

SQUIRE ARDEN.

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“SALEM CHAPEL,” “THE MINISTER’S WIFE,”

ETC., ETC.

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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 curtsy, 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 phaeton 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-temperdest 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 injunc-

tions 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 Pimpurnels 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 Pimpurnels 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 Pimpurnels 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 operation. 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 inherit-

ance, 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 con-

trol 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.

Such thoughts had been banished from Edgar's breast for a long time. He had dismissed them by a vigorous effort of will when he entered upon his life at Arden; it was but those signs and tokens of the past that brought them back, and again he made an effort to begin his task, though with so little relish for it. If it was anything affecting the Squire, Edgar felt he was not able to approach it calmly. A certain impatience, a certain disgust, came into his mind at the thought. To please Clare—that was a different matter. He opened the enclosure slowly and with reluctance, and once more turned over in his hand the inner packet, still sealed up, which had the appearance of having been thrown into the fire, and hastily snatched out again. The parcel was singed and torn, and one of the seals had run into a great blotch of wax, obliterating all impression. As he held it in his hand he felt the

place where the envelope was torn across, and remembered dimly that his sister had attributed her interest in it to the words she had read through this tear. What were they? he wondered. He turned the packet round and laid it on the table, with the torn part uppermost. It was his father's handwriting that appeared below, a writing somewhat difficult to read. He studied it, read it, lifted it nearer to his eyes—asked himself, "What does it mean?"—then he held it up to the light and read it over once more. What did it mean? A certain blank seemed to take possession of all his faculties—he wondered vaguely—the powers of his mind seemed to forsake him all at once.

This is what was written, in uneven lines, under the torn envelope, which had driven Clare desperate, and made her brother stupid, in his inability to understand—

"I will take him from you, bring him up as my son, and make him my heir—as you say, for my own ends."

Edgar was stupefied. He sat and looked at it blankly over and over. Son!—heir! What was the meaning of the words? He did not for the moment ask any more. "What does the fool mean? What does the fool mean?" he said, over and over. It did not move him to open the cover to inquire

further. He only sat stupid, and looked at it. How long he might have continued to do so it is impossible to tell; but all at once, in the quiet house, there was a sound of something falling, and this roused him. What could it be? Could it be Clare who had fallen? Could it— He roused himself up, and went to the door and listened. He had wasted an hour or more in one way or other before he even looked at his packet, and now the house was at rest, and everything still. Had Clare known the moment at which he read those words— had she fainted in sympathy? His mind had grown altogether so confused that he could not make it out. He stood watching at the door for some minutes, and then, hearing nothing further, shut it carefully, and went back and sat down again. The candles were clear enough; the writing, though difficult, was distinct. "I will take him from you, bring him up as my son, make him my heir." "Perhaps there is something more about it inside," Edgar said to himself, with a faint smile. He spoke aloud, with a sense that he was speaking to somebody, and then started at the sound of his own voice, feeling as if some one else had spoken. And then he laughed. It made a diabolical sound in the silence. Was it he that laughed, or some devil?—there must be devils about—and what a

fool he must be to be so easily startled ; what a fool —what a fool !

Then he opened the envelope. His hands trembled a little ; he came to himself gradually, and became aware that this was no light business he was about. It was the laugh that had roused him, the laugh with which he himself or somebody else —could it be somebody else ?—had disturbed the silence. A quantity of letters were inside, some in his father's writing, some in another—a large, irregular, feminine hand. Instinctively he secured that one which had appeared through the tear in the cover, and read it word by word. It was one of the square letters written before envelopes were used, and bore on the yellow outside fold an address half-obliterated and some postmarks. He read it to the last word ; he made an effort to decipher the outside ; he investigated and noted the yellow date on the postmarks. He knew very well what he was doing now ; never had his brain been more collected, never had he been more clear-headed all his life. Twice over he read it, word by word, and then put it down by his side, and arranged the others according to their dates. There were alternate letters, each with its reply. Two minds—two souls—had met in those yellow bits of paper, and gone through a terrible struggle ; they were the

tempter and the tempted—the one advancing all his arguments, the other hesitating, doubting, refusing—hesitating again. Carefully, slowly, Edgar read every one. There was nothing fictitious about them. Clear and distinct as the daylight was the terrible story they involved—the story of which he himself, in his ignorance, was the hero—of which he was the victim. All alone in the darkness and stillness of the night there fell upon him this awful revelation—a thing he had never expected, never feared—a new thing, such as man never had heard of before.

The business he was about was too tremendous to allow time for any reflection. He did not reflect, he did not think, he only read and knew. He felt himself change as he read, felt the room swim, so that he had to hold by the table, felt new lights which he had never dreamt of spring up upon his life. Sometimes it seemed to him as if even his physical form was changing. He was looking at himself as in a magic mirror, for the first time seeing himself, understanding himself, beholding the mystery clear away, the reality stand out. How clear it grew! A chill arose about him, as of a man traversing a mine, poking through half-lighted dreary galleries, and finding always the blue circle of outlet, the light at the end. He went on and on,

never pausing nor drawing breath. He looked like a historical student seated there, regulating his documents with such exactness, reading every bit of paper only according to its date. Some of them were smoked and scorched, and took a great deal of trouble to make out. Some were crabbed in their handwriting and uncertain in spelling. At some words a faint momentary smile would come upon his lips. It was a historical investigation. No family papers ever had such interest, ever claimed such profound study. The daylight came in over the tops of the shutters; first a faint blueness, gradually widening and whitening into light. To see him sitting with candles blazing on each side of him, holding up his papers to them, and the quiet observant day flooding the room around him with light, and the ineffectual barred shutters vainly attempting to obscure it—oh, how strange it was! Edgar himself never perceived the change. He felt the chill of morning, but he had been cold before, and took no notice. How grave he was, how steady, how pale, in the flashing foolish light of the candles! As if that was needed! as if all was not open, clear, and legible, and patent to the light of day.

This was the scene which Clare looked in upon when she softly opened the door. She had not

even undressed. She had sat up in her room, thinking that he would perhaps call, perhaps come to her, perhaps laugh, and ask her what her fright had meant, and show her how innocent and foolish these words were which had alarmed her. And then she had dozed and slept with a shawl round her; and then, waking up in the early morning, had stolen out, and seeing her brother's room open, had been seized with sudden terror wilder than ever. Her heart beat so loudly that she felt as if it must wake the house. She stole downstairs like a ghost, in her white evening dress. She opened the door, and there he sat in the daylight with his candles, not hearing her, not seeing her, intent upon his work. Was not that enough? She gave a low cry, and with a start he roused himself and looked up, the letters still in his hand. There was a moment in which neither moved, but only looked at each other with a mutual question and reply that were beyond words. Then he rose. How pale he was—like a dead man, the blood gone out of his very lips; and yet could it be possible he smiled? It was a smile Clare never forgot. He got up from his chair, and placed another for her, and turned to her with that look full of tenderness and pathos, and a certain strange humour. "I don't know how to address you now," he said, the smile retiring into-

his eyes. "I know who you are, but not who I am. It was natural you should be anxious. If you sit down, I will tell you all I know."

She came to him with a sudden impulse, and caught his arm with her hands. "Oh, Edgar! oh, my brother Edgar!" she said, moaning, but gazing at him with a desperate question, which he knew he had already answered, in her eyes.

"No," he said, gently putting his hand upon hers. A sudden spasm crossed his face, and for the moment his voice was broken. "No—— Your friend, your servant; so long as you want me your protector still—but your brother no more."

CHAPTER IX.

ARTHUR ARDEN felt himself very much at a loss next morning, and could not make it out. The brother and sister had left him to his own devices the night before, and again he found himself alone when he came down to breakfast. The same round table was in the window—the same vase of roses stood in the middle—everything was arranged as usual. The only thing which was not as usual was that neither Edgar nor Clare were visible. In this old, orderly, well-regulated place, such a thing had been never seen before. Wilkins paused and made a little speech, half shocked, half apologetic, as he put a savoury dish under Arthur's nose. "Master's late, sir, through business; and Miss Arden, she's not well. I'm sure I'm very sorry, and all the house is sorry. The first morning like——"

"Never mind, Wilkins," said Arthur. "I dare say my cousin will join me presently. I have been late often enough in this house."

"But never the Squire, if you'll remember," said

Wilkins. "Master was always punctual like the clock. But young folks has new ways. Not as we've anything to complain of; but from time to time there's changes, Mr. Arthur, in folk's selves, and in the world."

"That is very true, Wilkins," said Arthur, with more urbanity than usual. He was not a man who encouraged servants to talk; but at present he was on his good behaviour—amiable to everybody. "I am very sorry to hear Miss Arden is ill. I hope it is not anything beyond a headache. I thought she looked very well last night."

"Yes, sir; she looked very well last night," said Wilkins, with a little emphasis; "but for a long time past we've all seen as there was something to do with Miss Clare."

Arthur made no answer. He felt that to enter into such a discussion with a servant would not do, though he would have been glad enough to discover what was supposed to be the matter with Clare. So he held his tongue and eat his breakfast; and Wilkins, after lingering about for some minutes wooing further inquiry, took himself gradually away to the sideboard. Arthur sat in the bow-window at the sunny end, enjoying the pretty, flower-decked table, with all its good things; while Wilkins glided about noiselessly in black clothes, as glossy as a popular

preacher's, and as spotless, deferentially silent and alert, ready to obey a whisper, the lifting of a finger. No doubt it was chiefly for his own ends, and for the delight of gossip that he was so ready to obey, for Wilkins generally had a will of his own. But the stillness, the solitude, the man's profound attention, rapt Arthur in a pleasant dream. If he had been master here instead of his cousin! If he had been Squire Arden instead of this boy, who was not like the Ardens, neither externally nor in mind. His brain grew a little dizzy for a moment. Was he so? Was the other but a dream? Should he go out presently and find that all the people about the estate came to him, cap in hand, and that Edgar was a shadow which had vanished away. He could not tell what vertigo seized him, so that he could entertain even for a moment so absurd a fancy. The next, he gave himself a slight shake and smiled, not without some bitterness. "I am the penniless one," he said to himself; "I may starve, while he has everything. If he likes to turn me out to-morrow, I shall have nowhere to go to." How strange it was! Arthur was, of course, a Tory of the deepest dye—he held the traditionary politics of his race, which equally, of course, Edgar did not hold; but at this moment it would be vain to deny that certain theories which were wildly revolutionary

crossed his mind. Why should one have so much and another nothing? why should one inherit name, and authority, and houses, and lands, and another be left without bread to eat? No democrat, no red republican could have felt the difference more violently than did Arthur Arden, as he sat that morning alone in the quiet Arden dining-room, eating his kinsman's bread.

After a while Edgar came in. He was singularly pale, and his manner had changed in a way which Arthur could not explain to himself. He perceived the change at the first glance. He said to himself (thinking, as was natural, of himself only), "He has come to some determination about me. He has got something to propose to me." Edgar looked like a man with some weighty business on hand. He had no time for his usual careless talk, his friendly, good-humoured notice of everything. He looked like a general who has a difficult position to occupy, or to get his troops safely out of a dangerous pass. His forehead, which had always been so free of care, was lined and clouded. His very voice had changed its tone. It was sharper, quicker, more decisive. He seemed to have made a sudden leap from a youth into a serious man.

"My sister, I am sorry, is not well," he said;

“and I was up very late. I think she will stay in her room all day,”

“I am very sorry,” said Arthur, “Wilkins has been telling me. He says you were kept late by business; and you look like it. You look as if you had all the cares of the nation on your head.”

“I suppose the cares of the nation sometimes sit more lightly than one’s own,” said Edgar, with a forced smile.

“My dear fellow!” said his cousin, laughing in superior wisdom. “Your cares cannot be of a very crushing kind. If it was mine you were talking of—a poor devil who sometimes does not know where his next dinner is to come from; but that is not a subject, perhaps, for polite ears.”

“And the dinners have always come to you, I suspect,” said Edgar; “good dinners too, and handsomely served. Chops have not been much in your way; whereas you know most people who talk on such a subject——”

“Have to content themselves with chops? Some people like them,” said Arthur, meditatively. “By the way, Arden, does it not come within the sphere of a reforming landlord like you to reform the *cuisine* at the Arden Arms? If I were you, and had poor relations likely to come and stay there, I would make a difference. For you do consider the

claims of poor relations. Many people don't; but you—— By the way, you said something about Fazakerly. Is he actually coming? I should like to see the old fellow, though he is not fond of me."

"He is coming, certainly," said Edgar, with a momentary flush, "but I think not so soon as to-morrow. I—have something to do to-morrow—an old engagement. And then—my business with Fazakerly may be more serious than I thought,"

"As you please," said Arthur, shrugging his shoulders slightly. "You are master, I have nothing to do with it. It was bad taste to remind you, I know. But when one's pockets are empty, and the Mrs. Pimpernels of life begin to cast one off—that was an alarming defeat; I begin to ask myself, Are the crowfeet showing? is the grey visible in my hair."

"I can't see it," said Edgar, with a momentary smile.

"No, I take care of that," said the other; "though a touch of grey is not objectionable sometimes—it makes a man interesting. You scorn such levity, don't you? But then you are five and twenty, and foolish thoughts are extinguished in you by the cares of the estate."

Once more a momentary smile passed over Edgar's face. "Have you noticed any of the

changes I have made in the estate—do you like them?” he asked, with something like anxiety. What a strange fellow he is, Arthur thought—if I were he, should I care what any one thought? “I have renewed some leases which it perhaps was not quite wise to renew,” Edgar continued, “and lent some money for draining and that sort of thing. Probably you would not have done it. If I were to die now—let us make the supposition——”

“My dear Arden, I am sadly afraid you won’t die,” said his cousin; “don’t tantalise a man by putting such hopes in his head. How can you tell that I may not be prepared with a little white powder? If you were to die I should probably call in your drainage money, for even then I should be as poor as a rat—but I could not change anybody’s lease.”

“I wonder if you would take any interest in the property?” said Edgar; “there is a great charm in it, do you know. You feel more or less that you have some real power over the people. I don’t think much of what people call influence, but actual power is very different. You can speak to them with authority. You can say, if you do this, I will do that. You can rouse their self-interest, as well as their sense of right. I have not done very much more than begin it, but it has been very interesting

to me. I wonder if it would have the same effect on you."

He means to offer me the situation of agent, said Arthur Arden to himself. His agent! I! And then he spoke—"I'll tell you one thing I should take an interest in, Arden. I should look after those building leases for the Liverpool people. It would make the greatest possible difference to the estate; it would make up for the loss of Old Arden, which your sister carries off. That was a wonderfully silly business, if you will allow me to say so—I cannot imagine how you could ever think of alienating that."

A curious thrill passed over Edgar. It was quite visible, and yet he did not mean it to be visible. Up to this moment his gravity had been so real, his manner so serious, that his cousin had not for a moment suspected that he had anything to conceal. But this sudden shudder struck him strangely. "Are you cold," he asked, looking at him fixedly with a suspicious, watchful glance, "this fine morning? or are you ill, too?"

"Neither," said Edgar, restraining himself. "We were talking about the building leases. You, who are more of an Arden than I have ever been supposed to be——"

He attempted to say this with a smile, but his

lips were dry and parched, and his pallor increased. Was it possible that he could have found anything out—he whose interest, of course, was to destroy any evidence that told against himself? At the thought Arthur Arden's heart sank; for if Edgar's fears for his own position were once raised, it was very certain that there would not long remain anything for another to find out.

"You mistake," he said, "the spirit of the Ardens; they were not a romantic race, as people suppose—they had their eyes very well open to their interests. I don't know what made your father so obstinate; but I am sure his father, or his grandfather, as far back as you like to go, would never have neglected such an opportunity of enriching themselves. Why, look at the money it would put into your purse at the first moment. I should do it without hesitation; but then, of course, people would say of me—He is a needy wretch; he is always in want of money. And, of course, it would be quite true. Has old Fazakerly's coming anything to do with that?"

"It may have to do with a great many things," said Edgar, with a certain irritable impatience, rising from his chair. "Pardon me, Arden, I am going down to the village. I must see how poor little Jeanie is. I have got some business with Mr.

Fielding. Perhaps you would like to make some inquiries too."

"Not if you are going," said Arthur, calmly. "The girl was going on well yesterday. If you were likely to see her, I should send my love; but I suppose you won't see her. No, thanks; I can amuse myself here."

"As you please," said Edgar, turning abruptly away. He could not have borne any more. With an inexpressible relief he left the room, and freed himself from his companion. How strange it was that, of all people in the world, Arthur Arden should be his companion now!

As for Arthur, he went to the window and watched his cousin's progress down the avenue with mingled feelings. He did not know what to make of it. Sometimes he returned to his original idea, that Edgar, in compassion of his poverty, was about to make a post for him on the estate—to give him something to do, probably with some fantastic idea that to be paid for his work would be more agreeable to Arthur than to receive an allowance. "He need not trouble," Arthur said to himself. "I have no objection to an allowance. He owes it me, by Jove." And then he strolled into the library, which was in painful good order, bearing no trace of the vigils of the previous night. He sat down,

and wrote his letters on the old Squire's paper, in the old Squire's seat. The paper suited him exactly, the place suited him exactly. He raised his eyes and looked over the park, and felt that, too, to be everything he could desire. And yet a fickle fortune, an ill-judging destiny, had given it to Edgar instead.

CHAPTER X.

EDGAR was thankful for the morning air, the freshness of the breeze, the quietness of the world outside, where there was nobody to look curiously at him—nobody to speak to him. It was the first moment of calm he had felt since the discovery of last night, although he had been alone in his room for three or four hours, trying to sleep. Now there was no effort at all required of him—neither to sleep, nor to talk, nor to render a reason. He was out in the air, which caressed him with impartial sweetness, never asking who he was ; and the mere fact that he was out of doors made it impossible for him to write anything or read anything, as he might have otherwise thought it his duty to do. He went on slowly, taking the soft air, the fluttering leaves, the gleams of golden sunshine, all the freshness of the morning, into his very heart. Oh, how good nature was, how kind, caressing a man and refreshing him, however unhappy he might be ! But the curious thing in all this was, that Edgar was not

unhappy. He did not himself make any classification of his feelings, nor was he aware of this fact. But he was not unhappy : he was in pain : he felt like a man upon whom a great operation has been performed, whose palpitating flesh has been shorn away or his bones sawed asunder by the surgeon's skilful torture. The great shock tingles through his whole system, affects his nerves, occupies his thoughts, is indeed the one subject to which he finds himself ever and ever recurring ; and yet does not go so deep as to affect the happiness of his life or the tranquillity of his mind. Perhaps Edgar did not fully realise what it was which had fallen upon him. He was tingling, suffering, torn asunder with pain ; and yet he was quite calm. Any trifle would have pleased him. He was so wounded, so sore, so bleeding, that he had not time to look any further and be unhappy. The question what he should do had not yet entered his mind. In the meantime he was gladly silent, taking rest after the operation he had gone through.

He went down to the village vaguely, like a man in a dream. When he got to the great gate he asked himself, with a sort of curious wonder and interest, Should he go and tell Mr. Fielding—resolve all the Doctor's doubts for ever ? But decided no, because he was too tired. Besides, he had not made

up his mind what was to be done. He had not fully realised it—he had only felt the blow, and the rending, tearing pain—and now the hush after the operation, his veins still tingling, his flesh palpitating, but some soft opiate giving him a momentary, sweet forgetfulness of his suffering. Sufferers who have taken a very strong opiate often feel as Edgar did, especially if it does not bring sleep, but only a strange insensibility, an unexplainable trance of relief. He walked on and on, and he did not think. The thing had happened, the knife had come down; but the shearing and rending were past, and he was quiet. He was able to say nothing, think nothing—only to wait. At the present moment this was all.

