МАРГАРЕТ ОЛИФАНТ

SQUIRE ARDEN; VOLUME 1 OF 3

Маргарет Олифант

Squire Arden; volume 1 of 3

Олифант М. У.

Squire Arden; volume 1 of 3 / М. У. Олифант — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Margaret Oliphant
Squire Arden; volume 1 of 3

CHAPTER I

"What are the joy bells a-ringing for, Simon?" said an old woman, coming briskly out to the door of one of the pretty cottages in the pretty village of Arden, on a pleasant morning of early summer, when all the leaves were young, and the first freshness of the year was over the world. "There's ne'er a one married as I knows on, and it aint Whitsuntide, nor Holmfirth fair, nor–"

"It's the young Squire, stoopid," said the old clerk, gruffly, leaning his arms upon the little paling of the tiny garden and looking at her. "He's come home."

What he really did say was "he's coom whoam;" but the reader will be so kind as take it for granted that Simon Molyneaux was an old Lancashire man, and talked accordingly, without giving a pen not too familiar with the dialect the trouble of putting in all the o's that are necessary. Simon said coom, and he said loove, and moother; but as there is no moral meaning in the double letter, let us consent to leave it out.

"The young Squire!" said the old woman, with a start.

She was a tidy fresh old woman, with cheeks of a russet colour, half brown half red, yet soft, despite all their wrinkles—cheeks that children laid their little faces up to without feeling any difference of texture; and eyes which had stolen back during these years deeper into their sockets, but yet were bright and full of suppressed sunshine. She had a little shawl pinned over her print gown, and a great white apron, which shone in the sun, and made the chief light in the little picture. Simon's rugged countenance looking at her was all brown, with a deep dusky red on the tops of the cheekbones; his face was as full of cross-hatching as if he had been an old print. His eyes were deeper than were hers, but still at the bottom of the wrinkled caves they abode in had a spark of light in each of them. In short, there was sufficient resemblance between them still to show that Simon and Sarah were brother and sister. A young woman of four and twenty came to the door of the next cottage at the sound of his voice, and opening it, went in again, as if her duty was done. She was Simon's daughter and housekeeper, who was not fond of gossip, and the two kindred households were next door to each other. It was a very pretty village, much encouraged to keep itself tidy, and to cultivate flowers, and do everything that is proper in its condition of life, by the young lady at the Hall. The houses had been improved, but in an unobtrusive way. They were not painfully white-washed, but showed here and there a gleam of red brick in a thin place. The roses and the honeysuckles were not always neatly trained, and there was even an old shawl thrust into a broken pane in the window of Sally Timms, who was so much trouble to Miss Arden with her untidy ways. Old Simon had nothing but wallflower and southernwood (which was called lad's love in that region), and red and white daisies in his garden. But next door, if you came at the proper season, you might see picottees that were exhibited at the Holmfirth flower show, and floury auriculas, such as were the height of the fashion in the floral world a good many years ago. In short there was just that mixture of perfection and imperfection which kept the village of Arden a natural spontaneous village, instead of an artificial piece of luxury, cultivated like any other ornament, in consequence of the very close vicinity of the Hall gates.

"The young Squire!" said old Sarah again, who had been shaking her head all the time we have taken to interpolate this bit of description; and she did it still more emphatically now when she repeated her words, "Poor lad—poor lad! Eh, to think the joy bells should be rung in Arden Church along o' *him*! He never came home yet that I hadn't a good cry for't afore the day was done. Poor lad!"

"Thee needn't cry no more," said Simon, "along of him. He's come to his own, and ne'er one within twenty miles to say him nay. He came home last night, when folks were a' abed; but he's as bright as a May morning to look at him now."

"He was allays bright," said Sarah, wiping her eyes with her apron, an action which disturbed the whole picture, breaking up the lights, "when he was kepp like the lowest in the house, and 'ad the nose snapped off his face, he'd cry one minute and laugh the next, that's what he'd do. He never was long down, wasn't Mr. Edgar. Though where he got that, and his light hair, and them dancing eyes of his, it's none o' us that can say."

"It was off his mother he got 'em, as was natural," said the old clerk. "I saw her when old Master he brought her home first, and she was as fair as fair. But, Squire or no Squire, I'm going to my breakfast. Them bell-ringing boys they're at the Arden Arms already, drinking the Squire's sovereign, the fools, instead of laying it up for a rainy day. If they had the rheumatiz as bad as me they'd know what it was to have a penny laid by; but I don't know what young folks is coming to, I don't," said Simon, opening his own gate, and hobbling towards the open door. He had a large white handkerchief loosely tied about his shrivelled brown throat, and an old black coat, which had been an evening coat of the old Squire's in former days. Simon preferred swallowtail coats, chiefly because he thought they were more dignified, and became his position; but partly also because experience had taught him that coats which were only worn in the evening by their original proprietor had a great deal more wear in them than those which the Squire or the Rector walked about in all day.

Sarah went in also to her own cottage, where for the moment she was all alone. She spread down her white apron, and smoothed out the creases which she had made when she dried her eyes; but, notwithstanding, her eyes required to be dried again. "Poor lad," she said at intervals, as she "tidied" her already tidy room, and swept some imperceptible dust into the fireplace. The fire was made up. The cat sat winking by it. The kettle feebly murmured on the hob. It was not the moment for that kettle to put itself in evidence. It had made the breakfast, and had helped in the washing of the solitary cup and saucer, and it was only just now that it should retire into the background till the afternoon, when tea was again to be thought of. Its mistress was somewhat in the same condition. She walked round the room two or three times, trying apparently to find some piece of active work which required to be done, and poked into all the corners. "I done my scouring only yesterday," she said to herself in a regretful and plaintive tone; but, after a little interval, added energetically, "and I cannot settle down to plain sewing, not to-day." She said this as if somebody had commanded her to take to her plain sewing, which lay all ready in a basket on the table, and the command had roused her to sudden irritation. But it was only the voice of duty which gave that order. Even after this indignant protest, however, Sarah took her work, and put in three stitches, and then picked them carefully out again. "I think I'm a losing of my seven senses," she said to herself plaintively. "It aint no use a struggling." And with that the old woman rose, tied on her big old bonnet, and set out through Arden village in the sunshine on her way to Arden Hall.

To see that pretty rural place, you would never have supposed it was within a dozen miles of the great, vulgar, bustling town of Liverpool—nay, within half a dozen miles of the straggling, dreary outskirts of that big beehive. But yet so it was; from the tower of Arden Church you could see the mouth of the Mersey, with all its crowds of ships; and, but for the haughty determination of the old Squire to grant no building leases on his land, and the absence of railway communication consequent thereupon, no doubt Arden would have been by this time full of villas, and would have sent a stream of commercial gentlemen every morning out of its quiet freshness by dint of a ten o'clock train. But there was no ten o'clock train, and no commercial gentlemen, and no bright shining new villas; but only the row of houses, half whitewash half red brick, with lilac bushes all in flower, and traveller's joy bristling over their porches, and all the little gardens shining in the sun. The Church was early English; the parsonage was red brick of Queen Anne's time. And there was a great house flush with the road, disdaining any petty interposition of garden between it and the highway, with white steps

and a brass knocker, and rows upon rows of brilliant dazzling windows, which was the doctor's house. The parson and the doctor were the only gentlemen in Arden village; there was nobody else above the rank of an ordinary cottager. There was a little shop where everything was sold; and there was the post office, where stationery was to be had as well as postage stamps; and the Arden Arms, with a little green before it, and a great square sign-post standing out in the midst. A little way beyond the Church, which stood on the other side of the road, opposite but higher up than the Arden Arms, were the great Hall gates. They had a liberal hospitable breadth about them which was suggestive somehow of guests and good cheer. Two carriages could pass, the village folks said, with natural pride, through those wide portals, and the breadth of the great splendid old avenue, with its elms and limes, was in proportion. There were two footpaths leading on either side of the avenue, like side aisles in a great cathedral, under the green-arched splendour of meeting trees; and so princely were the Ardens, with all their prejudices, that not only their poor neighbours, but even Liverpool folks pic-nicing, had leave to roam about the park, and take their walks even in the side aisles of the avenue. The Squire, like a great monarch, was affable to the populace—so long as it allowed that it was the populace, and kept in its right place.

Up one of these side walks old Sarah trudged, with her white apron disturbing all the lights, and with many homely musings in her old head, which had scarcely a right to the dignified title of thoughts. She was thinking to herself—"Eh, my word, but here's changes! Master o' all, him that was never made no more of nor a stranger in his own father's house; nor half so much as a stranger. Them as come on visits would get the best o' all, ponies to ride, and servants to wait upon 'em, and whatever they had a mind for:—and Mr. Edgar put into that bit of a room by the nursery, and never a horse, nor a penny in his pocket. I'd just like to know how it was. Eh, my word, what a queer feel it must have! You mind me, he'll think he hears oud Squire ahind him many and many a day. And an only son! And I never heard a word against Madam, and Miss Clare always the queen of all. Bless him! none on us could help that; but I was allays one as stood up for Mr. Edgar. And now he's master o' all! I wonder is she glad, the dear? Here's folks a coming, a man and a maid; and I canno' see who they are with my bad eyes. Eb, but I could once see as good as the best. I mind that time I was in Cheshire, afore I came home here—Lord bless us, it's Miss Clare and the young Squire!"

