



RIGHT IN THE HEART OF THE GREAT STRIKE.

By Winifred Black.

REBECCA HERTSKY is a very interesting young woman. She is red-haired, and her skin is milk-white, and she has a pair of brilliant steel-blue eyes. If she had dark eyelashes she would be a beauty. She is twenty-two years old.

She looks about sixteen, but the people who live near her call her an old maid.

She lives down in Essex street. Her mother keeps a soda stand there.

I went down to Essex street to see Rebecca Hertsy last night.

Essex street is a picture at night. The houses are tall and dark and the steps are crowded with women. The sidewalks are lined with men who are trying to sell elastic and ribbons and shoestrings and wilted onions and withered beets and old fish. The street is paved with children. You have to walk very slowly down in Essex street. You would step on a dozen babies in less than a quarter of a block if you didn't.

Mrs. Hertsy's soda stand is almost in the middle of the block.

On one side of her, there's a grocery store, where they stand barrels of pickles out in front, so that purchasers can dip in and take out a double handful without waiting for the trial of a measure. On the other side of the soda stand there is a monument shop. The monuments stand out on the walk, too, and the monument man has a good deal of trouble keeping the boys from playing leap frog over his nice new tombstones. Mrs. Hertsy was very busy when I arrived at the soda fountain.

Four young men were buying soda for four young girls. All the young men held lighted cigars in one hand and carried the soda in the other, and the girls drank from the glasses which the young men held, and they laughed all the time.

"I beg your pardon," said I to Mrs. Hertsy, "is your daughter here?"

Mrs. Hertsy looked darkly at me and shook her head.

She is a big woman, with a heavy face and a pair of great tragic black eyes. She wears her hair in little spits curls. She would be rather a handsome woman if she were not so stout.

"Aw, she don't speak English?" said one of the young men.

"I am looking for Miss Hertsy," said I. "Perhaps you can tell me—The girls nudged each other.

"She thinks one of you is Miss Hertsy," said the young man who had spoken first. The girls burst into shrieks of laughter.

"No," said the young man, eying me shrewdly. "Miss Hertsy ain't here. She's in the country. She don't know nothing about the strike."

"Who wants to see me?" asked one from the steps of the tenement next door. And that's how Miss Rebecca Hertsy and I met. She came down from the steps to see me.

"I am going to the mass meeting," she said. "Some of the women in the union promised to be there. You may go, too, if you want to." I did want to, and so we set out to the meeting.

"I am trying to get the women organized," said Rebecca Hertsy. "It is hard work. I am not a leader—oh, no, I could not be that, but I want to help all I can.

"There are 45,000 men out on strike now. That means business. We will soon bring them to terms now."

"Bring who to terms?"

"Why, the contractors," said Miss Hertsy; "the contractors and the manufacturers. The contractors are as poor as we are now, but they must join with us or starve. When the strikes first began, eight years ago, the contractors were all our enemies. They made money, then—\$50—\$75 a week. They were rich men. They would not talk with us; but they were too rich. Other people saw it and they wanted to be rich, too; so they went and borrowed money and bought machines, and they took contracts, and they made \$40 a week and grew very rich.

"Then other people came and made \$20 a week, and now the contractors make, maybe \$10, maybe \$12; maybe \$7 or \$8 a week, and they are poor, too, and now we must all fight together—or die together."

Rebecca Hertsy speaks with a slight accent, that grows thick when she gets interested.

"She used to be a girl from Essex street. She talks as if she read a good deal.

"Eight years we have been striking," she said; "eight years—every year, at the same time. At first no one knew it, but the manufacturers. Then some one in the newspapers heard of it and they sent men to see us, and the men wrote and told the papers how we lived—and how we died. And there was a great time. The churches uptown got excited. They sent people down here—men and women and ministers. They all had little books. The women held their skirts up from the floor and the men carried handkerchiefs to their faces all the time they were down here, and they all said: 'How dreadful!' Then they wrote in the little books. Sometimes they sent packages of things to eat and to wear the next day. Then the police and the doctors, they talked, and they had meetings, and said that we lived in shameful houses, and that we were dying for want of fresh air, and there was much talk, and somebody tore out some buildings and make a park, and every one was talking about us and our homes.

