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SQUIRE ARDEN; VOLUME 3 OF 3

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Squire Arden; volume 3 of 3

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Содержание

Margaret Oliphant
Squire Arden; volume 3 of 3

CHAPTER I

"How is Miss Pimpernel?" Arthur asked as he entered the house. He went in with a great appearance of anxiety and haste, and he repeated his question to a maid who was just preparing to ascend the stairs. The footman had given him no answer—a fact which he did not even observe; and the maid made him a little curtsey, and cast down her eyes, and looked confused and uncomfortable. "My mistress is coming, sir," she said; and Arthur, looking up, saw that Mrs. Pimpernel herself was advancing to meet him. He saw at the first glance that there was to be war, and war to the knife, and that conciliation was impossible. "How is Miss Pimpernel?" he asked, taking the first word. "I was so glad to see she was able to move at once; but I fear she must have been much shaken, at least."

Mrs. Pimpernel came downstairs upon him before she made any answer. She bore down like a conquering ship or a charge of cavalry. Her face was crimson; her eyes bright with anger; her head was agitated by a little nervous tremble. "Mr. Arden," she said, rushing, as it were, into the fray, "I don't think Miss Pimpernel would have been much the better for you, whatever had happened. I don't think from what I have heard, that your kind service would have been much good to her. To tell the truth, when I heard some one asking, I never thought it could be you."

"Miss Pimpernel fortunately, had no need of my services," said Arthur firmly, standing his ground. "I cannot tell you what a relief it was to me to find her unhurt."

"Unhurt, indeed!" said Mrs. Pimpernel. "Who says she is unhurt? A delicate young creature thrown from a high phæton like that, and all but trampled under the horses' feet! And whose fault was it, Mr. Arden? I hope I shall have patience to speak. Whose *fault* was it, I say? And then to find herself deserted by those that ought to have taken care of her! All for the sake of a designing girl—an artful little cheat and hussy—a—a–"

"I am not the girl's defender," said Arthur Arden. "She may be all you say, and it is quite unimportant to me; but I thought she was killed, and Mr. Pimpernel and my cousin Edgar Arden were with your daughter."

"Ah, Mr. Arden!" said Mrs. Pimpernel, "he is a gentleman—he is a true gentleman, notwithstanding all the nonsense you have been putting in Mr. Pimpernel's head. And I tell you I don't believe a word of it—not a word! Mr. Arden is what he always was, and you are a poor, mean, shabby adventurer, poking into people's houses, and making yourself agreeable, and all that. Yes! I'll make you hear me! that I shall! I tell you you are no better than a–"

"Is it necessary that John and Mary should assist at this explanation?" said Arthur. He smiled, but he was very pale. He said to himself that to attach any importance to the words of such a woman would be folly indeed; but yet shame and rage tore him asunder. A lady would not have condescended to abuse him. She would have treated him with deadly civility, and given him to understand that his room was wanted for another guest. But Mrs. Pimpernel had not been trained to habits of conventional decorum. Her face was red, her head trembled with rage and excitement. She had suffered a great deal in silence nursing her wrath—and now there was no longer any need to restrain herself. Now, Mr. Pimpernel himself was convinced, and Alice was indignant. He had been making use of them, trifling with them, taking advantage of the shelter of their house to carry on first one "affair" and then another. Had it been Clare Arden who had at this last crowning moment led him away from Alice, the affront would have been bitter, but not so unpardonable. But a girl out of the village, a nobody, an artful– Words forsook Mrs. Pimpernel's burning lips. She felt herself no longer able to stand and pour forth her wrath. She made a dash at the door of Mr. Pimpernel's library, and sat down,

calling the culprit before her, with a wave of her hand. Arthur went in; but he shut the door, which was not what she had wanted. A certain moral support was in the fact that she stood, as it were, in the open centre of her own house, speaking loud enough to be heard by her husband and daughter above, and by the servants below stairs. But Mrs. Pimpernel, notwithstanding her courage, did not feel so comfortable when she found herself shut into the silence of a separate room, with Arthur Arden, pale and composed, and overwhelmingly gentlemanly, before her, and not even the presence of John or Mary to give her strength. It was a strategical mistake.

"I am glad to say it does not matter to me who hears me," she said. "Let those be ashamed that have acted shabby, and shown themselves what they are. For my part, I couldn't have believed it. To creep into a house, and live on the best of everything, and carriages and horses and all at your command—I should have been ashamed to do it. No man would have done it that was better than an adventurer—a mean, miserable–"

"Mrs. Pimpernel," said Arthur, "you have been very civil and friendly, asking me to your house, and I have done my best to repay it in the way that was expected. Pray don't suppose I am ignorant it was an affair of barter—the best of everything, as you say, and the carriages, &c., on one side; but on my side a very just equivalent. Let us understand each other. What am I supposed to have done amiss? Of course, our mutual accommodation is over, after this scene—but I should be glad to know, before I accept my dismissal, what I am supposed to have done amiss–"

"Equivalent! Accommodation! Oh you!– Without a penny to bless yourself with—and living on the fat of the land– Champagne like water, and everything you could set your face to. And now you brazen it out to me. Oh you poor creature! Oh you beggarly, penniless–"

"Pray let us come to particulars," said Arthur; "these reproaches are sadly vague. Come, things are not so bad after all. You expected me to be your attendant, a sort of upper footman, and I have been such. You expected me to lend the name of an Arden to all your junketings, and I have done it. You expected me, perhaps– But I don't want to bring in the name of Miss Pimpernel–"

"No, don't—if you dare!" cried the mother. "Mention my child, if you dare. As if she was not, and hadn't always been, a deal too good for you. Thirty thousand pounds of her own, and as pretty a girl and as good a girl– Oh, don't you suppose she cares! She would not look at you out of her window, if there was not another man; she would never bemean herself, wouldn't my Alice. You think yourself a great man with the ladies, but you may find out your mistake. Your cousin won't see you, nor look at you—you know that. Oh, you may start! She has seen through you long ago, has Miss Arden—and if you thought for a moment that my Alice– Good gracious!—to think a man should venture to look me in the face, after leaving my child to be killed, and going after a– Don't speak to me! Yes, I know you. I always saw through you. If it hadn't been for Mr. Pimpernel, and that sweet angel upstairs–"

And here Mrs. Pimpernel paused, and sobbed, and shed tears—giving her adversary the advantage over her. She was all the more angry that she felt she had wasted her words, and had not transfixed and made an end of him, as she had hoped—as she had meant to do. To see him standing there unsubdued, with a smile on his face, was gall and wormwood to her. She choked with impotent rage and passion. She could have flown at him, tooth and claw, if she had not put force on herself. Arthur felt the height of exasperation to which he was driving her, and, perhaps, enjoyed it; but nothing was to be made by continuing such a struggle.

"I am sorry to have to take my leave of you in such a way," he said, in his most courteous tone. "I shall explain to Mr. Pimpernel how grieved I am to quit his house so abruptly; but after this unfortunate colloquy, of course there is no more to be said. It is a pity to speak when one is so excited —one says more always than one means. Many thanks to you for a pleasant visit, such as it has been. You have done your best to amuse me with croquet and that sort of thing. Society, of course, one cannot always command. My man will bring over my things to—Arden in the course of the day. I trust that if we meet in the county, as we may perhaps do, that we shall both be able to forget this little passage of arms. Good-bye, and many thanks, Mrs. Pimpernel."

Mrs. Pimpernel gave a little stammering cry of passion and annoyance. She had never calculated upon her prey escaping so easily. She had not even meant to dismiss him entirely, but only to subdue him, and bring him under discipline. After all, he was an Arden, and going to Arden—as he said—and might procure invitations to Arden, probably, notwithstanding her affirmation about Clare. But Arthur left her no time for repentance. He withdrew at once when he had discharged this parting shot, closing the door after him, and leaving the panting, enraged woman shut up in that cool and silent place to come to herself as she best might. He was a little pleased with his victory, and satisfied to think that he had had the best of it. The maid was still standing outside, listening near the door, when he opened it suddenly. "Your mistress is a little put out, Mary," he said to her, with a smile. "Perhaps it would be better to leave her to herself for a few minutes. I hope Miss Pimpernel is not really hurt. Tell her I am grieved to have to go away without saying good-bye." And then he stopped to give John directions about his things, and distributed his few remaining sovereigns among them with fine liberality. The servants had grinned at his discomfiture before, but they grinned still more now at the thought of their mistress weeping with rage in the library, and her visitor escaped from her. "He was always quite the gentleman," Mary said to John, as he left the house; and they laid their heads together over the discomfiture that would follow his departure. Thus Arthur Arden shook the dust of the Red House from his feet, and went out upon the world again, not knowing where he was to go.

And his thoughts were far from cheerful, as he made his way among the shrubberies, which sometimes had looked to him like prison walls. Poor Alice and her thirty thousand pounds had always been something to fall back upon. If Clare did not relent, and would not explain herself, a man must do something—and though it was letting himself go very cheap, still thirty thousand pounds was not contemptible. And now that was over—the hope which after all had been his surest hope—all (once more) from thinking of other people's rather than of his own interests. What was Jeanie to him? She had never given him a kind word or smile. She was a child—a bloodless being—out of whom it was impossible to get even a little amusement. Yet for her sake here was thirty thousand pounds lost to him. And probably she would go and die, now that she had done him as much harm as possible, leaving it altogether out of his power to do her any harm, or compensate himself in the smallest degree. And in the meantime where was he to go? Arthur's funds were at a very low ebb. All this time which he had been wasting in the country he had been out of the way of putting a penny in his pocket; and for the moment he did not know what he was to do? He had said he was going to Arden, partly to impose on Mrs. Pimpernel, partly with a sudden sense that to throw himself upon Edgar's hospitality was about the best thing on the cards for him. Might he venture to go there at once, and risk welcome or rejection? At the very worst they could not refuse to take him in till Monday. But then it would be better to secure himself for longer than Monday—and Clare was very uncompromising, and Edgar firm, notwithstanding his good nature. Altogether the position was difficult. He had been making great way with the Pimpernels since Clare had shut her doors upon him. There had been nothing to disturb him, nothing to divide his allegiance, and therefore he had been utterly unprepared for this sudden derangement of plans. The Pimpernels, too, were utterly unprepared. His hostess had meant to "set him down," as she said, "to show him his proper place," to "bring him to his senses," but she had never intended the matter to be concluded so promptly. The discomfiture on both sides was equally great. He took a little pleasure in the thought of this, but yet it did not enlighten him as to where he was to go.