The young pair were coming down under the trees on the same path, and Sarah stopped short in her thinkings with a flutter, as if they must have divined the subject of them:—Two young people all in black, not lighting up the landscape as they might have done had their dress been as bright as their faces. The first thing that struck the observer was that they were utterly unlike; they had not even the same little family tricks of gait or gesture, such as might have made it apparent that they were brother and sister. The young lady was tall and slight, with a great deal of soft dignity and grace; dignity which might, however, grow imperious on occasion. Her face was beautiful, and regular, and full of sweetness; but those fine lines could set and harden, and the light young figure could erect itself, if need were, into all the severity of a youthful Juno. Her hair was very dark, and her eyes blue—a kind of beauty which is often of the highest class as beauty, but often, also, indicates a character which should attract as much fear as love. She was soft now as the opening day, leaning on her brother's arm with a certain clinging gesture which was not natural to her, lavishing upon him her smiles and pretty looks of affection. Old Sarah, looking on, divined her meaning in a moment. "Bless her!" the old woman said to herself, with a tear in the corner of her eye, which she dared not lift the apron to dry. Hard injustice and wrong had been Edgar's part all his life. His sister was making it up to him, pouring upon him all the sunshine she could collect into her moist eyes, to make him amends for having thus lived so long in the dark.

Clare Arden might have stepped out of one of the picture frames in the hall, so entirely was her beauty the beauty of her family; but her brother was as different as it is possible to imagine. He was scarcely taller than she was, not more than an inch or two, instead of towering over her as her father had done. He had light brown, curly, abundant hair, frizzing all over his well-shaped, well-poised

head; and brown eyes, which sparkled, and danced, and laughed, and spoke, and defied you not to like them. They had laughed and danced in his worst days, irrepressibly, and now, notwithstanding the black band on his hat, they sent rays about like dancing fauns, all life, and fire, and active energy. He looked like one whom nobody could wrong, who would disarm the sourest critic. A stranger would have instantly taken it for granted that he was the favourite child of the house, the one whose gay vagaries were always pardoned, and whose saucy ways no father or mother could well withstand. How such a being could have got into the serious old-world house of Arden nobody could make out. It was supposed that he was like his mother; but she had been in delicate health, poor lady, and had lived very little at Arden Hall. The village folks did not trouble their head with theories as to the cause of the old Squire's dislike to his only son, but the parson and the doctor had each a very decided opinion on the subject, which the reader shall learn further on, and make his own conclusions from. For, in the meantime, I cannot go on describing Edgar Arden. It is his business to do that for himself.

"Who is coming?" he said. "Somebody whose face I know; a nice old woman with a great white apron. But we must go on to see the village, and all your improvements there."

"There are no improvements," said his sister. "Oh, Edgar, I do hope you hate that sort of thing as I do. Let us keep it as it was. Our own people are so pleasant, and will do what we want them. The only thing I was afraid of you for was lest you should turn radical, like the rest of the young men. But then you have not been in the way of it—like the Oxford men, you know."

"I don't know about the Oxford men," said Edgar, "but I am not so sure I haven't been in the way of it." He had the least little touch of a foreign accent, which was very quaint from those most Saxon lips. He was just the kind of young man whom, anywhere abroad, the traveller would distinguish as an undeniable Briton; and yet his English had a touch of something alien in it—a flavour which was not British. He laughed as he spoke, and the sound startled all the solemn elms of Arden. The Ardens did not laugh much; they smiled very sweetly, and they liked to know that their smile was a distinction; but Edgar was not like the Ardens.

"How you laugh," said Clare, clinging a little closer to his arm, "It is very odd, but somehow I like it. Don't you know, Edgar, the Ardens were never people to laugh? We smile."

"So you do," said Edgar, "and I would rather have your smile than ever so much laughing. But then you know I am not half an Arden. I never had a chance. Here is our old woman close at hand with her white apron. Why, it is old Sarah! You kind old soul, how are you? How does it go?" And he took both her hands into his and shook them till old Sarah lost her breath. Then a twinkle like a tear came in to Edgar's laughing eye. "You gave me half-a-crown when I left Arden last," he said, still holding her hands, and then in his foreign way he kissed her first on one brown cheek and then on the other. "Oh, Master Edgar!" cried old Sarah, out of breath; while Clare looked on very sedately, not quite knowing what to say.

CHAPTER II

"It was kind of you to come and see my brother," said Clare at length, with something of that high and lofty sweetness which half implies—"it was kind, but it was a piece of presumption." She meant no harm to her old nurse, whom she was fond of in her heart, and who was besides a privileged person, free to be fond of the Ardens; but Edgar had been badly used all his life, and his sister was more proud on his behalf than if he had been the worshipped heir, always foremost. She drew herself up just a little, not knowing what to make of it. In one way it was right, and she approved; for even a king may be tender to his favoured dependents without derogation—but yet, certainly it was not the Arden way.

"Miss Clare, you don't think that, and you oughtn't for to say it," said old Sarah, with some natural heat; "but I've been about the house ever since you were born: and staying still to-day in my little place with my plain-sewing was more nor I could do. If there had been e'er a little maid to look to—but I ain't got none in hands now."

"I beg your pardon, Sarah," said Clare promptly; "and Mrs. Fillpot has something to say to you about that. If you will go up to the house and speak to her, now that you have seen Edgar, it will be very nice of you. We are going down to the village to see some of his old friends."

"The young master don't know the village, Miss Clare, as he ought to have done," said old Sarah, shaking her head. She had said such words often before, but never with the same result as now; for Clare was divided between allegiance to the father whom she loved, who was dead, and whom she could not now admit to have ever done any wrong—and the brother whom she loved, who was there by her side, and of whose injuries she was so keenly sensible. The blood rushed to her cheek—her fine blue eyes grew like steel—the lines of her beautiful face hardened. Poor old Sarah shrank back instinctively, almost as if she expected a blow. Clare's lips were formed to speak when her brother interrupted her, and probably the words would not have been pleasant which she was about to say.

"The more reason I should know it now," he said in his lighthearted way. "If it had not been so early, Sarah, you should have come back and made me some tea. What capital tea she used to make for you in the nursery, Clare, you lucky girl! It is Miss Arden's village I am going to see, Sarah. It shall always be hers to do what she likes with it. You can tell the people nothing is changed there."

"Edgar, I think we should go," said Clare, restraining him with once more that soft shade of possible haughtiness. "Stay till we come back, Sarah;" and with a little movement of her hand in sign of farewell, she led her brother away. "You must not tell your plans to that sort of person," she said with a quick breath, in which her momentary passion found relief.

"What! not your old nurse, Clare?" he cried. "You must not snub the old woman so. We had better make a bargain in time, we who are so different. You shall snub me when you please for my democratic ways, but you must not snub the others, Clare."

"What others?"

Edgar made no direct answer. He laughed and drew his sister's arm close within his own. "You are such a pretty picture with those great-lady looks of yours," he said; "they make me think of ruffs and hoops, and dresses all covered with pearls. What is a farthingale? I am sure that is what you ought to wear."

"You mean it is out of fashion to remember that one is well born, and of an old family," said Clare with energy, "but you will never bring me to see that. One has enough to do to keep one's proper place with all those encroachments that are going on, without one's own brother to take their part. But oh! forgive me, Edgar; I forgot: I will never say another word," she said, with the tears rushing to her eyes.

"What did you forget?" he said gently—"that I have been brought up as never any Arden was before me, and am not an Arden at all, so to speak? Perhaps on the whole it is better, for Arden

ways are not the ways of our time. They are very splendid and very imposing, and, in you, dear, I don't object to them, but–"

"Oh, Edgar, don't speak so!" said his sister, with a certain horror.

"But I must speak so, and think so, too," he said. "Could not you try to imagine, Clare, among all the many theories on the subject, that this was what was meant by my banishment? It is as good a way of accounting for it as another. Imagine, for instance, that Arden ways were found to be a little behind the generation, and that, hard as it was, and, perhaps, cruel as it was–"

"Edgar– I don't say it is not true; but oh, don't say so, for I can't bear it!"

"I shall say nothing you can't bear," he said softly, "my kind sister! you always did your best for me. I hope I should not have behaved badly anyhow; but you can't tell what a comfort it is that you always stood by me, Clare."

"I always loved you, Edgar," she cried, eagerly; "and then I used to wonder if it was my fault—if I got all the love because I was like the family, and a girl—taking it from you. I wish we had been a little bit like, do you know—just a little, so that people should say—'Look at that brother and sister.' Sometimes one sees a boy and a girl so like—just a beard to one and long hair to the other, to make the necessary difference; and then one sees they belong to each other at the first glance."

"Never mind," said Edgar with a smile, "so long as we resemble each other in our hearts."

"But not in our minds," said Clare, sorrowfully. "I can see how it will be. You will always be thinking one thing when I am thinking another. Whatever there may be to consider, you and I will always take different views of it. You are for the present, and I am for the past. I know only our own Arden ways, and you know the ways of the world. It is so hard, Edgar; but, dear, I don't for a moment say it is your fault," she said, holding his arm clasped between her hands, and looking up with her blue eyes at their softest, into his face. He looked down upon her at the same time with a curious, tender, amused smile. Clare, who knew only Arden ways, was so sure they must be right ways, so certain that there was a fault somewhere in those who did not understand them—but not Edgar's fault, poor fellow! He had been brought up away from home, and was to be pitied, not blamed. And this was why her brother looked down upon her with that curious amused smile.

