

in the "Times" under the head of "Marriages," and ran as follows:

"At the English Consulate, Christiania, Sir Philip Bruce-Errington, Bart., to Thelma, only daughter of Olaf Guldmar, *Bonde*, of the Alten Fjord, Norway. No cards."

BOOK II.

THE LAND OF MOCKERY.

CHAPTER I.

There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys.

Macbeth.

"I THINK," said Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, deliberately, laying down the "Morning Post" beside her breakfast cup, "I think his conduct is perfectly disgraceful!"

Mr. Rush-Marvelle, a lean gentleman with a sallow, clean-shaven face and an apologetic almost frightened manner, looked up hastily.

"Of whom are you speaking, my dear?" he inquired.

"Why, of that wretched young man, Bruce-Errington! He ought to be ashamed of himself!" And Mrs. Marvelle fixed her glasses more firmly on her small nose, and regarded her husband almost reproachfully. "Don't tell me, Montague, that you've forgotten that scandal about him! He went off last year, in the middle of the season, to Norway, in his yacht with three of the very fastest fellows he could pick out from his acquaintance—regular reprobates, so I'm told—and after leading the most awful life out there, making love to all the peasant girls in the place, he married one of them—a common farmer's daughter. Don't you remember? We saw the announcement of his marriage in the 'Times.'"

"Ah, yes, yes!" And Mr. Rush-Marvelle smiled a propitiatory smile, intended to soothe the evidently irritated feelings of his better half, of whom he stood always in awe. "Of course, of course! A very sad *mésalliance*. Yes, yes! Poor fellow! And is there fresh news of him?"

"Read *that*,"—and the lady handed the "Morning Post" across the table, indicating by a dent of her polished finger-nail the paragraph that had offended her sense of social dignity. Mr. Marvelle read it with almost laborious care—though it was remarkably short and easy of comprehension.

"Sir Philip and Lady Bruce-Errington have arrived at their house in Prince's Gate from Errington Manor."

"Well, my dear?" he inquired, with a furtive and anxious

glance at his wife. "I suppose—er—it—er—it was to be expected?"

"No, it was *not* to be expected," said Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, rearing her head and heaving her ample bosom to and fro in rather a tumultuous manner. "Of course it was to be expected that Bruce-Errington would behave like a fool—his father was a fool before him. But I say it was *not* to be expected that he would outrage society by bringing that common wife of his to London, and expecting *us* to receive her! The thing is perfectly scandalous! He has had the decency to keep away from town ever since his marriage—part of the time he has stayed abroad, and since January he has been at his place in Warwickshire—and this time—observe this!" and Mrs. Marvelle looked most impressive—"not a soul has been invited to the manor—not a living soul! The house used to be full of people during the winter season—of course, now, he dare not ask anybody lest they should be shocked at his wife's ignorance. That's as clear as daylight! And now he has the impudence to actually bring her here—into *society*! Good heavens! He must be mad! He will be laughed at wherever he goes!"

Mr. Rush-Marvelle scratched his bony chin perplexedly.

"It makes it a little awkward for—for you," he remarked, feelingly.

"Awkward! It is abominable!" And Mrs. Marvelle rose from her chair and shook out the voluminous train of her silken break-fast-gown, an elaborate combination of crimson with gray chinchilla fur. "I shall have to call on the creature—just imagine it! It is most unfortunate for me that I happen to be one of Bruce-Errington's oldest friends—otherwise I might have passed him over in some way—as it is, I can't. But fancy having to meet a great coarse peasant woman, who, I'm certain, will only be able to talk about fish and whale-oil! It is really *quite* dreadful!"

Mr. Rush-Marvelle permitted himself to smile faintly.

"Let us hope she will not turn out so badly," he said, soothingly—"but, you know, if she proves to be—er—a common person of—er—a very uneducated type—you can always let her drop gently—quite gently!"

And he waved his skinny hand with an explanatory flourish.

But Mrs. Marvelle did not accept his suggestion in good part.

"You know nothing about it," she said, somewhat testily. "Keep to your own business, Montague, such as it is. The law suits your particular form of brain—society does not. You would never be in society at all if it were not for me—now you know you wouldn't!"

"My love," said Mr. Marvelle, with a look of meek admiration at his wife's majestic proportions, "I am aware of it! I always do you justice. You are a remarkable woman!"

Mrs. Marvelle smiled, somewhat mollified. "You see," she then condescended to explain—"the whole thing is so extremely disappointing to me. I wanted Marcia Van Clupp to go in for the Errington stakes—it would have been such an excellent match—money on both sides. And Marcia would have been just the girl to look after that place down in Warwickshire—the house is going to rack and ruin, in *my* opinion."

