Маргарет Олифант

Squire Arden; Volume 2 of 3

Маргарет Уилсон Олифант

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Up to this time it had been Clare who had made herself anxious about her brother, worrying herself over his ways and his words, and all the ceaseless turns of thought and expression and perplexing spontaneousness which made him so unlike the Ardens; and Edgar had been conscious of her anxiety with a sense of amusement rather than of any other feeling. But now that their positions were reversed, and that it was he who was anxious about Clare, the matter was a great deal more serious. Edgar Arden felt but lightly the slights or the censures of fortune; he was not specially concerned about himself, nor prone to consider, unless on the strongest provocation, what people thought of him, or if he was taking the best way to obtain their suffrage. But this easy mind, which Clare sometimes took as a sign of levity of disposition, forsook him completely when his own duties were in question. He took them not lightly, but seriously, as Mr. Fazakerley, and Perfitt the steward, and everybody connected with the estate already knew. And not even the estate was so important as Clare. He asked himself, with a puzzled sense of ignorance and incapacity, what in such

circumstances a brother ought to do. He had all the theories of a young man against any restraint or contradiction of the affections; but held them much more strongly than most young men, who it must be admitted are apt to see very clearly the necessity of interference in the love affairs of their sisters, however much they may dislike it in their own. Edgar had no family training to help him, and he was aware that English habits in such matters were different from those foreign habits which were the only ones with which he had any acquaintance, and which transferred all power in the matter into the hands of parents. Poor Clare! who had no mother to sympathise with her, no father to guide her—was it not his business to be doubly careful of all her wishes, to watch over her with double anxiety, and anticipate everything she would have him to do? But then, supposing she should wish to marry this landless and not very virtuous cousin, this man whose prospects were naught, whose character was so unsatisfactory, and with whom he himself had so little sympathy—would it be right to let her do it? Should he acquiesce simply without a word? Should he remonstrate? Should he speak of it to her? Or should he wait until she had first consulted him? Edgar found it very hard to answer these questions. He took to watching his sister, and her manner to Arthur Arden, her ways and her looks, and every passing indication; and got hopelessly bewildered, as was natural, in that maze of fluctuating evidence, which sometimes seemed to him to go dead against, and sometimes to be entirely in favour of his

cousin.

For Clare did not let herself go easily down that dangerous slope. She stopped herself now and then, and became utterly repellant to Arthur; now and then she relapsed into softness. Sometimes she would ask, wonderingly, when he meant to go? "Is he to stay on at Arden for ever? Did you ask him to stay as long as he liked?" she would say with a frown on her brow, expending upon her innocent brother the excitement and restless agitation of her own mind. "Should you like him to stay as long as he wished?" Edgar asked on one of these occasions, with a look which he tried hard not to make too anxious. "I think we were far happier before anybody came," Clare answered, with curious heat, and a tone almost of resentment. What did it mean? Did she want really to get rid of the visitor? Did she really hate him, as she had once said she did? When Edgar recollected that his sister had said so, and that Arthur Arden had confirmed it, he was quite staggered. And thus June ran on amid difficulties, which much confused the relations between the brother and sister. Lord Newmarch too left traces of himself in the field. He had started a correspondence with both, according to his opportunities—that is, he wrote long letters to Edgar upon the state of the political world, and sent messages and *brochures* to Miss Arden, who sent him messages in return. If she was to marry either of them, surely Lord Newmarch was the more appropriate of the two. He was younger as well as richer, and, though he was a prig, had the reputation of being a good man. He was *galantuomo*, as well as

my lord; and, alas! it was quite uncertain whether Arthur Arden was *galantuomo*. Poor Edgar felt like an anxious mother, and laughed at himself, but could not mend it, until at last it occurred to him that the best way was to ask advice. Accordingly, he set out very solemnly one day about the end of June to consult his chief authorities. He meant to conceal his personal trouble under the guise of a fable. He would ask Mr. Fielding what a brother (in the abstract) ought to do in such a position, and he would ask Miss Somers. Miss Somers was not a very wise counsellor; but no doubt her brother must have interfered in her affairs one time at least, and she would have some practical knowledge. He went to lay his case before them with a little trepidation, wondering whether they would find him out at all, and what they would say. Dr. Somers probably would have been the best counsellor of all, but Edgar had no confidence nor pleasure in the Doctor since their last interview. So he chose Mr. Fielding in his study, and Miss Somers on her sofa, two people whose lives had not come to much; but surely they were old enough to know.

Mr. Fielding was in his study writing his sermon. It was the day after one of his grand discussions with the Doctor, and the good man was excited. He was engaged in the manufacture of a polemical sermon, culling little bits out of the polemical sermons which had gone before, but combining them so with links of the new that his adversary might not perceive the antiquity of some of his arguments. It was a relief to him to lay down his pen and clear his mind from the fumes of controversy. “I am very glad

to see you, Edgar," he said. "You find me in the midst of my troubles. Young Denbigh, you know, ought to take the preaching more than he does, but I have no confidence in him in a doctrinal point of view. He would be bringing up some of the new notions, and setting our good folks by the ears—though it is rather hard upon me to preach so often myself."

"But you are the best able to instruct us, Sir," said Edgar, who to tell the truth did not often derive a great deal of instruction from Mr. Fielding's good little sermons. And then the excellent Rector coughed modestly, and blushed a little, and put his paper away from him with a gently deprecating air.

"I suppose, when one lives to be seventy, one must have learned a little—if one has made a right start," he said, "at least I hope so, Edgar, I hope so; though some of us unfortunately– The thing that startles me is that Somers should take the Calvinist view. I would not judge him—I would be, indeed, the very last to judge any one; but how a man who has lived, on the whole, rather a careless sort of life—not culpable, I don't say that—but careless, as, indeed, the best of us are—should stand up for hell and torture, and all that, is more than I can guess. If he had taken another view—more lax instead of more strict–"

"Do you think he cares at all?" said Edgar, still under the prejudice of his last interview.

"God bless us, yes; surely he must care; don't you think he cares, Edgar? Why, then, he must be sniggering in his sleeve at me. No, no, my dear boy, of course he must be in earnest; no man

could be such a humbug as that. But if it was Mrs. Murray, who is Scotch, it would seem more natural. I hear she was in Church on Sunday, looking very serious. But, bless me, Edgar, you are very serious too. Is there anything wrong—with Clare?"

"There is nothing wrong—with anybody," said Edgar. "The fact is, I want your advice. At least, it is not I that want it, but—a very intimate friend of mine. He has got a sister, just like me, very pretty, and all that; but he does not know what to do–"

"About his sister?" asked Mr. Fielding, with a smile. "What does he want to do?"

"Did I tell you there was some one who—wanted to marry her?" said Edgar. "Yes, to be sure, that was it; somebody I—he don't approve of—not a proper match. And he doesn't know what to do, whether to speak to her, or to wait till she speaks, or whether he has any right to interfere. He is not her father, of course, only her brother, and he is in an utter muddle what to do. And of all the people in the world," said Edgar, with a little hysterical laugh which sounded like a giggle, "he has asked me."

"Well, that was a very curious choice, though the circumstances so much resemble your own," said the Rector, with a smile; "what do you think you would do if it were Clare?"

"That is just the question I have been asking myself," said Edgar, embarrassed. "Supposing, for the mere sake of argument, that it was Clare—I have not the remotest conception what I should do."

"With such a suitor as Arthur Arden, for instance? Edgar,

never try to take in anybody, for you cannot do it. I feel for you sincerely–"

"But stop," said Edgar; "I never said Arthur Arden had anything to do with it. I never implied–"

"You have been perfectly wary and prudent," said Mr. Fielding; "but I knew Arthur Arden long before you did, and I am quite sure he means to mend his fortune, if he can, by means of Clare. I knew it before you did, Edgar, and that was why I was so grieved to see him here. Now you know it, my dear boy, send him away."

"Why did not you warn me, if you knew?" asked Edgar, surprised.

"What was the good? He might have changed his mind, or you might have thought me mistaken, and I did not know Clare's feelings, or even yours, Edgar; if you had liked him, for instance– But, my dear fellow, now you have found it out, send him away."

"I know as little about Clare's feelings as you do," said Edgar, almost sullenly, feeling that this was really no solution of his difficulties. "Clare, I suppose, is the chief person to be consulted. Should I speak to her? Should I bring matters to a conclusion? Perhaps it might come to nothing if they were let alone."

"Edgar, my advice to you is to make short work," said the Rector, solemnly, "and send him away."

"That is very easy to say," said Edgar, "but it takes more trouble in the doing. What, my nearest relative, my heir if I die! How can I turn him out of the house which is almost as much

his as mine? So long as I am unmarried, which I am likely to be for some time, he is my heir."

"Then you like him?" said the Rector; "that was what I feared. Of course, if you like him, and Clare likes him, nobody has any right to say a word."

"But I never said I liked him," said Edgar, pettishly. "Neither love nor hatred seems necessary so far as I am concerned; but could not something be done that would be just without being disagreeable? I don't like to treat him badly, and yet–"

The Rector shook his head. "I think I would have courage of mind to do what I advise," he said; "he is too old for Clare, and he has not a good character, which is a great deal worse. He will make love to her one day, and then the next he will come down to the village–Faugh! I don't like to soil my lips with talking of such things. He is not a good man. I love Clare like my own child, and I would fight to the last before I would give her to that man. He ought never to have come here, Edgar, never again."

"Did anything happen when he was here before; do you know anything?" said Edgar, eagerly.