"No," he said, "it was not my fault; but I think you should take my theory on the subject into consideration, Clare. Suppose I had been sent off on purpose to inaugurate a new world?"

Clare gave a little shudder, but she did not speak. She was troubled even that he could joke on such a matter, or suggest theories, as if it had been a mere crotchet on the part of her father, who was incapable of anything of the kind; but she could not make a direct reply, for, by tacit mutual consent, neither of them named the old Squire.

"Let us think so at least," he answered gaily, "for the harm is done, I fear; and it would not be so bad to be a deserter from Arden ways, if one had been educated for that purpose, don't you think? So here we are at the village! Don't tell me anything. I remember every bit of it as well as if I had been here yesterday. Where is the old lathe-and-plaster house that used to stand here?"

"To think you should recollect it!" said Clare, her eyes suddenly lighting up; and then in an apologetic tone—"It was so old. I allow it was very picturesque and charming to look at; but oh, Edgar, you would not blame me if you knew how dreadfully tumble-down and miserable it was inside. The rain kept coming in, and when the brook was flooded in winter it came right into the kitchen; and the children kept having fevers. I felt very much disposed to cry over it, I can tell you; but you would not have blamed me had you seen how shocking it was inside."

"I wonder if Mistress Arden, in a ruff and a farthingale, would have thought about the drainage," he answered, laughing. "Fancy my blaming you, Clare! I tell you it is your village, and you shall do what you like with it. Is that Mr. Fielding at his gate? Let us cross over and shake hands with him before we go any further. He is not so old, surely, as he once was."

"It is we who are old," said Clare, with the first laugh that had yet come from her lips. "He is putting on his gloves to go and call on you, Edgar. The bell-ringers must have made it known

everywhere. Mr. Fielding and Dr. Somers will come to-day, and the Thornleighs and Evertons to-morrow, and after that everybody; now see if it does not happen just as I say!"

"Let us stop the first of these visits," said Edgar, and he went forward holding out his hand, while the parson at the gate, buttoning his grey gloves, peered at him through a pair of short-sighted eyes. "It will be very kind of you to name yourself, Sir, for I am very short-sighted," the Rector said, looking at him with that semi-suspicion which is natural to a rustic of the highest as well as the lowest social position. The newcomer was a stranger, and therefore had little right and no assignable place in the village world. Mr. Fielding, who was short-sighted besides, peered at him very doubtfully from the puckered corners of his eyes.

"Don't you know me?" said Edgar; and "Oh, Mr. Fielding, don't you know Edgar?" came with still greater earnestness from the lips of Clare.

"It is not possible!" said Mr. Fielding, very decidedly; and then he let his slim umbrella drop out of his fingers, and held out both his hands. "Is it really you, my dear boy!" he said. "Excuse my blind eyes. If you had been my own son I would not have known you. I was on my way to call. But though this is not so solemn or so correct it will do as well. And Clare: Will you come in and have some breakfast? It cannot be much past your breakfast hour."

"Nor yours either," said Clare; "it is so naughty of you and so wrong of you to sit up like that, when you might just as well read in daylight, and go to bed when everybody else does. But we don't follow such a bad example. We mean to have breakfast always by eight o'clock."

Mr. Fielding gave a little sigh, and shook his venerable head. "That is all very pretty, my dear, and very nice when you can do it; but you know it never lasts. Anyhow, don't let us stand here. Come in, my dear boy, come in, and welcome home again. And welcome to your own, Edgar," he added, turning quickly round as he led them into his study, a large low room, looking out upon the trim parsonage garden. He put out both his hands as he said this, and grasped both those of Edgar, and looked not at all disinclined to throw himself upon his neck. "Welcome to your own," he repeated fervently, and his eyes strayed beyond Edgar's head, as if he were confronting and defying some one. And then he added more solemnly, "And God bless you, and enable you to fill your high position like a man. Amen. I wonder what the old Doctor will say now."

"What should he say?" said Edgar, fun dancing in his bright brown eyes; "and how is he? I suppose he is unchangeable, like everything here."

"Not unchangeable," said Mr. Fielding, with a slight half-perceptible shake of his head at the levity, one of those momentary assumptions of the professional which most old clergymen indulge in now and then; "nothing is unchangeable in this transitory world. But old Somers is as steady as most things," he added, with a responsive glance of amusement. "We go on quarrelling, he and I, but it would be hard upon us if we had to part. But tell me about yourself, Edgar, which is more interesting. When did you get home?"

"Late last night," said Edgar. "I came straight through from Cologne. I began to get impatient as soon as I had settled which day I was to reach home, and came before my time. Clare was in bed, poor child; but she got up, fancy, when she heard it was me."

"Of course she did; and she wants a cup of chocolate now," said the old parson, "when her colour changes like that from red to white, you should give her some globules instantly, or else a cup of chocolate. I am not a homœopathist, so I always recommend the chocolate. Mrs. Solmes please, Miss Clare is here."

"Shall I make two, sir?" said the housekeeper, who had heard the unusual commotion, and put her head in softly to see what was the matter. She did not quite understand it, even now. But she was too highly trained a woman, and too good a servant to take any notice. The chocolate was her affair, while the identity of the new comer was not.

"Don't you know my brother, Mrs. Solmes?" cried Clare. "He has come home. Edgar, she takes such good care of dear Mr. Fielding. I don't know how he managed without her before she came."

Edgar was not failing in his duty on the occasion. He stepped forward and shook hands with the radiant and flattered woman, “as nat’ral as if I had known him all his life,” she said in the kitchen afterwards; for Mrs. Solmes was a stranger and foreigner, belonging to the next parish, who could not but disapprove of Arden and Arden ways, which were different from the habits of Thornleigh parish, to which she belonged. Edgar made her quite a little speech as he stood and held her hand—“Anybody who is good to Mr. Fielding is good to Clare and me. He has always been so kind to us all our lives.”

“He loves you like his own children, sir,” said Mrs. Solmes, quickly; and then she turned and went away to make the chocolate, not wishing to presume; while her master walked about the room, rubbing his hands softly, and peering at the young man from amid the puckers of his eyelids with pleased and approving satisfaction. “It is very nicely said,” cried Mr. Fielding, “very nice feeling, and well expressed. After that speech, I should have known him anywhere for an Arden, Clare.”

“But the Ardens don’t make pretty speeches,” said Clare, under her breath. She never could be suite sure of him. Everything he did had a spontaneous look about it that puzzled his sister. To be in Arden, and to know that a certain hereditary course of action is expected from you is a great advantage, no doubt, yet it sometimes gives a certain sobriety and stiffness to the external aspect. Edgar, on the contrary, was provokingly easy, with all the spontaneousness of a man who said and did exactly what he liked to do and to say. Clare’s loyalty to her race could not have permitted any such freedom of action, and it puzzled her at every turn.

“We must send for old Somers,” said Mr. Fielding. “Poor old fellow, he is very crotchety and fond of his own notions; but he’s a very good fellow. We are the two oldest friends you have in the world, you young people; and if we might not get a little satisfaction out of you I don’t know who should. Mrs. Solmes,” this was called from the study door in a louder voice, “send Jack over with my compliments to Dr. Somers, and ask him to step this way for a minute. No, Edgar, don’t go; I want to surprise him here.”

“But no one says anything about Miss Somers,” said Edgar; “how is she?”

“Ah, poor thing,” said Mr. Fielding, shaking his head, “she is confined to bed now. She is growing old, poor soul. For that matter, we are all growing old. And not a bad thing either,” he added, pausing and looking round at the two young figures so radiant in life and hope. “You children are sadly sorry for us—but fading away out of the world is easier than you think.”

Edgar grasped Mr. Fielding’s hand, not quite knowing why, with the compunction of youth for the departing existence to which its own beginning seems so harsh a contrast, and yet with a reverential sympathy that closed his lips. Clare, on the contrary, looked at him with something almost matter-of-fact in her blue eyes. “You are not so old,” she said quietly. “We thought you looked quite young as we came to the door. Please don’t be angry, but I used to think you were a hundred. You have grown ever so much younger these last three years.”

“I should be very proud if I were a hundred,” said Mr. Fielding, with a laugh; but he liked the grasp of Edgar’s hand, and that sympathetic glance in his eyes. Clare was Clare, the recognised and accustomed princess, whom no one thought of criticising; but her brother was on his trial. Every new look, every movement, spoke for or against him; and, so far, everything was in his favour. “Of course, he is like his mother’s family,” the old Rector said to himself, “more sympathetic than the pure Ardens, but with all their fine character and best qualities. I wonder what old Somers will think of him. And here he comes,” he continued aloud, “the best doctor in the county, though he is as crotchety as an old magician. Somers, here’s our young squire.”

