

IT TAKES ALL KINDS

By
Louis Bromfield



Harper & Brothers Publishers

NEW YORK and LONDON

1939

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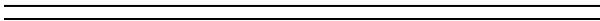
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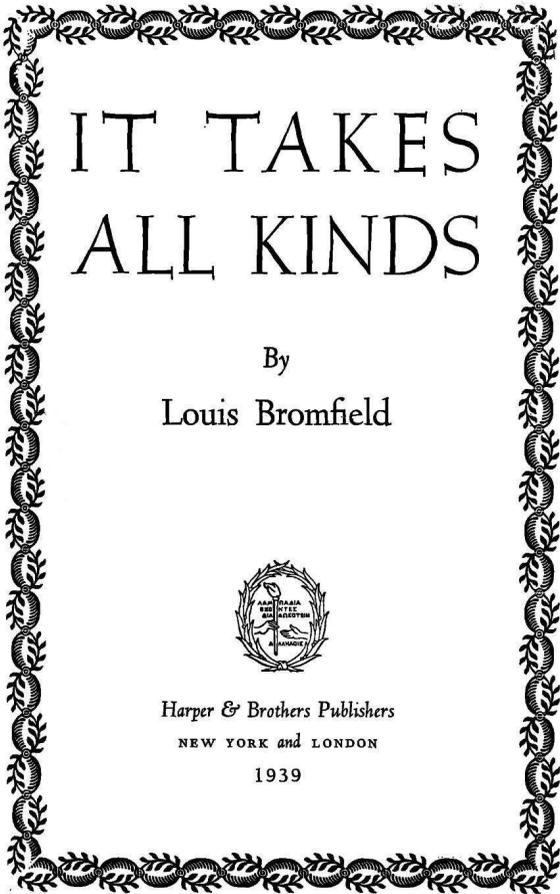
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FIRST EDITION

H-O

The story BETTER THAN LIFE was originally published serially under the title of AND IT ALL CAME TRUE and is published in England under the title of IT HAD TO HAPPEN. The story McLEOD'S FOLLY was originally published serially under the title of YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE.

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Good Time Bessie

ONCE long ago he was a matinée idol, of the good old-fashioned kind. Everyone knew him when he walked through Peacock Alley at the old Waldorf, and palpitating young women used to stand outside the stage door waiting to see him come out and climb into a hansom and drive off without ever looking to right or left. He must have been a dapper fellow because even as an old man with very little money, living in one room of a dusty old-fashioned hotel on the upper West Side, he managed somehow to give the appearance of a rather sporting old gentleman who had an excellent valet. He wasn't one to give in to circumstances, and he loved life. The terrible changes he had seen in the theater and in the world and in his own circumstances never succeeded in discouraging him or breaking his spirit.

I knew him through his daughter, and I used to go sometimes with her to call on him. He was inclined to live in the past and tell stories of what to him was the Golden Age of New York. Whenever he talked of it, it certainly sounded so, and so it may have been. He loved the island of Manhattan with a profound passion and had no desire to leave it, even in summer. In the Golden Age, he said, there wasn't any "season" in the theater. It went on the whole year round, winter and summer, and so he never got into the habit of leaving town save occasionally on an outing to Staten Island or Jersey City or when his company made a tour; and then he was miserable. He used to tell some tall stories, and he told

me this one. I am leaving it in his words because he told it so much better than I could possibly do it. I retire to the role of commentator and give place to him.

His room was not very large and it had a tiny narrow view of the North River, framed on both sides by apartment houses. It was a neat room, a room as dapper as the old gentleman himself. There was a bed in one corner, a table, an easy chair and two straight chairs, a small library made up almost entirely of collections of plays, and myriads of photographs, most of them rather yellow and spotted—of Ada Rehan and Rose Coghlan, the Drews, Lester Wallack and dozens of others. He had lived through three generations of the theater and known in two of them at least everybody of the least importance.

But this is the story the old gentleman told me, while he rocked and smoked a big cigar out of the box I brought him. I lay on the bed listening and upsetting him a little, I think, because I disturbed the neatness of his room. But the stiff chairs were impossible for any length of time.

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“Bessie,” he said, “was a big woman made on the scale they no longer make ’em... the kind of woman who warmed a man’s heart and made a light come into his eyes. I used to see it happen again and again. I remember her as she looked when she used to come into Jack’s early in the morning after the night spots like Rector’s and Churchill’s had begun to turn out their lights. The door would open and in would come Bessie with two or three men— sometimes there were a half-dozen—and when she came into the room something came into it with her which was not there before. Everyone

looked up and at first sight of her there was always a little hush and then two or three people—hicks or people who didn't know Broadway would say, 'That must be Bessie Devine.' They knew her from her picture in the papers or from the little cards you got with cigarettes ... pictures sometimes in tights and sometimes in a short spangled skirt. Her corsets must have been reinforced with steel because God never meant her to have a wasp waist. I ought to know if anyone did. She was built like Juno rather than Venus with big breasts and hips that were on the same scale as her vitality and her big warm nature.... She had honey-colored hair and blue eyes and the complexion of a peach. Her voice was loud and deep and when she laughed you could hear her all over the restaurant. Whenever she had had a little too much Irish whisky—she hated champagne and called it a "sissy drink"—it would turn warm and a little husky.

