teachers are specially trained for the work, and also unless at least a proportion of these are themselves blind. Among the blind I think individuals would be found capable of commencing and carrying on such [Pg 147] training schools; then of course each fresh teacher so trained might be able either to superintend another school, or to carry on in a blind school something of the pupil-teacher system now adopted for ordinary schoolmasters and mistresses.

In every country there ought to be at least one normal school where teachers for the blind may be trained. A simple way of effecting this would be for the Government to allow to one establishment, which should first be ascertained to be a superior one in its management and results, such an annual grant of money as should enable it to retain several young men as assistant-teachers, who would be ready to supply vacancies, and to take charge of newly-established institutions.

This kind of assistance would be, perhaps, the most valuable encouragement which a Government could give. It would ensure the training of persons to continue and perfect an art which has been kept in a state of infancy from the want of such a provision.

The blind may be divided into two classes—those so born and those who become so from disease or accident; the latter is by far the most numerous class. Bowen says he believes there is no authentic instance of any one born blind being restored to sight by human means. I should rather doubt this, as I have been told that congenital cataract can be removed if the operation takes place early enough, viz. at the age of one or two years. The same author says it is believed that blindness in after life might often be prevented were the organisation of the eye more thoroughly understood by physicians. He then gives some facts to show the extent to which blindness prevails. Bowen says the first accounts which we have of schools for the blind are those in Japan. They existed some years before that in Paris, thought to be the first in Europe, though there [Pg 148] is a doubt between it and the school at Amsterdam. In Japan the instruction appears to be oral. The blind seem to have fulfilled the office of historians to their nation, and to have formed no small proportion of the priesthood. The first regular system of embossed printing in Europe was the invention of Valentin Haüy, the founder of the Paris institution. Many alphabets have since been invented, of which I will not speak now, as this subject should be treated separately, but will only say that the education of the blind will receive an immense impulse when the improvement of which I believe embossed printing to be capable, is effected. There are many contrivances for writing; and here also I am not sure that all which is necessary is yet obtained, though much towards it has certainly been done. But in this case also, any increase of speed would be an immense help.

The blind have different wants in writing to those who see. They want to write easily and rapidly, and they want to commit their own thoughts or those of others to paper, or, in short, anything they wish to keep in a tangible form, by means of some rapid and easy process.

If possible they should have the power of making notes, and referring to them when made, with as much facility as the sighted. This at least ought to be the object aimed at. Perhaps it might be impossible fully to realise this idea, but I think very much might be done towards it. Even now Braille's embossed system goes far towards this, but I shall hope one day to treat of both reading and writing as distinct subjects. I will therefore only now say that every improvement and facility given to the blind in these two branches will do a great deal towards bringing their education to perfection. I have said given to the blind, but I would rather say every improvement and facility invented and contrived by the blind, as I believe in truth they must be their own helpers and deliverers, at least to a great extent.

Before leaving this subject, I will add that I believe the power of writing in some [Pg 149] tangible form, with the greatest possible ease and rapidity, to be of the highest importance to the blind; and with this view I should like to see Braille's system in use in all our schools.

This system was the invention of a blind man, and is, I believe, the best that has yet been contrived. I am sure the mind of many a blind person remains far below the degree of cultivation and maturity to which it might attain, simply from the want of

being able to emboss its thoughts upon paper. Some one, I know not who, says: use the pen to prevent the mind from staggering about; and this help should certainly be placed by some means or other within the reach of the blind generally.

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 150]

HER DIARY

> "The older we grow, the more we understand our own lives and histories, the more we shall see that the spirit of wisdom is the spirit of love, that the true way to gain influence over our fellow-men is to have charity towards them."—KINGSLEY.

In addition to the Common Place Book, which contains the result of many years of thought and investigation, Bessie kept during 1858 a diary. This shows not only her thoughts but her deeds. Her whole life was now engrossed by her work for the blind. French, Italian, German, the harp, the guitar, were all laid aside. Friends were made no longer for herself but for the blind. She was eagerly occupied with experiments in trade, with instruction, with visits to the workshop and the homes of her people, with letters and appeals, and with efforts to make known not only what was being attempted, but the need there was that more should be done.

She studied the census of 1851, and upon it based her statements as to the number of the blind throughout Great Britain and their condition. She learned that a large proportion of the number [Pg 151] lose their sight after having reached the age at which they are admissible to the existing institutions. She saw, therefore, that she must add to her scheme for employment that of the instruction of adults in trades by which they could earn a living. She did not believe in doles, pensions, and so-called "Homes." She believed in work, in a trade, a handicraft, the possibility of earning one's own living, as the means of restoring blind men and women to their place in human society. There is nothing that she records in the diary with more satisfaction than the progress made by adult pupils. The instruction and employment of women was also succeeding beyond her expectation, and the wages they earned approximated more nearly to the wages of sighted women than had been expected. But even her remarks on this proficiency of the women show her usual fair and broad view. She says:

> There are seven men and six women pupils. The best workwoman can earn seven shillings a week, working eight hours a day. Upon this she contrives to support herself and a little sister. A sighted brushmaker employing a hundred workwomen states that she must be a very good workwoman who can earn six shillings a week at eight hours a day. The women he employs often work twelve or fourteen hours to increase their earnings. This is great drudgery. It seems as if brush drawing was more a matter of touch than of sight. If we can only discover them, it may be that several trades will answer for the blind on this very account. I think at present that this will apply even more to women than to men. The male pupils work well and make great progress, but [Pg 152] their earnings, I think, would not bear the same proportion to those of sighted workmen as do those of the women. Still, as their work includes more than one branch, this may be a mistake, and at all events it must take them longer to become thoroughly good workmen, as they have more to acquire.

On 6th May 1858 she writes in the diary:

> Joined for the first time in the daily prayer and reading at the Repository [the Association was known by this name]. This was what I had often wished to do. Saw Mr. Dale, asked for his schoolroom for a lecture for the benefit of the Association; he gave leave. Told him what F. B. was doing about the *Times*. Took four [blind persons] for reading, and think they are getting on. Saw Mr. Bourke for the first time; had a long talk with him; think he will be more active than he has been in seeking out the blind and looking into their condition. Saw Levy Esqre. [not the manager], who showed me specimens of turning done by Mestre at Lausanne, who is blind, deaf, and dumb. Got Mr. Levy to promise to attend the meeting, on the 18th. Talked with Levy [manager] about the meeting. Corkcutting to be introduced before Walker's life-belt is made. Talked about furnishing carpenter as the next trade taught, also about embossed printing; think much might be done towards improving it....
>
> *8th May.*—Looked over, corrected, and altered proof of report. Dictated a note to Levy about it. Wrote to Mr. Cureton, asking if he could lend his church for Dr. Thompson to preach in, in July, if not earlier. Wrote to Mrs. Jones asking about Dr. Thorpe's chapel, also to Mr. Eyre, asking him to preach at Marylebone Church. Sent papers to both clergymen. Received from Mrs. Sithborp her guinea subscription. Entered letters of yesterday and to-day. Dictated some notes and thoughts for the Common Place Book. It [Pg 153] is a great pleasure to get some of these thoughts actually expressed. It gives them, as it were, a shape and a body, besides, I can never do what I wish without this, as I should never have the necessary materials. Saw Mary Haines. Wrote to Miss Repton.... Read a letter in two systems.

This allusion to "what she wishes" refers to her desire to write a book upon the condition of the blind. She had this object before her for many years, and prepared for it by accumulating statistics and information from every available source. She read the lives of blind men, books written by blind men, took copious notes, or had them taken for her, sometimes by her younger brother, sometimes by a sister. She "thought out" every statement made, every suggestion offered, with regard to the blind. Her book would have been singularly valuable. Her sound judgment, her power of looking at all sides of a question, would have saved her from the danger of forgetting that, although there are 30,000 blind in the United Kingdom, there are some millions who have the gift of sight. The book was never written, but her preparation for it made her a storehouse of information and of wise and tender thought, not only for the blind, but for all those who are afflicted and suffering.

> 17th May.... Saw Sir W. Reid, heard from him that a brush, with the Repository stamp, is left in the Museum at Malta; was very glad of this. Received from him £5. Heard he had seen Lord Cranbourne, and that Lord C. thought I was wrong in using and teaching T. M. L. system. I talked to Sir W. Reid of the different systems, also asked him for the names of books upon the blind mentioned to him by Lord C. Wrote to Lady Mayne to ask if she could get St. Michael's, Pimlico, lent. [Pg 154]
>
> Afternoon.—Went to Miss ——. Very little done there for the Association. Saw Dr. Jelf there; heard he would come to the meeting next day.

The list of letters written and embossed and duly recorded in the Journal will be omitted. They are the inevitable drudgery of such a work as she was now engaged in. Explanations, petitions, acknowledgments, inquiries, information, requests for the loan of pulpits from which the claims of the Association may be urged, of schoolrooms in which meetings can be held, all these things were part of her daily work. The sisters tell that Bessie could at this time emboss a letter upon her Foucault frame and dictate two others at the same time; always without mistake or omission.

On the 18th May 1858 the Annual Association Meeting was held, and the First Annual Report presented.

We learn from the balance-sheet that the receipts during this, the first year of accurate and formal management, had been £1784:3:11.

Of this, subscriptions and donations amounted to	£648	1	2
Balance in hand 25th April 1857	215	9	3
Sale of goods, etc.	920	13	6
	£1784	3	11

There was a balance in hand at the end of the year of £118:15:1. The number of blind men and women who had been employed during the year at the Institution, or in their own homes, was forty-three. [Pg 155]

The sum required for payment of rent, officials, teachers, and supplementary wages to the blind, amounted to £744:10:4. The annual subscription paid by Bessie was at this time £75, and in addition there is a donation of £10 for broom-making, and £2 for advertising. But the sum that appears in the subscription list is only the smallest part of that which she devoted to the service of the blind. Her private charity amongst them was at all times far-reaching and unstinted. She had many pensioners in London, and pleasant stories of them abound. There was a poor blind woman called Mary H., elderly and very lonely, whose wonderful trust and patience called forth Bessie's admiration. She ultimately procured the placing of Mary's name on the list of recipients of the Queen's Gate Money, she taught her to read, and allowed her monthly a certain quantity of tea and sugar.

One day when she came for her reading lesson Mary said:

"Oh, miss, I had such a strange dream last night!"

"Well, Mary, what was it?"

"Why, miss, I dreamt you were dead."

"Did you, Mary? and what did you think about it?"

"The first thing I thought, miss, was, what shall I do for my tea and sugar!"

The honesty and simplicity of this answer delighted Bessie, and she frequently spoke of Mary's dream. [Pg 156]

The saying of another pupil also pleased her. She taught a blind boy at Chichester to read, and when he came for his lessons the boy used to ask innumerable questions. One day she remarked upon this, and he frankly exclaimed:

"Oh yes, marm, so I do, I always likes to know up to the top brick of the chimney."

Brush-making, first introduced by Bessie and taught by Farrow, had proved a successful and remunerative occupation for the blind. Encouraged by this success, the making of bass brooms

was now added to the work carried on in the Euston Road. The coarse fibre used for this purpose has to be dipped in boiling pitch, and then inserted and fixed into holes in the wooden back of the broom. By an ingenious contrivance of the teacher, the hand of the blind man follows a little bridge across the boiling pitch, reaches a guide, at which he stops and dips his bristles into the shallow pan. He then withdraws his hand along the same bridge, kneads the pitch, and fixes the fibre in its hole. Several men sit round a table, and are thus enabled to work without risk of a burn at a trade which requires no skill.

The blind carpenter Farrow, who had made the fittings for the Holborn cellar, had been from that time permanently employed in the Institution.

In 1858 he was the teacher of thirteen blind men and women who were learning a trade. Levy had visited Norwich and Bath during the year 1858. In the latter city a Blind Home was formed for the employment of women instructed in the Bath Blind School. This was done in consequence of a Report of Bessie's institution which had been sent to the Committee at Bath. The School for the Indigent Blind, St. George's Fields, Southwark, had also opened departments for instructing and employing the adult blind, but we have no sheaf of old letters to give the history of this further development. [Pg 157]

The Committee of the Association might well look back with pleasure, and forward with hope. They well knew on whom the success of the work mainly depended; and in spite of Bessie's objection to the introduction of her name, the following paragraph closes the Annual Report issued in May 1858:

> Your Committee feel that their report would be very imperfect if they did not allude to the great services which have been rendered to this society, during the last year, by Miss Gilbert, the foundress of the Association. Whenever pecuniary embarrassment has threatened the efficiency of the Institution, her active zeal has soon replenished the funds; and when the Association has been unable to relieve the most distressing cases that have been pressed on their notice, the sufferers have found her ever ready to afford them timely help; and that, too, in a way which has shown such sympathising interest in their privations, as well as so much consideration for their feelings, that the value of the aid thus afforded can be fully appreciated only by those who have received it.

CHAPTER XIII [Pg 158]

THE FEAR OF GOD AND NO OTHER

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

Bessie's early education and happy home life counted for much in her work on behalf of the blind. She knew the advantage of being thrown on her own resources, of learning the ways of a house and the paths of a garden. She knew also that the happiness of the blind depends chiefly on companionship. "A deaf person," she used to say, "is very cheerful alone, much more cheerful than in society. It is social life that brings out his privation. But a blind man in a room alone is indeed solitary, and you see him at his best in society. It is social life which diminishes his disabilities."

Whilst she acquiesced, therefore, in Levy's wish that the work of the Institution should be exclusively carried on by blind persons, she was anxious that they should not be set apart and kept apart from other workmen.

Her diary for 1858 contains the following passage:

> Spoke to Levy about the workpeople in the Repository not having intercourse enough with those who see, and thought of the possibility of their belonging to Mr. Maurice's Working Men's College; I think that might be just the thing. L. asked what I thought about their attending a Bible Class by any of Mr. Dale's curates. I said I should like it, provided the mistake was not made of talking to them upon religion as if it must be a sort of last resource to the blind, to make up for the want of other things. L. understood what I meant, and said he was glad I had mentioned it. [Pg 159]

Any display of the blind with the object of calling attention to their affliction, and extorting money on account of it, was extremely painful to Bessie. She had too much reverence and tenderness for her fellow-sufferers to make a show of them, and she would not accept help if it involved any lowering of the tone she hoped to establish in the workshop. Blind men and women were to be taught that they could do an honest day's work and earn their own living.

An entry in the diary shows that she had to educate more than her workpeople before her views were adopted.

> L. spoke to me about a suggestion for employing blind beggars to carry boards to advertise the Association. Told him I strongly objected, and why.

The workpeople also frequently caused her anxiety.

> Felt and compared brushes from W. with those made at Repository. Our make is the best.
>
> L. told me things were rather uncomfortable between two of the women. I saw them each separately, and think and hope they will go on better, but the whole affair made L. [Pg 160] think how necessary what I have often spoken to him about would be in future; namely, the possibility of arranging for board and lodging for learners not having means of subsistence....
>
> Talked to L. about visiting the workmen at their own homes. He told me he thought I should have special advantages for so doing, and specially in speaking to them on spiritual matters.... Spoke about baskets not being made to measure. When good workmen do not make baskets according to order, something is to be taken off the price.... Went to Repository to try and find out what Susan M. had better do towards earning her living; am not sure about it, but so far as I can tell, don't think she would have musical talent enough to make her living by that; however, she has hardly learnt two years, so I think one can hardly judge.... Spoke to Mrs. L. about ventilator for Committee room, and about using disinfecting fluid in the workrooms on Sunday.... Mrs. H. gave me a towel made in a loom without steam, as a specimen of the linen proposed to be woven by Association workpeople. She also talked about a home for the blind without friends, where they should pay and, as I suggested, be entirely free to leave at any time. She thought perhaps the weaving might be carried on in some such place at a little distance from London.... Dictated note to Mrs. L. to ask about the state of health in the homes of the workmen, and to get their exact addresses. Spoke to mamma about visiting them.

We may be sure that there would be some anxiety on the part of her parents as to these visits to the homes of the workmen, but her wishes prevailed, and an entry dated 19th June 1858 states:

> Greatest part of the day occupied in visiting the workmen at their own homes. Was very [Pg 161] glad to do it, but sorry not to visit more of them. Only went to four—Hounslow, Hemmings, Barrett, and Symonds. Found the latter not so well off as I expected. He has not had much work besides Association work. Altogether what I saw confirmed me very much in the belief that such an Association as ours is very greatly needed.... Spoke to L. [Levy] purposely a little of what I had to give up for the work, only with a view of showing him that one often thought one would rather be doing other things, and of making him see that he was to some extent right in saying that I had made sacrifices. This was not at all with the view of making him suppose that I thought much of them, but in order to show him how true it is that one feels the work to be a sacred duty, for which, as for all other duties, sacrifices must be made. He is thoroughly imbued with this feeling, but I wish to keep it constantly both before him and myself, as I believe it is only thus that we can either of us work as God would have us work, and we both believe that He has made us His instruments for a special work for the blind....
>
> Wrote to the Dean of Westminster (the very Rev. R. C. Trench, who was about to preach for the Association in Mr. Llewelyn Davies' church) to describe the different papers I sent, and telling him I thought that in what had been done for the blind, those who saw had perhaps committed the mistake of making the blind feel how much they needed their aid, rather than how far they might become independent of it.... Gave £5 of my own on Capelin's account, but find Capelin has been earning more than I expected towards his maintenance, so that what I owed was not very much.... Talked with L. about Newman, and heard a very sad letter from him, written from the Union where he now is. Settled that the resolution as to his being employed should be acted upon, but I am sorry he is a bad workman, as this will make the thing very difficult.... Told L. we [Pg 162] ought to bring the Association into such a position that it should be able to bear the loss from bad work while a man is improving. Found, as I expected, that expense of management is about £300 a year, and think subscriptions now cover this entirely or very nearly.... Whilst I was at the Repository Herr Hirzel, master of the institution at Lausanne, came; I was anxious to get all possible information as to relief printing. He, Levy, and I, went through the merits of many of the different systems, which took a long time.

Relief printing for the blind is a subject beset with difficulty. In every country where books are embossed for the blind there are two or three different alphabets. There are systems in which dots and lines and abbreviations take the place of letters; and there are systems where the alphabet is enlarged and modified to suit the requirements of a person who is going to read with fingers instead of eyes. The number of books printed in relief is very small; and the result of using several systems is that a blind reader finds that four out of five of the very small number embossed are unintelligible. He can read Moon or Lucas or Braille, but Frere and Howe and Alston and a host of others he cannot decipher. Bessie spent much time upon the subject of relief printing, and could read nearly everything printed for the blind. She thought that Braille's was in itself the best system, but that Moon's was the only one really useful to adults, more especially to those whose hands have been hardened by labour. All except Moon's system must be acquired by the young and sensitive fingers of a child. Bessie would have liked to see the systems narrowed [Pg 163]

down to two, if not to one; but she found, as many others have done, that it was impossible to obtain unanimity on this point, as too many interests are involved in it. She made no progress in the matter, and put it on one side.

On the 7th of July the diary tells us she was at the Repository giving advice to "Martha."

> Talked much to Martha about her proposed marriage. Told her to ask if her intended husband would wish to go to Mr. Dixon on account of his near sight, saying that if this stood in the way of his getting something to do, and Mr. Dixon thought spectacles would help, he should have them.... L. sent me papa's motto, "The fear of God and no other." I had asked him to have it printed for the boarding-house.

In August of this year Bessie paid a visit to Miss Bathurst, who with her mother, Lady Caroline Bathurst, was then living at Stanmore. She met there Lady Elizabeth Waldegrave and Miss Butler. A friendship formed at that time with Miss Butler continued to the end of her life. She records the meeting in her diary, adding, "talked about the Association." Perhaps we should have been more surprised if she could have recorded that she talked about anything else.

On the 10th of August she left London for Chichester. The morning was spent in making arrangements for the Association.

> L. came. I told him to tell Hounslow that he was only to repay £3 out of the £6:10s. for the quarter's rent. Arranged to have a large applicant's book with full details. Found that all concerned were very much pleased with the boarding-house. Gave L. something for relief in special cases. Told him to see about getting several of Braille's small writing frames made, if he found the one I had sent to be successful. Impressed upon L. to take on more workpeople the very moment the sales would allow it. Talked to him of my plan for raising money to buy a West-end house, made him feel he must devote himself more than ever to the work, not that he is unwilling. [Pg 164]
>
> L. told me that the amount of goods bought in the past year had been too great, but that bass-broom and cocoa-mat making would do much towards keeping down this item.

The "purchase of goods" here referred to was always a sore point with Bessie. In order to fulfil the order of a customer, articles not made by the blind had often to be procured. The manager was on the horns of a dilemma. Custom was lost when an order was sent home incomplete, whilst, on the other hand, the Lady President wished nothing, or as little as possible, to be sold which was not the work of the blind. This difficulty, however, increased rather than diminished, and if there is any way of avoiding it, that way has not yet been discovered.

During the summer at Chichester, Bessie seems to have suffered much from exhaustion and fatigue, entries of "unavoidably nothing done" are frequent, as well as reports of "toothache."

The house in Euston Road was small and inconvenient, additional space was urgently required, and when it was found that there were empty rooms in an adjacent house they were at once secured. [Pg 165]

"Heard from L. that four rooms next door are engaged for £16 a year, and as the room where the materials were kept cost £5:4s., the extra expense will only be £10:16s."

A peaceful summer at Chichester brought time to spare for old pursuits. She had the garden with its birds and flowers, and her music and poetry as a solace after the grind of Association work.

"S. finished writing from my playing," she records, "a song from the *Saint's Tragedy*, which I hope I may get published for the good of the Association; it was begun yesterday."

She had written to Mr. Kingsley for permission to set Elizabeth's "Chapel Song" to her own music, and received an assurance that he would be very glad if any words of his could be useful to her, or any work of hers.

In September she was again in London for a Committee meeting, and there were the usual applications to consider, and the reading and talking with the workpeople. She inspected the new rooms and the boarding-house, and talked over the possibility of Levy's going to France upon business. After her return to Chichester and for many months we find almost daily entries "Embossed much French and dictated a great deal for L."