"He is your enemy, my dear boy, he is your enemy," said Mr. Fielding; and that was all that could be elicited from him. Edgar remembered that Clare had used the very same words, and it did not make him more comfortable. But yet, an enemy to himself was of so very much less importance; in short, it mattered next to nothing. He smiled, and tried to persuade Mr. Fielding that it was so, but produced no result. "Send him away" was all the

Rector would say: and it was so easy for one who had not got it to do to give such advice to Edgar, who was a man incapable of sending any stranger away who claimed his hospitality, and whose sense of that virtue was as keen as an Arab's. He would have taken in the worst of enemies had he wanted shelter, with a foolish, young, highminded scorn of any danger. Danger! Let the fellow do his worst; let him put forth all the powers he had at his command, Edgar was not afraid. But then! when Clare was in question, the importance of the matter increased in a moment tenfold, and he could not make up his mind what to do.

CHAPTER II

From Mr. Fielding Edgar went to Miss Somers, to whom he told his story under the same disguise, but who unlike the Rector believed him undoubtingly, and gave him her best sympathy, but not much enlightenment, as may be supposed. And he returned to Arden very little the wiser, asking himself still the same question, What should he do? Must he go home and be patient and look on while Arthur Arden, quite unmolested and at his ease, laid snares and toils for Clare? Clare had no warning, no preparation, no defence against these skilful and elaborate plots. She might fall into the net at any moment. And was it possible that her brother's duty in the matter was to sit still and look on? Would not his very silence and passive attitude embolden and encourage the suitor? Would it not appear like a tacit consent to his plans and hopes? He was walking up the avenue while these thoughts were passing through his mind, when all at once there came to Edgar a suggestion which cleared his whole firmament. I call it a suggestion, because I do not understand any more than he himself did how it happened that all at once, being in utter darkness, he should see light, and perceive in a moment what was the best thing to do. If some unseen spirit had whispered it all at once in his ear it could not have been more vivid or more sudden. "I must go to town," Edgar said to himself. He did not want to go to town, nor had the idea occurred to him before; but the

moment it came to him he perceived that this was the thing to do. Arthur could not stay when he was gone; indeed, to take him away from Clare he did not object to his cousin's company in London. "Poor fellow! after all I have the sweet and he has the bitter," Edgar thought; and to share his purse with his kinsman was the easiest matter, so long as the kinsman did not object. After he had made this sudden decision his heart sat lightly in his breast, and everything brightened up. He even grew conceited, the simple fellow, thinking on the whole it was so very clever of him to have thought of so beautiful and simple a solution to all his troubles, though, as I have said, he did not think of it at all, but had it simply thrown into his mind without any exertion of his.

"I have taken a great resolution," he said that evening after dinner before Clare left the table. "I have made up my mind to take the advice of all my good friends, and to betake myself to town."

"To town!" said Clare and Arthur, in a breath—she with simple astonishment, he with dismay. "To town, Edgar? but I thought you hated town," added Clare.

"I don't know anything about it—I don't love it," he said; "but one must not always mind that. There is Newmarch, who writes me—and—why, there are the Thornleighs. With such inducements don't you think it is worth a man's while to go?"

"The Thornleighs; oh, they are cheap enough. You will meet them everywhere," said Arthur, with a sneer. "If that is all you go to town for–"

"The Thornleighs!" said Clare; and she made a rapid feminine calculation, and decided that though it was very sudden it must be Gussy, and that a new mistress to Arden was inevitable. It did not strike her so painfully as it might have done, in the tumult of her personal thoughts. "Everything will be strange to you," she said. "And then you are so fond of the country, and have to make acquaintance with everything. Don't you think, Edgar —*that* might wait?"

"What might wait?" said Edgar, laughing; but he kept firm to his proposal. "Yes, I must go as soon as it is practicable," he said to Arthur when they were alone. "I have got to make acquaintance with my own country. I don't know London any more than I know Constantinople; I have been in it, and gazed at it, but that is all. And Newmarch is a very sensible fellow," he added, abruptly. "By the way, Arden, what do you say to coming with me? You might share my rooms. If you have not any pressing engagements–"

"I have nothing at all to do," said Arthur. "Of course, I should rather have stayed here. I need not tell you that, after all I have told you. Arden is to me the most captivating place in England. But if you are going, of course I must go too." And he sighed a profound sigh.

"Of course," said Edgar, with quiet calmness; and then there was an uncomfortable pause.

"That is what I object to," said Arthur Arden; "You give me to understand you won't interfere, and then you as good as turn

me out of the house by going away yourself. By Jove! I believe that is the reason why–"

"If you think I am to give up all control over my movements because you happen to be in the house–" said Edgar, with a laugh. "No, Arden, that will never do. And I never said I would not interfere. It might be my duty. I am Clare's brother, and the head of the house."

"Clare can take care of herself, and so can the house. Fancy *you*——"

"I am all it has for a head," said Edgar, keeping his temper with an effort. "But this is very unprofitable sort of talk."

And then there was a gloomy pause, all conversation being arrested. Arthur Arden had been making, he thought, considerable progress with Clare, which was a thing that made Clare's brother much less important. She and Old Arden seemed almost within reach of his hand, and what should he care for the Hall and the Squire if he were Mr. Arden of Old Arden, with a beautiful wife? But to be thus sent away at the most critical moment! Arthur was sullen, and did not think it worth his while to conceal it. He asked himself, Should he risk the final effort—should he put it to the test, and know at once what his fortune was to be? in which case he might scorn the spurious Arden and all his efforts; or should he be wary, and flatter him, and wait?

He had not yet resolved the question when they joined Clare on the terrace, which was her summer drawing-room. But Arthur's mind was not relieved by seeing the lady of his hopes

take her brother's arm, and lead him away along the front of the house, talking to him. "Has anything happened that makes you want to go?" Clare asked. "Have you heard anything—have you had any letter—is it about—Gussy? I am the only one that has a right to know, Edgar; you might tell *me*."

"Tell you what?"

"Why you are going to town: there must be some reason. I am sure it is not caprice. Edgar, don't you know, I care for everything that concerns you; but you speak as if your affairs were of no consequence, as if they were nothing to me."

"I am not so ungrateful nor so silly," said Edgar: "but look here. I can't tell you why I'm going, Clare; and yet I am going for a good reason, which is quite satisfactory to myself. Can you allow me as much private judgment as that?"

"Of course, your private judgment is all in all," said Clare, affronted. "How could any one attempt to dictate to you? But one might wish to know without thrusting in one's opinion– Tell me only this one thing, Edgar. Is it about Gussy Thornleigh?"

Edgar laughed in the fulness of his innocence. "No more about Gussy Thornleigh than about–"

"Me?" said Clare. "You are quite sure? If it is business, that is quite a different thing. I hope I am not so foolish as to think of interfering with business. But I do feel so concerned—so anxious, Edgar dear, about–"

"About what?" said Edgar, meeting her troubled look with his habitual smile.

"About your wife," said Clare, solemnly. She only shook her head when he laughed, disturbing all the quiet echoes. "Ah, yes, you may laugh," she said, "but it is of the greatest importance. I assure you our—cousin thinks so too."

Edgar made a profane exclamation. "I am infinitely obliged to him, I am sure," he said, after the objectionable words had escaped his lips. "Our cousin thinks so too!" What was "our cousin" between these two, who ought to be everything to each other? And then it occurred to him, with a softening sense of that comic element which runs through human nature, that while Arthur Arden so kindly interested himself in his (Edgar's) hypothetical interests, he, on his side, was taking a good deal of trouble wholly and solely on Arthur's account. His kinsman was not aware how much he was influenced by this consideration; and the thought of this mutual regard amused Edgar, even in the midst of his displeasure. "We all take an interest in each other," he said, laughing, half jestingly, yet with a sense of fun which was very odd to Clare.

And then she went, all unconscious, to her little table, and sat down, and took her work. She did not work very much, her hands being full of things more important—the affairs of the parish and estate; but to her, as to most other women, it was a welcome occasional refuge. It was true, quite true, that she was anxious about Edgar's wife, and ready to believe in the attractions of Gussy Thornleigh, or any one else who came in his way; but other feelings confused her mind at the same time. When Edgar went

away of course Arthur must go also; and Arthur had managed to twine himself up with her life in the strangest subtle way. How should she bear the blank when they were gone? It would be like the time before Edgar's return—the silent days when she was alone in Arden. But these days had not been quickened by any new touch of life as the present time had been; and it made her shudder to think how such grey days would look when they came back.

"This is fatal news to me," said Arthur, softly sitting down opposite to her. "I thought I might have stayed here at Arden, and for once kept out of the racket of town."

"I thought you liked town," said Clare, "and I thought my brother hated it. I must have been mistaken in both."

"Do not be so hard upon me. I have liked town more than I ought. When there are a good many things in a man's life that he is very glad to forget, and not many that are much pleasure to think of, town is a resource to him; but when there comes a balmy time like this, when it almost looks as if the gates of heaven might open once in a way–"

"You are very poetical," said Clare, forcing herself to smile, though her heart began to flutter and beat with the sense of something more to come.

"Am I?" he said, and then began to mutter between his teeth, the first line faintly, the second more audible—

"If Maud were all that she seemed,

And her smile were all that I deemed,
Then this world were not so bitter
But a smile might make it sweet."

Clare heard, but she did not smile. She kept her eyes on her work, and her lips shut close. And after he had discharged this little arrow, he sat and looked at her and wondered. She gave him no encouragement—not the least. She would not even let it be apparent that she understood, or that there was any meaning whatever perceptible to her in what he said. The only thing that could give him any hope was a subdued consciousness about her, a thrill of suppressed excitement—something which made her fix her eyes upon her work and restrain her breath. Arthur saw this, and it made his heart beat. She was expectant—waiting for other words which she foresaw were coming—words which he would have given a great deal to be allowed to speak. For one moment he hesitated, and had almost gone on. But again a cold dread came over him. Was it according to nature that a proud girl like Clare should thus wait for her lover's declaration if she meant to answer it favourably? Was it not a stately, reluctant kindness on her part, to get over a crisis which she felt to be coming, and spare him as much pain as possible? He shrank back into himself with a sense of suffering greater than he could have considered possible when this idea took possession of him. Would she have given him this gracious opportunity, waited for him in such stillness and consciousness, had any word but "No" been on her lips? He

did not think that Clare felt herself like a sovereign princess, one whom men dare not woo unless when signs and tokens to justify the daring are supplied. She sat motionless, expecting, meaning to give him courage. And he took from this indication of royal readiness to listen only an intimation of despair.