The conclusion of the matter was that for that night he went to the Arden Arms. Edgar had disappeared when he returned to the village, and all was quiet and silent. Arthur met Dr. Somers going down to the cottage in which Jeanie still was. The Doctor shook his head, but would not say much. "She is young, and she may pull through, if the place is kept quiet," was all the information he would give. But he asked Arthur to dinner, which was a momentary relief to him, and Arthur recounted to him, with many amusing details, the history of his dismissal by the Pimpernels. The Doctor chuckled, partly because it was a good story, and made the Pimpernels ridiculous, and partly because Arthur

Arden, though he put the best possible face upon it, must have been himself discomfited. “Serve him right,” the Doctor said within himself; but he asked him to dinner, and saved him from the horrors of a chop at the Arden Arms and a solitary evening in its little sanded parlour, which was a work of true benevolence—for Dr. Somers’ dinner and his claret would have been worthy of notice anywhere —much more when contrasted with the greasy attractions of a chop at the Arden Arms.

CHAPTER II

While Arthur went to the Red House, Edgar had been exerting himself to still all the roads and deaden every sound about Sally Timms' cottage. Sally's boys considered the operation as a personal compliment. They tumbled in the straw, and threw it about, and buried each other with cries of delight which had to be suppressed in the most forcible and emphatic way—until at last Edgar, driven to interfere, had to order the removal of Johnny and Tommy. "They can go to the West Lodge for the night," he said, with a hospitable liberality, at which the West Lodge keeper, who was helping in the work, groaned aloud. Sally herself, however, was very indignant at this exercise of despotic authority. She rushed to the front, and demanded to know why her cottage should be taken possession of, and the children carried off for the benefit of a stranger. "A lass as nobody knows, nor don't care to know," said Sally, "as has a deal too many gentlefolks alooking after her to be an honest lass." "Take her away too," said Edgar with benevolent tyranny. And Sally, with a scream of despair, snatched the old petticoat which stuffed her broken window, and fled from the bystanders, who did not attempt to carry out the Squire's command. "I'll go and I'll see what Miss Clare says to it," she cried. Edgar was a great deal too busy to pay any attention. He saw the work completed, and urged the necessity of care upon John Hesketh and his wife without considering that even they were but partial sympathisers. "I don't hold with no such a fuss," the women were saying among themselves. "If it had been the mother of a family she'd have had to take her chance; but a bit of a wench with a pretty face–" Thus he got no credit for his exertions, notwithstanding the injunctions of Dr. Somers. If Jeanie had been altogether unfriended, the village people would have shown her all manner of care and sympathy; but the Squire's kindness put an end to theirs. They sympathised with Sally in her banishment. "You'll see as Miss Clare won't like it a bit," cried one. "I don't think nothing of Sally, but she has a right to her own place." "She'll be well paid for it all," said another. Sally, and the fuss that was being made, and Miss Clare's supposed sentiments bulked much more largely with the villagers than the thought that Jeanie lay between life and death, although many of them liked Jeanie, and had grown used to see her, so small and so fair, wandering about the street. Only old Sarah stood with her apron to her eyes. "I'm as fond of her as if she was my own. She's the sweetest, patientest, good-temperedest lamb —none of you wenches can hold a candle to her," sobbed the old woman. "She stitches beautiful, though I'm not one as holds with your pretty faces," said Sally, the sexton's daughter; but these were the only voices raised in poor Jeanie's favour throughout the village crowd.

Edgar lingered last of all at the cottage door. John Hesketh's wife, partly moved by pity for the grandmother left thus alone, partly by curiosity to investigate the amount of dirt and discomfort in Sally Timms' cottage—had taken her place in the outer room, to remain with Mrs. Murray until Sally returned or some other assistant came. And Edgar lingered to hear the last news of the patient before going away. The twilight by this time was falling, faint little stars were appearing in the sky, the dew and the peacefulness of approaching night were in the atmosphere. While he stood waiting at the door, Mrs. Murray herself came out upon him all at once. She had an air of suppressed excitement about her which struck him strangely—not so much anxiety, as agitation, highly excited feeling. He put out his hand to her as she approached, feeling, he could not tell how, that she wanted his aid and consolation. She took his hand between both hers, and held it tight and pressed it close; and then surely the strangest words came from her lips that were ever spoken in such circumstances. "He carried her here in his arms—he left the other to save her. You'll no forget it to him—you'll no forget it to him. That is the charge I lay on you."

Edgar half drew away his hand in his surprise; but she held it fast, not seeming even to feel his attempt at withdrawal. "What do you mean?" he said. "I came to ask for Jeanie. Is it of Arthur Arden you are speaking—my cousin? But it is about Jeanie I want to know."

"Ay, your cousin," she said anxiously. "It's strange that I never kent you had a cousin. Nobody ever told me that– But mind, mind what I say. Whatever happens, you'll no forget this. He carried her here in his arms. He forgot all the rest, all the rest. And you'll no forget it to him. That's my injunction upon you, whatever anybody may say."

"This is very strange," Edgar said, in spite of himself. Who was she, that she should lay injunctions upon him—should bid him do this or that? And then he thought to himself that her head too must be a little turned. So startling an event probably had confused her, as Jeanie had been confused by a sudden shock. He looked at her very sympathetically, and pressed the hands that held his. "Tell me first how Jeanie is—poor little Jeanie; that is by far the most important now."

"It's no the most important," said the old woman almost obstinately. "I ken both sides, and you ken but little—very, very little. But whatever you do or say, you'll no forget him for this—promise me that you'll never forget."

"That is easy enough to promise," said Edgar; "but he was to blame, for it was he who put her in the carriage. I think he was to blame. And what am I to reward him for?—for carrying the poor child home?"

"Yes, for carrying her home," said Mrs. Murray, "in his arms, when the other was waiting that was more to him than Jeanie. You'll no please me, nor do your duty, if you do not mind this good deed. They say he's no a good man; but the poor have many a temptation that never comes near the rich; and if he had been in your place at Arden and you in his—or even–"

"My dear, kind woman," said Edgar, trying with a pressure of her hands to recall her to herself, "don't trouble yourself about Arthur or me. You are excited with all that has happened. Think of Jeanie. Don't take any trouble about us–"

"Eh, if I could help troubling!" she said, loosing her hands from his. And then the look of excitement slowly faded out of her face. "I am bidding you bear my burdens," she said, with a deep sigh; "as if the innocent could bear the load of the guilty, or make amends– You must not mind what I say. I've been a solitary woman, and whiles I put things into words that are meant for nobody's ear. You were asking about Jeanie. She is real ill—in a kind of faint—but if she is kept quiet, the doctor says she may come round. I think she will come round, for my part. She is delicate, but there is *life* in her: me and mine have all so much life." When she said these words Mrs. Murray fixed her eyes upon Edgar keenly and surveyed him, as if trying to fathom his constitution and powers. "I cannot tell for you," she said, with a sudden pause. He smiled, but he was grieved, thinking sadly that her brain was affected, as Jeanie's had been. What was to become of the hapless pair if the mother's brain was gone as well as the child's. The thought filled him with infinite pity, so great as almost to bring tears to his eyes.

"You must try and compose yourself," he said. "I will send Perfitt to see that you have everything you want, and perhaps when she is a little better she may be removed to your own rooms. This is not a comfortable cottage, I fear. But you must compose yourself, and not allow yourself to be worried one way or another. You may be quite sure I will stand by you, and take care of you as much as I can—you who have been so kind to everybody, so good–"

"Oh no, no, no good!" she cried, "not good. I think night and day, but I cannot see what to do; and when a wronged man heaps coals of fire on your head– Oh, you're kind, kind; and I'm no ungrateful, though I may look it. And it is not excitement, as you say, that makes me speak. There's many a thing of which a young lad like you is ignorant. You'll mind this to his credit if ever you can do him a good turn–"

"Yes, yes," said Edgar impatiently; and then he added, "Think of Jeanie. Arthur Arden is very well qualified to take care of himself."

And so he turned away, chafed and disquieted. Arthur Arden had been the cause of his leaving home, and here as soon as he returned Arthur Arden again was in his way, and a trouble to him. He walked through the village street very uneasy about poor Mrs. Murray, and Jeanie, who would

be in her sole charge. If the grandmother's mind was unsettled, how could she look after the child, and what would become of two creatures so helpless in a strange place? No doubt it must be in the family, as people say. Jeanie's monomania was about her brother, and Mrs. Murray's was about Arthur Arden. What had he to do with Arthur Arden? He was not his brother's keeper, that he should step in and make of himself a providence for Arthur's benefit. Altogether it was odd and disagreeable and discomposing. As his mind was thus occupied he walked along the village street, pre-occupied and absorbed. When he had nearly reached the Arden Arms he met Dr. Somers, and immediately seized the opportunity to make inquiries. The Doctor held up his hand as if warding him off.

"Not a word, Mr. Edgar, not another word. I have said if she's kept quiet and not excited she'll do. I don't like fuss any more than the villagers. You don't put straw down when a comfortable matron adds to the number of society, and why should you for this girl? You are all mad about Jeanie. She is a pretty girl, I allow; but there is as pretty to be seen elsewhere. You should hear your cousin on that subject. He and his misfortunes are as good as a play."

"What are his misfortunes?" said Edgar, and in spite of himself a certain coldness crept into his voice.

