

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"STINGING NETTLES."*

Admirers of Miss Bowen's former charming writings must surely ask—why, oh, why has she forsaken her lovely, if idealised, past, peopled with graceful figures, who moved in such sumptuous environment, to write of the present-day sordid unlovely type with which she has peopled her new book? She has indeed given us ashes for beauty with the sole relief of the descriptions of Italian scenery from which she has been apparently unable to refrain.

Lucie, the central figure of the book, was the young, good-looking English wife of an Italian husband—a selfish man, far advanced in consumption. He, at opening of the story, was living abroad, and she, nothing loth, remained in England as the bread-winner, which commodity she won by her pen, for she was a successful writer.

To support a sick husband was, of course, a sufficiently arduous task, but in addition she provided funds for a down-at-heel aunt and her vulgar daughter, who was always on the verge of an engagement that never materialised.

The opening pages reveal the three—Lucie, Aunt Lydia, and Sophie—at a smart restaurant, where they had been invited to dine by one of Sophie's numerous admirers.

Miss Bowen cleverly sketches the incongruity of these poor ladies in these surroundings, and Lucie's discomfiture at the fiasco—and Sophie's sullen recognition of the fact—that the rich American who had been their host had done what was expected of him in the way of entertainment, but obviously meant to go no further.

"It makes me sick . . . women . . . crowds and crowds of us . . . hordes . . . swarms—flung all over the place—the men sick of us—dead sick."

There is a good deal in this strain in the book—the preponderance of women seems to have been on Miss Bowen's mind while writing.

Lucie, it will be understood, was snowed under by these depressing personalities, but the summons abroad to her husband's sick bed did nothing to improve her position.

On her arrival, she found that her husband, Pio, had been asked to leave his hotel on account of his cough, and he had taken a house, Villa Calvini.

It rained without ceasing for three weeks; the clouds never left the hills, the sea never calmed, there was no relief to the biting cold; no one came near to the villa.

Lucie's musings are printed in italics.

"The days were just bearable; you pretended then that things weren't so bad; there was always the desperate hope that the doctor or someone might come. But the long wintry nights—ah! they were hell opened!"

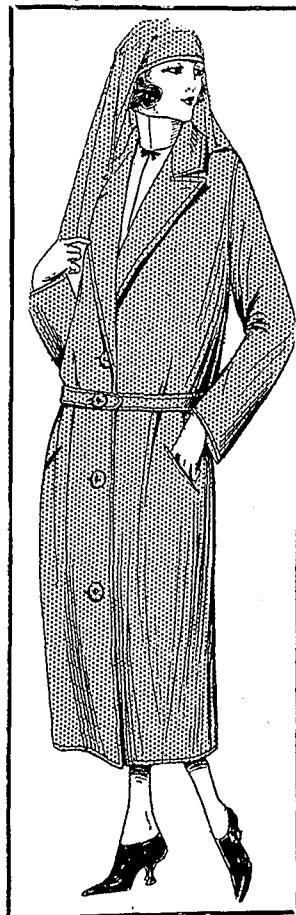
A most unpleasant and realistic picture is given of the sick man's terrible complaint and of his repulsive personality. Lucie could not discover one endearing trait in his character.

* By Marjorie Bowen. (Ward, Lock & Co.)

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