"Nothing ever seemed to dim that vitality and health of hers. She could drink and do without sleep and raise hell for days at a time and still look as blooming and fresh as a strawberry, fresh-picked with the dew still on it. She was too big to be a good dancer, and she never took the trouble to learn how to sing properly. Part of her charm for audiences lay in her amateurish quality; she never quite learned how to wait for a laugh or to put over her points. She always just missed them with a lazy indifference which in itself made you laugh. I think toward the end, it grew into a kind of technique or method which was all her own. If she hadn't broken her neck, she might have lived to be a fine performer, but she didn't live long enough to take any of it seriously. There were too many things in life that were more fun than worrying about being professional—things like eating and drinking and loving and giving people a good time. I think

she liked the stage simply because it was fun. She liked cracking jokes with the stage hands and the girls in the chorus. What always got across the footlights was her colossal vitality. The tired people in the audience fed off it. When she came on, a kind of wave of pleasure and fun went right through the whole house.

“Probably you wouldn’t know what the theater was like at the time she nourished but it wasn’t anything like it is today. It was fun then.... I’m talking about the end of the nineties when you were nothing but a kid. And everybody came to see it and people liked the theater because it was the theater. It hadn’t been corrupted by a lot of art ideas, and critics didn’t come to a new play just to find out whether it fitted into their own ideas of art or the ideas they were trying to work out in plays they were writing themselves. If a play was good entertainment they liked it. And in those days actors were actors, boy! They didn’t try to make an impression by doing nothing at all, or by going through a bag of tricks that they’d been told was art. They each had their own way and everything was free and easy and every actor gave everything he had to give, and that was what the public wanted. They liked an actor to tear up the carpet and break things.

“No, something is wrong with Americans nowadays. They’ve all got kind of pallid and anemic, and the theater along with them. But back in the nineties the theater was the theater—the way it was in the time of Molière and Shakespeare. People didn’t go to it just to say, ‘Oh, isn’t she real,’ and ‘Isn’t that set wonderful!’ Stage designers were just scene painters and the play was all the better for it. There weren’t a lot of interior decorators cluttering up the stage with a lot of stuff that would get them a big hand on the

opening night and then ruin a play by cluttering it all up with antique furniture and plush drapes. And actors were content to be actors. They didn't try to mix with society people any more than society people tried to mix with them. *They* knew where the fun was. It was in the theater and Rector's and Delmonico's and not in a Fifth Avenue drawing-room. I guess the movies have spoiled things too by taking away from the theater its best audience. I mean all those people who used to sit in the balconies and nigger heaven. They didn't want any grim realism. They wanted illusion and grandeur and splendor and real comedy like the nasty kind that Molière gave 'em.

“Well, anyway, there's no use going on about all that. I only bring it up to give you some idea of the kind of background Bessie had and the kind of person she was. There aren't any like her any more. As I said, she couldn't act, not according to our standards, but she was a hell of a lot better actress than most of these mincing respectable school marms that pass as actresses nowadays. No, men were men, and women were women in those days, and love affairs were love affairs.

“The first time I ever saw Bessie she was playing in *The Minx*, a kind of second role ... you know, the friend of the heroine ... and she was a great foil for little Herminie Ross who played the title role. Herminie was small with a little face like a Persian pussycat and a great little comedienne, and Bessie was big and blond with a big voice and a hearty laugh, and together they made the show, which wasn't so much of a show at that. And the moment I laid eyes on Bessie I took a quick look at the program to find out what her name was and said to myself, ‘That's the girl for me!’

“Let me see, that’s about thirty-five or forty years ago. That would make me about thirty-two at the time ... just the right age, not too young to be a sap and not too old so that I couldn’t take it, right all the way to the limit. Boy! I used to stay up all night and then go home and make love till three in the afternoon and be at the theater fresh as a daisy at a quarter to eight. I was in the company at Wallack’s that season, but just then I was playing only three nights a week so the rest of the time I had off except for rehearsals.

“Well, by the time the curtain came down on the last act of *The Minx* I was worked into a lather about this Bessie Devine. About the middle of the second act I forgot all about the play and all about the part Bessie was supposed to be portraying. She was just a woman to me—a woman called Bessie Devine I’d never seen before, who was my kind of woman. So when the curtain calls were over I went around backstage to call on Herminie Ross. She wasn’t my type at all, with her little pussycat ways, and she knew it too, so there wasn’t any trouble. We were good friends the way a man and a woman can be when they know they like each other and don’t want anything from each other. I found her in her dressing room, sort of smothered in flowers with a lot of Johnnies waiting around. That was more her school ... Johnnies with top coats and mustaches and hansom cabs at the door. I told her she was great in that part, which she was, and after a minute she got the dress boys out of her dressing room and when they were gone, she looked at me and said, ‘I know what you’re after. It’s not me. It’s Bessie you want to meet.’ You see she knew my type.

“I said, yes, it was, and she said, ‘I knew if you saw her, you’d fall. She’s not very ladylike but then you don’t like ’em

that way.’

“She put on some sort of a flossy wrap and said to her maid, ‘Look after those diamonds, Cleora, till I come back,’ and we went out the door through all the Johnnies and across to the other side of the stage. They gave me dirty looks. They always hated good-looking actors, I guess because they knew that the actors got for nothing what cost them diamonds and flowers and hansom cabs.

