

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"MISS HAROUN AL-RASCHID."*

This novel won the first prize in Hodder & Stoughton's competition for a thousand guineas. It is written in the first person by a Miss Jerningham, otherwise Miss Haroun al-Raschid. Her father was an Assyriologist of European repute, which she explains as "a person who digs in Asiatic Turkey for wrecked and buried towns of ancient Assyria and Babylonia." In case anyone should imagine that they are to be regaled with the dry bones of antiquity, we hasten to assure them that there is not a dry passage in the whole book, which is not only brimful of adventure, but of the most delightful humour as well. It is understood that when a daughter of tender age accompanies a father of Sir Horne Jerningham's calibre on his explorations in a country like Turkey, she is bound to see life from a point of view that is, to say the least of it, original. The writer takes us back to the beginning of things before she herself was born.

"My mother-to-be was the last of the race of hereditary Pashas of Amadiyah." She therefore belonged to the Moslem faith. Without being well acquainted with the Eastern customs, it will be understood without difficulty that the marriage of a Christian with a Moslem would create a very dangerous situation.

"Ratia Khan's guardians allowed Papa to work in a secluded corner of their court. Doubtless Ratia Khan found it a pleasant break in the monotony of life to slip out in the moonlight and peer down the mysterious hole as it deepened night by night.

"My father is handsome still—he was young then—one can see how it was bound to end. A court, high walled, moonlit, and topped by the moving pageant of the stars, a black shaft with the eerie noise of men working at the bottom, a comely young man eager to explain each piece as it was handed out, a lovely young girl as eager to learn, as she packed the treasures with her slim Abbasside fingers. The storks looking down—highly scandalised—from the roof, uncle and aunt dozing on the verandah, the song of the lapping river and rustling young leaves dallying with the spring night breeze, the scent of the distant wormwood-grown desert coming in subtle gusts to blend with the nearer, maddeningly subtle savour of the jessamine on the wall." A very alluring picture that, and it causes the whole scene to leap at once to the imagination. It was this mingling of the races that permitted Miss Jerningham to experience the wonderful adventures that she sets forth in this book. Had she been pure European she would not have survived to tell the tale. Her beautiful mother was supposed to have died when she was an infant, and: the quick burial of the East made it possible for

her husband to accept the fact of her death, although he had never seen her dead body. The Assyrian woman found life too hard and the isolation of separation from her people too grievous to be borne, so she went out of her husband's life by way of a feigned death.

She plays a prominent part in the protection of her daughter in her many hairbreadth escapes from the fury of the Turks, in her wild escapades. Once the daughter narrowly escaped being buried alive, as she had taken the place of firearms in a coffin that had been smuggled into a Christian village, the discovery of which would have meant certain death by massacre to the whole of the inhabitants. She heroically consented to play the part of the corpse when the firearms had been hastily disposed of, and she found it a somewhat perilous and very gruesome position.

"Near the head of the coffin a child whimpered; her mother comforted her in a caressing whisper. How, I thought, would that same child whimper under a Turkish bayonet? I would be buried alive sooner than learn through my own doing what that sound would be like."

Deliverance, however, came in time. But it can be well understood that "Papa's position and peace of mind was not improved by these and like incidents, and the knowledge of them had to be kept from him at all hazards."

As to the official enquiry, "it began to grow so searching that I had to cut it short at any cost, so I asked in a weak voice for some eau de cologne. It answered admirably."

Perhaps the most exciting chapter in the book is the race to the Tel against the French Assyriologist, for both parties had become aware that the mound hid priceless treasures of antiquarian value.

"We hurried. The Arabs knew the unspoken object of our trip as well as we did ourselves, and as they take Assyriology seriously they begged Papa in appealing falsetto to lead them to the Tel that they might blacken the faces of our rivals and cause them to eat abomination and defeat before the eyes of all Al Jezireh and the farthest dwellers in Irak Arabi."

We have no space to quote the fascinating description of that delirious adventure or to give more than an indication of the closing scene of the book, but in case there are readers who may be disappointed at the little mention of the romance, we may just add that there was a certain good-looking young American, and leave them to find out the rest, which we certainly advise them to do.

This life-like novel was well worth the 1,000-guinea prize. It is one of the most brilliant and original books which is likely to delight a discriminating public for many a long day.

H. H.

WORD FOR THE WEEK.

Cato said that the best way to keep good acts in memory was to refresh them with new.

Bacon.

* By Jessie Douglas Kerruish. (London: Hodder & Stoughton.)

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