CHAPTER III

Dr. Somers came in, with a pair of eagle eyes going before him, as it seemed, like pioneers, to warn him of what was in his way. The Rector peered and groped with the short-sighted feeble orbs which lurked amid a nest of wrinkles, but the Doctor's brilliant black eyes went on before him and inspected everything. He was a tall, straight, slim, but powerful old man, with nothing superfluous about him except his beard, which in those days was certainly a superfluity. It was white, and so was his hair; but his eyes were so much darker than any human eyes that were ever seen, that to call them black was not in the least inappropriate. He had been the handsomest man in the county in his youth, and he was not less so now—perhaps more, with all the imposing glory of his white hair, and the suavity of age that had softened the lines in his face—lines which might have been a little hard in the fulness of his strength. It was possible to think of the Rector as, according to his own words, fading away out of the earth, but Dr. Somers stood like a strong tower, which only a violent shock could move, and which had strength to resist a thousand assaults. He came into the sober-toned rectory, into that room which was always a little cold, filled with a soft motionless atmosphere, a kind of abiding twilight, which even Clare's presence did not dispel—and filled it, as it seemed, swallowing up not only the Rector, but the young brother and sister, in the fulness of his presence. He was the light, and Mr. Fielding the shadow in the picture; and, as ought always to be the case, the light dominated the shadow. He had taken in every thing and everyone in the room with a devouring glance in the momentary pause he made at the door, and then entered, holding out his hand to the newcomer—"They meant to mystify me, I suppose," he said, "and thought I would not recognise you. How are you, Edgar? You are looking just as I thought you would, just as I knew you would. When did you come home?"

"Last night, late," said Edgar, returning cordially the pressure of his hand.

"And did not wait to be waited on, like a reigning monarch, but came to see your old friends, like an impatient good-hearted boy? There's a fine fellow," said the Doctor, patting him on the shoulders with a caress which was quite as forcible as it was affectionate. "I ought to like you, Edgar Arden, for you have always justified my opinion of you, and done exactly what I expected you would do, all your life."

"Perhaps it is rash to say that I hope I shall always justify your opinion," said Edgar, laughing, "for I don't know whether it is a good one. But I don't suppose I am very hard to read," he added, with a warm flush rising over his face. He grew red, and he stopped short with a certain sense of embarrassment for which he could scarcely account. He did not even try to account for it to himself, but flushed all over, and felt excessively hot and uncomfortable. The fact was, he was a very open-hearted, candid young fellow, much more tempted to wear his heart upon his sleeve than to conceal it; and, as he glanced round upon his three companions, he could see that there was a certain furtive look of scrutiny about all their eyes: not furtive so far as the Doctor was concerned, who looked through and through him without any concealment of his intention. But Mr. Fielding had half-turned his head, while yet he peered with a tremulous scrutiny at his young guest; and Clare's pretty forehead was contracted with a line of anxiety which Edgar knew well. They were all doubtful about him—not sure of him—trying to make him out. Such a thought was bitter to the young man. His colour rose higher and higher, and his heart began to beat. "I do not think I am very difficult to read," he repeated, with a forced and painful smile.

"Not a bit," said the Doctor; "and you are as welcome home as flowers in May: the first time I have said that to you, my boy, but it won't be the last. Miss Clare, my sister would be pleased if you told her of Edgar's return. She will have to be prepared, and got up, and all sorts of things, to see him; but, if you were to tell her, she would think it kind. Ah, here's the chocolate. Of course in this house everything must give place to that."

"I will go over to Miss Somers for ten minutes," said Clare, "thank you, Doctor, for reminding me; and, dear Mr. Fielding, don't let Edgar go till I come back."

"I should like to go too," said Edgar. "No? Well, I won't then; but tell Miss Somers I will come to-morrow, Clare. Tell her I have brought her something from Constantinople; and have never forgotten how kind she used to be—how kind you all were!" And the young man turned round upon them—"It is a strange sensation coming back and feeling myself at home among the faces I have known all my life. And thank you all for being so good to Clare."

Clare was going out as he spoke, with a certain shade of reluctance and even of pride. She had been told to go, and she did not like it; it had been implied that she had forgotten a duty of neighbourship, and to Miss Somers, too, who could not move about, and ascertain things for herself; and Clare did not like to be reminded of her duties. She turned round, however, at the door, and looked back, and smiled her acknowledgment of what her brother said. These two old men had been very kind to her. They had done everything that the most attached old friends could do at the time of her father's death. That was a whole year ago; for old Squire Arden had made a stipulation that his son was not to come back, nor enter upon the possession of his right, till he was five-and-twenty—a stipulation which, of course, counted for nothing in the eye of the law, but was binding on Edgar, much as he longed to be at his sister's side. Thus, his father oppressed him down to the very edge of his grave. And poor Clare would have been very forlorn in the great house but for her old friends. Miss Somers, who was not then so great an invalid, had gone to the Hall, to be with the girl during that time of seclusion, and she had been as a child to all of them. A compunction smote Clare as she turned and looked round from the door, and she kissed her hand to them with a pretty gesture. But still it was with rather an ill grace that she went to Miss Somers, which was not her own impulse. Compulsion fretted the Arden soul.

"I brought Clare into the world, and Fielding has been her head nurse all his life," said the Doctor, "no need for thanking us on that score. And now all's yours, Edgar. I may say, and I'm sure Fielding will say, how thankful we both are to see you. You could not have been altogether disinherited, as the property's entailed; but I never was easy in my mind about it during your father's lifetime. The old Squire was a very peculiar man; and there was no telling–"

"Doctor," said the young man, once more with a flush on his cheek, "would you mind leaving out my father's name in anything that has to be said?—unless, indeed, he left any message for me. He liked Clare best, which was not wonderful, and he thought me a poor representative of the Ardens, which was natural enough. I have not a word to say against him. On the whole, perhaps, I have got as much good of my life as if I had been brought up in England. I have never been allowed to forget hitherto that my father did not care for me—let me forget it now."

"Exactly," said the Doctor, looking at him with a certain curious complacency; and he gave a nod at Mr. Fielding, who stood winking to get rid of a tear which was in the corner of his eye. "Exactly what I said! Now, can you deny it? By Jove! I wish he had been my son! It is what I knew he would say."

"Edgar, my dear boy," said the Rector, "every word does you credit, and this more than all. Your poor father was mistaken. I say your poor father, for he evidently had something on his mind just before he died, and would have spoken if time had been allowed him. I have no doubt it was to say how sorry he was. But the Ardens are dreadfully obstinate, Edgar, and he never could bring himself to do it. It is just like you to say this. Clare will appreciate it, and I most fully appreciate it. It is the best way; let us not dwell upon the past, let us not even try to explain. Your being like your mother's family can never be anything against you—far from it. I agree in every word you say."

This speech, flattering and satisfactory as it was, took the young man a little by surprise. "I don't know what being like my mother's family has to do with it," he said, with momentary petulance; but then his brighter spirits gained the mastery. "It is best never to explain anything," he continued, with a smile. "There is Clare calling me. I suppose I am to go to Miss Somers, notwithstanding your

defence, Doctor." And he waved his hand to Clare from the window, and went out, leaving the two old men behind him, following him with their eyes. He was glad to get away, if truth must be told; they were fighting some sort of undisclosed duel over his body, Edgar could see, and he did not like it. He went across the village street, which was very quiet at that end, to the Doctor's great red brick house, and as he did so his face clouded over a little. "They have got some theory about me," he said to himself; "am I never to be rid of it? And what right has any one to discuss me and my affairs now?" Then the shade gradually disappeared from his face, and in spite of himself there glided across his mind a sudden comparison between the last time he had been at Arden and the present. Then he had a boy's keen sense of injustice and unkindness eating into him. It had not cut so deeply as it might have done if his temperament had been gloomy; but still it had galled him. He had felt himself contemned, disliked, thrust aside—his presence half clandestine—his wishes made of no account—his whole being thrust into a corner—a thing to hide, or at least to apologise for. Now, he was the master of all. The bells had rung for his home-coming; everything was changed. The thought made his head swim as he walked along in the serene stillness, with the swallows making circles about, and the bees murmuring round the blossomed trees. He had been living an uncertain wandering life, not always well supplied with money, not trained to do anything, an innocent vagabond. Now there was not a corner of his life upon which some one interest or another did not lay a claim. He had the gravest occupations on his hands. He might make for himself a position of high influence and importance in his county; and could scarcely be insignificant if he tried. And all this had come to him without any training for it. His very habits of mind were not English; even in the midst of these serious thoughts the village green, which was at his left hand, beyond the Church and the Rectory, caught his eye, and a momentary speculation came across him, whether the village people danced there on Sundays? whether the fairs were held there, or the tombola, or something to represent them? and then he stopped and laughed at himself. What would Mr. Fielding say? Thus Edgar had come to be Squire Arden without even the habit of being an Englishman. The sense of injustice which had weighed upon him all his life might have embittered his beginning now, had his mind been less elastic. But nature had been so good to him that he was able to toss these dreary thoughts aside, as he would have tossed a ball, before he went in to see Miss Somers. "Things will come right somehow," he said to himself. Such was his light-hearted philosophy; while Clare stood grave and silent at the door to meet him, with a seriousness which would have been more in accordance with his difficulties than with hers. What troubled her was the question—Would he be a radical, and introduce innovations, ignore the mightiness of his family, conduct himself as if his name were anything else than Arden? This sufficed to plant the intensest seriousness, with almost a cast of severity in it, upon the brow of Clare.

"Didn't I tell you exactly how it would happen?" said the Doctor, when Edgar was gone; "no sentiment to speak of—utter absence of revengeful feelings: settling down as if it was the most natural thing in the world—bygones to be bygones, and a fair start for the future. Didn't I tell you? That boy is worth his weight in gold."

"You certainly told me," said Mr. Fielding, faltering, "something very like what has come to pass; but I don't receive your theory, for all that. No, no; depend upon it, the simplest explanation is always the best. One can see at a glance he is like his mother's family. Poor thing! I don't think she was too happy; and that must have intensified old Arden's remorse."

