

another—and if a lady is as beautiful as an angel, and cuts out everybody wherever she goes, why you can't expect the other ladies to be very fond of her. 'Tisn't in human nature—at least not in feminine human nature. Men don't care much about their looks one way or the other, unless they're young chaps—then one has a little patience with them and they come all right."

But Britta had become meditative again. She went slowly up into her mistress's room and began arranging the few trifles that had been left in disorder.

"Just fancy!"—she said to herself—"some one may hate the Froken even in London just as they hated her in Bosekop, because she is so unlike everybody else. I shall keep my eyes open—and I shall soon find out any wickedness against her! My beautiful, dear darling! I believe the world is a cruel place after all—but *she* sha'n't be made unhappy in it, if I can help it!"

And with this emphatic declaration, she kissed a little shoe of Thelma's that she was just putting by—and, smoothing her curls, went down to her supper.

CHAPTER III.

Such people there are living and flourishing in the world—Faithless Hopeless, Charityless—let us have at them, dear friends, with might and main!—THACKERAY.

WHO can adequately describe the thrilling excitement attending an aristocratic "crush"—an extensive, sweeping-off-of-old-scores "at home"—that scene of bewildering confusion which might be appropriately set forth to the minds of the vulgar in the once-popular ditty, "Such a getting upstairs I never did see!" Who can paint in sufficiently brilliant colors the mere *outside* of a house thus distinguished by this strange festivity, in which there is no actual pleasure—this crowding of carriages—this shouting of small boys and policemen?—who can, in words, delineate the various phases of lofty indignation and offense on the countenances of pompous coachmen, forced into contention with vulgar but good-natured "cabbys"—for right of way?—who can sufficiently set forth the splendors of a striped awning avenue, lined on both sides with a collection of tropical verdure, hired for the occasion at so much per dozen pots, and illuminated with Chinese lanterns! Talk of orange groves in Italy and the languid light of a southern moon! What are they compared to the marvels of striped awning? Mere trees—mere moonlight—(poor products of Nature!) do not excite either wonder or envy—but, strange to say, an awning avenue invariably does! As soon as it is erected in all its bland suggestiveness, no matter at what house, a small crowd of street arabs and nurse-maids collect to stare at it—and when tired of

staring, pass and repass under it with peculiar satisfaction—the beggar, starving for a crust, lingers doubtfully near it, and ventures to inquire of the influenza-smitten crossing-sweeper whether it is a wedding or a party? And if Awning Avenue means matrimony, the beggar waits to see the guests come out—if, on the contrary, it stands for some evening festivity, he goes, resolving to return at the appointed hour, and try if he cannot persuade one "swell" at least to throw him a penny for his night's supper. Yes—a great many people endure sharp twinges of discontent at the sight of Awning Avenue—people who can't afford to give parties, and who wish they could—pretty, sweet girls who never go to a dance in their lives, and long with all their innocent hearts for a glimpse—just *one* glimpse!—of what seems to them inexhaustible, fairy-like delight—lonely folks, who imagine in their simplicity, that all who are privileged to pass between the lines of hired tropical foliage aforementioned, must perforce be the best and most united of friends—hungry men and women who picture, with watering mouths, the supper-table that lies *beyond* the awning, laden with good things, the very names of which they are hopelessly ignorant—while now and then a stern, dark-browed Thinker or two may stalk by and metaphorically shake his fist at all the waste, extravagance, useless luxury, humbug, and hypocrisy Awning Avenue usually symbolizes, and may mutter in his beard like an old-fashioned tragedian: "A time *will* come!" Yes, Sir Thinker!—it will most undoubtedly—it *must*—but not through you—not through any mere human agency. Modern society contains within itself the seed of its own destruction—the most utter Nihilist that ever swore deadly oath need but contain his soul in patience and allow the seed to ripen. For God's justice is as a circle that slowly surrounds an evil and as slowly closes on it with crushing and resistless force—and feverish, fretting humanity, however nobly inspired, can do nothing either to hasten or retard the round, perfect, absolute and Divine Law. So let the babes of the world play on, and let us not frighten them with stories of earthquakes—they are miserable enough as it is, believe it!—their toys are so brittle, and snap in their feeble hands so easily, that one is inclined to pity them! And Awning Avenue, with its borrowed verdure and artificial light, is frequently erected for the use of some of the most wretched among the children of the earth—children who have trifled with and lost everything—love, honor, hope, and faith, and who are traveling rapidly to the grave with no consolation save a few handfuls of base coin, which they must, perforce, leave behind them at the last.