And then he went down in his dream to the cottage where Jeanie was. As the women curtseyed to him at their doors, and the school-children made their little bobs, he asked himself, why? Would they do it if they knew? What would the village think? How would the information be received? Those Pimpernels, for instance, who had turned Arthur Arden out, how would they take it? Somehow, Edgar felt as if he himself had changed with Arthur Arden. It was he, he thought, who had become the poor cousin—he who was the one disinherited. We say he thought, but he did not really

think; it was but the upper line of fancy in his mind—the floating surface to his thoughts. Though he had not made up his mind to any course of action, and was not even capable of thinking, yet at the same time he felt disposed to stop and speak to everybody, and say certain words of explanation. What could he say? You are making a mistake. This is not me; or, rather, I am not the person you take me for. Was that what he ought to say? And he smiled once more that curious smile, in which a certain pathetic humour mingled. “Who am I?” he said to himself. “What am I?—a man without a name.” It gave him a strange, wild, melancholy amusement. It was part of the effect of the laudanum; and yet he had not taken any laudanum. His opiate was only the great pain, the sleepless night—the sudden softening, calming influence of the fresh day.

“She’s opened her eyes once,” said Mrs. Hesketh, at the cottage door. “You don’t think much of that, sir; but it’s a deal. She opened her eyes, and put out her hand, and said, ‘Granny!’ Oh, it’s a deal, sir, is that! The Doctor is as pleased as Punch; and as for t’oud dame——”

“Is she pleased?” said Edgar.

“I don’t understand her, sir,” said the woman; “it looks to me as if she was a bit touched”—and

here Mrs. Hesketh laid her finger on her own forehead. "Husht! she'll hear. She won't take a morsel of rest, won't t'oud dame. I canna think how she lives; but, bless you! she's got somethin' else on her mind—something more than Jinny. I'm a'most sure—— Lord! I've spoke below my breath, but she's heard us, and she's coming here."

"Will you watch my bairn ten minutes, while I speak to the gentleman?" said Mrs. Murray. "Eh! I hope you'll be blessed and kept from a' evil, for you're a good woman—you're a good woman. Aye, she's better. She'll win through, as I always said. We've grand constitutions in our family. Oh, my bonnie lad! it's a comfort to me to see your face."

Edgar must have started slightly at this address, for the old woman started too, and looked at him with a bewildered air. "What did I say?" she asked. "Mr. Edgar, I've sleepit none for three nights. My heart has been like to burst. I'm worn out—worn out. If I said something that wasna civil, I beg your pardon. It is not always quite clear to me what I say."

"You said no harm," said Edgar. "You have always spoken kindly, very kindly, to me—more kindly than I had any right to. And I hope you will continue to think of me kindly, for I am not

very cheerful just now, nor are my prospects very bright——”

“*Your* prospects no bright!” Mrs. Murray looked round to see that no one was near, and then she came out upon the step, and closed the cottage door behind her, and came close up to him. “Tell me what’s wrong with you—oh, tell me what’s wrong with you!” she said, with an eager anxiety, which was too much in earnest to pause or think whether such a request was natural. Then she stopped dead short, recollecting—and went on again with very little interval, but with a world of changed meaning in her voice. “Many a one has come to me in their trouble,” she said. “It’s *that* that makes me ask—folk out of my ain rank like you. Whiles I have given good advice, and whiles—oh! whiles I have given bad; but its that that makes me ask. Dinna think it’s presumption in me.”

“I never thought it was presumption,” said Edgar; and there came upon him the strongest, almost irresistible, impulse to tell what had happened to him to this poor old woman at the cottage door. Was he growing mad too?—had his misfortune and excitement been too much for him? He smiled feebly at her, as he bewildered himself with this question. “If I cannot tell you now, I will afterwards,” he said; and lingered, not saying any more.

Her keen eyes investigated him while he stood so close to her. His fresh colour was gone, and the frank and open expression of his face. He was very pale; there were dark lines under his eyes; his mouth was firmly closed, and yet it was tremulous with feeling repressed and restrained. Alarm and a look of partial terror came into Mrs. Murray's face.

"Tell me, tell me!" she cried, grasping his arm.

"There is nothing to tell, my good woman," he said, and turned away.

She fell back a step, and opened the door which she had held closed behind her. Her face would have been a study to any painter. Deep mortification and wounded feeling were in it—tears had come to her eyes. Edgar noticed nothing of all this, because he was fully occupied with his own affairs, and had no leisure to think of hers; and had he noticed it, his perplexity would have been so intense that he could have made nothing of it. He stood, not looking at her at all—gone back into his own thoughts, which were engrossing enough.

"Ay," she said, "that's true—I'm but your good woman—no your friend nor your equal that might be consulted. I had forgotten that."

But Edgar had given her as much attention as he was capable of giving for the moment, and did

not even remark the tone of subdued bitterness with which she spoke. He roused himself a little as she retired from him. "I hope you are comfortable," he said; "I hope no one annoys you, or interferes. The woman of the house——"

"There she is," said Mrs. Murray, and she made him a solemn little curtsy, and was gone before he could say another word. He turned, half-bewildered, from the door, and found himself face to face with Sally Timms, who felt that her opportunity had come.

"I don't want to be disagreeable, sir," said Sally, without a moment's pause. "I never was one that would do a nasty trick. It aint your fault, nor it aint her fault, nor nobody's fault, as Jinny is there. But not to give no offence, Squire, I'd just like to know if I am ever going to get back to my own little 'ouse?"

"I am very sorry, Sally," Edgar began, instinctively feeling for his purse.

"There's no call to be sorry, sir," said Sally; "it aint nobody's fault, as I say, and it aint much of a house neither; but it's all as I have for my little lads, to keep an 'ome. A neighbour has took me in," said Sally; "an' it's a sign as I have a good name in the place, when folks is ready o' all sides to take me in. And the little lads is at the West.

Lodge. But I can't be parted from my children for ever and ever. Who's to look to them if their mother don't? Who's to see as their faces are clean and their clothes mended? Which they do tear their clothes and makes holes in their trousers enough to break your heart—and nothing else to be expected from them hearty little lads."

"I will give you any rent you like to put on your house," said Edgar, with his purse in his hand. "I wish I could make poor Jeanie better, and give you your cottage back; but I can't. Tell me your price, and I will give it to you. I am very sorry you have been disturbed."

"It aint that, sir," said Sally, with her apron to her eyes. "Glad am I and 'appy to be useful to my fellow-creetures. It aint that. She shall stay, and welcome, and all my bits o' things at her service. I had once a good 'ome, Squire; and many a thing is there—warming-pans, and toast-ing-forks, and that—as you wouldn't find in every cottage. Thank ye, sir; I won't refuse a shillin' or two, for the little lads; but it wasn't that. If you please, Squire——"

"What is it?" said Edgar, who was getting weary. The day began to pall upon him, though it was as fresh and sweet as ever. The influence of that opiate began to wear out. He felt himself

incapable of bearing any longer this dismal stream of talk in his ears, or even of standing still to listen. "What is it? Make haste."

"If you please," said Sally, "old John Smith, at the gate on the common, he's dead this morning, sir. It's a lonesome place, but I don't mind that. The little lads 'ud have a long way to come to school, but I don't mind that; does them good, sir, and stretches their legs so long's they're little. If you would think of me for the gate on the common—a poor decent widow-woman as has her children's bread to earn—if ye please, Squire."

A sudden poignant pang went through Edgar's heart. How he would have laughed at such a petition yesterday! He would have told Sally to ask anything else of him—to be made Rector of the parish, or Lord Chancellor—and he would have thrown that sovereign into her lap and left her. But now he thought nothing of Sally. The lodge on the common! He had as much right to give away the throne of England, or to appoint the Prime Minister. A sigh which was almost a groan burst from his heart. He poured out the contents of his purse into his hands and gave them to her, not knowing what the coins were. "Don't disturb Jeanie," he said, incoherently, and rushed past her without another word. The lodge on the common!

It occurred to Edgar, in the mere sickness of his heart, to go round there—why, he could not have told. He went on like the wind, not heeding Sally's cry of wonder and thanks. The morning clouds had all blown away from the blue sky, and the scorching sun beat down upon his head. His moment of calm after the operation was past.

CHAPTER XI.

EDGAR walked on and on, through the village, over the perfumy common, which lay basking in the intense unbroken sunshine. All the mossy nooks under the gorse bushes were warm as nests which the bird has just quitted—the seedpods were cracking under the heat, all the sweet scents of the wild, mossy, heathery, aromatic bit of heath were coming out—the insects buzzing, every leaf of the vegetation thrilling under the power of the sunshine. He went straight across the common, disregarding the paths, through gorse and juniper bushes, and tufts of bracken, and beds of heather. He did not see and he did not care. The lodge was two miles away along a road which was skirted on either side by the lingering half-reclaimed edges of the heath—and if the walk had been undertaken with the intention of making a survey of the beauties of Arden, it could not have been better chosen. The lodge on the common was just within the enclosure of the park. Its windows commanded the long, purple-green stretch of

heath, with the spire of Arden church rising over it in the distance, and a white line of road, on which were few passengers; but the lodge windows were closed that morning. The hot sun beat on them in vain—old eyes which for fifty years had contemplated that same landscape were now closed upon it for ever. John Smith had been growing old when he went to the lodge; he had been there before the old Squire's time, having known him a boy. He had lived into Edgar's time, and was proud of his hundred years. "I can't expect to see e'er another young Squire," he had said the last time Edgar had seen him. "Don't you flatter me. Short o' old Parr, and them folks in the Bible, I don't know none as has gone far over the hunderd; but I don't say but what I'd like to see another young Squire." The words came back into Edgar's mind as he paused. He knocked softly at the cottage door, and took off his hat when the daughter, herself an old woman, steady and self-possessed, as the poor are in their deepest grief, came to the door. "Will you come in and look at him, sir," she said; and her look of disappointment when he said no, went to Edgar's heart, full as it was of his own concerns. He turned back, and went in, and looked with awe upon the old, old worn face, which he remembered all his life. That wrinkled pallid countenance might

have been a thousand years old, instead of only a hundred. Only a hundred! And poor old John, too, in his time had known troubles such as make years of days. One son had gone for a soldier, and been killed "abroad;" another had been the victim of an accident in the Liverpool docks, and was a cripple for life; another had "gone to the bad;" and there was a daughter, too, who had "gone to the bad"—landmarks enough to portion out the life of any man. Yet there he lay, so quiet after all, having shaken it off at last. Edgar, in his youth, in the first terrible shock of a misfortune which seemed to throw every other misfortune into the shade, looked at the remains of his old, old servant with a thrill of awe. Do your best for a hundred years, suffer your worst, take God's will patiently, go on working and working: and at the end this—this and no more. "He's got to his rest now, sir," said the daughter, putting up her apron to her eyes which shed few tears—"we didn't ought to grumble nor to cry; and I try not. He's safe now is t'oud man. He's with mother and the little ones as died years ago. I can't think as I'll know 'em when I get there. It's so long ago, and I'm so old mysel', they'd never think it was me. But I'll know father, and father will tell them. I can't help cryin' now and again, but I canno' grudge that he's got to his rest."

Edgar went out of the house hushed for the moment in all his fever of wild thoughts. Rest! He himself did not want rest. He was too young, too ardent, too full of life to think of it as desirable; but anyhow there was an end to everything: an end—and perhaps a new beginning elsewhere. His mind was a religious mind, and his nature was not one to which real doubts concerning the unseen were possible. But there is something in a great mental shock which unsettles all foundations. At all events, whatever else there might be in life, there was an end—and perhaps a new beginning. And yet what if a man had to work on through all the perplexities of this sick and vexed world for a hundred years?—a world in which you never know who you are, nor what—where all in a moment you may be thrust out of the place you believed you were born in, and your life, all torn across and twisted awry, made to begin anew. How often might a man have to begin anew?—until at last there came that End.

He walked along through the woods not consciously remarking anything, and yet noting unconsciously how all the big trunks gleamed in the sunshine, the silvery white lines of the young birches, the happy hush and rustle among the branches. Was it sound, or was it silence? The leaves twinkled in the light, which seemed to fill

all their veins with joy, and yet they said Hush, hush! at their highest rapture. Hush, hush! said all nature, except here and there a dry bough which cracked under the flying feet of rabbit or squirrel, a broken branch or a pine cone that fell. The dying, the falling, the injured, and broken, sent harsh undertones into the harmony; but the living and prospering whispered Hush! Did this thought pass articulately through the young man's mind as he threaded these woodland paths? No; some broken shadow of it, a kind of rapid suggestion—no more; and moment by moment his painful thoughts recurred more and more to himself.

What was he to do? It was not the wealth of Arden, or even the beauty of Arden, or the rank he had held as its master, or any worldly advantage derived from it that wrung his heart to think of—All these had their share of pain apart from the rest. The first and master pang was this, that he was suddenly shaken out of his place, out of his rank, out of that special niche in the world which he had supposed himself born to fill. He was cast adrift. Who was he? what was he? what must he do? At Arden there were quantities of things to do. He had entered upon the work with more absolute pleasure, than he had felt in the mere enjoyment of the riches and power connected with

it. It was work he could do. He felt that he had penetrated its secrets, held its key in his hand; and now to discover that it was not his work at all—that it was the work of a man who would not do it, who would never think of it, never care for it. This thought overwhelmed him as he went through the wood. It came upon him suddenly, without warning, like a great thunderbolt. The work was to be transferred to a man who would not do it—whose influence would be not for good but for evil in the place. And nobody knew—— Hush, hush! oh, heavens, silence it! fresh breeze, blow it away! Nobody knew—nobody but one, who had vowed never to betray, never to say a syllable—one whose loss would be as great as his own. There was so much that could be done for Arden—the people and the place had such powers of development in them. There was land to be reclaimed, fit to grow seed and bread; there were human creatures to be helped and delivered; a thousand and a thousand things came into his mind, some great and some small—trees to be planted even—and what Arthur Arden would do would be to cut down the trees; cottages to be built—and what would he care for the poor, either physically or morally? If Arden could speak, would not it cry to heaven to be kept under the good rule of the impostor, and saved from

the right heir? And then the race which had been so proud, how would it be covered with shame!—the house which had wrapped itself up in high reserve, how would its every weakness be exposed to the light! And up to this time nobody knew—The good name of the Ardens might be preserved, and the welfare of the estate, and every end of real justice served—by what? Putting a few old papers into the fire. Clare had nearly done it last night by the flame of her candle. God bless Clare! And she, too, would have to be given up if everything else was given up—he would no longer have a sister. His name, his work, his domestic affections—everything he had in the world—all at the mercy of a lit taper or a spark of fire! If Arden was to be burnt down, for instance—such things have been—if at any time in all these years it had been burnt down, or even the wing which contained the library, or even the bureau in that room—no one would ever have known that there was any doubt about the succession. Ah, if it had happened so! What a strange, devilish malice it was to lock it up there, to throw confusion and temptation upon two lives! Was it Squire Arden's spirit, vindictive and devilish, which had led Clare to that packet? But no (Edgar thought in the wandering of his mind), it could not be Squire Arden; for Clare, too, would be a sufferer.

He saw now, so well and clearly, why he had been made to consent to the arrangement which gave Old Arden to Clare. Clare was of the Arden blood ; whereas he——

And then it occurred to him to wonder who he was. Not an Arden ! But he must be some one's son——belong to some family——probably have brothers and sisters. And for ever and ever give up Clare !——Clare, his only sister——the sole being in the world to whom from childhood his heart had turned. Already he no longer ventured to touch, no longer called her by her name. He had lost his sister ; and no other in the world could ever be so sweet.

Edgar's mind was gradually drained of courage and life as he went on. How was he to do it ? It was not money or position, but himself and his life he would have to give up. How could he do it ? Whereas, it was easy, so easy to have a fire kindled in his bedroom, or even a candle—— They had been almost burned already. If they had been burned he never would have known. Nobody would have been the wiser ; and yet he would have been an impostor all the same. And as for Arthur Arden, he should share everything——everything he pleased. He should have at least half the income now, and hereafter all—— Yes ; Edgar knew that

such arrangements had been made. He himself might pledge himself not to marry; but then he thought of Gussy Thornleigh, and this time felt the blow so overpower him that he stopped short, and leant against a tree to recover himself. Gussy, whom he was to speak to to-morrow. Oh, good heavens!—just heavens!—was ever innocent man so beset! It is easy to speak of self-sacrifice; but all in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, that a man should give up name, home, living, his position, his work, his very existence, his sister, and his bride—all because Squire Arden who was dead was a damned accursed villain; and that Squire Arden who was alive might squander so much money, spoil so many opportunities of valiant human service! Good God! was ever innocent man so beset!

And then, as he went on thinking, the horror of it overpowered him more and more. Most men when they are in trouble preserve the love of those who are dear to them—nay, have it lavished upon them, to make up for their suffering, even when their suffering is their own fault. But Edgar would have to relinquish all love—even his sister's—and it was no fault of his. No unborn babe could be more innocent than he was of any complicity in the deception. He had been its victim all his life; and

now that he had escaped from its first tyranny, must he be a greater victim still—a more hopeless sacrifice? Oh, God, what injustice! What hateful and implacable tyranny!

And the flame of a candle would set everything right again—a momentary spark, the scented, evanescent gleam with which he lit his cigar—the cigar itself falling by chance on the papers. And were there not a hundred such chances occurring every day? Less than that had been known to sweep a young, fair, blooming, beloved creature, for whose sweet life all the estates in the world would not be an equivalent, out of the world. And yet no spark fell to burn up those pieces of paper which would cost Edgar everything that made life dear. He had been standing all this while against the trunk of the tree, pondering and pondering. He was startled by a gamekeeper passing at a distance, who took off his hat respectfully to his master. His master? Couldn't the fellow see? Edgar felt a strong momentary inclination to call out to him—No; not to me. I have no right to your obeisance, not much right even to your respect. I am an impostor—a man paltering with temptation. Should he break the charmed whispering silence, and shout these words out to the winds, and deliver his soul for ever? No. For did not the leaves and the

winds and the tender grass and the buzzing insects unite in one voice—Hush! Hush! Hush! Such was the word which Nature kept whispering, whispering in his ear.

CHAPTER XII.

THE state of affairs at Arden on this strange day was very perplexing to Arthur. Clare did not make her appearance even at dinner, but there were sounds of going and coming on the stairs, and at one time Arthur could have sworn he heard the voice of Edgar at his sister's door. She was well enough to see her brother, though not to come downstairs. And among the letters which were brought down to be put into the post-bag surely there was more than one in her handwriting. She had been able to carry on her correspondence, then; consequently the illness must be a feint altogether to avoid him, which was not on the whole flattering to his feelings. Arthur felt himself, as he was, in a very undignified position. He had experienced a good many humiliations of late. He had been made to feel himself not at all so captivating, not so sought-after, as he had once been. The Pimpernels had ejected him; and here were his cousins, his nearest relations—two chits who might almost be

his own children, and who ought to have been but too happy to have a man of his experience with them, a man so qualified to advise and guide them—here were they shutting themselves up in mysterious chambers, whispering together, and transacting their business, if they had any business, secretly, that he might not be of the party! It was not wonderful that this should be galling to him. He resented it bitterly. What! shut him out from their concerns, pretend illness, whisper and concert behind his back! He was not a man, he reflected, to thrust himself into anybody's private affairs; and surely the business might have been put off, whatever it was, or they might have managed somehow to keep it out of his sight if he was not intended to see it; whereas this transparent and, indeed, vulgar device thrust it specially under his eye. In the course of his reflections it suddenly flashed upon his mind that such conduct could only proceed from the fact that what they were occupied about was something which concerned himself. They were laying their heads together, perhaps, to be of service to him—to “do him good.” There was never man so careless yet but the thought that somebody wished to do him good was gall to him. What they intended, probably, was to make him Edgar's agent on the estate. It would be earning

his bread honestly, doing something for his living—a step which had often been pressed upon him. He would be left at Arden, guardian of the greatness and the wealth of a property which he was never to enjoy, making the best of the estate for Edgar's benefit; seeing him come and go, enjoying his greatness; while his poor kinsman earned an honest living by doing his work! By Jove! Arthur Arden said to himself; it was a very likely idea, this of the agentship—nothing could have been more natural, more suitable. It was just the sort of thing to have occurred to such a mind as Edgar's, who was naturally fond of occupation, and who would have been his own agent with pleasure. If the truth were known, no doubt Edgar thought he was making a little sacrifice by arranging all this for his cousin. Confound him! Arthur said. And if such an idea had actually entered Edgar's mind, this would have been his reward.