During this summer she was oppressed by the consciousness that the mental training of the blind had not taken its due place in her scheme. She wanted to find something that would afford instruction and at the same time recreation for the poor, something to awaken and enlarge their interest in the external world. She found that the perceptive faculties which take the place of sight suffer from a want of due cultivation, and she wished to remedy this by enabling the blind to obtain information about natural objects. Something, she thought, might be done by a development of the sense of touch, and by arranging a Natural History Museum in such a manner that every specimen could be handled. In connection with the Museum, she proposed to form a department for the exhibition of inventions in aid of the blind. These were to be arranged without reference to the "sighted," and in such a manner that the blind could easily examine and compare them. An exhibition of this kind was opened in Paris in October 1886, but the idea originated in the fertile brain of Bessie Gilbert. [Pg 166]

Meanwhile the Museum for her poor was the first thing to be started, and she prepared for it by visiting the Chichester Museum. In September we read:

"Went to Museum to ask the cost of stuffing birds and about collections of eggs, and the order of arranging birds. Settled with E. that she should ask Mr. —— to shoot some birds, and with Mr. H. that he should tell Smith the bird stuffer to come to me next Wednesday." Mr. —— seems to have [Pg 167] had only moderate success with his gun, as a later entry records, "Received two birds from Mr. ——." There are frequent accounts of "looking over eggs," "arranging glass case for the stuffed birds, and talking about the Museum to all who could give advice or make useful suggestions."

Early in this year a large oil painting of blind men and women at work round a table in the Euston Road was painted by Mr. Hubbard. An engraving taken from the picture, with an account of the institution, was inserted in the *Illustrated News* of 24th April 1858, and in May the picture was purchased "by subscription" for the sum of ten guineas, and fixed outside the shop, where for many years it attracted the notice of passers-by. It was engraved for the use of the Institution, and may still be seen on the Annual Report, Price Lists, etc., whilst the original painting hangs in the Berners Street Committee Room.

The account given by the *Illustrated News* called attention to Bessie's work. It was followed by letters in *The Times*, *Daily News*, and other journals, and by an article in *Household Words*, believed to be by Charles Dickens, entitled "At Work in the Dark." Many subscriptions, donations, and promises of help were received in consequence of these notices in the Press.

Mr. Walker, who invented a life-belt, offered the benefit of its manufacture to the Association, and a new trade, corkcutting, was set on foot.

In the course of the year the "Association of Blind Musicians" applied, through Mr. Swanson, [Pg 168] blind organist of Blackheath Park Church, to be admitted to union with Bessie's influential society. She was warmly interested in the appeal, and willing to grant such help, pecuniary and other, as the greater Association could render to the less. The aim of Mr. Levy, Mr. James Lea Summers, Mr. Swanson, and other blind musicians was to give a thorough musical training to, and to obtain employment as organists and teachers for, blind men with a talent for music.

The petition was courteously received, and after much discussion by the Committee and consideration by Bessie, the prayer for union, but without pecuniary aid, was granted. The Musical Association, however, had neither sufficient funds nor enough influence for the undertaking. But the promotors acted as pioneers, and a few years later Bessie saw that the efforts of Dr. Campbell and the establishment of the Normal College for the Blind at Norwood, would satisfactorily accomplish all that the Blind Musicians had attempted.

The trades hitherto taught to women had been leather and bead work, and the making of nosebags for horses. These were found to be unremunerative, and it was necessary to substitute others for them. There was at that time a great demand for fine baskets imported from France, and it occurred to Bessie that if they could procure the blocks upon which these baskets were made and the tools used, she might learn the art of basket-making and teach the workwomen.

But there was a difficulty in the way. The manufacture of these baskets was a monopoly, and the [Pg 169] firm to which they were consigned would give no information as to the locality whence they came. Some one must go to France and find out. Who could go except Levy!

It was to prepare him for this journey that for more than a year Bessie had been at every spare moment "embossing French words for L.," as the diary informs us, or dictating a vocabulary. In the autumn of 1858 he and his wife set out on their journey of discovery. Bessie had applied for a grant in aid of Levy's expenses, but the Committee did not accede to her request, so that funds were provided from her private purse.

The blind man and his wife took the wrong train at Calais, and for some time did not discover their mistake. However, they retraced their steps, and after many adventures learnt that the baskets arrived in large crates at Calais from the north of France, and were shipped for England. No one knew exactly whence they came. Levy commenced a search which threatened to be fruitless, when one day at St. Quentin he met a *comis-voyageur*, who told him that the village in which these baskets were made was Oigny, about eight miles distant.

On the following day Levy and his wife stood at the door of the very man who supplied baskets to the Institution, and found that their appearance caused surprise and alarm. But when Levy explained the object of his visit he met with a cordial reception. The manufacturer showed and [Pg 170] allowed him to purchase blocks and tools; taught him the ingenious contrivance by which the blocks could be taken to pieces and removed when the baskets were completed, and gave him all the information in his power as to the method and cost of production. He also took him to the village where the workpeople lived; but it is a cider-growing country, and many were away at the apple harvest. Levy and his wife were kindly received in the cottages, and he wrote to Miss Gilbert that a canary was singing in every house, and that many of the villagers grew their own osiers.

The result of this journey was very encouraging, although Bessie did not learn the trade or become a teacher of basket making. She had other work to do. Levy himself taught the blind women, and says that he found them apt pupils. When Bessie visited London in November she reports that she "felt A. at the basket work, and was shown the use of all the tools and the blocks. The English ones are made much better than the French, but after French patterns. Found from

all I saw and heard that a great advance has been made, but there are seventy-six more applicants for work. Saw and talked to H. to encourage him."

Before long the women are reported to be making fine baskets which please customers, and are bought in preference to the French. They had plenty of employment in executing orders, until, unfortunately for them, fine baskets went out of fashion, and bags came in.

For some time after his visit to France, Levy wrote and printed his name Lévy. [Pg 171]

The autumn brought a new scheme. Collecting boxes were to be fixed in different parts of London, and application was made to hotels and other places of resort to receive the boxes, together with specimen cases of the work of the blind. Bessie had, as usual, a busy time with her letters, but she did not forget the Museum.

When she went to town in November she talked to the workpeople about it, and they liked the idea. She had taken "two or three things from the garden" to show them; and in December, when she went to town for the "women's tea-party," she "took the crocodile," and "the women were delighted with it."

She wrote a letter at this time for publication, pleading for the education of blind children in the ordinary schools for the poor. She was also in correspondence with Mrs. Hooper, who was preparing a magazine article on the work of the blind. She records that she urged Mrs. Hooper to attach "more importance to donations and subscriptions, to speak of the Museum, and to tell the educated blind that they ought to assist the blind poor to help themselves." Through a friend she also applied for the custom of Cheltenham College for Ladies.

Bessie had decided to give £2000 to the Association as an endowment fund. The conditions of her gift were brought before the Committee, discussed, and accepted. The money was invested in the [Pg 172] names of three trustees, and the Association seemed now to stand upon a sure footing. These conditions will be read with interest.

CONDITIONS.

1. As long as those employed and taught by the Association, or receiving any benefit whatsoever therefrom, shall be admitted by the decision of the Committee, or by some one deputed by themselves, and not by the votes of the subscribers.

2. As long as blindness shall not disqualify any person from holding the office of Superintendent, Traveller, or Porter.

3. As long as it is a fundamental rule of the Association that the immediate objects of this Association shall be to afford employment to those blind persons who for want of work have been compelled to solicit alms, or who may be likely to be tempted to do so; to cause those unacquainted with a trade to be instructed in some industrial art; and to introduce trades hitherto unpractised by the blind; also to support a circulating library consisting of books in various systems of relief printing, to the advantages of which the indigent blind shall be admitted free of charge, and others upon payment of the subscription required by the Committee; to collect and disseminate information relative to the physical, mental, moral, and religious condition of the blind; and to promote among individuals and institutions, seeking to ameliorate the condition of the blind, a friendly interchange of information calculated to advance the common cause among all classes of the blind.

4. As long as the Committee shall consist of both ladies and gentlemen.

5. As long as at least six blind men or women shall be supplied with work at their homes by the Association, each at a sum of not less than six shillings per week; and so long as at least three blind men and three blind women shall be receiving instruction at [Pg 173] the cost of the Association.

These conditions deserve the careful consideration of every one interested in the blind, and should be religiously observed in the Institution founded by Bessie Gilbert.

Her work had now greatly increased; a large number of blind persons were regularly employed, and the public had responded to every appeal for funds. A meeting was held in May 1859, with the Bishop of London in the chair, and the time seemed to have come for that further information which Colonel Phipps had intimated might be sent to the Queen.

In April 1859, therefore, a letter was written to Her Most Gracious Majesty, by her very dutiful and humble servant E. M. M. Gilbert, to which the following reply was received:

BUCKINGHAM PALACE, *7th May 1859*.

MADAM—In reply to your letter of the 29th April, I have now the pleasure to inform you that Her Majesty the Queen has been graciously pleased to grant her patronage to the Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind, for which you have shown so much sympathetic interest and so large and liberal a benevolence.—I have the honour to be, madam, your obedient humble servant,

C. B. PHIPPS.

Miss Gilbert.

Bessie returned very dutiful acknowledgments and grateful thanks to the Queen, who had for the second time granted her petition and rendered signal service to her cause.

Henceforward, on the first page of annual reports, and on all bills and notices, appear the magical words— [Pg 174]

Patroness. Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen.

They were doubtless, as Bessie believed them to be, a tower of strength to her, inspiring confidence, securing friends, bringing custom and money.

Proud and happy too were the blind workmen as they sat round their little table, cautiously dipping fibre into the boiling pitch. They could reply to inquirers that orders had been received from Buckingham Palace, from Osborne, and from Windsor Castle, and that they were "making brooms for the Queen."

CHAPTER XIV [Pg 175]

EVERYDAY LIFE

> "Ce que peut la vertu d'un homme ne se doit pas mesurer par ses efforts, mais par son ordinaire."—PASCAL.

In January 1859 Bessie, with a younger sister, paid a ten days' visit to Fir Grove, Eversley, the home of her friend Miss Erskine. It was at this time that she became personally acquainted with Charles Kingsley. She heard him preach in his own church, and the sermon was one that she always referred to with gratitude as having helped and strengthened her.[7]

Miss Erskine remembers that Bessie walked and talked with Mr. and Mrs. Kingsley, and that they learnt to love her dearly. They quickly recognised the brave and faithful nature of the blind lady. "When you have medicine to take you drink it all up," said Charles Kingsley.[8] Never was there a truer remark.

She might, in the diary she was then keeping, have recorded many interesting incidents connected with that visit. But she merely makes a note of work done on behalf of the Association, [Pg 176] and there is one solitary mention of Mr. Kingsley's name—"talked to Mr. Kingsley about the Museum." That she talked about the Association it is unnecessary to add, and as a proof of it we find in the spring that Mr. Kingsley asked the Rev. Llewelyn Davies either to preach or to lend his pulpit in aid of her work.

On her return to Chichester the remainder of January was spent in writing letters to ask for anecdotes concerning the blind, and in obtaining material for her proposed book.

An autograph letter soliciting patronage was written at this time to the blind King of Hanover. She tells how she first dictated, then copied it herself, and also wrote herself to enclose it to Miss Boyle, by whom it was to be forwarded. "Seems little enough," she adds, "but took a long time."

With regard to her biographies, Levy writes as follows:

"I think Mr. Taylor would lend any work he has; the best he has I think are all German. The translations which I have heard from them remind me of the efforts which have been made to discover the North-West Passage, you are continually boring through ice, and if perchance you do meet with a piece of clear water you are no sooner aware that it is such than you are hemmed in with ice again.

"If you were to write and ask him to lend you any work on the biography of the blind it would do [Pg 177] good, but all that Germany has produced for the blind is not worth spending much time upon." He proceeds to tell her of a meeting held at St. John's Wood, and of the feeling that seemed to prevail that the institution there for the blind must either adopt "our views" or else come to the ground; and how in consequence of this the title had been changed to "The London Society for teaching the blind to read and for teaching the Blind Industrial Arts." He ends his letter, "It seems truly miraculous that in so short a space of time so much should be done with the various institutions. There is St. John's Wood, St. George's, Manchester, Bristol, Exeter, York, and Bath of which we know."

Bessie's friends heard of her proposed book on the blind with interest. Mr. Browne, the Rector of Pevensey, wrote in warm approval, and offered when in London to consult books for her at the British Museum. The late Colonel Fyers wrote from Dover Castle, enclosing an account of the life of a blind doctor, Rockliffe, of Ashley in Lincolnshire. Her brother Tom writes from Trinity College, sending notes on the life of the blind professor, Sanderson of Cambridge, who died in 1739. He speaks of a picture on the stairs of the library, of which he thinks she might make use. Her own note-book is filled with accounts of the lives of Holman, Gough, Huber, Laura Bridgman, and others. Many letters sent to her at this time have been preserved; one from a blind man, [Pg 178] Elisha Bates, interested her greatly:—

ELISHA BATES. I am thirty-three years of age. I was born at Coburn near Richmond, Yorkshire. My parents were agricultural labourers. I was born quite blind. I was always fond of horses. I used as a little boy to drive the horses in Mr. Fryer's threshing machine. I began this about nine years of age. I went daily to the ploughing fields, and although so young I was allowed to drive the horses for the ploughman. I could very early find my way about the village and to the different fields of the farmers. Up to eleven years of age I went with the other boys of the village to seek birds' nests, and often found my way to and from the neighbouring villages. I always had an excellent memory for recollecting the turns in the road and the variations of the surface, by which I was guided. I never had a stick up to this time, and up to the present time I rarely use one. I went to the Liverpool Blind Institution at twelve years of age, and learnt to read in the characters for the blind, and was taught the trade of ropemaking. I was so good in finding my way at Liverpool that I used to take charge of an old man [Hewell Kennedy] in our walking excursions. He was lame, deaf, and blind, and I used to take him about three miles up the London Road to the Old Swan Inn. I never forget a road I have once travelled over. I have no difficulty in avoiding obstacles. I think I do so from the acuteness of my hearing; I listen attentively to my footfall, and when approaching any object which may intercept my progress, even a lamp-post, I can discover a slight difference in the sound. If I have any doubt I tread a little louder, so as to satisfy my ear. I never fail in making it out. The difference in the sound is difficult to describe; but if I am near a wall or any object in my path I feel the sound to be more confined and not to extend itself as in an open space. It comes quicker to my ear. I left Liverpool at the age of seventeen and returned by railway to my native village. I [Pg 179] remained a year at home and drove the farmer's horses. I then went to the Victoria Asylum at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where I earned 8s. a week in making ropes. I remained there until I was twenty-two years old. Whilst in Newcastle I got thoroughly acquainted with the streets, and used to take out and deliver goods in the town. I came home by the railway and stayed two or three months. I then found my way on foot and alone to Sunderland, 45 miles. I asked people on the way how to steer my course. I always learnt what turns I had to take and the distance from place to place. I could calculate very accurately the time it took me to complete any given distance, and knew exactly when I arrived at the end of it. I then found my way from Sunderland to Newcastle, some 15 miles of very busy road, and had a great many of the colliery railways to cross. I walked back from Newcastle to Colburn unattended and alone. I then, after remaining at home a short time, started for Leeds, and walked above 50 miles in two days. I am a very quick walker on a good road. I went in search of work. I went alone from Leeds to Bradford, 10 miles of very busy road. I returned home walking alone the whole way by Otley, Knaresborough, and Leming, about 50 miles. I married after my return from Newcastle and have two children. After my last journey from Bradford I settled down at Richmond. My wife never travels with me, I always go alone. At Richmond I commenced with a donkey and cart as a firewood gatherer. My wife and I gathered firewood and brought it in my cart to Richmond, and sold it to my customers. I next got a pony and larger cart, and have ever since regularly led coals from the railway station into the town. I can find my way to any house in the town and never have any assistance in driving my cart and going about. I get off and on to my [Pg 180] cart as well as any other driver, and when it is empty I sit on my cart and drive with reins. With a load I go by the horse's head. I can tell instantly when any other vehicle is either coming towards me or coming past me in the same direction, and I turn my horse accordingly to avoid them. I never have any falls in walking alone, and never come in contact with anything when driving. I have never had any accident I groom my pony myself and go to purchase all the food it requires. I have always enjoyed good health. I have my amusements as well as work. I go angling in the River Swale with rod, and salmon roe as bait, and occasionally get a good dish of trout. I have also been a nut-gatherer, and found my way to the woods, and have gathered large quantities, which I have sold. I am fond of singing, and used to play the piano a little at Liverpool. I have not had any opportunities of doing so since. I do not always confine my leading coals to the town of Richmond; I occasionally take a load of coals or other articles, such as furniture, to a distance of 10 or 12 miles from the town. I was the other day employed with my horse and cart at Crake Hall near Bedale, 12 miles from Richmond. Of course I do all my work by myself and unattended by any one.

RICHMOND, *2d June 1859*.

Bessie refers in her diary at this time to MSS. in a considerable "state of advance;" but the only part of her work actually completed by herself and now recoverable is the title-page. She was too closely occupied with the work done in the Euston Road to give much time to the writing of a book. In the midst of a record of her literary work we come upon such an entry as "sold two brushes." Indeed there was no time in which she would not gladly throw aside anything else in [Pg 181] order to "sell two brushes."

Early in February she paid a short visit to friends at Ashling, in Sussex; and on the 26th of February we have the last entry in her diary. The full details of her busy life are at an end. There is no further detailed account of the interminable letters and appeals, the visits to blind men and women, the arrangements and plans and suggestions. They are all to go on for many a long year; but the labour of recording them is abandoned, and there is an attempt to diminish work which

threatens to be overwhelming.

One of her letters at this time is to Mr. Eyre, "Rector of Marlbourne." What almost insuperable difficulties spelling must offer even to the educated blind! How much more we all learn from sight, from reading, than from the dictionary! When a word occurs for the first time to a blind person he can only spell by ear; and Marlbourne for Marylebone is a very creditable solution of a difficulty.

One of the most interesting workmen in the Institution at this time was both blind and deaf. Levy heard of, and, at Bessie's request, visited him in his own home. The poor fellow had worked to support two sisters and an aged mother until severe illness, fever, robbed him of sight and hearing. He had regained health, but sat in one corner of the room moaning "I am wretched, very wretched." Hearing no sound of his own voice he had ceased to speak to others, and sat in silence, save for these incessant moans, and in darkness; roused from time to time by a push on [Pg 182] the shoulder and a plate of food put into his hands. The sisters did their best to support themselves and him by their needle, but he was as one living in the grave, and he was only twenty-one.

Such a case excited Bessie's deepest compassion. In a single afternoon Levy roused the poor fellow from almost hopeless despondency, and placed him once more in communication with the world around; taught him the letters of the dumb alphabet on his own hand, and spelt out the joyful information that he could learn a trade and earn his living by it. He did not readily believe this, but from that time the moans of "wretched, very wretched" ceased. He was admitted at once as a pupil at Euston Road, and learnt so rapidly that in six weeks he was able to write letters to his friends. Also he had ceased to "spoil material," which is the general occupation of learners for many months, and was earning between four and five shillings a week; whilst at the end of a year he was in receipt of excellent wages.

Bessie went frequently to the workshop "to talk to A." He would repeat aloud the letters formed upon his hand, and guess words and even sentences in a surprising manner. It was instructive to remark how soon an intelligent listener knows all you are going to say, and how unnecessary are many of our long explanations. Valuable lessons in brevity and conciseness were to be learnt from A., and the blind and deaf man soon brought you down to the bare bones of the information [Pg 183] you had to give. An angry glance was thrown away upon him, and finger talk has no equivalent for that slight and incisive raising of the voice which implies that the speaker intends a listener to hear him to the end.

The slow, monotonous utterance of the deaf man, a pronunciation which, as years passed on, became strangely unreal, and a sense of the loneliness to which he was condemned, attracted much attention to this intelligent man.

After a time he married. His wife, a widow with a little girl, was no comfort to him; but the child soon became his inseparable and devoted companion. When work was over she used to read a newspaper to him. She uttered no sound, but sat with the paper in her lap, whilst her little fingers fluttered about his hand like the wings of a bird, and his slow monotonous voice followed her, repeating words and sentences, or telling her to go on to something else.

One day Bessie, who was often accompanied by a friend, took with her Miss Elizabeth Wordsworth, daughter of the late Bishop of Lincoln, to have a chat with A.

Miss Wordsworth sent her the following poem in memory of the visit:

A Ministry of Love to One Blind and Deaf.

Near him she stands, her fingers light
  In quick succession go
Across his yielding palm, as white,
  As swift, as flakes of snow.

The diamond on her hand, that gleams [Pg 184]
  And flashes when it stirs,
Toward other eyes may fling its beams,
  But never gladden hers.

No word she speaks, no whisper soft
  His inner mind to reach;
No glances casts, tho' looks are oft
  More eloquent than speech.

The smile that gilds a friendly face
  Shall never meet his eye;
Songs, footsteps, laughter, tears, give place
  To dreary vacancy.

Silence and darkness, brethren twain
  For ever at his side,
Still hold him in their double chain
  Inexorably tied.

Yet love is stronger still, and she
  Even hither wins her way,
And soothes the long captivity
  Beneath that iron sway.

Such tenderness, long years ago,
  The nymphs of ocean led
To stern Prometheus stretched in woe
  Upon his stony bed.

Or in the shape of insect, flower,
  Or bird has helped to cheer,
In later times, full many an hour
  Of bondage, sad and drear.

But what can comfort, like the heart
  That sorrow's self has known;
Since that has learnt the healing art
  From sufferings of its own.

And casting selfish grief away [Pg 185]
  Forgets its own distress
In sorrows heavier still, that prey
  On some more comfortless.

This she has learnt—the secret this
  Of her calm life below;
This gives those lips that sober bliss
  And smoothes that peaceful brow.

Yet more; the love of human kind,
  How pure soe'er it be,
Can never fill the heart, designed
  To grasp infinity.

True, when the night of grief is dark
  It gladdens us to ken
The distant cottage fires, and mark
  The peaceful homes of men.

But such as upward lift their eye
  Will see a worthier sight,
The myriad stars, that in the sky
  Seem homes for angels bright.

Thus guided they pursue their way
  Thro' loneliest heath and dell,
Till on their work of mercy, they
  Come where their brethren dwell.

And such as she no earthly glow
  Would e'er suffice for them,
Shine on her, 'mid these dwellings low,
  Thou Star of Bethlehem!

