

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"THE THIRD ESTATE,"*

This is perhaps one of the most fascinating of all Miss Bowen's attractive historical novels, which are such a source of delight to her large circle of admirers. "The Third Estate" is of the period immediately preceding the French Revolution, and the title refers to the bourgeois class, which has been the theme of so many able writers and which affords so great scope for the imaginative pen. We may be sure that it is a period of which Miss Bowen is not slow to take full advantage, and the volume under notice, as may be expected, teems with colour and vivid portraiture. Picture after picture is rapidly sketched, glowing with personality, intrigue and the easy virtue of that period. Miss Bowen revels in descriptions of rich dresses, sumptuous apartments, handsome gallants, and presents them in such a manner that one has the effect of a succession of richly painted canvases unfolded before one's eyes.

The scene opens on the deathbed of Louis XV and the banishment of his mistress Du Barry from the Court. The young page, the Marquis de Sarcey, around whom the present romance is woven, was then a boy of fifteen, and owned one of the noblest names and one of the most considerable fortunes in France. He scarcely admitted the Bourbons to be of better blood than himself. It was he who offered to conduct the fallen favourite to her apartment, "he was too great and too proud to turn his back on her. A de Sarcey does not have to consider to whom he speaks." He is described as a precociously cynical boy—and the child proved the father of the man. We next meet him at the age of thirty. He was not often bored. Through thirty years of age his brilliant life had not begun to pall upon him, he contrived to find pleasure in vice, in idleness and uselessness. He had the reputation of being absolutely heartless and absolutely disinterested in the events of the day. At this period he was about to sign his marriage contract with the elder daughter of the wealthy M. le President. Pélagie de Haultpenne was neither beautiful nor clever, but this did not trouble him. "M. de Haultpenne was used to accepting insolence from his future son-in-law. He knew that it was only his great wealth that made such an alliance possible. M. de Sarcey was perhaps the most brilliant match in the kingdom and his haughtiness could easily be condoned."

It was on the occasion of the formal betrothal that de Sarcey saw for the first time the younger daughter Eugénie, who was on the eve of her own betrothal to her hitherto unknown suitor, M. de Rochfort.

Unlike her sister, she was a beautiful girl, full of life and allurements. Finding herself by chance

alone with de Sarcey, she imagines him to be her future husband, and the girl's charm and his own whimsical and unscrupulous disposition lead him to play the suitor in good earnest and to make passionate love to her.

The affair, begun in jest on his part, ends in sober earnest, and the interview ends like the marriage service with amazement on Eugénie's part.

Eugénie had caught the name of her sister's betrothed husband.

"Who are you, Monsieur?" she asked hurriedly,

He bowed indifferently.

"The Marquis de Sarcey."

He made no excuses for the mistake he had purposely encouraged, and she stared at him almost beside herself.

"M. de Sarcey," she murmured. "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!"

But from that moment Eugénie and de Sarcey for weal or woe love one another.

De Sarcey, accustomed to ask and have, demands of their father that the younger girl's name should replace that of her elder sister in the marriage contract, but M. le President refused to subject his elder daughter to this affront or to transfer her huge dowry to the younger.

On the eve of his marriage with Pélagie his passion still dominates him and in the gardens under the moon he asks Eugénie, "Will you come away with me now—will you? Away through the little door I entered this morning, under my mantle, we two together. Will you come, you sweet child?"

"You are mad," she answered languidly, as one speaks from the depth of a dream.

Her sister's honour and her pledged word to her betrothed for the time being give her strength to resist him, and he duly marries Pélagie.

It was not in de Sarcey's nature to be balked of anything on which he had set his heart. On the eve of Eugénie's marriage with de Rochemont she flies the country with her sister's husband, and escapes across the frontier into Italy, where they spent two blissful years, apparently untroubled by remorse or pangs of conscience.

The troublous times in France, and a piteous appeal from Pélagie to her husband to retrieve his honour and stand by his Sovereign in his hour of need, stirred the slumbering loyalty in de Sarcey's heart, and he takes what proves to be his final leave of Eugénie as her lover.

Crowded with incident as are the closing chapters of this book, the careful drawing and wealth of detail are observed to the last page, and the interest holds one absorbed to the last.

Marjorie Bowen has given another great work to her appreciative public. In times like these, when life is of necessity sombre, Miss Bowen's brilliant imagination and graceful writing carry one away to times which, though, like our own, they teem with tragedy, are touched with such light and shade, and filled in with such brilliant colour, that one is stimulated rather than depressed."

H. H.

* By Marjorie Bowen. Methuen & Co., London.

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