

A Humorist's Daughter.

By BRUNO LESSING.

Laugh and the world laughs with you,
Weep and you weep alone.
For the sad old earth must borrow its
mirth—
It has trouble enough of its own.

HAVE you ever, in philosophic mood, speculated upon the sad fact that all the really beautiful things of life have become commonplace? A flower, a song, a picture, a thought—he it great and beautiful enough to win the admiration of the mass of mankind—how quickly our faded taste turns up its nose in contempt! Imagine, in ordinary conversation, a person dwelling upon the glory of sunshine, the perfume of the rose, or even the sentiment expressed in the lines above, and how quickly you would be bored. For the beautiful things of life are as old as the hills, and—perhaps you are right—they are commonplace. So let us turn from them—it was merely a recollection that suggested this train of thought, a recollection that arose through reading of a strike of garment-workers on the East Side.

There was such a strike many years ago—as there probably will be many years from now—and it started in Nathan Levy's sweat-shop. It was here that Sophie Ramunsky worked, sharp-eyed, weazened little Sophie Ramunsky, whom all the older generation of the ghetto still remember. They remember her, not because of what she is about to relate or, in fact, for anything that she ever did herself, but her father, in his day, was known to all of them as Melech, one of the great humorists of Yiddish literature. Under his nom-de-plume of Melech he wrote for nearly all the weekly and monthly periodicals that were published in Russia and Poland in the Yiddish jargon. He stopped writing suddenly and came to this country, where he never wrote, and in the course of time it became known about that he was paralyzed and that his daughter had to work in a sweat-shop to keep him alive. So, you see, they knew Sophie Ramunsky, even though they had never seen her, for there was enough glamour to the name of Ramunsky to cast a tiny ray of light upon his daughter.

In the little garment factory in which she worked it needed no knowledge of Sophie's ancestry to establish the fact that one of the rarest gifts of the gods—the blessed sense of humour—had been bestowed upon her. From early morning till late at night, when the mood was upon her, she could keep the whole roomful of men and women laughing while they worked. Slaves of the whirling machines, stitching, cutting, ironing, carrying loads and sorting them out from the break of day until long after the sun had set, the god of mirth himself must have inspired her to make that joyful laugh. She would tell stories and anecdotes, recite humorous poems, that her father had written or that she had read somewhere, and make quaint remarks about the thousand and one incidents that made up the day's work. And they would laugh and give answer, and the ball of merriment would be thrown about all the living day. Levy, the sweeter, encouraged her; for, in addition to the enjoyment he derived from her incessant bantering, he would laughingly assert that she was worth twice her wages because the others worked so much harder and more cheerfully on account of her presence.

One day a new man came into the room and took his place at a machine. Gordin was his name, Morris Gordin, a big, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed son of Israel, exceedingly quiet in manner, but seemingly full of reserve force. Upon that day Sophie was in her best mood, and twitted him upon accepting an oar in the same galley with the rest of them—she was quite a learned little thing—insisting that if she were a man as big as he she would surely be a rower instead of a slave. He took it good-naturedly and when the day's work was done, even thanked her for having

made his task easier. Sophie looked at him with those sharp little eyes of hers, and a wonderful expression came into them. You know the expression, do you not, when a mother gazes upon her child?

From that day Sophie changed. The change was a gradual one. Her cheerful spirits never for one moment seemed abated, but it began to happen quite frequently that she would sit quietly, never uttering a word, although the gaiety that she had inspired continued to cheer the others. One day when all were jesting over what they would each do if they had a million dollars—it was Sophie, as usual, who had started the discussion—one of the men said to Gordin:

"Your little sweetheart there would spend it all on books. She's always reading."

Sophie became quite pale. "I'm not his sweetheart," she exclaimed impulsively and the next moment, laughed aloud to conceal her embarrassment.

When the day's work was done Gordin asked her, with a twinkle in his eyes, "Why were you so annoyed when Markowitz called you my sweetheart?"

"Am I your sweetheart?" she asked calmly, though with reddened cheeks.

"Why, no. Not seriously," replied Gordin slowly. "He was only jesting."