"Ah, yes!" agreed her husband, mildly. "Van Clupp is a fine girl—a *very* fine girl! No end of 'go' in her. And so Errington Manor needs a good deal of repairing, perhaps?" This query was put by Mr. Marvelle, with his head very much on one side, and his brilliant eyes blinking drowsily.

"I don't know about repairs," replied Mrs. Marvelle. "It is a magnificent place, and certainly the grounds are ravishing. But one of the best rooms in the house is the former Lady Errington's boudoir—it is full of old-fashioned dirty furniture, and Bruce-Errington won't have it touched—he will insist on keeping it as his mother left it. Now that is ridiculous—perfectly morbid! It's just the same thing with his father's library—he won't have that touched either—and the ceiling wants fresh paint, and the windows want new curtains—and all sorts of things ought to be done. Marcia would have managed all that splendidly—she'd have had everything new throughout—Americans are so quick, and there's no nonsensical antiquated sentiment about Marcia."

"She might even have had new pictures and done away with the old ones," observed Mr. Marvelle, with a feeble attempt at satire. His wife darted a keen look at him, but smiled a little too. She was without a sense of humor.

"Nonsense, Montague! She knows the value of works of art better than many a so-called connoisseur. I won't have you make fun of her. Poor girl! She *did* speculate on Bruce-Errington—you know he was very attentive to her at that ball I gave just before he went off to Norway."

"He certainly seemed rather amused by her," said Mr. Marvelle. "Did she take it to heart when she heard he was married?"

"I should think not," replied Mrs. Marvelle, loftily. "She has too much sense. She merely said: 'All right! I must stick to Masherville!'"

Mr. Marvelle nodded blandly. "Admirable—admirable!" he murmured, with a soft little laugh. "A *very* clever girl—a very bright creature! And really there are worse fellows than Masherville! The title is old."

"Yes, the title is all very well," retorted his wife—"but there's no money—or at least very little."

"Marcia has sufficient to cover any deficit?" suggested Mr. Marvelle, in a tone of meek inquiry.

"An American woman *never* has sufficient," declared Mrs. Mar-

velle. "You know that as well as I do. And poor dear Mrs. Van Clupp has so set her heart on a really brilliant match for her girl—and I had positively promised she should have Bruce-Errington. It is really too bad!" And Mrs. Marvelle paced the room with a stately, sweeping movement, pausing every now and then to glance at herself approvingly in the mirror above the chimney-piece, while her husband resumed his perusal of the "Times." By and by she said, abruptly:

"Montague!"

Mr. Marvelle dropped his paper with an alarmed air.

"My dear!"

"I shall go to Clara Winsleigh this morning—and see what she means to do in the matter. Poor Clara! She must be disgusted at the whole affair!"

"She had rather a liking for Errington, hadn't she?" inquired Mr. Marvelle, folding up the "Times" in a neat parcel, preparatory to taking it with him in order to read it in peace on his way to the Law Courts.

"Liking? Well"—and Mrs. Marvelle, looking at herself once more in the glass, carefully arranged the ruffle of Honiton lace about her massive throat—"it was a little more than liking—though, of course, her feelings were perfectly proper, and all that sort of thing—at least, I suppose they were! She had a great friendship for him—one of those emotional, perfectly spiritual and innocent attachments, I believe, which are so rare in this wicked world." Mrs. Marvelle sighed, then suddenly becoming practical again, she continued: "Yes, I shall go there and stop to luncheon, and talk this thing over. Then I'll drive on to the Van Clupps', and bring Marcia home to dinner. I suppose you don't object?"

"Object!" Mr. Marvelle made a deprecatory gesture, and raised his eyes in wonder. As if he dared object to anything whatsoever that his wife desired!

She smiled graciously as he approached and respectfully kissed her smooth cool cheek before taking his departure for his daily work as a lawyer in the city, and when he was gone, she betook herself to her own small boudoir where she busied herself for more than an hour in writing letters and answering invitations.

She was, in her own line, a person of importance. She made it her business to know everything and everybody—she was fond of meddling with other people's domestic concerns, and she had a finger in every family pie. She was, moreover, a regular match-maker—fond of taking young ladies under her maternal wing, and "introducing" them to the proper quarters, and when, as was often the case, a distinguished American of many dollars but no influence offered her three or four hundred guineas for chaperoning his daughter into English society and marrying her well, Mrs. Rush-Marvelle pocketed the *douceur* quite gracefully, and did her

best for the girl. She was a good-looking woman, tall, portly, and with an air of distinction about her, though her features were by no means striking, and the smallness of her nose was out of all proportion to the majesty of her form—but she had a very charming smile, and a pleasant, taking manner, and she was universally admired in that particular “set” wherein she moved. Girls adored her, and wrote her gushing letters full of the most dulcet flatteries—married ladies on the verge of a scandal came to her to help them out of their difficulties—old dowagers troubled with rheumatism or refractory daughters poured their troubles into her sympathizing ears—in short, her hands were full of other people’s business to such an extent that she had scarcely any leisure to attend to her own. Mr. Rush-Marvelle—but why describe this gentleman at all? He was a mere nonentity—known simply as the husband of Mrs. Rush-Marvelle. He knew he was nobody—and, unlike many men placed in a similar position, he was satisfied with his lot. He admired his wife intensely, and never failed to flatter her vanity to the utmost excess, so that, on the whole, they were excellent friends, and agreed much better than most married people.