“Herminie didn’t knock on the door; she just pushed it open. There was a squeal and I saw Bessie snatch up a dressing gown and hold it before her. No costume could have become her more. She clutched it all in a lump so that beneath the edge of it I caught sight of her big fine legs and above it a glimpse of her big breasts. Her long blond hair was undone and fell over her white shoulders.

“I expected a scene to follow the squeal. I’d been through the same sort of surprise often enough before and usually there were screams of indignation and bad language, even from ladies who had no temerity whatever at showing themselves under almost any other circumstances. But Bessie seemed to take it all naturally as a joke.

“She laughed and said, ‘You almost caught me. Better luck next time.’

“Herminie started to introduce me but Bessie said, ‘Oh, you don’t need to go into that. I’ve seen him plenty of times over at Wallack’s.’ Still clutching the dressing gown to her with one hand she held out the other. ‘Sure, I know Mr. Davenport. I go over to Wallack’s every time I have a moment off to learn how to act.’

“And then I caught sight of an odd little woman sitting in the background. She was small and rather withered in

appearance and dressed in clothes which gave the impression of being too big for her. They weren't actually, but everything she wore seemed to be oversized as if she had withered away since she got them. She wore an enormous fur around her neck and an enormous hat with plumes which seemed to extinguish her like a candle snuffer. The hat and furs must have cost a lot once but they were shabby now. The plumes drooped wearily and the furs had a plucked look.

“Graciously, as if she were fully dressed and wearing a tiara instead of being stark naked save for a dressing gown stained with make-up pressed against her stomach, she turned and said, ‘Meet my sister, Mrs. Rafferty.’

“Mrs. Rafferty gave me a faded smile and Bessie said, ‘Don't go away, Mr. Davenport. Just give me a minute to slip something on and you can come in.’

“ ‘Sure,’ I said. ‘I'll wait. Get dressed and we'll get something to eat.’

“ ‘Fine,’ said Bessie and closed the door.

“Outside I thanked Herminie and asked, ‘Who's Mrs. Rafferty? Ought I to ask her too?’

“ ‘No,’ said Herminie. ‘That's only her sister. She's got six children and her husband drinks. Bessie has to look after 'em all. Whenever Mrs. Rafferty appears it means there's been trouble at home. Probably Rafferty is in jail.’

“And with that Herminie crossed the stage and went back to her pussycat nest with the flowers and the diamonds guarded by Cleora and the Johnnies waiting outside. It struck me as funny that there weren't any flowers in Bessie's dressing room, and certainly there wasn't a single diamond. It was just a bare ugly dressing room, empty save for her own clothes.

“And then out of the darkness in the wings came the figure of ‘Bink’ Mallory, not dressed up the way he always was in the evening but still in a checked suit with a top coat and a brown derby. His big red face looked depressed and when he grinned it was a melancholy grin which didn’t do justice to all the gold teeth he had.

“He said, ‘Hello,’ and I said, ‘Hello. What’s the matter? Why aren’t you dressed up?’

“ ‘I just got in from Long Branch. They gave me a spring cleaning down at the track today and I need considerable cheerin’ up. So I came along to see Bessie and get a laugh. I ain’t in the way, am I?’

“ ‘No,’ I said. ‘Not in *my* way. Not exactly. I just met her for the first time. I asked her out for supper. I’m not in your way, am I?’

“ ‘No. I just want some fun and a couple of good laughs. We can all go out together. I’ll clear out early. I ain’t had any sleep for two nights.’

“And just then we were joined by somebody else coming out of the shadows and it was Harry Peel, who’d just finished his act at the Victoria Roof. He must have been awful funny that night at Hammerstein’s because there wasn’t any comedy left in him. He had a face a mile long.

“ ‘Hello, boys,’ he said, ‘waiting for Bessie? Hope I’m not in the way?’

“ ‘No. Come along and eat.’

“ ‘I’ve just had a row with the management,’ he said, ‘and walked out, and I needed that dough. God knows when I’ll get another good booking. I want to go and get drunk.’

“So the three of us waited there till Bessie got her clothes on, exchanging stories and talking Broadway gossip. It struck me as funny that there weren’t any Johnnies outside the door waiting for Bessie ... but only an actor, a race-track man and a comic juggler. And then Bessie came out, looking big and beautiful and healthy, dressed all in black with a black feather boa which trailed on the floor and a big black hat covered with ostrich plumes. Something came out the door with her ... health and vigor and good nature and love, I think. Love for everybody and everything. She wanted everybody to have a good time.

“So the four of us went to Rector’s for a time and then to Jack’s and there Harry Peel left us. He was drunk and happy again. Bessie had done that to him with her stories. She had a way of seeing funny things that happened during the day on the street, in restaurants, among the stage hands, and afterward she would recount them, not always in the most delicate language but in an irresistibly funny fashion. In spite of being no actress at all she was a good mimic. She could recreate for you any character which had caught her attention during the day. Harry Peel had forgotten about his quarrel and his lost job. Tomorrow he’d get up with fresh spirits and a new point of view, ready to begin all over again.

