M. E. BRADDON

THE INFIDEL

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A Story of the Great Revival

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CHAPTER I.

GRUB-STREET SCRIBBLERS.

Father and daughter worked together at the trade of letters in the days when George the Second was king and Grub Street was a reality. For them literature was indeed a trade, since William Thornton wrote only what the booksellers wanted, and adjusted the supply to the demand. No sudden inspirations, no freaks of a vagabond fancy ever distracted him from the question of bread and cheese; so many sides of letter-paper to produce so many pounds. He wrote everything. He contributed verse as well as prose to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and had been the winner of one of those prizes which the liberal Mr. Cave offered for the best poem sent to him. Nothing came amiss to his facile pen. In politics he was strong—on either side. He could write for or against any measure, and had condemned and applauded the same politicians in fiery articles above different aliases, anticipating by the vehemence of his phrases the coming guineas. He wrote history or natural history for the instruction of youth, not so well as Goldsmith, but with a glib directness that served. He wrote philosophy for the sick-bed of old age, and romance to feed the dreams of lovers. He stole from the French, the Spaniards, the Italians, and turned Latin epigrams into English jests. He burnt incense before any altar, and had written much that was base and unworthy when the fancy of the town set that way, and a ribald pen was at a premium. He had written for

the theatres with fair success, and his manuscript sermons at a crown apiece found a ready market.

Yes, Mr. Thornton wrote sermons—he, the unfrocked priest, the audacious infidel, who believed in nothing better than this earth upon which he and his kindred worms were crawling; nothing to come after the tolling bell, no recompense for sorrows here, no reunion with the beloved dead—only the sexton and the spade, and the forgotten grave.

It was eighteen years since his young wife had died and left him with an infant daughter—this very Antonia, his stay and comfort now, his indefatigable helper, his Mercury, tripping with light foot between his lodgings and the booksellers or the newspaper offices, to carry his copy, or to sue for a guinea or two in advance for work to be done.

When his wife died he was curate-in-charge of a remote Lincolnshire parish, not twenty miles from that watery region at the mouth of the Humber, that Epworth which John Wesley's renown had glorified. Here in this lonely place, after two years of widowhood, a great trouble had fallen upon him. He always recurred to it with the air of a martyr, and pitied himself profoundly, as one more sinned against than sinning.

A farmer's daughter, a strapping wench of eighteen, had induced him to elope with her. This Adam ever described Eve as the initiator of his fall.

They went to London together, meaning to sail for Jersey in a trading smack, which left the docks for that fertile island twice in a month. The damsel was of years of discretion, and the elopement was no felony; but it

happened awkwardly for the parson that she carried her father's cash-box with her, containing some two hundred pounds, upon which Mr. Thornton was to start a dairy farm. They were hotly pursued by the infuriated father, and were arrested in London as they were stepping on board the Jersey smack, and Thornton was caught with the cash on his person.

He swore he believed it to be the girl's money; and she swore she had earned it in her father's dairy—that, for saving, 'twas she had saved every penny of it. This plea lightened the sentence, but did not acquit either prisoner. The girl was sent to Bridewell for a year, and the parson was sentenced to five years' imprisonment; but by the advocacy of powerful friends, and by the help of a fine manner, an unctuous piety, and general good conduct, was restored to the world at the end of the second year—a happy escape in an age when the gifted Dr. Dodd died for a single slip of the pen, and when the pettiest petty larceny meant hanging.

Having bored himself to death by an assumed sanctimony for two years, Thornton came out of the house of bondage a rank atheist, a scoffer at all things holy, a scorner of all men who called themselves Christians. To him they seemed as contemptible as he had felt himself in his hypocrisy. Did any of them believe? Yes, the imbeciles and hysterical women, the ignorant masses who fifty years ago had believed in witchcraft and the ubiquitous devil as implicitly as they now believed in Justification by Faith and the New Birth. But that men of brains—an intellectual giant like Sam Johnson, for instance—could kneel in dusty city churches Sunday after Sunday and search the Scriptures for

the promise of life immortal! Pah! What could Voltaire, the enlightened, think of such a time-serving hypocrisy, except that the thing paid?

"It pays, sir," said Thornton, when he and his little knot of friends discussed the great dictionary-maker in a tavern parlour which they called "The Portico," and which they fondly hoped to make as famous as the Scribbler's Club, which Swift founded, and where he and Oxford and Bolingbroke, Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot talked grandly of abstract things. The talk in "The Portico" was ever of persons, and mostly scandalous, the gangrene of envy devouring the minds of men whose lives had been failures.