The "Song of Elizabeth" from the *Saint's Tragedy* was published during the year 1859, and Bessie writes to Addison and Hollier to say that instead of an engraving she will have the price-list of the [Pg 186] Association on the title-page. This remarkable decision they seem to have induced her to abandon, for the title-page is of the ordinary kind. There were at this time about a hundred and fifty blind persons deriving benefit from the Association: sixty-three were supplied with work at their own homes; forty-seven were employed at the Euston Road; the remainder were pupils, agents, travellers, shopman, and superintendent, whilst three received pensions. So many more were applying for work and instruction that at the May meeting the Bishop of Oxford offered a donation of £20 on condition that nineteen similar donations were announced in a given time. He thus raised £400 for the relief of some of the more pressing cases amongst the applicants. The increase of workmen made an increase in the sales necessary, and the trade of the Association was assuming formidable dimensions. The buying and selling, the control of workrooms and management of stock, the care of ledgers, accounts, bills and receipts, might now with great advantage have been made over to a competent and adequately paid sighted manager. Such an arrangement would have left Bessie free to devote herself to the charitable part of her enterprise; to elevate and educate the blind, to investigate cases, and make experiment with trades. With Levy as her faithful coadjutor how much might she not have done!

She was pledged, however, to a more ambitious attempt, and felt herself bound in honour to show what the blind can do alone and unaided. A proposal was made in January 1859 to employ a [Pg 187] "sighted" accountant, but as this was opposed by Bessie it was not carried. And yet at this very time the incessant and anxious work of past years was beginning to tell upon her, and she had

urgent need of rest.

She was mainly responsible for the funds necessary to carry on the business. Being familiar with every detail of the business, she was called upon to explain its intricacies to her Committee. She had often to justify and secure the carrying out of arrangements which did not meet with general approval. Every scheme, proposal, experiment, rested ultimately upon her; upon this one blind lady, whose health had never been good, but whose strenuous energy and strong sense of duty forbade her to say no to any appeal on behalf of fellow-sufferers.

Museum, boarding-house, sick fund, musicians' association, with its classes for vocal and instrumental music, endowment fund, fund for establishing a West-end shop, fund in aid of tradesmen who had lost their sight; all these are the outcome of a single year's work. There are also letters innumerable to be written and answered, appeals to be made, applications to be replied to. She threw herself with fervid zeal into all her work, and a day was accounted lost if she had not accomplished in it something for the Association.

Two sisters were married in 1858, but the diary contains no other record of such important events than "unavoidably nothing done." Her heart beat warm and true as ever, home and friends were dear as ever, but for a time her horizon was bounded by the narrow walls of one small dark house in the Euston Road. [Pg 188]

Herr Hirzel, director of the blind institution at Lausanne, who had visited the Association during the summer, was so well pleased with all he saw that he decided on his return to Switzerland to open workshops for the blind. At different times some six institutions had also applied for teachers or blind superintendents, but no workmen had been trained or were qualified to fill such posts. Bessie saw that this was an omission in her scheme, and at once resolved that special facilities for the training of intelligent blind men ought to be provided.

In the autumn, however, the long threatened reaction from overwork set in, and she was prostrated by weakness and depression. In November she was induced to try the effect of complete rest, and paid a long promised visit to Miss Isabella Law, at Northrepps Rectory, near Cromer.

She took with her a Foucault frame and taught Miss Law to use it, and what further employment she found during her short holiday is best told in Miss Law's letters.

Writing at Christmas 1859 she says:

> It is just six weeks to-day since you left us. I can never forget that miserable morning; it is always haunting me like a dreadful dream that I try in vain to get rid of.... I hardly know what to tell you about myself; it is a very difficult subject to write about. I have been trying to do more in the school lately than I ever did before. I think of you when I am there, and try to do my best. Still I am afraid, as Madame Goldschmidt said of the clergyman, my best is very little. My sisters are going next week to spend a few days with some friends in the neighbourhood: how I should like to have you with me then. I remember so well your once speaking to me about accustoming myself to be alone whenever it was necessary, and not to depend too much on others for companionship, so now you see I am going to have a little trial in that way. You will think of me then, won't you? and I shall be thinking of you more than ever.... I took a bit of my writing this morning to show the school children, and they seemed delighted with it.... I must say good-bye now, ... and how much love I send I never could tell you. [Pg 189]

On the 5th of January 1860 Miss Law writes:

> I sincerely hope that this new year may be a very happy one to you and to all who are dear to you. It seems so strange to me to look back to this time last year. I feel somehow as if a change had come over my life since then. I mean I seem to see things in quite a new light, and to feel my responsibilities far more than I did before; and I know it is all through your influence. I feel it would have been indeed a happy year to me if the only blessing it had brought me had been your friendship, which I value far more than I can ever tell you.... My heart clings to every little remembrance of you one by one, and they are all very dear to me.

No account of her life would be adequate which did not bring out the stimulating effect of Bessie's friendship, and the way in which even an hour spent with her would have its result, and open a way to useful activity. Miss Law was specially influenced with regard to her poems, in which Bessie took a warm interest. At first they were sent for approval and criticism, but before long Miss Law was more than able to stand alone, and she published a small volume, which was well received and favourably noticed. [Pg 190]

The following pretty lines have been preserved amongst Bessie's papers:—

> Will you please tell me very truly what you think of this little poem? You know I have a great respect for your opinion, and that is why I send it.
>
> WHAT IS SYMPATHY?
>
> It is the perfect tune that lies
> Underneath all harmonies.

The brook that sings in summertide
Between the flowers on either side.
It is that voiceless under part,
That, still unheard, heart sings to heart.
The interchange of thoughts that lie
Too deep for louder melody.
The breath that makes the lyre move
With silent echoings of love.

ISABELLA LAW.

Bessie paid other short visits to old friends at this time. We hear of her with Miss Bathurst at Stanmore, and greatly interested in Miss Bathurst's most honoured friend, Lady Byron. She also stayed with Miss Butler, who remembers that one day when she was about to mount her horse Bessie stood stroking his legs, saying: "Surely this must be thorough-bred." Another time, as [Pg 191] Bessie stood near him, the horse stretched out his head and took the rose she was wearing so gently from her dress that she did not know it until she was told that he was eating it. Bessie used to drive in a pony carriage with Miss Butler, and to puzzle her hostess by a request for a description of the scenery.

On one occasion a gentleman who had become recently blind was asked to meet Bessie at Stanmore. It was very touching to see her sit by the blind man's side, take his hand and try to encourage and comfort him. Work for others, help for others; these were the things she told him that would make life worth living, and her own ardour was able to inspire him as well as others with hope and energy.

FOOTNOTES:

[7] *Town and Country Sermons*; 18. "Character of Peter."

[8] Page 8.

CHAPTER XV

[Pg 192]

TIME OF TROUBLE

"Good times and bad times and all times pass over."

BEWICK'S VIGNETTES.

Bishop Gilbert's family circle was fast diminishing. His eldest son and four daughters were married. The *sisterhood* was broken up. Numerous home duties at Chichester and in London, together with the care of parents whose health was beginning to fail, engrossed the time and thought of the daughters at home. Bessie still received sympathy and assistance, but she lived a very independent life, and relied more and more upon the services of a confidential maid, who wrote her letters, made the entries in diary, note-book, and journal, from which we have taken extracts, and accompanied her wherever she went.

Her entire absorption in the work of the Institution could not fail to become a source of isolation; and it began to cause anxiety to parents and friends. They knew her delicacy and the need in which she stood of constant watchful care, and they followed her with apprehension as she sailed [Pg 193] out into the ocean of labour and endeavour.

Some remonstrances from old and dear friends reached her, and the faithful Fraülein D. wrote as follows:

> Don't you allow that one great interest to absorb all others.... Remember that our very virtues can become snares of sin to us if we do not watch ourselves, our purest actions may lead us wrong. One great difficulty we have to deal with, in this our so complex state of trial, is to keep within us an even balance of things. Do the one thing, but do not leave the others undone, and above all seek, in all we do, not our own but the glory of God.... Don't you show a little want of faith and trust in your own eagerness and over-anxiety about your Institution, which, though most laudable in itself, may become a snare to you if it makes you neglect duties quite as, if not more, sacred?

Bessie preserved this letter, and in her humility she would lay it deeply to heart; but she knew that the Institution was not a work in which she sought her own glory. She was labouring for the blind, who depended upon her, and whom she could not forsake. She had "put her hand to the plough," and could not draw back.

In a very different tone we find a few words from her father, written after Miss Law had paid Bessie a visit in Queen Anne Street.

PALACE, CHICHESTER, *28th September 1860*.

MY DEAREST BESSIE—They tell me it will be a doleful parting between you and poor Miss

Law, especially on her side, which I can well understand, as she has not the resource in active occupation which you have. Your mistake and suffering may be in taking too much of it, without allowing yourself, or rather, taking as a part of duty also, the *délassement* of passing events, of social conversation and intercourse. Well, this is not exactly what I meant to say, but it may do on the principle of "a word to the wise." They tell me too you want £15, so here is my cheque for £15 and Archdeacon Mackenzie's, also on Coutts's, for £20. He says only it is a donation for your Institution in Euston Road. H. told me you have a notion he gave it for some specified purpose, the West End, for instance, but he says nothing of the kind. The cheques are each of them payable just as they are on being presented at Coutts's. I have acknowledged the £20 to the Archdeacon. Those at home do doubtless give you the chitchat news.... I suppose some one will write besides me, so I only add that I am, my dearest Bessie, yr. ever affectionate father,

[Pg 194]

A. T. Cicestr.

In the early part of 1860 Miss Bathurst wrote to congratulate Bessie on a "noble donation," coming "doubtless in answer to the law that they that seek shall find," and the donation has a pleasant history.

One day when Bessie was in Queen Anne Street a servant told her that a lady wished to see Miss Gilbert. She went downstairs accompanied, as usual, by her maid, and on entering the room found one whom she discovered by her voice to be a very old lady, whose first words were:

"My dear, I am very tired; send your maid for a glass of sherry."

This was done, and when she had finished the sherry the old lady said:

"My dear, I bring a contribution for your work. You see my relations have kept me a long time from having the control of my money, and now I am determined they shall never get a penny of it."

[Pg 195]

Then she turned to the maid who had brought the sherry: "Young woman," she said, "count these notes."

They were carefully wrapped in newspaper, ten notes for £50 each, and every note in its own piece of newspaper. They were duly counted and passed to Bessie. "You will acknowledge them, my dear," said the old lady, "in the *Times* and under initials."

And that was all. No more was ever heard of her, and there was no clue to her identity.

Singularly enough there was a second donation of £500, also from a lady, in October of the same year. The first announcement of it came from Levy, who writes from 127 Euston Road.

17th October 1860.

Dear Madam—In speaking finances yesterday I said that we could do nothing more than we had done unless God sent us a special blessing. God has sent us a special blessing in a donation of

Five Hundred Pounds.

His instrument in this gift is a lady, who did not wish her name mentioned, but Mr. Evans, the gentleman to whose discretion the giving or holding the donation was left, quite agreed with me that her name should be published. Her name is Miss Terry.—I am, dear madam, yours truly,

W. H. Levy.

The following letter is from the Mr. Evans alluded to:

[Pg 196]

17th October 1860.

Madam—I think it will give you pleasure to be informed that, having £500 placed in my hands yesterday for a Blind Institution, I searched out the one with which you were said to be connected. After going round Euston Square twice, calling at the wrong places, I at last traced it to the Euston Road, where I saw the Report and Mr. Levy. When I told him my object he literally cried for joy, and this I think will be interesting also to you to know. The lady who gives this handsome donation is Miss Mercy E. Terry of Odiham, Hants, through her bankers, Messrs. Child and Co. I need not say, rejoicing as I do in such charitable gifts, that it affords me very considerable pleasure in being the bearer of this intelligence to you, although a stranger, as greatly interested in the aforesaid Institution. The money has this day been paid to Messrs. Williams and Co. on account of the Society.—I am, madam, yours very obedly.,

E. P. Evans.

Bessie, in acknowledging the letter, asks if the donation is in response to an appeal for help. Mr. Evans replies: "Thanks are due to Miss Terry alone, but chiefly to a watchful Providence who so appropriately guided her charity to your Institution in need of it. Your individual application had no influence in the matter; for, in fact, applications of that kind are so numerous that it is not my

practice to give them attention. I did not know that you had written until you told me; but now I find that you did so, because your letter lies amongst others put aside.

"Your wishes and prayers are, however, answered in another way, and that is very satisfactory." [Pg 197]

These donations gladdened Bessie's heart, and were frequently referred to as coming at a time when heavy pecuniary anxiety was pressing upon her. She had applied this year to Mr. Tatton of Manchester, but he replied that it would be impossible to raise funds in Manchester for a London institution; people would feel that the many indigent blind in Lancashire and Cheshire had a stronger claim upon them. He wishes her success, and informs her that they are busily engaged in erecting a large addition to the Blind Asylum in Manchester to enable them to carry out the system of teaching trades to, and finding regular employment for, non-resident blind. "The success of your Association," he adds, "in establishing and carrying out such a system, has been one main cause of inducing us to take such steps as will enable us, although at a very heavy cost, to give the plan a fair trial in Manchester, and I feel very sanguine as to its success."

This information would give as much pleasure in its own way as the announcement of a donation of £500.

In addition to her autograph letters, a circular asking for custom for the Institution, and signed by the Rev. W. Champneys, Sir John Anson, and the Rev. Pelham Dale, was issued in 1860. These earnest, patient, importunate appeals went steadily on; they were written by herself or by any friend whose sympathy she could enlist, and sent to any and every newspaper that would consent [Pg 198] to insert them. But in spite of all efforts stock was increasing, sales diminishing, and an augmented number of blind applicants clamouring for admission. The boarding-house began to be a source of anxiety, not only on account of the expense connected with it, but by reason of the character of many of the inmates. Blind men were sent to the London boarding-house at the suggestion and with the warm approval of persons interested in them; and in the belief that they would learn a trade and earn their own living. But in many cases the man only looked upon London as a happy hunting ground. The last thing he intended to do when he got there was to work. He wanted a comfortable home, a small and certain allowance, and to beg in the London streets. Tied up together are letters warmly recommending a man to the benefits of the Institution, detailing his many virtues as well as his needs, followed by others from the same writer sorrowfully recognising failure, and very frequently acknowledging that the man was "at his old tricks again."

Bessie's faith in her cause was unshaken even by these painful experiences. She showed infinite pity and tenderness to all blind applicants, and gave to each one who was admitted a fair opportunity to improve and reform. She believed that honesty, goodness, and habits of industry were constantly found beneath the garb of the blind beggar, and that he must not be judged by the ordinary standard, because his condition of idleness had been enforced, and was often of long [Pg 199] standing. She learned to know all the temptations to which the blind were exposed, and whilst she fully recognised and acknowledged them, she endeavoured to show a way of escape. In spite of many failures she could point to individuals and families rescued from beggary and placed in a position to which it had seemed impossible even to aspire.

Still, with all allowances which her wide charity and large experiences were ready to make, it soon became apparent that a boarding-house for blind men and women conducted by a blind man would not answer. Abuses crept or rather leapt in, and Bessie, suffering and depressed, was unable to intervene actively, as she would have done if her health had permitted. There seemed to be no alternative, and the boarding-house was closed.

Mrs. Powell, sister of the Rev. F. D. Maurice, and twin sister of Mrs. Julius Hare, was one of Bessie's old and dear friends. She was a member of the Committee of the Association, and took keen interest in its work. We learn from her letters that Bessie was too ill to take part in the arrangements for the workpeople at Christmas 1860, or to attend the Committee meeting in January 1861. Mrs. Powell sends a prescription for a plaster "which seems to do wonders in neuralgia, and in soothing the brain after there has been any strain upon it."

Miss Bathurst also writes frequently at this time. "How earnestly I hope sleep may be given back to you," she says. "Those long nights of waking will try you sorely." She tells of a sermon [Pg 200] preached by Mr. Maurice on the text, "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit," and how he had dwelt on the change in the meaning of the word endeavour since it was first used by the translators, and that it was at that time a word full of energy, implying, "Put out all your force as for something which you are capable of accomplishing."

But Bessie was in no condition to receive encouragement from words which would at another time have roused her like the call of a trumpet.

The day of endeavour was for the present at an end; weary months passed on, and her condition was unchanged. An abscess formed in the lower jaw, and, after consultation, it was resolved to remove eleven teeth. It was also decided to perform this severe operation all at one time and without the use of chloroform. There were special difficulties on account of the condition of Bessie's throat and the adjacent tissues which seemed at the time to justify this decision; but the result was disastrous, almost fatal. It was months before she rallied from the shock of the acute and prolonged pain. When, three weeks after the operation, she was at the lowest ebb and her condition very critical, it was discovered that the spire of Chichester Cathedral was in imminent danger and must shortly fall. Just that part of the palace in which her room was situated was

believed to be in danger of being crushed if the spire fell, and it was absolutely necessary that she should be removed. The Dean and Mrs. Hook made immediate preparations to receive her at the Deanery, which was supposed to be out of danger. She was taken from her bed on the 21st of February 1861, and carried to the safest room in the palace, but before she could be removed from the house the spire fell, collapsing like a house of cards, injuring no animate thing, and doing little harm to any other part of the structure. Bessie was really proud of that spire. It had been good and beautiful in life, and its fall was the type of a peaceful and appropriate end. Chichester mourned its loss; it was, as the local journal said, "the most symmetrical spire in England, on which the eye of Her Majesty and her Royal Consort when in the Isle of Wight must have sometimes rested with delight." [Pg 201]

To the blind lady the cathedral and its beautiful spire had also been very dear. But as she had been too ill for apprehension, so she was at first spared the sharp pang of regret. Many months of prostration followed the dental operation, and it was more than a year before she was again restored to health. As soon as she could attend to letters, she received frequent reports of the work in London. The underground railway was in course of construction, and had blocked the Euston Road. Trade was annihilated there, and the blind had lost all ready-money custom. Debts were assuming ominous proportions, and Levy, upon whom the whole strain and responsibility now fell, showed signs of failing health.

Mrs. Powell wrote on the 7th of May 1861 from Palace Gardens, to give Bessie an account of the Committee meeting. She said that: [Pg 202]

> Levy was in a weakly, nervous state, soon exhausted. He said it was nervous fever from which he suffered, and that the doctor told him he must have rest. In his absence from the room it was proposed to arrange that he might spend every Saturday and Sunday out of London. Mr. Dixon, the oculist, who was a member of the Committee, said he must be careful not to go too far, as in a weak state of health people suffered more than they gained by long railway journeys. Levy came back into the room and announced that nothing could be done or thought of till "the annual meeting" was over. There was a debt of £1400 hanging over the Institution, half of it trade debt, and half from customers who could not be got to pay ready money; and Levy announced that the loss of custom from the underground railway stopping access to the shop amounted to £20 a week.

Mrs. Powell concludes by saying:

> I need not add that much sympathy and regret were expressed by the Committee at your continued weakness and suffering, and all hoped soon to see you there again. I know how anxious you must feel to be amongst them; but you will remember "your strength is now to sit still," until it can be said "Arise, He calleth thee." In patience you will possess your spirit. May God bless you at all times.

On the 13th of May the Bishop writes to give an account of the annual meeting held at St. James's Hall, and presided over by the Bishop of London.

> Queen Anne Street, W., *13th May 1861*.
>
> My very dear Bessie—Ford [her maid] gives a most encouraging account of your progress and walking performances, and I can reciprocate with a capital one of this day's meeting. The room was quite full, galleries and all; 2067 were stated to be present. There were some donations, but I have not heard yet the amount of the collection. [Pg 203]
>
> It is clear to me the Association has now taken its footing in London and in the nation, and that with God's blessing it will go on and become a national Institution, and that you, my dear child, may humbly rejoice in it. I have not time for more.—Yr. ever affectionate father,
>
> A. T. Cicestr.

Such a letter would greatly help forward Bessie's convalescence, which, though slow, was beginning to show signs of progress. In July a letter from Levy must have reassured her as to the state of his health, and it is interesting as the description of a blind man at a fire, with all his wits about him, and other blind men to help him.

> 127 Euston Road, *3d July 1861*.
>
> Dear Madam—Last night a fire of an alarming character broke out nearly opposite the Institution, and at one time our premises were placed in great danger, large masses of fire falling thickly over our premises for upwards of half an hour.
>
> It is a matter of thankfulness that I was at home.
>
> Our officers and other people hastened from their homes to our assistance. I caused the cocoa-matting to be taken from the floors, immersed in water, and spread over the roof, and every vessel capable of holding water was filled and passed from hand to hand in regular succession, so that the stream was continually kept up on all exposed parts.
>
> The office books were tied in blankets ready to be carried away, but providentially the

wind changed and we were relieved from anxiety. Four houses were destroyed or injured, but the only damage we have received is from the water, which is very slight—I am, dear madam, yours truly, [Pg 204]

W. H. Levy.

During the early summer of 1861 a tent was set up in the garden at Chichester, to which Bessie was carried on all suitable days. She was happy with birds and trees and flowers around her, and received visits from many old and tried friends. Her recovery was very slow, but there was always sufficient progress to point to the ultimate restoration of health.

Throughout the year the workpeople sent affectionate greetings and appreciative verses to their generous friend and patron. Bessie resumed the occupations of her youth, and in the months of her enforced absence from London and the work of the Association she wrote long poems and gave her time to music and reading.

With a view to publication, she submitted some of her poems to her old friend, the Rev. H. Browne, asking for a candid opinion. He writes as follows:

Pevensey, Eastbourne, *15th August 1861*.

Dear Bessie—I have read your poems, and, as you desired, have criticised closely. The faults are chiefly in the versification. Here and there I suspect they have not been written down correctly from your dictation. The thoughts, sentiments, and images are very pleasing, and the expression generally good. That on "The Poplar Leaves" is exceedingly pretty and gracefully expressed. It needs but a few alterations to make it all that it should be. "Spring" is striking in point of thought, but the versification should flow more smoothly, and the diction here and there needs correction.

"Thoughts Suggested by a Wakeful Night" are so good that I should like to see them made as perfect as possible, and as blank verse needs more finish than rhyme this task will need some pains. I hope you will not be discouraged at my criticism. If you think of sending any of these poems to some magazine "The Poplar Leaves" would best lead the way. I am sorry I cannot help you in this, having no connection with that kind of periodical literature nor any acquaintance with its conductors. You will see that I have made no notes on "Jessie." There are many pleasing lines in it, but it wants unity, the introductory part having no necessary connection with the catastrophe, and the latter being only a distressing accident.... [Pg 205]

The poems, which with returning health and strength were laid aside, are very defective in form, but the thoughts and feelings that were a solace to the blind lady cannot fail to interest the reader. These poems also show what the Chichester garden was to her, and what intellectual interests and resources she had when she was incapable of the active work of her Association.