After dinner he went out into the Park to smoke his cigar. It was a lovely night, and strolling about in the fresh evening air was better than being shut up in a melancholy room without a creature near him to break the silence. He took a long walk, and finally came back to the terrace round the house. The favourite side of the terrace was that which lay in front of the drawing-room

windows; but the terrace itself ran quite round Arden to the flower garden behind, which it joined on the two sides. In mere wantonness Arthur extended his stroll all the way round, which was an unfrequent occurrence. On the darkest side, where the terrace was half-obscured by encroaching trees, he saw a glimmer of light in some windows on the ground-floor. They were the windows of the library, he perceived after a while, and they were partially open—that is to say, the windows themselves were open, but the shutters closed. As Arthur strolled along passing them, he was attracted by the sound of voices. He stopped; his own step was inaudible on the grass, even if the speakers within had ever thought of danger. He paused, hesitated a moment, listened, and heard the sound more distinctly; then, after a moment's debate with himself, went up to the nearest window. There was no moonlight; the night was dark, and the closest observer even from without could scarcely have seen him. He threw his cigar away, and after another pause seated himself on the stone sill of the window. A great bush of clematis which clung about one side hid him in its fragrant bower. He could have escaped in a moment, and no one would have been the wiser; and the moths buzzed in over his head to the light, and the sound of the

two voices came out. It was Clare and Edgar who were talking—Clare, who had been shut up in her room all day, who was too ill to come downstairs; but she had come down now, and was talking with the utmost energy—a tone in which certainly there was no appearance of failing strength. It was some time before he could make out more than the voices, but indignation and despite quickened his ears. The first, whose words he could identify, was Clare.

“Look here,” she said, advancing, as would seem, nearer to the window, and speaking with an animation very unlike her ordinary tones. “Look here, Edgar! My father himself meant to burn them. Oh, that I should have to speak so of poor papa! But I acknowledge it. He has been wicked, cruel! I don’t want to defend him. Yet he meant to burn them, you can see.”

“But did not,” said Edgar. “He did not; that is answer enough. Why, having taken all this trouble, and burdened his soul with a crime, he should have left behind the means of destroying his own work, heaven knows! Probably he thought I would find it, and conceal it for self-interest; but yet carry the sting of it for ever. I have been thinking long on the subject: that is what he must have meant.”

“Oh, Edgar!” said Clare.

“That must have been his intention. I can see no other. He must have thought there was no doubt that I would in my turn carry on the crime. How strangely one man judges another! It was devilish, though. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but it was devilish. After having bound me, as he thought, by every bond to keep his secret, he would have thrust upon me the guilt too!”

“Oh, Edgar, Edgar!” Clare said, with a moan of pain. From the sound of the voices Arthur gathered that Edgar must be seated somewhere near the table, while Clare walked about the room in her agitation. Her voice came, now nearer, now farther from the window, and it may be supposed with what eager interest the eavesdropper listened. He would not have done it had there been time to think, or at least so he persuaded himself afterwards. But for anything he knew his dearest interests might be involved, and every word was important to him. A long silence followed—so long, that he thought all had come to an end; and with an intense sense of being mocked and tantalised, was about to get up and steal away, when he was recalled once more by the voice of Clare.

“It was I who found them,” she said, “where I had no right to look. It was for you to say whether

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these papers should have been disturbed or not. I
think myself among them, having no right: there-
fore I ought to be heard now. Edgar, listen to me!
I will make them public, think of the scandal, the
scandal. Think of our name dragged in the dust,
and as long as you have been brought up in—the
house that is yours— Listen to me! Oh,
Edgar are you going to throw away your life?
It is not your fault. You are innocent of every-
thing. You would never have known if my
father had had the justice to destroy these papers
—if he had had the unpardonable, the horrible
courage of burning them out. If you will not do
what I ask you to do, I will never, never forgive
myself all my life. I will feel that I have been the
cause. Edgar you never refused to listen to me
before.

Arthur Arden had to bend forward close to the
woman to hear at all, but even then could not be
assured of the thrill of feeling that was in it.
"But you never counselled me to do wrong
before. Never. You have been like an angel to
me."

There was a pause between the preceding words
and the next, as if he had difficulty in pronouncing
the words: wholly unintelligible to Arthur,

whose worst suspicions fell so much short of the truth.

“Oh, no, no,” she said: “do not speak to me so, Edgar. This has shown me what I am. I have been more like a devil. I have nothing but pride, and ill-temper, and suspicion to look back upon. Nothing, nothing else! Remember, I might have burned them myself. If I had been worthy to live, if I had been fit for my place in this house, if I had been such a woman as some are—my father’s daughter—your sister, Edgar—I should have burned them myself.”

“My—sister,” he cried, with again a pause, and in a softened tremulous tone. “That is the worst; that is the worst! What are you doing, Clare?”

“My duty now,” she said wildly, “to him and to you!”

Then there was a pause. Arthur Arden would have given everything he possessed in the world for the power of looking inside—but he dared not. He sat on the window-sill with all his faculties concentrated in his ears. What was she doing? There was some movement in the room, but sounds of gentle feet upon a Turkey carpet betray little. The first thing audible was a broken sobbing cry from Clare.

“Let me do it! I will go down on my knees to

you. I will bless you for it, Edgar! Edgar! You will be more my brother than ever you were in my life!"

Another silence—nothing but the sobbing of intense excitement and a faint rustle as if the girl worn out had thrown herself into a chair; and then a sound of the rustling and folding of paper. Oh, if he could but see! The half-closed shutter jarred a little, moved by the wind; and Arthur, roused, found a little chink, the slenderest crevice by which he could see in. All that he saw was Edgar sealing a packet. The wax fell upon it unsteadily, showing emotion which was not otherwise visible in his look. Then he wrote some name upon the packet, and put it in the breast-pocket of his coat.

"There it is," he said cheerfully; "I have directed it to Mr Fazakerly, and that settles the whole business. We must not struggle any more about it. Do you think I have had no temptation in the matter? Do you think I have got through without a struggle? The Thornleighs came back to-day—and to-morrow I was going to Thorne to ask her to be my wife."

When he said these words, Edgar for the moment overcome with his conflict, dropped his head upon his hands and covered his face. All the levity, all the ease and secondary character of his

feelings towards Gussy had disappeared now. He felt the pang of giving up this sweetness as he had not yet felt anything. All rushed upon him at once—all the overwhelming revelations he had to make. Edgar was brave, and he had kept the thought at bay. But now—Gussy, Clare, himself—all must go—every love he had any right to, or any hope of—every companionship that had ever been his, or that he had expected to become his—“Oh God!” he said in the depths of his overthrow. It was the first cry that had come from his lips.

Arthur Arden, peering in, saw Clare go to him and throw her arms round him and press his bowed head against her breast. He saw her weep over him, plead with him in all the force of passion. “Give it to me; give it to me; give it to me!” she cried, with the reiteration of violent emotion. “You will make me the most miserable creature on earth. You will take every pleasure out of my life.”

“Hush, hush!” he said softly, “Hush! we must make an end of this. Come and breathe the air outside? After all, what is it? An affair of a day. To-morrow or next day we shall have made up our minds to it; and the world cares so little one way or another. Come out with me and take breath, Clare.”

“I cannot, I cannot,” she cried. “What do I care for air or anything. Edgar, for the last time, stop and think.”

“I have thought till my brain is turning,” said Edgar, rising and drawing her arm within his to the infinite alarm of the listener, who transferred himself noiselessly to the other side of the great clematis bush, which fortunately for him grew out of a great old rose tree which was close against the wall. “For the last time, there is nothing to think about. It is decided now, and for ever.”

And immediately a gleam of light fell upon the window-sill where the false kinsman had been listening; and the brother and sister came out, she leaning closely on his arm. They took the other direction, to the spy’s intense relief; but the last words he heard inflicted torture upon him as the two passed out of sight and hearing; they were these: “Arthur Arden loves you, Clare.”

CHAPTER XIII.

WELL! He had listened—he had disgraced himself—he was humbled in his own eyes, and would be lost in Clare's, should she ever find it out. And what had he made by it? He had discovered that Edgar had discovered something, which Clare would fain have destroyed—something which evidently affected them both deeply, and to which they gave a probably exaggerated importance. That was all. Whether it was anything that could affect himself he had not found out—not a word had been said to throw any light upon the mystery. The two knew what it was themselves, and they did not stop in their conversation to give any description of it for the benefit of the listener. Such things are done only by people on the stage. The eavesdropper in this case was none the wiser. He was much excited by the allusions he had heard. His faculties were all wound up to observe and note everything. But his knowledge of the world made him incredulous. After the first thrill of excitement—after the

intense apprehension and shame with which he watched them disappear into the night, when he began seriously to think the matter over, he did not find in it, it must be said, any encouragement to his hopes. Arthur Arden knew the definite suspicion which all the circumstances of Edgar's life had raised in many minds, and at a very recent time he had seriously nourished a hope of himself finding among the Squire's papers something which should brand the Squire's heir with illegitimacy, and prove that he was no Arden at all, though the offspring of Squire Arden's wife. Only the other day he had entertained this thought. But now, when it would seem that some such papers had been found, the futility of it struck him as nothing had ever done before. A posthumous accusation would have no effect, he saw, upon the law. Squire Arden had never disowned Edgar. He had given him his name, and acknowledged him as his son, and no stigma that he could put upon him, now he was dead, could counteract that acknowledgment. He smiled bitterly to think that he himself could have been so very credulous as to believe it would; and he smiled still more bitterly at the perturbation of these two young people, and how soon Mr. Fazerly would set their fears at rest. As soon as they had disappeared, he stepped boldly into the library

by the open window, and examined the place to see if perchance any relics were left about, of which he could judge for himself; but there was nothing left about. And he had nothing for it but to leave the library, and retire to the drawing-room, of which for most of the evening he had been the solitary inmate. Some time after the sound of windows closing, of steps softly ascending the stairs, made it apparent that Edgar and Clare had come in, and finally separated for the night; though nobody appeared to disturb his solitude, except Wilkins, who came in and yawned, and pretended to look if the lamps wanted trimming. But even when he retired to his room it seemed to Arthur that he still heard stealthy steps about the house and whispering voices. Disturbance was in the very air. The wind rose in the night, and moaned and shivered among the trees. There was a shutter somewhere, or an open door, which clanged all through the night. This, and his suspicions and doubts, broke Arthur's sleep; and yet it was he who slept most soundly that night of all who bore his name.

In the morning, they all met at breakfast as on ordinary occasions. Clare was so pale that no doubt could be thrown upon her illness of the preceding day. She was as white as marble, and her great blue eyes seemed enlarged and dilated, and shone

with a wistful, tearful light, profoundly unlike their ordinary calm. And her brother, too, was very pale. He was carefully dressed, spoke very little, and had the air of a man so absorbed in his thoughts as to be partially unaware what was going on around him. But Clare let nothing escape. She watched her cousin; she watched the servants; she watched Edgar's lips, as it were, lest any incautious word might escape them. When he spoke, she hurried to interrupt him, repeating or suggesting what he was about to say. And Arthur watched too with scrutiny scarcely less keen. He might have taken it all for a fit of temper on her part had he not heard their conversation last night. But now, though he felt sure no results would follow which could affect him personally, his whole being was roused—he was ready to catch the meaning out of any indication, however slight.

It had been late before either the brother or sister appeared, to the great dismay of Wilkins, who made many apologies to the neglected guest. "I don't know what's come over them. I don't indeed, sir," Wilkins had said, with lively disapproval in his tone. And the consequence was that it was nearly eleven before breakfast—a mere pretence to both Edgar and Clare, though their kinsman's appetite was not seriously affected—was over. Then

Edgar rose from his chair, looking, if possible, paler than ever, intensely grave and self-restrained. "I think I may go now," he said to Clare; "it is not too early. I should be glad to have it over."

"Let me speak to you first," said Clare, looking at him with eyes that grew bigger and bigger in their intense supplication. "Edgar, before you go, and—— Let me speak to you first——"

"No," he said with a faint smile. "I am not going to put myself to that test again. I know how hard it is to resist you. No, no."

"Just five minutes!" cried Clare. She ran out into the hall after him; and Arthur, full of curiosity, rose too, and followed to the open door of the dining-room. She took her brother's arm, put her face close to his ear, pleaded with him in a voice so low that Arthur could make out nothing but many repetitions of the one word, "Wait;" to which Edgar answered only by a shake of the head or tender-melancholy look at her. This went on till his horse was brought to the door. "No," he said, "no, dear; no, no," smiling upon her with a smile more touching than tears; and then he stooped and kissed her forehead. "For the last time," he said softly in her ear, "I will not venture to do this when I come back." It was a farewell—one of those first farewells which are almost more poignant than the last

—when imagination has fully seized the misery to come, and dwells upon it, inflicting a thousand partings. Arthur Arden, standing at the door behind, with his hands in his pockets, could not hear these words; but he saw the sentiment of the scene, and was filled with wonder. What did it mean? Was he going to run away, the fool, because he had discovered that his mother had not been immaculate? What harm would that do him—fantastic-romantic paladin? So sure was Arthur now that it could not do any legal harm that he was angry with this idiotic, unnecessary display. He could be none the better for it—nobody could be any the better for it. Why, then, should the Squire's legal son and unquestionable heir make this ridiculous fuss? It roused a suppressed rage in Arthur Arden's breast.

And Clare, seeing him watch, came back to the dining-room as her brother rode away from the door. She restrained the despair that was creeping over her, and came back to defy her kinsman. Though, what was the good of defying him, when so soon, so very soon, there would be nothing to conceal? She went back, however, restraining herself—meeting his eyes of wonder with a blank look of resistance to all inquiry. “Has Edgar gone off on a journey?” Arthur asked, with well-affected

simplicity. "How strange he should have said nothing about it! Where has he gone?"

"He has not gone on a journey," said Clare.

"I beg your pardon—your parting was so touching. I wish there was somebody to be as sorry for me; but I might go to Siberia, and I don't think anyone would care."

"That is unfortunate," said Clare. She was very defiant, anxious to try her strength. For once more, even though all should be known this very day, she would stand up for her brother—her brother! "But don't you think, Mr. Arden," she said abruptly, "that such things depend very much on one's self? If *you* are not sorry to part with any one, it is natural that people should not interest themselves about you."

"I wonder if the reverse holds," said Arthur; and then he paused, and made a rapid, very rapid review of the situation. If this was a mere fantastical distress, as he believed, Clare had Old Arden and (independent of feeling, which, in his circumstances, he was compelled to leave out of the transaction) was of all people in the world the most suitable for him; and if there was anything in it, it was he who was the heir, and in such a case he could make no match which would so conciliate the county and reconcile him with the general public.

His final survey was made, his conclusion come to in the twinkling of an eye. He drew a chair near the one on which she had listlessly thrown herself. "I wonder," he repeated, softly, "if the reverse holds?—when one loves dearly, has one always a right to hope for some kind feeling in return?—if not love, at least compassion and pity, or regret?"

"I do not know what you are talking of," said Clare, wearily. "I don't think I am equal to discussion to-day."

"Not discussion," he said, very gently. "Would you try and listen and realise what I am talking about, Clare? It seems the worst moment I could have chosen. You are anxious and disturbed about something——"

"No," she said, abruptly; "you are mistaken, Mr. Arden"—and then with equal suddenness she broke down, and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, yes, yes, I am anxious and full of trouble—full of trouble! Oh, if you were a man I could trust in, that I dared talk freely to—— But you will know it soon enough."

It was a moment at which everything must be risked. "What if I knew it—or, at least, what if I guessed it already?" said Arthur, bending over her. "Ah, Clare, how surprised you look! You were too innocent to know; but there are many people

who have known that there was a danger hanging over Edgar. You don't suppose your father's conduct to him could have been noticed by everybody without there being some suspicion of the cause?"

Clare raised her face, quite bloodless and haggard, from her hands. She looked at him with a look of awe and fear. "Then you knew it!" she said, the words scarcely able to form themselves on her lips.

"Yes," said Arthur; "and for your consolation, Clare—though it should be the reverse of consolation to me—I do not think he should fear. Such things as these are very difficult to prove. The Squire never said a word in his lifetime. I don't know if any court of law would allow your brother to prove his own illegitimacy—I don't think they would. He has no right to bring shame on his mother——"

"What do you mean?" said Clare, looking at him suddenly with a certain watchfulness rising in her eyes.

"I am entering on a subject I ought not to have entered upon," he said. "Forgive me; it was only because I wanted to tell you that I don't think Edgar has any just cause for fear. If you would only trust me, dearest Clare. I should ask your pardon for saying that, too—but though you should

never think of me, never speak to me again, you are still my dearest. Clare, you sent me away, and I could not tell why. Don't send me away now. I am a poor beggar, and you are a rich lady, and yet I love you so well that I must tell you, whatever your opinion of me may be. Couldn't you trust me? Couldn't you let me help you? You think I would be Edgar's enemy, but I would not. He should have everything else if he left me you."

She looked up at him with a movement of wonder. Her eyes interrogated him over and over. He had wounded her so much and so often—about Jeanie—about the Pimpernels—about—— And yet, if he really meant it—could it be possible that he was willing to leave Edgar everything, to give him no trouble, if only she——? Was it a bargain she was going to make? Ah, poor Clare! She thought so—she thought her impulse was to buy her brother's safety with her own, but at the same moment her heart was fluttering, beating loud, panting to be given to him whom she loved best. And yet she loved Edgar. To her own consciousness it was her brother she was thinking most of now—and what a comfort it would be thus to purchase Arthur's promise not to harm him, and to trust everything to Arthur! She wavered for an instant, with her mind full of longing. Then her heart misgave her.

She had allowed him to take her hands in his, and to kiss them ; while she looked him in the face, with eyes full of dumb inquiry and longing, asking him over and over again was this true ?

“Stop, stop,” she said faintly ; “if it was my own secret I would trust you—if it was only me—— Oh, stop, stop ! If you will say the same to-morrow—when he has told you—then I will—— Oh, if I can survive it, if I am able to say anything ! Cousin Arthur, I am worn out ; let me go now.”

“It is hard to let you go,” he said. “But, Clare, tell me again—if I say the same to-morrow, after he has told me—you will——? Is that a promise ? You will listen to me—you will give me what I desire most in the world—is it a promise, Clare ?”

“Let me go,” she said. “Oh, this is not a time to speak of—of our own happiness, or our own concerns.”

“Thanks for such words—thanks, thanks,” he cried, “I ask no more. To-morrow—it is a bargain, Clare.”