“About five o’clock ‘Bink’ Mallory with his checked suit and brown derby bade us good night and I was left to see Bessie home. That was what I was waiting for all the time but now when the time came, I didn’t know exactly how to cope with Bessie. Maybe I should say I didn’t exactly know how to approach what was on my mind. You’d have said that it was the easiest thing in the world to say to a woman like Bessie, ‘I’m crazy about you. Take me home with you,’ but it

wasn't. God knows I wasn't any novice at such things and I knew at least twenty ways of leading up to the subject, but none of them seemed to fit Bessie. Suddenly, left alone with her, all my slick Casanova tricks just curled up and died.

"I've had about forty years to think it over and I've come to the conclusion that Bessie had a peculiar quality which most girls I knew never had. She was on the level, more on the level than any woman I ever knew, and somehow when you'd tried to pull a fast one with Bessie you were ashamed of yourself because you knew she wouldn't do that kind of thing to you. Nobody ever pretended that Bessie was pure as the driven snow, but whenever she was generous with her favors there was a reason for it and the reason wasn't money.

"Anyway, we got into a hansom. I drove her home just at dawn to the old Hoffman House where she was living then, and all the way there I never made a pass at her or even a suggestive remark. We just talked like any two nice people that like each other—about the milk wagons, and the show and about acting. And when we left each other I asked if I could see her again soon and she said, 'Sure, come on around any night.' "

"When I came home that night, Lester heard me open the door and got up as usual to make me a cup of tea. Lester was my valet. He was a little Cockney I found in London when I was over there with Ada Rehan. He wanted to come to the States so I brought him home with me. We were both kids then. I must have been about twenty-four or five and Lester was about twenty-one. He'd been with me for eight years when I first met Bessie and he had a kind of worship for me,

like a faithful dog. He hadn't any life of his own. He was small and ugly and he didn't seem to know anyone or how to make any friends. He just kept to my flat, and the only fun he had was when people came in and we had a party and he could wait on them and look at the beautiful women and the sporting men. He'd trained himself to wake the moment he heard my key turn in the lock and then he'd get up and make me tea and see that I got safely to bed.

“I was never able to discover what went on inside his head. Sometimes I used to think nothing went on in there, but I guess there must have been something because there never was a better servant. I used to tell him a good many things ... the kind of things I didn't tell to anyone else, just for the pleasure it gave me to see his eyes light up and a funny grin that would curl up one side of his ugly little face. And that way he had a kind of life of his own, which wasn't real, of course, but came to him through me. Years afterward I found out that I was pretty close to being right about it. In some funny way he got to imagining that he was *me*, and that all the escapades I went through were really happening to him too. He'd spent a good part of his life being hungry and beaten and he knew he was little and ugly and so he was afraid of ever trying anything on his own. He worked it all out somehow. I suppose when I was out all night he was with me in a funny way, seeing all the rowdy men and the beautiful women I saw. Of course he never did go out and he never did go with me. He managed it in a kind of dream life. It was just the same whether he was awake or asleep.

“Anyway, there he was when I came home and he said, as he poured my tea, ‘Miss Ransom came in tonight, sir.’ She

was a girl from the Casino chorus that I'd been carrying on with for some time.

“ ‘Did she wait?’ I asked him.

“ ‘No, she didn't,’ he said. ‘I didn't let her in.’

“ ‘Why?’ I asked him.

“ ‘Because I found her picture torn up in your wastepaper basket, sir. I was afraid she might come in and break things up.’

“ ‘That's right, Lester,’ I said. ‘That's just what she would have done. If she comes back again always keep the door on the chain. She's the kind that gets cold mad and smashes things up. It's all over with Miss Ransom, Lester.’

“ ‘I'm glad of that, sir.’

“ ‘Why, Lester?’ I asked him.

“ ‘If you'll excuse me, sir, I always thought you couldn't count on her.’

“That was exactly it. She was a nice girl but you couldn't count on her and she had tantrums; sometimes right in a restaurant she'd throw all the dishes on the floor and begin to scream. I didn't care much for that. I didn't mind breaking it off. The funny thing was that Lester knew all about it. He'd sort of been going through the affair with me. He'd had a half-dozen pictures of Polly Ransom, which he'd cut out of newspapers and theatrical magazines, pinned to the wall of his room for months, just as if he was the one who was carrying on with her. When I looked into his room the next day they were all gone.

“The next night I went to *The Minx* again, only instead of going out front I came behind stage and spent my time between Herminie's dressing room and Bessie's. When one

was on the stage I went to sit in the dressing room of the other, and so I came to learn a lot about Bessie while she was before the footlights and Herminie was waiting to go on. Usually Herminie couldn't bear any other pretty woman who happened to be in the same company with her, but Bessie she didn't seem to mind. She even liked her, and while I sat talking with her I began to understand why. Bessie wasn't in any sense a rival. On the stage she served as a foil to Herminie and made Herminie seem even more *petite*, and certainly more young than she really was, and off the stage she didn't offer any competition, at least any competition that Herminie need worry about. I began to learn why there weren't any Johnnies waiting for Bessie and why there weren't flowers and diamonds in her dressing room.