So it may be that the crippled crossing-sweeper outside Winsleigh House is a very great deal happier than the master of that stately mansion. He has a new broom—and Master Ernest Winsleigh has given him two oranges, and a rather bulky stick of sugar-

candy. He is a protégé of Ernest's—that bright handsome boy considers it a "jolly shame" to have only one leg, and has said so with much emphasis—and though the little sweeper himself has never regarded his affliction quite in that light, he is exceedingly grateful for the young gentleman's patronage and sympathy thus frankly expressed. And on this particular night of the grand reception he stands, leaning on his broom and munching his candy, a delighted spectator of the scene in Park Lane—the splendid equipages, the prancing horses, the glittering liveries, the excited cabmen, the magnificent toilets of the ladies, the solemn and resigned deportment of the gentlemen—and he envies none of them—not he! Why should he? His oranges are in his pocket—untouched as yet—and it is doubtful whether the crowding guests at the Winsleigh supper-table shall find anything there to yield them such entire enjoyment as he will presently take in his humble yet refreshing dessert. And he is pleased as a child at a pantomime—the Winsleigh "at home" is a show that amuses him—and he makes sundry remarks on "im" and "er" in a meditative *sotto voce*. He peeps up Awning Avenue heedless of the severe eye of the policeman on guard—he sweeps the edge of the crimson felt foot-cloth tenderly with his broom—and if he has a desire ungratified, it is that he might take a peep just for a minute inside the front door, and see how "they're all a-goin' it!"

And how *are* they a-goin' it? Well, not very hilariously, if one may judge by the aspect of the gentlemen in the hall and on the stairs—gentlemen of serious demeanor, who are leaning, as though exhausted, against the balusters, with a universal air of profound weariness and dissatisfaction. Some of these are young fledglings of manhood—callow birds who, though by no means innocent—are more or less inexperienced—and who have fluttered hither to the snare of Lady Winsleigh's "at home," half expecting to be allowed to make love to their hostess, and so have something to boast of afterward—others are of the middle-aged complacent type who, though infinitely bored, have condescended to "look in" for ten minutes or so, to see if there are any pretty women worth the honor of their criticism—others again (and these are the most unfortunate) are the "nobodies"—or husbands, fathers, and brothers of "beauties," whom they have dutifully escorted to the scene of triumph, in which they, unlucky wights! are certainly not expected to share. A little desultory conversation goes on among these stair-loungers—conversation mingled with much dreary yawning—a trained opera-singer is shaking forth chromatic roulades and trills in the great drawing-room above—there is an incessant stream of people coming and going—there is the rustle of silk and satin—perfume shaken out of lace kerchiefs and bouquets oppresses the warm air—the heat is excessive—and there is a never-ending monotonous hum of voices, only broken at rare

intervals by the "society laugh"—that unmeaning giggle on the part of the women—that strained "ha, ha, ha!" on the part of the men, which is but the faint ghostly echo of the farewell voice of true mirth.

Presently, out of the ladies' cloak-room come two fascinating figures—the one plump and matronly, with gray hair and a capacious neck glittering with diamonds—the other a slim girl in pale pink, with dark eyes and a ravishing complexion, for whom the lazy gentlemen on the stairs make immediate and respectful room.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Van Clupp?" says one of the loungers.

"Glad to see you, Miss Marcia!" says another, a sandy-haired young man, with a large gardenia in his button-hole and a glass in his eye.

At the sound of his voice Miss Marcia stops and regards him with a surprised smile. She is very pretty, is Marcia—bewitchingly pretty—and she has an air of demure grace and modesty about her that is perfectly charming. Why! oh, why does she not remain in that sylph-like attitude of questioning silence? But she speaks—and the charm is broken.