"They talk about us yet. Sometimes they come to visit us. I've heard them call us picturesque."

"See! I know the people here. Come, I will show you." The girl's face was set with a strange intensity.

She went into a narrow little hall, and she walked up a narrow flight of stairs. It was as dark as Egypt on the stairs. I could not see my hand before my face.

"Don't put your hand on the banister," said Rebecca Hertsy. "You may not find it all the time. When you do find it you will not like it."

I followed her as quickly as I could. The stairs grew steeper and shakier as we went up.

I could scarcely breathe for want of decent air. At last we were at the top of the tenement. Rebecca Hertsy knocked at a narrow door, then she opened it and went in. The room inside was not more than 16 feet square. There was a stove in one corner and a cot bed in another corner, and there was a heap of something in another corner.

There were two chairs in the room, and there was a wooden table set against the wall.

A woman sat at a sewing machine sewing, a little girl sat on the floor pulling threads out of a pile of vests. The child saw us, and spoke to the woman. The woman turned her head and nodded. Then she went on sewing.

Rebecca Hertsy said something in a guttural jargon that was like German and yet not like it. The woman nodded toward the pile of something in the nearest corner.

Rebecca beckoned to me.

bit of a baby lying on the floor and looked down at a little

I followed her, and a pile of vests. The baby was not more than two weeks old. It was very thin. "It will not live," said Rebecca, quietly. "I am glad." I looked toward the woman at the machine.

"She don't understand," said Rebecca. "She speaks nothing but Yiddish. I don't think she would care much if she could understand."

"Why should she care?"

"The baby lies there all day. At night she takes it in the bed with her and the little girl. It cries at night, and she can't sleep. It is sick, and it would want to die if it knew."

They are all hungry. All the time they are hungry. Yet they are not the poorest. They do not keep a boarder.

Most of our people keep boarders. One in each corner of the room.

It is not nice, but they must pay the rent.

For such a room? Four dollars a month.

Cheap? Yes, but when you make \$10 a week by working sixteen hours a day? The woman has been sick. She is working to make up for lost time. Forgive her if she does not stop to say good-by. At the foot of the stairs Rebecca Hertsy turned and looked at me.

"Do you find us picturesque?" she said when we were out in the street. She stood still and pointed.

"You see these houses?" she said. "They look very nice from the outside—fire escapes, you see, the articles in the papers did that, years ago—and brownstone fronts, some of them, and a good front door, and people laughing on the steps, and every one of these houses is full of rooms like the one you have just seen, and the people who live in these rooms are 'out on strike.' Do you find it interesting?"

"For eight years they have gone out on strike. I was a little girl, the first time. My father was a coat maker. He made \$3 a week. He worked from 6 in the morning until 11 or 12 at night. I remember the morning hour. I had to get up first and make the coffee."

"We always had coffee for breakfast, coffee and bread, and sometimes I had been up so late helping with the bastings, that I could scarcely keep my eyes open in the morning, and I had hard work to keep from scalding myself with the hot water. But I always went to school. My father made me do that, no matter how hard times were."

"He is dead now. He died one cold Winter when he had no work."

"I heard the dispensary doctor say what killed him. I can't remember the word, but I know what he meant."

"He meant cold and hunger, and being tired with hard work."

"When he went on strike, the last time, we went hungry for days. There were four of us children. We didn't like the strike, and we went home and begged our father to work any way, but we were afraid."

"When he went back to work he said we would never be so poor again. The contractors made him promises and signed great papers, and there was to be plenty of work, and good wages—\$8 or \$10 a week, and only ten or twelve hours work. But the contractors changed their minds when work got slack. And now it is just the same again. We are not so poor. My mother's uncle left her a little money, and she has the soda stand, and I work at finishing, myself."