"Yes, it is fatal news to me," he said, with a deep sigh; and he got up, and stood over her, reluctant to go, too unhappy to stay. "When shall I see Arden again, I wonder, and what will have become of us all by that time?" he added, taking momentary courage; but just then Edgar came up to them, and it was too late.

CHAPTER III

Clare's thoughts had travelled very far during Arthur Arden's visit at the Hall. When he arrived she had made up her mind to endure him, to have as little to say to him as possible, to watch anxiously all his relations with her brother, and keep all her wits about her to counteract his schemes against Edgar, if he had any. But all these original intentions had floated away from her, she could not tell how. The whole condition of affairs was changed. He had no schemes against Edgar: on the contrary, he heartily liked and thought well of the strange, generous, open-hearted soul, who was so very unlike all the Ardens had ever been, and yet was the head of the Ardens, and master of the family destiny. Arthur did not understand him any more than Clare did, but had given in his declaration of loyalty and support. So that the great obstacle—was it the only obstacle between them?—was swept away at once. And then there had been the doubt of her cousin's motives, the uncertainty as to his meaning, whether he loved her for herself, or whether—but this Clare had been very reluctant to think of—he had contemplated enriching himself by her means. It would have been quite natural that he should have done so by means of any other lady. It was not the mere mercenary pretence at love which revolted his young kinswoman, but simply a personal aversion to be herself the subject of such a commercial transaction. This dread had also floated away. How

could it withstand the influence of his presence—of his looks and words, and the absolute devotion he threw into his manner towards her? They had been together for long days, spending, with little meetings and partings, hours in each other's society—not alone, indeed, but almost better than alone; for a skilful and experienced hunter like Arthur Arden has it in his power to isolate his victim, and to make her feel herself the one object of interest—the one being in the room and in the world, with almost a more subtle certainty than could be given by downright words. All this Clare had come through, and it had wrought a great change upon her. She had been penetrated with Arthur Arden's influence through and through. She had grown to feel that everything she had, or anybody else had, would be better spent in his service than in any other—that it was natural to devote her possessions to him—that he had a right to appropriate what he would. This was never breathed into words, even in her own mind, but it had come to be her fixed, half-conscious principle. Mercenary!—how could it be mercenary? The world had done him the huge injustice of leaving him, a born prince, without any due provision, and was it not some one's duty—every one's duty—to neutralise that horrible injustice? Clare no longer thought of it as a desire on his part, but as a necessity on her own. And now he must go away, as poor, as unfriended, as lonely as ever, without either money in his purse, or companion to make his life go easier! She too grew furious with Edgar as she thought it all over. For a caprice! It must be a caprice. He

said it was not for Gussy Thornleigh, which would have been a feasible reason, though frivolous. And what then was it for? A foolish boyish fancy, an inclination towards pleasure-seeking and the follies of London society. Nothing more! And to risk two lives for that! To break up all the combinations that were daily growing into shape and becoming practicable—all for a vulgar fancy to go to town! Clare was very angry with her brother. She thought more meanly of him than she had ever done before. "It is his education," she said to herself. "He must have been used to all kinds of junketing, as people are abroad, and he has tried to get into our quiet English ways without effect. And he feels he must get back to his natural element. Oh, heavens, *my* brother!" This was how poor Edgar was judged in the midst of his self-denial—the usual fate of those who think more of others than of themselves.

It was not till the very day before her brother's departure that Clare acquired a clearer light upon the subject. She had gone to visit Miss Somers, which was a duty she had much neglected of late. The village too had been neglected; she could scarcely tell why. "I have been so busy," she said, "with visitors in the house. Visitors are so rare in Arden, one gets out of the way of them; but now Edgar is going away, of course I shall be quiet enough."

This she said with a sigh; but Miss Somers was not quick enough at the first moment to understand that Clare had sighed. She was full of other subjects, and anxious for information on her own account.

"Dear Edgar, he is so nice," she said. "A young man, you know, who must have so many things—but just as pleased– Do you know, I think he is—a little—fond of me, Clare! Of course I don't mean anything but what is right. I am old enough to be– And then to think he should ask in that nice way–Fancy, Clare, my advice! If it had been my brother, you know—or anybody—but my advice!"

"Did Edgar ask your advice?" said Clare, with a smile; and she said to herself what a deceiver he is—he will do anything to please people. As if anybody could be the better of Miss Somers's advice!

"It was not for himself, my dear. Of course it can't be very– I may tell *you*. That friend of his, Clare, and the sister, you know– And then somebody that was fond of her—and what was he to do? It was as good as a novel—indeed, I think it was rather better. Don't you remember that story where there was– Oh, my dear child, I am sure you remember! There was such a sweet girl—Helena was her name—or no—I think it was Adela, or something—and she had a lover. Just the same– And then the good brother in such distress. Clare, why do you turn so red? I am sure you know–"

"About a brother and a sister and a gentleman who loved her," said Clare, colouring high. "Oh, no—I mean yes—I think I do recollect. And did you say the brother wanted your advice?"

This was said in a tone which chilled poor Miss Somers through and through to her very heart.

"I told him so," she said, faltering. "Of course I never pretended to set up to be very– And how could I give advice? But then the poor dear brother was so– And I suppose he thought a lady, you know—and old enough to be—or perhaps it was only to please me. I told him oh, no! never, never! And I told him some things that were *too*—— Dear Edgar was quite affected, Clare."

"Did you advise him to go away?" asked Clare, with a smouldering fire in her eyes.

"Oh, my dear, could I take upon me to– And then he never said anything about– It was the poor girl I was thinking of. I said oh, no! never, never!—rather anything than that. You know what I have said to you so often, Clare? When a girl has a disappointment, you never can tell. It may be consumption, or it may be—oh, my dear, the unlikeliest things!—bilious fever I have known, or even rheumatism. I told dear Edgar, and he was so nice; he was sure his friend would never think– And fancy, dear, of its being *my* advice!"

"It must be very flattering to you," said Clare; but she rose instantly, and took a very summary leave, avoiding Miss Somers's kiss. She went home, glowing with anger and mortified pride. It was but too easy to see through so simple a veil. Edgar, who met her on the way home, could not understand her glowing cheek and angry eye. He turned and walked with her, feeling quite concerned about his sister. "What has happened?" he said. "Something disagreeable at the village? Can I set it right for you, Clare?"

"No," she said; "it is nothing disagreeable in the village. It is much nearer than the village. Edgar, I have found out why you are going away. You are going for my sake; you think I am not able to manage my own affairs—to take care of myself. You think so poorly of your sister as that!"

"What do you mean?" he said. "*I* think anything that is disagreeable or distasteful to you? You cannot believe it for a moment–"

"It is that Arthur Arden may go," she said firmly, but with flaming cheeks. And Edgar looked at her confused, not knowing what to say. But after the first moment he recovered himself.

"I think he has paid us a sufficiently long visit, I confess," he said. "I think, as it cannot be his while I live, that perhaps he had better not remain longer at Arden. But why should this be a matter of offence to you?"

Clare was silent; her blush grew hotter, her eyes were glowing still, but she faltered, and drooped her head as she went on.

"If that was all! if you had no other meaning! Edgar, do you think I am so frivolous, so lightly moved, so–"

"Clare," he said seriously, "do not let us discuss a subject which has not yet been put in our way. I think of you as the creature I love best in the world. I prize your happiness, and comfort, and welfare more than anything in the world. What would you have me say? I do not think I am wronging any one by going for a few weeks to London. I neither reproach nor restrain by so simple a step. Don't let us talk of it any more."

"You do both," said Clare, under her breath; but Edgar was kind, and would not hear. He was sorry for her, seeing her emotion, and he was half ashamed besides that his immaculate sister—the Princess whom everybody served and honoured—should suffer herself to be thus moved. It gave him a little pang to think that anything connected with Arthur Arden, or, indeed, with any man, could thus disturb her stately maidenly serenity. A man may be very respectful of love in the abstract, but the sight of his sister in love is a sight which is not pleasant to him. He tried to shut it out from himself by rushing hurriedly into other matters of conversation, and did a great deal of talking by way of covering her silence. Clare recovered her composure by degrees, and then had to recover from the shame which followed, and the feeling of having betrayed herself, so that Edgar's monologue was of infinite value to her, though, perhaps, she was scarcely grateful enough to him for keeping it up; and it was then that she fully found out that her brother, who was so weakly considerate of everybody's feelings, and anxious to save everybody pain, was nevertheless very firm when he thought it necessary, and did not give in, as many people supposed he would be sure to do. This discovery had a great effect upon his sister. It bewildered her, as going entirely against her preconceived notions, and it also moved her to a little alarm. For she, too, had supposed he would yield, being so tender of giving pain, and he had not yielded nor budged a step. And Clare, high-minded and high-spirited and proud as she was, grew frightened, as she glanced with furtive eyes at her

gentle brother, who, she knew well, would not hurt a fly.

