

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

CURIOUS HAPPENINGS.*

This collection of short stories is another of Miss Bowen's successes. Unlike many of its kind, one feels that the very best work has been put into them. Each story has its thrill and many of them are of breathless interest. Needless to add they are full of colour, and are of the period that lends itself to romance. Miss Bowen has not lost her skill in portraying handsome gallants and lovely dames, nor has she lost the art well known to her admirers of bringing the atmosphere of "other days around us." As these stories are of almost equal merit and as it is not possible to allude to more than two or three, we do not claim to have commented on those that we have chosen for any other reason than that space forbids our mentioning them all.

"The Pond" tells of a woman distorted with jealousy at her brother's marriage and the consequent deposition of herself as mistress of her ancestral home. Catherine was by nature a woman with a violent temper, and the concluding tragedy is that she deliberately drowns her little nephew in the pond on the estate. The race after the child in the direction of the pond is told with terrible force. "He was sobbing with terror; her spare figure hastening after him was endowed with all the horror with which his imagination had peopled dark places and long silences, all the dreads that lurked (he somehow knew) in the distant reaches of the world beyond his home."

His little face was livid; in this supreme moment he recalled his father's teaching, who had instilled into him the maxims of a race whose admired virtue was courage.

"I shouldn't have runned away," he sobbed, "only 'cos you're so much bigger than me."

"Belle Hutchinson" tells of a woman with a stormy past who thought she had found sanctuary at last. "It had been very pleasant to be calmly cared for, to be respected and loved, and she had been very content with a certain wistfulness in her happiness."

And now it was all at an end. Her young convent-bred sister whom she had ardently desired to shield was treading in the footsteps of her elder sister.

"She would have been safer with me after," thought poor Belle, who had been so happy that her sister was far from the turmoil of her reckless life."

She looks on her husband as a knight errant and decides to unburden her distress, but he had just returned from France where he had heard such scandals connected with her name. "Do you think I should have married you if I had not believed you to be an honest woman?"

There was mingled with her despair, astonishment that there should be anyone who did not know her for an Irish adventuress at whose name men shrugged their shoulders and laughed."

"I think I can guess your news, Ma'am. Nancy is like yourself, too easy, a defect in the blood!"

"How do you know?—how do you know?" she said, backing before him and stumbling in her long gown.

"Because I was Nancy's lover, Ma'am."

The cynical attitude of this man can hardly be surpassed.

"The Umbrella Mender," for sheer tragedy would be outdone with difficulty.

"He had been to the Rotunda to hear his beloved sing, but she had not appeared, and he was returning in low spirits."

The reason for her absence was unavoidable, she was lying murdered in a lonely house in the neighbourhood. The plot in this story and its working out is a masterly piece of work.

"Margaret Muskerry" is a story of a duel fought with sinister intent and ended in the failure of the plot to kill the intended victim. The drunken heir to the estate was urged by Margaret his sister to fight an accomplished swordsman, her ardent wish being that her brother should be killed and thus rid his family of the ruin that was hanging over them. He was also betrothed to a girl who was his sister's friend and she hoped that his death would be the means of uniting her instead to her younger and favourite brother. John the reprobate however defeats the intrigue, kills his adversary and lives to be we presume the curse of his family.

"A Venetian Evening" is one of the most pathetic of all these stories, all of which have their share of pathos. Duilo, the heir to the Marchese Barbetta, was left penniless, who had all his life believed himself to be in the future a wealthy man.

He had lived as one who will some day, any day, be rich. Who would guess that his uncle would one day fall from his seat in the lamp-hung gondola and die without a word among the glasses and the fruits, the sweets and the wine of the floating supper table?

"I leave," said the will, "no money, prodigious debts, and the rest to the Holy Church." The servant girl who alone remained in the house when his ruin became known, at his request dresses herself in the fine clothing of his house and dines with him on the gondola.

"You are a great lady now," he smiled.

She stepped into the gondola, fair and light as a lily and sank back among the velvet cushions.

"For one night."

"Will you go back, Musetta?"

"To what? To be a kitchenmaid again? I shall always be a lady in silk."

It is inferred, as so much is, in these cleverly written tales, that the Marchese and Musetta died by drowning. It was so much better than facing to-morrow.

*By Marjorie Bowen. London: Mills & Boon, Ltd.

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