"Then, please don't—oh, please! I must be in a bad temper to-day to get so peevish over nothing. Don't mind anything I said. Take Rose Levine—she'd make an ideal sweetheart for you if you must have one."

"Who is Rose Levine?"

Sophie laughed. "Who is Rose Levine? And you working in the same shop with her for over a week, never even noticed her? She's the pretty girl with brown eyes and soft wavy hair who sits near the window at the double machine."

"I never even noticed her," said Gordin.

"If she were dressed in pretty clothes you'd notice her quickly enough," said Sophie, and there was a slight trace of bitterness in her voice. Had you dressed Sophie Ramunsky in the most beautiful clothes in the world they would hardly have made her plain features pretty. The next day Gordin took notice of Rose Levine. Sophie's eyes were upon his face while he was studying the delicately moulded features of the pale girl who seemed so tiny sitting there at that enormous machine.

"I knew you would think she is pretty. She is. Very pretty. You must speak to her. She's very nice."

Gordin found no opportunity before the day was done to speak with Rose, and when, later, Sophie asked him what he thought of her, he made a slight grimace.

"Still never set the world afire."

One night Gordin asked Sophie to go to the theatre with him. The evening passed in that delightful camaraderie that can exist only between a clever woman and a man who is interesting to her. All the following day Sophie was happy, wonderfully happy, and, as usual, all her fellow workers caught the infection of her spirits. It was just as they were preparing to leave the shop for the day that she heard Gordin ask Rose Levine to go to the theatre with him the following week. The light died in her eyes, and she seemed to wilt.

There was discontent among the workmen. It had been fermenting for some time, though vaguely and without expression, and, strangely enough, it was Sophie Ramunsky who first saw and analyzed and gave it concrete form. Strangely enough—and yet most naturally. It is a curious fact that a sense of humour should be the invariable complement, not only of intelligence but of a keen perception and an insight into the heart of affairs. I know of no more fitting handmaiden to Wisdom than Humour. Give me a true humorist and I will show you a real philosopher. No wonder, then, that it was a humorist's daughter who first saw clearly the conditions that existed in Levy's shop, and saw, likewise, the remedy; though it is doubtful if she foresaw the terrible consequences that an attempt to apply the remedy would entail.

"Please walk home with me," Sophie said to Gordin as they were all preparing to leave the shop. "I want to talk with you."

"Listen to me," she said, as they were walking homeward. "I'm sure this is a good time to organize a union of all the people in our line of work. There are only twelve shops, and it takes so long to learn the work that they couldn't get people to take over places. If you go and talk to two or three men in every shop you'll find them all willing to join a union. It costs so much to live, rent is so high, and we get so little that I'm sure it will be very easy for us all to get bigger wages and less hours if we have a union behind us."

Gordin looked at her with sparkling eyes. "I think you're wonderful!" he exclaimed. "You're perfectly right. Why didn't I think of that myself? Only to-day I was thinking how easy it would be for the boss to give us all a little money and let us work an hour a day less. God knows he makes enough out of us. But it never occurred to me to get up a union. Thank you, Sophie. You'll never be sorry you gave me that idea."

The union was organized. It would hardly be interesting to recount the slow process by which it came into full being. The secret encounters in out-of-the-way places, after a long day's work had been done, the whispered conferences, the pleasant arguments that had to be cautiously advanced to enlist the reluctant, the collection of money from scanty hoards to defray the expenses of a headquarters—they were rather more pathetic than interesting. But the time finally came when Gordin, from a written document in his hand, read to the sweaters the ultimatum of the workers—a demand for twenty cents a day more wages and a reduction of an hour in the day's work. At the same time this proclamation was read by a workman in each of the other shops. It was Sophie who had written the proclamation and given it to Gordin.

The sweaters were prompt to refuse the concessions demanded, and every single workman left the shops. Strikes have become so common that it would be wearisome to go into the details of this one. There is but this difference between a strike of garment-workers on the East Side and a strike of the average American labourer: among the former the conditions that exist when work is plenty are so deplorable that the slightest change for the worse instantly makes them distressing.