"Old Arden's fiddlestick!" said the Doctor. "I wouldn't give *that* for his remorse. He had his reasons you may be sure. Character has been my favourite study all my life, as you know; and if that frank, open-hearted, well-dispositioned boy ever came out of an Arden's nest, I expect to hear of a dove in an eagle's. He has justified every word I ever said of him. I declare to you, Fielding, I am as fond of him as if he were my own boy."

"Poor fellow!" said Mr. Fielding, shaking his head, as if that was not so great a compensation as might have been desired. "He will get into dozens of scrapes with these strange ways of thinking; and he knows nothing and nobody—not a soul in the county—and probably will be running his head

against some stone wall or other before he is much older. If I had been twenty years younger I might have tried to be of use to him, but as it is–"

"As it is we shall both be of use to him," said the Doctor, "never fear. Of course, he will get into a hundred scrapes; but then he will struggle out again, and no harm will come of it. If he had been like the Ardens he might have escaped the scrapes, but he would have missed a great deal besides. I like a young man to pay his way."

"It appears to me, Somers, that you are a radical yourself," said the Rector, shaking once more his feeble old head.

"On the contrary, the only real Tory going. The last of my race,—the Conservative innovator," said Dr. Somers. "These old races, my dear Fielding, are beautiful things to look at. Clare, for instance, who is the concentrated essence of Ardenism—and how charming she is! But that order of things must come to an end. Another Squire Arden would have been next to impossible: whereas this new-blooded sanguine boy will make a new beginning. I don't want to shock your feelings as a clergyman: but the cuckoo's egg sometimes comes to good."

"Somers," said the Rector, solemnly, "I have told you often that I knew Mrs. Arden well. She was a good woman; as unlikely to go wrong as any woman I ever knew. You do her horrible injustice by such a supposition. Besides, think: he was always with her wherever she went—there could not have been a more devoted husband; and to imagine that all the while he had such a frightful wrong on his mind—it is simply impossible! besides, she was the mother of Clare."

"That covers a multitude of sins, of course," said the Doctor, "but you forget that I know all your arguments by heart. I don't pretend to explain everything. It is best never to explain, as that boy says —wise fellow! Half the harm done in the world comes of explanations. But to return to our subject. I never said he found it out at once; perhaps—most likely—it was not discovered in her lifetime. Her papers might inform him after her death. It is curious that when there is anything to conceal, people do always leave papers telling all about it. If you will give me any other feasible explanation I don't stand upon my theory. Like his mother's family—bah! Is that reason enough for a man to shut his heart against his only boy? Besides, he is not like any one I know. I wish I could light upon any man he was like. It might furnish a clue–"

"When you are on your hobby, Somers, there is no stopping you," said the Rector, with a look of distress.

"I am not alone in my equestrian powers," retorted the Doctor, "you do quite as much in that line as I do; but my theory has the advantage of being credible, at least."

"Not credible," said Mr. Fielding, with gentle vehemence. "No, certainly not credible. Nothing would make it credible—not even to have heard with your ears, and seen with your eyes."

"I never argue with prejudiced persons," answered the Doctor, with equal haste and heat; and thus they parted, with every appearance of a quarrel. Such things happened almost daily between the two old friends. Dr. Somers took up his hat, gave a vague nod of leave-taking, and issued forth from the rectory gate as if he shook the dust from his feet; but all the same he would drop in at the rectory that evening, stalking carelessly through an open window as if, Mrs. Solmes said, who was not fond of the Doctor, the place belonged to him. He went across the street with more than his usual energy. His phaeton stood at his own door, with two fine horses, and the smartest of grooms standing at their heads. Dr. Somers was noted for his horses and the perfection of his turn-out generally, which was a relic of the days when he was the pride of the neighbourhood, and, people said, might have married into the highest family in the county had he so willed. He was still the handsomest man in the parish, though he was no longer young; and he was rich enough to indulge himself in all that luxury of personal surroundings which is dear to an old beauty. Edgar, who was standing at one of the twinkling windows, watched the Doctor get into his carriage with a mixture of admiration and relief. On the whole, the young man was glad not to have another interview with his old friend; but his white hair and his black eyes, his splendid old figure and beautiful horses, were a sight to see.

CHAPTER IV

"I am not quite in a state to receive a gentleman," Miss Somers was saying when Edgar went in, with a little flutter of timidity and eagerness. "But it is so kind of you to let me know, and so sweet of dear Edgar to want to come. I told my brother only last night I was quite sure– But then he always has his own way of thinking. And you know why should dear Edgar care for a poor creature like me? I quite recognise that, my dear. There might be a time in my young days when some people cared– but as my brother says– And just come from the Continent, you know!"

"May I come in?" said Edgar, tapping against the folding screen which sheltered the head of the sofa on which the invalid lay.

"Oh, goodness me! Clare, my love, the dear boy is there! Yes, come in, Edgar, if you don't mind– But I ought to call you Mr. Arden now. I never shall be able to call you Mr. Arden. Oh, goodness, boy! Well, there can't be any harm in his kissing me; do you think there can be any harm in it, Clare? I am old enough to be both your mothers, and I am sure I think I love you quite as well. Of course, I should never speak of loving a gentleman if it was not for my age and lying here so helpless. Yes, I do feel as if I should cry sometimes to think how I used to run about once. But so long as it is only me, you know, and nobody else suffers– And you are both looking so well! But tell me now how shall you put up with Arden after the Continent and all that? I never was on the Continent but once, and then it was nothing but a series of fétes, as they called them. I was saying to my brother only last night–; for you know you never would visit the Pimpernels, Clare–"

"Who are the Pimpernels? and what have they to do with it?" said Edgar. "But tell me about yourself first, and how you come to be on a sofa. I never remember to have seen you sitting still before all my life."

"No, indeed," said Miss Somers, her soft pretty old face growing suddenly grey and solemn, "that is what makes old Mercy think, it's a judgment; but you wouldn't say it was wicked to be always running about, would you now? It's wrong to follow one's own inclinations, to be sure, but so long as you don't harm anybody– There are the Pimpernel girls, who play croquet, from morning till night —not that I mean it's wicked to play croquet—but poor Mr. Denbigh gets just a little led away I fear sometimes; and if ever there was a game intended for the waste of young people's time–"

"Never mind the Pimpernels," said Clare, with a slightly imperative note in her voice. "It is Edgar who is here beside you now."

"Oh, yes—dear fellow; but do you know I think my mind is weakened as well as my body? Do I run on different from what I used, Edgar? I was talking to my brother the other night—and he busy with his paper—and 'how you run on!' was all he said when I asked him– You know he might have given me a civil answer. I fear there is no doubt I am weakened, my dear. I was speaking to young Mr. Denbigh yesterday, and he says he said to the Doctor that if he were him he would take me to some baths or other, which did him a great deal of good, he says; but I could not take him away, you know, nor give anybody so much trouble. He is such a nice young man, Edgar. I should like you to know him. But, then, to think when I ask just a quiet question, 'how you do run on!' he said. Not that I am complaining of him, dear–"

"Of young Mr. Denbigh?" said Clare.

"Now, Clare, my love—the idea! How could I complain of young Mr. Denbigh, who is always the civillest and nicest– Of course, I mean my brother. He says these German baths are very good; but I would not mention it to him for worlds, for I am sure he would be unhappy if he had to leave home only with me."

Edgar and Clare looked at each other as Miss Somers, to use her own expression, ran on. Clare was annoyed and impatient, as young people so often are of the little follies of their seniors; but Edgar's brown eyes shone with fun, just modified by a soft affectionate sympathy. "Dear Miss

Somers," he said, half in joke half in earnest, "don't trouble yourself about your mind. You talk just as you always did. If I had heard you outside without knowing you were here, I should have recognised you at once. Don't worry yourself about your mind."

"Do you think not, Edgar?—do you really think not? Now that is what I call a real comfort," said Miss Somers; "for you are not like the people that are always with me; you would see in a moment if I was really weakened. Well, you know, I could not make up my mind to take him away—could I? For after all it does not matter so much about me. If I were young it would be different. Dear Edgar, no one has been civil enough to ask you to sit down. Bring a chair for yourself here beside me. Do you know, Clare, I don't think, if you put it to me in a confidential way, that he has grown. He is not so tall as the rest of you Ardens. I was saying to my brother just the other day—I don't care for your dreadfully tall people; for you have always to stoop coming into a room, and look as if you were afraid the sky was falling. And oh, my dears, what a long time it is since we have had any rain!"

"Any rain?" said Edgar, who was a little taken by surprise.

"What the farmers will do I can't think, for you can't water the fields like a few pots of geraniums. That last cutting you sent me, Clare, has got on so well. Do you mean to keep up all the gardens and everything as it used to be, Edgar? You must make her go to the Holmfirth flower show. You did not go last year, Clare, nor the year before; and I saw such a pretty costume, too, in the last fashions-book—all grey and black—just the very thing for you. You ought to speak to her, Edgar. She has worn that heavy deep mourning too long."

"Don't, please," said Clare, turning aside with a look of pain on her face.