"You don't like him?" said Dr. Somers; "neither do I. I hate a man who lives on his wits. Generally neither the wits nor the man are worth much. But as I say, this time Arthur Arden's as good as a play. He has been turned out of the Red House—the Pimpernels will have no more of him. It is a capital story. He has been sponging upon them for a month (this, of course, is between ourselves), and I daresay they were very glad to get rid of him. You never can tell when such a visitor may go away."

"I thought the Pimpernels liked it," said Edgar; but did not care to enter into any discussion about his cousin; and he walked on in silence for some seconds by the Doctor's side, meaning thus to express his desire to be quit of the subject. He had, on the whole, had quite too much of Arthur Arden. He felt with the Pimpernels that to be quit of him would be a relief.

"Where are you going?" said the Doctor. "It is getting late. Come with me and dine. I have just asked Arden. He is houseless and homeless, you know; and I know what it is to be condemned to the hospitalities of the Arden Arms–"

"Is he at the Arden Arms?" said Edgar. "I suppose only for to-night. He must have plenty of houses to go to—a man who is so well known in the world. Thanks, Doctor; but Clare must have been expecting me for some time. I must go home."

"Clare has not been very well," said the Doctor. "I am glad you have come back. If there ever had been such a thing as brain disease among the Ardens I should have been frightened. Fielding gave me a hint, and I went to see her. The girl has something on her mind. I don't know if it is about Arthur Arden–"

"Confound Arthur Arden!" said Edgar. "What do you suppose he could have to do with my sister Clare?"

"Oh, nothing; nothing, of course," said the Doctor, "except that they were great friends, and now they are friends no longer. And she has not looked well since; there is a look of anxiety and trouble about her. My dear fellow, you and I may not think much of Arthur Arden, but with women he could cut us both out. Some men have that way. There is no genuine feeling about them, and yet they get far before the best. His father was the same sort of fellow; he was my contemporary, and it used to set me on edge to see him. My poor sister, Letty, to this day imagines that he was fond of her. Your cousin is not a man to be despised."

"Doctor, I don't doubt you are very wise and very right," said Edgar; "but you forget you are speaking of Clare. Tell Miss Somers I am coming to see her to-morrow after church. And, Doctor, I think it would be worth your while to examine the old woman, Jeanie's grandmother. I don't think she is quite right. She was speaking wildly. I did not know what to make of her. And if you consider what a helpless pair they would be! What could they do? especially if they were both ill in that way–"

"In what way?—concussion of the brain?" said the Doctor. "Is it Mrs. Murray's brain you are anxious for? My dear boy, you may dismiss your fears. That woman has life enough for half-a-dozen of us cold-blooded people. Her brain is as sound as yours and mine. But it is a very anxious case, and it may well disturb her. Perhaps the accident may be good for the child if she mends. Everything is so mysterious about the brain. Won't you reconsider the matter, and come? I don't want to say too much for my dinner; but it is not bad—not bad, you know—a little better than usual, I think. No? Well, I think it would do you more real good than a long walk in the dark; but, of course, you must have your own way."

And thus they parted at the great gates. The avenue was very dark, and Edgar was not in brilliant spirits. He seemed to himself to be entering a moral as well as a physical obscurity, confused by many mysterious shadows, as he took the way to his own door.

CHAPTER III

The dogcart reached home with news of Edgar's approach before he himself arrived. It passed him in the avenue, and so did Sally Timms, who had rushed to the Hall to carry the news of Jeanie's accident, and to make an appeal on her own account to Clare. Thus his sister had been made acquainted with the cause of his detention—which was a relief to him: for he was fatigued with his recent exertions. He stopped Sally, and recommended her guest to her best care, and gave her a sovereign; and then he went on tired to his own house. His own house! The words were pleasant. The woods rustled darkly about him, concealing everything but the Hall itself, with lights glimmering in its windows; but the sense of secure proprietorship and undisturbed possession was sweet. The sight of Arden brought back the thought of Gussy Thornleigh and of all the new combinations and arrangements that might be coming, which did not excite him, perhaps, so much as they ought to have done, but yet were sweet, and had a soft thrill of pleasure in them. She would be a most genial, gracious little mistress of the house. True, the thought of dethroning Clare was a great trouble to him, an immense obstacle in the way; but probably Clare would marry too, or something would happen. And in the meantime Gussy's image was very pleasant, mingling with that of his sister, giving him a sense of a double welcome, a double interest in his movements. To be loved was very sweet to Edgar. The warm domestic affection, the sense of home enclosing all that was dear, filled his heart with something more tender, almost more delicate than passion. He would never be overpoweringly in love, perhaps; but was that necessary to the happiness of life? With so much as he had he felt that he should be content.

Clare did not come down stairs to meet him, as he expected, which gave him a little chill and check in the warmth of his affectionate pleasure. He had to go up by himself, somewhat startled by the quietness of the house; feeling as if there was nobody in it, or at least nobody to whom his return was an event. And then he bethought himself of what Dr. Somers had said of Clare. He had been so angry about the allusion to Arthur Arden that the report of the state of his sister's health had escaped his attention. When he thought of this he ran hastily up stairs and made his way to the favourite sitting-room, where she had always received him. But there was nobody there. Clare was in the big ceremonious drawing-room—the place for strangers, with many lights, and the formal air of a room which was not much used. He rushed forward as she rose from the sofa at his entrance. He was about to take her into his arms, but she held out her hand. Her cheeks were flushed, her brow cloudy; she did not meet his eye, but averted her face from him in the strangest way. "You are come at last! I had almost given up thoughts of you," she said, and sat down again on her sofa, constrained and cold;—cold, though her hand was burning and her cheek flushed crimson. Could it be possible that she was merely angry at his delay?

"I am late, I know," he said, "but I will tell you why—or, I suppose, you have heard why, as I met Sally Timms coming down the avenue. But, Clare, are you ill? What is the matter? Are you not glad to see me? I lost no more time than I could help in obeying your summons, and this little detention to-night is not my fault."

"I have not blamed you," said Clare. "Thanks—I am quite well. It is rather late, however, and I fear your dinner–"

"Oh, never mind my dinner," said Edgar, "if that is all. I am delighted to get back to you, though you don't look glad to see me. I met Somers in the village, and he told me you had been ill. You must have been worrying yourself while you have been alone. You must not stay here alone again. I begin to think it is bad for everybody. My dear Clare, you change colour every moment. Have I frightened you? I am so grieved—so sorry;" and he stooped over her, and took her hand in his and kissed her cheek. Clare trembled, body and soul. She could not shrink from him—she could not respond to him. She wanted to break away—to shut herself up, never to see him more; and yet she wanted to lay her

head down upon his shoulder, and cry, “Oh, my brother! my brother!” What was she to do? The end was that, torn by these different impulses, she remained quite motionless and unresponsive, giving to Edgar an impression of utter coldness and repulsion, which he struggled vainly against. He looked at her for a moment with unfeigned wonder. Then he let her hands drop. He had seen her out of temper, and he had seen her sorrowful; but this was more than either, and he could not tell what it meant.

“I have worried you by being so late,” he said quietly; “I am very sorry, Clare. I did not think you would be anxious. But to-morrow I hope you will be all right. Must I go and dine? I am not hungry; but surely you will come too?”

“Yes, I will come, if you want me,” said Clare, faintly, and Edgar walked away to his dressing-room with the strangest sense of desertion. What had he done to separate his sister from him? It was obviously something he had done; not any accidental cloud on her part, but something he was guilty of. Poor Edgar put himself in order for dinner with a feeling that the weather had grown suddenly cold, and he had arrived, not in his own but in a strange house. When he went down Clare was in the dining-room, already seated at the opposite end of the great dining-table. “Where is our little round table that we used to have,” he asked, with distress that was almost comical. “You forget that we had been having visitors when you went away,” said Clare. Was she angry still that he had gone away? Was it the dismissal of the visitors which had made her angry? Was it—Arthur Arden? Edgar was too much distressed and amazed to speak. He told her the story of the accident, feeling as if it was necessary to raise his voice to reach her where she sat half-a-mile off, with her face now pale and fixed into a blank absence of expression, as if she were determined to give no clue to her meaning. But even this history which seemed to him a perfectly innocent and impersonal matter, having nothing to do with themselves, and therefore a safe subject for talk, was received with a certain chill of incredulity which drove poor Edgar wild. Did they not believe him? He said “they” in his mind, because even Wilkins had put on an air incredulous and disapproving, as he stood behind Clare’s chair. Finally Edgar grew half amused by dint of amazement and discomfiture. The oddness of this curious tacit disapproval struck him, in spite of himself. He felt tempted to get up and make them a serio-comic speech. “What have I done that you are both sitting upon me?” he felt disposed to say; but after all the atmosphere was terribly chilly and discouraging, and even a laugh was not to be obtained.

After the servants had retired it was worse than ever. Clare sat in the distance and made her little set speeches, with an attempt at indifferent conversation. And when he got up and brought his chair and his glass of claret close to her, she shrank a little, insensibly. Then for the first time he perceived a sealed packet which lay beside her on the table. This is the cause of my offending, Edgar said to himself. Some nonsense verses or letters about my youthful pranks. But these youthful pranks of his had not been at all serious, and he was not much afraid. He smiled to himself, to see how his prevision was verified when she rose from the table.

“I am very tired,” said Clare. “I don’t know why I should be so stupid to-night. Here are some papers which I found in the bureau—in the library. I have not opened them as you will see. I read one sentence through a tear in the envelope– and I thought—it appeared to me– I imagined—that you ought to see them. I think I shall go to bed now. Perhaps you will take them and—examine them —when you feel disposed. I am so stupid to-night.”

“Surely I will examine them—or anything else you like me to do,” said Edgar. “My sister ought to know I would do anything to please her. Must it be done to-night? for do you know I am unhappy to see you look so strangely at me—and a little tired too.”

“Oh, not to-night, unless you wish—when you think proper. They have never been out of my hands,” said Clare, with growing seriousness. “I should like you, please, till you look at them, to keep them very safe.”