The Poplar Leaves.

The poplar leaves are whispering low
In the setting summer beams;
As they catch the lovely farewell glow
That lights the hills and streams.

What tell they in those murmurs low,
Under the rising moon?
As they wave so gracefully to and fro,
I would ask of them a boon.

Have you any word for me, [Pg 206]
A word I fain would hear?
'Twas dropped perchance beneath your tree
Too faint for human ear.

Ye whisper so very low yourselves,
That as they lightly pass,
Ye needs must hear e'en fairy elves
At revels in the grass.

Then tell me, tell me, if she came
Beneath the setting sun,
And breathed a song, a sigh, a name
Or sweet word ever a one.

Then whisper it again to me,
Ye have not let it go,
It thrilled the whole height of your tree
Through every leaf I trow.

Yet still they whispered on and on,
But never a word for me;

Till, from the hill-tops, light was gone;
And I left the poplar tree.

Again I stood beneath that tree
When the fields were full of sheaves;
But now it mattered not to me
What said the poplar leaves;

For one stood with me 'neath the moon,
As they dropped their whispers low,
From whom I gained that precious boon,
The word I longed to know.

Lines suggested by a Wakeful Night.

Oh sleep, where art thou? I could chide thee now
That truant-like thou'rt absent from thy place; [Pg 207]
Or e'en could call thee by a harsher name,
Deserter; yet I will not brand thee thus.
Oh! wherefore dost thou leave me? Haste and come,
That in thy presence I forget all else.
Except thou grant me from thy precious store
Some lovely dream of joy; that, like a child,
Lies folded to thy breast, but which thou canst
At will send forth to wander here or there,
Bearing some wondrous message on its way.
Are such dreams thine? scarce know I whence they are,
Yet sleep in sober earnest, I believe
They are not truly thine, but dwell above
In worlds of light where thou art all unknown.
Yet hold they here strange intercourse with thee,
So that thy soft'ning veil is o'er them thrown,
And a mist in part doth dim their brightness,
And dull the melody of their sweet voice.
While, in the language of their home, they tell
Of its joy and beauty, bidding our souls,
As treasures, keep the whispers which they bring.
For though their sweet voice muffled be and low,
And though thy dewy mist enfold them,
Yet speak they truly with such heavenly power,
That in the joy and light of such a presence
Doth the spirit see this world, and heaven
To be more near than ofttimes we can tell
In the movements of our life; when the links
Uniting both, by us are left untraced;
While sad and weary we do often mourn
Their dreary distance, since our faithless hearts
Will sunder them so far, then cannot rest
In the sever'd world they make unto themselves,
Since that they are inheritors of both.
And He who dwelt on earth, to prove with power
That both these worlds were one, meeting in Him, [Pg 208]
Since by His mighty will of love He came
To link again upon the Cross the chain
Which should so closely evermore have bound them,
Which, save for Him, had utterly been sever'd,
He hath said, for every age to hear,
Within is the Kingdom of God; blest truth,
Within; and yet we look afar and gaze
Around in search of somewhat we call heaven,
And oft perchance thinking 'tis found, rejoice,
But soon in sadness is the quest renewed.
For that we seek a kingdom of our own,
No hope than this more utterly forlorn,
We have no kingdom and we cannot reign,
In serving only can we find our life
And perfect freedom, the true life of kings.
But whom to serve we may, nay needs must, choose;
And if the happy choice be made, then ours
Is the glorious privilege to know
That earth and heaven (howe'er Rebellion,
With his sceptre point in triumph, saying
Behold me, by earth's homage, king confessed),
One kingdom are, rul'd ever by one King.
Who through His love will teach this, more and more

Until our hearts, living His life of love,
Shall know and feel His presence all their heaven.

EVENING.

1.

Ye sounds of day, why all so still,
And hushed as if in sleep?
Is there some power whose sovereign will
Bids you such silence keep?
I ask'd, no voice replied, it seemed
The while as tho' all nature sweetly dreamed,
But soon that spirit of the shade
The breeze, in softest whispers, answer made.

2. [Pg 209]

Hast thou seen the sun, with fainting beams
In parting, kiss the hills and streams,
Didst mark the blush of that farewell glow
And how he linger'd loth to go?
For soon to the queen of the glowing west,
He knew he must yield and sink to rest.

3.

He had caught the sound of her step from far,
Had heard her greet her own bright star,
And triumphing tell how the god of day
Would yield his kingdom to her sway,
And how she comes to reign alone,
For he is gone, that glorious one.

4.

O'er sounds she holds entire sway,
When she wills silence all obey,
Soon as her coming draweth near,
Many are hush'd, that she may hear
Those only which she makes her own,
Whose music breathes a lulling tone.

5.

The streams that flow in melody,
The soothing insect-hum,
The green leaves whispering softly
While I, on light wings come,
And with low murmurs lull the groves,
These all make music which she loves;
All these, when the stirring day doth end,
To give her sweet welcome their voices blend.

6.

Then ceas'd the voice, but all around
Floated a gentle murmuring sound; [Pg 210]
While fragrant breath of greeting rose
From flowers sinking to repose,
To welcome evening's peaceful reign,
The while responding to the strain,
Their willing tribute of thanks and praise
My heart and voice at once did raise:

7.

Oh evening, I will sing to thee,
Thou silent mother of thought;
My heart shall breathe the melody,
With glowing rapture fraught;
Yes, I will sing to thee, and tell
How I love thy solemn hour,
How in thy stillness lies a spell
Of soothing holy power.

8.

Thou comest in calm majesty
To thy bowers in the west;
And weary nature blesseth thee,
For she knows thou bringest rest,
She waits thy coming anxiously,
And all the lovely flowers
Droop their leaves in thanks to thee,
For life-renewing showers.

9.

Well may they bless thee, for I trow
When the joyous morn doth wake,
And with its beams their slumbers break,
All fresh and bright their leaves shall glow;
And to the deep feeling heart,
That which can love thee best,
How beautiful thou art!
Cradle of peace and rest.

10. [Pg 211]

It loves thy presence, and to thee
By chains of deepest thought is bound.
Such thought as sets the spirit free
Hallowing all around.

11.

Then wakes in man his nature high,
He feels his immortality;
And in the peace at evening given
Bethinks him he is heir of heaven.

CHAPTER XVI [Pg 212]

THE FIRST LOSS

"The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction."—WORDSWORTH.

In August 1861 Bessie was removed to Bognor for the benefit of sea air, and began to show signs of complete recovery. Some of the sisters were her constant companions and devoted nurses; she received visits from her parents, and loving letters from many friends.

She returned to Chichester in the late autumn, restored to her usual average of health; and in December the Bishop wrote to her, the eldest daughter at home, as he had done in the old days when she was a girl, to prepare for the return of the family from Brighton.

Christmas was spent as usual at the palace, and with the new year Bessie began gradually to resume her work for the Institution.

Her first frame letter was written in March 1862 to her father, and has been preserved:

PALACE, CHICHESTER, *1st March 1862*.

MY DEAREST PAPA—I had long ago settled that my first letter with the frame should be to you, and most thankful I am to be able to be at the "stocking making" again, though very likely I shall not make a very good workwoman; but please take the work, such as it is, as a little sign that Bessie has not forgotten all the love shown her while she was ill, how you used to come and sit with her in the midst of all you had to do. I am very very thankful to be so much stronger, and to have been brought through the suffering as I have been. [Pg 213]

I hope you will take care of yourself when you start for confirmations, the winds now are so bitterly cold. Indeed, you do provide well for us; it will be very enjoyable to have the Brownes. Did you see that curious letter in *The Times* not long since, headed "Is it —;" I thought it would interest you. I hope it has not been necessary to light gas to-day for morning service. However, the day has not been very bright here. Yesterday I was out in the garden in the morning, but I have a little cold and so was not tempted to-day, as there was no sun. Robin is to sleep here to-night; he preaches, I think, at St. Andrews. Very much love to mamma and all.—I am ever your dutiful and loving child,

BESSIE.

The difficulties of the Association had increased during the period of Bessie's illness and absence.

Subscriptions and donations now amounted to between two and three thousand a year, and goods had been sold to about the same amount. But so large a percentage on sales was paid to all blind agents and travellers and to Mr. Levy that the increase of trade threatened to swamp the undertaking. Moreover, sales did not keep pace with productive power, and a large quantity of stock was on hand.

A Sub-Committee was appointed to investigate the financial condition of the Association, and their report, practical and sound as it was, proved very distasteful to Bessie. [Pg 214]

They advised the employment of a sighted shopman, the substitution of some easier and more accurate method of keeping accounts, the payment of all money received into the bank, and an arrangement under which Mr. and Mrs. Levy should receive a fixed salary in lieu of commission on sales. They also intimated their belief that the time had come when the Society must look to its director simply for general management, and must be prepared to employ a thoroughly efficient staff in the shop and workrooms.

The report really amounted to a suggestion to supersede her faithful manager; a step to which Bessie and Levy were equally opposed. Bessie hoped to avert it by raising money to pay the debts, and open a West-end shop; and as the Committee was powerless without the alliance of the Lady President, there was at any rate a reprieve.

To obviate one of the difficulties arising from want of funds, the Bishop offered £40 a year as the wages of a sighted shopman, in addition to his subscription of £5.

He announces this in a letter written from Queen Anne Street on the 22d May 1862, to Bessie at Chichester. His offer was gratefully accepted by the Committee. It was also arranged that donations and subscriptions should be paid into the banking account; and not, as hitherto, used as soon as received in the payment of bills and wages. But the director was unwilling to [Pg 215] relinquish any of his duties, and Bessie considered that when her own health, which was rapidly improving, should be quite re-established, the assistance she could give would lighten his duties and responsibilities.

Under these circumstances there seemed no pressing need of reform in the management. Bessie had one remedy for all the suggestions of the Sub-Committee; and this was to plead both in public and in private for money and custom. In 1863 there were articles and letters in *The Times*, and in all the principal London journals, and a paper in Miss Yonge's *Monthly Packet* by Mrs. Hooper, who had previously written on the subject in *Household Words*. Mr. Gladstone was asked to speak at the annual meeting to be held in May, and replied:

11 Downing Street, Whitehall, *17th March 1863*.

> Madam—It would be with so much regret that I should decline a request proceeding from you, that although uncertain whether my public duties may permit me to attend the meeting to which you refer, on the 11th May, I cheerfully engage to do so, subject only to the contingency of any call upon me elsewhere, such as I may be unable to decline.—I have the honour to be, madam, your very faithful servant,
>
> W. E. Gladstone.
>
> Miss Gilbert.

Mr. Gladstone attended the meeting and advocated the claims of the Association, not, as he said, from motives of philanthropy but as a political economist, and because it was founded on sound principles. He said: [Pg 216]

"While this Association aims to promote the general welfare of the blind, it aims at promoting that welfare in a very specific manner and by well-determined means. It is not founded on the idea that the blind, because they have suffered a great and heavy visitation, are therefore to be the mere passive recipients of that which the liberality of their fellow-creatures may bestow. It does not proceed on the idea that because the blind are so, they have therefore ceased to partake in other respects in that mysterious nature of which we are all partakers, with its immense capabilities and powers, with its high hopes and great dangers. For in all other respects the blind continue to be sharers in every thing pertaining to us as men; and if I rightly apprehend the idea of this Institution, it is this, that while we minister to the wants of the blind in a specific manner, yet we still consider them as rational beings, as members of society, as capable of various purposes, as not intended to be sent into a corner, or to be excommunicated from us; but as intended to bear their part as citizens, as enlightened and civilised creatures, and as Christians. Employment given to the blind is a great source of happiness. The sentence which was termed the primeval curse, if on one side it presented the aspect of a curse, also presented on the other the aspect of a blessing,—the necessity, the condition of true happiness. Employment is a blessing for us all, but it is much more to the blind. Employment to the blind is the condition of [Pg 217] mental serenity, of comfort and resignation. Employment to the blind is also the condition of subsistence,—that is, of honourable and independent subsistence. It is a great thing for an institution when we are enabled to say that its rules and practice are in harmony with political economy, for political economy is founded on truth. I believe that the rules of the Association are based on the laws which regulate the accumulation and distribution of the means of subsistence. In this Association we have the union of what the coldest prudence would dictate, and of what the

most affectionate Christian heart would desire."

Mr. Gladstone was at that time the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and his advocacy was very valuable. The pecuniary result of the meeting, which had given her some months of labour, was most gratifying to Bessie, and she resumed her work of collecting funds with fresh ardour. We find her making application, in vain, for a grant from the Peabody Fund. The question of State aid for the blind was suggested to her, and she set to work in the usual patient and thorough way, to obtain information and to look around for influential help. But the autumn brought sorrow and grave anxiety, which almost put a stop to other work. Mrs. Gilbert, whose health had long been failing, declined rapidly. Bessie remained at Chichester, and wrote constantly and very tenderly [Pg 218] to the sister, Mrs. Elliot, who was unable to leave her own home, and yet anxious to be with her mother if the illness should prove alarming. Bessie writes an autograph letter on 9th December 1863, tells of the arrival of married sisters at the palace, of the anxiety of Dr. Tyacke and her father, of the sympathy they all feel for the one who cannot join them, "we know how much your heart is with us, and how much we should like to have you here.... I have just heard that Mary thinks mamma looking better than she expected, and Sarah says she does not think her looking quite so ill as on Monday. It is a pleasure to tell you anything the least cheering.... You do not know how sorry we all are for you; I hope you will not find this letter difficult to read. I wished especially to write to you to-day to tell you how we all think of you, and feel for and with you in all this difficulty and anxiety."

That evening a younger sister prepared some arrowroot in the sick-room, and the blind daughter administered it carefully, spoonful after spoonful, to her dying mother. "It pleased them both so much," we are told, and it was the last office of love, for on the 10th December Mrs. Gilbert died.

The death of this warm-hearted, generous woman, who had made home so happy for her children, devoted wife and loving mother, was a crushing blow. Death had not visited the home for nearly thirty years, and this great grief opened up the possibility of future loss, and was as a [Pg 219] pillar of cloud that followed them.

Miss Law, writing to Bessie on the 23d of January 1864, says:

> I can indeed most fully enter into all you have felt and are feeling still, under this dark shadow, which has fallen around you; but surely by and by you will be enabled to see the light that must be shining behind it. Oh, I do trust that the sad empty place in all your hearts may each day be filled more and more with the loving presence of Him who has sounded all the deepest depths of human sorrow and suffering, that He might know how to feel for and comfort us the better. Yes, you must indeed feel comforted already in the thought of the fulness of her joy and rest and peace. I am very glad your poor father has been so strengthened through his great trouble; he is rich in having many loving children to help and comfort him.... My book has been far more successful already than I had expected; there have been several very nice reviews; we are going to have them reprinted altogether, and then I will send you a copy.... Some day I should like to know your thoughts about my little poems, and which ones you like best among them. Dear Miss Proctor [Adelaide] is still very ill, though at times she revives wonderfully. I was able to see her twice when I was in town. She writes to me now and then herself, and her sister Edith constantly.

Not long before Mrs. Gilbert's death the possible marriage of a younger daughter had greatly interested her. She looked forward with confidence to her child's future happiness, and when her own condition became serious she begged that in no case might the marriage be postponed. It [Pg 220] was therefore solemnised in March 1864 as quietly as possible. This sister, H——, had been for some years Bessie's special ally, and the loss of her active help and unfailing sympathy was severely felt.

CHAPTER XVII [Pg 221]

HOW THE WORK WENT ON

> "He who has but one aim, and refers all things to one principle, and views all things in one light, is able to abide steadfast, and to rest in God."—Thomas à Kempis.

Goods manufactured by the blind had been for some years advanced to blind agents on a system known as "sale or return." This had proved satisfactory so long as the agents were carefully selected. But there had been some relaxation in the requisite caution, and large consignments had been made to blind men who returned neither money nor goods, and who were found to be without either honesty or cash. In 1864 the loss to the Institution by sale and return amounted to more than £1200.

Bessie was not discouraged by the loss. She felt so keenly the force of the temptations to which the blind were exposed, and the possibility that they had at first hoped and intended to be honest, and had only gradually fallen into evil ways, that it was with difficulty she could be induced to acquiesce in the abolition of a system which worked so badly. However, it had to be given up, and [Pg 222]

she set to work to pay the debts incurred.

Instead of the annual meeting of May 1865, a bazaar in aid of the funds of the Institution was suggested.

The first idea of this was very distasteful to Bessie. She had a horror of the ordinary bazaar. But it was pointed out that a sale of goods on behalf of the blind, held in the right place and by the right persons, would have none of the features to which she so justly objected. Her scruples were overcome, and after she had given her consent she devoted the autumn and winter months of 1864 and the early part of 1865 to the necessary preparations for the undertaking. She applied to the Duke and the late Duchess of Argyle for permission to hold the sale in Argyle Lodge. They very kindly consented; and the Duchess suggested that if any use was to be made of the grounds of Argyle Lodge the date fixed should not be too early in the spring. In consequence of this advice it was resolved to hold the sale on the 21st and 22d of June.

As the time appointed drew near, Bessie's labours were saddened and rendered difficult by a great loss. Her brother-in-law, Colonel the Honourable Gilbert Elliot, who had never quite recovered from the effects of the South African and Crimean campaigns, was taken seriously ill in March and died on the 25th of May 1865.

The arrangements for the sale, which was a public undertaking, were now completed, and it was [Pg 223] decided to proceed with it, but the work was carried on by Bessie at great cost and with a heavy heart; for, as she says in one of her rare autograph letters, sent to Mrs. Elliot on the 25th May: "You know how we all love dear Gilbert."

Many friends came forward to offer such help as could be given, and the sale promised to be a success. The list of stall-holders was excellent, and encouraged Bessie to hope for a good attendance and good results.

Lady Constance Grosvenor, Lady Blantyre, Lady Jocelyn, Lady Victoria Wellesley, the Marchioness of Waterford and Lady Anson, the Marchioness of Ormonde, Miss Gilbert, Mrs. Imwood Jones, Mrs. Green, Mrs. King, Mrs. Fox, Mrs. C. Dyke and Lady Geraldine St. Maur held stalls. Gate money and the sale of goods produced £1078. Over £200 was received in donations, and the net result of the sale was more than £1300.

Bessie had good reason to be satisfied, not only with the money but with the influential patrons she had secured for the Institution. The report for the following year gives an imposing list of vice-patrons,—the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Dukes of Rutland and Argyle, the Earls of Abergavenny, Chichester, and Darnley, the Bishops of St. David's, Chichester, Lichfield, Oxford, St. Asaph, and Lincoln, Lord Ebury, Lord Houghton, Mr. Gladstone, Sir Roundell Palmer, the Dean of Westminster, and Professor Fawcett.

The pecuniary result of the sale, though perhaps not all that was expected, seemed to justify the [Pg 224] Committee in taking a West-end shop. They secured No. 210 Oxford Street, and decided to keep the old houses in the Euston Road as workshops.

Mr. Levy, in a letter sent to Chichester on the 30th September 1865, announces the completion of the arrangements for a lease on the terms offered by the Committee. He adds that one brushmaker has a shop nine doors off, and another brushmaker has a shop twenty-four doors off, but he thinks their vicinity will not injure the Association. He probably expected that influential patrons and their friends would purchase from the blind, and that no orders would go astray. This expectation was not realised, and in the course of two or three years the vicinity of the two brush shops was found to be a serious disadvantage.

During the early summer of this year Bessie received a letter written on behalf of the Committee of the Blind Asylum at Brighton; asking if their schoolmistress and her assistant, who were not themselves blind, could be received for "a few days" in the "asylum in the Euston Road." They wanted to see the working of it, and more especially to learn the trades taught to women.

Bessie replied that the Institution was not an "asylum," and that no one could be received to live in the house. She expressed her disapproval of the employment of "sighted" teachers, but offered [Pg 225] to arrange with the Brighton Committee for the reception of one or two blind persons to be taught brush-making and other trades, with a view to becoming teachers. She explained fully the objects of the Association, and expressed her opinion that an attempt to acquire any trade "in a few days" could only result in misconception and failure.

There were several letters on both sides, but neither yielded. Bessie would not consent to train "sighted" teachers "in a few days," and Brighton would not send blind pupils.

Three years previously the Davenport Institution had applied for a blind teacher. A man trained by the Association had been sent, and had given entire satisfaction. He succeeded a "sighted" teacher, and was said to have done more in six months than his predecessor in two years. Bessie always urged the necessity of employing blind teachers, on the ground that they alone could know all the difficulties of the blind; and it would have been impossible for her to sanction so retrograde a step as the training of "sighted" teachers in an institution full of blind persons, many of whom were quite capable of teaching others.

Bessie left London much exhausted by the labours and sorrow of the spring.

She required a long rest to restore her strength. We have a short account of her summer in the

following letter to Miss Butler, written in October, from Queen Anne Street.

[Pg 226]

> My dear Miss Butler—... I am sure you must have thought it strange that I have not answered your letter long before this, but I wanted to have the pleasure of writing to you myself, and I have just lately had a good deal of work, I mean handy-work, which has prevented my so doing. Added to which I only returned home about a fortnight ago after, for me, a wonderfully long absence, about which I must tell you presently.
>
> I have come up to-day from Chichester for our Committee to-morrow, and am talking to you in this way in the evening. I too am very sorry not to have seen you this year, but I hope we may see you still. How are you after all your nursing and anxiety. You must want some refreshment, I should think.
>
> Now with regard to Mr. —— I shall be very glad to do anything I can, but I really hardly see what I can say or do. My father generally likes these sort of things to be official, and I really don't think I should do any good by mentioning Mr. ——'s name before the ordination. Papa would only say to me: "The examination must take its usual course, and I cannot do anything," he would say. Still I will take an opportunity of saying something, nor would I hesitate at all about it, but that I really think that with papa such a mention would do no good. I hope you will quite understand that I have not said all this from any unwillingness to do what you ask, but really because I don't see how to do so to any purpose; otherwise it would give me particular pleasure to do it for you at your request. I am very glad indeed you have succeeded so well with ——. Every such practical proof of what a blind person can do is a help more or less to the general cause. Thank you very much for making the experiment with her.
>
> I told you I had been long away from home. I felt I wanted a complete change. I don't know when I ever felt this so much. Well, I paid some visits, one at about twenty-three miles from Birmingham, and from thence I went to the festival. I heard *St. Paul*; and the day but one after the *Messiah*. I cannot tell you what enjoyment this music was to me; never did I hear such choruses. Each individual singer seemed to love the music. I shall never forget the wondrous beauty of the singing. However, I was completely knocked up afterwards for three or four days, but it was well worth all the headache and exhaustion which I had after it. The journey there and back was a very great additional fatigue. Altogether I enjoyed my visits very much, and am all the better for them, ready, I hope, please God, for plenty of work this winter. Will you please send me the money in your hands before December. We have deposited money towards the working capital, and I am most anxious if possible to find money for current expenses without touching this capital, and also if possible to add to the deposit. Of course the more custom the better; I very much want regular custom from wine merchants for baskets, that we may employ basketmakers accordingly.
>
> Can you get some such custom with my love to your Mother I am yours ever affectionately Bessie Gilbert my sisters are well only Sarah at home Papa very well good bye.