“It seemed that she couldn't stomach Johnnies. She was born on Ninth Avenue and she didn't like flossy manners and what she called ‘clubmen.’ In the first place their dandified manners made her nervous and in the second place they bored her. And gentlemen, she said, were ‘dirty’ when they made love. Afterward when we were living together she explained what it was she meant. It took her a long time because she wasn't very good at words, but I finally discovered that what she objected to was their condescension. Most of them felt, she said, that they were so damned superior to you that they were doing you a favor and soiling themselves in the process. And she wouldn't have any of that. So whenever some Johnny turned up, she told him right out that it wasn't any use trying to hang around because she never went out with clubmen. What she liked, Herminie said, was fellow actors and sports and often enough chaps who were down on their luck.

“ ‘She just goes around looking for fellows who are broke. She can spot ’em a mile off,’ Herminie used to say. ‘So she doesn’t come out very well where diamonds and flowers are concerned. God knows she could use a few jewels and a little cash now and then. She never has any. She’s always giving it away. That girl just hasn’t got any sense about money. She ought to cut loose from that family of hers ... the Raffertys and all her brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts and God knows what. As if they weren’t enough she’s always paying the rent for chorus girls and doctors’ bills for stage hands. What’s going to become of her? A girl has to look out for herself in this business. If Bessie had any sense she could have a cold hundred thousand laid away right now. And she hasn’t got a dime.’

“Well, all that didn’t exactly put me off Bessie. Anyway, you knew that if she liked you, she *liked* you. She wasn’t just pretending to get out of you what she could. What Herminie said explained a lot of other things about Bessie ... why it was so hard to get down to brass tacks on that first evening and why every now and then, right in the midst of all her laughing and good nature, her face would suddenly grow sad when she thought nobody was watching her, and sometimes you’d hear her sigh, very quietly, as if she didn’t want anybody to hear her. You see, all the time, down underneath all that good-time manner, she knew what it was all about. She knew the human race was pretty sad and tragic, only she refused to admit it and she wasn’t going to let anybody else suspect what she knew. She was just born that way ... *knowing*, and I always had a feeling that she took the responsibility for the whole mess on her own big handsome shoulders and did her best to straighten it out. She was always taking over the troubles of other people, and didn’t

want you to know about it. It would have made her feel sort of ashamed.

“Well, to make a long story short, Bessie and I took up together. It must have been love because God knows on her side she couldn’t have expected anything else from an actor making a couple of hundred dollars a week. We had a little flat of two rooms where we used to meet. Lester stayed on in the other flat to take care of it and I didn’t see so much of him. Sometimes I wouldn’t come home for two or three days, and that upset him terribly. He worried over not being able to get up in the morning when I came in to make my tea, and he fussed because he couldn’t look me over from head to foot every time I went out to see that I was turned out the way a gentleman should be. And his own dreary little life got drearier and drearier because after Bessie became my sweetheart, I didn’t have any more of those parties he used to like so much, when he could pour drinks and listen to the talk of all the sports and the beautiful women.

“Once or twice he said to me, very respectfully, ‘Sir, you ought to bring Miss Devine around here some time to show her what a nice flat you have and how well it’s kept.’ There was a little reproach in his voice as if I’d insulted him somehow by not bringing her to see what a good, devoted servant he was. I kept promising to bring her around and have a party for her but I kept putting it off and then it was too late and Bessie was where she couldn’t ever go to parties again.

“It was the happiest time in my life. God knows I’ve known plenty of women but never one that could touch Bessie. Life was full of excitement and fun twenty-four hours of the day. We were together for about six months and then my father died out in Kansas City and I had to go out there to

my mother. It was in August, I remember, and hotter than Hades. I left Lester in the flat and said good-by to Bessie, telling her I'd be back in ten days or so. Well, there was trouble about the will and my mother was sick and all broken up and I couldn't leave her, and so ten days got to be two weeks and then three and then four. Bessie wasn't much at writing letters but I used to hear from her about once a week, little short letters full of bad spelling with news of New York and a lot of stories and jokes she'd picked up during the week. They always made me laugh and feel better. I couldn't read all of them to my mother because some of the stories weren't exactly the kind you could tell to nice old ladies, but I used to read her parts of them and they'd make her laugh and feel much better. It was as if Bessie had the power of putting some of her big hearty self into an envelope to send out to me in Kansas City. I've always thought it was as much Bessie's letters as the doctors themselves that helped my mother to get well that time.

“Anyway, she began to get strong again and I bought my ticket for a Friday to go back to Bessie and work and then on a Wednesday I got a telegram from Herminie Ross. I'll never forget that telegram. For me it was just as if the world had suddenly come to an end. It was like getting up one morning to find that the whole universe had gone cock-eyed and the sun had failed to come up. Bessie was dead. She'd been killed in an accident during a political outing in Hoboken.

“I took the next train back and when I got to my flat Lester wasn't there. It was the first time in all our life together he hadn't come to the door when I rang the bell. I went to the janitor and he gave me a note. He said it was from Lester and that he had written it himself for Lester because Lester

couldn't read or write. When I opened it I discovered the second blow at the foundations of my life. Lester was gone.

“The janitor had written for him something like this:

Dear sir;

I regret to say that I have had to leave. I cannot tell you the reason. I was very satisfied with the place and you have always been more than kind to me, but I have to go.

Something has happened. I could not face you again on account of shame. Forgive me, sir, if I ask God to bless and keep you.