And thus she made her escape, half glad, half shocked that she could think of anything but Edgar, and not half knowing what she had pledged herself to. Neither did Arthur Arden know to what he had pledged himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

EDGAR rode over the verdant country, wearily, languidly, with a heart that for once was closed to its influence. He was tired of the whole matter. It no longer seemed to him so dreadful a thing to give up Arden, to part from all he cared for. If he could but be done with the pain of it, get it over, have no more trouble. Agitation had worn him out. The thought that he would have another day like yesterday to live through, or perhaps more than one other day, filled his heart with a sick impatience. Why could he not ride on to the nearest railway station, and there take any train, going anywhere, and escape from the whole business? The mere suggestion of this relief was so sweet to him that he actually paused at the cross road which led to the railway. But he was not the kind of man to make an escape. To leave the burthen on others and save himself was the last thing he was likely to do. He touched his horse unconsciously with his whip and broke into a gay canter on the grassy border

of the road that led to Thorne. Coraggio! he cried to himself. It would not last so long after all. He would leave no broken bits of duty undone, no ragged edges to his past. A little pain more or less, what did it matter? Honestly and dutifully everything must be done; and, after all, the shame was not his. It was the honest part that was his—the righting of wrong, the abolition of injustice. Strange that it should be he, a stranger to the race, who had to do justice to the Ardens! He was not one of them, and yet he had to act as their head, royally making restitution, disposing of their destinies. He smiled a painful smile as this thought crossed his mind. They were one of the proudest families in England, and yet it fell to a nameless man, a man most likely of no lineage at all, to set them right. If any forlorn consolation was to be got out of it at all it was this.

When Edgar was seen riding up the avenue at Thorne it made a commotion in the house. Mary and Beatrice spied him from the window of the room which had been their schoolroom, and where they still did their practising and wrote their letters to their dearest friends. “Oh, there is Edgar Arden coming to propose to Gussy!” cried Beatrice; and they rushed to the window to have a look at him, and then rushed to the drawing-room to warn the

family. "Oh, mamma, oh, Gussy! here's Edgar Arden!" they cried. Lady Augusta looked up from her accounts with composed looks. "Well, my dear children, I suppose none of us are much surprised," she said. Gussy, for her part, grew red with a warm glow of rosy colour which suffused her throat and her forehead. "Poor, dear boy!" she said to herself. He had not lost a moment. It was a little past noon, not time for callers yet. He had not lost a moment. She wondered within herself how it would come—if he would ask her to speak to him alone in a formal way—if he would ask her mother—if he would manage it as if by chance? And then what would he say? That question, always so captivating to a girl's imagination, was soon, very soon, to be resolved. He would tell her he had loved her ever since he knew her—he would tell her—— Gussy's heart expanded and fluttered like a bird. She would know so soon all about it; how much he cared for her—everything he had to tell.

But they were all shocked by his paleness when he came in. "What have you been doing to yourself?" Gussy cried, who was the most impulsive. "Have you been ill, Mr. Arden?" said sympathetic Ada. They were all ready to gather about him like his sisters, to be sorry for him, and adopt all his

grievances, if he had any, with effusion. He felt himself for the moment the centre of all their sympathies, and his hurt felt deeper and more hopeless than it had ever done before.

“I am not in the least ill,” he said, “and I have not been doing anything to speak of; but Fortune has been doing something to me. Lady Augusta, might I have half an hour’s talk with you, if it does not disturb you? I have—something to say——”

“Surely,” said Lady Augusta; and she closed her account-books and put them back into her desk. He meant to take the formal way of doing it, she supposed—a way not so usual as it used to be, but still very becoming and respectful to the fathers and mothers. She hesitated, however, a little, for she thought that most likely Gussy would like the other method best. And she was not so much struck as her daughters were by the change in his looks. Of course, he was a little excited—men always are in such an emergency, more so than women, Lady Augusta reflected; for when it comes to that a woman has made up her mind what is to be the end of it, whereas the man never knows. These reflections passed through her mind as she locked her desk upon the account-books, thus giving him a little time to get by Gussy’s side if he

preferred that, and perhaps whisper something in her ear.

But Edgar made no attempt to get by Gussy's side. He stood where he had stopped after shaking hands with them all, with a faint smile on his face, answering the questions the girls put to him, but visibly waiting till their mother was ready to give him the audience he had asked. "I suppose I must go and put him out of his pain; how anxious he looks, the foolish boy," Lady Augusta whispered, as she rose, to her eldest daughter. "Mamma, he looks as if he had something on his mind," Ada whispered back. "I know what he has on his mind," said her mother gaily. And then she turned round and added aloud, "Come, Mr. Arden, to my little room where I scold my naughty children, and let us have our talk."

The sisters, it must be said, were a little alarmed when Edgar was thus led away. They came round Gussy and kissed her, and whispered courage. As for the giddy young ones, they tried to laugh, though the solemnity of the occasion was greater than they could have supposed possible. But the others had no inclination to laugh. "It is only agitation, dear, not knowing what your answer may be," Ada said, though she did not feel any confidence that it was so. "He should not have made so formal an affair

of it," said Helena ; " That is what makes him look so grave." Poor Gussy, who was the most deeply concerned of all, cried. " I am sure there is something the matter," she said. The three eldest kept together in a window, while Mary and Beatrice roved away in quest of some amusement to fill up the time. And a thrill of suspense and excitement seemed to creep over all the house.

Edgar's courage came back to him in some degree, as he entered Lady Augusta's little boudoir. Imagination had no longer anything to do with it, the moment for action had come. He sat down by her in the dainty little chamber, which was hung with portraits of all her children. Just opposite was a pretty sketch of Gussy, looking down upon him with laughing eyes. They were all there in the mother's private sanctuary, the girls who were her consolation, the boys who were her plague and her delight. What a centre it was of family cares and anxieties ! She turned to him cheerfully as she took her chair. She was not in the least afraid of what was coming. She had not even remarked as yet how much agitated he was. " Well, Mr. Arden !" she said.

" I have come to make a very strange confession to you," said Edgar. " You will think I am mad, but I am not mad. Lady Augusta, I meant to have

come to-day to ask you—to ask if I might ask your daughter to be my wife.”

“Gussy?” said Lady Augusta, with the tears coming to her eyes. There was something in his tone which she did not understand, but still his last words were plain enough. “Mr. Arden, I don’t know what my child’s feelings are,” she said; “but if Gussy is pleased I should be more than content.”

“Oh, stop, stop,” he said. “Don’t think I want you to commit yourself—to say anything. Something has happened since then which has torn my life in two—I cannot express it otherwise. I parted from you happy in the thought that as Arden was so near and everybody so kind— But in the meantime I have made a dreadful discovery. Lady Augusta, I am not Edgar Arden; I am an impostor—not willingly, God knows, not willingly——”

“Mr. Arden,” Lady Augusta said, loudly, in her consternation, “you are dreaming—you are out of your mind. What do you mean?”

“I said you would think I was mad. It looks like madness, does not it?” said Edgar, with a smile, “but, unhappily, it is true. You remember how my father—I mean Mr. Arden—always treated me?—how he kept me away from home? I was not treated as his son ought to have been. I have

never said a word on the subject, because I never doubted he was my father—but I have the explanation now.”

“Good God!” said Lady Augusta; she was so horror-stricken that she panted for breath. But she too put upon the news the interpretation which Arthur Arden put upon it. “Oh, Mr. Arden!” she cried, “don’t be so ready to decide against your poor mother! A jealous man takes things into his head which are mere madness. I knew her. I am sure she was not a wicked woman. I am a mother myself, and why should I hesitate to speak to you? Oh, my dear boy, don’t condemn your mother! Your father was a proud suspicious man, and he might doubt her without cause. I believe he doubted her without cause. What you have discovered must be some ravings of jealousy. I would not believe it. I would not, whatever he may say!”

And she put out her hand to him eagerly in her sympathy and indignation. Edgar took it in his, and kissed the kind, warm, motherly hand.

“Dear Lady Augusta,” he said, “how good you are! It is easier to tell you now. There is no stigma upon—Mrs. Arden; that was one of the attendant evils which have followed upon the greater crime. I am not her son any more than I

am her husband's. I am a simple impostor. I have no more to do with the Ardens than your servant has. I am false—all false; a child adopted—nothing more."

"Good God!" said Lady Augusta once more. By degrees the reality of what he was saying came upon her. His face so pale, yet so full of lofty expression; his eyes that gleamed and shone as he spoke; the utter truthfulness and sincerity of every word impressed her in her first incredulity. Good God! he meant it. If he were not mad—and he showed no signs of being mad—then indeed it must be true, incredible as it seemed. And rapidly as a flash of lightning Lady Augusta's mind ran over the situation. How unfortunate she was! First Ada, and now—— But if this was how it was, Gussy must not know of it. She was capable of heaven knows what pernicious folly. Gussy must not know. All this ran through Lady Augusta's mind while she said the two solemn words of the exclamation given above.

And then there was a little pause. Edgar stopped too, partly for want of breath. It had cost him a great deal to say what he had said, and for the moment he could do no more.

"Do you mean to say this is true, Mr. Arden?" said Lady Augusta. "True! I cannot believe my

ears. Why, what inducement had he? There was Clare."

"So far as I can make out, it was thought to be impossible that there should be any children; but that I cannot explain. It is so," said Edgar, insisting pathetically. "Believe me, it is so."

"And how did you find it out?"

Lady Augusta's tones were very low and awe-stricken; but her interrogatory was close and persistent. Edgar was depressed after his excitement. He thought he had calculated vainly on her sympathy. "Clare found the letters," he said, "in my father's—I mean in Mr. Arden's room. They are too clear to admit of any doubt."

"*She* found them! What does she think of it? It will not be any the better for her; and you such a good, kind brother to her!" cried Lady Augusta in a tone of indignation. She was glad to find some one to find fault with. And then she made a long pause. Edgar did not move. He sat quite still opposite, looking at her, wondering would she send him away without a word of sympathy? She looked up suddenly as he was thinking so, and met his wistful eyes. Then Lady Augusta, without a moment's warning, burst out sobbing, "Oh, my poor dear boy! my poor dear boy!"

Edgar was at the furthest limit of self-control.

He could not bear any more. He came and knelt down before her, and took her hand, and kissed it. It was all he could do to keep from weeping too. "Thanks, thanks," he said, with a trembling voice; and Lady Augusta, kind woman, put her arm round him, and wept over him. "If I had been Clare I would have burned them, and you should never have known—you should never have known," she cried. "Oh, my poor, poor boy!"

"I am very poor now," he said. "I thought you would be my mother—I who never had one. And Gussy—you will tell her; and you will not blame me——"

"Blame you!" cried Lady Augusta. "My heart bleeds for you; but I blame Clare. I would have burned them, and never thought it wrong."

"But it would have been wrong," he said softly, rising. "Clare would burn them now if I would let her. She is not to blame. Dear Lady Augusta, good-bye. And you will say to Gussy——"

He paused; and so did she, struggling with herself. Should she let him see Gussy? Should she allow him to say good-bye? But Gussy was only a girl, and who can tell what mad thing a girl may propose to do? "Pardon me! pardon me!" she said; "but it is best you should not see Gussy now."

“Yes,” said Edgar; “it is best.” But it was the first real sign that one life was over for him, and another begun.

CHAPTER XV.

ONE life over and another begun—one over and another begun: the words chimed in his ears as he rode away. And great was the consternation of the servants at Thorne when he rode away—great the amazement of Mary and Beatrice, who had gone back to their private room, and were waiting there to be called down and hear “the news.” “Gussy has refused him!” they said to each other with indescribable dismay. Their countenances and their hearts fell. What! the excitement all over, nothing to inquire into, no wooing to watch, nor wedding to expect? The girls thought they had been swindled, and went down together, arm in arm, to inquire into it. But the succession of events at this moment was too rapid to permit us to pause and describe the scene which they saw when they went down stairs.

In the meantime Edgar rode back to Arden, saying these words over to himself—one life ended and another begun. The one so sweet and warm and kindly and familiar, the other so cold and so un-

known. He did not even know what his name was—who he was. The letters in the packet were few in number. They were signed only with initials. The post-marks on one outside cover which was preserved had been partially obliterated; but the name, so far as he could make it out, was that of some insignificant post-town which he had never heard of. At present, however, that question had not moved him much. He knew himself only as Edgar Arden. He could not realise himself in any other character, although at this very moment he had been proclaiming himself to be Edgar Arden no more. How hard it would be to change; to tear up his roots, as it were, to be no more Clare's brother, to enter a world absolutely unknown. Ah, yes! but that was a distant dread—a thing that looked less by being far. In the meantime it was not the passive suffering, but the active, that was to be his. As he rode along, he asked himself anxiously what must be his next step. The Rector must be told, and Dr. Somers. He thought with a little gleam of satisfaction of going to the Doctor, and dispersing all his evil thoughts in the twinkling of an eye. That sweet little gentle face in the picture, the woman who was Clare's mother, not his—it was his part to remove the cloud that had so long been over it. He saw now that everybody had

more or less believed in this cloud—that there had been a feeling abroad even among those who defended her most warmly that poor, Mrs. Arden required defence. And now it was he, not her son, a changeling, who was to do her justice. “I can clear my mother,” he said to himself—and another swift shooting pang went through his heart the moment he was conscious of the words he had used—but he could not disentangle this dreary knot. The confusion would clear away with time. He could not stop using the words he had always used, or turn his thoughts in a moment from the channel they had flowed in all his life.

What Edgar did first was to ride to the station, but not this time with any thought of making his escape. He telegraphed to Mr. Fazakerly, bidding him come at once on urgent business. “I shall expect you to dinner to-night,” was the conclusion of his message. What had to be done, it was best to do quickly, now as always. To be sure he had secured it now. He had done that which made it unimportant whether the papers were burned or not: and it was best that all should be concluded without delay. The only thing that Edgar hesitated at was telling Arthur Arden. He was the person most concerned: all that could be affected in any one else was a greater or less amount of feeling—a thing

always evanescent and never to be calculated upon ; but the news was as important to Arthur as to Edgar. A man (poor Edgar thought) of high and delicate character would have gone to Arthur first, and told him first ; but he himself was not equal to that. He did not want to tell it to Arthur Arden. He would rather have some one else tell it to him—Fazakerly—any one. He loathed the idea of doing it himself. He even loathed the idea of meeting his successor, his heir, as he had so often called him ; and he could not have told why. It was not that he expected any unkindness or want of consideration from Arthur. No doubt he would behave just as he ought to do. He would be kind ; probably he would offer to pension the unwilling impostor. He would be happy, exultant in his wonderful success ; and that would make him kind. But yet, the only person to whom Edgar hesitated to communicate his downfall was the one who was most interested in it. The very thought of him brought renewed and growing pain. For there was Clare to be thought of—Clare whom Arthur professed to love—whom, if he loved her, he would now be, so far as outward circumstances were concerned, a fitting match for. Edgar had made up his mind that he must give up his sister. He had decided that, whatever might be said or done now in this

moment of excitement and agitation, Clare was lost to him, and that the bond between them could not be kept up. But if she were Arthur Arden's wife the breaking of the bond would be more harsh, more complete, than in any other case. His breast swelled, and then it contracted painfully, bringing bitter tears to his eyes. Never, should he live a hundred years without seeing her, could Clare cease to be his sister. Nothing could make her less or more to him. If it was not blood, it was something deeper than blood. But Arthur Arden's wife!

Poor Edgar! he could not answer for his thoughts, which were wild and incoherent, and rushed from one point to another with feverish speed and intensity; but his actions were not incoherent. He rode from the railway to the village very steadily and calmly, and stopped at Sally Timms' cottage-door to ask for Jeanie, who was better and had regained consciousness. Then he went up the street, and dismounted at the Rectory gate. He had not intended to do it, or rather he had not known what he intended. The merest trifle, a nothing decided him. The door was open, and the Rector's sturdy cob was standing before it waiting for his master. Edgar made a rapid reflection that he could now tell his story quickly, that there would be no time for much talk. He went in without knocking by

the open door. Mr. Fielding was not in the library, nor in his drawing-room, nor in his garden. "I expect him in every moment, sir," Mrs. Solmes said, with a curtsey. "He's visiting the sick folks in the village. The horse is for young Mr. Denbigh, please, sir. Master has mostly given up riding now."

Edgar made a nod of assent. He was not capable of speech. If this had been his first attempt to communicate the news, it would have seemed providential to his excited fancy. But Lady Augusta had not been out, and he had been able to tell his tale very fully there. Now, however, there seemed a necessity laid upon him to tell it again. If not Mr. Fielding, some one at least must know. He went across to the Doctor's, thinking that at least he would see Miss Somers, who would not understand nor believe him. He had sent his horse away, telling the groom he would walk home. He was weary, and half crazed with exhaustion, sleeplessness, and intense emotion. He could not keep it in any longer. It seemed to him that he would like to have the church bells rung, to collect all the people about, to get into—no, not the pulpit, but the Squire's pew—the place that was like a stage-box, and tell everybody. That would be the right thing to do. "Simon!" he called out to the old clerk, who had been working somewhere about the church-

yard, and who at the sound of the horse's hoofs had come to see what was going on, and stood with his arms leaning on the wall looking over. "Is there aught ye want as I can do for ye, Squire?" said old Simon. "No; nothing, nothing," said poor Edgar; and yet he would have been so glad had some one rung the church bells. He paused, and this gentle domestic landscape burned itself in upon his mind as he crossed to the Doctor's door. The village street lay asleep in the sun. Old Simon, leaning on the churchyard wall, was watching in a lazy, rural way the cob at Mr. Fielding's door waiting for the curate, Edgar's groom going off with his master's horse towards the big gates, and a waggon which was standing in front of the Arden Arms. The waggoner had a tankard of ale raised to his face, and was draining it, concealing himself behind its pewter disk. The quietest scene: the sun caught the sign-post of the Arden Arms, which had been newly painted in honour of Edgar, and played upon the red cap of the drayman who stood by, and swept down the long white road, clearing it of every shadow. All this Edgar saw and [noted without knowing it. In many a distant scene, at many a distant day, this came back to him—the gleam of that red cap, the watchful spectatorship of the old man over the churchyard wall.

Dr. Somers met him coming out. "Ah!" said the Doctor, "coming to see me. I am in no particular hurry. Come in, Edgar. It is not so often one sees you now——"

"You will see me less in the future," said Edgar with a smile; "but I don't think there will be many broken hearts."

"Are you going away?" said Dr. Somers, leading the way into his own room. "Visits, I suppose; but take my word for it, my boy, there is no house so pleasant as your own house in autumn, when the covers are as well populated as yours. No, no; stay at home—take your visits later in the year."

"Dr. Somers," said Edgar, "I have come to tell you something. Yes, I am very serious, and it is very serious—there is nothing, alas, to laugh about. Do you remember what you hinted to me once here about—Mrs. Arden. Do you recollect the story you told me of the Agostini——"

"Ah, yes!" said the Doctor, growing slightly red. "About your mother—yes, perhaps I did hint; one does not like to speak to a man plainly about anything that has been said of his mother. I am very sorry; but I don't think I meant any harm—to you—only to warn you what people said——"

“And I have come to tell you that people are mistaken,” said Edgar, with rising colour. He felt, poor fellow, as if he were vindicating his mother by proving that he was not her son. She was his mother in his thoughts still and always. Dr. Somers shook his head ever so slightly; of course, that was the right thing for her son to say.