The wife of Thornton's advocate, who was well off and childless, had taken compassion on the sinner's three-year-old daughter, and had carried the little Antonia to her cottage at Windsor, where the child was well cared for by the old housekeeper who had charge of the barrister's rural retreat. It was a cottage *orné* in a spacious garden adjoining Windsor Forest, and to-day, in her twentieth year, Antonia looked back upon that lost paradise with a fond longing. She had often urged her father to take her to see the kind friend whose bright young face she sometimes saw in her dreams, the very colour of whose gowns she remembered; but he always put her off with an excuse. The advocate had risen to distinction; he and his wife were fine people now, and Mr. Thornton would not exhibit his shabby gentility in any such company. He had been grateful for so beneficent a service at the time of his captivity, and had expatiated upon his thankfulness on three sides of letter-paper, blotted with real tears; but his virtues were impulses rather than qualities of

the mind, and he had soon forgotten how much he owed the K.C.'s tender-hearted wife. Providence had been good to her, as to the mother of Samuel, and she had sons and daughters of her own now.

Antonia knew that her father had been in prison. He was too self-compassionate to refrain from bewailing past sufferings, and too lazy-brained to originate and sustain any plausible fiction to account for those two years in which his child had not seen his face. But he had been consistently reticent as to the offence which he had expiated, and Antonia supposed it to be of a political nature—some Jacobite plot in which he had got himself entangled.

From her sixth year to her seventeenth she had been her father's companion, at first his charge—and rather an onerous one, as it seemed to the hack-scribbler—a charge to be shared with, and finally shunted on to the shoulders of, any good-natured landlady who, in her own parlance, took to the child.

Thornton was so far considerate of parental duty that, having found an honest and kindly matron in Rupert Buildings, St. Martin's Lane, he left off shifting his tent, and established himself for life, as he told her, on her second floor, and confided the little girl almost wholly to her charge. She had one daughter five years older than Antonia, who was at school all day, leaving the basement of the house silent and empty of youthful company, and Mrs. Potter welcomed the lovely little face as a sunny presence in her dull parlour. She taught Antonia—shortened to Tonia—her letters, and taught her to dust the poor little cups and ornaments of willow-pattern Worcester china, and to keep

the hearth trimly swept, and rub the brass fender—taught her all manner of little services which the child loved to perform. She was what people called an old-fashioned child; for, having never lived with other children, she had no loud boisterous ways, and her voice was never shrill and ear-piercing. All she had learnt or observed had been the ways of grown-up people. From the time she was ten years old she was able to be of use to her father. She had gone on errands in the immediate neighbourhood for Mrs. Potter. Thornton sent her further afield to carry copy to a printer, or a letter to a bookseller, with many instructions as to how to ask her way at every turn, and to be careful in crossing the street. Mrs. Potter shuddered at these journeys to Fleet Street or St. Paul's Churchyard, and it seemed a wonder to her that the child came back alive, but she stood in too much awe of her lodger's learning and importance to question his conduct; and when Antonia entered her teens she had all the discretion of a woman, and was able to take care of her father, and to copy his hurried scrawl in her own neat penmanship, when he had written against time in a kind of shorthand of his own, with contractions which Antonia soon mastered. The education of his daughter was the one duty that Thornton had never shirked. Hack-scribbler as he was, he loved books for their own sake, and he loved imparting knowledge to a child whose quick appreciation lightened the task and made it a relaxation. He gave her of his best, thinking that he did her a service in teaching her to despise the beliefs that so many of her fellow-creatures cherished, ranking the Christian religion with every hideous superstition of the dark ages, as only a

little better than the delusions of man-eating savages in an unexplored Africa, or the devil-dancers and fakirs of Hindostan.

This man was, perhaps, a natural product of that dark age which went before the Great Revival—the age when not to be a Deist and a scoffer was to be out of the fashion. He had been an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, taking up that trade as he took up the trade of letters, for bread and cheese. The younger son of a well-born Yorkshire squire, he had been a profligate and a spendthrift at Oxford, but was clever enough to get a degree, and to scrape through his ordination. As he had never troubled himself about spiritual questions, and knew no more theology than sufficed to satisfy an indulgent bishop, he had hardly considered the depth of his hypocrisy when he tendered himself as a shepherd of souls. He had a fluent pen, and could write a telling sermon, when it was worth his while; but original eloquence was wasted upon his bovine flock in Lincolnshire, and he generally read them any old printed sermon that came to hand among the rubbish heap of his bookshelves. He migrated from one curacy to another, and from one farmhouse to another, drinking with the farmers, hunting with the squires; diversified this dull round with a year or two on the Continent as bear-leader to a wealthy merchant's son and heir; brought home an Italian wife, and while she lived was tolerably constant and tolerably sober. That brief span of wedded life, with a woman he fondly loved, made the one stage in his life-journey to which he might have looked back without self-reproach.