Your devoted servant,

Lester Bitts.

“Then for a day or two I forgot all about Lester. Bessie was the only one I could think of.... Bessie whom I would never see again.

“Herminie told me the story. It seemed that Bessie had been asked to be the guest of honor at a Democratic political picnic and rally over in Hoboken and as she always said yes, she accepted, and was crowned Queen of the Rally on a throne. She must have looked wonderful because that was just the sort of big human background in which she belonged. You could just see her there in the midst of all those families drinking beer and enjoying themselves.... Bessie seated on a throne with a crown on her head and a stein of beer in one hand ... big and handsome and good natured.

“The accident happened late in the afternoon. It seemed that three breweries had sent beer trucks with their finest big horses drawing them... six big Percherons on each truck. They took part in a kind of pageant. It was good advertisement too for the breweries. About five o'clock

Bessie got the notion that as Queen of the occasion she wanted to drive one of the trucks, and as everybody was feeling gay, they let her do it. Still wearing her crown she climbed up to the seat and took the reins. There was a driver beside her to show her how to drive six big brewery horses at once, but he'd had a little too much beer and he and Bessie began to laugh and the horses got out of hand and started to gallop. When the driver snatched the reins from her and tried to straighten them out, they got tangled. The horses went faster and faster with Bessie and the driver laughing and clinging to the high seat, until they crashed into a corner of the grandstand and the whole truck went over with Bessie and the driver underneath. When they finally righted the truck and pulled her out, she was dead.

“We gave her a wonderful funeral. Everybody on Broadway came and hordes of people, mostly shabby men and women down on their luck whom nobody had ever seen. They were, I guess, all people whom Bessie had helped. And all the Rafferty family were there and the uncles and aunts and cousins from Ninth Avenue. There were masses and masses of flowers from blankets of roses down to scrubby little bunches of nasturtiums. I hope there's an afterlife and that Bessie was able to see what was going on. She would have loved her own funeral.”

4

“I wasn't the only one who missed her. There were all those down and outers who came to the funeral, and people in places like Rector's and Jack's would suddenly miss something, not quite knowing what it was, and then as the evening wore on they would discover that what they missed was Bessie. They didn't see her sweep in with her plumes

and feather boas and they didn't hear her loud laugh. The table in Jack's and at Rector's where actors and sporting men once gathered like flies on honey, was empty now. Something was gone.

“As for Lester I thought that some day he'd just walk in the door and go about his work again without saying anything. A week passed and then another and then another and finally I got in a little Filipino to take his place, planning to fire him when Lester returned; but Lester never came back. I got the police to looking for him—Mike Regan at the Forty-sixth Street station was a friend of mine and he saw that they searched thoroughly—but they never found hide nor hair of him. It was easy enough for him to disappear because he hadn't any friends or connections except me and so there wasn't anybody you could question about him. When I showed his note to the police they said, ‘What was he ashamed of? What'd he steal? Didn't you miss nothing?’ And I said, ‘No, I didn't miss anything.’ All my diamond studs and my two fancy watches—everything of any value I found locked in my strong box just the way they always were. Lester had left the key with the janitor. As a matter of fact, there was one thing missing but I never spoke of it to the police partly because it seemed so unimportant and partly because I had a feeling—you know, one of those feelings you can't account for which are always right—that I'd better leave the whole thing lie. The only thing missing was a picture of Bessie, cabinet size, in an evening dress with hat, plumes and boa.

“The police gave up the problem of Lester and I began to settle down. I wasn't very old—only in my middle thirties—but somehow after Bessie, I never had any more fun

larruping around. Right in the middle of a love affair I'd begin to be bored and start comparing the woman to Bessie and then that would be the end of it. So one day I married Minnie Sands. She was just a kid then, playing ingenues in our company. I never regretted it. It was one of those good old-fashioned stage marriages that don't happen any more, with kids born in dressing rooms and carried along on tour to sleep in trunk lids and bureau drawers. I've been lucky all my life. Bessie was one kind of luck and Minnie another and both of 'em were okay.

“And in the meanwhile Herminie Ross married one of her Johnnies. She's still alive and you read about her now and then in the society columns, a respected and fashionable old lady. She gives a lot of her money to charity and works on Actors' Relief Boards. After Bessie died and Herminie got married I didn't see much of her until one day about ten years ago I was asked to speak at one of those high-brow drama meetings, and there sitting next to me at the speakers' table was Herminie. She hadn't changed very much and gradually we got to talking about the old days, and when lunch was over, she said to me, ‘Why don't you come home with me for a cup of tea? We can talk there without having everybody listen in on us.’ I knew she was dying to let down her hair and talk, but she didn't want to in front of all the other society women at the lunch. And that was just what she did. She had done well for herself, as well as poor Bessie had done poorly, but in her heart Herminie was still a trouper and sometimes, she said, she nearly died for wanting to talk about the old days.

“I stayed until eight o'clock and then it was she told me why Lester had disappeared. All the time she and Bessie

were playing in *The Minx* they used to tell each other all their adventures, usually before the show, because afterward there never was any time, what with all Herminie's admirers trouping in and out. Bessie used to tell her everything and one night Bessie came in and said to her, 'Herminie, every night I come in now for a week or more there's been a little man standing under the street lamp outside the stage door. I think he wants to speak to me from the way he looks at me. I don't know what he wants but I guess if it was a touch he'd have spoken of it before now. I feel kind of sorry for him, hanging around like that. He looks so scared and unhappy.'