“You think I have come, without evidence, to make a mere assertion,” Edgar continued. “Listen a moment——”

“My dear fellow,” said Dr. Somers, shrugging his shoulders, “how could you, or any one, make more than a mere assertion on such a subject. Assert what you please. You may be right—most likely you are right; but it is a matter which cannot be brought to proof.”

“Yes,” said Edgar. This time it was worse than even with Lady Augusta. With her he had the support of strong feeling, and counted on sympathy. But the Doctor was different. A film came over the young man’s eyes; the pulsations of his heart seemed to stop. The Doctor, looking at him, jumped up, and rushing to a cupboard brought out some wine.

“Drink it before you say another word. Why Edgar, what is this?”

He put the wine away from him with some im-

patience. "Listen," he said; "this is what it is—I am not Mrs. Arden's son!"

Dr. Somers looked at him intently—into his eyes, in a way Edgar did not understand. "Yes, yes," he said, "I see—take the wine; take it to please me—Edgar Arden, I order you, take the wine."

"To please you, Doctor," said Edgar, "by all means." And when he had drank it, he turned to his old friend with a smile. "But I am not Edgar Arden. I am an impostor. Doctor, do you think I am mad?"

Dr. Somers looked at him once more with the same intent gaze. "I don't know what to make of you," he said, in a subdued tone. "No more jesting, Edgar, if this is jesting. What is it you mean?"

"I am speaking the soberest, saddest truth," said Edgar. "Clare will tell you; I have no right to call her Clare. I do not know who I am; but Mrs. Arden is clear of all blame, once and for ever. I am not her son."

CHAPTER XVI.

To say that the Doctor was utterly confounded by this revelation was to say little. He had not begun so much as to think what it meant when Edgar left him. An impatience which was foreign to his character had come to the young man. He was eager to tell his astounding news; but it irritated him to be doubted, to have to go over and over the same words. He did not show this feeling. He tried hard to keep his temper, to make all the explanations that were wanted; but within him a fire of impatience burned. He rushed away as soon as he could get free, with again that wild desire to be done with it which was the reverse side of his eagerness to tell it. If he could but get away, be clear of the whole matter, plunge into the deep quiet of the unknown, where nobody would wonder that he was not an Arden, where he might call himself anything he pleased! He went up the avenue with feverish speed, noting nothing. Nature had ceased to have power to compose him.

He had been swept into a whirlpool of difficulty, from which there could be no escape but in flight; and till his work was done he could not fly.

And it seemed to Edgar a long, long time since he rode down between those trees—a very long time, a month, perhaps a year. With all his heart he longed to be able to escape, and yet a certain fascination drew him back, a wondering sense that something more might have happened, that there might be some new incident when he went back to divide his attention with the old— Perhaps were the bureau searched more closely there might be something else found—something that would contradict the other. All these fancies flashed through his mind as he went on. He was but half-way up the avenue when he met Mr. Fielding coming down. The Rector looked just as he always did—serene, kind, short-sighted—peering at the advancing figure, with a smile of recognition slowly rising over his face. “I know people generally by their walk,” he said, as they met; “but I don’t recognise your walk this morning, Edgar: you are tired? How pale you are, my dear boy! Are you ill?”

“Didn’t she tell you?” said Edgar, wearily.

“She tell me?—who tell me?—what? You frighten me, Edgar, you look so unlike yourself. I

have been with Clare, and I don't think she is well either. She looked agitated. I warned you, you remember, about that man——”

“Don't speak of him, lest I should hate him,” said Edgar. “And yet I have no cause to hate him—it is not his fault. I will turn back with you and tell you what Clare did not tell you. She might have confided in you, anyhow, even if there had been a chance that it was not true.”

The Rector put his arm kindly within that of the agitated young man. He was the steadier of the two; he gave Edgar a certain support by the contact. “Whatever it is that agitates you so,” he said, “you are quite right—she might have told me; it would have been safe with me. Poor Clare! she was agitated too——”

This allusion overwhelmed Edgar altogether. “You must be doubly kind to her when I am gone,” he said, hurriedly. “Poor Clare! That is another thing that must be thought of. Where is she to go to? Would you take her in, you who have always been so kind to us? I would rather she were with you than at the Doctor's. Not that I have anything to do with it now; but one cannot get over the habits of one's life in twenty-four hours. Yes, poor Clare, I had no right to it, as it appears; but she was fond of me too.”

“Of course, she was fond of you,” said the Rector alarmed. “Come, Edgar, rouse yourself up. What does it mean this talk about going away? You must not go away. All your duties are at home. I could not give my consent——”

And then Edgar told him succinctly, in the same brief words which he had used before, his extraordinary tale. He told it this time without any appearance of emotion. He was getting used to the words. This time he paid no attention to the incredulity of his listener. He simply repeated it with a certain dull iteration. Mr. Fielding’s exclamations of wonder and horror fell dully on his ears. He could not understand them. It seemed so strange that any one should be surprised at a thing he had known so long. “Sure,” he said with a smile; “am I sure of my own existence? No, I don’t mean of my own identity, for at present I have none. But I am as sure of it as that I am alive. Do you think it would be any pleasure to me to go and spread such news if it were not true?”

“But, Edgar,——” began the Rector..

“That is the curious thing,” he said musingly; “I am not Edgar. I suppose a man would be justified in keeping his Christian name—don’t you think so? That surely must belong to him. I could not

be John or George all at once, after being Edgar all my life. Surely I keep that."

"My poor boy," cried the Rector, in dismay. "My poor boy, come home, and lie down, and let me bring Somers up to see you. You are not well, you have been doing too much in town, keeping late hours, and—— You will see, a little rest will set you all right."

"Do you think I am mad?" said Edgar. "Look at me—can you really think so? I know only too well what I am saying. It is a very strange position to be placed in, and makes one talk a little wild, perhaps. Of course, I know nobody wants to take from me my Christian name; that was nonsense. But when one has just had such a fall as I have had, it confuses one a little. Will you come with me to the Hall, and see the papers? Clare should have told you. There is no harm in my calling her Clare, do you think, just for a time? I never can think of her but as my sister. And we must try and arrange what she is to do."

"Edgar, am I to believe you?" cried Mr. Fielding. "Is it madness, or is it something too dreadful to name? Do not look at me like that, my dear boy. Don't smile, for Heaven's sake! you will break my heart."

"Why shouldn't I smile?" said Edgar. "Is all

the world to be covered with gloom because I am not Squire Arden? Nonsense! It is I who must suffer the most, and therefore I have a right to smile. Clare will get over it by degrees," he added. "It has been a great shock to her, but she will get over it. I don't know what to say about her future. Of course I have no right to say anything, but I can't help it. I suppose the chances are she will marry Arthur Arden. I hate to think of that. It is not mere prejudice against him as superseding me; it is because he is not worthy of her. But it would be the most suitable match. Of course you know she will lose Old Arden now that I am found out?"

"Edgar, stop! I can't bear it," cried the Rector. "For Heaven's sake don't say any more!"

"But why not? It is a relief to me; and you are our oldest friend. Of course I had no more to do with the entail than you have; all that is null and void. For Clare's sake I wonder he did not destroy those papers, if for nothing else. Mr. Fielding, I have a horrible idea in my head. I wish I could get rid of it. It is worse than all the rest. He hated me, because of course I reminded him continually of his guilt. He wanted me to break my neck that day after Old Arden was settled on Clare. It would have been the most

comfortable way of arranging the matter for all parties, if I had only known. But I can't help thinking he carried his enmity further than that. I think he left those letters to be a trap to me. He meant me to find them, and hide them or destroy them, and share his guilt. Of course he believed I would do that; and oh, God! how strong the temptation was to do it! If I had found them myself—if they not been given to me by Clare——”

Mr. Fielding pressed the arm he held. He doubted no longer, questioned no longer. “My poor boy! my poor boy!” he murmured under his breath; and, kind soul as he was, in his heart, with all the fervour of a zealot, he cursed the old Squire. He cursed him without condition or peradventure. God give him his reward! he said; and for the first time in his life believed in a lake of fire and brimstone, and wished it might be true.

“I suppose I have got into the talking stage now,” said poor Edgar. “I have had a long spell of it, and felt everything that can be felt, I believe. It was on Sunday night I found it out—fancy, on Sunday night!—a hundred years ago. And I want you to stand by me to-day. I have telegraphed for Fazakerly. I have asked him to come to dinner; why, I don't know, except that dinner is a solemnity which agrees with everything. It will be my table

for the last time. Is it not odd that Arthur Arden should be here at such a moment? not by my doing, nor Clare's, nor even his own—by Providence, I suppose. If Mr. Pimpernel's horses had not run away, and if poor little Jeanie had not been in the carriage—— What strange, invisible threads things hang together by! Am I talking wildly still?"

"No, Edgar," said Mr. Fielding, with a half sob. "No, my poor boy. Edgar, I think it would be a relief to be able to cry—— What shall you do? What shall you do? I think my heart will break."

"I shall do very well," said Edgar, cheerily. "Remember, I have not been brought up a fine gentleman. I shall be of as much use in the world probably as Arthur Arden, after all. Ridiculous, is it not? but I feel as if he were my rival, as if I should like to win some victory over him. It galls me to think that perhaps Clare will marry him—a man no more worthy of her—— But, of course, the match would be suitable, as people call it, *now*"

"Say you don't like it, Edgar," said Mr. Fielding, with sudden warmth. "Clare, you may be sure, if she ever neglected your wishes, will not neglect them now."

Edgar shook his head; a certain sadness came into the meditative smile which had been on his face. "I believe she loves him," he said, and then

was silent, feeling even in that moment that it was not for Clare's good he should say more. No; it was not for him to lay any further burdens upon his sister. His sister! "I *must* think of her as my sister," he said aloud, defending himself, as it were, from some attack. "It is like my Christian name. I can't give that up, and I can't give her up—in idea, I mean; in reality, of course, I will."

"The man who would ask you to do so would be a brute," cried Mr. Fielding.

"No man will ask me to do so," said Edgar. "I don't fear that; but time, and distance, and life. But you are old—you will not forget me. You will stand by me, won't you, to the last!"

The good Rector was old, as Edgar said; he could not bear any more. He sat down on the roadside, and covered his face with his handkerchief. And the tears came to Edgar's eyes. But the suffering was his own, not another's; therefore they did not fall.

Thus they separated, to meet again in the evening at the dinner, to which Edgar begged the Rector to ask Dr. Somers also. "It will be my last dinner," he said, with a smile; and so went away—with something of his old look and manner restored to him—home.

Home! He had been the master of everything,

secure and undoubting, three days ago. He was the master yet to the gamekeeper, who took off his hat in the distance ; to Wilkins, who let him in so respectfully ; even to Arthur Arden, who watched him with anxious curiosity. How strange it all was ! Was he playing in some drama not comprehended by his surroundings, or was it all a dream ?

It seemed a dream to the Rector, who hurried home, not knowing what to think, and sent for Dr. Somers, and went over it all again. Could it be true ? Was the boy mad ? What did it mean ? They asked each other these questions, wondering. But in their hearts they knew he was not mad, and felt that his revelation was true. And so all prepared itself for the evening, when everything should be made public. A sombre cloud fell over Arden to everybody concerned. The sun looked sickly, the wind refused to blow. The afternoon was close, sultry, and threatening. Even Nature showed a certain sympathy. She would say her "hush" no longer, but with a gathering of clouds and feverish excitement awaited the catastrophe of the night.

CHAPTER XVII.

AND yet amid all this excitement and lurid expectation, how strange it was to go through the established formulas of life : the dinner, the indifferent conversation, the regulated course of dishes and of talk ! Mr. Fazakerly made his appearance, very brisk and busy as usual. He had come away hurriedly, in obedience to Edgar's summons, from the very midst of the preparations for a great wedding, involving property and settlements so voluminous that they had turned the heads of the entire firm and all its assistants. Fortunately he was full of this. The bride was an heiress, with lands and wealth of every description—the bridegroom a poor Irish peer, with titles enough to make up for the money which was being poured upon him ; and the lawyer's whole soul was lost in the delightful labyrinth of wealth—this which was settled upon the lady, that which was under the control of the husband. He talked so much on the subject, that it was some time before he perceived the pre-occupied

faces of all the rest of the company. The only one thoroughly able to talk was Dr. Somers, whose mind was never sufficiently absorbed by any one subject to be incapable of others, and who knew everybody, and could discuss learnedly with his old friend upon the property and its responsibilities. Edgar, too, did his best to talk. His excitement had run into a kind of humour which was "only his fun" to Mr. Fazakerly, but which brought tears to the Rector's eyes. He meant to die gaily, poor fellow, and make as little as possible of this supreme act of his life. Clare sat at the head of the table, perfectly pale and silent. She made a fashion of eating, but in reality took nothing, and she did not even pretend to talk. Mr. Fielding by her side was as silent. Sometimes he laid his withered gentle old hand upon hers when she rested it on the table, and he looked at her pathetically from time to time, especially when Edgar said something at which the others laughed. "I wish he would not, my dear—I wish he would not," he would murmur to her. But Clare made no reply. He who was no longer her brother was to her the most absorbing of interests at this moment. She could not understand him. An Arden would have concealed the thing, she thought to herself, or if he had been forced to divulge it, would have done it with unwilling

abruptness and severity, defying all the world in the action. But the bitter pride which would have felt itself humbled to the dust by such a revelation did not seem to exist in Edgar. If there was in him a certain desperation, it was the gay desperation, the pathetic light-heartedness of a man leading a forlorn hope. He defied nobody, but faced the world with a smile and a tear—a man wronged, but doing right—a soul above suspicion. And Clare was asking herself eagerly, anxiously, what would be the difference it would make to him. It would make a horrible difference—more, far more, than he in his sanguine soul could understand. His friends would drop off from him. In her knowledge of what she called the world, Clare felt but too certain of this. The dependants who had hitherto hung upon his lightest word would become suddenly indifferent, and she herself—his sister—what could she do? Clare was aware that even she, in outward circumstances, must of necessity cease to be to him what she had been. She was not his sister. They could no longer remain together—no longer be each other's close companions; everything would be changed. Even if she continued as she was, she would be compelled to treat Edgar with the ceremonies which are universally thought to be necessary between a young

woman and a young man. If she continued as she was? Were she to marry, the case would be different. As a married woman, he might be her brother still. And yet how could she marry, as it were, on his ruin; how could she build a new fabric of happiness over the sacked foundations of her brother's house? Her brother, and yet not her brother—a stranger to her! Clare's brain reeled, too, as she contemplated his position and her own. She was not capable of feeling the contrast between Edgar's playful talk and the precipice on which he was standing. She was too much absorbed in a bewildering personal discussion what he was to do, what she was to do, what was to become of them all.

Arthur Arden was at her other hand. He was growing more and more interested in the situation of affairs, and more and more began to feel that something must be in it of greater importance than he had thought. Clare never addressed a word to him, though he was so near to her. Her eyes were fixed on the other end of the table, where Edgar sat. Her lips trembled with a strange quiver of sympathy, which seemed actually physical, when her brother said anything. She looked too far gone in some extraordinary emotion to be able to realise what was going on. When Arthur spoke she did

not hear him. She had to be called back to herself by Mr. Fielding's soft touch upon her hand before she noticed anything, except Edgar. "You seem very much interested in what Mr. Fazakerly is saying. Do you know this bride he is talking of?" Arthur said, trying to draw her attention. "Clare, my love, Mr. Arden is speaking to you; he is asking if you know Miss Monypenny," said the Rector, with a warning pressure from his thin fingers. "Oh, I beg your pardon; I did not hear you," Clare would reply, but she made no answer to the question. Her attention would stray again before it was repeated. And then Mr. Fielding gave Arthur Arden an imploring glance across the table. It seemed to ask him to spare her—not to say anything—to leave her to herself. "She is not well to-night," the Rector said, softly, with tears glistening in his old eyes. What did it mean? Arthur asked himself. It must be something worse than he had thought.

The silence at the other end of the table struck Mr. Fazakerly, as it seemed, all at once. He gave two or three anxious looks in the direction of Clare. "Your sister does not look well, Mr. Edgar," he said. "We can't afford to let her be ill, she who is the pride of the county. After Miss Monypenny's, I hope to have her settlements to prepare. You will not be allowed to keep her long, I promise you.

But I trust she is not ill. Doctor, I hope you have been attending to your duty. Miss Arden can't be allowed, in all our interests, to grow so pale."

"Miss Arden is not in the way of consulting me on such subjects," said the Doctor. "She has a will of her own, like everybody belonging to her. I never knew such a self-willed race. When they take a thing into their heads there is no getting it out again, as you will probably find, Fazakerly, before you are many hours older. I have long known that there was a disposition to mania in the family. Oh, no, not anything dangerous—monomania—delusion on one point."

"I never heard of it before," said Mr. Fazakerly, promptly, "and I flatter myself I ought to know about the family if any one does. Monomania! Fiddlesticks! Why, look at our young friend here. I'll back him against the world for clear-seeing and common sense."

"He has neither the one nor the other," said Dr. Somers, hotly. "I could have told you so any time these ten years. He may have what people call higher qualities; I don't pretend to pronounce; but he can't see two inches before his nose in anything that concerns his own interest; and as for common sense, he is the most Quixotic young idiot I ever knew in my life."

“Don’t believe such accusations against me,” said Edgar, with a smile. “Your own opinion is the right one. I don’t pretend to be clever ; but if there is anything I pique myself upon, it is common sense. This is the best introduction we could have to the business of the evening. It is not anything very convivial, and it may startle you, I fear. Perhaps we had better finish our wine first, Doctor, don’t you think ?”

“What is the matter ?” said Mr. Fazakerly. “Now I begin to look round me, you are all looking very grave. I don’t know what you mean by these signs, Mr. Fielding. Am I making indiscreet observations ? What’s the matter ? God preserve us ! you all look like so many ghosts !”

“So we are—or at least some of us,” said Edgar, “ghosts that a puff of common air will blow away in a moment. The fact is, I have something very disagreeable to tell you. But don’t look alarmed, it is disagreeable chiefly to myself. To one of my guests at least it will be good news. It is simple superstition, of course, but I can’t tell you while you are comfortable, taking your wine. I should like you not to be quite at your ease. If you were all seated in the library, on hard chairs, for example——”

“Edgar !” said Clare, in a sharp tone of pain.

Dr. Somers laid a hand on his arm. "Don't overdo it," he said, with something between remonstrance and sympathy. The Rector stood covering his eyes with his hands. At all this Arthur Arden looked on with keen and eager interest, and Mr. Fazakerly with the sharpest, freshly-awakened curiosity, not knowing evidently what to make of it. Arthur's comment was of a kind that made the heart jump in his breast. The secret, whatever it was, had been evidently confided both to the Doctor and the Rector. They were reasonable men, not likely to be affected by a foolish story; yet they both, it was apparent, considered it something serious. A hundred pulses of impatience and excitement began to beat within him. And yet he could not, with any regard to good taste or good feeling, say a word.

"Don't be afraid," said Edgar; "it is not bravado. What I have to say is very serious, but it is not disgraceful—at least to me. There is no reason why I should assume a gloom which is not congenial to myself, nor natural so far as others are concerned. As it has been mentioned so early, perhaps it is better not to lose any time with preliminaries now. Will you come with me to the library? The proofs of what I have to say are there. And without any further levity, I would rather speak to you in that room than in this."