But if Clare was frightened, the effect upon Edgar was still more serious. He felt that his flight was too late to do any good. She loved this man whom he thought so unworthy of her. So much older, poorer, less true and good than herself; a man, with so many soils of the world upon him, whom even Edgar felt to possess experiences of which he would rather know nothing; but Clare loved him! Nothing else could account for her agitation. It was too late to banish him from the house, too late to build up defences round her—the stronghold was gone. Edgar's quick mind jumped from that conclusion to an instant and final summary of Arthur Arden's character. He was a man who might mend, as so many men might mend, if prosperity smiled upon him. If he had love, and money, and an established position, he might settle down, as so many have settled down, all his wild oats sown, and himself a most virtuous member of society—"a sober man among his boys," giving them the best advice and example. Had he been the Squire, he would have fitted the place beautifully. This idea came to Edgar in spite of himself. He would have made an admirable Squire, and the little process of wild oats-sowing would have been no social disadvantage to him. Even now, if he became Mr. Arden, of Old Arden, in right of his wife—this was one of the things that annoyed Edgar, but he tried to look it in the face. His sister had said no more about giving that possession up, and Edgar did not find it within the limits of his powers to make a proposal to her on the subject—

and accordingly the chances were that Arthur would be Arden, of Old Arden, while Edgar was only the young Squire. It galled even his sweet temper to think of this transference. But, putting feeling aside, and thinking only of justice, he did not doubt that his cousin would mend. He had reached the age when men often mend, when dissipation becomes less sweet, and reputation more dear, and when comfort comes in as a powerful auxiliary to virtue. To have only such satisfaction as could be given by these thoughts when he was considering Clare's future husband, and her hopes of happiness, was poor enough; but still it was better than the thought that he was giving her over to the charge of a man who would ruin her and break her heart.

The household at Arden was an uneasy one that night; the three kept together, making each other uncomfortable, but with a vague sense of safety in company. Edgar was anxious to prevent any definite explanation; Arthur was afraid to risk the words he would be sure to say if Clare and he were alone; and she, not knowing what she feared, not knowing what she wished, afraid of her brother, afraid of her cousin, uncertain of herself, kept between them, with such a painful attempt at ordinary talk as was possible. They were to separate to-morrow—the two men into the world, the woman into the stillness which had been familiar to her so long. "I am used to it, but it will be different," she said, almost pathetically, strong in the presence of both, and feeling that what she said could produce no agitating response. "It will be very different for all of us," said Arthur Arden. "Will there

ever come days like these again?”

CHAPTER IV

It would be difficult to conceive anything more strangely lonely and bleak than Arden seemed to Clare the day after her brother and cousin left it. She wandered about the vacant rooms and out upon the terrace, and kept thinking that she heard their voices and steps, and caught glimpses of them turning the corners. But they were gone—Edgar to come back again shortly, so that could scarcely be counted a calamity. But Arthur—would he come at all? Would he be years of coming, as he had been before? It seemed to Clare that it was years instead of weeks since she had dwelt thus alone and tranquil, waiting for Edgar's return. She had been alone, but then her loneliness had seemed natural. She took it as a matter of course, scarcely pausing to think that she was different from others, or, if she ever did so, feeling her isolation almost as much a sign of superiority as of anything less pleasant. She was the Chatelaine—the one sole lady of the land, in her soft maidenly state; and the visits of the kind friends who offered themselves on all sides to come and stay with her, out of pity for her solitude, had been more a trouble than a pleasure to her. But now it seemed to Clare that she would be thankful for any companionship—anything that would free her from her own thoughts. She felt like a boat which had drifted ashore, like something which had been thrown out of the ordinary course of existence. Life had gone away and left her; and yet she was

more full of life than she had ever been before, tingling to the very finger points, expecting, hoping, looking for a thousand new things to come. Once it had not occurred to her to look for anything new; but now every hour as it came thrilled her with consciousness that her life might be changed in it, that it might prove the supreme moment which should decide the character and colour of all the rest.

And yet what hope, what chance, what possibility was there that this auspicious moment should come now? Had not "everybody" been driven away? This was how she phrased it to herself—not one person, but every one. Who could approach her now in the solitude which was a more effectual guard than twenty brothers? If "any one" wished to come, if any one had anything to say, why, the visit must be postponed, and the words left unsaid, until—how could she tell how long? Three years had passed between Arthur Arden's two last visits. What if three years should come and go again before Chance or Fate brought him back? It could only be Chance that had done it this time, not Providence; for if Providence had been the agent, then the visit must have come to something, and not ended without result. Thus Clare mused, as it were, in the depths of her being, concealing even from herself what she was thinking. When Arthur Arden's name flitted across that part of her mind which lay, so to speak, in the light, she blushed, and started with a sense of guilt; but in the shadowy corners, where thought has no need of words, and where a hundred aimless cogitations pass like breath, and

no sense of responsibility comes in, she put no bridle upon her dreaming fancy. And it was all new to her; for dreams had never been much in Clare's way. Hers had been a practical intelligence, busied with many things to do and think of—the village and her subjects in it; the legislation necessary for them; the wants of the old women and the children—a hundred matters of detail which deserved the consideration of a wise ruler, and yet must be kept subordinate to greater principles. Even the larger questions affecting the estate had come more or less into Clare's hands. She had been allowed no time to dream, and she had not dreamt; but now idleness and loneliness fell upon her both together. She was weary of the village and its concerns. She had nothing else to occupy her. And, indeed, she had no desire for other occupations, but preferred this new musing—this maze of fancies—to anything else in earth and heaven.

But the evenings were dreary, dreary, when darkness fell, and the wistful shadows of the summer night gathered about her, and no one came to break the silence. She tried to follow her brother in imagination, and to picture to herself what he might be doing—hanging about Gussy Thornleigh, perhaps—letting himself drift into the channel indicated by Lady Augusta. Ah!—and then, while she thought she was still thinking of Edgar and Gussy, Clare's fancies would take their flight in another direction to another hero. When this, however, had gone on for a few days and nights, she was seized with a sense that it must not continue—that such a way of passing her time was fatal. It was much

too like the girls whom Clare had read of in novels, whom she had indignantly denied to be true representatives of womankind, and whom she had scorned and blushed for in her heart. Was she to become one of that maudlin, sentimental band, to whom love, as novel-writers and essayists said, was everything, and to whom the inclinations of one man in this world conveyed life or death? Clare's modesty, and her pride, and her good sense, all rose in arms. She had given up all her former pursuits for these first dreamy days; but now she woke up, and tied on her hat, and forced herself down the avenue to the village. There something was sure to be found to do—whatever might be the state of her own mind or its fancies. She walked straight to Sarah's cottage, where Mary Smith and Ellen Jones were still busy with their needlework and their clear-starching. Sarah was sitting out in her cottage doorway, enjoying the evening calm. The sun had not yet set, but it had fallen below the line of the trees; and Sarah's doorway was shadowy and cool. The old woman had many grumbles bottled up for Clare's private enjoyment, which had been aggravated by keeping. Mary was "the thoughtlessest lass." She had burned a big hole in Miss Somers' muslin dressing-gown with an iron that was too hot. She had torn Mrs Pimpernel's lace; and then, instead of trying to do her best for the future, she had cried her eyes out, and become hysterical, and could do nothing at all. Nor was Ellen a great deal better. Sally, next door, had got a piece of work clean spoiled in her hands; and some things as she was making for Mrs Solms, the Rector's housekeeper, had just

got to be unpicked on the spot. “The back was put to the front, and the wrong side to the right side—as if she had tried!” said old Sarah. “It couldn’t be accident, Miss Clare; and the sleeves put in bottom up. It’s enough to break a body’s heart, after all the trouble I’ve took.” The two culprits stood curtseying with their aprons to their eyes while this dreadful picture was being drawn; and Clare put on her most solemn face, and told them she was very sorry. “I hope I shall never hear anything of the kind again,” she said, in her most serious tones; and then stopped, and sighed with a weariness which had never before moved her. “Am I to go on all my life,” she said to herself, “looking after Mary’s clear-starching and Ellen’s sewing? Is this all I am to have out of the existence which is so rich and full to some people?” And for the moment Clare thought she understood Helena Thornleigh and the rest of the young women who wanted something to do. But this, the reader will perceive, was not really because she wanted anything to do, or was dissatisfied with the conditions of her own life, but only because she was in that state of suspense which turns existence all awry, and demands excitement of some kind outside to neutralise the excitement within.

Clare’s mind, however, was suddenly diverted from herself when she looked into old Sarah’s living-room, and saw another figure, which she had not before remarked, seated in the background. When Sarah perceived her keen look inside, she approached Clare with nods and significant glances. “Yes, Miss,” she said in a whisper, “she’s there, and as sensible as you or me,

and the sweetest little thing that ever was, though she's Scotch, and I don't hold with Scotch, not in general. Just you go in and say a word to her, Miss Clare."

"I don't think she ought to be left by herself," said Clare, drawing back with a certain repugnance. Jeanie was seated in a low chair, and looked like a child—her pretty head, with its golden hair closely braided about it, bent over her work. She looked so serious, so absorbed in her occupation, so far removed from the feverish regions in which Clare felt herself to be wandering, that the dislike she had felt for this mysterious child suddenly warmed into a certain curiosity and interest. She paused on the threshold, looking in, feeling as if the step she was about to take was much more important than an innocent every-day entrance into Sarah's cottage; but after that momentary hesitation she went in, causing the little recluse to raise her head. When she saw who it was Jeanie rose, and gave Miss Arden a chair—not as Mary or Ellen would have done, but with simple courtesy. She stood until her visitor was seated, and then sat down again. But still she did not give to Clare that curtsey which she felt to be her due.

"I am glad to see you are better," Clare said, with a little stiffness; and then she was melted in spite of herself by the soft wistful look in little Jeanie's eyes. "Has your mother left you alone?" she said. "It must be strange to you to be left alone in such a place as this."

"They are all kind, kind," said Jeanie. "I'm no lonely, as if it

was new to me; and then I have something to do. My head has been so strange, I have never had a seam for so long. And now it is as if I was coming back–"

"Poor child!" said Clare, "does it make you suffer much? Do you feel ill when– I mean when—your head has been strange, as you say–?"

"I canna think about it," said Jeanie, softly; "I mustna think about it; the world begins to swim and swim, and the light to go out of my eyes– I will sew my seam, if ye please."