"So Herminie said, 'Why don't you speak to him?' and Bessie said, 'All right, I will.'

"Well, Herminie didn't hear any more about it for about a week and then one night Bessie came in early to the theater and came straight to Herminie's dressing room and said she had a funny story to tell her.

"She said, 'I did speak to the little man and I took him home with me.' And Herminie said, 'What do you mean took him home with you?'

" 'Just that,' said Bessie. 'I took him home with me. He's been with me for a week, day and night.'

" 'What about Jack?' asked Herminie, meaning me, and Bessie said, 'It's all right. What he don't know won't hurt him, and anyway some day he'll understand. Wait until you hear the story.'

"It seemed that when she did speak to the little man, he was so frightened he couldn't answer her at first and then slowly she got out of him that it *was* her he'd been waiting to see night after night under the lamppost. He was afraid he'd annoyed her and he said that all he ever asked was just the

chance to look at her as she came in and out of the theater, if it didn't upset her. He said she didn't need to bother with a poor little thing like him with so many other men wanting to make love to her and marry her. He didn't know it, of course, but he'd said just the right thing, about the only thing he could have said to make Bessie notice him, only I guess he was so scared at the moment that he didn't even want to say the right thing. Anyway, he was just Bessie's dish—somebody scared and abused and humble. So she said, 'Come along and have a bite to eat.' But he thanked her and said he couldn't go to any restaurant. 'It's all right,' he said, 'if you'll just let me look at you every night and say good evening sometimes.' He kept addressing her very respectfully as 'Madam' which made Bessie laugh. So she said, 'All right. You're coming home with me and I'll cook you up something. You look as if you hadn't had a square meal for months.'

"When they got home Bessie made it into a real party. She opened champagne for him and Irish whisky for herself and they sat down to have a big time. All the time the little man was scared to death and tongue-tied. She couldn't get anything out of him for a long time but 'yes' and 'no' until presently the champagne began to work and then he talked about himself, and Bessie drew him out.

"She found out that he'd been an orphan since he was three years old and that he'd worked hard ever since he was a kid and nobody had ever loved him. 'I guess I was too ugly,' he said, 'and too measly for any woman ever to look at me.' Anyway, no woman ever did from the time he was a kid. 'But inside,' he said, 'I'm just like any other man. I fall in love but nothing ever comes of it. I wouldn't dare ask any woman to

“speak to me.” And then Bessie got out of him that he’d been beaten and kicked and abused so much as a child that all he ever wanted to do was shrink away from people and hide, for fear of a blow or a nasty crack. So he didn’t know anybody at all.

“Well, by this time the whisky Bessie was drinking had begun to work on her too and she began to cry over his story and said, ‘I’ll tell you what you’re going to do. You’re going to stay here with me. I’ll fix things up for you.’

“And so, still trembling and frightened, the little man stayed on. For more than a week except when she was at the theater, Bessie cosseted and cared for him ... this poor little man who had never been loved by any creature and had never been a woman’s lover or known what love was. And Bessie confided in Herminie her belief that when she had finished with him he’d be a different man. He wouldn’t be scared or timid ever again and anyway he wouldn’t die without ever having known the love of a woman. And what a woman! One who couldn’t be bought for any amount of money or diamonds.

“Herminie said that he came with Bessie to the theater every night and was there waiting when the curtain went down, but he never came inside. He waited for her under the lamppost at the end of the stage door alley. He’d stay there from a quarter to eight when he left Bessie until midnight when she came out again. He hadn’t anything else to do. And sometimes he’d see Herminie coming out with three or four admirers wearing all her orchids and diamonds. And then Bessie would come out alone and take him home with her.

“It was Herminie who discovered who he was. One night Bessie’s sister Mrs. Rafferty came into her dressing room

with an extra load of troubles and so Bessie was late, and when Herminie came out the little man was standing by the lamppost. At sight of her he turned away quickly into the shadows but this time he didn't turn quickly enough. She saw that it was Lester.

“But Bessie never found out because she never again came into Herminie's dressing room for a gossip. The next day she went to Hoboken to be Queen of the Rally and Herminie never saw her again alive.”

5

“When I left Herminie's swell house on Fifth Avenue that night, I didn't go home but went straight to Jack's and had dinner in a corner, all alone. Somehow or other the occasion demanded it. There didn't seem to be any other place in New York that was fitting and proper and in a way the melancholy state of that grand old restaurant was right too. Prohibition had come in and Jack's was on its last legs. There weren't any actors or sporting men. There wasn't anyone there save a few dreary people eating here and there alone or in twos and threes; but there were the ghosts of Diamond Jim Brady and Herminie Ross and Edna MacCauley and Good Time Bessie. There was, I think, even the ghost of myself.