When he had said this, without waiting to hear Mr. Fazakerly's amazed exclamations, Edgar walked quietly to the other end of the table and offered his arm to Clare. Before she took it, she joined her hands together, and looked up beseechingly in his face. He shook his head, with a tender smile at her, and drew her hand within his arm. This dumb show was eagerly observed by Arthur Arden at her left hand. By this time he was so lost in a maze that he no longer permitted himself to think. What was the meaning of it all? Was the boy a fool to give in, and throw up his arms at once? He had not, it was evident, even spoken to Fazakerly first, as any man in his senses would have done. For once in his life Arthur was moved to a disinterested sentiment. Even yet, after all that had been said, he had no real hope that any advantage was coming to himself; and something moved him to interfere to save an unnecessary exposure. A certain compassion for this candid foolish boy—a compassion mingled with some contempt—had arisen in his heart.

“Arden,” he said hastily, “look here, talk it over with Fazakerly first. I don't know what cock-and-a-bull story you have got hold of, but before you make a solemn business of it, for Heaven's sake talk it over with Fazakerly first.”

Edgar put out his hand, without at first saying a word. It took him nearly half a minute (a long interval at that crisis) to steady his voice. "Thanks," he said. "It is no cock-and-bull story; but I thank you for thinking, and saying that. Come and hear what it is—and, for your generosity, thanks."

"It was not generosity," answered Arthur, under his breath. He was abashed and confounded by the undeserved gratitude. But he made no further attempt to detain the procession, which set out towards the library. Edgar placed Clare in a chair when he had reached it. He put her beside himself, and with a movement of the hand invited the others to seat themselves. The table had been prepared, the lamp was burning on it, and before one of the chairs was already laid a packet of letters directed to B. Fazakerly, Esq. Edgar meant that his evidence should be seen before he told his tale.

"Will you take possession of these," he said, seating himself at the end of the table. "These are my proofs of what I am going to tell you; and it is so strange that you will need proofs. My sister—I mean Miss Arden—now seated beside me—found these papers. They have thrown the strangest light upon my own life, and upon that of my predecessor here."

“Your father?” said Mr. Fazakerly, with a glance of dismay.

“I shall have to go back to the time when the late Squire was married,” said Edgar. “I beg you to wait just for a few minutes and hear my story, before you ask for any explanations. It has been commonly supposed, I believe, that the reason for the treatment I received during my childhood and youth, was that Squire Arden had been led to doubt whether I was his son, and to think my mother—I mean Mrs. Arden—unfaithful to him. This was a great slander and calumny, gentlemen. The reason Squire Arden was unkind to me was that he knew very well I was neither his son nor Mrs. Arden’s, but only an adopted child.”

There was a murmur and movement among the guests. Arthur Arden rose up in his bewilderment, and remained standing, staring at the man who had thus declared himself to be no Arden; and Mr. Fazakerly cried out loudly, “Nonsense; no! no! no! I know a great deal better. The boy’s brain is turned. Don’t say another word.”

“I asked you to hear me out,” said Edgar, whose colour and spirit were rising. “I told you I should have to go back to the time when Squire Arden married. He married a lady in very delicate health—or else she fell into bad health after their marriage.

Five years afterwards the doctors told him that he had no chance whatever of having any children. His wife was too ill for that; but not ill enough to die. She was likely to live, indeed, as long as any one else, but never to give him an heir. He hated, I can't tell why, his next of kin. I am not here to excuse him, but I believe there were excuses, for that—and after some hesitation he formed the plan of adopting a child, giving it out to be his own, and born abroad. The manner in which he carried out this plan is to be found in the packet in Mr. Fazakerly's hands; and I am the boy whom he adopted. I can't quite tell you," Edgar continued, with the faint smile which had so often during three days past quivered about his lips, "who I am, but I am not an Arden. I am an impostor; and my cousin—I beg his pardon—Mr. Arthur Arden, is the proprietor of this place and all that is in it. He will allow me, I am sure, to retain his place for the moment, simply to make all clear."

"To make all clear!" gasped Arthur. Clear! as if everything in heaven and earth was not confused by this extraordinary revelation, or could ever be made clear again.

"He must be mad," said Mr. Fazakerly, loudly. And yet there went a thrill round the table—a

feeling which nobody could resist—that every word he said was true.

“I have not sought any further,” said Edgar. “These letters have contented me, which disclose the whole transaction; but everybody knows as well as I do the after particulars. How Mr. Arden slighted me persistently and continuously—and yet how, without losing a moment when I came of age, he made use of me to provide for my—for Miss Arden. The fact that Old Arden was settled upon her, away from me, is of itself a corroborating evidence. Everything supports my story when you come to think of it. It makes the past clear for the first time.”

And then there was a pause, and they all looked at each other with blank astonishment and dismay. At least Mr. Fazakerly looked at everybody, while the others met his eye with appealing looks, asking him, as it were, to interfere. “It cannot be true—it is impossible it should be true,” they murmured, in their consternation. But it was Clare who was the first to speak.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLARE rose up instinctively, feeling the solemnity of the occasion to be such that she could not meet it otherwise. She was paler than ever, if that was possible — marble white — with great blue eyes, pathetically fixed upon the little audience which she addressed. She put one hand back feebly, and rested it on Edgar's shoulder to support herself. "I want to speak first," she said. "There is nobody so much concerned as me. It was I who found those papers, as my brother says. I found them, where I had no right to have looked, in an old bureau which did not belong to me, which I was looking through for levity and curiosity, and because I had nothing else to do. It is my fault, and it is I who will suffer the most. But what I want to tell you is, that I don't believe them. How could any one believe them? I was brought up to love my father, and if they are true my father was a—was a—— I cannot say the word. Edgar asks me to give up everything I have in life when

he asks me to believe in these letters. Oh, all of you, who are our old friends! you knew papa. Was he such a man as that? Had he no honour, no justice, no sense of right and wrong in him? You know it would be wicked to say so. Then these papers are not true."

"And I know they are not true in other ways," cried Clare, flushing wildly as she went on. "If Edgar was not my brother, do you think I could have felt for him as I do? I should have hated him, had he been an impostor, as he says. Oh, he is no impostor! He is not like the rest of us—not like us in the face—but what does that matter? He is a thousand times better than any of us. I was not brought up with him to get into any habit of liking him, and yet I love him with all my heart. Could that be anything but nature? If he were not my true brother, I would have hated him. And, on the contrary, I love him, and trust him, and believe in him. Say anything you please—make out what you please from these horrible letters, or any other lie against him; but I shall still feel that he is my own brother—my dearest brother—in my heart!"

Clare did not conclude with a burst of tears, solely because she was past weeping. She was past herself altogether; she was not conscious of any-

thing but the decision about to be come to—the verdict that was to be given by this awful tribunal. She sank back into her chair, keeping her eyes fixed upon them, too anxious to lose a single gesture or look. “Bring her some water,” said Dr. Somers; “give her air, Edgar; no, let her alone—let her alone; that is best. Just now, you may be sure, she will take no harm.”

And then there came another pause—a pause in which every sound seemed to thud and beat against the anxious ears that waited and listened. Arthur Arden had taken his seat again. He was moved, too, to the very depths of his being. He covered his face with his hands, unable to look at the two at the head of the table, who were both gazing at the company waiting for their fate. Edgar had taken Clare’s hand, and was holding it fast between his own. He was saying something, of which he was not himself conscious. “Thanks, Clare! courage, Clare!” he was repeating at intervals, as he might have murmured any other babble in the excitement of the moment. Mr. Fazakerly was the only one who stirred. He broke open the seals of the packet with agitated haste, muttering also under his breath. “Parcel of young fools!” was what Mr. Fazakerly was saying. He let the papers drop out in a heap upon the table, and

picked up one here and one there, running it over with evident impatience and irritation. Then he tossed them down, and pushed his spectacles off his forehead, and wrathfully regarded the little company around him. "What am I expected to do with these?" he asked. "They are private letters of the late Mr. Arden, not, so far as I am aware, brought before us by any circumstances that call for attention. I don't know what is intended to be done with them, or who produces them, or why we are called together. Mr. Edgar, I think you might provide better entertainment for your old friends than a mare's nest like this. What is the meaning of it all? My opinion is, they had better be replaced in the old bureau from which Miss Clare tells us she fished them out."

But while he said this in his most querulous tone, Mr. Fazakerly picked up the papers one by one, and tied them together. His irritation was extreme, and so was his dismay, but the last was uppermost, and was not easy to express. "If these had come before me in a proper way," he went on, "of course I should have taken all pains to examine them and see what they meant; but unless there is some reason for it—some object, some end to be gained—I always object particularly to raking up dead men's letters. I have known endless mischief

made in that way. The chances are that most men do quite enough harm in their lifetime, or at least in a lawful way by their wills and so forth, after their death, without fishing up every scrap of rancour or folly they may have left behind them. Mr. Edgar, you have no right that I know of to go and rummage among old papers in order to prejudice yourself. It is the merest nonsense. I can't, for my part, consent to it. I don't believe a word of it. If anybody else takes it up, and I am called upon to defend you, of course I will act to the best of my ability; but in the meantime I decline to have anything to do with it. Take them away——”

Mr. Fazakerly thrust the tied-up parcel towards his client. Of course, he knew very well that the position he took up was untenable after all that had been said, but his irritation was real, and the idea of thus spoiling a case went to his very heart. He pushed it along the table; but, by one of those curious accidents which so often surpass the most elaborate design, the little packet which had been the cause of so much trouble, instead of reaching Edgar, stopped short in front of Arthur Arden, who was still leaning on the table, covering his face with his hand. It struck him lightly on the elbow, and he raised his head to see what it was. It was all so strange that the agitated company was moved

as by a visible touch of fate. Arthur stared at it stupidly, as if the thing was alive. He let it lie, not putting forth a finger, gazing at it. Incredible change of fortune lay for him within the enclosure of these faded leaves; yet he could not secure them, could not do anything, was powerless, with Clare's eyes looking at him, and the old friends of the family around. His own words came back to his mind suddenly in that pause—"Let him take everything, so long as he leaves me you." And Clare's answer, "Say that again to-morrow." To-morrow! It was not yet to-morrow; and what was he to say?

It was Edgar, however, and not Arthur, who was the first to speak. "If it must be a matter of attack and defence," he said, "the papers are now with the rightful heir, and it is his to pursue the matter further. But I don't want to have any attack or defence. Mr. Arden, will you be so good as to take the packet, and put it in your lawyer's hands. I suppose there are some legal forms to be gone through; but I will not by any act of mine postpone your entrance upon your evident right."

A pause again—not a word said on any side—the three old men looking on without a movement, almost without a breath; and Arthur Arden, with his elbows still resting on the table, and his head turned aside, gazing, as if it were a reptile in his

path, at the packet beside him. How he would have snatched at it had it not been for these spectators! There was no impulse of generosity towards Edgar in his mind. Such an impulse would have been at once foolish and uncalled for. Edgar himself had taken pains to show that he wanted no such generosity—and a man cannot part lightly with his rights. Everything would have been easy enough, clear enough, but for Clare's presence and her words that morning. If he were to do what every impulse of good sense and natural feeling prompted—take up the papers before him and make himself master of a question affecting him so nearly—then no doubt he would lose Clare. He would lose (but that was of small importance) the good opinion of that foolish old Rector. He would create a most unjust prejudice against himself if he showed any eagerness about it, even in the eyes of the doctor and the lawyer, practical men, who knew that justice must prevail; and he would lose Clare. What was he to do? It was cruel, he felt, to put him to such a trial. He kept looking at the papers with his head turned, half of it shadowed over by the hands from which he had lifted it, half of it (his forehead and eyes) full in the light. To his own consciousness, an hour must have passed while he thus pondered. The others thought it

five minutes, though it was not one. But another train of thought rapidly succeeded the first in Arthur's mind. What did it matter, after all, what he did? He could be generous at Edgar's cost, who, he felt sure, would accept no sacrifice. He gave a glance at the young man who was no Arden, who was looking on without anxiety now, with a faint smile still on his face, and a certain bright curiosity and interest in his eyes. It was perfectly safe. There are some people whom even their enemies, even those who do not understand them, can calculate upon, and Edgar was one of these. Arthur looked at him, and saw his way to save Clare and to save appearances, and yet attain fully his will and his rights. He took the packet up, and put it in Clare's lap.

"Here I put my fate and Edgar's," he said, with, in spite of himself, a thrill of doubt in his voice which sounded like emotion. "Let Clare judge between us—it is for her to decide——"

Before Clare could speak, Edgar had taken back the papers from her. "That means," he said, almost gaily, with a laugh which sounded strange to the excited company, "that they have come back to me. Clare has had enough of this. It is no matter of romantic judgment, but one of evidence merely. Mr. Fielding, will you take my sister away? Yes.

I will say my sister still. She does not give me up, and I can't give her up. Arden is little in comparison. Clare, if you could give me a kingdom, you could not do more for me than you have done to-night. Go with Mr. Fielding now——”

She rose up, obeying him mechanically, at once. “Where?” she said. “Edgar, tell me. Out of Arden? If it is no longer yours, it is no longer mine.”

“Hush, dear,” he said, soothing her as if she had been a child—“hush, hush. There is no cause for any violent change. Your kinsman is not likely to be hard upon either me or you.”

“He put the matter into my hands,” she cried, suddenly, with a sob. “O Edgar, listen! Let us go away at once. We must do justice—justice. Let us go and hide ourselves at the end of the world—for it cannot be yours, it is his.”

She stumbled as she spoke, not fainting, but overcome by sudden darkness, bewilderment, failure of all physical power. The strain had been too much for Clare. They carried her out, and laid her on the sofa in the quiet, silent room close by, where no excitement was. How strange to go out into the placid house, to see the placid servants carrying in trays with tea, putting in order the merest trifles! The world all around was unconscious of what was passing—unconscious even under the same roof—

how much less in the still indifferent universe outside. Edgar laughed, as he went to the great open door, and looked out upon the peaceful stars. "What a fuss we are making about it!" he said to his supplanter, whose mind was incapable of any such reflection; "and how little it matters after all!" "Are you mad, or are you a fool?" cried Arthur Arden under his breath. To him it mattered more than anything else in heaven or earth. The man who was losing everything might console himself that the big world had greater affairs in hand—but to the man who was gaining Arden it was more than all the world—and perhaps it was natural that it should be so.

Half-an-hour after the three most concerned had returned to the library, to discuss quietly and in detail the strange story and its evidences. These three were Edgar, Arthur, and Mr. Fazakerly. The Rector sat by Clare's sofa, in the drawing-room, soothing her. "My dear, God will bring something good out of it," he was saying, with that pathetic bewilderment which so many good people are conscious of in saying such words. "It will be for the best, my poor child." He patted her head and her hand, as he spoke, which did her more good, and kept by her—a supporter and defender. The Doctor gave her a gentle opiate, and went away. They

were all, in their vocations, ministering vaguely, feebly to those desperate human needs which no man can supply—need of happiness, need of peace, need of wisdom. The Rector's soft hand smoothing one sufferer's hair; the doctor's opiate; the lawyer's discussion of the value of certain documents, legally and morally—such was all the help that in such an emergency man could give to man.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE others seated themselves once more round the library table. There was a change, however, in their circumstances and position which would have been immediately manifest to any observer. It had been Edgar an hour ago who was the chief person concerned; it was he who had to communicate his story, and to note its effect upon his audience. But now it was Arthur who was the chief; not that he had anything to tell; but all the anxiety had transferred itself to him—all the burden. His brow was heavy with thought and care. He was feverishly eager to read and to hear everything that could be said, and he watched Mr. Fazakerly with the devouring anxiety of one who felt life and death to hang on his lips. "It does not matter what you think or what I think, but what he thinks," he said abruptly when Edgar explained something. His whole attention was bent upon the lawyer. He read the letters in Mr. Fazakerly's look. The chances were he did not himself make out or under-

stand them, but he saw what the other thought of them, and that was enough.

“Softly, softly,” said Mr. Fazakerly; “don’t let us go too fast. I acknowledge these are ugly letters to find; they make a very strong case against the old Squire. He was a man who would stick at nothing to get his own will. I would not say so before your sister, Mr. Edgar, but still it was true. I have known cases in which he did not stick at anything. And there can be no doubt that it affords an instant explanation of his conduct to you. But the law distrusts too clear an explanation of motives—the law likes facts, Mr. Edgar, and not motives. We must go very gently in this difficult path. I will allow that I think this is the late Mr. Arden’s handwriting—for the sake of argument I will allow that; but these letters, you will perceive, all make a proposition. There is nothing in them to prove that the proposition was accepted—not a word—a fact which of itself complicates the matter immensely. We have Mr. Arden’s word for it, without any confirmation—nothing more.”

“I think you mistake,” said Edgar; “there are these other letters which consider and accept the proposal. They are, I think, remarkable letters. The person who wrote them could no doubt be identified. I think they are quite conclusive that.

the proposal was accepted. Look at this, and this, and this——”

“All very well—all very well,” said the lawyer. “Letters signed ‘J. M. ;’ but who is ‘J. M.’? I conclude a woman. I don’t make out what kind of a person at all. There are errors of spelling here and there, which do not look like a lady ; and there is something about the style which is not like an uneducated person. I decline to receive as evidence the anonymous letters of ‘J. M.’”

Arthur Arden followed the speakers with his eyes, and with breathless attention. He turned from one to another, noting even their gestures, the little motions of arm and hand with which they appealed to each other. He was discouraged by Mr. Fazakerly’s tone ; he raised his eyes to Edgar, almost begging him to say something more—to bring forward another argument for his own undoing. It was the strangest position for them both. Edgar had taken upon himself, as it were, the conduct of his adversary’s case ; he was the advocate of the man who was to displace and supersede him. He was struggling with the champion of his own rights for those of his rival, and with the strangest simplicity that rival tacitly appealed to him.

“I don’t understand these matters of detail——”
Edgar began.

“Detail, my dear sir, detail!” said Mr. Fazakerly, “they are matters of principle. If letters like these were to be accepted as affecting the succession to a great property, nobody would be safe. How can I tell who this ‘J. M.’ was? It might be anybody—nobody. She may have written these letters at random altogether. And, besides, there is not a tittle of evidence to connect you with ‘J. M.’ Even supposing the whole correspondence perfectly genuine, which is a thing requiring proof in the first place, how am I to know—how is any one to know—that you are the child referred to? There is, on the contrary, everything against it. You yourself jump at a conclusion. You say you are not like the Ardens, and that your father was unkind to you, and from these two facts you arrive at the astounding conclusion that you are not Mr. Arden’s son. Mr. Edgar, I do not wish to be uncivil, but there is nothing in it. We cannot decide such a question on evidence so slight—— God bless me! what is that?”

The sound was startling enough; but it was only a knock, though an emphatic and determined one, at the door. Edgar rose to open it, and found Wilkins outside endeavouring to hold back an unlooked for visitor. “She would come, sir,” said Wilkins in trouble——

"Is it you, Mrs. Murray?" said Edgar, startled he scarcely knew why; yet somehow not feeling her presence inappropriate. "I am very busy at this moment. I hope Jeanie is not worse——"

She made no attempt to enter the room; but standing outside in the imperfect light, looked anxiously in his face. "I came because I couldna help it," she said slowly, "because I was concerned in my mind about yours and you."

"That was kind," he said with a smile. He opened the door wide, and revealed her standing on the threshold—a dark, commanding figure. "We are busy about very important business," said Edgar; "but still, if you have anything to say to me—if Jeanie is worse——"

"Jeanie is better, or I would not have left her," said the Scotchwoman; and then she put her hand suddenly upon his arm, and drew him towards her. "It's you I am troubled about," she said suddenly, with the hoarseness of great emotion. "I've never got you out of my mind since you said you were in trouble. Oh, my bonnie lad! I have no right to speak, but my heart is in sore pain. Oh, if I could but be of some service to you!"