He was delighted with his daughter's quick intellect and growing love for books. She began to help him almost as soon as she could write, and now in her twentieth year father and daughter seemed upon an intellectual level.

"Nature has been generous to her," he told his chums at "The Portico." "She has her mother's beauty and my brains."

"Let's hope she'll never have your swallow for gin-punch, Bill," was the retort, that being the favourite form of refreshment in "The Portico" room at the Red Lion.

"Nay, she inherits sobriety also from her mother, whose diet was as temperate as a wood-nymph's."

His eyes grew dim as he thought of the wife long dead—the confiding girl he had carried from her home among the vineyards and gardens of the sunny hillside above Bellagio to the dismal Lincolnshire parsonage, between grey marsh and sluggish river. He had brought her to dreariness and penury, and to a climate that killed her. Nothing but gin-punch could ever drown those sorrowful memories; so 'twas no wonder Thornton took more than his share of the bowl. His companions were his juniors for the most part, and his inferiors in education. He was the Socrates of this vulgar Academy, and his disciples looked up to him.

The shabby second floor in Rupert Buildings was Antonia's only idea of home. Her own eerie was on the floor above—a roomy garret, with a casement window in the sloping roof, a window that seemed to command all London, for she could see Westminster Abbey, and the Houses of Parliament, and across the river to the more rustic-looking streets and lanes on the southern shore. She loved her garret for the sake of that window, which had a broad stone

sill where she kept her garden of stocks and pansies, pinks and cowslips, maintained with the help of an occasional shilling from her father.

The sitting-room was furnished with things that had once been good, for Mrs. Potter was one of those many hermits in the great city who had seen better days. She was above the common order of landladies, and kept her house as clean as a house in Rupert Buildings could be kept. Tidiness was out of the question in any room inhabited by William Thornton, whose books and papers accumulated upon every available table or ledge, and were never to be moved on pain of his severe displeasure. It was only by much coaxing that his daughter could secure the privilege of a writing-table to herself. He declared that the destruction of a single printer's proof might be his ruin, or even the ruin of the newspaper for which it was intended.

Such as her home was, Antonia was content with it. Such as her life was, she bore it patiently, unsustained by any hope of a happier life in a world to come—unsustained by the conviction that by her industry and cheerfulness she was pleasing God.

She knew that there were homes in which life looked brighter than it could in Rupert Buildings. She walked with her father in the evening streets sometimes, when his empty pockets and his score at the Red Lion forbade the pleasures of "The Portico." She knew the aspect of houses in Pall Mall and St. James's Square, in Arlington Street and Piccadilly; heard the sound of fiddles and French horns through open windows, light music and light laughter; caught glimpses of inner splendours through hall doors; saw

coaches and chairs setting down gay company, a street crowded with link-boys and running footmen. She knew that in this London, within a quarter of a mile of her garret, there was a life to which she must ever remain a stranger—a life of luxury and pleasure, led by the high-born and the wealthy.

Sometimes when her father was in a sentimental mood he would tell her of his grandfather's magnificence at the family seat near York; would paint the glories of a country house with an acre and a half of roof, the stacks of silver plate, and a perpetual flow of visitors, gargantuan hunt breakfasts, hunters and coach-horses without number. He exceeded the limits of actual fact, perhaps, in these reminiscences. The magnificence had all vanished away, the land was sold, the plate was melted, not one of the immemorial oaks was left to show where the park had been; but Tonia was never tired of hearing of those prosperous years, and was glad to think she came of people who were magnates in the land.

CHAPTER II.

MISS LESTER, OF THE PATENT THEATRES.