“Certainly,” he said, with the promptest goodwill, and put the parcel into his breast pocket, which was scarcely large enough to contain it, and bulged out. “It does not look very graceful, does it?”

he said with a smile as he lighted her candle for her, and then looked wistfully into her eyes. “I hope you will be better, dear, to-morrow,” he said tenderly. “I am so sorry to have annoyed you to-night.”

“Not annoyed me,” Clare said, choking, and made a few steps across the threshold. Then she came back quickly, almost running to him, where he stood holding the door in his hand looking wistfully after her. “Oh Edgar, forgive me. I can’t help it!” she moaned; and held up a pale cheek to him, and turned and fled.

Edgar sat down again by the table, very much puzzled indeed. What did she mean? what could be the matter with her? Poor Clare? Could it be this Arthur Arden, this light o’ love—this man who was attractive to women, as Dr. Somers said? Edgar’s pride in his sister and his sense of delicacy revolted at the idea. And then it occurred to him that the packet she had given him might contain Arden’s letters, and that Clare was struggling with her feelings and endeavouring to cast him off. He took the packet out of his pocket, and opened the envelope. But when he found the original enclosure inside, old and brown, and scorched, with yellow letters showing through the worn cover, this idea faded from Edgar’s mind. He put them back into the outer cover with a sigh of relief. Of course, had Clare exacted it, he said to himself, he would have read them at once; but they were old things which could not be urgent—could not be of much weight one way or another. And he was anxious and tired, and not in a state of mind to be bothered with old letters. Poor Clare! She had been a little unkind to him; but then she had made that touching little apology which atoned for everything. To console himself, Edgar got up, and, lighting a cigar, strolled out upon the terrace; for as most men know, there is not only consolation, but counsel in tobacco. Clare’s window was on that side of the house, and he watched the light in it with a grieved and tender sympathy. Yes, poor Clare! She had no mother to tell her troubles to, no sister to share her life. Her lot (he thought) was a hard one, notwithstanding all her advantages. Her father had been her only companion, and he was gone, and his memory, instead of uniting his two orphan children together, hung like a cloud between them. Perhaps there might even now be memories belonging to the old Squire’s time which troubled Clare, and which she could not confide to her brother. His heart melted over her as he mused. Would Gussy, he wondered, take a sister’s place, and beguile Clare out of herself? And then he thought he would talk the matter over with Lady Augusta, and ask her motherly advice. As this crossed his mind, he realised more than ever how pleasant it would be to have such people belonging to him. He who had been cast out of his family, and had in reality nothing but the merely natural bond, the tie of blood between himself and his only sister, felt—much more than a man could who had been trained in the ordinary way—how pleasant it would be to be adopted by real choice and affection into a family. Perhaps it seemed to him more pleasant in imagination and prospect than it ever could be in reality —perhaps Gussy’s brothers, who were prone to get into scrapes, might, indeed, turn out rather a bore than otherwise. But he had no thought of such considerations now. And, when he went to his room, he locked up carefully out of the way of harm Clare’s papers. To-morrow, perhaps, when his mind was more fresh, he would look them over to please her, or, if not to-morrow, some day soon. He was quite tranquil about them, while she was so anxious. His sister’s good-night had soothed him, and so, to tell the truth, had his cigar. He had a peaceful, lovely Sunday before him, and then the arrival of the Thornleighs, and then– Thus it was, with a mind much tranquillised, and the feeling of home once more strong upon him, that Edgar went to rest in his own house.

CHAPTER IV

Next morning was a calm bright summer Sunday, one of those days which are real Sabbaths —moments of rest. It was like the "sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright," of George Herbert's tender fancy. Nothing that jarred or was discordant was audible in the soft air. The voices outside, the passing steps, were as harmonious as the birds and the bees that murmured all about—everything that was harsh had died out of the world. There was nothing in this Sunday but universal quiet and calm.

Except in Clare Arden's face and voice. She came down stairs before her brother, long before him, as if she had been unable to sleep. Her brow was drawn in and contracted as if by some pressing uncertainty and suspense. Her voice had a broken tone in it, a tone like a strained string. With a restlessness which it was impossible to conceal, she waited for Edgar's appearance, gliding back and forward from the library to the dining-room where breakfast was laid. The round table had been placed for them in the window not by Clare's care, but by Wilkins; a great vase of late roses—red and white—stood in the centre. The roses were all but over, for it was the second Sunday in July; but still the lawns and rosebeds of Arden produced enough for this. How strange she thought that he should be so late. Was it out of mere wantonness? Was it because he had been sitting up late over the enclosures she had given him; was it that he feared to meet her after– She suggested all these reasons to herself, but they did not still her restlessness nor bring Edgar down a moment earlier. She could not control her excitement. How was she to meet him for the first time after this discovery, if it was a discovery? How would he look at her after such a revelation? And yet Clare did not know what manner of revelation it was; or it might be no revelation at all. It might be her fancy only which had put meaning into the words she had seen. They might refer to something entirely indifferent to her brother and herself. Clare said so in her own mind, but she could not bring herself to believe it. The thought had seized upon her with crushing bewildering force. It had left her no time to think. She did not quite know what she fancied, but it was something that would shake her life and his life to their foundations, and change everything in heaven and earth.

Edgar came down at his usual hour, bright and light-hearted, as his nature was. He went up to the breakfast table with its vase of roses, and bent his face down over it. "How pleasant Sunday is," he said, "and how pleasant it is to be at home! I hope you are better this morning, Clare. Could any one help being better in this sweet air and this lovely place? I never thought Arden was half so beautiful. Fancy, there are people in town just now wasting their lives away! I am sure you are better, Clare–"

"I—think so," she said, looking at him anxiously. Had he read them? Had he not read them? That was the question. Her whole soul was bent upon that and that alone.

"You are not looking well," he said, with tender anxiety. "What have you been doing to yourself? I would say I hoped you had missed me; but you don't look so very glad to see me now—not nearly so glad as I am to see you. If you had come with me to town it might have done you good. And I am sure it would have done me good. It is dreary work living alone—in London above all–"

"Not for a man," said Clare. Her voice was still constrained; but she made a desperate effort, and put away from her as much as she could her disinclination for talk. How unlike he was to other men—how strange that he should not take pleasure in things that everybody else took pleasure in; dreary work living alone, for a young man of his position, in London—how ridiculous it was!

"Well, I assure you I found it so," said Edgar; "if you had been with me, I should have enjoyed it. As it was, I was only amused. The Thornleighs are coming back to-morrow. I saw a great deal of them—more than before they went to town–"

Here he paused, and a warmer colour, a certain air of pleasure and content diffused itself over his face. A thrill of pain and apprehension ran through Clare. The Thornleighs!—were they to be brought into the matter too? She half rose from the seat she had taken at the table. "Have you read those letters?" she asked, in a hasty, half-whispering, yet almost stern voice.

"What letters? Oh, those you gave me last night! No, not yet. Do you wish me to do it at once? You said it did not matter, I think; or, at least, I understood there was no haste."

"Oh, no haste!" said Clare, with a certain sense of desperation stealing over her; and then she took courage. "I don't mean that; they have troubled me very much. The sooner you read them, the sooner I shall be relieved, if I am to be relieved. If it would not trouble you too much to go over them to-night?"

"My dear Clare, of course I will read them directly if you wish it," said Edgar, half-provoked. "You have but to say so. Of course, nothing troubles me that you wish. I sent down to ask after poor little Jeanie this morning," he added, after a pause, falling into his usual tone; "and the doctor says she has had a tolerably good night. I must go and see Miss Somers after church. She will have learned all about it by this time, and that story about Arthur Arden and the Pimpernels. Miss Pimpernel, I told you, was thrown out of the carriage as well as Jeanie–"

"I think you told me," said Clare faintly. "I know so little about Miss Pimpernel; and I do not like that other girl. It may be prejudice, but I don't like her. I wish you would not talk of her to me."

Edgar looked up at his sister with grave wonder—"As you please," he said seriously, but his cheek flushed, half with anger, half with disappointment. What could have happened to Clare? She was not like herself. She scarcely looked at him even when she spoke. She was constrained and cold as if he were the merest stranger. She had again avoided his kiss, and never addressed him by his name. What could it mean? Scarcely anything more was said at breakfast. Clare could not open her lips, and Edgar was annoyed, and did not. It seemed so very mysterious to him. He was indeed as nearly angry as it was in his nature to be. It seemed to him a mere freak of temper—an ebullition of pride. And he was so entirely innocent in respect to Jeanie! The child herself was so innocent. Poor little Jeanie!—he thought of her with additional tenderness as he looked at his sister's unsympathetic face.

"I suppose we may walk together to church as usual," he said. It was the only remark that had broken the silence for nearly half an hour.

"If you have no objection"—said Clare formally, with something of that aggravating submission which wives sometimes show to their husbands, driving them frantic, "I think I shall drive—but not if you object to the horses being taken out."

"Why should I object?" he said, restraining himself with an effort, "except that I am very sorry not to have your company, Clare."

Then she wavered once more, feeling the empire of old affection steal over her. But he had turned away to the window, grieved and impatient. It was like a conjugal quarrel, not like the frank differences between brother and sister. And this was not how Clare's temper had ever shown itself before. Edgar left the table, with a sense of pain and disappointment which it was very hard to bear. Why was it? What had he done? His heart was so open to her, he was so full of confidence in her, and admiration for her, that the check he had thus received was doubly hard. His sister had always been to him the first among women. Gussy of course was different—but Gussy had never taken the same place in his respect and admiring enthusiasm. Clare had been to him, barring a few faults which were but as specks on an angel's wing, the first of created things; and it hurt him that she should thus turn from him, and expel him, as it were, from her sympathies. He stood uncertain at the window, not knowing whether he should make another attempt to win her back; but when he turned round he found, to his astonishment, that she was gone. How strange—how very strange it was. As she had abandoned him, he saw no advantage in waiting. He could go and ask for Jeanie, and see how things were going on, at least, if he was not required here. He gave Wilkins orders about the carriage with a sigh. "My sister proposes to drive," he said; and as he said it he looked out upon the lovely summer Sunday morning, and the wonder of it struck him more than ever. She had liked to walk with him down the leafy avenue, under the protecting shadows, when he came home first, and now she changed her habits to avoid him. What could it mean? Could this, too, be Arthur Arden's fault?