[Pg 227]

The last sentence is printed as it stands, and gives a specimen of the occasional want of capitals and of punctuation almost inevitable when the writer is hurried. But think of the concentration required to write letters which allow of no interruption and no revision.

In the autumn of this year an excellent scheme was inaugurated, capable of a development which it has never yet received. The object of it was to enable blind persons living in the country to learn a trade suited to their own neighbourhood, and to be instructed in reading and writing without the expense and very grave risk of a prolonged residence in London.

[Pg 228]

It was proposed to send a blind teacher, with his wife, to lodge in any village or town where there were persons whose friends were willing and able to provide for their instruction. These persons were to be taught at their own homes, or in some more convenient place, a remunerative trade, such as cane and rushwork, the making of beehives, rush baskets, and garden nets; mat-making, chair-caning, etc. They were also to be taught reading, and the use of appliances for writing and keeping accounts.

The Association did not undertake to supply any work, it had to be found in the neighbourhood. With the help of the charitable it was considered that this ought not to be difficult; and even if the blind did not entirely earn their own living, the little they could do would be a help so far as it went. Bessie had proved long before this that employment, with the intercourse it brings, is the greatest alleviation to the suffering of many a blind man or woman. During the autumn of 1865 two blind persons in the country were taught trades at their own homes, and also learned to read and write. The cost was not more than £10 for each person, a sum much less than that which has to be provided for those who are sent to London for training.

[Pg 229]

Some day, perhaps, these peripatetic blind instructors may once more be sent out by the Institution, with advantage both to themselves and others.

A period of steady quiet work was now before Bessie. Letters, appeals, investigations, and reports filled her time.

The Archbishop of York presided at the annual meeting in 1866, and the balance-sheet for that year shows receipts amounting to £7632. She found herself engaged in a large commercial as

well as a philanthropic undertaking; and the success of her industrial work began to tell, not only in Great Britain, but in the United States of America. She was much gratified by the report of the Principal of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, 1866, in which the following passage occurs:

> We are gratified to report the successful working of the literary and musical branches of the Institution, and also the favourable progress of our manufacturing department, in teaching and employing blind persons in useful trades; experience every year confirms the necessity of a house of industry for the regular employment of pupils whose term of instruction has terminated, and of the adult blind.
>
> The education of the blind is a simple matter; nor is it susceptible of much improvement in the way of securing their future welfare. The great idea which encourages the establishment and support of all such institutions by the several States is the preparation of the blind for future usefulness and happiness, by self-dependence. Their misfortune unfits them for the large number of industrial and professional pursuits open to the seeing; but there are mechanical arts in which they become good, if not rapid workers. The difficulty with many, especially those without friends and homes, is [Pg 230] in securing employment, and in earning fully enough for their support. Without this, the failure, idleness, and demoralisation which too often follow prove how imperfect is their previous instruction in this direction.
>
> The "Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind," founded in London by Miss E. Gilbert, is an example of a very practical organisation for the employment of the blind, which has been alluded to in our former reports. It gives work, in various ways, to about 170 adult blind persons, many of whom were previously begging in the streets. The deficiency of their earnings is supplied by annual subscriptions and legacies, the usual sources of support in Great Britain for the benevolent institutions.
>
> Such institutions will never be self-sustaining. But the support of an industrial association which enables every blind person to earn 100, 200, or 300 dollars a year, is certainly better than to throw such persons upon the charities of the wayside, or to consign them to pensioned idleness.

In the autumn of this year Bessie was at Chichester, and in addition to the difficulty of walking, which she experienced after any time of hard work, she began to discover that vibration from any great or sudden noise affected her painfully. She drove with her father and a sister from Chichester to Kingly Bottom, a vale in the South Downs, for the last day's shooting of the rifle volunteer corps in September 1866. The sharp crack of the rifles tried her greatly, and brought on so much pain that she was glad to accept a seat in the carriage of a friend and go home, instead of waiting, as the Bishop wished to do, for the end of the match. The noise seemed to [Pg 231] exhaust her.

During the autumn of 1866 Mr. F. Green, who for many years had rendered great service by his work on the Committee, presented to the Association five shares of £100 in the Marine Insurance Company, of which he was a director. They yielded at that time £40 a year, and the gift was a source of much gratification to Bessie.

She was at Chichester in December, and wrote thence on the 21st to her widowed sister, Mrs. Elliot, dwelling on the service she could render to others:

> "Having you must make all the difference," she says, when alluding to a succession of troubles which had fallen upon Lady Minto, with whom Mrs. Elliot was staying. "Really there is not and will not be any lack of work for you. You have had, I should think, quite as much as you could do for some time past.... There is a chance of Tom's coming in January.... I suppose you know all about him and his doings. I can't think how he would have got on without you."

Then she gives news from home:

> I am expecting them in after the ordination every moment. This time it is in the cathedral; twelve candidates I think. Papa came down to breakfast this morning, and was to go in time for the whole service. Only think, one of the priests has been in agonies of toothache all through the examination; but in spite of it Mr. Browne was delighted with all he did. The poor man had two teeth taken out, and happily to-day was flourishing.... I do hope you will like the little paper knife which I am so very glad to [Pg 232] send you. I was quite taken with the little bells of the lilies.... Nora to-day is quite in her element and full of work, putting up a number of parcels to send off in different directions.... Ever your loving sister,
>
> Bessie Gilbert.

"Tom," of whom she speaks, had recently been appointed Vicar of Heversham, near Milnthorpe; and Mrs. Elliot had visited him at the vicarage, and superintended the domestic arrangements of her bachelor brother.

Bessie received no Christmas box which gave her more pleasure than the following poem, which appeared in *Punch* on the 29th of December:

A Box for Blindman's Buff.

Sit down to eat and drink on this glad day,
  And blest be he that first cries, "Hold, enough!"
Gorge, boys, and girls; and then rise up to play.
  You *can*. A game in season's Blindman's Buff.

The ready fillet round the seamless brow
  Of youth or maiden while quick fingers bind,
Beneath the golden-green pearl-berried bough,
  What fun it is to play at being blind!

But some at Blindman's Buff with eyes unbound
  Might join, for whom less sport that game would be
Because it is their life's continual round:
  The Blindman's Buff of those that cannot see.

If poor, for alms they can but grope about.
  But Science to their need assistance lends;
And "knowledge, at one entrance quite shut out,"
  Puts veritably at their fingers' ends.

Thus they who else would starve to labour learn. [Pg 233]
  Does that consideration strike your mind?
Their living do you wish that they should earn,
  Instead of crying "Pity the poor Blind?"

Then know there's not a charitable Dun,
  Subscription seeking at your gate who knocks,
That more deserves your bounty than the one
  Who for the Blind requests a Christmas Box.

At Oxford Street's two-hundred-and-tenth door
  Inquire within about the Blind Man's Friend.
Or send your guinea, if you like, or more;
  As many more as you can spare to send.

Punch, 29th December 1866.

In August 1867 Bessie paid her first visit to the Vicar of Heversham. She writes a "frame" letter from the North to Mrs. Elliot, and sends warm appreciation of her work in the house, and of the "little three-cornered things in the pink room." The "nice woman" was probably a certain Jane Todd, formerly a servant, but at that time settled in a home of her own. Quite an extraordinary friendship sprang up between her and Bessie, and to the end of her life Jane Todd daily offered up special prayers on behalf of her friend the blind lady.

There are again ominous allusions to her difficulty in walking. "I walk better here," she says; and again, "I can't tell you how much I enjoy moving more freely."

Heversham, Milnthorpe, *23d August 1867*.

My dear K.—I meant my first frame letter from here to be to you, so now I am beginning it. I have the morning room which you used to have, and enjoy it very much. How nice [Pg 234] the house is, and how you must have worked to make it so. Mrs. Argles and Mrs. Braithwaite seem very much impressed with all your hard work. Is it true that those little three-cornered things in the pink room with the china on them were washhand stands? You have made a capital use of them.... I walked up the lower Head yesterday, then stayed there and had some tea brought me, and afterwards walked to the school through all those stiles. After the meeting we came back by the road. I have been able to walk better here, and it is such a pleasure. I can't tell you how much I enjoy moving more freely. Wednesday I walked as far as the house at Levens and back after a rest at a cottage near, where we found a very nice woman who certainly talked Westmoreland, but really with a pretty accent.... Your loving sister,

Bessie.

The difficulty in walking, to which she alludes, had again increased; and in 1867 or 1868 she consulted Sir James Paget with regard to it. He thought it proceeded from weak ankles and general debility, and prescribed rest and care.

She was at Queen Anne Street in February 1868, and much interested in a public dinner at Chichester at which her father was to be present Dean Hook wrote to give her an account of the proceedings.

The Deanery, Chichester, *5th February 1868*.

My dear Miss Gilbert—I cannot help writing to tell you that the dear good Bishop was yesterday more animated and more eloquent than I ever heard him. He seemed so well

and so happy that I am glad he went. It was indeed an ovation to his lordship, as much as to the Mayor; he was so enthusiastically received. As I knew that you were anxious about him, under the notion that he was doing too much, I trouble you with this note. The calm serenity with which he always does his duty, and in performing it does his best, is a very beautiful trait in his character, and I doubt not now that he will get through his visitation duties without suffering too much from fatigue. It is not work, it is worry which tries a man, and all his clergy will exert themselves to save him from worries.—Believe me to be, your affectionate friend, [Pg 235]

W. F. Hook.

Bessie's own work at this time was mainly the preparation for the annual meeting in May, together with appeals for custom to the secretaries of public institutions.

The Lady Superintendent of the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street replies that brushes for the Hospital are always purchased at the depot in Euston Road.

The Secretary of the Islington Shoe Black Brigade tells her that so far as he can, consistently with the interests of his Society, and as regards the price charged for various articles, he has always given the Society for the Blind as much custom as possible. These are types of innumerable answers; and she went on with this drudgery year after year; every ignoble detail of it glorified by the constant presence of the aim for which she worked. The sufferings of the blind poor were always borne in her heart; the hope of alleviating them was the mainspring of all her actions. Letters, accounts, appeals, petitions, these are all the machinery with which she works. [Pg 236] She has learnt the proportion of result to be expected, and is seldom disappointed or disheartened by indifference or coldness. But encouragement and approval from those whom she honours is very helpful to her.

At the meeting held on 14th May 1868 Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Fawcett, and Professor Owen were amongst the principal speakers. Mr. Gladstone wrote as follows on the 8th:

11 Carlton House Terrace, S.W., *8th May 1868*.

My dear Madam—If Mr. Levy will kindly call on me at half-past one on the 14th, I will take the instructions and information from him with reference to the meeting. I cannot be quite sure of escape from my duties in the House (which meets on Wednesdays at twelve) but unless necessity keeps me away you may depend upon me.—I remain, very faithfully yours,

W. E. Gladstone.

Miss Gilbert.

Mr. Gladstone's speech at that meeting is best described by its effect upon Bessie herself. She writes as follows:

Palace, Chichester, *20th June 1868*.

My dear Kate—I have long been wishing to write to you, and, indeed, before the meeting a dictated letter was just begun to you, but there was no time to write it. After the meeting I was only too glad to do anything rather than write letters; any, therefore, which I could avoid I did, and also I wished to wait until I should have time and opportunity to write to you quietly myself. So now you see I have begun. Had it been at any other time I should have liked you to have been present at the meeting. To you I [Pg 237] can say without fear of reproof that some of Mr. Gladstone's words often come back upon me with a force and power that seems to kindle new life within me. I long to realise them, that I may more really feel them to be deserved. Professor Owen's was a beautiful speech. I think we shall clear about a hundred and twenty pounds.... From your ever loving sister,

Bessie.

CHAPTER XVIII [Pg 238]

BLIND CHILDREN OF THE POOR

> "Toutes les bonnes maximes sont dans le monde, on ne manque qu'à les appliquer."—Pascal, 391.

The education of blind children had occupied Bessie's thoughts for many years. So far back as 1863 she had been in communication with Mr. Lonsdale of the National Society, inquiring as to the State aid given to industrial schools, and the conditions under which schools for the blind could be certified so as to secure the benefit of the Acts. She had begun in her usual careful and systematic way by obtaining all the available statistics of existing schools; and now in view of a new and enlarged scheme for the general education of the poor, the time seemed to have arrived for action. She resolved to lay before those in authority the needs of the blind, their number, the

possibility of minimising their affliction, and by means of adequate education opening to them avenues of employment and independence. This work engrossed her time and thoughts in 1869 and the early months of 1870.

The co-operation of all societies working on behalf of the blind was necessary. It was essential to [Pg 239] submit to the ministers of the Crown such reliable evidence as to the number of blind children, and the urgency of their claims, as to make it impossible that they should be overlooked in any adequate system of education for the people.

Bessie sent out in the first place a Memorandum to all institutions for the blind in Great Britain, and to several influential and friendly members of Parliament. In this she set forth the step she proposed to take, asked for suggestions, conditions, additions, alterations, or proposed omissions in the petition, of which a copy was enclosed; for information as to presenting it, for support and assistance in the labour involved. She also asked the opinion of those to whom she wrote as to the best method of procedure, whether by petition to Parliament or by a memorial to the Lords of the Privy Council.

The replies which she received were very encouraging, and she found that general opinion was in favour of a Memorial. The document was prepared, and copies of it were submitted for approval, together with a circular letter. A private letter written by Bessie herself to the authorities, and to all influential friends, accompanied the printed documents. She sent these papers to the Oxford Street shop to be folded and addressed, and as an example of her minute care, the following episode is of interest.

Amongst her papers there is the copy of instructions sent to Oxford Street, after she had [Pg 240] inspected the circulars. She writes that the titles of institutions must be copied from the list she had previously furnished, that full titles must be used in the Memorials to institutions and to private individuals, and that abbreviations are only admissible on the envelopes. She gives instructions for writing out afresh all those memorials in which she had found the titles to be abbreviated.

These preliminaries occupied the early months of 1869. The Memorial was completed and sent up in July, and Lord de Grey promised to receive a Deputation in support of it. Bessie drew up a list of the names of those members of Parliament and influential members of her own and of kindred institutions who should be invited to form the Deputation. All arrangements being made, the Deputation met at the Westminster Palace Hotel, on the 10th of February 1870, and proceeded thence to the Education Office. Bessie, with other ladies, remained at the hotel, and subsequently received a report of the proceedings.

Earl de Grey and Ripon, Lord President of the Privy Council, with whom was Mr. Forster, received the Deputation. The representatives of twenty-nine institutions for the blind were present, and also Lord Houghton, Lord Manvers, Dean Hook, Sir James Hamilton, Admiral Ryder, Admiral Sotheby, General J. Graham, and the following members of Parliament: Messrs. D. M'Laren', Beresford Hope, H. Woods, W. J. Mitford, W. D. Murphy, F. Wheelhouse, Sir J. Anson, [Pg 241] and Lt.-Colonel Gray.

Lord Houghton introduced the Deputation, and said they desired to impress on Lord de Grey the advisability of giving all possible consideration to the Memorial presented by Miss Gilbert in the previous July, praying that a large number of Her Majesty's subjects who, at birth or afterwards, were deprived of sight, should have a fair share of protection and interest in any measure of general education which might be designed by the Government. It was most desirable that a class which was so helpless should receive the best consideration which could be given to their condition.

Dean Hook spoke in support of the object of the Deputation, and many of the members of Parliament and others who were present gave information as to the condition of the blind in different parts of the country.

Lord de Grey asked several questions as to the instruction which the blind received, and said he would carefully consider the representations made to him by so important and influential a Deputation. He said there were many points connected with institutions for the blind which placed them in a different category from the elementary schools which it was the object of the parliamentary grant to aid. Other questions were involved, and other institutions might put forth claims, as, for example, those for the deaf and dumb. It would be the duty of the Council to weigh most seriously the practicability of the Memorial, and he assured the Deputation that they had [Pg 242] the utmost sympathy of Mr. Forster and himself.

Upon this Lord Houghton thanked Lord de Grey for his courtesy, and the Deputation withdrew.

There was no immediate action as the result of the labour of a whole year, and probably no special action on behalf of a class, however afflicted, can be expected from the Government of a country. But Bessie's work was not unproductive. She tried to show, and succeeded in showing, that the blind need not be separated and isolated. Her own example and her own life demonstrated this, and pleaded more powerfully than words could do. If the time ever comes when blind children are duly provided for in our schools, and blind men and women in our workshops, it will be chiefly owing to the lifelong endeavours of Bessie Gilbert, and to her unfaltering and earnest devotion to a cause that she thought worthy of living for and, if need be, of dying for.

The condition of her own health had now become very serious. After the Memorial had been sent in and before the Deputation was received Bessie was so exhausted, and movement had become so difficult and painful, that Dr. Little was consulted on her behalf.

He pronounced the spine to be in fault, ordered a mechanical support, tonics, regular exercise, much rest in a recumbent position, and recommended Folkstone and sea air for some months. Bessie followed his directions most obediently. She was very brave in bearing the discomfort and [Pg 243] oftentimes the pain of the cumbersome "support." She persevered in walking for an hour daily according to his orders, dragging herself along with great difficulty, and getting so heated and overtired that the sister who accompanied her thought the walk did more harm than good. But she had been told to do it, and with the old submission to authority she did it. Her faithful attendant, Charlotte Gadney, was also with her at Folkstone from the end of July to October. She spent much time out of doors, on the Lees, in a bath chair. By the autumn she and those with her were convinced that, in spite of rest and care, she could not walk so well as she had done in the spring. There was much reading aloud, for she was compelled to allow herself more time than usual for relaxation.

The sisters especially remember her enjoyment of George MacDonald's *Robert Falconer*. In later times, if any one spoke of violins or violinists, she would say "Ah, do you remember *My Beautiful Lady*?" She heard parts of *Sir Gibbie* also; and said of *Janet*, "She realises most fully the truth that we are indeed all members one of another."

There were several pleasant days to stand out in after years as associated with the months spent at Folkstone. One of these was a day at Saltwood with Canon and Mrs. Erskine Knollys. Bessie drove there, and then the Canon himself wheeled her in an arm-chair to the American Garden. Even in late autumn this was very beautiful, and she enjoyed the description of it. An afternoon at [Pg 244] Cheriton with Mr. and Mrs. Knatchbull-Hugessen was also a great pleasure to her. At this time riding in a carriage was not only no fatigue, but she was able to enjoy long drives and all that they brought within her reach.

She returned to Chichester and London in somewhat better health, and resumed work on behalf of the Deputation.

Whilst she was at Folkstone her time was chiefly occupied in writing letters, and in reply to one of her petitions she heard from General Knollys that "it would afford the Prince of Wales much satisfaction to be placed on the list of Vice-Patrons of the Society in aid of the Blind;" and also "that H. R. H. had been pleased to direct him to enclose a cheque for twenty-five guineas in aid of the funds of the Society."

The following letter, which she received at this time from Pennsylvania, interested her:

To Miss Gilbert.

No. 1040 Penn Street,
Reading, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.,
13th September 1869.

I take the liberty of addressing you as one who has taken so philanthropic an interest in the blind. About the mid-winter of '62-3 I was travelling in Idaho Territory, and, owing to the severe effects of the "glare" produced by the sun's rays upon the snow, my sight received so severe a shock that I became temporarily blind. Afterwards I partially recovered my sight; but through the want of skill in my medical attendant and general improper treatment, the optic nerve became entirely and, as I fear, hopelessly [Pg 245] paralysed. I am now completely deprived of sight. Being thus, unfortunately, among those with whom you so greatly sympathise, I too, losing in my full-grown manhood, this perhaps most benign of the Great Father's gifts to poor humanity, feel a strong personal interest in my fellow-sufferers.

Understanding then that you have successfully established an "Association for the General Welfare of the Blind," in which each occupant is finally paid for his labour, in contradistinction to the usual plan of blind asylums, where there is no remuneration, except what education may afford, I purpose attempting a similar enterprise.

Will I therefore be taxing your kindness too much in asking you to forward to me to this place (as headed) the last report of your noble institution, and, if not contained therein, such instructions as will enable me to establish such institution in this country? And praying that the Good God may prosper you in your benevolent designs, I remain, with the greatest respect, your obt. servt.,

Theodore B. Vache.

A bright letter to the present writer shows Bessie in a playful mood. It was written after her return from Folkstone, and when health and spirits were much better than they had been in July. But locomotion had become very difficult; and it was painful to witness her laboured efforts to move and walk, and the difficulty she experienced in getting into or out of a cab or carriage.

The Palace, Chichester, *October 1869*.

My dear F.—I hope you will soon receive another polling paper. I suppose you did not

pay your subscription last year, and so paid for two years in one. If I were as clever as Mr. Lowe perhaps I should contrive to squeeze a little more out of our subscribers, and make them all the while feel that it was the most natural thing in the world that they should make double payments. This is the way to do business, is it not? Double payments, bringing about double receipts; very nice thing, you know, for the receivers; and as to the other side of the question, why, you know, we needn't look too closely into that. You see many persons are quite unable to look at more than one side of a question, so that limited views have their advantages. Does Mr. Lowe think so? [Pg 246]

Well, I should hope very much to see you and Miss B. on Thursday, and if you can't have me, please just write to 210 Oxford Street and say so, and then I will tell you where to come. I don't know yet where I shall be, but very probably at Miss R.'s at 117 Gloster Terrace. Love to Miss B. From yours affectionately,

E. Gilbert.

At this time Bessie was warmly interested in, and very hopeful as to the results of, Mr. Gladstone's efforts on behalf of Ireland, and referred frequently to the subject. In the following letter to her sister, Mrs. Elliot, there is a mention of orders for work. She was unable on account of the state of her health to write as much as usual, and therefore gave more time to knitting vests and muffetees, and making watch chains. The money received for them went to her "work-bag," and helped to relieve the necessities of deserving blind people:

The Palace, Chichester, *23d December 1869*.