Besides Mrs. Potter, to whom she was warmly attached, Antonia had one friend, an actress at Drury Lane, who had acted in Mr. Thornton's comedy of *How to please her*, and who had made his daughter's acquaintance at the wings while his play was in progress. Patty Lester was, perhaps, hardly the kind of person a careful father would have

chosen for his youthful daughter's bosom friend, for Patty was of the world worldly, and had somewhat lax notions of morality, though there was nothing to be said against her personally. No nobleman's name had ever been bracketed with hers in the newspapers, nor had her character suffered from any intrigue with a brother actor. But she gave herself no airs of superiority over her less virtuous sisters, nor was she averse to the frivolous attentions and the trifling gifts of those ancient beaux and juvenile macaronis who fluttered at the side-scenes and got in the way of the stage-carpenters.

Thornton had not reared his daughter in Arcadian ignorance of evil, and he had no fear of her being influenced by Miss Lester's easy views of conduct.

"The girl is as honest as any woman in England, but she is not a lady," he told Antonia, "and I don't want you to imitate her. But she has a warm heart, and is always good company, so I see no objection to your taking a dish of tea with her at her lodgings once in a way."

This "once in a way" came to be once or twice a week, for Miss Lester's parlour was all that Antonia knew of gaiety, and was a relief from the monotony of literary toil. Dearly as she loved to assist her father's labours, there came an hour in the day when the aching hand dropped on the manuscript or the tired eyes swam above the closely printed page; and then it was pleasant to put on her hat and run to the Piazza, where Patty was mostly to be found at home between the morning's rehearsal and the night's performance. Her lodgings were on a second floor overlooking the movement and gaiety of Covent Garden, where the noise of the waggons bringing asparagus from Mortlake and strawberries

from Isleworth used to sound in her dreams, hours before the indolent actress opened her eyes upon the world of reality.

She was at home this windy March afternoon, squatting on the hearthrug toasting muffins, when Miss Thornton knocked at her door.

"Come in, if you're Tonia," she cried. "Stay out if you're an odious man."

"I doubt you expect some odious man," said Tonia, as she entered, "or you wouldn't say that."

"I never know when not to expect 'em, child. There are three or four of my devoted admirers audacious enough to think themselves always welcome to drop in for a dish of tea; indeed, one of 'em has a claim to my civility, for he is in the India trade, and keeps me in gunpowder and bohea. But 'tis only old General Granger I expect this afternoon—him that gave me my silver canister," added Patty, who never troubled about grammar.

"I would rather be without the canister than plagued by that old man's company," said Tonia.

"Oh, you are hard to please—unless 'tis some scholar with his mouth full of book talk! I find the General vastly entertaining. Sure he knows everybody in London, and everything that is doing or going to be done. He keeps me *aw courrong*," concluded Patty, whose French was on a par with her English.

She rose from the hearth, with her muffin smoking at the end of a long tin toasting-fork. Her parlour was full of incongruities—silver tea-canister, china cups and saucers glorified by sprawling red and blue dragons, an old

mahogany tea-board and pewter spoons, a blue satin *négligé* hanging over the back of a chair, an open powder-box on the side table. The furniture was fine but shabby—the sort of fine shabbiness that satisfied the landlady's clients, who were mostly from the two patent theatres. The house had a renown for being comfortable and easy to live in—no nonsense about early hours or quiet habits.

"Prythee make the tea while I butter the muffins," said Patty. "The kettle is on the boil. But take your hat off before you set about it. Ah, what glorious hair!" she said, as Antonia threw off the poor little gipsy hat; "and to think that mine is fiery red!"

"Nay, 'tis but a bright auburn. I heard your old General call it a trap for sunbeams. 'Tis far prettier than this inky black stuff of mine."

Antonia wore no powder, and the wavy masses of her hair were bound into a scarlet snood that set off their raven gloss. Her complexion was of a marble whiteness, with no more carnation than served to show she was a woman and not a statue. Her eyes, by some freak of heredity, were not black, like her mother's—whom she resembled in every other feature—but of a sapphire blue, the blue of Irish eyes, luminous yet soft, changeful, capricious, capable of dazzling joyousness, of profoundest melancholy. Brown-eyed, auburn-headed Patty looked at her young friend with an admiration which would have been envious had she been capable of ill-nature.

"How confoundedly handsome you are to-day!" she exclaimed; "and in that gown too! I think the shabbier your

clothes are the lovelier you look. You'll be cutting me out with my old General."

"Your General has seen me a dozen times, and thinks no more of me than if I were a plaster image."

"Because you never open your lips before company, except to say yes or no, like a long-headed witness in the box. I wonder you don't go on the stage, Tonia. If you were ever so stupid at the trade your looks would get you a hearing and a salary."