"Waal now! Dew tell!" she exclaims. "I thought yew were in Pa-ar—is! Ma, would yew have concluded to find Lord Algy here? This is *too* lovely! If I'd known *yew* were coming I'd have stopped at home—yes, I would—that's so!"

And she nods her little head, crowned with its glossy braids of chestnut hair, in a very coquettish manner, while her mother, persistently beaming a stereotyped company smile on all around her, begins to ascend the stairs, beckoning her daughter to follow. Marcia does so, and Lord Algernon Masherville escorts her.

"You—you didn't mean that?" he stammers rather feebly—"You—you don't mind my being here, do you? I'm—I'm *awfully* glad to see you again, you know—and—er—all that sort of thing!"

Marcia darts a keen glance at him—the glance of an observant clear-headed magpie.

"Oh, yes! I dare say!" she remarks with airy scorn. "Spect *me* to believe *yew*! Waal! Did yew have a good time in Pa-ar—is?"

"Fairly so," answers Lord Masherville, indifferently. "I only came back two days ago. Lady Winsleigh met me by chance at the theater, and asked me to look in to-night for 'some fun,' she said. Have you any idea what she meant?"

"Of course!" says the fair New Yorker, with a little nasal laugh. "Don't *yew* know? We're all here to see the fisherwoman from the wilds of Norway—the creature Sir Philip Errington married last year. I conclude she'll give us fits all round, don't yew?"

Lord Masherville, at this, appears to hesitate. His eyeglass troubles him, and he fidgets with its black string. He is not intellectual—he is the most vacillating, most meek and timid of mortals—but he is a gentleman in his own poor fashion, and has a sort of fluttering chivalry about him, which, though feeble, is better than none.

“I really cannot tell you, Miss Marcia,” he replies almost nervously. “I hear—at the club—that—that Lady Bruce-Errington is a great beauty.”

“Dew tell!” shrieks Marcia, with a burst of laughter. “Is she really though! But I guess her looks won’t mend her grammar any way!”

He makes no reply, as by this time they have reached the crowded drawing-room, where Lady Winsleigh, radiant in ruby velvet and rose-brilliant, stands receiving her guests, with a cool smile and nod for mere acquaintances—and a meaning flash of her dark eyes for her intimates, and a general air of haughty insolence and perfect self-satisfaction pervading her from head to foot. Close to her is her husband, grave, courtly, and kind to all comers, and fulfilling his duty as host to perfection—still closer is Sir Francis Lennox, who in the pauses of the incoming tide of guests finds occasion to whisper trifling nothings in her tiny white ear, and even once ventures to arrange more tastefully a falling cluster of pale roses that rests lightly on the brief shoulder-strap (called by courtesy a sleeve) which keeps her ladyship’s bodice in place.

Mrs. Rush-Marvelle is here too, in all her glory—her good-humored countenance and small nose together beam with satisfaction—her voluminous train of black satin showered with jet gets in everybody’s way—her ample bosom heaves like the billowy sea, somewhat above the boundary line of transparent lace that would fain restrain it—but in this particular she is prudence itself compared with her hostess, whose charms are exhibited with the unblushing frankness of a ballet-girl—and whose example is followed, it must be confessed, by most of the women in the room. Is Mr. Rush-Marvelle here? Oh, yes—after some little trouble we discover him—squeezed against the wall and barricaded by the grand piano—in company with a large album, over which he pores, feigning an almost morbid interest in the portraits of persons he has never seen, and never will see. Beside him is a melancholy short man with long hair and pimples, who surveys the increasing crowd in the room with an aspect that is almost tragic. Once or twice he eyes Mr. Marvelle dubiously as though he would speak—and, finally, he *does* speak, tapping that album-entranced gentleman on the arm with an energy that is somewhat startling.