And then there was a little pause, and everything was still. Old Sarah and her pupils stayed outside, and the murmur of their voices sounded softly in the summer air; but within the clock ticked, and the white ashes from the half-dead fire fell now and then faintly on the hearth, and Jeanie's "seam" rustled as she worked; that was all. Though there was that ghost of a fire, the room, with its tiny window and thick walls, was cooler than many a much better ventilated house; and the light was cool and green and shadowy, coming through the tall woody branches of a geranium trained upon a fanshaped framework, which answered instead of a curtain to the little window. Clare sat embarrassed, not knowing how to address this creature, who was so unlike anything she had known or encountered before.

"Do you remember your home? I suppose it is a place very different from Arden?" she said at last.

"Home! oh it's bonnie, bonnie!—bonnier than Arden," cried Jeanie, and then she paused with instinctive courtesy. "But Arden

is beautiful," she said. "It's a' so beautiful that God has made. I canna' bide towns and streets and places that are built—but Arden– and the green grass and the bonnie trees–"

Where had the child learned to think of other people's sentiments—was it natural to her nation—or only to her individual character? Clare felt that the Marys and Ellens of the village would not have thought of any such refinement. "Do you live among the hills?" she said.

"On Loch Arroch side. The trees are very bonnie, and so are all the parks and pleasant fields," said Jeanie; "but if you were to see the hills up among the clouds, and the bonnie water at their feet! and then when you live always there, and your heart gets full–"

"Poor child!" said Clare again, growing more and more interested in spite of herself. "You are too young to have felt your heart grow full as you say."

"I am seventeen," said Jeanie. "Plenty folk have learned trouble before that. Granny says she had nobody to take care of her when she was seventeen—neither father nor mother, nor– And I have always her– Oh, if you had seen my Willie!" she said suddenly, "he was aye so bright and so kind. Miss Arden, you have a brother too–"

"My poor child!" cried Clare. "Jeanie, Jeanie, if that is your name, don't think of that. For your poor grandmother's sake don't do anything to bring it on."

"I cannot bring it on," said Jeanie; "it comes when I am not

thinking of Willie, if there is ever a time I am not thinking of him. It's best to let me cry. Oh my bonnie boy! and in the sea, Miss Arden; think of that! no a grave under the sod, where I could go and greet, but in yon great, great, wild stormy sea—it is that I cannot bear."

"Let us talk of something else," said Clare, trembling. "Do you like old Sarah? I hope she is very attentive to you and does everything you want. You must come to the hall some day and see me; I am all alone in the hall."

"Where has he gone that you are your lane?" said Jeanie; and she raised her head with a look of anxiety which startled Clare.

"He! whom?" cried Miss Arden; she drew herself up and looked at Jeanie from her altitude, feeling all her prejudices reawaken. Jeanie, for her part, put down her work in her lap, and crossed her hands softly with a smile and a sigh.

"I am meaning your bonnie brother, Miss Arden. Oh, I wish he was my brother! We dinna know him, but we're awfu' fond of him, both grannie and me."

"Fond of him!" exclaimed Clare, more and more bewildered. "Do you know what you say?"

"Oh aye, real fond," said innocent Jeanie; "he has such a bonnie light in his eyes."

And while Clare sat in a state of partial stupefaction wondering what this might mean, there was a little stir at the door, and Mrs. Murray came in, as it were to the rescue, before her child could commit herself more.

CHAPTER V

"I am speaking of Miss Arden's brother," said Jeanie, introducing her grandmother into the conversation without a moment's pause. "Granny, tell Miss Arden. He's like faces we ken, and his voice is like a kent voice. If I was in trouble I would go and ask him. I would trust him, and I would be safe. Granny!"

"She speaks as others of her age would scarcely speak," said the grandmother, quietly. "She's no like others, Miss Arden. Her trouble is like a shield about her, like an angel o' the Lord. You think she should not name like that a gentleman that's far, far above her, but it's in her innocence she speaks. She has taken a fancy into her head that your brother is like her brother–"

"So he is," said Jeanie, softly. "She would have thought so too, if she had seen my Willie; no like yon grand, dark, hard man that comes and troubles me with his e'en; but oh, so friendly and so kind, and like a real brother. The other gives me a thrill at my heart. I'm feared still, though it's no *him*!"

"What other?" said Clare in some amazement. Except the Rector and the Doctor there was no gentleman in Arden of whom Jeanie could have spoken, and neither of them could be so described—a grand, dark, hard man! Her heart began to flutter painfully, and no one answered her question. Perhaps it was because there was a rustle and movement outside, and Sarah appeared on the threshold. "Mrs. Pimpernel's acoming, Miss

Clare, with her daughter and the gentlemen," said Old Sarah. "T'ou'd lady's awful pushing, and you're not one as likes that sort; and Mrs. Murray, it's best for you and for me as Jeanie should go upstairs."

"I will go upstairs too," said Clare, hurriedly; and she rose and went hastily up the narrow staircase, forgetting that any invitation was necessary. But Mrs. Murray did not forget. She made a little ceremonious speech to the unceremonious young lady of the manor. "It's a poor place," she said, "but such as it is Miss Arden is very welcome." Clare, however, was far too deeply convinced of her own importance to see any reproof in these words.

"Come and sit here," said Jeanie, softly, stealing a little hand, which was like a child's, into Clare's. "I see all the folk passing from this window. Granny says no to do it; but I say what harm? And there he is, that dark man. I saw him with you, and once since then, and he spoke soft and kind; but oh, Miss Arden, I'm feared for that man! You canna see into his heart; whiles I think, has he a heart at all? And what does he want coming here?"

Clare's curiosity, or rather her anxiety, was great. She allowed herself to be drawn to the lattice window, which stood half open, all embowered in honeysuckle. She kept Jeanie's soft hand in hers with a sense of clinging to it, as if there was help in its soft childlike pressure. The new-comers were walking down the village street, filling the breadth of the road—Mrs. Pimpernel full-blown and gorgeous as usual; her pretty daughter half smothered in her finery; at one hand the young curate, Mr.

Denbigh, whose head was supposed to be turned by croquet and Alice; and on the other– Clare said to herself she had known it all along. She had divined it from the first moment when Jeanie spoke. She stood leaning one arm against the half-opened window, and with the other hand holding Jeanie fast. Yes, of course, it was he; she had known it all along. The scene looked so familiar to her that she seemed to have seen it somewhere in a picture ages ago. Pretty Alice Pimpernel, blushing, and saying two words by intervals now and then—"Oh, no, Mr. Arden," and "Oh, yes, Mr. Arden" (was not that the sort of conversation Alice Pimpernel kept up? somebody, she could not remember who, had once told Clare)—and stooping over her, doing his best to entertain her, smiling that smile she knew so well– Clare grasped Jeanie's hand so hard that it hurt the girl, who gave a half-suppressed cry; and then the young Princess of Arden dropped suddenly into the nearest chair. Her heart seemed to sink somewhere into unimaginable depths. It was no surprise to her. She had known it all along. And yet–

Jeanie stood by her, unaware of what was passing through her companion's mind; or was she somehow aware, though Clare said not a word? "He thinks little, little of her he's speaking to," said Jeanie, softly. "He thinks nothing of her. If it was me, I would not let a man speak to me and look at me like that, and scorn me, Miss Arden. They're rich and grand, but he thinks he's better than them–"

"And he *is* better than them," said Clare, under her breath.

"He is an Arden. Better than them! They are nobody. You are better. Hush! you don't understand–"

And she held the little hand clasped tight, and almost leaned upon Jeanie, not knowing it. The party came nearer; their voices became audible from the window, and it annoyed Clare to hear sounds behind her, Mrs. Murray moving about, which prevented her hearing what was said. She uttered an imperative "Hush!" and turned round, half angrily, to command silence; but still she could hear nothing but the well-accustomed tones—the voice she knew so well. "You must see her. She is the prettiest creature," she heard him say just as they passed into the room below; and then Clare loosed Jeanie's hand, and looked at her with a new inspiration. It was not for Alice Pimpernel; it was for Jeanie this visit was made.

"You pretended to be afraid of him when you met him with me," she said sharply, and then turned to the grandmother. "She fainted or something at the sight of him, and now he brings people to make a show of her. How is this?" she cried. "Do you know that this village is mine, and I have the charge of it? I must know what it means. You must explain this to me."

"Miss Arden," said Mrs. Murray, "you mistake me and mine, I canna tell why. I have lived sixty years in this world, and nobody has bidden me humble myself as you have done—though it is justice upon me, but you know nothing of that. I owe ye no explanation. I am not of your parish nor in your charge; but out of courtesy, and because of something ye never heard of, I'll satisfy

you this time. The man is nothing to her nor to me. He was like a man that once we knew, as I told you. But he came here three days ago, and I was glad, for the poor bairn saw it was another face and another voice, and got over her fear. He's clever and soft-spoken, as ye ken; but he should never speak to my Jeanie more, never with my will. That is all I have to say. You should not be here, spying on your kinsman, you that's such a proud lady. You should not watch at that window, nor catch his words unawares. I would do more for you than for anybody in the world that's not my ain–"

"Why do you talk such nonsense to me," cried Clare, angrily. "Am I such a fool as to be deceived by it? What reason have you to care for me? I thought you were proud and gave yourself airs, but I did not think you would make false pretences like this. Why should you care for me–"

"I canna tell ye why, and ye will never ken," said Mrs. Murray with a sigh, "though I would give my life for you or your brother, if that would serve you. But you say well, I have no right to make pretences. You're young and I'm old, Miss Arden, and when your kinsman is below you should not be watching him here."