“I ate alone, served by a tired, somewhat untidy waiter, who moved about as if he were serving ghosts. And I thought about what Herminie, sitting in her expensive, decorated drawing-room had told me. Bessie, long ago had been right, when she said, ‘Some day he'll understand.’ I did understand. If I had discovered about Lester twenty-five years before, I would have been crazy with anger and jealousy at both of them, never seeing that what Bessie had done was perhaps

the kindest thing she had ever done in a life that was given over to doing kind things for other people. There was in the story something so fantastically grand and human, that what I cared and thought was of no importance. Like in the old story of the Juggler of Notre Dame, I think God understood. Bessie gave the only thing she had to give, and believe me it was no small gift. Sitting there over my oysters I was sure now that Lester had been there at the funeral, lost somewhere in the great crowd, hiding from me... the only other person besides Bessie that he had loved.

“Only one thing tormented me and that was a terrible curiosity to know what had become of Lester in the twenty-five years since he left the note written for him by the janitor. Perhaps, I thought, it changed his whole life. Perhaps he’s married now with children and grandchildren, maybe living right here in New York somewhere near me. Or maybe he forgot his fear of women and became a lady killer. Or maybe ... but everything I tried to figure out about him was wrong, I found out in the end.

“My wife died and my children got married and I wasn’t any longer a leading man but a character actor and jobs got scarcer and scarcer. The pictures never seemed to have any use for me and the new people who came to Broadway didn’t remember me even if they’d ever heard of me. And so to make ends meet, I gave up my flat and came up here to live. It isn’t a very good hotel but it’s clean and neat and the rooms are big with high ceilings, and I can’t complain about life. I’ve had a lot of fun and that’s the thing that’s important. I can sit here and look at the river and have a lot of fun just thinking about it all.

“Anyway, I’d been here only a day or two when I heard a quarrel going on downstairs in the lobby back of the screen that hides the entrance to the service elevator and I heard somebody speak Bessie Devine’s name, which I hadn’t heard for years and then somebody, somebody young, said, ‘Bessie Devine, my eye! There wasn’t any such person!’ and the young voice laughed and the old voice said, ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about... you and your silly moving picture magazines.’

“Waiting for the elevator, I managed to peek through a crack in the screen and there standing with two or three suits, freshly pressed and on hangers, was Lester. There couldn’t be any mistake. Nobody ever had such an ugly face as Lester’s. It was so ugly that age made little difference to it. And he had the poorest little rickety body in the world, because as a child he’d never had enough to eat.

“I didn’t speak to him then but I sent for Jimmy, the bellboy he’d been quarreling with. Jimmy is a nice kid who grew up to be the porter. And I asked him about Lester, because it *was* Lester all right, There wasn’t any mistake. And Jimmy said, ‘Oh, he’s nuts! He’s a good hotel valet and harmless but completely nuts.’ And when I asked him why, he said, ‘Oh, all he does is talk about the good old days and a love affair he had with some dame called Bessie Devine. He says that everybody knew her and she was a big star, but none of the boys around here ever heard of her, and anyway, can you imagine any big star havin’ a love affair with an ugly little runt like that.’ And then I told him not to tease Lester any more because there once was a big handsome actress called Bessie Devine and that it was true that she’d had a love

affair with Lester; but when I got all through, you could see he didn't believe me any more than he'd believed Lester.

“So I sent for Lester and when he saw me he didn't believe it at first and then he turned white and began to shake all over, and then he cried. But I told him it was all right because it had all happened so long ago that it couldn't possibly make any difference except to bring a couple of old men like ourselves both closer together than we had ever been, and that we must be friends because that's what Bessie would have liked more than anything in the world. And so we came to know each other all over again, in a different way. We talked a lot about Bessie but we never talked openly about what had happened between him and her, and presently I began to understand what the effect of the affair on him had been all these years. It wasn't at all what I thought. Because it was the only thing which had ever happened to him all his life and because it was so incredible and tremendous, it seemed to have unsettled his mind. And as he grew older he couldn't think about anything else ... only just this wonderful thing that had happened to him. And then whenever he got a little acquainted with anybody he'd tell them the story. At first he didn't use her name but when nobody believed him and said, ‘Well, if it really happened to you, what was her name?’ and he'd tell it, but that only made it worse because then nobody would believe that Bessie Devine whom everybody knew at Rector's and Jack's, had ever slept with this ugly little valet. And as the years passed he began to find people who had never even heard of Bessie Devine and, like Jimmy the bellhop, said there wasn't any such person. So it only got worse and worse, until that day he and I found each other again as old men, and after that he didn't care. You see

at last, after more than thirty years, he'd found someone who believed his story."

6

"So that's the end of the story," the old gentleman said. "Lester insists on looking after me just the way he did thirty-five years ago. It makes him kind of happy, so I let him do it."

Just then there was a knock on the door and the old actor said, "Come in." The door opened and in came Lester carrying a worn gray suit on a coat hanger. It was freshly pressed and I understood why the old gentleman always looked so well turned out instead of looking shabby and untidy. I understood too why the room was so neat and spotless. The valet was unmistakably Lester. I never saw an uglier, more misshapen little man.

"Lester," said the old gentleman, "this is a friend of mine. I've just been telling him about Bessie. He's too young to remember her."

Lester gave a slight glance of distaste at the sight of me, sprawled in ungentlemanly fashion on the untidy bed and then said, "Yes, sir. I'm pleased to know you." A light came into the poor little Cockney face. "Bessie, sir. That was a great woman. I think she was the greatest woman I ever knew."

[The end of *Good Time Bessie* by Louis Bromfield]