"Am I really handsome?" Tonia asked, with calm wonder.

She had been somewhat troubled of late by the too florid compliments of booksellers and their assistants, whom she saw on her father's business; but she concluded it was their way of affecting gallantry with every woman under fifty. She had a temper that repelled disagreeable attentions, and kept the boldest admirer at arm's length.

"Handsome? You are the beautifullest creature I ever saw, and I would chop ten years off my old age to be as handsome, though most folks calls me a pretty woman," added Patty, bridling a little, and pursing up a cherry mouth.

She was a pink-and-white girl, with a complexion like new milk, and cheeks like cabbage-roses. She had a supple waist, plump shoulders, and a neat foot and ankle, and was a capable actress in all secondary characters. She couldn't carry a great playhouse on her shoulders, or make a dull play seem inspired, as Mrs. Pritchard could; or take the town by storm as Juliet, like Miss Bellamy.

"Well, I doubt my looks will never win me a fortune; but I hope I may earn money from the booksellers before long, as father does."

"Sure 'tis a drudging life—and you'd be happier in the theatre."

"Not I, Patty. I should be miserable away from my books, and not to be my own mistress. I work hard, and tramp to the city sometimes when my feet are weary of the stones; but father and I are free creatures, and our evenings are our own."

"Precious dull evenings," said Patty, with her elbows on the table and her face beaming at her friend. "Have a bit more muffin. I wonder you're not *awnweed* to death."

"I do feel a little *triste* sometimes, when the wind howls in the chimney, and every one in the house but me is in bed, and I have been alone all the evening."

"Which you are always."

"Father has to go to his club to hear the news. And 'tis his only recreation. But though I love my books, and to sit with my feet on the fender and read Shakespeare, I should love just once in a way to see what people are like; the women I see through their open windows on summer nights—such handsome faces, such flashing jewels, and with snowy feathers nodding over their powdered heads——"

"You should see them at Ranelagh. Why does not your father take you to Ranelagh? He could get a ticket from one of the fine gentlemen whose speeches he writes. I saw him talking to Lord Kilrush in the wings t'other night."

"Who is Lord Kilrush?"

"One of the finest gentlemen in town, and a favourite with all the women, though he is nearer fifty than forty."

"An old man?"

"*You* would call him so," said Patty, with a sigh, conscious of her nine and twenty years. "He'd give your father a ticket for Ranelagh, I'll warrant."

Tonia looked down at her brown stuff gown, and laughed the laugh of scorn.

"Ranelagh, in this gown!" she said.

"You should wear one of mine."

"Good dear, 'twould not reach my ankles!"

"I grant there's overmuch of you. Little David called you the Anakim Venus when he caught sight of you at the side scenes. 'Who's that magnificent giantess?' he asked."

"The people of Lilliput took Captain Gulliver for a giant, and the Brobdignagians thought him a dwarf. 'Tis a question of comparison," replied Tonia, huffed at the manager's criticism.

"Nay, don't be vexed, child. 'Tis a feather in your cap for Garrick to give you a second thought. Well, if Ranelagh won't suit, there is Mrs. Mandalay's dancing-room. She has a ball twice a week in the season, and a masquerade once a fortnight. You can borrow a domino from the costumier in the Piazza for the outlay of half a dozen shillings."

"Do the women of fashion go to Mrs. Mandalay's?"

"All the town goes there."

"Then I'll beg my father to take me. I am helping him with his new comedy, and I want to see what modish people are like—off the stage."

"Not half so witty as they are on it. Is there a part for me in the new play?"

Patty would have asked that question of Shakespeare's ghost had he returned to earth to write a new Hamlet. It was

her only idea in association with the drama.

"Indeed, Patty, there is an impudent romp of quality you would act to perfection."

"I love a romp," cried Patty, clapping her hands. "Give me a pinafore and a pair of scarlet shoes, and I am on fire with genius. I hope David will bring out your dad's play, and that 'twill run a month."

"If it did he would give me a silk gown, and I might see Ranelagh."

"He is not a bad father, is he, Tonia?"

"Bad! There was never a kinder father."

"But he lets you work hard."

"I love the work next best to him that sets me to it."

"And he has been your only schoolmaster, and you are clever enough to frighten a simpleton like me."

"Nay, Patty, you are the cleverest, for you can do things—act, sing, dance. Mine is only book-learning; but such as it is, I owe it all to my father."

"I hate books. 'Twas as much as I could do to learn to read. But there's one matter in which your father has been unkind to you."

