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PIPISTRELLO

AND OTHER STORIES.

BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF "FRIENDSHIP," "MOTHS," ETC.

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1880.

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PIPISTRELLO.*

I AM only Pipistrello.

Nothing but that; nothing more than any one of the round brown pebbles that the wind sets rolling down the dry bed of the Tiber in summer.

I am Pipistrello; the mime, the fool, the posturer, the juggler, the spangled saltimbanke, the people's plaything, that runs and leaps and turns and twists, and laughs at himself, and is laughed at by all, and lives by his limbs like his brother the dancing bear, and his cousin the monkey in a red coat and a feathered cap.

I am Pipistrello; five and twenty years old, and strong as you see, and good to look at, the women have said. I can leap and run against any man, and I can break a bar of iron against my knee,

* Originally written in French by the author for the *Nouvelle Revue*.

and I can keep up with the fastest horse that flies, and I can root up a young oak without too much effort. I am strong enough, and my life is at the full, and a day's sickness I never have known, and my mother is living. Yet I lie under sentence of death, and to-morrow I die on the scaffold; if nothing come between this and the break of dawn, I am a dead man with to-morrow's sun.

And nothing will come; why should it?

I am only Pipistrello; I am only Pipistrello. The people have loved me, indeed, but that is no reason why the law should spare me. Nor would I wish that it should: not I.

They come and stand and stare at me through the grating, men and women and maidens and babies. A few of them cry a little, and one little mite of a child thrusts at me with a little brown hand the half of a red pomegranate. But for the most part they laugh. Why, of course they do. The street children always laugh to see a big black steer with his bold horned head go down under the mace of the butcher. The street always finds that droll. The strength of the bull could scatter the crowd as the north wind scatters the dust, if he were free; but he is not, and his strength serves him nothing. The hammer fells him and the crowd laughs.

The people of this old Orte know me so well. Right and left, up and down, through the country I have gone all the years of my life. Wherever there was fair or festa, there was I, Pipistrello, in the midst. It is not a bad life, believe me. No life is bad that has the sun and the rain upon it, and the free will of the feet, and the feel of the wind, and nothing between it and heaven.

My father had led the same kind of life before me; he died at Genoa, his spine broken in two like a snapt bough, by a fall from the trapeze before the eyes of all the citizens. I was a big baby in that time, thrown from hand to hand by the men in their spectacles as they would have thrown a ball or an orange.

My mother was a tender, young, and gentle creature, full of tenderness for her own people: with strangers shy and afraid. She was the daughter of a poor weaver. My father had found her and wooed her in Etruria, and although he had never taken the trouble to espouse her before the mayor, yet he had loved her and had always treated her with great respect. She was a woman very pure and very honest. Alas, the poor soul! To-day her hair is white as the snow, and they tell me she is mad.

So much the better for her if she know nothing;