“It is to blay I am here!” he announces. “To blay ze biano! I am great artist!” He rolls his eyes wildly and with a sort of forced calmness proceeds to enumerate on his fingers—“Baris, Vienna,

Rome, Berlin, St. Betersburg—all know me! All resbect me! See!” And he holds out his buttonhole in which there is a miniature red ribbon. “From ze emberor! Kaiser Wilhelm!” He exhibits a ring on his little finger. “From ze Czar!” Another rapid movement and a pompous gold watch is thrust before the bewildered gaze of his listener. “From my bubils in Baris! I am bianoist—I am here to blay!”

And raking his fingers through his long locks, he stares defiantly around him. Mr. Rush-Marvelle is a little frightened. This is an eccentric personage—he must be soothed. Evidently he must be soothed!

“Yes, yes, I quite understand!” he says, nodding persuasively at the excited genius. “You are here to play. Exactly! Yes, yes! We shall all have the pleasure of hearing you presently. Delightful, I’m sure! You are the celebrated Herr—”

“Machtenklinken,” adds the pianist, haughtily. “Ze celebrate Machtenklinken!”

“Yes—oh—er—yes!” And Mr. Marvelle grapples desperately with this terrible name. “Oh, er—yes! I—er know you by reputation, Herr—er Machten— Oh, er—yes! Pray excuse me for a moment!”

And thankfully catching the commanding eye of his wife, he scrambles hastily away from the piano and joins her. She is talking to the Van Clupps, and she wants him to take away Mr. Van Clupp, a white-headed, cunning-looking old man, for a little conversation, in order that she may be free to talk over certain naughty bits of scandal with Mrs. Van Clupp and Marcia.

To-night there is no place to sit down in all the grand extent of the Winsleigh drawing-rooms—puffy old dowagers occupy the sofas, ottomans, and chairs, and the largest and most brilliant portions of the assemblage are standing, grinning into each other’s faces with praiseworthy and polite pertinacity, and talking as rapidly as though their lives depended on how many words they could utter within the space of two minutes. Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, Mrs. Van Clupp and Marcia make their way slowly through the gabbling, pushing, smirking crowd till they form a part of the little *coterie* immediately round Lady Winsleigh, to whom, at the first opportunity, Mrs. Marvelle whispers:

“Have they come?”

“The modern Paris and the new Helen?” laughs Lady Clara, with a shrug of her snowy shoulders. “No, not yet. Perhaps they won’t turn up at all! Marcia dear, you look *quite* charming! Where is Lord Algy?”

“I guess he’s not a thousand miles away!” returns Marcia, with a knowing twinkle of her dark eyes. “He’ll hang round here presently! Why—there’s Mr. Lorimer worrying in at the doorway!”

"Worrying in" is scarcely the term to apply to the polite but determined manner in which George Lorimer coolly elbows a passage among the heaving bare shoulders, backs, fat arms, and long trains that seriously obstruct his passage, but after some trouble he succeeds in his efforts to reach his fair hostess, who receives him with rather a supercilious uplifting of her delicate eyebrows.

"Dear me, Mr. Lorimer, you are quite a stranger!" she observes, somewhat satirically. "We thought you had made up your mind to settle in Norway!"

"Did you really, though!" and Lorimer smiles languidly. "I wonder at that—for you knew I came back from that region in the August of last year."

"And since then I suppose you have played the hermit?" inquires her ladyship, indifferently, unfurling her fan of ostrich feathers and waving it slowly to and fro.

"By no means! I went off to Scotland with a friend, Alec Macfarlane, and had some excellent shooting. Then, as I never permit my venerable mamma to pass the winter in London, I took her to Nice, from which delightful spot we returned three weeks ago."

Lady Winsleigh laughs. "I did not ask you for a categorical explanation of your movements, Mr. Lorimer," she says, lightly—"I'm sure I hope you enjoyed yourself?"

He bows gravely. "Thanks! Yes—strange to say, I *did* manage to extract a little pleasure here and there out of the universal dryness of things."

"Have you seen your friend, Sir Philip, since he came to town?" asks Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, in her stately way.

"Several times. I have dined with him and Lady Errington frequently. I understand they are to be here to-night."

Lady Winsleigh fans herself a little more rapidly, and her full crimson lips tighten into a thin, malicious line.