"No, no—in nothing."

"Yes," said Patty, shaking her head solemnly, "he has brought you up an atheist, never to go to church, not even on Christmas Day; and to read Voltaire"—with a shudder.

"Do you go to church, Patty? 'Tis handy enough to your lodgings."

"Oh, I am too tired of a Sunday morning, after acting six nights in a week; for if Bellamy and Pritchard are out of the bill and going out a-visiting, and strutting and grimacing in

fine company, there's always a part for a scrub like me; and if I'm not in the play I'm in the burletta."

"And do you think you're any wickeder for not going to church twice every Sunday?"

"I always go at Christmas and at Easter," protested Patty, "and I feel myself a better woman for going. You've been brought up to hate religion."

"No, Patty, only to hate the fuss that's made about it, and the cruelties men have done to each other, ever since the world began, in its name."

"I wouldn't read Voltaire if I was you," said Patty. "The General told me 'twas an impious, indecent book."

"Voltaire is the author of more than forty books, Patty."

"Oh, is it an author? I thought 'twas the name of a novel, like 'Tom Jones,' only more impudent."

There came a knock at the door, and this time Patty knew it was her old General.

"Stop out, Beast!" she cried. "There's nobody at home to an old fool!" upon which courteous greeting the ancient warrior entered smiling.

"Was there ever such a witty puss?" he exclaimed. "I kiss Mrs. Grimalkin's velvet paw. Pray how many mice has Minette crunched since breakfast?"

His favourite jest was to attribute feline attributes to Patty, whose appreciation of his humour rose or fell in unison with his generosity. A pair of white gloves worked with silver thread, or a handsome ribbon for her hair secured her laughter and applause.

To-day Patty's keen glance showed her that the General was empty-handed. He had not brought her so much as a

violet posy. He saluted Antonia with his stateliest bow, blinking at her curiously, but too short-sighted to be aware of her beauty in the dim light of the parlour, where evening shadows were creeping over the panelled walls.

Patty set the kettle on the fire and washed out the little china teapot, while she talked to her ancient admirer. He liked to watch her kitten-like movements, her trim sprightly ways, to take a cup of weak tea from her hand, and to tell her his news of the town, which was mostly wrong, but which she always believed. She thought him a foolish old person, but the pink of fashion. His talk was a diluted edition of the news we read in Walpole's letters—talk of St. James's and Leicester House, of the old king and his grandson, newly created Prince of Wales, of the widowed princess and Lord Bute, of a score of patrician belles whose histories were more or less scandalous, and of those two young women from Dublin, the penniless Gunnings, whose beauty had set the town in a blaze—sisters so equal in perfection that no two people were of a mind as to which was the handsomer.

Tonia had met the General often, and knew his capacity for being interesting. She rose and bade her friend good-bye.

"Nay, child, 'tis ill manners to leave me directly I have company. The General and I have no secrets."

"My Minette is a cautious puss, and will never confess to the singing-birds she has killed," said the dodderer.

Tonia protested that her father would be at home and wanting her. She saluted the soldier with her stateliest curtsey, and departed with the resolute *aplomb* of a duchess.

"Your friend's grand manners go ill with her shabby gown," said the General. "With her fine figure she should do well on the stage."

"There is too much of her, General. She is too tall by a head for an actress. 'Tis delicate little women look best behind the lamps."

Thornton was fond of his daughter, and had never said an unkind word to her; but he had no scruples about letting her work for him, having a fixed idea that youth has an inexhaustible fund of health and strength upon which age can never overdraw. He was proud of her mental powers, and believed that to help a hack-scribbler with his multifarious contributions to magazines and newspapers was the finest education possible for her. If they went to the playhouse together 'twas she who wrote a critique on the players next morning, while her father slept. Dramatic criticism in those days was but scurvily treated by the Press, and Tonia was apt to expatiate beyond the limits allowed by an editor, and was mortified to see her opinions reduced to the baldest comment.

She talked to her father of Mrs. Mandalay's dancing-rooms. He knew there was such a place, but doubted whether 'twas a reputable resort. He promised to make inquiries, and thus delayed matters, without the unkindness of a refusal. Tonia was helping him with a comedy for Drury Lane—indeed, was writing the whole play, his part of the work consisting chiefly in running his pen across Tonia's scenes, and bidding her write them again in accord with his suggestions, which she did with equal meekness and facility.