"I am not watching him," said Clare; and she sat with an obstinate stateliness by the window, her face deeply flushed, her heart beating high. It was not her fault. She would not have stolen here into this coign of 'vantage had she thought of Arthur. It was but to avoid the Pimpernels, not to watch him. But, even had she known he was coming, would it not have been better

in any case to keep out of his way? Had not Edgar left home on purpose to send him away from Arden?—Edgar, whose fault it was, who had thus thrown his cousin into the arms of the Pimpernels, into the way of temptation. Clare was unreasonable, as was natural. She forgot—as it is so easy to forget—that Arthur Arden was much older than her brother, far more experienced, a man doubly learned in the ways of the world. The first thing that occurred to her had been to suspect poor little Jeanie, to blame Mrs. Murray; and now her imagination fell upon Edgar, putting all the responsibility on his shoulders. He had sent his cousin away. It was a new beginning which poor Arthur was making—an attempt, poor fellow, at that pure domestic life which had never been within his reach before. And Edgar, who had all the lands and all the prosperity, had refused to this other Arden even the poor shelter of his roof—the chance of learning to love something that was better than his past had been. And thus he had been thrown back upon the Pimpernels. To look at these good people in the mirror of Clare's fancy, one would have supposed they were everything that was disorderly and improper, instead of being the most respectable of households, correct in every possible point, and domestic to a degree only possible to a British nature with commercial associations. Clare sat and listened to the hum of voices down-stairs with the strangest emotion. What was he doing there? What had he come for? Why was he making himself the attendant of Alice Pimpernel? He had no money, and her father was rich—was he, thwarted in his affections, intent

upon marrying and indemnifying himself by securing money at least? All these thoughts passed through Clare's mind with the rapidity of lightning. Very different would have been her brother's thoughts, even of Arthur Arden; but Clare's mind was more sophisticated than Edgar's, and leapt in a moment at this vulgar danger, which to her felt so real. And, as we have said, the idea of marrying for money did not in itself revolt her. If he could not secure the woman he loved, and her fortune, what could he do but at least attempt to secure another fortune?—something he could live on, and which would give him something to live for. Alice Pimpernel! How much would she have? Clare wondered, in her feverish suspense. Something, surely, not worth the sacrifice—a share of her father's money only—not an estate or ancient barony in her own right.

And then it occurred to her suddenly, she could not tell why, that Old Arden was the seat of an ancient barony. It had dropped away from the family in some of the civil wars; but the Squires had once been Barons, and Lord Arden was a title that might easily be renewed in a generation unfriendly to attainders, and which had a respect for old memories. Should it be Edgar who would bear the recovered title? Edgar, Lord Arden! The idea was absurd somehow. And then, Old Arden was not Edgar's, but hers—hers to bestow. Good heavens!—that it should be so! And all the time, Arthur Arden—he who was the truest representative of the family, in look, and thought, and disposition—he who would be the ideal Lord Arden—was wasting his time upon a cotton-

broker's daughter—a Liverpool girl, with a little paltry money—down-stairs! These may have been deemed strange thoughts for a girl who had just seen her lover absorbed in attendance upon another. She had been miserable enough—angry enough for the first moment. She had loathed the innocent Jeanie, and hated the stupid Alice; but while she thus sat waiting and listening, it was another channel into which her thoughts flowed. It was because he had been sent away from her own side that he was driven to "amuse himself"—poor fellow! And she could give him all that was needful, and the higher life along with it! Clare's heart beat high with impatience as she heard the sound of the voices. Should she go down and reveal herself? Should she wait? What should she do? It was while her excitement thus gradually grew stronger—after she had risen and seated herself again twice over, and felt herself almost carried away by the torrent of her thoughts—that the stir down-stairs took a definite form; there was a sound of approaching footsteps and voices, which came nearer and nearer. Mrs. Murray divined what it meant sooner than Clare did; and hastily taking Jeanie's hand, led her into the inner room. "Take your seam, my bonnie lamb, and never you mind what they say or what they do," said the grandmother; and she closed the door upon her charge, and drew a chair to the table, and took up her own knitting. The room grew suddenly a place full of protection and safety, Clare could not tell how. The first sensation of fright, and horror, and excitement, at the sound of their approach, died out of her mind. "Thanks," she said, under her breath. And then

there came a sudden knock and flutter of voices close by; and Arthur Arden, smiling and introducing the pretty figure of Alice Pimpernel, suddenly appeared at the door.

CHAPTER VI

Clare, who knew what was coming, had instinctively changed her position. She had subdued her excitement, as perhaps only a woman could do, and adopted, with the speed of thought, her ordinary air of stately composure. Her look was that of one paying a dignified, yet friendly, visit to a cottage acquaintance, below her in rank, yet not beyond the range of her sympathy. And Mrs. Murray, with feminine skill so natural that it was unconscious, supported her visitor in the emergency. Not a word of explanation passed between them; but yet, they instinctively fell into their parts. Arthur Arden, however, was not in the least prepared for the sight which met his eyes as he opened the door. Partly as making an experiment, to see if it was possible to rouse her, and partly out of sheer idleness and indifference, he had suddenly suggested to Alice Pimpernel to "visit the little beauty" upstairs. "I know the mother; and I want your opinion," he had said. "Oh, Mr. Arden!" had been Alice's reply, as she buttoned the second button of her gloves; and thus they had come upstairs. But it would be impossible to describe in words how small Arthur Arden felt when he opened the door and found himself suddenly in the presence of his cousin Clare. Though he was a man of experience, and not easily daunted, the sudden sight of her covered him with confusion. Instead of introducing Alice into the room as he had intended, he stumbled into it before her,

and changed colour and hesitated like a boy of sixteen. "Miss Arden!" he stammered forth, not knowing what he said; and forgot all about Alice Pimpernel behind him, who tried to peep over his shoulder, and mentally sank upon her knees before the majesty of Clare.

"Yes," said Clare; and then, after a little pause—"Do you want me, Mr. Arden, or Mrs. Murray? Please tell me, and I will go away."

"I wanted—it is nothing—I did not know," Arthur stammered. "Miss Pimpernel was interested—that is, I told her of– I think you know Miss Pimpernel."

And then, much confused, he stood aside, and made visible Alice, who proferred her shy obeisance, and once more buttoned her glove, too shy to venture to speak. Clare rose, and bowed in her stately way. She was mistress of the situation; and no one could have told how violently her heart was beating against her side.

"I have paid Mrs. Murray too long a visit," she said. "I must go now. I did not know you were in the neighbourhood, Mr. Arden. You are at the Red House, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Arthur, meekly. "I meant to have let you know– but– Mrs. Pimpernel is down-stairs. I intended to have continued my walk to the Hall to ask how you were–"

"Oh! I am always very well," said Clare; and then there was a pause in the hostilities, and the two armies stopped and looked at each other. Mrs. Murray had taken no notice of the belligerents

up to this moment. She had gone on quietly with her knitting, aware that her own charge was in safety. Now she looked up from her work, though without rising from her seat, and turned to the new-comers with a grave face.

"If ye were wanting me, Sir, I would like to know what it was for? I am no used to the ways of the place, and I cannot think I could be of any use."

"Oh, Miss Arden!" said Alice Pimpernel, driven to her wits' end, and feeling that it was now her turn to say something. The girl gave Clare a supplicating glance. "Would she knit something for mamma—or– Oh, I don't know what to say!"

And Arthur Arden gave no assistance. He stood speechless among them, cursing his own folly. Clare had all the advantage, whereas he had only the comfort of feeling that he had made himself look like a fool in everybody's eyes.

"I think the young lady has come to see Jeanie," said Clare.

"But Jeanie is no a show, that folk should come to see her," said the grandmother. "She is as much thought of and as precious to her own folk as any young lady. It's no that I would be uncivil to them that mean no harm, but my Jeanie is as sacred to me as any lady's bairn."

"Oh, Mr. Arden!" said poor Alice Pimpernel.

At this moment there was heard in the distance the sound of rustling robes and heavy feet upon the stair, a sound which carried confusion to all bosoms except that of Alice, whose relief when she heard the approach of her maternal guardian was great.

Mrs. Pimpernel's cheerful voice was heard before she could be seen. "Well," she said, "have you seen her, and is she as wonderful as you thought? Poor thing! I am sure I am sorry for her, with this stair to go up and down; and the poor old lady–"

The poor old lady stood confronting Mrs. Pimpernel, who came in very red and heated, and almost fell into her arms. "My good woman, do give me a chair," she cried. "I am nearly suffocated. Oh, Alice and Mr. Arden, what are you doing here? Give me a chair, please. Miss Arden, I declare! How nice it is to meet like this, when one is trying to do the little good one can among the poor! It is so charming of you to take such trouble with your people, Miss Arden. There is really next to nothing left for any one else to do. Might I ask you for a glass of water, my good woman? and wipe the glass first, please. Everything looks very clean, but one never can get quite rid of dust in a cottage. Wipe it well, please."

Clare stood looking on with consternation while these ejaculations were uttered. She had very little sympathy with Mrs. Murray, but yet there was something about her which made Mrs. Pimpernel's easy "my good woman" sound extraordinary enough. "What will she do? Will she scold, or turn her out?" was Clare's question to herself. What Mrs. Murray did was to laugh—a low, soft laugh—which brightened her face as Clare had never seen it, and to bring from a side-table a bottle of water, a glass, and a snow-white napkin. She rubbed the glass for full three minutes, always with a smile upon her face. "Do you think

it clean now?" she said, holding it up with amused demonstration. "If I were at home I would give you better than water; and if you should ever come to Loch Arroch I will be glad to see you —you and yours. Miss Arden, the lady means no harm," the old woman added, turning to Clare, "and she's simple and kind. Why should I no make clean the glass and serve her to drink? She kens no better. I take that easy, easy; but them that would make an exhibition of my poor bairn–"

"I don't think any one meant to offend you," said Clare; and then she turned and bowed to Mrs. Pimpernel, who started from her seat to detain her. "I must go, thank you; I am busy," she said, with another stately gesture of leave-taking to where Arthur and Alice stood together. "Bring Jeanie to see me to-morrow," she added, pausing as she went away. It was an impulse she could not restrain, though Jeanie's part in it was very small. She lingered that there might be a chance for some one else to say something—a possibility. And then she made that chance impossible. "Come up as early as twelve o'clock, please, if she is well enough. I have a great deal to talk to you about." And with these words she hurried away. She would not look at him, or permit any sympathetic glance to open the way for a word. And yet she had lingered that a look or word might come. Strange inconsistency! She ran downstairs, leaving them above, leaving them together, and went out alone, without saying a word to Sarah or her myrmidons, feeling so lonely, so sad, so solitary, so deserted by heaven and earth! It was right, quite right, of

Arthur Arden to make some provision for himself; she had no fault to find with him, not a word to say. But she was very solitary, and very sad. If she only had been spared the sight of it! But no; all her fortitude would be required. He would probably live here in the neighbourhood somewhere after he had married Alice Pimpernel; and he would be well off at least, if not happy! Oh! surely not happy with that insipid creature, who buttoned her gloves and trembled to hear her own name.