Edgar never knew how it was—perhaps some trick of words like something he had recently seen—perhaps the passion in her voice—perhaps a

sudden intuition, a touch of nature, warning him of things unknown and unseen. Suddenly he changed the position of affairs, put his hand on her arm, and drew her into the room. "Come," he said, "I want you. Don't hesitate any longer; I have a question to ask you." He had to exercise almost a little force to bring her into the room. She stopped upon the threshold, resisting the pressure of his hand. "No," she said, "no before these strange folk; it was for you I came, and you alone."

"I have something to ask you," said Edgar. "Come in and help me. I think you can."

He led her in unwillingly up to the table. She gave an alarmed and anxious look upon the two people sitting by. Arthur Arden, whose mind was open to everything, looked up and stared at her; but the lawyer, after one hasty glance, took no further notice. He went on reading the papers, shrugging his shoulders at this absurd interruption. In his own mind it was a proof that the story he had just heard was true as the Gospel, and that the young man who admitted every chance comer into his intimacy could not be an Arden. But externally he paid no attention. It was not his business to see, but to be blind. Arthur Arden was in a very different mood; everything was important to him—he caught at the faintest indications of mean-

ing, and was on the outlook eagerly for any incident. He watched closely, as Edgar led Mrs. Murray up to the table. He perceived how reluctant she was, how she stood on the defensive, watchful, and guarding herself against surprise. What share could she have in the matter, that all her faculties should be thus on the alert? Edgar's demeanour too was very amazing to the spectator. His eye had brightened—a curious air of quickened interest was in his face; he looked as if he felt himself on the eve of a discovery. He led the old woman up to the table, holding her by the arm. It was a strange scene; the lawyer reading on steadily, taking no notice; the other spectator in the shade, looking on so eagerly—the two figures standing between. The woman had the air of going blindfold to encounter some unknown danger, which, whatever it was, she was prepared to resist. Then Edgar spoke with so much energy and impressiveness that even Mr. Fazakerly paused, and pushed his spectacles up on his forehead, and looked up hurriedly. "Look at these," he said, bringing her close to the open packet of letters—"Look at them, and tell me if you ever saw them before."

Mrs. Murray approached, looking straight before her, keeping, with an evident effort, every sign of emotion from her face. But when her eye fell on

the papers, an extraordinary change came over her. She came to a dead stop—she uttered a low cry—she looked at them, stooping over the table, and threw up her hands with a wild gesture of dismay. And then all at once she recollected herself, stiffened all over, stood desperately erect, with her hands clasped before her, and looked at them all with a dumb defiance, which was wonderful to see.

“What did you say, sir?” she asked. “I am growing old; I am no so quick at the up-take as I once was. I’ve been in this room before, in an hour of great trouble and pain to me, and it works upon my nerves to see it again. Sir, what did ye say?”

And she turned from one to another, severally defying them. Her face had become blank of every expression but that one. This was the way in which she betrayed herself. She defied them all. Her face said—Find me out if you can; I will never tell you—instead of wearing, as a more accomplished deceiver would have done, the air of having nothing to find out.

“Have you ever seen these letters before?” said Edgar; and he lifted the papers and put them into her hands. Arthur, who was watching, saw her breast heave. He saw her hand clutch them, as if she would have torn them in pieces. But she dared not tear them in pieces. She looked at them, made

a pretence to read, and stood as if she were an image cut out of stone.

"How should I have seen them?" she said, putting them back on the table as if they had burned her. "My cousin, Thomas Perfitt, is an old servant of your house; but how should its secrets have come to me?"

"Look here," said Edgar, in his excitement; "I believe you know; something tells me that you know. Mr. Fazakerly, give us your attention. You will not serve me by pretending ignorance if you know. I have found out that I am not Mr. Arden's son."

"Softly, softly!" said the lawyer, putting his hand on Edgar's arm. "That is mere assertion on your part; there is no proof."

"Hear me out," cried Edgar. "I am speaking from myself only. I am certain I am not Mr. Arden's son, nor Mrs. Arden's son. I am a stranger altogether to the race. To me these letters prove it fully. For his own evil ends, whatever they may have been, the master of this house adopted me—perhaps bought me——"

Here there was another interruption. Mrs. Murray put out her hand suddenly as if to stop him, and gave a cry as of pain; but once more stiffened back into her old attitude, regarding them with the

same defiant look. Edgar paused, he looked her full in the face, he put his hand upon her arm. "You injure me by your silence," he said. "Speak! Are you my—— Am I——?" His voice shook, his whole frame trembled. "You are something to me," he cried, looking at her. "Speak, for God's sake! Was it you who wrote these letters? You know them—you recognised them. It is for my benefit that you should speak. Answer me!—the time is past for concealment. Tell me what you know."

Mrs. Murray's lips moved, but no sound came; she looked from one to another with rapid eager looks but the defiance in her face did not pass away. At last her voice burst out aloud with an effort. "Let me sit down," she said; "I am growing old, and I am weary with watching, and I cannot stand upon my feet." The three men beside her leant forward to hear these words, as if a whole revelation must be in them, so highly were they excited. When it became apparent that she revealed nothing, even Mr. Fazakerly was so much disturbed as to push his chair away from the table, and to give his whole attention to the new actor in the scene. Edgar brought her a seat, and she sat down among them with an air of presiding over them, and with a strange knowledge of the crisis, and all its particulars which seemed natural at the

moment, and yet was proof above all argument that she was not unprepared for the disclosure that had been made to her. There was no surprise in her face. She was greatly agitated, and evidently restraining herself with an effort that was almost superhuman; but she was not astonished, as a stranger would have been. This fact dawned upon the lawyer with curious distinctness after the first minute. Edgar was baffled in his appeal, and Arthur wanted the power to make use of his observations. But Mr. Fazakerly saw, and watched, and had all his wits about him. And neither at that moment nor at any other did the old solicitor of the Ardens, the depository of all the family secrets, forget that the reigning Squire, whether he were the rightful heir or not, was his client, and that he was retained for the defence.

“Mr. Edgar,” said Mr. Fazakerly, “and Mr. Arthur, you are both too much interested to manage this properly. You take it for granted that everything bears upon the one question, which this good lady, of course, never heard of before. Leave her with me. If she knows anything—which is very unlikely—she will inform me in confidence. Of course, whatever I find out shall be disclosed to you at once,” he added, with a mental reservation. “Leave it to me.”

But whether that could have been done or not was never put to the test. As he finished speaking, Wilkins came to the door hastily. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but some folks is come from the village, asking if one Mrs. Murray is here. I beg your pardon, I'm sure, for interrupting——"

The old Scotchwoman rose up suddenly in the midst of them with a cry of fear, which she no longer attempted to restrain.

"Is it my Jeanie?" she exclaimed. "Oh, good Lord, good Lord, I'm paying dear, dear!"

"I must go with her," said Edgar, in his excitement. Something in his face, some strange likeness never perceived before, startled both his companions. Arthur Arden rose too. He did not care about Jeanie. He had forgotten, in this greater excitement, that he was guilty in regard to the girl. All he thought of was to follow this new clue—to see them together—to watch the new resemblance he had found out in Edgar's face.

CHAPTER XX.

JEANIE was lying propped up on pillows, struggling for breath. Her face, which had always been like that of an angel, was more visionary, more celestial than ever; the golden hair, which had always been so carefully braided, hung about her head like a halo. It was hair which fell in soft, even tresses, not standing on end or struggling into rebellious curls: everything about her was soft, harmonious, submissive. Her eyes were full of light, enlarged, with that fatal breadth and fulness which generally has but one meaning. A little flush of fever on her cheeks kept up the appearance of health. Her pretty lips were parted with the panting, struggling breath. Dr. Somers stood at her bedside, looking very grave. Sally Timms sat crying in a corner. Mrs. Hesketh came to the door to meet the poor grandmother, with her apron at her eyes. "She was took bad half-an-hour after you went—just about when you'd have got to the Hall; and called and called till it made you sick to hear—'Granny!

granny! granny!’—never another word. Oh, I’m thankful, Missis, as you’ve come in time.”

“Half-an-hour after I left!” said Mrs. Murray; “when I was denying the truth. Oh, me that thought to hide it from the Lord!—me that thought she was better, and He couldna go back! And the angel cried upon me, Granny! granny! Lad, do you hear that!—I have lost my Jeanie for you!”

She put her hand upon Edgar’s shoulder as she spoke. Her face was white and ghastly with her despair. She thrust him from her, almost with violence. “Oh, let me never see you more! Oh, let me never see you more! I have lost my Jeanie for you!”

“Is there no hope?” said Edgar, clutching Dr. Somers by the arm. He had given way to the mother, to let her approach the bed, and now stood behind with a face so grave and grieved that any answer seemed unnecessary. He shook his head; and then, after a little interval, spoke.

“I know no reason why this should have come on. Some agitation which I cannot explain. There is no hope, unless it can be calmed somehow. The grandmother may do it, or perhaps——”

Dr. Somers turned round and looked the newcomers in the face. Was it possible that the inno-

cent creature dying before his eyes could have loved either of these men? Arthur Arden was the kind of man to pursue an intrigue anywhere, and he had singled out Jeanie. And Edgar was young and well-looking, and the chief object of interest to the village. Could her eye or her heart have been caught by one of them. Why were they both here? The Doctor's mind was full of the one remaining chance. He looked at Edgar again, whose face was full of emotion; he had his heart in his eyes; he was always sympathetic, always ready to feel for any sufferer. The Doctor mused over it a little, watching keenly the approach of the grandmother to the bedside. Mrs. Murray went to her child as calmly as if she had never known a disturbing feeling in her life. She bent over her like a dove over her nest. "My bairn! my bonnie woman! my Jeanie!" she murmured; but the patient was not stilled. The Doctor looked anxiously on, and then he yielded to an impulse, which he could not have explained. He took Edgar by the shoulder and drew him forward. "Go and speak to her," he said. "I!" whispered Edgar, astonished. "Go and speak to her," cried the Doctor, in tones scarcely audible, yet violently imperative, and not to be disobeyed. The young man, deeply moved as he was, went forward doubt-

fully, longing and yet afraid. What could he say? What could he do? He did not understand the yearning that was in his heart towards this little suffering girl. He had no sense of guilt towards her, had never harmed her, one way or another. He longed to go and take her in his arms, and carry her away to some halcyon place where there would be rest. Dying was not in his thoughts; but Edgar, too, was weary of agitation, and suffering, and distress. He had suffered, and he had not come to the end of his sufferings. Oh, to be able to escape somewhere, to carry away poor Jeanie, to lay her down in some cool valley, in some heavenly silence! Tears were in his eyes. He thought of her, and of Clare, and Gussy, all mingled together—all whom he loved best. He went up to the bedside, behind the old woman who had thrust him away so passionately, yet who somehow belonged to him too. "Jeanie," he said, in a low tremulous voice, "Jeanie, little Jeanie!" The other spectators instinctively fell back, perceiving, they could not tell how, that this was an experiment which was being tried. Jeanie's panting breath was hushed for a moment; she made a distinct effort, half raising herself. "Who was that; who was that?" she cried. ("Speak again," said Dr. Somers, once more, in that imperative, violent whisper behind.)

"Jeanie," said Edgar, advancing another step, "Do you know me? Speak to me, Jeanie!"

She gave a great cry. She threw herself forward, opening her arms; her face blazed as with a sudden light of joy. "Willie! Willie! Willie!" she cried, as on the first night when she had seen Edgar from her window, and, leaning half out of her bed, threw herself into his arms.

An awful pause ensued. Mrs. Murray kneeled down by the bedside, and with her face raised, and two big tears flowing slowly down her cheeks, lifted up her clasped hands and prayed. Her eyes were fixed upon Jeanie, but she did nothing to detach her from the arms in which, as the spectators thought, she would certainly die. Dr. Somers held them all back. He held up his hand so that no one moved. He stood watching the pair thus strangely clasping each other, standing close behind Edgar, to give aid if necessary, with one finger laid softly on Jeanie's wrist. Was it for life, was it for death? Even the women, who had been looking on, stole softly forward, with all the interest which attends the crisis of a tragedy, staying the tears which had flowed in a kind of mechanical sympathy at the apparent approach of death. They comprehended that death had been stayed at least for the moment, and they did not know how. As for

Edgar, he stood in this unexpected and innocent embrace, feeling the soft weight upon his breast, the soft, feeble arm round him, the velvet-soft lips on his cheek, with an indescribable emotion. "If she lives, I will be her brother. I am her brother from this hour," he said to himself. He held her fast, supporting her, with thoughts in which not a single shade of evil mingled. Jeanie was sacred to him. He did not understand what had moved her. He had, indeed, forgotten, in this sudden change of all his thoughts, the suspicions he had of her mother. He thought only that she had cast herself upon his support and protection, and that henceforward she was to him as the sister he had lost.

"Lay her back gently. Stand by her—her strength is failing," said the Doctor's quick voice in his ear. "Softly, softly! Stand by her. Now the wine—she will take it from you. Edgar, life and death are on your steadiness. Support her—give her the wine—now—now—"

She took it from him, as Dr. Somers said. She smiled on him, and drew his hand feebly with both hers till she had placed it under her cheek. Then she said "Willie!" again in a faint whisper like a sigh, and fell asleep sweetly and suddenly, while they all watched her—fell asleep, not in death but in life,

with Edgar's hand supporting her child-like, angel-like face.

Then Mrs. Murray rose from her knees. "I must speak," she said, with a gasp; "if I did not speak now, I would repent and tempt the Lord again. Him that's standing there is Jeanie's near kin—no her brother, as my bonnie lamb thinks he is—but near, near of kin, and like, like to him that's gane. And I am his mother's mother, a guilty woman, no worthy of God's grace. I have made my confession, and now I can tempt the Lord no more."

This strange speech fell upon, it seemed, unheeding ears. The indifferent spectators stared, not knowing what it meant. The Doctor was absorbed in watching his patient; and Edgar, in the new and strange position which he was obliged to keep, did not realise what was said. He heard the words, and was conscious of a vague wonder in respect to them, but was too fully occupied, body and mind, to be able to make out what they meant. Only Arthur Arden took them fully into his mind. He could scarcely restrain an exclamation, scarcely keep himself still, when this confirmation of every hope, and explanation of every difficulty, came to his ears. He went out immediately, in the stupor of his delight, and stood at the cottage door, under the

twinkling stars, repeating it over to himself. "Near of kin to Jeanie—near, near of kin." No Arden at all—an alien, of different name and inferior race. And it was he, Arthur, who was Arden of Arden. Could it be true? was it true? The night was dark, relieved only by the stars which throbbed and trembled in the sky. One of them shone over the dark trees of Arden in the distance, as if it were a giant fairy blossom springing out of the foliage. Was the star his, too, as well as the trees? Was all his, really his—the dewy land under his feet, the wide line of the horizon where it extended over the park and the woods—the very sky, with its "lot of stars." His head swam and grew dizzy as the thought grew—all his—house and lands, name and honour. A wild elation took possession of him. All that had happened had been well for him; and there passed across his mind vaguely an echo of that wonderful sentiment with which those who are at ease pretend to console those who suffer. All for the best—had not all been for the best? The accident which almost killed Jeanie—the sudden crisis of illness which had made the watchers send to Arden for her grandmother—all for the best. God had taken the trouble to disturb the order of nature—to wear out the young life to such a thread as might snap at any moment—to wring the old

heart with bitterest pangs of anxiety—all for good to him. Thus the egotist mused; and though he was irreligious, said, with a horrible gratitude, and something like an assumption of piety in his heart, “Thank God!”—Thank God! for all but killing Jeanie—for working havoc in her mother’s breast. It had been all for the best.

Strangely enough, Mrs. Murray, after an interval, followed him out to the door. She grasped him by the arm in her excitement. “I thought once I was indebted to you,” she said. “I thought I should be thankful that you brought my bairn in, carrying her in your arms; but I know now whose blame it was she got her accident. I know now what you would have put into her head if it had not been for her innocence. And it is for you I must ruin my bonnie lad, and cover my name with shame. Oh, the Lord sees if it’s hard or no! But mind you this, man, you will never be his equal if you were to labour night and day—never his equal—nor nigh him. And never think that those that have loved him will stoop down to the like of you.”

She thrust him away, as she spoke, with a scorn that made Arthur wild. What! he the true proprietor of Arden to be dismissed so? He turned to gaze at her as she disappeared, shutting the door upon him. An impulse seized him to throw a stone

at the window—to do something which should show his contempt and rage ; but he did not do it. He thought better of it. He could afford to be magnanimous. He left the place where Jeanie's young life had been put in such jeopardy by his fault, and where he had just concluded that it had been for the best, without seeking for any further news of Jeanie. She might die or live for anything he cared. Her brother was with her, or her cousin, or whatever he was—the fellow who had kept him so long out of Arden. Thus he turned away through the dark village, up the dark avenue, and went home to Arden, where the lights were still burning in all the windows, and the master expected home. It was on his lips to say—"I am master now ; when that fellow comes, do not let him in ;" but in that point too he restrained himself. Fazakerly was in the house, and Clare was in the house. He did not wish to come into collision with either of them. For Edgar, he did not care.

Meantime Edgar stood, fatigued and weakened by the excitement of the day, by Jeanie's bedside, with her cheek resting on his hand. It required all his muscular energy to support him in that strange task. He scarcely ventured to breathe for fear of disturbing her. When he made a little movement, her hands tightened upon his arm as she slept.

The Doctor held wine to his lips, and encouraged him. "You are saving her life," he said; and Edgar smiled and stood fast. He was saving her life—at this moment when his own strength was weakest, his own courage lowest; but it was not he who had endangered her life. The man who was to blame was entering Arden, full of elation and selfish joy, while Edgar stood by the humble bedside saving the life of the almost victim. What a strange contrast it was! But there are some men in the world whose lot it always is to be the ones who suffer and save—and their lot is not the worst in this life. The hours were long as they crept and crept onward to the morning. The Doctor dozed in his chair. Even the old mother slept by snatches in the midst of her watch—but Edgar, elevated by weariness, and weakness, and spent excitement, out of the ordinary regions of fleshly sensation, stood by Jeanie's bedside, and did not sleep. He went over it all in his heart—he felt it was now finally settled somehow—everything confirmed and made certain, though he did not quite know how. He thought of all that had to be given up, with a faint, wan smile upon his lips. This time it was not an opiate, it was a numbness that hung over him, partly physical because of his attitude, but still more spiritual because of the exhaustion of his heart. All was

over—he was a new being, coming painfully into a changed life through bitter pangs, of which he was but half-conscious. And Jeanie slept with her cheek on his hand, and the other living creatures in the cottage watched and slept, and breathed around him. And life and the great universe moved and swam about him, like scenes in a phantasmagoria—one scene dissolving into another, nothing steady or definite in earth or heaven. Sometimes, as if a stray light had caught it, one scene out of the past would suddenly shine out before him, generally something quite unconnected with his present position; and then a strange gleam would fall over the future, over that unknown waste which lay before. Thus the night stole on, till every minute seemed an hour, and every hour a day.

CHAPTER XXI.