"Well, I asked them, of course—as a matter of form," she says, carelessly—"but I shall, on the whole, be rather relieved if they don't come."

A curious amused look comes over Lorimer's face.

"Indeed! May I ask why?"

"I should think the reason ought to be perfectly apparent to you"—and her ladyship's eyes flash angrily. "Sir Philip is all very well—he is by birth a gentleman—but the person he has married is not a lady, and it is an exceedingly unpleasant duty for me to have to receive her."

A faint tinge of color flushes Lorimer's brow. "I think," he says, slowly, "I think you will find yourself mistaken, Lady Winsleigh. I believe—" Here he pauses, and Mrs. Rush-Marvelle fixes him with a stony stare.

"Are we to understand that she is educated?" she inquires, freezingly. "Positively well educated?"

Lorimer laughs. "Not according to the standard of modern fashionable requirements!" he replies.

Mrs. Marvelle sniffs the air portentously—Lady Clara curls her lip. At that moment everybody makes respectful way for one of the most important guests of the evening—a broad-shouldered man of careless attire, rough hair, fine features, and keen, mischievous eyes—a man of whom many stand in wholesome awe—Beaufort Lovelace, or as he is commonly called, "Beau" Lovelace, a brilliant novelist, critic, and pitiless satirist. For him society is a game—a gay humming-top which he spins on the palm of his hand for his own private amusement. Once a scribbler in an attic, subsisting bravely on bread and cheese and hope, he now lords it more than half the year in a palace of fairy-like beauty on the Lago di Como—and he is precisely the same person who was formerly disdained and flouted by fair ladies because his clothes were poor and shabby, yet for whom they now practice all the arts known to their sex in fruitless endeavors to charm and conciliate him. For he laughs at them and their pretty ways—and his laughter is merciless. His arrowy glance discovers the "poudre de riz" on their blooming cheeks—the carmine on their lips, and the "kohl" on their eyelashes. He knows purchased hair from the natural growth—and he has a cruel eye for discerning the artificial contour of a "made-up" figure. And like a merry satyr dancing in a legendary forest, he capers and gambols in the vast fields of Humbug—all forms of it are attacked and ridiculed by his powerful and pungent pen—he is a sort of English Heine gathering in rich and daily harvests from the never-perishing, incessantly growing crop of fools. And as he—in all the wickedness of daring and superior intellect—approaches, Lady Winsleigh draws herself up with the conscious air of a beauty who knows she is nearly perfect—Mrs. Rush-Marvelle makes a faint endeavor to settle the lace more modestly over her rebellious bosom—Marcia smiles coquettishly, and Mrs. Van Clupp brings her diamond pendant (value, a thousand guineas) more prominently forward—for as she thinks, poor ignorant soul! "wealth always impresses these literary men more than anything!" In one swift glance Beau Lovelace observes all these different movements—and the inner fountain of his mirth begins to bubble. "What fun those Van Clupps are!" he thinks. "The old woman's got a diamond plaster on her neck! Horrible taste! She's anxious to show how much she's worth, I suppose! Mrs. Marvelle wants a shawl, and Lady Clara a bodice. By Jove! What sights the women do make of themselves!"

But his face betrays none of these reflections—its expression is one of polite gravity, though a sudden sweetness smooths it as he

shakes hands with Lord Winsleigh and Lorimer—a sweetness that shows how remarkably handsome Beau can look if he chooses. He rests one hand on Lorimer's shoulder. "Why, George, old boy, I thought you were playing the dutiful son at Nice? Don't tell me you've deserted the dear old lady! Where is she? You know I've got to finish that argument with her about her beloved Byron."

Lorimer laughs. "Go and finish it when you like, Beau," he answers. "My mother's all right. She's at home. You know she's always charmed to see you. She's delighted with that new book of yours."

"Is she? She finds pleasure in trifles, then——"

"Oh, no, Mr. Lovelace!" interrupts Lady Clara, with a winning glance. "You must not run yourself down! The book is exquisite! I got it at once from the library, and read every line of it!"