Thus it was that Edgar left the house so early, ill at ease. His sister thought that probably the effect of her constraint and withdrawal of sympathy would be that, tracing her changed demeanour to its right cause, he would hasten to read the packet she had given him. But Edgar never thought of the packet. It did not occur to him that a parcel of old letters could have anything to do with this most present and painful estrangement. While he went out, poor fellow, with his heart full of pain, Clare looked at him from the window with anger and astonishment. What did he care? Perhaps he had known it all along—perhaps he was a conscious– But no, no. Not till the last moment—not till evidence was before her which she could not resist—would she believe that. So the carriage came round, and she was driven to church in solitary state—sometimes excusing, sometimes condemning herself. It was a thing which happened so rarely that the village folks were in a state of commotion. Miss Arden was ill, they thought—nothing else could explain it; and so thought the kind old Rector and even Dr. Somers, who knew, or thought he knew, better than any of the others. As for Arthur Arden, who had gone to church with the hope of being invited by Edgar to accompany him home, he was in despair.

Edgar, for his part, walked down very gloomily through the village to ask for Jeanie, and had his news confirmed that she had spent a tolerably good night. “But in a dead faint all the time,” said Mrs. Hesketh, who had taken the place of nurse. “She breathes, poor dear, and her heart it do beat. But she don’t know none of us, nor open her eyes. It’s awful to see one as is living, and yet dead. T’ou’d dame, she never leaves her, not since she was a-talking to you, sir, last night.”

“Could I see her now?” said Edgar; but Mrs. Hesketh shook her head; and he could not tell why he wanted to see her, except as some relief to the painful dulness which had come over him. The next best thing he could do seemed to be to walk to the Red House, and ask after Alice Pimpernel. There he found no lack of response. Mr. Pimpernel himself came out, and so did Mrs. Pimpernel, with profuse and eager thanks. “If it had not been for you Mr. Arden, my child might have perished,” said the mother. “No, no, not so bad as that,” Edgar could not but say with surprise. “And the person who was most to blame never even gave himself the trouble to inquire till all was over,” the lady added with a look of rage. They wanted to detain him, to give him breakfast, to secure his company for Mr. Pimpernel, who was going to drive to church with the younger children. But Edgar did not desire to join this procession, and suffer himself to be paraded as his cousin’s successor. Somehow the village and everything in it seemed to have changed its aspect. He thought the people looked coldly at him —he felt annoyed and discouraged, he could not tell why. It seemed to him as if the Thornleighs would not come, or coming, would hear bad accounts of him, and that he would be abandoned by all his friends. And he did not know why, that was the worst of it; there seemed no reason. He was just the same as he had been when Clare received him as her dearest brother. What had happened since to change her mind towards him he was totally unable to tell. The *sourd* and obscure atmosphere of family discord was quite novel to Edgar. For most of his existence he had known nothing about family life; and then it had seemed to him so warm, so sweet, so bright. The domestic life, the warm sense of kindred about him had been his chief attraction to Gussy. His heart was so full, he wanted sisters and brothers and quantities of kinsfolk. And now the discovery that those good things could bring pain as well as pleasure confused him utterly. Clare! his only sister, the sole creature who belonged to him, whom nature gave him to love, to think that without a cause she should be estranged from him! When he fairly contemplated the idea, he gave himself, as it were spiritually, a shake, and smiled. “It takes two to make a quarrel,” he said to himself, and resolved that it was impossible, and could not last another hour.

CHAPTER V

Mr. Fielding preached one of his gentle little sermons upon love to your neighbour on that especial morning. The Doctor had been quiet, and had not bothered the Rector for some time back. There had been a good deal of sickness at the other end of the parish, and his hands had been full. It was a sermon which the Arden folks had heard a good many times before; but there are some things which, like wine, improve in flavour the longer that they are kept. Mr. Fielding produced it about once in five years, and preached it with little illustrations added on, drawn from his own gentle experience. And each time it was better than the last. The good people did not remember it, having listened always with a certain amount of distraction and slumberousness; but Dr. Somers did, and had noted in his pocket-book the times he had heard it. "Very good, with that story about John Styles in the appendix," was one note; and four or five years later it occurred again thus—"Little sketch of last row with me put in as an illustration—John Styles much softened; always very good." Next time it was —"John Styles disappeared altogether—quarrel with me going out—old Simon in the foreground; better than ever." The Arden folks were not alert enough in their minds to discern this; but the gentle discourse did them good all the same.

And there in front of him, listening to him, in the Arden pew, were three who needed Mr. Fielding's sermon. First, Clare, pale with that wrath and distrust which takes all happiness out of a woman's face, and almost all beauty. Then, sitting next to her, with a great gap between, now and then looking wistfully at her, now casting a hasty glance to his other side—anxious, suspicious, watchful —Arthur Arden, at the very lowest ebb, as he thought, of his fortunes. He had been as good as turned out of the Red House. He had no invitation nearer than the end of August. Clare had passed him at the church door with a bow that chilled him. Edgar, coming in late, had taken scarcely any notice of him. Nothing could appear less hopeful than his plan of getting himself invited once more to Arden, covering the Pimpernels with confusion, and showing publicly his superiority over them. Alas! he would not look superior, he could not be happy in the Arden Arms. Accordingly he sat, anxious about his cousins, hating all the world besides. Could he have crushed Mrs. Pimpernel by a sudden blow he would have done it. Could he have swept Jeanie out of his way he would have done it. Even underneath his anxiety for their favour, a bitter germ of envy and indignation was springing up in his heart towards his kinsfolk, Edgar and Clare.

And next to him sat Edgar, whose heart was heavy with that sense of discord—the first he had ever known. He had not been the sort of man with whom people quarrel. If any of his former comrades had been out of temper with him, it had been but for a moment—and he had no other relation to quarrel with. The sense of being at variance with his sister hung over him like a cloud. Edgar was the only one to whom the Rector's gentle sermon did any good. He was guiltless in his quarrel, and therefore he had no *amour-propre* concerned, no necessity laid upon him to justify himself. He was quite ready to say that he was wrong if that would please any one; yes, no doubt he had been wrong; most people were wrong; he was ready to confess anything. And though he was not a very close listener generally to Mr. Fielding's sermons, he took in this one into his heart. And the summer air, too, stole into his heart; and the faint fragrance of things outside that breathed in through the open door, and even the faint mouldy flavour of age and damp which was within. The little village church, when he looked round it, filled him with a strange emotion. What was it to others? What was it to himself? A little break in life—a pause bidding the sleepy peasant rest in the quiet, dropping warm langour on the eyelids of the children, giving to the old a slumberous pensiveness. He saw them softly striving to keep themselves awake—sometimes yielding to the drowsy influence—sometimes open-eyed, listening or not listening—silent between life and death. Such sweet, full, abounding life outside; hum of insects, flutter of leaves, soft, all-pervading fragrance of summer roses. And within, the monuments on the wall glimmering white; the white head in the pulpit; the shadowy, quiet, restful

place where grandsires had dozed and dreamed before. What an Elysium it was to some of those weary, hardworking old bodies! Edgar looked out upon them from the stage-box in which he sat with a thrill of tender kindness. To himself it might have been a mental and spiritual rest before the agitations of the next week. But something had disturbed that and made it impossible. Something! That meant Clare.

When they all left the church Arthur Arden made a bold stroke. “I will walk up with you to the Hall if you will let me,” he said. Clare was within hearing, and she could not restrain a slight start and tremor, which he saw. Was she afraid of him? Did she wish him to come or to stay away? But Clare never turned round or gave the slightest indication of her feelings. She walked out steadily, saying a word here and there to the village people who stood by as she passed to the carriage, which was waiting for her at the gate.

“I am going to see Miss Somers,” said Edgar, “and Clare is driving—but if you choose to wait–”

It was not a very warm invitation, but Arden accepted it. He wished the Pimpernels to see him with his cousin. This much of feeling remained in him. He would have been mortified had he supposed that they knew he was only at the Arden Arms. He would go to the Doctor’s house with Edgar, and declared himself quite ready to wait. “I don’t think Miss Somers likes me, or I should go with you,” he said, and then he went boldly up to Mr. Pimpernel and asked for his daughter. “I am sorry I had to leave so abruptly,” he said, “but I could not help myself,” and he gave his shoulders a shrug, and looked compassionately with a half smile at the master of the Red House.

“Yes,” said Mr. Pimpernel, accepting the tacit criticism with a certain cleverness. “Mrs. Pimpernel expresses herself strongly sometimes. Alice is better. Oh, yes! It was an affair of scratches only—though for a time I was in great fear.”

“I never was so afraid in my life,” said Arthur, and he shuddered at the thought, which his companion thought a piece of acting, though it was perfectly genuine and true.

“You did not show it much,” he said, shrugging his shoulders in his turn, “at least so far as we were concerned. But, however, that is your affair.” And with a nod which was not very civil he called his flock round him, and drove away. Arthur followed Edgar to the Doctor’s open door. He went into the Doctor’s sacred study, and took refuge there. Dr. Somers did not like him he was aware; but still he did not hesitate to put himself into the Doctor’s easy chair. Why didn’t people like him? It was confounded bad taste on their part!

In the meantime Edgar had gone up stairs, where Miss Somers awaited him anxiously. “Oh, my dear Edgar,” she said, “what a sad, sad– Do you think she will never get better? My brother always says to me– but then, you know, this isn’t asking about nothing—it’s asking about Jeanie. And Alice, whose fault it was– Oh Edgar, isn’t it just the way of the world? The innocent little thing, you know —and then the one that was really to blame escaping—it is just the way of the world.”

“Then, it is a very disagreeable way,” said Edgar. “I wish poor little Jeanie could have escaped, though I don’t wish any harm to Miss Pimpernel.”