He grew a little lazier every day as he discovered his daughter's talent, and encouraged her to labour for him. He praised himself for having taught her Spanish, so that she had the best comedies in the world, as he thought, at her fingers' ends.

It was for the sake of the comedy Tonia urged her desire to see the *beau monde*.

"'Tis dreadful to write about people of fashion when one has never seen any," she said.

"Nay, child, there's no society in Europe will provide you better models than you'll find in yonder duodecimos," her father would say, pointing to Congreve and Farquhar. "Mrs. Millamant is a finer lady than any duchess in London."

"Mrs. Millamant is half a century old, and says things that would make people hate her if she was alive now."

"Faith, we are getting vastly genteel; and I suppose by-and-by we shall have plays as decently dull as Sam Richardson's novels, without a joke or an oath from start to finish," protested Thornton.

It was more than a month after Tonia's first appeal that her father came home to dinner one afternoon in high spirits, and clapped a couple of tickets on the tablecloth by his daughter's plate.

"Look there, slut!" he cried. "I seized my first chance of obliging you. There is a masked ball at Mrs. Mandalay's to-night, and I waited upon my old friend Lord Kilrush on purpose to ask him for tickets; and now you have only to run to the costumier's and borrow a domino and a mask, and see that there are no holes in your stockings."

"I always mend my stockings before the holes come," Antonia said reproachfully.

"You are an indefatigable wench! Come, there's a guinea for you; perhaps you can squeeze a pair of court shoes out of it, as well as the hire of the domino."

"You are a dear, dear, dearest dad! I'll ask Patty to go to the costumier's with me. She will get me a good pennyworth."

CHAPTER III.

AT MRS. MANDALAY'S ROOMS.

Mrs. Mandalay's rooms were crowded, for Mrs. Mandalay's patrons included all the varieties of London society—the noble, the rich, the clever, the dull, the openly vicious, the moderately virtuous, the audaciously disreputable, masked and unmasked; the outsiders who came from curiosity; the initiated who came from habit; dissolute youth, frivolous old age, men and boys who came because they thought this, and only this, was life: to rub shoulders with a motley mob, to move in an atmosphere of ribald jokes and foolish laughter, air charged with the electricity of potential bloodshed, since at any moment the ribald jest might lead to the insensate challenge; to drink deep of adulterated wines, fired with the alcohol that inspires evil passions and kills thought. These were the diversions that men and women sought at Mrs. Mandalay's; and it was into this witch's cauldron that William Thornton plunged his daughter, reckless of whom she met or what she saw and heard, for it was an axiom in his blighting

philosophy that the more a young woman knew of the world she lived in, the more likely she was to steer a safe course between its shoals and quicksands.

Antonia looked with amazement upon the tawdry spectacle—dominos, diamonds, splendour, and shabbiness, impudent faces plastered with white and red, beauty still fresh and young, boys still at the University, old men fitter for the hospital than for the drawing-room. Was *this* the dazzling scene she had longed for sometimes in the toilsome evenings, when her tired hand sank on the foolscap page, and in the pause of the squeaking quill she heard the clock ticking on the stairs and the cinders crumbling in the grate? She had longed for lighted rooms and joyous company, for the concerts, and dances, and dinners, and suppers she read about in the *Daily Journal*; but the scenes her imagination had conjured up were as different from this as paradise from pandemonium.

Dancing was difficult in such a crowd, but there was a country dance going on to the music of an orchestra of fiddles and French horns, stationed in a gallery over one end of the room. The music was a *pot-pourri* of favourite melodies in the "Beggar's Opera," and the strongly marked tunes beat upon Antonia's brain as she and her father stood against the wall near the entrance doors, watching the crowd.

A master of the ceremonies came to ask her if she would dance. Her father answered for her, somewhat curtly. No, the young lady had only looked in to see what Mrs. Mandalay's rooms were like.

"Mrs. Mandalay's rooms are too good to be made a show for country cousins," the man answered impudently, after a flying glance at Thornton's threadbare suit; "and Miss has too pretty a figure under her domino to shirk a dance."

"Be good enough to leave us to ourselves, sir. Our tickets have been paid for; and we have a right to consume this polluted atmosphere without having to suffer impertinence."

"Oh, if you come to that, sir, I carry a sword, and will swallow no insult from a beggarly parson; and there are plenty of handsome women pining for partners."

He edged off as he spoke, and was safe amongst the crowd before he finished his sentence.

"Let's go home, sir," said Antonia. "I never could have pictured such an odious place."