My dear Kate—I send you my loving Christmas greetings with some of the home violets to sweeten them withal. It was very tantalising seeing you, or rather not seeing you, like that in London. I was so glad you thought I moved better. I do, and it is such a comfort I can't tell you. Still I find a difference directly if I get too much tired. I had hoped to have had some muffetees ready for you, but must do them afterwards, as I have had to knit two under-vests as an order, and have not yet finished the second. You cannot think how wonderfully well papa got through the ordination. Dr. Heurtley, who presided, was quite astonished. Only think of it, H. is coming on Monday for a week. I am so very glad of it. No time for more, your loving sister, [Pg 247]

Bessie Gilbert.

Bishop Gilbert's health had slowly but very steadily declined after the death of his wife in 1863. He was surrounded by the loving care of daughters devoted to him. But the loss of the friend and partner of his whole life was one from which he never recovered.

Bessie was the only member of the family not keenly alive to the failure of her father's health. Partly, no doubt, owing to her blindness, and partly to the effort that the Bishop always made to be bright and cheerful in the society of his "dear child Bessie," she did not perceive how seriously the burden of work and responsibility told upon him. The sisters at home were glad to spare her the anxiety which they felt, and she passed the Christmas time of 1869-70 without alarm and without that sense of impending loss which was weighing heavily upon others. When at last the blow came it fell suddenly, and fell heavily upon her, and was not softened by any sense of relief that the burden of his life was removed.

She had gone to London for the Deputation to Lord de Grey on the 10th of February 1870, and was still there when she was summoned to Chichester by telegram on Sunday the 20th. [Pg 248]

The sisters at home had been conscious for some days of a greater sense of uneasiness than usual, but there was nothing definite to take hold of. The Bishop came down as usual to the dining-room on Friday the 18th. On Saturday the 19th he kept his room for the early part of the day, and dined in the morning-room, that room adjoining his own in which Bessie used to spend so much time with her mother when first they went to Chichester. The absent sons and daughters were informed of this failure of strength on Saturday morning, but there were no alarming symptoms until the evening. Then and on the following morning, Sunday the 20th, telegrams summoned them to Chichester without delay. Bessie reached the palace about 10 P.M. on Sunday. Her father recognised her, but he was by that time too weak to speak. There were no last words, and he sank peacefully to his rest, dying at 5 A.M. on Monday, 21st February 1870.

Bessie had left home without even a suspicion that she might be recalled by a sudden summons, and now it seemed to her impossible that her father's death should precede her own, and that a loss that she had not dared even to think of, should have fallen upon her. She was stunned by the blow, but she bore it with characteristic and Christian courage, patience, and submission.

CHAPTER XIX [Pg 249]

IN TIME OF NEED

"The grave is heaven's golden gate,
And rich and poor around it wait."—Blake.

It was deemed undesirable for Bessie to remain at Chichester during the sad week that followed the death of her father. She went to her elder sister, Mary, the beloved Mary of her youth, now the mother of a family and head of a large household.

She wrote with her own hand a short note to one of the sisters at the palace, which reassured them as to her condition.

MILTON HILL, *28th March 1870*.

> MY DEAR SARAH—Thank you for all your letters. As you say, all the preparations must be painful, but I am very thankful to hear you and Nora are pretty well. You know without my telling you so, how very much you are in my thoughts. I hope to come back Tuesday or Wednesday, but Mary wants me to stay. Is it so, that we need not go till after Easter? I should like to know, because of what I may have to do about my own things. I think the appointment seems very good. As for me I am rather better to-day, having slept better two nights; but it is difficult to me as yet to do things, I have so little energy or [Pg 250] interest in anything. I will write again about my coming. Mary is really pretty well I think, the last day or two have been much pleasanter. Love to you all from your loving sister
>
> BESSIE.

She returned to the palace but did not stay long, and spent the greater part of the two months of preparation for leaving Chichester with her sister, Mrs. Woods. She went, however, to her old home in April, and left it finally with her brother and two unmarried sisters on the 21st of April 1870.

Loving words greeted them on the day of their departure. "Wherever we are," wrote one of the sisters, "we shall all know that we are thinking of each other."

The house in Queen Anne Street was let at this time; two sisters went to St. Leonards, but Bessie, with her faithful maid, took the much shorter and easier journey to Slinfold Rectory, near Horsham, the home of her sister Lucy, Mrs. Sutton.

She was sad and in very feeble health. All the future seemed dark and uncertain; she could make no plans, she could not look forward. At such a time the tender and loving care of Mr. and Mrs. Sutton were very precious to her. Insensibly, almost unconsciously, she was helped by the numerous children around her. Living in their midst she learnt to know them intimately, and they cheered her and amused her. The little boys had quaint ways and odd sayings, and they made her [Pg 251] forget herself and listen to them and wonder at them. The eldest girl, also a Lucy, had always been a pet, and now became very dear to her. From Slinfold she went to her sister Fanny, Mrs. Casson, at Torquay, and there found another kind brother-in-law, another large family of nephews and nieces, all ready to love and to wait upon the dear "Aunt Bessie." Four homes, in all of which she was a welcome and honoured guest, were thus open to her. Hitherto her time had been divided between London and Chichester. She had not allowed herself the luxury of visits to married sisters, and had only seen them and their children on the occasion of their visits to the palace or London. Now she began to be intimate with them, to be interested in the character and dispositions of the young people, and to enjoy the family life of which one and all helped to make her feel she was a member.

Meantime old and dear friends gathered around her and sought to comfort and encourage her. She preserved many letters which she prized and had found helpful. One of the first to speak was the Rev. H. Browne, who held the living of Pevensey. He was one of the Bishop's chaplains, the author of *Ordo Sæclorum*, a student of German theology, and, that which most attracted Bessie, he was a very good reader, and at Chichester had often read aloud Shakespere's plays to the *sisterhood*. Mr. Browne now was the first to strike a note to which she could respond:

> He rests from his labours and his works do follow him. Yours remain. It is needless for [Pg 252] me to say it, for you must all know it better than I, he counted it among his mercies that a work had been raised up for you, which when father and mother were gone would be to you the work and the blessing of your life. He evidently acknowledged this as God's calling to you, and as one of the thoughts in which he was greatly comforted in looking forward upon your future life.

Many other writers dwelt upon the unsparing labour and self-denying zeal of her father, and all recognised that she, the daughter so near his heart and always the object of his most tender love and watchful care, must be the one most deeply stricken by the pain of separation.

"To you, I imagine, the blow will come heaviest," wrote Mrs. Powell; and this sentiment is repeated in almost every letter.

A letter from the Secretary of her own Association, informing her of a vote of condolence passed by the Committee, begins, oddly enough, with

> "I have the *pleasure* to inform you,"

The blind workmen and workwomen did their best to express their regret at the death of "his lordship the Bishop," and a note is enclosed to her by the Rev. B. Hayley, written by a poor fellow in the Chichester Union, "just to show what the poor, the very poorest in the diocese, think of

your dear father."

The Rev. Dr. Swainson, Canon of Chichester, now Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, heard that Bessie's grief was heightened by the fact that she had spent the last fortnight before her father's death in London, engrossed by the work of the Deputation to Lord de Grey. His letter of sympathy and consolation may be as helpful to others as it was to her, and it is therefore inserted unabridged. [Pg 253]

SPRINGFIELD, NEWNHAM, CAMBRIDGE,
30th March 1870.

MY DEAR MISS GILBERT—I hope you will permit me to write you a few lines on the subject which I hear from many quarters has caused you much additional sorrow in regard to the death of our dear father in God. I mean your absence from Chichester during the last fortnight of his life. I really do not know that you should regret it: because it was really of God's appointment: you were engaged over your work for Him: your sisters over their work for Him: your dear father over his work for Him: each and all to the best of your powers, and why should you repine if it pleased God to remove him so quietly, so gently, so lovingly, without telling you beforehand that He was going thus to take him? May you not rejoice rather that his last days of consciousness were filled with thoughts that you were able to go on with that work in which he took so deep an interest, that some have thought that the best memorial of the love of the diocese to him would be an effort to strengthen your hands in that work? Of course I have often thought of the way in which my dearest father and dearest mother were taken away from me. I was absent from both: but I could not regret my absence. Mrs. Swainson was present at the removal of both her parents: but was not all this of God's appointment? When we ask Him to guide us day by day, may we not leave it to Him how He guides us? I am sure you will excuse me writing thus: the loss is indescribable, the centre of your earthly affections removed: on this I need not speak. But I feel sure that [Pg 254] you need not and you should not take any blame to yourself, because your work carried you away at the time when God, who so arranged it, was pleased to call your father home.—Believe me to be, my dear Miss Gilbert, ever yours very truly,

C. A. SWAINSON.

The Bishop of Rochester wrote, "His course, ever since he has been a bishop, has been so straightforward, so true, that he has won everybody's admiration and respect."

These and other tributes Bessie preserved and treasured. They helped her, and after a time they comforted her. In May we have one of the first letters written by her own hand, and speaking of her own feelings. It is addressed to a dear friend of the early Oxford days.

SLINFOLD RECTORY, HORSHAM, *1st May 1870*.

MY DEAR MRS. BURROWES—I was very grateful for your most kind affectionate letter, although I have not written to tell you so. For some time I really could hardly do anything. No loss in the world could be what this loss is to me. I am always wanting him, always missing him, still I am now better able to feel the blessedness for him, and also better able to think of his being spared suffering and infirmity, which would probably have increased; and yet in spite of all this I often cannot help feeling how my heart would rebound with life if I could know that he could be here again with us. But I long for the hope of being with him to grow stronger and stronger, so that it may be more and more a living power within me, and a real comfort. I am much better and stronger than I was; but cannot say much for my powers of walking. I cannot say that I take much interest in things yet, and am often oppressed with a feeling of the dreary [Pg 255] length of the days without seeing him or hearing anything about him; but as you so kindly say in your letter I shall hope, when able to do so, to work better than I have done if God will grant me help to strengthen me for this work. I did go up from hence to London for the day for our May Committee, and am very glad I did so, and made a beginning of taking up the work again. I have also done a little towards it in other ways, but just now my own nice maid is having a little holiday, and instead Mrs. Gadney is with me; she cannot write much, while I am not up to much business yet. Lucy, I am sure, would send you her love, but I am writing in my room. She would have written to you, but that I said I would do so myself, as I had intended for some time to write and thank you for your very affectionate letter.... Believe me, my dear Mrs. Burrowes, yours affectionately,

BESSIE GILBERT.

Miss Mackenzie, sister of Bishop Mackenzie, wrote:

I shall never forget his kind fatherliness and his beautiful courtesy and his loving thoughtfulness for every one. What a comfort it is to have all that to look back upon, but now whilst it is all so fresh your hearts must bleed. Dear Bessie, I am so thankful you have your work, your calling, your vocation to attend to, and in trying to alleviate the troubles of others, as you have always done, you will find the best relief to your own sorrow.

The letters from those she loved, whilst full of sympathy, also dwelt upon the call and claim of duty, in the fulfilment of which Bessie could alone find peace. She struggled bravely to respond, but the task before her was more difficult than any that she had yet accomplished; and there was [Pg 256] no renewal of physical power, even when she began to recover from the shock of her great sorrow. She paid many visits with her sisters, and returned to Queen Anne Street in August 1871. The change in her health was at that time painfully evident to her friends in London. She moved slowly, with difficulty, and was easily exhausted by slight fatigue. Still she resumed her work for the blind, as we find by a letter from the Dean of Westminster [Dean Stanley] written on the 22d of June 1871. He informs her that he will have much pleasure in acceding to her request to preach on behalf of the Association for the Blind on Sunday morning, 23d July, at Whitehall.

In reply to an appeal to Mr. Ruskin, made somewhat later, she received the following characteristic answer:

DENMARK HILL, S.E., *2d September 1871*.

> MADAM—I am obliged by your letter, and I deeply sympathise with all the objects of the Institution over which you preside. But one of my main principles of work is that every one must do their best and spend their all in their own work, and mine is with a much lower race of sufferers than you plead for—with those who "have eyes and see not."—I am, madam, your faithful servant,
>
> J. RUSKIN.
>
> The Lady President of the Association for
> Promoting the Welfare of the Blind.

In the autumn of 1871 Bessie joined a great gathering of the Gilbert family at Heversham for the celebration of the marriage of the rector, their youngest brother, the "Tom" of early days. She [Pg 257] returned to spend a few months only in Queen Anne Street, for she and two sisters had taken a house in Stanhope Place, Hyde Park, which was to be their future home.

The Queen Anne Street house was associated in many ways with Bessie's life and work in London, with the visits to her of the blind workpeople, with the early days of the Association, with the growth and development of the objects that had engrossed her life. Perhaps it was dearer to her than either the Oxford or the Chichester home. Certainly the wrench of separation was more painful than any previous one had been; and she had less hope and energy for the unknown future that was before her.

When the change of house had been accomplished she paid a visit to Mrs. Bowles, at Milton Hill, but this did little to restore her exhausted energy. During May and June 1872 there was a marked deterioration in her condition; she walked with greater difficulty, could not rise from a chair without assistance, and before the end of June had to be carried up and down stairs. She went to church for the last time early in June, driving to All Saints, Norfolk Square, and walking home.

Greatly alarmed at her condition, the family now turned in many directions for the help and advice of eminent medical men. Sir William Jenner took perhaps the most hopeful view. He thought it not impossible that the nerves of motion might regain power, and prescribed in the [Pg 258] meantime "the life of a cabbage." Dr. Little was never sanguine. Dr. Hughlings Jackson and Dr. Hawkesley held out but little hope of improvement. All agreed that she must rest, vegetate, lead the life of an invalid.

When the prospect of the future really dawned upon her, who can wonder that she found submission, acquiescence, exceedingly hard. "My whole being revolts at the very idea," she said one day.

On another occasion, with a part humorous, part pathetic expression, she exclaimed, "The change is great and," after a pause, "not pleasant." But in later years, after long and patient suffering, she was able to say, "Many have a heavier cross."

She announced by letter to the present writer the verdict of her physicians, adding the pathetic words, "Love me to the end."

CHAPTER XX [Pg 259]

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

> "By two wings a man is raised above the earth, namely by Simplicity and Purity."—THOMAS À KEMPIS.

There was still much within Bessie's power; and in tracing her work at this period we find little diminution in her correspondence. She received letters almost daily from Colonel Fyers on the business of the Institution. Levy wrote frequently and fully to her. She had given him great assistance in writing a book on *Blindness and the Blind*, and her own notes were made over to him.

A letter which she received in March 1872 is interesting as a description of preparations made by a blind man, Levy, carried out by a blind carpenter, Farrow, and related to the blind lady, Miss Gilbert. The occasion was the Thanksgiving for the Restoration of the Prince of Wales in February 1872, when the streets were gay with decorations and every window full of spectators. No house showed more bravely than the Institution for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind in Oxford Street; [Pg 260] subscribers and their friends, the Committee and their friends, filled every window, and the blind were keenly alive to all that was going on around them, and to the distinction of the Prince's plume and gas jets and the letters V.R., "each about four feet long in gold paper."

> "The decorations," writes Levy, "consisted of a Union Jack flag at the top of the house, and about half way up a crown and Prince's plume, made of gold paper, projecting from the wall, and the letters V.R., each about four feet long and two feet broad, made in thick rossets in silver paper on crimson ground, also projecting some distance from the wall, a wreath of flowers extended from the house to the post at the curb of the pavement, the lamp of which contained a transparency.
>
> "At night the illumination consisted of a Prince's plume in gas jets, which we bought for three pounds ten instead of hiring a similar one for ten pounds; the wood used for seats will be made into housemaids' boxes, etc. and the American cloth with which they were covered made available for dress baskets.
>
> "I think if you give five pounds it will be enough, as ten pounds will cover the whole expense. The goods and glass cases were taken out of the shop windows and three rows of seats, which gradually receded and increased in height, were formed. The same kind of seats were in the Committee room and the apartments above, out of which the windows were taken. A rail was put to keep people from going on to the balcony, as it was not safe; tables with wine and biscuits were placed, and Mr. Osmond had something more substantial in his rooms, with which Mr. Reid and others were well pleased."

On the 1st April 1872 the Rev. Frederick Denison Maurice died. Bessie had been but slightly [Pg 261] acquainted with him, but he was the brother of her old and dear friends, Mrs. Powell and Mrs. Julius Hare. She had been less startled by his written and spoken words than many of those in her own circle, and on his death she recognised that a great power had gone from amongst us, and sincerely mourned his loss.

She worked as usual at the arrangements for the annual meeting in 1872, and on the 22d June the Archbishop of York, who presided, wrote to tell her of its success.

22d June 1872.

> My dear Miss Gilbert—I attended the meeting and made my short speech. There never was a nicer meeting, the speakers were full of gratitude to you for all you had done. We could have had twice the number of speakers if we had wanted them.
>
> I hope, my dear Miss Gilbert, that God will strengthen you and enable you to carry on for many years your excellent Association.—Ever with much regard, yours truly,
>
> W. Ebor.

The Princess Edward of Saxe-Weimar, sister of the Duke of Richmond, conveyed a request from Bessie to the Duke and Duchess of Teck, whose interest she hoped to enlist for the annual meeting of 1872. They were abroad in the spring, but the Duke returned in time to preside at the June meeting. Bessie never dropped any of the links in her chain, and her early life at Chichester had given her many valuable allies.

In her long days of enforced inactivity she would recall to mind visits to Goodwood, to Arundel, interest expressed and shown in the objects she had at heart, and would redouble her efforts to [Pg 262] raise up friends for the blind.

Meantime there was a steady deterioration in her own physical condition.

The malady which had been making insidious progress for so long was degeneration of the spinal cord. The disease is one that generally owes its origin to accident or injury, but so far as could be ascertained Bessie had never met with either.

The physicians who attended her throughout the last years of her life inclined to the view that the poison in the blood left by scarlet fever was the cause not only of the condition of the throat, from which she suffered throughout her whole life (it will be remembered that she could only drink in sips), but also of this degeneration of the spinal cord.

Looking back, the members of her family recalled to mind that her powers of motion had not for many years been free and unimpeded. The significant entries in diary and letters, as to her moving and walking better, will not be forgotten. But the true cause of this had not been suspected, except by Dr. Little; for mischief to the spinal cord may be carried very far before there is any outward sign to manifest it. The power of motion and merely animal functions are affected by it; but intelligence remains alert and the brain power unaffected. The symptoms which accompany it are at first attributed to weakness, overwork, physical fatigue, any of which would be sufficient to account for them before the disease has reached the stage in which its true [Pg 263]

nature is unmistakably revealed. Mental trouble will often accelerate the progress of this malady, and occasion its more rapid development. This cause had also been at work.

The death of her father in 1870 was sudden and most unexpected to Bessie. The subsequent giving up of the two homes, at Chichester and in London, which long years had endeared to her; the necessity of planting herself in and learning to accommodate herself to a new house, with all the old familiar landmarks swept away—all these things were sources of suffering to one of her delicate nervous organisation; and doubtless they gave an added impetus to the progress of disease.

She met her troubles with great courage; she bore them with unmurmuring patience; but they produced their inevitable result, and flung her aside when the storm was over as a weed is cast up by an angry sea.

There were a few months during which various remedies were suggested and tried, but all unsuccessfully. The two sisters, who henceforward devoted their whole life to her, now took it in turns to sleep on a sofa in her room, so as to help her to move and turn in bed during the night. But when she realised that loss of power was not a phase but one of the conditions of her illness, she would not allow them to do this, saying she must have them "fresh for the daytime." A sick nurse was engaged, and, with Charlotte Gadney, ministered to her.

For a little time she was able occasionally to be taken into Hyde Park in an easy bath chair and always recumbent, but she could only bear the vibration of the movement for a very short distance. When she reached the park she would remain for some hours enjoying the air. [Pg 264]

Quiet and fresh air (two things that London cannot give) seemed more and more essential; and in August 1872 her sister Mary (Mrs. Bowles) wrote to propose that she should pay a long visit to Milton Hill, in Berkshire. Her doctors warmly approved of the proposal, if only she could bear the journey; and Mr. Bowles, to whom she was warmly attached, busied himself with preparations for her comfort.

After many anxious inquiries and careful arrangements, it was settled that, accompanied by her sister Sarah, she should undertake the journey in an invalid carriage, "by road and rail," being lifted in at her own door and lifted out at Milton Hill.

This was done; but the railway officials attached the carriage to the end of an express train; the oscillation and vibration were insupportable, and she reached Milton Hill almost unconscious from pain and fatigue. In the hope of lessening her suffering she had been held in the nurse's arms all the latter part of the railway journey; but even this could do little to diminish the agony she endured. She was carried to bed as soon as she reached Milton Hill, and after some days of complete rest she began to rally. It was then a great pleasure to her to note all that had been done by the "best and kindest brother-in-law that any one ever had." [Pg 265]

"Did you ever know such a brother-in-law!" she used to say.

Rooms for her and her servants had been arranged on the ground floor, with easy access to the beautiful garden and grounds. She arrived in August, and as soon as she had somewhat recovered, she was carried every day that the weather allowed, to a tent that had been put up in a pleasant part of the garden. She enjoyed being read aloud to; she had great delight in her nephews and nieces; but most of all she appreciated the opportunity of uninterrupted intercourse with her sister. They were again the "Mary and Bessie" of youthful days; not friends learning to know and love each other, but sisters with a wealth of buried recollections to be brought out to the light of day; interests, tastes, and affections in common; only a spark, an electric flash of memory, needed to illuminate the whole. No wonder that the time passed happily, and "life between four walls" dawned upon the sufferer, not without promise of alleviation.

For, in spite of the hours spent in the tent, it was practically already life within four walls. All thought of work or occupation outside her own home had to be abandoned; she must keep only that which she could guide and control from the sick-room. "I feel like a train which has been left upon a siding," she used to say.