“No, my dear,” said Miss Somers; “fancy my calling you ‘my dear,’ as if you were my own sister! Do you know I begin now to forget which is a gentleman and which a lady—me that was always brought up– But what is the good of being so very particular?—when you consider, at my time of life. Though some people think that makes no difference. Oh, no, you must never wish her any harm; but a little foolish, flighty—with nothing in her head but croquet you know, and– Young Mr. Denbigh has so fallen off. He used to come and talk quite like– And then he would tell my brother what he should do. My brother does not like advice, Edgar. Doctors never do. They are so used, you know– And then about these German baths and everything. He used to tell my brother– and he was not nice about it. Sometimes he is not very nice. He has a good heart, and all that; but doctors, you know, as a rule, never do– And then your cousin—do you think he meant anything?– I once thought it was Clare; but then these people are rich, and when a man like that is poor–”

"I don't know what he meant," said Edgar; "but I am sure he can't mean anything now, for he has left the Pimpernels."

"And I suppose he is going to you?" said Miss Somers, "for he can't stay in the Arden Arms; now, can he? He is sure to be so particular. When men have no money, my dear—and used to fine living and all that– And I don't believe anything is to be had better than a chop– Chops are greasy in such places– And then Arthur Arden is used to things so– But my dear, I think not, if I were you—on account of Clare. I do think not, Edgar, if you were to take my advice."

"But I fear I can't help myself," said Edgar, with a shadow passing over his face–

Miss Somers shook her head; but fortunately not even the gratification of giving advice could keep her long to one subject. "Well—of course Clare is like other girls, she is sure to marry somebody," she said—"and marriage is a great risk Edgar. You shouldn't laugh. Marriage is not a thing to make you laugh. I never could make up my mind. It is so very serious a thing, my dear. Suppose afterwards you were to see some one else? or suppose– I never could run the risk—though of course it can't be so bad for a gentleman– But, Edgar, when you are going to be married—vows are nothing—I wouldn't make any vow—but,—it is this, Edgar—it is wrong to have secrets from your wife. I have known such trouble in my day. When a man was poor, you know—and she would go on, poor thing, and never find out—and then all at once– Oh, my dear, don't you do that—tell her everything—that is always my—and then she knows exactly what she can do–"

"But I am not going to be married," said Edgar with a smile, which did not pass away as common smiles do, but melted over all his face.

"I hope not," said Miss Somers promptly, "oh, I hope not—after all this about the Pimpernels —and– But that was your cousin, not you. Oh, no, I hope not. What would Clare do? If Clare were married first, then perhaps– But it would be so strange; Mrs. Arden—Edgar, fancy! In my state of health, you know, I couldn't go to call on her, my dear. She wouldn't expect—but then sometimes young ladies are very– And perhaps she won't know me nor how helpless– I hope she'll be very nice, I am sure—and—pretty, and– Some people think it doesn't matter—about beauty, you know, and that– It's a long, long time since I took any interest in such things—but when I was a young girl, it used to be said– Now I know what you are thinking in yourself—how vain and all that—but it is not vanity, my dear. You like to look nice, you know, and you like to please people, and you like—of course, you like to look nice. When I was young there were people that used to say—the little one—they always called me the little one—or little Letty, or something– I suppose because they were fond of me. Edgar, everybody is fond of you when you are young."

"And when you are old too," said Edgar; "everybody has been fond of you all your life, I am sure—and will be when you are a hundred—of course you know that."

"Ah, my dear," said Miss Somers, shaking her head. "Ah my dear!"—and two soft little tears came into the corners of her eyes—"when you are old– Yes. I know people are so kind—they pity you—and then every one tries; but when you were young, oh, it was *so*—– There was no trying then. People thought there was nobody like– and then such quantities of things were to happen– But sometimes they never happen. It was my own fault, of course. There was Mr. Templeton and Captain Ormond, and—what is the good of going over–? That is long past, my dear, long past–"

And Miss Somers put her hands up softly to her eyes. She had a sort of theoretical regret for the opportunity lost, and yet, at the same time, a theoretical satisfaction that she had not tempted her fate—a satisfaction which was entirely theoretical; for did she not dream of her children who might have been, and of one who called Mamma? But Miss Somers was incapable of mentioning such a thing to Edgar, who was a "gentleman." To have betrayed herself would have been impossible. Arthur Arden was below waiting in the Doctor's study, and he came out as Edgar came down and joined him. He had not been idle in this moment of waiting. Something told him that this was a great crisis, a moment not to be neglected; and he had been arranging his plan of operations. Only Edgar, for this

once thoughtless and unwary, thought of no crisis, until Tuesday came, when he should go to Thorne. He thought of nothing that was likely to change his happy state so long as he remained at home.

CHAPTER VI

"The fact is, I am a little put out by having to change my quarters so abruptly," said Arthur Arden. "I am going to Scotland in the beginning of September, but that is a long way off; and to go to one's lodgings in town now is dreary work. Besides, I said to the Pimpernels when they drove me out—they actually turned me out of the house—I told them I was coming here. It was the only way I could be even with them. If there is a thing they reverence in the world it is Arden; and if they knew I was here–"

"It does not entirely rest with me," said Edgar, with some embarrassment. "Arden, we had a good deal of discussion on various subjects before I went away."

"Yes; you went in order to turn me out," said Arthur meditatively. "By George, it's pleasant! I used to be a popular sort of fellow. People used to scheme for having me, instead of turning me out. Look here! Of course, when you showed yourself my enemy, it was a point of religion with me to pursue my own course, without regard to you; but now, equally of course, if you take me in to serve me, my action will be different. I should respect your prejudices, however they might run counter to my own."

"That means–?" said Edgar, and then stopped short, feeling that it was a matter which he could not discuss.

"It is best we should not enter into any explanations. Explanations are horrid bores. What I want is shelter for a few weeks, to be purchased by submission to your wishes on the points we both understand."

"For a few weeks!" said Edgar, with a little horror.

"Well, say for a single week. I must put my pride in my pocket, and beg, it appears. It will be a convenience to me, and it can't hurt you much. Of course, I shall be on my guard in respect to Clare."

"I prefer that my sister's name should not be mentioned between us," said Edgar, with instinctive repugnance. And then he remembered Mrs. Murray's strange appeal to him on behalf of his cousin. "You have all but as much right to be in Arden as I have," he said. "Of course, you must come. My sister is not prepared; she does not expect any one. Would it not be wiser to wait a little—till to-morrow—or even till to-night?"

"Pardon me," said Arthur; "but Miss Arden, I am sure, will make up her mind to the infliction better—if I am so very disagreeable—if she gets over the first shock without preparation. Is it that I am getting old, I wonder? I feel myself beginning to maunder. It used not to be so, you know. Indeed, there are places still—but never mind, hospitality that one is compelled to ask for is not often sweet."

It was on Edgar's lips to say that it need not be accepted, but he refrained, compassionate of his penniless kinsman. Why should the one be penniless and the other have all? There was an absence of natural justice in the arrangement that struck Edgar whenever his mind was directed to it; and he remembered now what had been his intention when his cousin first came to the Hall. "Arden," he said, "I don't think, if I were you, I would be content to ask for hospitality, as you say; but it is not my place to preach. You are the heir of Arden, and Arden owes you something. I think it is my duty to offer, and yours to accept, something more than hospitality. I will send for Mr. Fazakerly to-morrow. I will not talk of dividing the inheritance, because that is a thing only to be done between brothers; but, as you may become the Squire any day by my death–"

"I would sell my chance for five pounds," said Arthur, giving his kinsman a hasty look all over. "I shall be dead and buried years before you—more's the pity. Don't think that I can cheat myself with any such hope."

This was intended for a compliment, though it was almost a brutal one; but its very coarseness made it more flattering—or so at least the speaker thought.

"Anyhow, you have a right to a provision," Edgar continued hastily, with a sudden flush of disgust.

"I am agreeable," said Arthur, with a yawn. "Nobody can be less unwilling to receive a provision than I am. Let us have Fazakerly by all means. Of course, I know you are rolling in money; but Old Arden to Clare and a provision to me will make a difference. If you were to marry, for instance, you would not find it so easy to make your settlements. You are a very kind-hearted fellow, but you must mind what you are about."

"Yes," said Edgar, "you are quite right. What is to be done must be done at once."

"Strike while the iron is hot," said Arthur, languidly. He did not care about it, for he did not believe in it. A few weeks at Arden in the capacity of a visitor was much more to him than a problematical allowance. Fazakerly would resist it, of course. It would be but a pittance, even if Edgar was allowed to have his way. The chance of being Clare's companion, and regaining his power over her, and becoming lawful master through her of Old Arden, was far more charming to his imagination. Therefore, though he was greedy of money, as a poor man with expensive tastes always is, in this case he was as honestly indifferent as the most disinterested could have been. Thus they strolled up the avenue, where the carriage wheels were still fresh which had carried Clare; and a certain relief stole over her brother's mind that they would be three, not two, for the rest of the day. Strange, most strange that it should be so far a relief to him not to be alone with Clare.

Clare received them with a seriousness and reserve, under which she tried to conceal her excitement. Her cousin had deceived her, preferred a cottage girl to her, insulted her in the most sensitive point, and yet her heart leapt into her throat when she saw him coming. She had foreseen he would come. When he came into church, looking at her so wistfully, when he followed her out, asking to walk with Edgar, it became very evident to her that he was not going to relinquish the struggle without one other attempt to win her favour. It was a vain hope, she thought to herself; nothing could reverse her decision, or make her forget his sins against her; but still the very fact that he meant to try, moved, unconsciously, her heart—or was it his presence, the sight of him, the sound of his voice, the wistfulness in his eyes? Clare had driven home with her heart beating, and a double tide of excitement in all her veins. And then Arthur, too, was bound up in the whole matter. He was the first person concerned, after Edgar and herself; they would be three together in the house, between whom this most strange drama was about to be played out. She waited their coming with the most breathless expectation. And they came slowly up the avenue, calm as the day, indifferent as strangers who had never seen each other; pausing sometimes to talk of the trees; examining that elm which had a great branch blown off; one of them cutting at the weeds with his cane as undisturbed as if they were—as they thought—walking quietly home to luncheon, instead of coming to their fate.