"My dear love, I am only thinking of your good. Now is it reasonable, Edgar? She looks beautiful in mourning, to be sure; but it is more than a year, and she is still in crape. I would have put on my own light silk if I had known you were coming. I hate black from my heart, but it is the most useful to wear, with nice coloured ribbons, when you get old and helpless. I don't know if you notice any change in my appearance, Edgar? Now how odd you should have found it out! I have plenty of hair still—it is not that; but one gets so untidy with one's head on a pillow without a cap. Mrs. Pimpernel has quantities of hair; but a married lady is quite different—they can wear things and do things– Did you observe, Edgar, if ladies wear caps just now abroad?"

"They wear a great many different things," said Edgar, "according to the different countries. I brought Clare a yashmak from Constantinople to cover her head with, and an Albanian cap–"

"My dear," said Miss Somers, sitting upright with horror, "the idea of Clare wearing a cap at nineteen! That shows one should never speak to a man about what is the fashion. Just look at her lovely hair! It will be time enough for that thirty years hence. I cannot think how you could like to live among the Turks. I hope you did not do as they do, Edgar. It may be all very nice to look at, but having a quantity of wives and that sort of thing must be very dreadful. I am sure I never could have put up with it for a day; and then it goes in the very face of the Bible. I hope you are going to forget all that sort of thing now, and settle down quietly here."

"Miss Somers," said Edgar, with mock solemnity, "if I had left a quantity of wives at Constantinople, is it possible that you could calmly advise me to forget them, and marry another here?"

Miss Somers sat up still more straight on her sofa, and showed signs of agitation. "I am sure I would not advise you to what was wrong for all the world," she said. "Oh, Edgar, my poor boy, what a dreadful position! You might ask the Rector– But if they were heathens, you know, in a Christian country do you think it would be binding? Clare, dear, suppose you step into the drawing-room a minute, till we talk this dreadful, dreadful business over. Oh, you poor boy! It seems wicked for me, an unmarried lady, even to think of such things; but if I could be of any use to you– Edgar! that kind of poor creatures," said Miss Somers, putting her face close to his, and speaking in a whisper, "people buy them in the market, you know, as we read in books. Listen, my dear boy. It is not nice, of course, but–"

"What?" said Edgar, bending an eager ear.

"You could sell them again, don't you think? Poor souls, if they are used to it, they wouldn't care. Good gracious, how can you laugh, with such a burden on your mind? I am thinking what would be the best, Edgar, for you."

The old lady was so anxious that she put her soft wrinkled old hand upon his, holding him fast, and gazing anxiously into his face. "You young men have such strange ways of thinking," she said, looking disapprovingly at him; "you treat it as if it was a joke, but it is very, very serious. Clare, my love, just go and speak to old Mercy a moment. I cannot let him leave me, you know, until we have settled on something to do."

"He is only laughing at you," said Clare, with indignation. "How can you, Edgar? Dear Miss Somers, do you really believe he could be so wicked?"

"Wicked, my dear?" said Miss Somers, with a look of experience and importance on her eager old face, "young men have very strange ways. The less you know about such things the better. Edgar knows that he can speak to me."

"But Clare is right," said Edgar, smothering his laugh. "I did not mean to mystify you. I brought nothing more out of Constantinople than pipes and embroideries. I have some for you, Miss Somers. Slippers that will just do for you on your sofa, and a soft Turkish scarf that you might make a turban of–"

"What should I do with a turban, my dear boy?" said the invalid at once diverted out of her solemnity, "though I remember people wearing them once. My mother had a gorgeous one she used to wear when she went out to dinner—you never see anything so fine now—with bird of paradise feathers. Fancy me in a turban, Clare! But the slippers will be very nice. There was a Mr. Templeton I once knew, in the Royal Navy, a very nice young man, with black hair, like a Corsair, or a Giaour, or something– That was in my young days, my dears, when I was not perhaps quite so unattractive as I am now. Oh, you need not be so polite, Edgar; I know I am quite unattractive, as how could I be otherwise, with my health and at my age? He was a very nice young man, and he paid me a great deal of attention; but dear papa, you know—he was always a man that would have his own way–"

Here Miss Somers broke off with a sigh, and the story of Mr. Templeton, of the Royal Navy, came to an abrupt conclusion, notwithstanding an effort on the part of one of the listeners to keep it up. "Was Mr. Templeton at Constantinople?" Edgar asked, bringing the narrator back to her starting-point; but it was not to be.

"Oh, what does it matter where Mr. Templeton was?" said Clare. "Edgar has come down to see the village, Miss Somers, and all the poor people; and I must take him away now. Another time you can tell us all about it. Edgar, fancy, it is nearly twelve o'clock."

"It is so nice of you to come and chatter to me," said the invalid. She was a little fatigued by the conversation, the burden of which she had taken on herself—by Edgar's (supposed) difficulties about the wives, and by that reference to Mr. Templeton of the Royal Navy. "You may send old Mercy to me," she said with a sigh as she kissed Clare; for old Mercy was the tyrant whom Miss Somers most dreaded in the world. It was a sad change from the presence of the young people to see that despot come into the room, in the calm confidence of power. "Now, lie down a bit, do, and rest yoursel'," Mercy said, peremptorily, "or we'll have a nice restless night along o' this, and the Doctor as cross as cross. Lie down and rest, do."

Meanwhile the brother and sister went downstairs, she relieved, he much softened, and full of a tender compassion. "If that would do her any good, you and I might take her to the German baths some day," said the soft-hearted Edgar, "if she is able to go. Such a restless little being as she was, it is hard to see her lying there."

"I hope I am not hard-hearted," said Clare, "but I think she is very well where she is. It is not as if she suffered much. We have lost almost an hour with her chatter. We shall never get back in time for luncheon if we talk to other people as long."

"But there are not many other people like Miss Somers," said Edgar, with a passing shade of gravity. He in his turn was grieved now and then by something Clare did or said. But in a few minutes they returned to their interrupted stream of talk, and began to discuss the village, and the plans for the new cottages, and the enlargement of the schools, and the restoration of the Church, and many other matters of detail. The two went from house to house, the village gradually becoming aware of them, and turning out to all the doors and the windows. The women stopped in their cooking and the men, jogging home for their early dinners, ranked themselves in rows here and there, and stood and gaped; the children formed themselves into little groups, and looked on awestricken. Such was Edgar's first entry as master into the hereditary village. He made himself very "nice" to all the bystanders, and was as cordial as if he had been canvassing for their votes, Clare thought, who stood by in her position as domestic critic, and noted everything. It was odd to see what trifles he remembered, and what a memory he had for names and places. If he had been canvassing he could not have been more ingratiating, more full of that grace of universal courtesy which, in a general way, is only manifest at such times. And yet, it was not as a candidate for their favour, but as their sworn hereditary sovereign, that he came among them. Clare, her mind already in a tumult with all the events and all the talk of the morning, could not but acknowledge to herself that it was very strange.

CHAPTER V

Edgar Arden had lived hitherto, as we have said, a very desultory wandering sort of life. He had been at school in Germany during his earlier years, and afterwards at Heidelberg, at the University, where he had seen a great many English afar off, and vaguely found out the difference between their training and ways of thinking and those in which he had himself been brought up. When he had first come to the age when a boy begins to inquire into his own position, and when it no longer becomes possible to take everything for granted, he had been told first that it was for his health that he had been sent away from home; and when he had fully satisfied himself that his health could no longer be the reason, other causes had been suggested to him equally unsatisfactory. It was his father who was in bad health, and could not be troubled with a lively boy about him; but then there were schools in England as well as in Germany, which would have settled that matter: or the German education was superior, which was a theory his tutor strongly inclined to, but which did not seem to Edgar's lively young intelligence quite justified by the opinion visibly entertained by the English travellers whom he met. His first visit to England, after he was old enough to understand, made matters a great deal more clear to him. Injustice and dislike are hard to conceal from a young mind, even under the most specious disguises—and here no disguise was attempted. The Squire received his boy with a coldness which chilled him to the heart, saw as little of him as he possibly could, endured his presence with undisguised reluctance, and made it quite apparent to poor Edgar that, unlike all the other sons he had ever seen in his life, he was only a vexation and trouble to his father. The fact that his father was his enemy dawned vaguely upon him at a much later period; for it is hard in extreme youth to think that one has an enemy. A vague sense of being hustled into corners, and shut out of the life of the family, such as it was, had been the cloud upon his earlier days. He had felt that only in Clare's nursery did he hold that position of chief and favourite to which surely the only son of the house was entitled. And little Clare accordingly became the one bright spot in the house which he still by instinct called home.