Throughout the winter of 1872-73 she gave all the strength and time at her disposal to the interests and occupations of the blind. A fresh anxiety troubled her. Levy's health was failing seriously, and several members of the Committee wished him to take a long leave of absence. The work connected with his book, added to his ordinary duties as manager of the Association, had exhausted his strength. Bessie received letters from friends on the Committee telling her that Levy must have rest, and from Levy saying it was impossible for him to take it during her absence. The year 1873 was passing on with this, which seemed a heavy cloud, hanging over her, when suddenly a storm burst, which swept away all other anxiety in the one engrossing sorrow which it brought. [Pg 266]

After less than a week's illness her beloved sister Mary, Mrs. Bowles, died on 20th October at Milton Hill. Bessie was in the same house, but was too ill to be taken to her sister's room; and they never met after the day on which Mrs. Bowles was attacked by a fatal malady. Bessie's sick-nurse, and an old and faithful servant of the Gilbert family, who happened to be staying at Milton Hill, were unremitting in their attention to Mrs. Bowles; and from them Bessie heard of the variations in her condition almost from hour to hour. When all was over Bessie, in her weak condition, was crushed and exhausted. She seemed unable to endure the shock of this sudden blow, and at first could only lie and moan, "Oh, why was she taken and I left?"

Archdeacon Atkinson, a near neighbour and old friend of her sister's, did his best to soothe and comfort her. The grief of Mr. Bowles and the children roused her. She saw how much they needed help, and before long she was the old brave Bessie, full of thought for the sorrow of others, and engrossed by her endeavours to console and comfort them. [Pg 267]

Before the death of Mrs. Bowles it had been arranged that Bessie should spend the winter at Torquay. This plan was adhered to; and in November 1873, travelling in one of the railway companies invalid carriages, she bore the journey fairly well, and reached Torquay without the terrible suffering caused by her previous journey.

She had bright and sunny rooms in Sulyarde Terrace, and on fine days she was still able to spend a few hours out of doors, reclining in an invalid chair; sometimes also she could sit up in her chair for an hour or two, and at this time, when her food was duly prepared, she was still able to feed herself. Her sister Lucy, Mrs. Casson, with husband and many children, resided at Torquay; and she found here, also, a kind brother-in-law, unremitting in his attentions, and numerous young nephews and nieces, whom she knew and loved. In January 1874 Levy died. Father, mother, and sister; house and home and health had been taken from Bessie; and now the faithful servant and friend of her whole life followed. She had put great constraint upon herself at the time of her sister's illness and death, but she was powerless against this blow. Deep depression [Pg 268] settled down upon her, which took the form of constant self-reproach. She, the most unselfish and considerate of women, was given over, as it were, to an avenging spirit, which upbraided her with faults never committed, and exacted expiation for imaginary crimes of selfishness and self-seeking. Such dark passages may be borne in mind by other sufferers, tortured with self-questionings and doubt.

The first thing to rouse her was the desire to say some words to the blind men and women on whose behalf Mr. Levy had worked for so many years. As soon as she had somewhat recovered, she wrote perhaps the most touching record we have of her work, her hope, her sorrow, and her submission.

2 Sulyarde Terrace, Torquay, *10th February 1874*.

My dear Friends—I feel that both you and I have had a very great loss indeed, and my heart yearns to say to you that you do not know how grieved I am for you; you know full well what the loss is to yourselves, but you can hardly tell what it is to me; you cannot know how he who is now taken and I have worked together with the self-same end of helping you, and now I am left, deprived of all the help that your dear and true friend gave me, and it is impossible for me to tell you how deeply I feel the loss.

Mr. Levy never spared himself when your interest was at stake, and now that he is taken from us, and I am left alone, I feel that I must ask you all to give me all the help in your power, and you can help me by giving me your confidence, by showing me that you feel I will do the best I can for you, and, above all, by trying, with God's help, to [Pg 269] become the men and women He would have you to be. Nothing gives me greater joy than for the Association to be the means of helping you, by God's blessing, to lead really Christian lives. This means that you should have in your hearts the love of God and the love of your neighbour, which love will prevent you hurting anybody by word or deed, make you true and just in all your dealings, and temperate and sober in your living. My earnest desire is that the Association should help you to learn and labour truly to get your own living; but you know that this must be a work of time. If I could prevent it there should not be one blind person begging, but all should have the blessing of earning their living; but, as I say, it will take a long time to bring this to pass. Had I been asked I should have said, "You would do better without me than without him who is taken from us; but God does not ask us, and does what He sees and knows to be best, and He has taken Mr. Levy to his rest and reward, and has left me."

If it is His will that I should have strength, I will, with His help and with the aid of the friends engaged in the work, do the best I can. Many of you I have never seen; I wish this were not so, but I cannot help it; but to you all I earnestly say: please think of me as of one who has your truest interest at heart, who is, like yourselves, without sight, and who tries, to the best of her power, to understand what it is to be poor as well as blind, and who longs for your help and co-operation in the work of endeavouring to help you to help yourselves. You will help me, will you not?—Believe me, my dear friends, to be most sincerely yours,

Elizabeth Gilbert.

P.S.—I have signed my name with the pen which Mr. Levy invented for us. You and I must pray that God will help me to do what will be best for you. I know God will not [Pg 270] leave us, for He loveth the blind, as He doth all human beings, more than we can possibly understand or know, so that we must try and trust in Him fully in all our trials. May God bless you all!

With advancing spring the cloud of depression was dispelled. She became more cheerful, began to talk of a return to London, and to look forward to her life there. The return journey was undertaken in the second week in June. It was safely accomplished, though at the cost of very great weariness and exhaustion. When she reached Stanhope Place and had been carried to her room, she said, "No more journeys for me." This was indeed her last journey, for though in 1877

she had such a longing for fresh country air that there was a consultation, and her physicians sanctioned removal, yet when the time came her heart failed, and she remained at home.

On her return from Torquay she went into Hyde Park about half a dozen times in an invalid chair, but after October 1874 she left the house no more. She was, however, still able for a time to be dressed, to sit up for an hour or two, and to be carried up and down stairs. As the winter advanced a sitting-room was arranged on the same floor as her bedroom, and then she came downstairs daily no more. In spite of all precautions against cold she had a severe attack of bronchitis in 1875, and was attended by Dr. Hawkesley, whom she knew and liked as a fellow-worker on the Council of the Normal College for the Blind. He was struck by the manner in which [Pg 271] she threw off the attack. "She is doing so gallantly," he said. But she did not regain the strength lost during this illness, and resumed life after every access of sorrow and suffering on a lower level, as it were, and with diminished vital powers. After the spring of 1875 she was not dressed again, and never sat up. Recumbent on one of Alderman's couches, in a pretty dressing-gown, with soft warm shawls, and lace, and bright colour, such as she loved, about her, she spent her good days. On the bad ones she was not lifted from her bed.

She had indeed become like a train that is left upon a siding, and all her busy life was hushed and silent.

When the summer came, and her rooms were to be repapered and painted, she was carried downstairs. The drawing-rooms were specially prepared as her bed and sitting-rooms, and she would stay in these her "country quarters" for six weeks or two months. After that she was taken upstairs in the same way for the autumn, winter, and spring. This removal required great care and very skilful management, as the couch on which she reclined had to be lifted over the bannisters, and any jerk or unexpected movement caused both pain and apprehension.

A fresh sorrow awaited her. In 1876 Charlotte Gadney, her faithful and affectionate attendant, had a paralytic seizure, and it was necessary for the sake both of mistress and maid that they should part. Bessie could not at first acquiesce in separation; she reproached herself as the cause [Pg 272] of Charlotte's illness, and could not rest until she was informed of all the minutest details connected with her.

But when the parting was over Bessie's anxiety gradually diminished, and Charlotte's recovery was more rapid than had been expected. She was never well enough to resume attendance upon her beloved mistress, but from time to time she came on a short visit, much to her own and Bessie's delight.

Meanwhile the Association struggled on under the care of successive managers. Levy's illness and frequent absence had caused confusion, irregularity, and loss, which his successors were not slow to take advantage of. They found it easy to persevere in defects occasioned by his failing health and want of sight; but the untiring devotion to the cause of the blind, and unwearied efforts on their behalf, which had made these defects of comparatively small importance, were lost to the Association for ever.

Bessie knew and lamented the shortcomings, but she could no longer supplement them. Successive years diminished her powers of work. Sleeplessness, pain, exhaustion, wore her out; and sometimes for days together she could not bear even an allusion to the Association and its work. Occasional fits of deafness, to which she had always been liable, depressed her more than they had ever previously done. These attacks recurred several times, and lasted for many weeks at a time. It was difficult for her to shake off the gloom that accompanied them, and the sense of [Pg 273] isolation and solitude. Her hands and arms were too feeble to allow her to read or work for more than a few moments, so that she was not only cut off from the society of those she loved, but unable to occupy herself in any way.

From time to time she regained a little strength, and then it was touching to see how she at once resumed her labours. At the beginning of her illness she took great interest in the inauguration of the Normal College for the Blind. Dr. Campbell had several long conversations with her in 1871, before she left Queen Anne Street, and at his request she had joined the Committee of the College and even attended some of its meetings. She rejoiced in the success that now attended Dr. Campbell's efforts; but she was convinced that a musical career was, in most cases, impossible for the blind. "Many adult persons lose their sight, but the loss does not entail a love of music," she would say. She saw, and had always seen, that handicrafts were the only possible occupation for the majority, especially amongst the poor and uneducated; and one of her chief objects was to increase the number of trades which the blind could follow. She used to say that, with a little ingenuity and contrivance, many additional trades might be thrown open to them. With this end in view she continued to make herself acquainted with the details of different occupations, and wished that experiments "on a very small scale" should be carried out. But there were too many difficulties in the way. Want of health, want of money, want of space for [Pg 274] workrooms, met her at every turn. Still, whenever there was a bit of work that she could do, she did it. In November 1874 a special Committee had been appointed by the Charity Organisation Society to consider "what more can be done to promote the welfare of the blind, especially in relation to their industrial training." The Earl of Lichfield presided, and the subjects to be considered were as follows:

1. What is being done industrially for the blind, and in what ways?

   (*a*) For learners.

(*b*) For journeymen.

2. What more can be done through existing agencies?

(*a*) By improvements in system of working.

(*b*) By co-operation between the agencies.

(*c*) By fresh retail shops.

3. May not a large proportion of the able-bodied blind be rendered thoroughly self-supporting?

4. Should the education and training of the blind be to any extent provided for from the rates or other State sources, and, if so, to what extent?

The first paper read on the welfare of the blind had been forwarded by Bessie, with an expression of deep regret "That the state of her health prevented her from attending the meeting." She wrote as follows:

In endeavours to promote the welfare of the blind, it is essential that some important facts should be borne in mind, viz.—

1st. That many blind persons, although instructed in some trade, are either reduced to begging or are driven to the workhouse, not through their own fault, but simply for the want of any regular employment in their trade. [Pg 275]

2d. That children constitute but a small proportion of the blind, as about nine-tenths of the thirty thousand blind in the United Kingdom become so above the age of twenty-one.

3d. That about half the sightless population live in rural districts.

4th. That the health of persons without sight is, as a general rule, below that of others.

5th. That this cause operates, in addition to loss of sight, to bring about the slow rate at which the blind work as compared with the sighted.

6th. That social ties are even more essential to the blind than to others.

Objects to be Aimed at.

1st. To foster self-reliance, and to enable the blind to help themselves.

2d. To eradicate the habit of suspicion by promoting friendly intercourse between the blind and the sighted.

3d. To develop the faculties of the blind in every direction.

4th. To improve their physical condition.

5th. In industrial training to endeavour to lessen, as far as possible, the difference in speed in the work between the work of the blind and that of the sighted, while making it the first object to secure good and efficient work.

6th. To do everything to reduce the dependence of the blind as far as possible, while endeavouring, by Christian instruction, to enable them to accept the unavoidable dependence of their condition in a spirit of humility and thankfulness which will soften and sweeten it to them, and will turn this dependence into one of their greatest blessings, as it will be the means of uniting them more closely to their fellow-creatures.

Means towards these Ends. [Pg 276]

1st. Endeavour to enable the blind to earn their own living, and with this view seek out and send children to existing blind schools.

2d. Promote the establishment of institutions for providing the blind on leaving the schools with regular employment, and for teaching trades to persons ineligible for admission to the schools, which is the case, as a rule, with those above twenty-one years of age.

3d. When practicable, supply blind persons with regular employment at their own homes, and encourage them to do anything they can on their own account independently of any institution.

4th. Try to introduce trades hitherto not carried on by the blind, giving the precedence to such as can be practised without sighted aid.

5th. Cultivate habits of method and precision in the blind, which will all tend to improve the rate at which they work.

6th. Make the training of efficient blind teachers a special object.

7th. Encourage residence in the country rather than in towns by giving employment at home, thus cementing family ties and promoting health.

8th. Form lending libraries of embossed books in all the various systems in use, and establish classes for religious and other instruction.

OBSERVATIONS.

Many other means besides those here mentioned might be suggested, but the aim of this paper has been to state some of the chief facts bearing on the subject, and to mention some of the most obvious means for improving the condition of the blind.

Regular employment at their own homes, when practicable, is of great service to the blind, and especially as by this means numbers in the country can be reached. It might also be possible to some extent to carry out what might be called Rural Home Industrial Teaching, of course regulating the trades taught according to local circumstances. [Pg 277]

The importance of opening new trades to the blind can hardly be exaggerated, and friends of the blind must welcome every successful effort in this direction. Next to the benefit of real Christian principles must be placed that of enabling the sightless to earn their own living; but where this is impossible pensions should be given.

Lastly. Let the blind themselves be consulted, and have as much voice as possible in the measures adopted for their welfare; and this is said not only with a view to the educated, but especially to the more intelligent blind in humbler positions, since, as is well known, the mass of those without sight will be found among the poorer classes. The more this is done the more will the blind feel that the sighted desire to carry out such measures as shall act like so many levers with which to raise them from their present depressed condition, and will then heartily second the efforts made, and thankfully grasp the friendly hands held out to them; but which they will only accept reluctantly and coldly, not having their own heart in the work, unless convinced that the main object in view is to enable them, by their own efforts, to stand as far as possible on an equality with their fellow-creatures.

The suggestions made in this little paper had all been thought out upon a bed of pain, and with sorrows of her own that might well have engrossed her attention. But Bessie never, to the end of her life, lost an opportunity of working and speaking on behalf of those to whom that life had been devoted.

Two events in the history of the Association which deeply interested her were the removal from Oxford Street to more commodious premises in Berners Street, and the Special Bequest of £10,000 by Mr. Gardner. She was gratified to learn that the Special Bequest was no bar to the participation of the Association in the general advantages provided by Mr. Gardner for the blind. [Pg 278]

CHAPTER XXI [Pg 279]

LIFE IN THE SICK-ROOM

"They also serve who only stand and wait."—MILTON.

During the last few years of life Bessie Gilbert never left her invalid couch and bed. In addition to blindness she was liable to distressing attacks of deafness, to sleeplessness, agonising pain, and weary exhaustion. Her throat was often affected, swallowing was difficult. She had lost power in the upper limbs, could only use her hands for a few seconds to read the raised type for the blind, or to do a few stitches of chain work for those she loved; even that became impossible before the end. The record of work for the Institution dwindles down during these years, but she lived for it as completely as she had ever done. She would deny herself the one pleasure that remained—a visit from some one she loved, because it would exhaust her and render her incapable of the little she could now do.

For three or four years she received almost daily business letters from Colonel Fyers, and dictated replies to them when her health allowed, but this uncertain interposition was of little value, and by degrees matters of business ceased to be submitted to her. When any question on which she entertained a strong opinion was brought forward, she would occasionally explain her view in a letter to the Committee, but these letters also diminished in number. Her interest in individuals never decreased; the blind workpeople and their affairs occupied her to the very last. [Pg 280]

In 1878 she heard that one of the workmen was about to marry a workwoman, since dead, who was blind, deformed, and very much out of health. She could not approve of such a marriage, and did her utmost to prevent it. She wrote to express her views, and sent a favourite sick-nurse to the Institution to emphasise them. The result was that she received the following letter, informing her that the engagement was at end:

INSTITUTION OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE
WELFARE OF THE BLIND.

28 BERNERS STREET, LONDON, W., *3d August 1878.*

MADAM—I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your very kind letter of the 2d inst., and to

express to you how deeply I feel the very great interest you on all occasions have shown towards me, and especially now. I know you must have my welfare at heart, otherwise you would not have favoured me with this communication, for which I sincerely thank you. I, as well as L. W., have, through the means of your kind letter, seen the matter of our proposed marriage from a different point of view, and have therefore decided to act in harmony with your wishes, which no doubt are for our best. [Pg 281]

I regret very much that any uneasiness should have been caused you by this affair, and trust that in future nothing on my part will occur to cause it again.—I am, madam, your obedient servant,

C. C.

Miss Elizabeth Gilbert.

Bessie warmly approved of marriage for the blind, and was sometimes charged with promoting it injudiciously. In this case she would have been very glad if C. could have found a healthy, capable wife, who would have made him happy. She used to say that blindness was the strongest possible bond of sympathy between husband and wife; and as she did not for herself witness the untidiness and discomfort in the homes where man and wife are both blind, and the almost unavoidable neglect of young children, she could not share the objection of many members of the Committee to marriage between the workpeople.

In 1879 her widowed sister, the Hon. Mrs. Elliot, was married to Mr. Childers. Mr. Childers had not previously known Bessie personally, but he saw her several times afterwards, and was greatly impressed by her marvellous patience and resignation.

In one of her early interviews with him she had asked for information as to the Blind and Deaf Mute Education Bill, which Mr. Wheelhouse, member for Leeds, Mr. Mellor, and others, had introduced into the House of Commons, but had been unsuccessful in passing. She wished to see [Pg 282] any papers Mr. Wheelhouse could send, and was much interested in his efforts and in the correspondence which followed her request.

Many letters received at this time have been preserved, and they show the influence which, from her bed of pain, she exercised on all around her.

The following is from her old friend, Mr. Coxe, librarian of the Bodleian. It is his last letter to her; he died in the following July:

NORTHGATE, OXFORD, *S. Stephen's Day, 1880*.

MY VERY DEAR BESSIE—How much I thank you for thinking of me on my sick-bed, and sending me such a welcome Christmas gift to perfume my existence. My wife immediately seized upon one (as owing, or due, to her) and carried off the rest to some secret store-room, unknown to me as yet, in my new house. I have been now nearly three months in my bed and bedroom; how dare I speak of it to you in a spirit other than of deep thankfulness that I have been allowed to brave all weathers, and to work unscathed even to my 70th year. Dear Fan ("old Fan!" it was such a pleasure seeing her!) will have told you what nice quarters we have fallen on wherein to end our days. It was one of the two houses I used in days gone by to covet; the other was old Mr. Parker's, now young Fred Morrell's. Well, dear Bessie, this season has had its message of peace too for you. I am sure that you have received and welcomed it; that simple message in these sad days of rebuke and blasphemy becomes more and more precious. I am not likely to be again a traveller, tho' I should like to see Hilgrove in his new home, only fifteen miles away, so that I am not likely to see you again in this life. May it be granted that we may enjoy a happy reunion in that which shall be. Best love to the "Duchess" and Nora, with much to yourself from yours, dearest Bessie, ever [Pg 283] affectionately,

H. O. COXE.

The year 1881 brought to Bessie a long fit of depression, due mainly to an attack of deafness; but she had also much anxiety with regard to the Association. She heard of custom diminishing, a manager dismissed for dishonesty, heavy losses upon Government contracts undertaken in order to give work to the blind throughout the winter, diminished income and subscriptions, and increased demands for aid. In the old days she would have stirred up her friends, made appeals through the press, organised a public meeting, and surmounted all difficulties.

The utmost she could now do was to draw up a short circular, asking all those interested in her work to become Associates, and to subscribe a sum of not less than one shilling a year. Such Associates were to pledge themselves to promote the sale of goods made by the blind. She submitted her scheme and circular to the Committee, and was advised to make the minimum subscription half a crown. In this form it was issued, but, lacking the energy with which she would in former time have launched it, there was no appreciable result.

On the 2d of May 1882 a concert in aid of the Association was held, by the kindness of the Duke of Westminster, at Grosvenor House. Bessie did what she could, but by far the greater part of the work connected with it fell upon her sisters. The Duke wrote directly it was over to congratulate her upon a very successful result; and Bessie was greatly cheered to learn that when all [Pg 284]

incidental expenses were paid, there would remain the sum of £326: 17: 6.

The Committee endeavoured as far as possible to save her the distress of knowing the difficulties in which they were involved. Sir E. Sotheby was untiring in his zealous endeavours to promote the interests of the Association, and to shield Bessie from anxiety. Colonel Fyers, though in failing health, never lost sight of the object he had so long worked for. But all efforts were unavailing. Every fact and figure connected with the undertaking had been impressed upon an inexorable memory. Nothing now escaped her. She detected every financial error, and every departure from her original aims and objects. She saw what grave difficulty lay in the fact that since the death of Levy no manager had been appointed who had any special interest in the blind. She feared that the work of her whole life would be ignored; and that there would be no higher aim than to keep open a shop and carry on a trade. Oppressed by this fear, she made one last appeal, one final effort, on behalf of those whom she had loved and served for so long.

The address to the Committee, bearing date Whit Monday 1882, may be looked upon as her last will and testament. Internal evidence shows that it was in that light she herself looked upon it, and that she endeavoured to sum up in one short statement, which recapitulates the most important points in the early rules of the Association, the result of a lifetime of work, thought, experience, and devotion. [Pg 285]

THE ASSOCIATION FOR PROMOTING THE GENERAL WELFARE OF THE BLIND

WHITMONDAY, *29th May 1882.*

This title should always be borne in mind by those managing the Association, as it clearly indicates the scope of the undertaking. Trade is a most necessary and essential part of the work; and the more sure the foundation upon which the trade is carried on the better will be the security for its prosperity; but trade is by no means the most important part of the undertaking, and indeed it is my earnest desire that the Association should never under any circumstances become a mere trading institution. This would be a great falling off from the original scope and object with which this Association was founded. I wish those who may be at any time entrusted with the management of the Association always to remember that it is open to them to do everything they can, that is likely to promote the welfare of the blind. The particular directions in which this may be done will often be clearly indicated by the circumstances of the Association, and by opportunities which may arise at any given time. Still, certain fixed principles should always be kept in view, as laid down in our rule No. 2, "That the immediate objects of this Association shall be to afford employment to those blind persons who, for want of work, have been compelled to solicit alms, or who may be likely to be tempted to do so. To cause those unacquainted with a trade to be instructed in some industrial art, and to introduce trades hitherto unpractised by the blind. Also, to support a Circulating Library consisting of books in various systems of relief print, to the advantages of which the indigent blind shall be admitted free of charge, and others upon payment of the subscription required by the Committee. To enable blind musicians to show that the loss of sight does not prevent their being efficient organists and scientific musicians. To collect and disseminate information relative to the physical, mental, moral, and religious conditions of the blind; and to promote among individuals and institutions seeking to ameliorate the condition of the blind, a friendly interchange of information calculated to advance the common cause." [Pg 286]

Rule 16 also provides, "That with a view to increase the funds and extend the utility of the Association, the Committee shall have power to receive into connection with the Association other kindred institutions, and shall seek to form auxiliaries in various parts of the kingdom."