"Arden is going to stay with us a little, Clare, if you can take him in," Edgar said, with that voluble candour which a man always exhibits when he is about to do something which will be disagreeable to the mistress of his house—be she mother, sister, or wife. "He has no engagements for the moment, and neither have we. It is a transition time—too late for town, too early for the country—so he naturally turned his eyes this way."

"That is a flattering account to give of it," said Arthur, for Clare only bowed in reply. "The fact is, Miss Arden, I was turned out by my late hostess. May I tell you the story? I think it is rather funny." And, though Clare's response was of the coldest, he told it to her, giving a clever sketch of the Pimpernels. He was very brilliant about their worship of Arden, and how their hospitality to himself was solely on account of his name. "But I have not a word to say against them. My own object was simply self-interest," he said. He was talking two languages, as it were, at the same moment—one which Edgar could understand, and one which was addressed to Clare.

And there could be no doubt that his presence made the day pass more easily to the other two—one of whom was so excited, and the other so exceedingly calm. They strolled about the park in the afternoon, and got through its weary hours somehow. They dined—Clare in her fever eating nothing;

a fact, however, which neither of her companions perceived. They took their meal both with the most perfect self-possession, hurrying over nothing, and giving it that importance which always belongs to a Sunday dinner. Dinner on other days is but a meal, but on Sunday it is the business of the day; and as such the two cousins took it, doing full justice to its importance, while the tide rose higher and higher in Clare's veins. When she left them to their wine, she went to her own room, and walked about and about it like a caged lioness. It was not Clare's way, who was above all demonstration of the kind; but now she could not restrain herself. She clenched her two hands together, and swept about the room, and moaned to herself in her impatience. "Oh, will it never be night? Will they never have done talking? Can one go on and go on and bear it?" she cried to herself in the silence. But after all she had to put on her chains again, and bathe her flushed face, and go down to the drawing-room. How like a wild creature she felt, straining and chafing at her fetters! She sat down and poured out tea for them, with her hand trembling, her head burning, her feet as cold as ice, her head as hot as fire. She said to herself it was unlady-like, unwomanly, unlike her, to be so wild and self-indulgent, but she had no power to control herself. All this time, however, the two men made no very particular remark. Edgar, who thought she was still angry, only grieved and wondered. Arthur knew that she was dissatisfied with himself, and was excited but not surprised. He gave her now and then pathetic looks. He wove in subtle phrases of self-vindication—a hundred little allusions, which were nothing to Edgar but full of significance to her—into all he said. But he could not have believed, what was the case, that Clare was far past hearing them—that she did not take up the drift of his observations at all—that she hardly understood what was being said, her whole soul being one whirl of excitement, expectation, awful heartrending fear and hope. It was Edgar at last who perceived that her strength was getting worn out. He noticed that she did not hear what was said—that her face usually so expressive, was getting set in its extremity of emotion. Was it emotion, was it mania? Whatever it was, it had passed all ordinary bounds of endurance. He rose hastily when he perceived this, and going up to his sister laid his hand softly on her shoulder. She started and shivered as if his hand had been ice, and looked up at him with two dilated, unfathomable eyes. If he had been going to kill her she could not have been more tragically still—more aghast with passion and horror. A profound compassion and pity took possession of him. "Clare," he said, bending over her as if she were deaf, and putting his lips close to her ear, "Clare, you are over-exhausted. Go to bed. Let me take you up stairs—and if that will be a comfort to you, dear, I will go and read them now."

"Yes," she said, articulating with difficulty—"Yes." He had to take her hand to help her to rise; but when he stooped and kissed her forehead Clare shivered again. She passed Arthur without noticing him, then returned and with formal courtesy bade him good-night; and so disappeared with her candle in her hand, throwing a faint upward ray upon her white woe-begone face. She was dressed in white, with black ribbons and ornaments, and her utter pallor seemed to bring out the darkness of her hair and darken the blue in her eyes, till everything about her seemed black and white. Arthur Arden had risen too and stood wondering, watching her as she went away. "What is the matter?" he said abruptly to Edgar, who was no better informed than himself.

"I don't know. She must be ill. She is unhappy about something," said Edgar. For the first time the bundle of old letters acquired importance in his eyes. "I want to look at something she has given me," he added simply. "You will not think me rude when you see how much concerned my sister is? You know your room and all that. I must go and satisfy Clare."

"What has she given you?" asked Arthur, with a certain precipitation. Edgar was not disposed to answer any further questions, and this was one which his cousin had no right to ask.

"I must go now," he said. "Good-night. I trust you will be comfortable. In short, I trust we shall all be more comfortable to-morrow. Clare's face makes me anxious to-night."

And then Arthur found himself master of the great drawing-room, with all its silent space and breadth. What did they mean? Could it be that Clare had found this something for which he had sought, and instead of giving it to himself had given it to her brother, the person most concerned,

who would, of course, destroy it and cut off Arthur's hopes for ever. The very thought set the blood boiling in his veins. He paced about as Clare had done in her room, and could only calm himself by means of a cigar which he went out to the terrace to smoke. There his eyes were attracted to Clare's window and to another not far off in which lights were burning. That must be Edgar's, he concluded; and there in the seclusion of his chamber, not in any place more accessible, was he studying the something Clare had given him? Something! What could it be?

CHAPTER VII

More than one strange incident happened at Arden that soft July night. Mr. Fielding was seated in his library in the evening, after all the Sunday work was over. He did not work very hard either on Sundays or on any other occasions—the good, gentle old man. But yet he liked to sit, as he had been wont to do in his youth when he had really exerted himself, on those tranquil Sunday nights. His curate had dined with him, but was gone, knowing the Rector's habit; and Mr. Fielding was seated in the twilight, with both his windows open, sipping a glass of wine tenderly, as if he loved it, and musing in the stillness. The lamp was never lighted on Sunday evenings till it was time for prayers. Some devout people in the parish were of opinion that at such moments the Rector was asking a blessing upon his labours, and "interceding" with God for his people—and so, no doubt, he was. But yet other thoughts were in his mind. Long, long ago, when Mr. Fielding had been young, and had a young wife by his side, this had been their sacred hour, when they would sit side by side and talk to each other of all that was in their hearts. It was "Milly's hour," the time when she had told him all the little troubles that beset a girl-wife in the beginning of her career; and he had laughed at her, and been sorry for her, and comforted her as young husbands can. It was Milly's hour still, though Milly had gone out of all the cares of life and housekeeping for thirty years. How the old man remembered those little cares—how he would go over them with a soft smile on his lip, and—no, not a tear—a glistening of the eye, which was not weeping. How frightened she had been for big Susan, the cook; how bravely she had struggled about the cooking of the cutlets, to have them as her husband liked them—not as Susan pleased! And then all those speculations as to whether Lady Augusta would call, and about Letty Somers, and her foolish, little kind-hearted ways. The old man remembered every one of those small troubles. How small they were, how dear, how sacred—Milly's troubles. Thank Heaven, she had never found out that the world held pangs more bitter. The first real sorrow she had ever had was to die—and was that a sorrow? to leave him; and had she left him? This was the tender enjoyment, the little private, sad delight of the Rector's Sunday nights; and he did not like to be disturbed.

Therefore, it was clear the business must be of importance which was brought to him at that hour. "Your reverence won't think as it's of my own will I'm coming disturbing of you," said Mrs. Solmes, the housekeeper; "but there's one at the door as will take no denial. She says she aint got but a moment, and daren't stay for fear her child would wake. She's been in a dead faint from yesterday at six till now. The t'oud woman as lives at oud Sarah's, your reverence; the Scotchy, as they calls her—her as had her granddaughter killed last night."

"God bless me!" said Mr. Fielding, confused by this complication. He knew Jeanie had not been killed; but how was he to make his way in this twilight moment through such a maze of statements? "Killed!" he said to himself. It was so violent a word to fall into that sacred dimness and sadness—sadness which was more dear to him than any joy. "Let her come in," he added, with a sigh. "Lights? no! I don't think we want lights. I can see you, Mrs. Solmes, and I can see to talk without lights."

"As you please, sir," said the housekeeper; "but them as is strangers, and don't know your habits, might think it was queer. And then to think how a thing gets all over the village in no time. But, to be sure, sir, it's as you please."

"Then show Mrs. Murray in," said Mr. Fielding. He had never departed from his good opinion of her, notwithstanding that she was a Calvinist, and looked disapproval of his sermons; but that she should come away from her child's sick-bed, that was extraordinary indeed.

And then in the dark, much to the scandal of Mrs. Solmes, Mrs. Murray came in. Even the Rector himself found it embarrassing to see only the tall, dark figure beside him, without being able to trace (so short-sighted as he was, too) the changes of her face. "Sit down," he said, "sit down," and bustled a little to get her a chair—not the one near him, in which, had she been alive, his Milly would have sat—(and oh! to think Milly, had she lived, would have been older than Mrs. Murray!)

—but another at a little distance. “How is your child?” he asked. “I meant to have gone to see her to-night, but they told me she was insensible still.”

“And so she is,” said the grandmother, “and I wouldna have left her to come here but for something that’s like life and death. You’re a good man. I canna but believe you’re a real good man, though you are no what I call sound on all points. I want you to give me your advice. It’s a case of a penitent woman that has done wrong, and suffered for it. Sore she has suffered in her bairns and her life, and worse in her heart. It’s a case of conscience; and oh! sir, your best advice–”

“I will give you the best advice I can, you may be sure,” said Mr. Fielding, moved by the pleading voice that reached him out of the darkness. “But you must tell me more clearly. What has she done? I will not ask who she is, for that does not matter. But what has she done; and has she, or can she, make amends? Is it a sin against her neighbour or against God?”