He had returned when he was seventeen, and again after he came of age—though not to be received with any rejoicings at that later period, as became the birthday of the heir. His birthday was over when he came home, and Clare, a girl of sixteen, thrust her little furtive present into his hand with a full sense that her brother was not to the Squire what he was to her. But at this period something occurred which enlightened Edgar as to his father's feelings towards himself in the cruellest way; it enlightened him and yet it threw a confusion darker than ever over his life. The day after his arrival Mr. Arden sent for him, and elaborately explained to him that he wished for his aid in breaking the entail of certain estates, of which the young man knew nothing. It was the longest interview that had ever taken place between the two; and the Squire made very full explanations, the meaning of which was but indistinct to the youth. Edgar had all the impatient and reckless generosity which so often accompanies a buoyant temperament; his sense of the sweets of property was small; and he knew next to nothing about the estates. Had he known much there is little doubt that he would have done exactly as he did; but, however, he had not even that safeguard; and the consequence was that he took his father's word at once, responded eagerly and promptly to the proposal, and gave his consent to denude himself of the property which had been longest in the family, the little estate from which the name of Arden first came, and which every Arden acquainted with his family history most highly prized. Edgar, however, knew very little about his family history; and with the foolish disinterestedness of a boy he acquiesced in all his father suggested. But after the necessary arrangements in respect to this were concluded Edgar caught a glance from his father's eye which went to his heart like an arrow. It was in the hunting-field, where, untrained as he was, he had acquitted himself tolerably well; and he was just about to take a somewhat risky fence when he saw that look which he never forgot. The Squire had reined in his own horse, and sat like a bronze figure under a tree watching his son. And as plain as eyes could tell Edgar read in his father's look a suppressed inappeasable enmity, which

it was impossible to mistake; his father was watching intently for the spring—was it possible he was hoping that a fall would follow? How it was that Edgar got over the fence he never could tell; for to his hopeful, all-believing temper such a sudden glimpse into the darkness was like a paralysing blow. He kept steady on his saddle, and somehow, without any conscious guidance on his part, the horse accomplished the leap; but Edgar turned straight back, and went home with such a sense of misery as he had never experienced before. He was too wretched to understand the calls sent after him—the questions with which he was assailed. He could not even reply to Clare's wondering inquiries. His father hated him—that was the discovery he had made. To suspect that anybody hated him would have given Edgar a shock; but to know it beyond all doubt, and to feel that it was his father who regarded him with such fierce enmity, made his very heart sink within him. He went away next day, giving no explanation of his desire to do so. Nor did the Squire make any inquiries. It was a mutual relief to them to be free of each other. Before his departure his father informed him that he would henceforward receive a much more liberal allowance—an intimation which Edgar received without thinking what it meant—without caring what sense was in the words. And that was the last he had seen of the Squire. Nobody but himself knew of this incident. It was nothing—an impression—a fancy; but in all Edgar's life nothing had happened that was so bitter to him. The effect had not lasted, for his mind was essentially elastic, and he was young, and free to amuse himself as he would. Fortunately, the kind of amusements he preferred were innocent ones; for he had no guide, no one to control or restrain him, and not even the shadow of parental authority. His father hated him—a horrible freedom was his inheritance—nobody cared if he were to die the next day—nay, on the contrary, there was some one who would be glad.

This impression, which had been swept out of his mind by years and changes, came back upon him with singular force as all at once his eye fell on the great portrait of old Squire Arden, painted when he was Master of the Hounds, in sporting costume, which hung in the hall. He stopped short before it as he went in with his sister on the first day of his return, and felt a shudder come over him. Perhaps it was the costume and attitude which moved his memory; but there seemed to lurk in his father's face, as he entered the house of which that father had been unable to deprive him, the same look which once had fallen upon him like a curse. He stopped short and grew pale, in spite of all his attempts to control himself. "Would you think it cruel, Clare," he said suddenly in his impulsive way, "if I were to ask you to transfer that portrait to some other place? It has a painful effect upon me there."

"This is your house, Edgar," answered Clare. On this point her sweetness abandoned her. She knew he had been badly used; but she knew at the same time that her father had been all love and kindness to herself. Therefore, as was natural, Miss Arden took it for granted that somehow it must be Edgar's fault.

"That is not the question," he said. "I can understand by my own what your feelings must be on the subject. But it cannot harm him to remove it, and it does harm me to have it stay. If you will make this sacrifice to me, Clare–"

"Edgar, I tell you this is your house," she said, with the tears rushing to her eyes; and ran in and left him there, in a sudden passion of grief and anger. Her brother, left alone, looked somewhat sadly round him. He was very destitute of those impulses of self-assertion which come so naturally to most young men; on the contrary, his impulse was to yield when the feeling of anyone he loved ran contrary to his own: he was a little sorrowful at Clare's want of sympathy, but it did not move him to act as master. "What harm can it do me now?" he said, going up and looking closely at the portrait. It came natural to him to reason himself out of his own fancies, and to give place to those of others. "It would be wounding her only to satisfy my caprice," he added after a while; "and why should I be indulged in everything, I should like to know?" Poor boy! up to this moment he had never been indulged in anything all his life. He stayed a long time in the hall, now walking about it, now standing before the portrait. It haunted him so that he felt obliged to face it, and defy the look; and

he could not but think with a sigh what a comfort it would be to get quit of it, to take it down and turn it somewhere with its face to the wall. But then he remembered that though he was the master he was more a stranger in the house than any servant it contained; and what right had he to cross his sister, and go in the face of every tradition, and offend every soul in the place, by taking down that picture, which looked malevolent to nobody but him? "God forgive you!" he said at last, shaking his head at it sorrowfully as he went slowly upstairs. He could not feel himself free or safe so long as it remained there. If anything happened to him—supposing, for instance (this grim idea crossed his mind in spite of himself)—supposing it might ever happen that he should be carried into that hall, wounded or mangled by any accident, would the painted face smile at him, would the eyes gleam with a horrible joy? And it was his father's face. Edgar shuddered, he could not help it, as he went slowly up the great stairs. As he went up, some one else was coming down, making a gleam of reflection in the still air. It was old Sarah, with her white apron, making a curtsey at every step, and finding that mode of progress difficult. Edgar's mobile countenance dressed itself all in smiles at the appearance of this old woman. Clare would have thought it strange, but it came natural to her brother; though, perhaps, on the whole, it was Clare, her own special charge and nursling, who was most fond of old Sarah, as, indeed, it became her to be.

"Have you been waiting for us?" he said. "My sister has gone to look for you, I suppose."

"Not gone to look for me, Mr. Edgar," said Sarah, petulantly; "run upstairs in one of her tantrums, as I have seen her many a day. You'll have to keep her a bit in hand, now you've come home, Mr. Edgar."

"*I* keep her in hand!" cried Edgar, struck with the extreme absurdity of the suggestion; and then he tried hard to look severe, and added—"My dear old Sarah, you must recollect who Miss Arden is, and take care what you say."

"There's ne'er a one knows better who she is," said old Sarah, "she's my child, and my jewel, and the darlin' of my heart. But, nevertheless, she's an Arden, Mr. Edgar. All the Ardenses as ever was has got tempers—except you; and for her own good, the dear, you should keep her a bit in hand; and if you say it was her old nurse told you, as loves her dearly, it wouldn't do no harm."

"Am I the only Arden without a temper?" said Edgar, gaily; "it's odd how I want everything that an Arden ought to have. But my sister is queen at Arden, Sarah; always has been; and most likely always will be."

"Lord bless you, sir, wait till you get married," said Sarah, nodding her head again and again, and beaming at the prospect. "Eh! I'd like to live to see that day!"

"It will be a long day first," said Edgar, with a laugh, meaning nothing but a young man's half-mocking, half-serious denial of the coming romance of his existence; "though I promise you, Sarah, you shall dance at my wedding—but at Clare's first, which is the proper arrangement, you know."

"If he was a good gentleman, Sir, and one as was fond of her, I shouldn't care how soon it was," she said. "Eh, my word, but I'll dance till I dance you all off the floor!"

"But you must not go without something to remind you of your first visit to us," he said; and he took out his purse from his pocket with the lavish liberality of his disposition. "Look, there is not very much in it. Buy something you like, Sarah, and say to yourself that it is given you by me."

"No, Mr. Edgar; no, Sir. Oh, good Lord, not a purse full of money, as if that was all I was thinking of! I didn't come here, not for money, but to see Miss Clare and you."

"It is because it is your first visit to us," repeated Edgar, and he gave her a kind nod, and went lightly past to his rooms. All his gloomy thoughts and superstitions had been driven out of his mind by this momentary encounter. His light heart had risen again like a ball of feathers. The glooms and griefs that lay in his past he shook off from him as lightly as thistledown. He thought no more of his father's grim face in the hall—did not even look at it when he went downstairs. Was it that his mind was a light mind, easily blown about by any wind? or that God had given him that preservative which He gives to those whom He has destined to bear much in this world? At so early a moment,

when his life lay all vague before him, this was a question which nobody could answer. There was one indication, however, that his elasticity was strength rather than weakness, which was this—that he had not forgotten what had moved him so strongly, but was able, his sunny nature helping him, to put it away.

CHAPTER VI

The first day at Arden had been play; the second, work began again, and the new life which was so unfamiliar to the young Squire came pouring in upon him like a tide. In the morning he had an appointment with the family solicitor, who was coming, full of business, to lay his affairs before him, and to inaugurate his curiously changed existence. In the evening, his old friends in the village were coming to dine with this equally old friend, and Edgar felt that he would, without doubt, have a great deal of good advice to encounter, and probably many reminiscences which would not be pleasant to hear. None of these very old friends knew in the least the character of the young man with whom they had to do. They saw, as everybody did, his light-heartedness, his cheerful oblivion of all the wrongs of the past, and quiet commencement of his new career; but they did not know nor suspect the thorns that past had left in his mind—the haunting horror of his father's look, the aching wonder as to the meaning of treatment so extraordinary, which had never left him since he caught that glance, coupled with a strange consciousness that some time or other he must find out the secret of this unnatural enmity. Edgar, though he was so buoyant as almost to appear deficient in feeling to the careless observer, kept this thought lying deep down in his heart. He would find it out some time, whatever it was; and though he could not frame to himself the remotest idea what it was, he felt and knew that the discovery, when it came, would be such as to embitter if not to change his whole existence. No one had any clue to the cause of the Squire's behaviour to his son. To Clare it had seemed little more than a preference for herself, which was cruel to her brother, as shutting him out from his just share in his father's heart, but not of any great importance otherwise; and at least one of the theories entertained on the subject outside the house of Arden was such as could not be named to the heir. Therefore, he had not a single gleam from without to assist him in resolving this great question; yet he felt in the depths of his heart that some time or other it would be resolved, and that the illumination, when it came, could not but bring grief and trouble in its train.