"I am exceedingly flattered!" says Lovelace, with a grave bow, though there is a little twinkling mockery in his glance. "When a lady so bewitching condescends to read what I have written, how can I express my emotion!"

"The press is unanimous in its praise of you," remarks Lord Winsleigh, cordially. "You are quite the lion of the day!"

"Oh, quite!" agrees Beau, laughing. "And do I not roar 'as sweet as any nightingale?' But I say, where's the new beauty?"

"I really do not know to whom you allude, Mr. Lovelace," replies Lady Winsleigh, coldly. Lorimer smiles and is silent. Beau looks from one to the other amusedly.

"Perhaps I've made a mistake," he says, "but the Duke of Roxwell is responsible. He told me that if I came here to-night I should see one of the loveliest women living—Lady Bruce-Errington. He saw her in the park. I think *this* gentleman"—indicating Sir Francis Lennox who bites his mustache vexedly—"said quite openly at the club last night that she *was* the new beauty—and that she would be here this evening."

Lady Winsleigh darts a side glance at her "Lennie" that is far from pleasant.

"Really it's perfectly absurd!" she says with a scornful toss of her head. "We shall have house-maids and bar-girls accepted as 'quite the rage' next. I do not know Sir Philip's wife in the least—I hear she was a common farmer's daughter. I certainly invited her to-night out of charity and kindness in order that she might get a little accustomed to society—for, of course, poor creature! entirely ignorant and uneducated as she is, everything will seem strange to her. But she has not come——"

"SIR PHILIP AND LADY BRUCE-ERRINGTON!" announces Briggs at this juncture.

There is a sudden hush—a movement of excitement—and the

groups near the door fall apart staring and struck momentarily dumb with surprise, as a tall, radiant figure in dazzling white, with diamonds flashing on a glittering coil of gold hair, and wondrous sea-blue earnest eyes, passes through their midst with that royal free step and composed grace of bearing that might distinguish an empress of many nations.

"Good heavens! What a magnificent woman!" mutters Beau Lovelace—"Venus realized!"

Lady Winsleigh turns very pale—she trembles and can scarcely regain her usual composure as Sir Philip, with a proud tenderness lighting up the depths of his hazel eyes, leads this vision of youth and perfect loveliness up to her, saying simply:

"Lady Winsleigh, allow me to introduce to you—my wife! Thelma, this is Lady Winsleigh."

There is a strange sensation in Lady Winsleigh's throat as though a very tight string were suddenly drawn round it to almost strangling point—and it is certain that she feels as though she must scream, hit somebody with her fan, and rush from the room in an undignified rage. But she chokes back these purely feminine emotions—she smiles and extends her jeweled hand.

"So good of you to come to-night!" she says, sweetly. "I have been longing to see you, Lady Errington! I dare say you know your husband is quite an old acquaintance of mine!"

And a languorous glance, like fire seen through smoke, leaps from beneath her silky eyelashes at Sir Philip—but he sees it not—he is chatting and laughing gayly with Lorimer and Beau Lovelace.

"Indeed, yes!" answers Thelma, in that soft, low voice of hers, which has such a thrilling richness within it: "And it is for that reason I am very glad to meet you. It is always pleasant for me to know my husband's friends."

Here she raises those marvelous, innocent eyes of hers and smiles—why does Lady Winsleigh shrink from that frank and childlike openness of regard? Why does she, for one brief moment, hate herself?—why does she so suddenly feel herself to be vile and beneath contempt? God only knows!—but the first genuine blush that has tinged her ladyship's cheek for many a long day suddenly spreads a hot and embarrassing tide of crimson over the polished pallor of her satiny skin, and she says hurriedly:

"I must find you some people to talk to. This is my dear friend Mrs. Rush-Marvelle—I am sure you will like each other! Let me introduce Mrs. Van Clupp to you—Mrs. Van Clupp, and Miss Van Clupp."

These ladies bow stiffly, while Thelma responds to their prim salutations with easy grace.

"Sir Francis Lennox"—continues Lady Winsleigh, and there is something like a sneer in her smile, as that gentleman makes a