It was about twelve o’clock in the day when Mrs. Rush-Marvelle’s neat little brougham and pair stopped at Lord Winsleigh’s great house in Park Lane. A gorgeous flunky threw open the door with a virtuously severe expression on his breakfast-flushed features,—an expression which relaxed into a smile of condescension on seeing who the visitor was.

“I suppose Lady Winsleigh is at home, Briggs?” inquired Mrs. Marvelle, with the air of one familiar with the ways of the household.

“Yes’m,” replied Briggs, slowly, taking in the “style” of Mrs. Rush-Marvelle’s bonnet, and mentally calculating its cost. “Her ladyship is in the boo-dwar.”

“I’ll go there,” said Mrs. Marvelle, stepping into the hall, and beginning to walk across it in her own important and self-assertive manner. “You needn’t announce me.”

Briggs closed the street-door, settled his powdered wig, and looked after her meditatively. Then he shut up one eye in a sufficiently laborious manner and grinned. After this, he retired slowly to a small anteroom, where he found the “World” with its leaves uncut. Taking up his master’s ivory paper-knife, he proceeded to remedy this slight inconvenience—and, yawning heavily, he seated himself in a velvet arm-chair, and was soon absorbed in perusing the pages of the journal in question.

Meanwhile Mrs. Marvelle, in her way across the great hall to the “boo-dwar,” had been interrupted and nearly knocked down by the playful embrace of a handsome boy, who sprung out upon her suddenly with a shout of laughter—a boy of about twelve years old, with frank, bright blue eyes and clustering dark curls.

“Halloo, Mimsey!” cried this young gentleman. “Here you

are again! Do you want to see papa? Papa’s in there!”—pointing to the door from which he had emerged. “He’s correcting my Latin exercise. Five good marks to-day, and I’m going to the circus this afternoon! Isn’t it jolly?”

“Dear me, Ernest?” exclaimed Mrs. Marvelle, half crossly, yet with an indulgent smile—“I wish you would not be so boisterous! You’ve nearly knocked my bonnet off.”

“No, I haven’t,” laughed Earnest. “It’s as straight as—wait a bit!” And waving a lead-pencil in the air, he drew an imaginary stroke with it. “The middle feather is bobbing up and down just on a line with your nose, it couldn’t be better!”

“There, go along, you silly boy!” said Mrs. Marvelle, amused in spite of herself. “Get back to your lessons. There’ll be no circus for you if you don’t behave properly! I’m going to see your mother.”

“Mamma’s reading,” announced Ernest. “Mudie’s cart has just been and brought a lot of new novels. Mamma wants to finish them all before night. I say, are you going to stop to lunch?”

“Ernest, why are you making such a noise in the passage?” said a gentle, grave voice at this juncture. “I am waiting for you, you know. You haven’t finished your work yet. Ah, Mrs. Marvelle! How do you do?”

And Lord Winsleigh came forward and shook hands. “You will find her ladyship in, I believe. She will be delighted to see you. This young scapegrace”—here he caressed his son’s clustering curls tenderly—“has not yet done with his lessons—the idea of the circus to-day seems to have turned his head.”

“Papa, you promised you’d let me off Virgil this morning!” cried Ernest, slipping his arm coaxingly through his father’s.

Lord Winsleigh smiled. Mrs. Rush-Marvelle shook her head with a sort of mild reproachfulness.

“He really ought to go to school,” she said, feigning severity. “You will find him too much for you, Winsleigh, in a little while.”

“I think not,” replied Lord Winsleigh, though an anxious look troubled for an instant the calm of his deep-set gray eyes. “We get on very well together, don’t we, Ernest?” The boy glanced up fondly at his father’s face and nodded emphatically. “At a public school, you see, the boys are educated on hard and fast lines—all ground down to one pattern—there’s no chance of any originality possible. But don’t let me detain you, Mrs. Marvelle—you have no doubt much to say to Lady Winsleigh. Come, Ernest! If I let you off Virgil you must do the rest of your work thoroughly.”