The strikers organized headquarters where Gordin presided as leader of the strike, and Sophie, as secretary, was ever at his side, with suggestions and help. There are two sides to a strike. One you see at the public meetings that strikers always hold, where speakers thunder at capital, dwell upon the outrages they have suffered, and cheer their hearers with glowing accounts of the progress of the strike, the panic of the employers, and the imminence of victory. The other side you rarely see. It is found only at the headquarters of the strikers, where pale-faced workmen come to inquire how much longer they are expected to suffer, and where women come, often with babies in their arms, to ask if there would be any harm in their men going to work, if only for one day, because there is no money in the house and hungry mouths are clamoring for food. It was with such callers that Sophie Ramunsky laboured. She would answer and argue and plead. And through all that she said there would flash, ever and anon, just that ray of humour that would make life, for the moment, brighter for each complainant and lighten the burden.

It was Gordin who always presided at the meetings and made the principal speech, but none of his hearers knew that it was Sophie who, under pretence of discussing his speech with him beforehand, had suggested most of the ideas that gave it force. And then, frequently, Sophie herself would speak, and always in humorous vein. Grim humor, it is true, but at least a variation of the deadly monotony of thought that was oppressing them all.

"Fellow corpses," she would say, "for that is what we are, let us all imagine ourselves dead and buried and then think how much more pleasant it is to be here and only hungry. I saw my old boss to-day. He was pale and looked sick. The money that he has lost is making him so miserable that I'm going to bed hungry to-night with a smile on my lips."

There was actually no understanding left. Unhappy as they all were they had to smile with her. The newspapers—

the big dailies of the city that belonged to the outside world—began to give space to the strike. Gordin was hailed as the "King of the Garment Workers." His portrait was published, and an interview with him was printed nearly every day. Sophie ceased to speak in public from the moment the meetings were chronicled in the newspapers, but redoubled her endeavours among the wavering individuals. Gradually public opinion was aroused, public opinion before whom the gods of right and wrong must humbly bow—and the sweaters surrendered. They held a meeting and sent a messenger to the headquarters of the strikers to ask Gordin to come before them. There was no one at headquarters but Sophie, and when the significance of the message dawned upon her she almost swooned with joy.

"Tell them," she said, "that Mr. Gordin will be there very shortly. I will find him and send him as quickly as possible."

It took longer than she had thought to find him. He was not at his home nor at any of the customary gathering places of the strikers. By mere chance she met one of the women who worked in her shop and who, in reply to her question, told her that she had seen Gordin enter one of the coffee houses on East Broadway. And there Sophie found him.

As she entered it seemed to her, at first, that the place was deserted. An instant later she saw Gordin. He was sitting at a table in the corner of the room farthest from the door with Rose Levine at his side, and at that very moment when Sophie espied him in the act of raising Rose's hand to his lips with that indescribably tender gesture and that look in his eyes that can be inspired by only one emotion. For an instant it seemed to Sophie that her heart had stopped beating and all the blood in her body had rushed to her head. Then, when she saw that they were aware of her presence, her heart began to beat again, very quickly and with a sharp pain, and she stood perfectly still, because she felt weak and was afraid that her legs would fall. But she smiled at their confusion.

"You poor little fiddle-dove!" she exclaimed, in a faltering voice. "It really is a crime to disturb you. But we've won the strike, and the poor bosses are waiting for you, Mr. Gordin. You'd better go right away and—'even a twinkle came into her eyes—'I'd go with him if I were you, Rose. He'll be a husband all his life, but he'll be a hero for only about five minutes to-day."

You see she was a humorist's daughter.

The strike was won, and the very next day Levy's shop looked exactly as it had always looked before. The workers earned a few pennies more and toiled an hour a day less, but this grew so quickly into the accustomed order of things that they ceased to derive any happiness from it whatever. In the course of time Gordin and Rose were married, and Gordin became foreman in the shop. The machines became no more deafening—they clanked and whirled as they had always done, and the atmosphere of the place was depressing. Sophie Ramunsky, whose father had been a great humorist in his day, frequently lightened the workers' lot by her cheering pleasanties and her drab philosophy. But often, unobserved, she would gaze out the window at the blue sky that God has given to master and slave alike, and the tears would come into her eyes.

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