“Baith, baith,” said the old woman. “Oh, Mr. Fielding, you’re an innocent, virtuous man. I ken it by your face. This woman has been airt and pairt in a great wrong—an awfu’ wrong; you never heard of the like. Partly she knew what she was doing, and partly she did not. There are some more guilty than her that have gone to their account; and there’s none to be shamed but the innocent, that knew no guile, and think no evil. What is she to do? If it was but to punish *her*, she’s free to give her body to be burned or torn asunder: oh, and thankful, thankful! Nothing you could do, but she would take and rejoice. But she canna move without hurting the innocent. She canna right them that’s wronged without crushing the innocent. Oh, tell me, you that are a minister, and an old man, and have preached God’s way! Many and many a time He suffers wrong, and never says a word. It’s done now, and canna be undone. Am I to bear my burden and keep silent till my heart bursts, or must I destroy, and cast down, and speak!”

The woman spoke with a passion and vehemence which bewildered the gentle Rector. Her voice came through the dim and pensive twilight, thrilling with life and force and vigour. In that atmosphere, at that hour, any whisper of penitence should have been low and soft as a sigh. It should have been accompanied by noiseless weeping, by the tender humility which appeals to every Christian soul; but such was not the manner of this strange confession. Not a tear was in the eye of the penitent. Mr. Fielding felt, though he could not see, that her eyes, those eyes which had lost none of their brightness in growing old, were shining upon him in the darkness, and held him fast as did those of the Ancient Mariner. Suddenly, without any warning, he found himself brought into contact, not with the moderate contrition of ordinary sinners, but with tragic repentance and remorse. He could not answer for the first moment. It took away his breath.

“My dear, good woman,” he said, “you startle me. I do not understand you. Do you know what you are saying? I don’t think you can have done anything so very wrong. Hush, hush! compose yourself, and think what you are saying. When we examine it, perhaps we will find it was not so bad. People may do wrong, you know, and yet it need not be so very serious. Tell me what it was.”

“That is what I cannot do,” she said. “If I were to tell you, all would be told. If it has to be said, it shall be said to him first that will have the most to bear. Oh, have ye been so long in the world without knowing that a calm face often covers a heavy heart! Many a thing have I done for my ain and for others that cannot be blamed to me; but once I was to blame. I tell ye, I canna tell ye what it was. It was this—I did what was unjust and wrong. I schemed to injure a man—no, no me, for I did not know he was in existence, and who was to tell me?—but I did the wrong thing that made it possible for the man to be injured. Do you understand me now? And here I am in this awful strait, like Israel at the Red Sea. If I let things be, I am doing wrong, and keeping a man out of his own; if I try to make amends, I am bringing destruction on the innocent. Which, oh, which, tell me, am I to do?”

She had raised her voice till it sounded like a cry, and yet it was not loud. Mrs. Solmes in the kitchen heard nothing, but to Mr. Fielding it sounded like a great wail and moaning that went to his heart. And the silence closed over her voice as the water closes over a pebble, making faint circles and waves of echo, not of the sound, but of the meaning of the sound. He could not speak, with

those thrills of feeling, like the wash after a boat, rolling over him. He did not understand what she meant; her great and violent pain bewildered the gentle old man. The only thing he could take hold of was her last words. That, he reflected, was always right—always the best thing to advise. He waited until the silence and quietness settled down again, and then he said, his soft old voice wavering with emotion, “Make amends!”

“Is that what you say to me?” she said, lifting up her hands. He could see the vehement movement in the gloom.

“Make amends. What other words could a servant of God say?”

He thought she fell when he spoke, and sprang to his feet with deep anxiety. She had dropped down on her knees, and had bent her head, and was covering her face with her hands. “Are you ill?” he said. “God bless us all, she has fainted! what am I to do?”

“No; the like of me never faints,” she answered; and then he perceived that she retained her upright position. Her voice was choked, and sounded like the voice of despair, and she did not take her hands from her face. “Oh, if I could lie like Jeanie,” she went on, “quietly, like the dead, with nae heart to feel nor voice to speak. My bit little lily flower! would she have been broken like that—faded like that, if I had done what was right? But, O Lord my God, my bonnie lad! what is to become of him?”

“Mrs. Murray! Mrs. Murray!” said Mr. Fielding, “let me put you on that sofa. Let me get you some wine. Compose yourself. My poor woman, my good woman! All this has been too much for you. Are you sure it is not a delusion you have got into your mind?”

The strange penitent took no notice of him as he stood thus beside her. Her mind was occupied otherwise. “How am I to make amends?” she was murmuring; “how am I to do it? Harm the innocent, crush down the innocent!—that’s all I can do. It will relieve my mind, but it will throw nothing but bitterness into theirs. The prophet he threw a sweetening herb into the bitter waters, but it would be gall and wormwood I would throw. The wrong’s done, and it canna be undone. It would but be putting off my burden on them—giving them my pain to bear; and it is me, and no them, that is worthy of the pain.”

“Mrs. Murray,” said the Rector, by this time beginning to feel alarmed; for how could he tell that it was not a madwoman he had beside him in the dark? “you must try and compose yourself. I think things cannot be so bad as you say. Perhaps you are tormenting yourself for nothing. My dear good woman, sit down and rest, and compose yourself, while I ring the bell for the lamp.”

Then she rose up slowly in the darkness between him and the window, and took her hands from her face. She did not raise her head, but she put out her hand and caught his arm with a vigour which made Mr. Fielding tremble. “I was thinking if I had anything else to say,” she said, in a low desponding tone, “but there’s nothing more. I cannot think but of one thing. If you’ve nothing more to say to me, I’ll go away. I’ll slip away in the dark, as I came, and nobody will be the wiser. Mr. Fielding, you’re a real good man, and that was your best advice?”

“It’s my advice to everybody, in ordinary circumstances,” said Mr. Fielding. “If you have done wrong, make amends—the one thing necessitates the other. If you have done wrong, make amends. But, Mrs. Murray, wait till the lamp comes and a glass of wine. You are not fit to go back to your nursing without something to sustain you. Sit down again.”

“I am fit for a great deal more than that,” she said; “but no, no, nae lights. I’ll go my ways back. I’ll slip out in the dark, as I slipped in. I’m like the owls—I’m dazzled by the shinin’ light. That’s new to me, that always liked the light; but, sir, I thank ye for your goodness. I must slip away now.”

“You are not fit to walk in this state,” he said, following her anxiously to the door; “take my arm; let me get out the pony—I will send you comfortably home.”

Mrs. Murray shook her head. She declined the offer of the old man’s arm. “I have mair strength than you think,” she said; “and Jeanie must never know that I have been here. Oh, I’m strengthened

with what you said. Oh, I'm the better for having opened my heart; but I'll slip out, as long as there are none to see."

And, while the gentle Rector stood and wondered, she went out by the open window, as erect and vigorous as if no emotion could touch her. Swiftly she passed into the darkness, carrying with her her secret. What was it? Mr. Fielding sunk into his chair with a sigh. Never before had any interruption like this come into Milly's hour.

CHAPTER VIII

Edgar went to his own room, with a certain oppression on his mind, to seek those papers which surely his sister gave the most exaggerated importance to. It seemed ridiculous to go upstairs at that hour; he took them out of his dressing-case, into which he had locked them, and went down again to the library. It was true that he would fain have occupied his evening in some other way. He would have preferred even to talk to Arthur Arden, though he did not love him. He would have preferred to read, or to walk out and enjoy the freshness of the summer night. And, much better than any of these, he would have preferred to have Clare's own company, to talk to her about the many matters he had laid up in his mind, and, perhaps, if opportunity served, to enter upon the subject of Gussy. But this evidently was not how it was to be. He must go and read over dull papers, to please his sister. Well, that was not so very difficult a business, after all. It was Clare's interest in them that was so strange. This was what he could not understand. As he settled himself to his task, a great many thoughts came into his mind in respect to his sister. She had been brought up (he supposed) differently from other girls. He could not fancy the Thornleighs, any of them, taking such interest in a parcel of old papers. They must be about Arden somehow, he concluded, some traditionary records of the family, something that affected their honour and glory. Was this what she cared for most in the world—not her brother or any future love, but Arden, only Arden, her race. And then he reflected how odd it was that two of Clare's lovers had made him their confidant—Arthur, a man whom any brother would discourage; and Lord Newmarch, who was an excellent match. The one was so objectionable, the other so irreproachable, that Edgar was amused by the contrast. What could they expect him to do? The one had a right to look for his support, the other every reason to fear his opposition; but what did Clare say, what did she think of either?—even Arthur Arden's presence was nothing to her, compared with these old letters. He seated himself, without knowing it, at his father's place, in his father's chair. No association sanctified the spot to him. Once or twice, indeed, he had been called there into the Squire's dreadful presence, but there was nothing in these interviews to make the room reverent or sacred. He put himself simply in the most convenient place, lighted the candles on the table, and sat down to his work. Clare was upstairs—he thought he heard her soft tread overhead. Yes, she was different from other girls; and he wondered in himself what kind of a life hers would be. Would she—after all, that was the first question—remain in Arden when Gussy came as its mistress?—if Gussy ever came. Would she find it possible to bend her spirit to that? Would she marry, impatient of this first contradiction of her supremacy?—and which would she choose if she married? All these questions passed through Edgar's mind, gravely at first, lightly afterwards, as the immediate impression of her seriousness died away. Then he looked at all the things on the table—his father's seal, the paper in the blotting-book, with its crest and motto. How well he remembered the few curt letters he had received on that paper, bidding him "come home on Friday next to spend a week or a fortnight," as the case might be—very curt and unyielding they had been, with no softening use of his name, no "dear Edgar," or "dear boy," but only the command, whatever it was. It was not wonderful that he had little reverence, little admiration, for his father's memory. His face grew sterner and paler as he turned over those relics of the dead man, which moved Clare only to tenderest memories. Twenty years of neglect, of injury, of unkindness came before him, all culminating in that one look of intense hatred which he remembered so well—the look which made it apparent to him that his father—his father!—would have been glad had he died.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.