Clare hurried along the village street at a pace quite unusual to her; but she had not gone far when she found that she was pursued. She would not look back for the first moment; but, notwithstanding the repugnance in her own mind to turn and speak to him, it was inconsistent to her dignity to be thus followed by her cousin, whom everybody knew. She turned round with the best grace she could muster, and addressed him with her usual manner. "Did you want me?" she said, and slackened her pace that he might come up.

"It seems so strange that you should ask," said Arthur, "Want you? As if I dared tell you half how much– But never mind! I went to the Pimpernels' thinking I should be at hand and might have opportunities– I did not know you were so prejudiced against them. May not I even come to see you while I am there?"

"Being there does not matter much," said Clare, hastily, and then she corrected herself. "Of course, you think me prejudiced and disagreeable," she said; "but I am as I was brought up. Edgar thinks me dreadfully prejudiced. I dare say they are very nice,

and all that; but perhaps it would be as well that you did not come to Arden while you were there."

"Why?" said Arthur, in a low voice.

"Why? Oh, I can't tell why. Because I don't like it. Because I am cross and testy, and like to contradict you. Because– But you know it is no use asking. If a woman is not to chose who she will call on, she must be oppressed and trampled down indeed."

"You are concealing your real objection," said Arthur; and I, who went because I thought– Why, I met Edgar there! But never mind; of course, it must be as you please. I said I would stay a fortnight. Must I never come near you all that time? It is very hard. And it is harder still that Edgar should have gone away as he did, breaking all our party up. Do you know, I have never been so happy, not all my life?"

"I am sure you must be quite as happy now," said Clare; "and I hope you will be prosperous in everything you may undertake. Edgar, I am sure, would be very glad to hear, and I– I do so hope, Mr. Arden, that everything you wish will thrive—as you wish–" And here Clare stopped short, breathing quickly, almost overcome by mixture of despite, and self-restraint, and sorrow for herself, which was in her mind.

"Do you, indeed?" he said. "That is very, very kind of you. It would be kinder still if you knew—but you don't care to know. If I should ever remind you of your good wishes—not now, because I dare not, but afterwards—some time—if I should pluck up courage–"

"I don't think there is any great courage required," said Clare. "Trust me, I shall always be glad to hear that you have done—well for yourself. There could be no more agreeable news. Neither Edgar nor I could have any desire but to see you—happy. Excuse me, I am going to see Miss Somers. I should ask you to come in too, but she is such an invalid, and I am keeping you from your friends. You may be sure you have my very best wishes—good-bye–"

And Clare held out her hand to him, and smiled a smile which was very proud and uncomfortable. She had not in the least intended to visit Miss Somers, but it would have been utterly impossible for her (she thought) to have walked up all the length of the avenue by Arthur Arden's side. Most likely he would have told her of his progress with Alice. And how could she bear that? It was better to part thus abruptly as long as she was capable of smiling and uttering those good wishes which, she had some faint perception, were gall and wormwood to the recipient. She could see that her benevolent hopes and desires were bitter to him, and it pleased her to see it. Yet, notwithstanding, she still believed in Alice Pimpernel. Why should he be there otherwise? He might not like it to be known until everything was settled—it might be galling to his pride. But still, why should he be there but for that? It was the only possible attraction. And no doubt it was a very sensible thing to do. She hurried across to the doctor's house without looking back, eager to be rid of him—to get away—to forget all about it. And yet not without a thought that perhaps

he would refuse to be dismissed—perhaps would insist upon explaining—perhaps– But the door opened and closed upon her, and not a word was said to prevent her visit to Miss Somers. When she looked out of the invalid's window Arthur was walking very slowly and quietly down the street to rejoin his friends. This was how it was to be. Well! he had been driven out of Arden, poor fellow! he had been discouraged in his dearer hopes. She herself had been unkind to him; and Edgar had been, oh, how unkind! And he was poor, and must do something to re-establish himself in the world. Was he to blame? Clare clasped her two hands tightly together, and set her lips close that no sigh might escape from them. What alternative was there for him but to act as he was doing; and what for her but to wish him well? And Edgar, too, no doubt, would wish him well—Edgar, who had done it all.

CHAPTER VII

Arthur Arden went back to the Pimpernels' with no very comfortable feelings. He had gone to the Red House, he said, in order to be near Arden, and that he might make frequent visits to the central object of his pursuit; but he had not been aware how far Clare carried out her principles, and that she really declined to know the people whom she did not think her equals. Arthur was accustomed to people who sneer yet visit and take advantage of all the wealth and luxuries of the *nouveaux riches*. Make use of them: was not that what all the world did, accepting their costly dinners and fine carriages, and laughing at them behind their backs? How was it that Clare refused to do this like other people? Her kinsman could not tell. He thought it foolish of her, if Clare could do anything foolish, and in his own mind quoted the example of a great many very fine people indeed who did it freely. Why should one be so much better than others? he thought to himself; and so went back disconcerted to join the Pimpernels.

Clare was wrong in the conclusion she had jumped at, and still she was not altogether wrong. Alice was pretty and quite inoffensive, and she would have thirty thousand pounds. When a young man of good family without any money or any profession has arrived at the borders of forty, various questions present themselves to him in a very decided way, and demand consideration. What is to become of him? You may keep time at

bay if you have all the aids and preventives at hand for doing so; but when that is not the case, when you have, on the other hand, anxieties instead of cosmetics, and increase your wrinkles by every hour's thought, the crisis is a very formidable one. Arthur Arden had been brought up, like so many young men, with vague thoughts of an appointment which was to do everything for him. This expectation had quieted the consciences of everybody belonging to him. He had been waiting for an appointment as long as he could recollect, and he was still waiting for it now. To tell the truth, the progress of years did not make it more likely or bring it any nearer; but still, he knew a great many people who had in their hands the giving of appointments, and it was not impossible that such a thing might drop from the skies at any moment. What he would have done with it when it came, after so many years' lounging about the world without anything definite to do, is a different question. But, in the meantime, Alice Pimpernel, as a *pis aller*, was as good as an appointment, and Clare a great deal better, and it seemed only natural that the best should claim his devotion first. He had not attempted to exercise upon Alice the full force of those fascinations which he had poured forth upon Clare; but he kept her in hand, as it were, ready for an emergency. He cleared the cloud off his face as he approached the door of old Sarah's cottage, where the ladies had just appeared. Young Denbigh, the curate, had left them when they went in, so that Arthur was their sole escort. He arrived in time to hear Mrs. Pimpernel's parting words.

"Don't think any more about the loss. It was not very expensive lace, you know, and I have plenty. Thank heaven, I am not in circumstances to be obliged to consider every trifle. I was annoyed at first, of course, and it was dreadfully careless of the girl. What does she expect is to become of her, I wonder, if she takes no more pains? I have known a girl just simply ruined by such carelessness. Oh, you need not cry—crying does very little good. I assure you I have, indeed."

"It's what I'm atelling 'em morning, noon, and night," said old Sarah, while the culprit retired into her apron, and sobbed, and curtsied, being past all power of speech.

"Simply ruined," said Mrs. Pimpernel with solemn iteration; "but I trust you will think what you are doing, and never be so wicked again. I am very much interested in your lodgers, Sarah. What a very nice old woman, and so clean! Mr. Arden did you observe? But there is no use speaking to you gentlemen—you are always thinking of something else. So very clean! If anything should ever be wanted for her or for the sick girl, you may send to me freely. We are never without some little delicacy, you know—something that would tempt an invalid. Mr. Pimpernel is so very particular about what he eats. All you gentlemen are. I dare say you want it more after being out in the world all day knocking about. Well, Mr. Arden, and so you went and made your peace with your cousin? I hope everything is right now."

"Nothing was wrong," said Arthur hastily. "I had no peace to make. I was only anxious to ask Miss Arden about—Edgar. I

don't know where he is, and I wanted his address."

"She does not half like your staying with us," said Mrs. Pimpernel. "Oh, don't speak to me! I know better. I don't know what we have ever done to her, but she hates us, does Miss Arden. She is quite spiteful because you are staying with us."

"Oh, mamma, dear!" said Alice, in gentle deprecation.

"You may say what you please, Alice, but I know better. That child is always standing up for Miss Arden. I don't know why she should, I am sure, for she never is barely civil. Not that we want anything from her; we visit quite as much as I wish to visit; but if I were ever so anxious to increase my list, Arden Hall, you know!– It never was very amusing, I believe. It is not that I care for the airs she gives herself–"

"You forget that my cousin has been brought up very quietly," said Arthur. "Her father was very peculiar. He never saw any society unless he could not help it. You know, indeed, that poor Edgar, his only son– But that is a painful subject to us all."