"I never saw this Mr. Fazakerley," he said, as Clare and he sat alone over their breakfast on that second morning. Already it had become natural to him to be the master of the great house, of all those silent servants, the centre of a life so unlike anything that he had known. His mind was very rapid, went quickly over the preliminary stages, and accustomed itself to a hundred novelties, while a slower fancy would but have been having its first gaze at them; but the absolutely New startled him to a greater degree than it ever could have startled a more leisurely imagination. "I don't know him a bit," he repeated, with a half laugh, in which there was more nervousness than amusement. "What sort of a man is he? I always like to know–"

"Mr. Fazakerley!" said Clare, with a soft echo of wonder, "why, all the Ardens have known all the Fazakerleys from their cradles. He must have had you on his knee a hundred times, as I am sure he had me."

"I don't think so," said Edgar, suppressing, because of the servants, any other question, "or, if I ever saw him I have forgotten. Why must we have business breaking in upon us at every turn? I am afraid I like play."

"I am afraid you have had too much play," Clare said, looking at him with those eyes of young wisdom, utterly without experience, which look so soft yet judge so hardly; "but, Edgar, you must remember you are not a wanderer now. You have begun serious life."

"I wonder if life is as serious as you are, Clare," he said, looking at her with that half-tender, half mocking look, which Clare did not quite understand nor like; "or whether this lawyer and his green bag will be half as alarming as those looks of yours. I may satisfy him; but I fear I shall never come up to your mark."

"Don't speak so, please," said Clare. "Why shouldn't you come up to my mark? I like a man to be very high-minded and generous, and that you are, Edgar; but then I like people to have proper pride,

and believe in their own position, and feel its duties. That is all—and I like people to be English–, and it would be so nice to think you were going to show yourself a true Arden, in spite of everything." This was said at a fortunate moment, when Wilkins, the butler, was at the very other end of the great room, fetching something from the sideboard, and could not hear. She leant across the table hastily, before the man turned round, and added, in a hurried tone, "Don't discuss such things before the servants, Edgar; they listen to everything we say."

"I forgot," he said; "I never had servants before who knew English. You don't recollect that English has always been a grand foreign language to me."

"The more's the pity!" said Clare, with a deep sigh. This sentiment made her beautiful face so long, and drooped the corners of her mouth so sadly, that her brother laughed in spite of himself.

"But it is possible to live out of England for all that," he said; "and I know people in Germany that would have the deepest sympathy with you. The Von Dummkopfs think just the same of themselves as the Ardens do, and look down just as much upon outsiders. I wonder how you would like the Fraulein Ida? They have twenty quarterings in their arms, and blood that has been filtered through all the veins worth speaking of in Germany for ever so many centuries; but then the Von Dummkopfs are not so rich as we are, Clare."

"As if I ever thought of that!" she said. "Who is Fraulein Ida? I have no doubt I shall like her —if she is nice. But, Edgar, though I would not say a word against your German friends, it would be so much nicer if you would marry an English girl. I should be able to love her so much more."

"Softly," said Edgar; "don't go so fast, please. I have not the least intention of marrying any one; and I don't admire the Fraulein Ida. I want nobody but my sister, as long as she will keep faithful to me. Let us have the good of each other for a little now, without any one to interfere."

"Edgar, no one can interfere," said Clare hurriedly. "Now that man is gone, oh, Edgar! I must say one word for poor papa. I know he was hard upon you, dear; but he never interfered—never said a word—never tried to keep me from loving you. Indeed, indeed, he never did! I know I was cross yesterday about that picture. If you don't like it, it shall come down; it is only right it should come down. But oh, Edgar, he was so kind, he was so good to me!"

Edgar had risen before the words were half said, and stood by her, holding her tenderly in his arms. "My dear little sister!" he said, "you have always been the one star I had to cheer me. You shall hang all the house with his picture if you like. I forgive him all my grievances because he was good to you. But, Clare, he hated me."

"No, Edgar, not hated," cried Clare, raising to him her weeping face. "Oh, not hated; but he loved mamma so, and you were so like her, he never could bear–"

Her voice faltered as she spoke. It was all she could say, but she did not believe it. As for Edgar, he shook his head with a smile that was half bitter half sad.

"I know better," he said; "but it is a question we need not discuss. Believe the gentle fiction, dear, if you can. But I will never say a word again about any picture. Let it be. It would be hard if your brother could not put up with anything that was dear to you. Now tell me about Mr. Fazakerley, and what he is going to say."

"Edgar, it all belongs to the same subject," said Clare, drying her eyes. "I am glad you have spoken. I should not have had the courage to begin. There is something about the Old Arden estate; they told me, but I would not listen to them—would not hear anything about it till you came back. They said it was your doing as well as his; I don't understand how that can be. They said you wanted it to be settled on me; but why, Edgar, should it be settled on me? It is neither right nor natural," said Clare, her blue eyes lighting up, though tears still hung upon the eyelashes. "Arden, that gave us our name—that was the very beginning of the race—why should you wish to give it to me?"

"Is it given to you?" said Edgar, with a certain sense of bewilderment creeping over him. "I am afraid I have been like you—I have not understood, nor thought on the subject indeed for that matter. There was something about breaking the entail between him and me; but I did not understand

anything about it. I never knew—Clare, I can't make it out," he said, suddenly sitting down and gazing at her. "Why did he hate me?"

Then they looked at each other without a word. Clare's great blue eyes, dilated with grief and wonder, and two big tears which filled them to overflowing, were fixed upon her brother's face. But she had no elucidation to give. She only put out her hands to him, and took his, and held it close, with that instinctive impulse to tender touch and contact which is more than words. She followed her brother with her eyes while he faced this new wonder. "Well," he was saying to himself, "of course you must have known he meant something by breaking the entail. Of course it was not for your sake he did it. What could it be for? You never asked—never thought. Of course it could only be to take it from you. And why not give it to Clare? If not to you, of course it must go to Clare; and but for that she could not have had it. It is very well that it should be so. It is best; is it not best?" Thus he reasoned according to his nature, while Clare sat watching him with wistful dilated eyes. While he calmed himself down she was rousing herself. Her agitation rose to the intolerable pitch, while his was slowly coming down to moderation and composure. The sudden cloud floated away from him, and the light came back to his eyes. "I begin to see it," he said slowly. "Don't be vexed, Clare, that I did not see it all at once. It is not that I grudge you anything; he might have given you all, and I don't think I should have grudged it. It is the mistrust—the preference. It is so strange. One wonders what it can mean."

"Yes," said Clare, impulsively, "I wonder too. But, more than that, Edgar; you did not know—you did it in ignorance; and I will never, never, take advantage of that! I was bewildered at first; but it is your right, and I will never take it from you–"

Then it was he, who had been robbed of his birthright, who had to exert himself to reconcile her to his loss. "Nay, that is nonsense," he said. "It is done, and it cannot be done over again. The will must not be interfered with: it is my business to see to that. No, Clare; don't try to make me do wrong. Nothing we can say will change it, nor anything you can do either. What has been given you is yours, and yours it must remain."

"But I will not accept it," said Clare; "I will give it all back the moment I come of age. What! rob you and your children, Edgar—all the Ardens that may come after you! That is what I will never do."

"It is time enough to think of the Ardens who may come after me," said Edgar, with an attempt at a laugh. But Clare was not to be pacified so easily. He drew closer to her side, and sat down by her, and took her hand, and spoke softly in her ear, arguing it out as if the question had not been a personal one. "It startled me at first," he said; "it was strange, very strange, that he should think of taking this, as you say, Clare, not only from me, but from all the Ardens to come; but then you were the dearest to him, and that was quite natural. And it must have been my fault that he did not tell me. I never asked any questions about it—never thought of inquiring. He must have taken me for a kind of Esau, careless of what was going to happen. If I had shown a little more interest, no doubt he would have told me. Of course, he must have felt it would have been for your advantage had I known all about it, and been able to stand by you. I am so glad you have told me now. You may be sure he would have done so had I behaved myself properly. So, you see, it was my fault, Clare. I must have been ungracious, boorish, indifferent. It is clear it was my fault."

"Mr. Fazakerley, sir, is in the library," said Wilkins, opening the door. There was a certain breath of agitation in the air about the two young people which the servants had scented out; and the eager eyes of Wilkins expressed not only his own curiosity, but that of the household in general. "He was a patting of her and a smoothing of her down," was the butler's report downstairs, "and Miss Clare in one of her ways. I daresay they have quarrelled already, for she is her father's daughter, is Miss Clare." The brother and sister were quite unconscious of this comment; but though they had not quarrelled, the conflict of feeling had risen so high that Mr. Fazakerley's arrival was a relief to both. "I must go and see him," Edgar said, loosing his sister's hand, and laying his own tenderly upon her bowed head. "Don't let it trouble you so much. You will see it as I do when you think of it rightly, Clare."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.