"My mother's uncle was a contractor."

"Yes, all the contractors are our own people. They know what they are doing."

"Seven years ago there were only 25,000 men on strike."

"Three years ago there were 35,000, and this year there are 45,000. It is growing all the time."

"This time we will succeed. We must succeed this time. Forty-five thousand men out on strike, and the women down to join. The contractors will do anything to get us back. You will see! You will see!"

The mass meeting was at Waltham Hall. Waltham Hall is down in Orchard street. Waltham Hall is in a narrow ill-smelling street.

There's a saloon on one side of it, and the entrance to the

hall is up a flight of narrow, ill-smelling stairs. The stairs were blocked as Rebecca Hertsy and I went up there.

Frowzy, unkempt, glassy-eyed men stumbled up the stairs, and groped their way down by the banister.

Two big policemen stood at the head of the stairs, and said: "Take it easy, now; don't rush; plenty of time. Take it easy."

And the unkempt men cowered under the policemen's eyes, and fell to pushing, and elbowing, and fighting furtively the women the policemen looked the other way, for all the world like a crowd of hungry, homeless, frightened dogs. A tall, hollow-chested young fellow, with a waxen face, caught sight of Rebecca Hertsy and waved his battered old hat to her, above the heads of the crowd.

The girl flushed a little. "He's going to speak," she said.

"He's a good speaker. He tells the truth. He is not afraid."

The young fellow's feeble face was ablaze with intense excitement.

For once, he was some one of importance.

For once, people would look at him, and wonder what he thought and what he was going to say. He fought his way to the platform.

"See," said Rebecca Hertsy. "See all these men. Look at their faces. You can see how poor they are. You can see how hungry they are. Do you know what a man said to me about them the other day. He is a reporter. He came down here to make what he calls a story."

"He said that these men looked like dogs to him. Yes, he said that. Like starved dogs. He said the hungry curs in the street might as well 'strike' as these men. He said they had as much brains as a dog, and as much courage, and he said they were chased and hit and stoned, too, and he said—"

The young man who had waved his hat at us, walked to the edge of the platform.

The blazing indignation faded from Rebecca Hertsy's face. "S—h," she said, "he begins to speak."

The young man threw up his gaunt arms in a mute appeal for silence. He did not get it.

A few people at the front of the hall nudged each other and sat back to listen, but most of the unkempt men went on whispering and shouting, and gesticulating, as if the young man on the platform did not exist. Of the few who did listen—some smiled like pleased children—but the most of them looked at him with vague, puzzled eyes that were more pathetic than any tears could be.

The young man spoke quietly at first. Then he raised his guttural voice in a strange cadence, that was half a song and half a shriek.

"He is telling them to stand fast, like men," said Rebecca Hertsy. "He tells them to remember the years that are gone. He tells them to remember the other strikes. He tells them to think of their babies who cry for food. He says—"

"The usual thing," said a young man leaning across me and speaking to the excited girl, "it's just as I told you the other day. They are poor, hungry dogs. They bark—they do not bite. They say these things every year."

"Yes," said Rebecca Hertsy, her blue eyes ablaze, "and it is as true to-day as it always is."

"And as it always will be," said the young man sharpening his pencil.

"No—no," said Rebecca Hertsy. "You shall not say so. You shall not think so. You—and your 'story' you are always looking for. You will see one, one day, that will interest you. Yes, even you. It will be 'picturesque' enough then. We have starved long enough. We are beginning to understand. For eight years we have had the strike. Every year there are more men who go out. This year we shall win—this year. S—h—he's speaking again!"

WINIFRED BLACK.



AMONG THE WIVES AND THE CHILDREN OF THE STRIKERS.

(Sketched from life in the heart of the striking district by a Journal artist.)