"'Tis one of the most fashionable assemblies in London, child."

"Then I wonder at the taste of Londoners. Pray, sir, let's go home. I should never have teased you to bring me here had I known 'twas like this; but you have at least cured me of the desire to come again—or to visit any place that resembles this."

"You are pettish and over-fastidious. I came here for your amusement, and you may stay here for mine. I can't waste coach hire because you are capricious. I must have something for my money. Do you stay here quietly, while I circulate and find a friend or two."

"Oh, father, don't leave me among this rabble! I shall die of disgust if any one speaks to me—like that vulgar wretch just now."

"Tush, Tonia, there are no women-eaters here; and you have brains enough to know how to answer any impudent jackanapes in London."

He was gone before she could say anything more. She had hated to be there even with her father at her side. It was agony to stand there alone, fanning herself with the trumpery Spanish fan that had been sent her with the domino. She was not shy as other women are on their first appearance in an assembly. She had been trained to despise her fellow-creatures, and had an inborn pride that would have supported her anywhere. But the scene gave her a feeling of loathing that she had never known before. The people seemed to her of an unknown race. Their features, their air exhaled wickedness. "The sons of Belial, flown with insolence and wine." She hated herself for being there, hated her father for bringing her there.

They had come very late, when the assembly was at its worst, or at its best, according to one's point of view. The modish people, who vowed they detested the rooms, and only looked in to see who was there, were elbowing their way among fat citizens and their wives from Dowgate, and rich merchants from Clapham Common; while the more striking figures in the crowd belonged obviously to the purlieus of Covent Garden and the paved courts near Long Acre.

Tonia watched them till, in spite of her aversion, she began to grow interested in the masks and the faces. The faces told their own story; but the masks had a more piquant attraction, suggesting mystery. She began to notice couples who were obviously lovers, and to imagine a

romance here and there. Her eyes passed over the disreputable painted faces, and fixed on the young and beautiful, secure in pride of birth, the assurance of superiority. She caught furtive glances, the lingering clasp of hands, the smile that promised, the whisper that pleaded. Romance and mystery enough here to fill more volumes than Richardson had published. And then among the people who came in late, talked loud, and did not dance, there were such satins and brocades, velvet and lace, feathers and jewels, as neither the theatres nor her dreams had ever shown her. She was woman enough to look at these with pleasure, in spite of her masculine education.

She had forgotten how long she had been standing there when her father came back, smelling of brandy, and accompanied by a man whom she had been watching some minutes before, one of the late arrivals, who looked young at a distance, but old, or at best middle-aged, when he came near her. She had seen him surrounded by a bevy of women, who hung about him with an eager appreciation which would have been an excuse for vanity in a Solomon.

The new-comer's suit of mouse-coloured velvet was plainer than anybody else's, but his air and figure would have given distinction to a beggar's rags, and there needed not the star and ribbon half hidden under the lapel of his coat to tell her that he was a personage.

"My friend and patron, Lord Kilrush, desires to make your acquaintance, Antonia," her father said with his grand air.

She had heard of Lord Kilrush, an Irish peer, with an immense territory on the Shannon and on the Atlantic which he never visited; a man of supreme distinction in a world

where the cut of a coat and the pedigree of a horse count for more than any moral attributes. While he had all the dignity of a large landowner, the bulk of his fortune was derived from his mother, who was the only child of an East Indian factor, "rich with the spoil of plundered provinces."

Antonia had been watching the modish women's manoeuvres long enough to be able to sink to the exact depth and rise with the assured grace of a fashionable curtsey. The perfect lips under the light lace of her mask relaxed in a grave smile, parting just enough to show the glitter of pearly teeth between two lines of carmine. Her flashing eyes and lovely mouth gave Kilrush assurance of beauty. It would have taken the nose of a Socrates, or a complexion pitted with the smallpox, to mar the effect of such eyes and such lips.

"Pray allow me to escort you through the rooms, and to get you a cup of chocolate, madam," he said, offering his arm. "Your father tells me that 'tis your first visit to this notorious scene. Mrs. Mandalay's chocolate is as famous as her company, and of a better quality—for it is innocent of base mixtures."

"Go with his lordship, Tonia," said her father, answering her questioning look; "you must be sick to death of standing here."

"Oh, I have amused myself somehow," she said. "It is like a comedy at the theatres—I can read stories in the people's faces."

She took Kilrush's arm with an easy air that astonished him.