And with a courteous salute the grave, kindly faced nobleman re-entered his library, his young son clinging to his arm and pouring forth boyish confidences which seemingly received instant

attention and sympathy—while Mrs. Rush-Marvelle looked after their retreating figures with something of doubt and wonder on her placid features. But whatever her thoughts, they were not made manifest just then. Arriving at a door draped richly with old-gold plush and satin, she knocked.

“Come in!” cried a voice that, though sweet in tone, was also somewhat petulant.

Mrs. Marvelle at once entered, and the occupant of the room sprung up in haste from her luxurious reading-chair, where she was having her long dark tresses brushed out by a prim-looking maid, and uttered an exclamation of delight.

“My dearest Mimsey!” she cried, “this is quite *too* sweet of you! You’re just the very person I wanted to see!” And she drew an easy fauteuil to the sparkling fire—for the weather was cold, with that particularly cruel coldness common to an English May—and dismissed her attendant. “Now sit down, you dear old darling,” she continued, “and let me have all the news!”

Throwing herself back on her lounge, she laughed, and tossed her waving hair loose over her shoulders, as the maid had left it—then she arranged, with a coquettish touch here and there, the folds of her pale pink dressing-gown showered with delicate Valenciennes. She was undeniably a lovely woman. Tall and elegantly formed, with an almost regal grace of manner, Clara, Lady Winsleigh deserved to be considered, as she was, one of the reigning beauties of the day. Her full dark eyes were of a bewitching and dangerous softness—her complexion was pale, but of such a creamy, transparent pallor as to be almost brilliant—her mouth was small and exquisitely shaped. True, her long eyelashes were not altogether innocent of “kohl”—true, there was a faint odor about her as of rare perfumes and cosmetics—true, there was something not altogether sincere or natural even in her ravishing smile and fascinating ways—but few, save cynics, could reasonably dispute her physical perfections, or question the right she had to tempt and arouse the passions of men, or to trample underfoot, with an air of insolent superiority, the feelings of women less fair and fortunate. Most of her sex envied her—but Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, who was past the prime of life, and who, moreover gained her social successes through intelligence and tact alone, was far too sensible to grudge any woman her beauty. On the contrary, she was a frank admirer of handsome persons, and she surveyed Lady Winsleigh now through her glasses with a smile of bland approval.

“You are looking very well, Clara,” she said. “Let me see—you went to Kissingen in the summer, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did,” laughed her ladyship. “It was delicious! I suppose you know Lennie came after me there! Wasn’t it ridiculous!”

Mrs. Marvelle coughed dubiously. “Didn’t Winsleigh put in an appearance at all?” she asked.

Lady Clara’s brow clouded. “Oh, yes! For a couple of weeks or so. Ernest came with him, of course, and they rambled about together all the time. The boy enjoyed it.”

“I remember now,” said Mrs. Marvelle. “But I’ve not seen anything of you since you came back, Clara, except once in the park and once at the theater. You’ve been all the night at Winsleigh Court—by the by, was Sir Francis Lennox there too?”

“Why, naturally!” replied the beauty, with a cool smile. “He follows me everywhere like a dog! Poor Lennie!”

Again the elder lady coughed significantly.

Clara Winsleigh broke into a ringing peal of laughter, and rising from her lounge, knelt beside her visitor in a very pretty coaxing attitude.

“Come, Mimsey!” she said, “you are not going to be ‘proper’ at this time of day! That would be a joke! Darling, indulgent, good old Mimsey!—you don’t mean to turn into a prim, prosy, cross Mrs. Grundy! I won’t believe it! And you mustn’t be severe on poor Lennie—he’s such a docile, good boy, and really not bad looking!”

Mrs. Marvelle fidgeted a little on her chair. “I don’t want to talk about *Lennie*, as you call him,” she said, rather testily—“only I think you’d better be careful how far you go with him. I came to consult you on something quite different. What are you going to do about the Bruce-Errington business? You know it was in the ‘Post’ to-day that they’ve arrived in town. The idea of Sir Philip bringing his common wife into society! It’s too ridiculous!”

Lady Winsleigh sprang to her feet, and her eyes flashed disdainfully.

“What am I going to do?” she repeated, in accents of bitter contempt. “Why, receive them, of course! It will be the greatest punishment Bruce-Errington can have! I’ll get all the best people here that I know—and he shall bring his peasant woman among them, and blush for her! It will be the greatest fun out! Fancy a Norwegian farmer’s girl lumbering along with her great feet and red hands!—and, perhaps, not knowing whether to eat an ice with a spoon or with her fingers! I tell you, Bruce Errington will be ready to die for shame—and serve him right too!”

Mrs. Marvelle was rather startled at the harsh, derisive laughter with which her ladyship concluded her excited observations, but she merely observed, mildly:

“Well, then, you will leave cards?”

“Certainly!”

“Very good—so shall I,” and Mrs. Marvelle sighed resignedly.