The Association will probably never be called upon to undertake anything with regard to music, as the field is now so well and fully occupied by the Royal Normal College; but the rule is quoted exactly as it stands in order to show the breadth of the original design, which design should be kept steadily in view. It is most desirable that among those who may direct the Association there should always be some persons who should make it their special object to study the condition of the blind, and in this study the knowledge of the following facts will be found of service, viz.—

1st. That many blind persons after leaving the schools are, although instructed in some trade, reduced to begging or driven to the workhouse, not through their own fault, but simply for the want of any regular employment in their trade.

2d. That children constitute but a small proportion of the blind; as about nine-tenths of the 30,000 blind in the United Kingdom become so above the age of twenty-one, and are then ineligible for admission to most blind schools.

3d. That about half the sightless population live in rural districts. [Pg 287]

The address ends here abruptly. Probably the writer's strength was exhausted with the effort to think and to dictate.

During 1882, 1883, 1884 Bessie carried on at long intervals a correspondence with Mr. Wood,

Superintendent of the School for the Blind, Sheffield. She learns that his pupils are taught to read embossed type on Braille's system, which her own experience had shown to be unsuited to those who have hard manual labour to perform. In every letter she requests information on this point: "Can the workpeople still read Braille's type?" she asks. The opening up of fresh trades, the establishment of workshops for the benefit of those who leave the school, are questions which she suggests for the serious consideration of the Sheffield Committee, and she asks Mr. Wood for information, at any time he can send it, as to work in any way connected with the blind.

About this time Bessie heard that John Bright had spoken at the Normal College, Norwood, and appealed to him on behalf of Berners Street. He replied:

132 Piccadilly, *26th July 1883.*

> Dear Madam—I thank you for your letter and for the volume you have sent me. My engagements are so many and so constantly pressing that I cannot hope to do much for the cause you have at heart. I hope, however, the cause is making progress, and it is not unlikely that some general inquiry into the condition of the blind will be made before long, and that good may come from it. My presence and speech at Norwood were accidental. I must leave more practical work to others.—I am, very truly yours, [Pg 288]
>
> John Bright.
>
> Miss Gilbert, 5 Stanhope Place, Hyde Park, W.

The volume sent was most probably Levy's *Blindness and the Blind*.

During 1883 Bessie received frequent letters from the Chairman of her Committee, Sir E. Sotheby, and the Hon. Secretary, Captain Hume Nicholl. They referred to her the different appeals from blind men, women, and boys which reached them; these she carefully investigated and reported upon. During her illness, as throughout her whole life, the utmost help and best advice she could give were always at the disposal of the blind. Farrow, who had worked twenty-eight years at the Institution, loses no opportunity of sending her cheering news. He writes at this time with respect to the brushmakers:

> During the last six months orders have poured in from all quarters, and I can say that all the years I have been connected with the Institution we have not done so much before in the same time. Brushes manufactured indoors in 1882 amounted to £3200. The present year, from the 1st January to the 1st of June, amounted to £1471: 6: 4 in twenty-two weeks.

There was an Industrial Exhibition in the Agricultural Hall, Islington, in 1883, and the blind stall from Berners Street was always crowded. Farrow writes:

> If the manager of the Agricultural Hall had given us a better position in the body of the hall no doubt we should have done more than we did. The sales amounted to about £110. The donation boxes yielded £15. The cost of the undertaking about £29. The profits of the sale and [contents of] boxes included came to £50, leaving a balance of £21. I superintended the arrangements of the benches as two years ago. The workpeople who represented the different branches are as follows.... I visited the hall several times for the purpose of examining the machinery, to see if there was anything to be learnt for the benefit of the Association.... This year we have the whole of the work of the L. S. W. Railway, and we have also obtained that of St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington. For the future I will not send in any tender unless I see the samples first, as it was often done before without my seeing them. [Pg 289]

This blind man who "examined the machinery" and must "see the samples" is one after Bessie's own heart, and there was always a merry laugh of approval when she spoke of his letters.

A conference was held at York in 1883 on the condition of the blind. It was followed in 1884 by a meeting at Sheffield on the same subject, and presided over by Lord Wharncliffe.

Bessie had, at Lord Wharncliffe's request, furnished suggestions and information. He writes as follows:

Wortley Hall, Sheffield, *12th January 1884*.

> Madam—I have taken the liberty of sending to you a copy of the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* containing the report of our meeting on Thursday last, and have to express to you my warm thanks for the kindness with which you answered my letter, and for the valuable suggestions contained in your reply. I can only hope that you will be interested with the report of our proceedings, and will approve of what was then said.—I remain, yrs. faithfully, [Pg 290]
>
> Wharncliffe.
>
> Miss Gilbert.

The paper of suggestions referred to, travels over much of the ground familiar to Bessie for so many years, and never, as she thought, adequately explored by those who were working for the blind.

She writes to Lord Wharncliffe:

"It is almost impossible for a blind man, singlehanded, to cope with all the difficulties with which he has to contend, and the result has often been begging or the workhouse. Happily there are many more industrial institutions than there were."

One can imagine with what a thrill of satisfaction she would write this, as she remembered the little cellar in Holborn and the humble origin of all her subsequent work. She continues:

> It would be most desirable that the ordinary schools and such institutions should play into one another's hands, so as to shorten as far as possible the interval between the pupils leaving [school] and their being employed. Sometimes the blind might be taught some special branch of a trade, and might perhaps even be employed by masters among their sighted workpeople. This would answer the double purpose of lightening the work of the Institution, and also of drawing attention to the blind and to what they are able to do, which is a very important point.
>
> As industrial institutions must depend to a very great extent upon custom for their support, it is well to bear in mind that some persons without sight can both help themselves and the institution employing them by acting as travellers. People are often very much interested by this means, and look forward to the regular recurring calls of [Pg 291] the blind travellers. Besides which it saves people trouble in dealing with an institution if they happen to live at some distance.
>
> It is almost needless to say that all the capabilities of the blind should be brought out as much as possible, as the more this is done and the more their highest interests are cared for, the more will their whole condition be elevated and improved. The problem of enabling the blind to earn their own living is by no means an easy one, and is well worthy of the attention of loving hearts and wise intellects for its solution.

The whole tone of these wise and thoughtful remarks shows that Bessie had never lost touch with her work. Her interest is as fresh, her expectation as vigorous as ever. She throws out a new suggestion—that of the employment of the blind in special branches of a trade—which may even yet bear fruit. She pleads for "the elevation of the whole condition of the blind," in contradistinction to the administration of charitable doles to degrade them. She had a wide experience of both systems, and could now speak with authority. The letter indeed marks a recrudescence, and has a ring of hope about it. It is not the utterance of one who speaks on the other side of a closed door. You feel that the door is open and she may enter and resume work. There was, in fact, throughout 1884 an indefinable improvement and amelioration in her condition which led her, not perhaps to hope, but to entertain a thought of the possibility of such a measure of recovery as might once more enable her to take an active share in the work of the [Pg 292] Institution. It is not likely that this expectation was entertained either by her doctors or nurses; but Bessie had a distinct feeling that a change, an improvement, was before her. "Would it not be wonderful," she said to the present writer in the early summer of 1884, "if I should recover?" And in reply to a question suggested by this remark, she added, "I feel as if there would be a change."

CHAPTER XXII [Pg 293]

TWILIGHT

> "The noble mansion is most distinguished by the beautiful images it retains of beings passed away; and so is the noble mind."
>
> WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

Fifteen years of suffering had left Bessie Gilbert unchanged as to the aims and work of her life. Long lonely hours of thought had shown her the need that the blind have of help and sympathy, the impossibility of independence and self-supporting work for them unless through the active charity of individuals and the co-operation of the State.

And it was the "General Welfare of the Blind" that engrossed her, and not merely their trades. She knew, no one better, how much need they have of resources from within, the pleasures of memory, the courage given by hope and aspiration. Her long years of illness enlarged her ideas of what could be done and ought to be done for them. She contrasted her own condition with that of the poor and untaught, and forgave them all their faults when she remembered their sad state.

Bessie had been carefully prepared for the inevitable solitude of her lot. Her mind was richly [Pg 294] stored and her memory so carefully trained, that it seemed to allow no escape of anything that interested her. During the long weary days and nights of illness, when deafness isolated her even more than blindness, she would go over the whole story of a book read to her years before. She would recall the symphonies and sonatas she had listened to in early days, and find exceeding great enjoyment in the memory of her music. Indeed, towards the end she had but little pleasure in music heard through the outward ear, for her nerves were not able to endure the shock of a sudden or unexpected outburst of sound. But the music which she could call from out the

chambers of memory was soft and tender, and its most impassioned passages gave her no pain. The soul of the music spoke to her soul, and silence brought to her the rapture of spiritual communion.

In early youth she had been accustomed, in the daily family prayers, to read in turn her verse of the Lessons and the Psalms. In later years she always read them to herself or had them read aloud to her. During her illness she scarcely ever failed to hear them; and the evening Psalms ended her day. She knew very many of the Psalms by heart, and "specially delighted in the glorious ascriptions of praise and thanksgiving in those for the thirtieth evening of the month." She liked to think that every month and every year at its close was accompanied by praise and thanksgiving. "It pleased and touched her greatly," writes her sister N., "that in the New [Pg 295] Lectionary the miracle of restoring sight to the two blind men at Jericho, came as the second lesson for the evening of her birthday, 7th August.

"One of her most favourite verses in the Psalms was, 'Thou hast given me the defence of thy salvation. Thy right hand also shall hold me up, and thy loving correction shall make me great.'"

Two poems from the *Lyra Germanica* gave her constant comfort, and were in her heart and on her lips. She found in them the embodiment of her faith, and could use them not only as expressing her own feelings, but as bringing comfort and help, because they were the utterance of the ardent faith and devotion of others.

These two hymns really open to us the inner life of Bessie Gilbert. They show from whence she derived the strength and courage that supported her in the efforts and trials of her early life, and they reveal the source of the patient endurance of fifteen years of isolation and suffering.

Passion Week.[9]

I.

In the Garden.

Whene'er again thou sinkest,
  My heart, beneath thy load,
Or from the battle shrinkest,
  And murmurest at thy God;
Then will I lead thee hither, [Pg 296]
  To watch thy Saviour's prayer,
And learn from His endurance
  How thou shouldst also bear.

Oh come, wouldst thou be like Him,
  Thy Lord Divine, and mark
What sharpest sorrows strike Him,
  What anguish deep and dark,—
That earnest cry to spare Him,
  The trial scarce begun?
Yet still He saith: "My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

Oh wherefore doth His spirit
  Such bitter conflict know?
What sins, what crimes could merit
  Such deep and awful woe?
So pure are not the heavens,
  So clear the noonday sun,
And yet He saith: "My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

Oh mark that night of sorrow,
  That agony of prayer;
No friend can watch till morrow
  His grief to soothe and share;
Oh where shall He find comfort?
  With God, with God alone,
And still He saith: "My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

Hath life for Him no gladness,
  No joy the light of day?
Can He then feel no sadness,
  When heart and hope give way?
That cup of mortal anguish
  One bitter cry hath won,
That it might pass: "Yet, Father, [Pg 297]
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

And who the cup prepared Him,
  And who the poison gave?
'Twas one He loved ensnared Him,
  'Twas those He came to save.
Oh sharpest pain, to suffer
  Betray'd and mock'd—alone;
Yet still He saith: "My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

But what is joy or living,
  What treachery or death,
When all His work, His striving,
  Seems hanging on His breath?
Oh can it stand without Him,
  That work but just begun?
Yet still He saith: "My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

He speaks; no more He shrinketh,
  Himself He offers up;
He sees it all, yet drinketh
  For us that bitter cup,
He goes to meet the traitor,
  The cross He will not shun,—
He saith: "I come, My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

My Saviour, I will never
  Forget Thy word of grace,
But still repeat it ever,
  Through good and evil days;
And looking up to heaven,
  Till all my race is run,
I'll humbly say: "My Father,
  Thy will, not mine, be done!"

W. Hey, 1828.

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity. [Pg 298]

Be thou content; be still before
  His face, at whose right hand doth reign
Fulness of joy for evermore,
  Without whom all thy toil is vain.
He is thy living spring, thy sun, whose rays
Make glad with life and light thy weary days.
  Be thou content.

In Him is comfort, light, and grace,
  And changeless love beyond our thought;
The sorest pang, the worst disgrace,
  If He is there, shall harm thee not.
He can lift off thy cross, and loose thy bands,
And calm thy fears, nay, death is in His hands.
  Be thou content.

Or art thou friendless and alone,
  Hast none in whom thou canst confide?
God careth for thee, lonely one,
  Comfort and help will He provide.
He sees thy sorrows and thy hidden grief,
He knoweth when to send thee quick relief.
  Be thou content.

Thy heart's unspoken pain He knows,
  Thy secret sighs He hears full well,
What to none else thou dar'st disclose,
  To Him thou mayst with boldness tell;
He is not far away, but ever nigh,
And answereth willingly the poor man's cry.
  Be thou content.

Be not o'er-mastered by thy pain,
  But cling to God, thou shalt not fall;
The floods sweep over thee in vain,
  Thou yet shalt rise above them all;
For when thy trial seems too hard to bear [Pg 299]

Lo! God, thy King, hath granted all thy prayer.
Be thou content.

Why art thou full of anxious fear
How thou shalt be sustain'd and fed?
He who hath made and placed thee here
Will give thee needful daily bread;
Canst thou not trust His rich and bounteous hand,
Who feeds all living things on sea and land?
Be thou content.

He who doth teach the little birds
To find their meat in field and wood,
Who gives the countless flocks and herds
Each day their needful drink and food,
Thy hunger too will surely satisfy,
And all thy wants in His good time supply.
Be thou content.

Sayest thou, I know not how or where,
No hope I see where'er I turn;
When of all else we most despair,
The riches of God's love we learn;
When thou and I His hand no longer trace,
He leads us forth into a pleasant place.
Be thou content.

Though long His promised aid delay,
At last it will be surely sent:
Though thy heart sink in sore dismay,
The trial for thy good is meant.
What we have won with pains we hold more fast,
What tarrieth long is sweeter at the last.
Be thou content.

Lay not to heart whate'er of ill
Thy foes may falsely speak of thee,
Let man defame thee as he will, [Pg 300]
God hears and judges righteously.
Why shouldst thou fear, if God be on thy side,
Man's cruel anger, or malicious pride?
Be thou content.

We know for us a rest remains,
When God will give us sweet release
From earth and all our mortal chains
And turn our sufferings into peace.
Sooner or later death will surely come
To end our sorrows and to take us home.
Be thou content.

Home to the chosen ones, who here
Served their Lord faithfully and well,
Who died in peace without a fear,
And there in peace for ever dwell;
The Everlasting is their joy and stay,
The Eternal Word Himself to them doth say
Be thou content!
PAUL GERHARDT, 1670.

For weeks together during her illness Bessie was at times unable to sleep during the night. She was too considerate to her nurses to disturb them for mere sleeplessness. She would then, as we have said, recall to memory music and books which she had heard, and at these times Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott were a great resource to her. The characters she admired lived for her, and she would try to picture to herself how they would act in circumstances which she invented for them. Her knowledge of English history was also a source of interest, and often astonished those around her. One evening in 1884 a young niece preparing for an examination [Pg 301] asked in vain for information as to the "Salisbury Assize" until the question was put to "Aunt Bessie," who at once explained it.

There were long lapses, as it were, in her life. After the sleepless nights she had to sleep when she could, and her room in the daytime was hushed and silent, all external life and interest excluded. At night she was again fully awake, but it was to find herself alone in the "chambers of her imagery."

One of the two sisters who were her constant companions, and nursed her with unfailing devotion for fifteen years, writes as follows:

All through her illness, with the occasional exceptions when she suffered from deafness, her cheerfulness was marvellous, her patience never-failing, and her consideration and thoughtfulness for those around her very wonderful and touching.

She had a special name of her own for each of her nurses, all of them loved her, and upon several of them the influence of her patience and goodness was strongly marked, and will be of lifelong endurance. Her first sick-nurse came in 1872 and stayed two years. She often afterwards visited her. She came to see us after Bessie's death, and said with tears, "Oh, I did not do enough for her. I wish I had done more."

Bessie would often arrange little surprises and pleasures for us and give us flowers. She was anxious we should have all the variety we could, and took the greatest pleasure in hearing an account of what we had seen and done whilst away from her. She liked to see visitors when she was well enough, but was often nervous about it, fearing lest the excitement should do her harm, and interfere in any way with what little she could do for the Institution. [Pg 302]

Perhaps few realised how much she suffered; she was so patient, so bright, so sympathetic that it was difficult to do so. The last few months of her life were full of pain.

No record of Bessie's illness would be adequate which did not speak of the love that lightened every burden laid upon her. Sisters and brothers bound by so strong a bond of family love as the Gilberts are even more closely united by affliction. No day passed without its tribute of affectionate remembrance from absent members of the family. Her eldest brother, Mr. Wintle, always spent the afternoon of Sunday with her, when she was able to receive him. The Vicar of Heversham, the beloved "Tom" of her youth, saw her in London whenever it was possible. Married sisters visited and wrote to her, and a whole cloud of nephews and nieces hovered around her.

She valued highly the friendship as well as the skill of Mr. Sibley, the surgeon who for many years attended her. She depended upon him for almost daily visits. Very little could be done to arrest the progress of her malady; nothing to save her from much inevitable suffering. Alleviation, not cure, was all that could be looked for, and he was always ready to attempt, and often able to effect, some mitigation of the ills she had to endure.

Among many others who were kind and helpful, ready to aid her work and so to give her almost the only pleasure she could receive, were the Duke of Westminster, Lord and Lady Selborne, Madame Antoinette Sterling, who would sometimes sing to her, and the old and dear friends of the family, Dean and Mrs. Hook. No word can here be said of the two sisters, whose whole life was given up to her; none would be adequate. They knew, and they were known. That is enough. We may not lift the veil under which they passed so many years with Bessie in her long agony. [Pg 303]

FOOTNOTE:

[9] From *Lyra Germanica*, second series.

CHAPTER XXIII [Pg 304]

THE END

"In Thy light we shall see light."

The summer of 1884 in London was hot and exhausting. In Bessie's helpless condition excessive heat caused her real suffering; for she was fixed immovable upon her couch. But if she longed for cool breezes, the scent of flowers and song of birds, she uttered no murmur in their absence.

The slight improvement recognised with so much gratitude in the spring was not permanent, but the "change" she anticipated was at hand. "I feel as if there would be a change," she had said.

The autumn showed that she had seriously lost ground.

"Her throat," continues her sister N., "always painful and irritable, had now become a source of great suffering. There was constant pain, greatly increased every time she swallowed; whilst her weakness made it important that she should take plenty of nourishment. A troublesome cough came on; fits of coughing that lasted for hours and exhausted her terribly. At the same time neuralgia and rheumatism attacked the left leg and thigh, and violent pain caused her, with all her courage and patience, to scream in the most heartrending manner. Her whole body became most sensitive to touch, and yet she was obliged to be moved on account of the cough. Her limbs seemed to stiffen, and the body was like a leaden weight pressing on the bed. To change her position, even to touch her hair, caused her great pain; and it required four or even five persons to move her with the minimum of pain." [Pg 305]

This sad condition lasted through the autumn of 1884, but she improved wonderfully about

Christmas time, and there was alleviation and relief for herself and all around her. On Christmas day, however, a fresh sorrow befel her. Her brother-in-law, Mr. Bowles, died suddenly, and all her old grief at the loss of her sister Mary, of her father, and of dear friends, was reopened. She had a serious relapse, and before long the condition of her throat made it desirable to seek further advice. Dr. Semon was consulted, and he examined her throat by the help of the electric light. She was greatly interested in this examination, in the explanation of the apparatus used, and in the fact that hers was the first throat so examined since Dr. Semon's apparatus had been perfected.

Shortly afterwards her condition was aggravated by slight bronchitis, and for four days and nights she had no sleep. On the 7th of February 1885 Dr. Sibley saw her between 12 and 12.30, and anticipated no immediate danger. But he was again hastily summoned, and at 1.15 she died; conscious to the last moment.

"She had been so tired the night before," writes her sister. "About midnight she said: 'Art thou weary, art thou weary?' and we repeated the beautiful hymn, which seemed to soothe her. Even that last night she was full of thought for others. 'Mind you have some tea; do make yourselves some tea,' she said. She evidently followed the prayers that we said, and indeed her death was a falling asleep, so peaceful, with no pain or struggle whatever." [Pg 306]

The farewell of two old friends was by her bedside at Ascension Tide, May 1884, when Bessie received the Holy Communion.

Such a radiant light, such ineffable peace rested on her face when she lay back in silence on her pillow, that the writer thought "so will she look when at last her eyes are open to the eternal day." A kiss, a pressure of the hand, a word of farewell, and there was no other place of meeting in this life.

Undaunted by suffering and privation, patient, heroic, she lived and died. No murmur escaped her lips from early youth to age. She stood trembling with awestruck face when, after she had said, "Oh how I should like to see the sun!" her companion solemnly assured her, "And you shall see," and turned the sightless face towards the glowing sky. All was dark, the young girl could only answer, "I see nothing," as she turned and went slowly homewards. She accepted her blindness. It was the will of God. No word of lamentation escaped her throughout her life.

Again there came a time when a great cause had been entrusted to her, when she felt that it was prospering in her hands, when she hoped to raise the whole condition of the blind, to lift them up out of poverty and dependence, and place them on a level with all industrious and intelligent citizens. But a hand was laid upon her in the darkness. "I can do nothing," she said; and once again she turned and went slowly without a murmur, without repining, down the dark pathway to the grave and gate of death. But the work for which she gave her life has not died, and cannot die. Every good seed, sown upon good ground, must spring up and bear fruit. Her patient efforts, her success in "removing obstacles from before the feet of the blind," will help and encourage other workers. Blind children in our schools, blind workmen and workwomen in our shops and factories, will reap the harvest for which Bessie Gilbert laboured, and may join in the acknowledgment of dependence upon the Great Father which she so loved to utter: "All thy works praise thee, O Lord." [Pg 307]

THE END

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