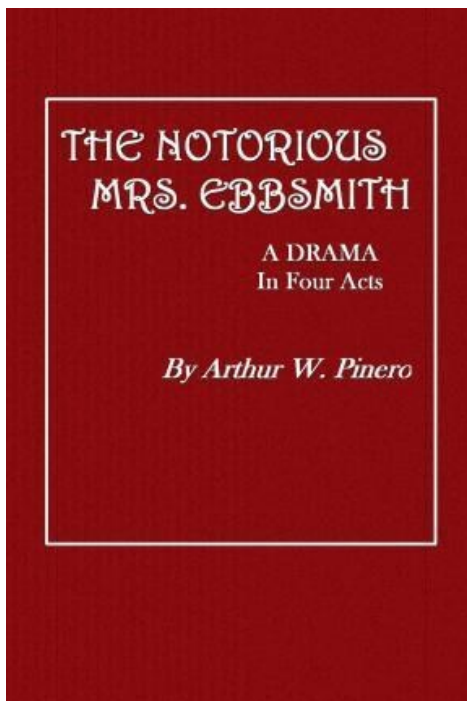


The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith

Arthur W Pinero



Synopsis: THE daughter of an atheist agitator has married a barrister, Mr. Ebbsmith, whom she does not love. After eight years of misery, she leaves him and starts life anew. as a nurse. Lucas Cleeve, a rising politician, also, has foundered on a marriage of untrue minds his wife is unsympathetic, and he cannot live with her. He falls ill. the nurse is brought to him, and begins her cure. As Cleeve mends, the two find time for long talks. Mrs. Ebbsmith is an emotional woman filled with vague ideals. She conceives the possibility of a union of souls, passionless but strong, in which marriage would only be an hindrance, for which the freedom of love would be the pillar of the house. Cleeve, easily inflamed by the nature with which he has contact at the moment, catches the fire of her enthusiasm: they determine to live together. Here the play opens. Cleeves relatives in London are writing to him in his seclusion at Venice, urging him to return to town and honor. He is unmoved, for it is always the present influence that has weight with him: and he is happy. One soon perceives, however, that Mrs. Ebbsmith is reaping disappointment of her life. Cleeve, she finds, is more of the lover than the idealist: the passion of his address repels her, because it seems to retard the ideality of their union. She is heart and soul a dreamer, dowdily-dressed and careless of her looks, and he vainly presses upon her handsome gowns and jewels. She cares for none of these things. Suddenly, upon the scene appears the old Duke, the head of Lucas Cleeves family, who has come from England with the intention of breaking off the connection. He is a clever old man, much too clever to remonstrate or preach, for he knows Lucass nature. He sneers at the woman, deprecates her with a shrug: -She is dowdy. I remember her in a coffee-house in a slum, preaching to half-drunken wastrels-mad Agnes, they called her. The picture burns into Lucass brain, the situation vexes him. In a moment Agnes Ebbsmith grasps the idea: she will fight the Duke with his own weapons. She hurries to her room, puts on the glittering gown, and returns to woo Cleeve in his own way. They will go out to theatre, to dine, anywhere-they will make a merry night of it. Cleeve is in raptures in a moment. You are a clever woman, says the Duke. So far the second act. Now other influences are brought to bear. Cleeves family put another proposal before Mrs. Ebbsmith. Let him return to town, and live under the same roof with his own wife, but not in communion with her. In this way convention may be satisfied. Meanwhile a separate maintenance, a suburban villa, will afford him a life of love with Mrs. Ebbsmith. There is another alternative. A manly young clergyman and his sister are interested in her, and propose to take her to a retreat in Yorkshire, where she can return to peace and purity. The clergyman writes the address in a Testament and gives her the book. But a change has come over her of late. Yielding to Lucass love, she has herself fallen in love with him. She, too, has felt an access of passion. The clergymans proposal seems the death-knell of that love, and, in a fit of passion, she flings the Bible into the fire, cursing the Christianity which, she thinks, has wrecked her life. Then another wave of emotion hurls her back upon herself, she thrusts her hand into the fire, and brings back to light the charred book, which she clasps to her bosom. This is the turning-point of the play. In the next act, after a final rupture with Lucas, she takes up the religious life again, returns to ideality, and starts for Yorkshire.

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