"Please, tell me!" said Mrs. Pimpernel. "One hears hints, you know; but it would be so much more satisfactory from one of the family. Do, please, tell me. He snubbed him dreadfully, and never educated him, nor gave him any allowance nor anything. Fancy, his own father! But there must have been some cause."

"He was a very peculiar man," said Arthur Arden. "There are things in families, you know, which don't bear discussion. If I was more hard-hearted than I am, or more indifferent to the credit of the name– But never mind—it is a question I would rather not

discuss."

"Oh, Mr. Arden!" cried Alice Pimpernel, clasping her hands, and looking up at him with unfeigned admiration. Yes, he was more interesting than Mr. Denbigh, with that fine family face, and all its romantic associations—and sacrificing himself, too, for the good of the family. How grand it was! The Pimpernels, too, had certain features which were peculiar to them; but oh! how different from the Ardens. Mr. Denbigh was interesting too—he was very nice and attractive, and second cousin to the Earl of Tintagel. But he had not a story to attract the imagination like this.

"I would never insist upon confidence," said Mrs. Pimpernel; it is against my principles, even with my own child. If it's about money, I always say, 'Speak to your papa—he is the one to manage all that;' and, between ourselves, he is a great deal too liberal; he never knows how to say 'No' to any of them. But if it's their feelings, I never exact anything. I am always ready to do my best, but confidence is a thing I would never exact."

"It is a thing I should be most ready to give," said Arthur Arden, with a bow and a smile, "if the secret were only mine. But my poor cousin Edgar—he is a most worthy fellow—an excellent fellow. I confess I was prejudiced against him, which is not unnatural, you know, considering that he stands, between me and– But really it is a question I must not enter on."

"Anything you may say to us will be sacred, you may be sure," Mrs. Pimpernel said, with breathless interest; and Alice

looked up appealingly in his face. They were quite tremulous with expectation, looking for some romance of real life, something more exciting than gossip. Arthur Arden could scarcely restrain the impulse to mystify them at least; but he remembered that it might be dangerous, and refrained.

"No," he said, with a sigh, shaking his head, "not even to you. If it were my own secret you should have it fast enough; but I must not betray another's. No, no. And poor Edgar is an excellent fellow—as good a fellow as ever breathed."

Mrs. Pimpernel shot a lively glance across him at her daughter, who replied to it quickly enough, though she was not over-bright. "Depend upon it, there is some flaw in Edgar Arden's title," was Mrs. Pimpernel's comment that evening when she repeated the conversation to her husband. "Depend upon it, all's not right there. I never saw anything written more plainly on a man's face."

"Then you must have seen fool written after it," said Mr. Pimpernel. "Stuff and nonsense! This fellow Arden is very well up to most things. He knows what he's about, does Arden; and so he should, if he's making up to your daughter, Mrs. Pimpernel."

"I wish you would not be so coarse," said the lady. "Making up! There is nothing of the sort. He is an agreeable sort of man, and knows everybody; though, if there was anything in this story, Alice might do worse. It would be very nice to have her settled so near us. And Arden is a good name; and I must say, if there is one thing I am partial to, it is a good family. Though you never will acknowledge it, or give any weight to it, it is well known my

grandmother was a Blundell–"

"I don't know anything about your grandmother; but I shan't give your daughter, if I can help it, to a fellow who has nothing. Why don't he get his appointment? Or, if he wants to marry, let him marry his cousin, and get her share of the property. That would be the sensible thing to do."

"He would not look at his cousin, take my word for it," said Mrs. Pimpernel. "He has more sense than that at least. A proud, stuck-up thing, as vain of her family– As if it was any virtue of hers to belong to an old family! She wasn't consulted about it. For my part, I'd rather be like Alice, well brought up, with a father and mother she has no reason to be ashamed of, than Clare Arden, with all her mysteries and nonsense. I should indeed; and that is a deal for me to say that am partial to old families. But, if you had a chance, you might just question Arthur Arden a little, and see what he means by it. I don't see why he should sacrifice himself. And if there should be anything in it, to have Alice settled so near us, on such a pretty property–"

Thus Mrs. Pimpernel showed an inclination not only to count her chickens before they were hatched, but even before it was quite certain that there were eggs for the preliminary ceremony. The husband did not say very much, but he thought the more. He had money to back any claimant, and would not hesitate to do so. And as for any folly about self-sacrifice or fine family feeling, the cotton-broker felt that he would make very short work with that. "Rubbish and nonsense!" he said to himself. "What were

all the feelings in the world in comparison with a fine property like Arden—a property that might almost double in value if it were in proper hands. Why, in building leases alone, he could undertake to add five thousand a-year to the property. There might be dozens of Arden Villas, Pimpernel Places, &c., which would pay magnificently, without interfering in the least with 'the amenities.' And if nothing was wanted but money for a lawsuit, why he himself would not mind providing the sinews of war.

"I understand there is some uncertainty about your cousin's title to Arden," he said next morning, in his uncompromising way.

"Good heavens! who said so?" said Arthur, in consternation; for to do him justice he had meant only to be interesting, and knew that, as respected Arden, his suspicions, and those of other people, did not value a brass farthing. "Pray be cautious of repeating such a thing. It is quite new to me–"

"Why, why, why!—I thought you gave a little colour to it at least, by something you said yourself—so I heard," said Mr. Pimpernel. "I am a practical man, Arden, and I never have any time to beat about the bush. *Should* there be anything in it, and *should* you be disposed to fight it out, and *should* you have evidence and all that, why, I should not mind standing by you, as a matter of business, you know. I don't understand fine feelings, but I understand what an estate's worth; and if you can prove to my solicitor you have ground to go upon, why, I shouldn't mind backing you up. There, I never make mysteries about anything,

and you will follow my example, if you take my advice–"

"My dear sir, how can I thank you for your confidence in me?" said Arthur. "The truth is, there has always been something very odd; but I fear that so far as evidence goes– You may depend upon it, if I ever should find myself in a position to prove anything, yours would be the first aid I should seek."

"Well, well, you know your own affairs best," said Mr. Pimpernel. And so there was no more said about it; but Arthur's brain was set to work as it had never yet been. What if there might be evidence after all—something the old Squire had made up his mind not to use? Arden was worth a great deal of exertion, even a little treachery; and, of course, if Edgar was not a real Arden, it would be a duty to the race to cast him out—a duty to the race, and a duty to himself. Duty to one's self is a very prevailing principle; there is not much about it in the canons of Christianity, but there is a great deal about it in the practical laws which govern the world. Arthur was vaguely excited by this unexpected proposal. He was not lawyer enough to know much of the possibilities or impossibilities of the matter. But it was worth thinking about, worth inquiring into, surely, if anything ever was.

CHAPTER VIII

It was with this idea strong in his mind that Arthur marked out for himself a certain scheme of operations during his stay at the Red House. He had still ten days to remain there, and time, it must be allowed, hung sometimes heavy on his hands. To play croquet with devotion for several hours every day requires a mind free from agitation and innocent of scheming—or, at least, not burdened with schemes which are very important—or any warm personal anxiety in the bigger game of life. Alice Pimpernel was good for two hours in the morning, with her little sisters, when they had done their lessons; and Arden felt that it was a very pretty group on the first day of his visit, when he looked up from his newspaper, and let his eyes stray over the well-kept lawn, with its background of trees, and all the airy figures in their light dresses that were standing about. But, then, Alice was good also for four hours in the afternoon, when there was nothing better going on—namely, from half-past two, when luncheon was just over, till half-past six; when it was time to dress for dinner. Young Denbigh, by right of his youth, was equal to this long continued enjoyment; but Arthur was not equal to it. And, as at that moment there were no other visitors at the Red House, time was hard to kill. He felt that if he had been a little younger he would have been driven, in self defence, to make love to somebody—Alice or her mother, it did not much matter which

—but it was too great a bore, with all his anxieties on his mind, and with the amount of real feeling he had in respect to Clare. Accordingly, it was rather a godsend to him when Mr. Pimpernel threw this suggestion into his mind. He did not take it up with any active feeling of enmity to Edgar, nor even with any great hope of success. If it were as he thought, the Squire had either been uncertain to the last of his wife's guilt, or he had been sufficiently infatuated to accept the consequences, finally and irredeemably —in which latter case, no doubt, he must have destroyed any evidence that existed against her; while, in the former case, there could have been no evidence sufficiently strong to convict her. In either point of view, it was madness, after all this lapse of time, to attempt to make any discoveries. Yet Arthur made up his mind to try to do so, with a resolution which grew stronger the more he thought of it. And from this moment he thought of little else. He had believed his own hypothesis steadily for so many years; and it was so much to his interest to believe it, if proof of any description could be found. He strolled down to the village next morning, not knowing exactly what he wanted, and stopped at old Sarah's cottage, and beguiled her into conversation. Jeanie, he noted, had been sent away at his approach, and this fact alone determined him to see Jeanie. He went upstairs, again, undaunted by the experience of yesterday, and knocked softly at the door of the little parlour. "Mrs. Murray," he said from the landing, not even presuming to enter, "I have something to say to Sarah, and I cannot manage it below, with these two girls listening and

staring. Would it disturb you to let us come up here?" There was a pause, and a little rustle, as of movement and telegraphed communications, before any answer was made to him; and then Arthur smiled to find that his appeal to Scotch politeness was not made in vain. "Come in, sir," Mrs. Murray said, gravely. Jeanie was seated at the open window with her needlework, and her grandmother in her usual place by the table, engaged in her usual occupation of knitting. "Take a seat, sir; we'll leave you to yourselves," said Mrs. Murray. But this did not suit Arthur, who, even in the midst of a new interest, loved to have two strings to his bow.

"By no means," he said; "what I have to say may be said quite well before you. I have to put a question or two about my cousins at the Hall. Here is a chair for you, Sarah; sit down, and don't be frightened. Nothing is going to happen. I want you to tell me what you know about Mrs. Arden, that is all."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.