ARTHUR ARDEN went up to the house, which he was now convinced was his own, with the strangest mixture of feelings. He was so confused and overwhelmed by all the events of the night, by the fluctuations of feeling to which he had himself been subject, that the exultation which it was natural should be in his mind was kept down. He did exult, but he did it like a man asleep, conscious that he was dreaming. He went in, and found the house all silent and deserted. Mr. Fazakerly had gone to his room; Clare had retired to hers; the Rector had gone home. Nobody but the solemn Wilkins was visible in the house, which began, however, to show a certain consciousness of the excitement within it. The tea-tray, which nobody had looked at, still stood in the drawing-room, lights were left burning everywhere, windows were open, making the flames flutter. It was not possible to mistake that visible impression of something having happened, which shows itself so soon on the mere

external surroundings of people in trouble. "May I make so free as to ask, sir, if ought has gone wrong?" Wilkins asked, standing at the door of the drawing-room, when he had opened it. "Yes, Wilkins, something has happened," said Arthur. It was on his lips to announce the event, not for the solace of Wilkins, but only to assure himself, by putting it into words, that the thing was true; but he restrained the impulse. "You will know it soon," he added, briefly dismissing the man with a slight wave of his hand. Wilkins went downstairs immediately, and informed the kitchen that "something was up. You can all go to bed," he added, majestically. "I'll wait up for master. That Arthur Arden is awful stuck up, like poor relations in general; but master he'll tell me." And thus the house gradually subsided into silence. Wilkins placed himself in the great chair in the hall and went to sleep, sending thrills of suppressed sound (for even in his snores he remembered his place, and kept himself down) through the silent dwelling. Arthur Arden was too much excited to sleep. He remained in the drawing-room, where he had allowed himself to be led by Wilkins. He was too self-absorbed to go from one room to another, to be conscious of place or surroundings. For hours together he paced up and down, going over and over

everything that had passed, and at every change in the scenes which formed before his fancy, stopping to tell himself that Arden was his own. His head swam; he staggered as he walked; his whole brain seemed to whirl with agitation; and yet he walked on and on, saying to himself at intervals, "Arden is mine." How extraordinary it was! And yet, at the same time, he was only the poor relation, the heir presumptive, in the eyes of the world. Even the declaration he had heard was nothing but evidence which might have to be produced in a court of law, which it would take him infinite pains and money, and much waiting and suspense, to establish, should it be necessary to establish it, in legal form. The letters were still in the hands of those most interested to suppress them. The witness whose testimony he had just heard was in their hands, and no doubt might be suborned or sent away. If it were any one but Edgar, he would have felt that all he had heard to-night might be but as a dream, and that his supplanter might still be persuaded by Fazakerly, by Clare, by some late dawning of self-interest, to defend himself. In such a case his own position would be as difficult as could be conceived. He would have to originate a lingering expensive lawsuit, built upon evidence which he could not produce. If he were himself

in Edgar's position, he felt that he could foil any such attack; but Edgar was a fool, a Quixote, a madman; or rather he was a low fellow, of no blood or courage, who would give in without a struggle, who had not spirit enough to strike a blow for his inheritance. By degrees he got to despise him, as he pursued his thoughts. It was want of blood which made him shirk from the contest, not the sense of justice or right, or any fantastic idea of honour. Arthur Arden himself was an honourable man—he did nothing which society could put a mark against, which could stain his reputation among men; but to expose the weakness of his own position, to relinquish voluntarily, not being forced to it, his living and name, and everything he had, in the world!—He calculated upon Edgar that he would do this, and he despised him for it, and concluded in his heart that such cowardice and weakness, though, perhaps, they might be dignified by other names—such as generosity and honour—were owing to the meanness of his extraction, the vulgarity of his nature. No Arden would have done it, he said to himself, with contempt.

At last he threw himself upon a sofa, in that feverish exhaustion which excitement and long abstinence from sleep produce. He had slept little on the previous night, and he had no longer the exu-

berance of youth to carry him over any repeated shortening of his natural rest. He put himself on the sofa where Clare had lain after her faint; but he was in too great a whirl to be able to think of Clare. He propped himself up upon the pillows, and fell into feverish snatches of sleep, often broken, and full of dreams. He dreamt that he was turning Edgar and all his belongings out of Arden. He dreamt that he himself was being turned out—that Clare was standing over him like an inspired prophetess, denouncing woe on his head—that old Fazakerly was grinning in a corner and jibing at him. “You reckoned without your host,” the lawyer said; “or, at least, you reckoned without me. Am I the man to suffer my client to make a fool of himself? Wilkins, show Mr. Arthur Arden the door.” This was what he dreamed, and that the door was thrown open, and a chill air from without breathed on him, and that he knew and felt all hope of Arden was gone for ever. The chill of that outside cold so seized upon him that he awoke, and found it real. It was the hour after dawn—the coldest of the twenty-four. The sun had not yet risen out of the morning mists, and the world shivered in the cold beginning of the day. The door of the room in which he was, was standing wide open, and so was the great hall door, admitting

the cold. In the midst, as in a sketch made in black and white, he saw Edgar standing talking to Wilkins. It struck him with a certain peevish irritation as he struggled up from his pillow, half-awake. "Don't stand there, letting in the cold," he said, harshly. Wilkins, irritable too from the same reason, gave him a hasty answer—"When a servant as has waited all night is letting in of his master, I don't know as folks as might have been in bed has got any reason to complain." Arthur swore an angry oath as he sprang from the sofa. "By —, you shall not stay in this house much longer, to give me your impudence!" "That's as the Squire pleases," said Wilkins, utterly indifferent to the poor relation. Edgar dismissed him with a kindly nod, and went into the drawing-room. He was very pale and worn out with all his fatigues; but he was not irritable. He came in and shut the door. "I wonder you did not go to bed," he said.

"Bed!" said Arthur, rising to his feet. "I wonder who could go to bed with all this row going on. Order that fellow to bring us some brandy. I am chilled to death on this confounded sofa, and you staying out the whole night. I haven't patience to speak to the old villain. Will you give the order now?"

“Come to the other room and I’ll get it for you,” said Edgar. “The man wants to go to bed.”

“If I don’t go to bed, confound them, why can’t *they* wait?” said Arthur. He was but half awake; excited, chilled, anxious, and miserable; altogether in a dangerous mood. But Edgar had his wits sufficiently about him to feel all the unseemliness of a quarrel between them. He took him into the dining-room, and giving him what he asked for left the room with a hurried good night. He was not able for any contention; he went upstairs with a heavy heart. The excitement which had supported him so long was failing. And this last discovery, when he had time to realise it, was not sweet to him, but bitter. He could not tell how that was. Before he had suspected her to be related to him, he had wondered at himself to feel with what confidence he had turned to the old Scotchwoman, of whose noble life Perfitt had told him. It had bewildered him more than once, and made him smile. He remembered now that he had gone to her for advice; that he had consulted her about his concerns; that he had felt an interest in all her looks and ways, which it was now only too easy to explain. He had almost loved her, knowing her only as a stranger, entirely out of his sphere. And now that he knew she was his nearest relation, his

heart recoiled from her. What harm she had done him! She had done her best—her very best—she and Squire Arden together, whose name he loathed—to ruin his life, and make him a wreck and stray in the world. By God's help, Edgar said to himself, he would not be a wreck. But how hard it was to forgive the people who had done it—to feel any charity for them! He did not even feel the same instinctive affection for Jeanie as he had done before. And yet he had saved her life; she had called him her brother, and in utter trust and confidence had been lying on his breast. Poor little Jeanie! Yet his heart grew sick as he thought of her and of the mother, who was his mother too. They were all that was left to him, and his heart rose against them. Sadness unutterable, weariness of the world, a sore and sick shrinking of the heart from everything around him, came upon Edgar. He had kept up so long. He had done all his duty, fulfilled everything that could be required of him. Could not he go away now, and disappear for ever from Arden, and be seen of none who knew him any more?

Such was the dreary impulse in his mind—an impulse which everyone must have felt who has borne the desertion of friends, the real or supposed failure of love and honour—and which here and

there one in the chill heart-sickening pride of despair has given way to, disappearing out of life sometimes, sometimes out of all reach of friends. But Edgar was not the kind of man to break off his thread of life thus abruptly. He had duties even now to hold him fast—a duty to Clare, who, only a few hours ago (or was it years), had called him—bless her!—her true brother, her dearest brother. If he were to be tortured like an Indian at the stake, he would not abandon her till all was done for her that brother could do. And he had a duty even to the man whom he had just left, to remove all obstacles out of his way, to make perfectly plain and clear his title to Arden. His insolence cannot harm me, Edgar reflected, with a smile which was hard enough to maintain. And then there were his own people, his new family, his mother's mother. Poor Edgar! that last reflection went through and through him with a great pang. He could not make out how it was. He had had so kind, so tender a feeling towards her, and now it seemed to him that he shrunk from her very name. Was his name, too, the same as theirs? Did he belong to them absolutely, to their condition, to their manner of life? If it were so, none in the outer world should see him shrink from them; but at this moment, in his retirement, the

thought that they were his, and they only, was bitter to Edgar. He could not face it. It was not pride, nor contempt of their poverty, nor dislike to themselves; but yet the thought that they were his family—that he belonged to them—was a horror to him. Should he go back with them to their Highland cottage?—should he go and desert them, as if he were ashamed? In the profound revulsion of his heart he grew sick and faint with the thought.

And thus the night passed—in wonder and excitement, in fear and trembling of many kinds. When the morning came, Jeanie opened her soft eyes and smiled upon the watchers round her, over all of whom was a cloud which no one understood. “I’ve been in yon awful valley, but I’m come back,” she said, with her pale lips. She had come back; but ah how many hopes and pleasant dreams and schemes of existence had gone into the dark valley instead of Jeanie! The old mother, who had seen so many die, and gone through a hundred heartbreaks, bent over the one who had come back from the grave, and kissed her sadly, with a passion of mingled feelings to which she could give no outlet. “But oh, my bonnie lad!” she said under her breath with a sigh which was almost a groan. She had seen into his heart, though he did not know it.

She had perceived, with a poignant sting of pain, one momentary instinctive shrinking on his part. She understood all, in her large human nature and boundless sympathy, and her heart bled, but she said never a word.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE reader may be weary of hearing of nights which went over in agitation, and mornings which rose upon an excitement not yet calmed down. But it is inevitable in such a crisis as that which we are describing that the excitement should last from one day to another. The same party who had met on the previous night in the library to examine the packet of letters, which had occasioned all this distress and trouble, met again next morning at breakfast. Clare did not appear. She had sent for Edgar in the morning, rousing him out of the brief, uneasy slumber which he had fallen into in broad daylight, after his night of trial. She had received him in her dressing-room, with a white muslin wrapper thrown round her, and her hair hanging about her shoulders, as she would have received her brother. But though the accessories of the scene were carefully retained, there was a little flush of consciousness on Clare's cheek that it was not her brother who was coming to her; and Edgar did not

offer the habitual kiss, but only took her hand in his while she spoke to him. "I cannot come down," she said. "I will not come down again while Arthur Arden is in the house. That is not what I mean; for I suppose, now you have made up your mind, it is Arthur Arden's house, and not ours."

"It is not mine," said Edgar. "Something else happened last night which confirmed everything. It is quite unimportant whether I make up my mind or not. The matter is beyond question now."

"What happened last night?" said Clare eagerly.

"I will tell you another time. We found out, I think, who I really am. Don't ask me any more," said Edgar, with a pang which he could not explain. He did not want to tell her. He would have accepted any excuse to put the explanation off.

Clare looked at him earnestly. She did not know what to say—whether to obey a rising impulse in her heart (for she, too, was a genuine Arden) of impatience at his tame surrender of his "rights"—or the curiosity which prompted her to inquire into the new discovery; or to do what a tender instinct bade her—support him who had been so true a brother to her by one more expression of her affection. She looked up into his face, which began to show signs of the conflict, and that decided her. "You can never be anything less to me than my

brother," she said, leaning her head softly against his arm. Edgar could not speak for a moment—the tears came thick and blinding to his eyes.

"God bless you!" he said. "I cannot thank you now, Clare. It is the only drop of sweetness in my cup; but I must not give way. Am I to say you cannot come down stairs? Am I to arrange for my dear sister, my sweet sister, for the last time?"

"Certainly for this time," said Clare. "Settle for me as you think best. I will go where you please. I can't stay—here."

She would have said, "in Arthur Arden's house," but the words seemed to choke her; for Arthur Arden had not said a word to her—not a word—since he knew——

And thus authorised, Edgar presented himself before the others. He took no particular notice of Arthur Arden. He said calmly, "Miss Arden does not feel able to join us this morning," and took, as a matter of course, his usual place. There was very little said. Arthur sat by sullenly, beginning to feel himself an injured man, unjustly deprived of his inheritance. He was the true heir, wrongfully kept out of his just place: yet the interest of the situation was not his, but clung to the impostor, who accepted ruin with such a cheerful and courageous quiet. He hated him, because even in this point

Edgar threw him quite into the shade. And Arthur felt that he might have taken a much superior place. He might have been magnanimous, friendly, helpful, and lost nothing by it; but even though the impulse to take this nobler part had once or twice visited him, he had not accepted it; and he felt with some bitterness that Edgar had in every way filled a higher *rôle* than himself.

They had finished their silent breakfast when Edgar addressed him. He did it with a marked politeness, altogether unlike his aspect up to this time. He had been compelled to give up the hope that his successor would be his friend, and found there was nothing now but politeness possible between them. "I will inform Mr. Fazakerly at once," he said, "of what took place last night. He will be able to put everything into shape better than we shall. As soon as I have his approbation, and have settled everything, I will take my sister away."

"She is not your sister," said Arthur, with some energy.

"I know that so well that it is unkind of any one to remind me," said Edgar, with sudden tears coming to his eyes; "but never mind. I repeat we will leave Arden to-day or to-morrow. It is easier to make such an arrangement than to break the

natural bonds that have been between us all our lives."

Arthur had made a calculation before he came downstairs. He had taken a false step last night when he adopted an insolent tone to, and almost attempted to pick a quarrel with the man who was saving him so much trouble; but in the circumstances he concluded that it was best he should keep it up. He said abruptly, "Miss Arden is not your sister. I object as her nearest relation. How do I know what use you may make of the influence you have obtained over her? I object to her removal from Arden—at least by you."

Edgar gave Mr. Fazakerly a look of appeal, and then made a strong effort to command himself. "I have nothing to keep now but my temper," he said, with a faint smile, "and I hope I may be able to retain that. I don't know that Mr. Arden's presence is at all needed for our future consultations; and I suppose, in the meantime, as I am making a voluntary surrender of everything, and he could not by legal form expel me for a long time, I am justified in considering this house, till I give it up, to be mine, and not his?"

"Certainly, Arden is yours," said Mr. Fazakerly. "You are behaving in the most unprecedented way. I don't understand what you would be at; but Mr.

Arthur Arden is utterly without power or capability in the matter. All he can do is to inform his lawyer of what he has heard——

“No power in the matter!” cried Arthur. “When I heard that woman confess last night openly that this—this gentleman, who has for so long occupied the place I ought to occupy, was *her* grandson! What do you mean by no power? Is Mr.—— Murray—if that is his name—to remain master of my house, in face of what I heard with my own ears——”

“You are perfectly entitled to bring an action, and produce your witnesses,” said Mr. Fazakerly promptly; “perfectly entitled—and fully justified in taking such a step. But in the meantime Mr. Edgar Arden is the Squire, and in full possession. You may wait to see what his plans are (no doubt they are idiotical in the highest degree), or you can bring an action; but at the present moment you have not the smallest right to interfere——”

“Not in respect to my cousin!” Arthur said, with rising passion.

“Not in respect to anything,” said the lawyer cheerfully.

And then the three stood up and looked at each other—Mr. Fazakerly having taken upon himself the conduct of affairs. It was Arthur only who was

agitated, Edgar having recovered his composure by renunciation of everything, and the lawyer having fully come to himself, out of sheer pleasure in the conflict which he foresaw.

“There have been a great many indiscreet revelations made, and loose talk of all kinds,” Mr. Fazakerly continued; “enough, I don’t doubt, to disturb the ideas of a man uninstructed in such matters. That is entirely your cousin’s fault, not mine; but I repeat you have no power here, Mr. Arthur Arden, either in respect to Miss Clare or to anything else. Mere hearsay and private conversation are nothing. I doubt very much if the case will hold water at all; but if it does, it can only be of service to you after you have raised an action and proved your assertions. Good morning, Mr. Arthur. You have gone too fast and too far.”

And in another moment Arthur was left alone, struggling with himself, with fury and disappointment not to be described. He was as much cast down as he had been elated. He gave too much importance to these words, as he had given to the others. He had thought, without any pity or ruth, that he was to take possession at once; and now he felt himself cast out. He threw himself down in the window seat and gnawed his nails to the quick,

and asked himself what he was to do. A lawsuit, a search for evidence, an incalculable, possibly unrecompensed expenditure—these were very different from the rapid conclusion he had hoped.

“My dear young friend,” said Mr. Fazakerly solemnly, turning round upon Edgar as they entered the library, “you have behaved like an idiot!—I don’t care who tells you otherwise, or if it has been your own unassisted genius which has brought you to this—but you have acted like a fool. It sounds uncivil, but it is true.”

“Would you have had me, as he says, carry on the imposture,” said Edgar, with an attempt at a smile. “Would you have had me, knowing who I am——”

“Pooh! pooh!” said Mr. Fazakerly. “Pooh! pooh! You don’t in the least know who you are. And that is not your business in the least—it is his. Let him prove what he can; you are Edgar Arden, of Arden, occupying a position which, for my part, I think you ought to have been contented with. To make yourself out to be somebody else is not your business. Sit down, and let me hear what you have to say.”

Then the client and the adviser sat down together, and Edgar related all the particulars he had learned. Mr. Fazakerly sobered down out of his

hopeful impatience as he listened. He shook his head and said, "Bad, very bad," at intervals. When he heard what Mrs. Murray had said, and that it was in Arthur Arden's presence, he gave his head a redoubled shake. "Very—bad—indeed," and pondered sadly over it all. "If you had but spoken to me first; if you had but spoken to me first!" he cried. "I don't mean to say I would have advised you to keep it up. An unscrupulous counsellor would have told you, and with truth, that you had every chance in your favour. There was no proof whatever that you were the boy referred to before this Mrs. Murray appeared; and nothing could be easier than to take Mrs. Murray out of the way. But I don't advise that—imposture is not in my way any more than in yours, Mr. Edgar. But at least I should have insisted upon having a respectable man to deal with, instead of that cold-blooded egotist; and we might have come to terms. It is not your fault. You are behaving most honourably—more than that—Quixotically. You are doing more than any other man would have done—and we could have made terms. There could have been no possible objection to that."

"Yes, I should have objected," said Edgar; "I do not want to make any terms——"

"Then what do you mean to do?" cried Mr.

Fazakerly. "It is all very fine to be high-minded in theory, but what are you to do? You have not been brought up to any profession. With your notions, you could never get on in business. What are you to do?"

Edgar shook his head. He smiled at the same time with a half-amused indifference, which drove his friend to renewed impatience.

"Mr. Edgar," he said solemnly, "I have a great respect for you. I admire some of your qualities—I would trust you with anything; but you are behaving like a fool——"

"Very likely," said Edgar, still with a smile. "If that were all! Do you really suppose that with two hands capable of doing a few things, not to speak of a head and some odd scraps of information—do you really suppose a man without any pride to speak of, will be unable to get himself a living? That is nonsense. I am quite ready to work at anything, and I have no pride——"

"I should not like to trust too much to that," said Mr. Fazakerly, shaking his head. "And then there is your sister. Miss Clare loses by this as much as you do. Of course now the entail stands as if you had never taken any steps in the matter, and Old Arden is hers no longer. Are you aware that, supposing her fully provided for by that most

iniquitous bequest, your father left her nothing else? She will be a beggar as well as you."

"You don't mean it!" cried Edgar, with a flush of warm colour rushing over his face. "Say that again! You don't really mean it? Why, then, I shall have Clare to work for, and I don't envy the king, much less the proprietor of Arden. Shake hands! you have made me twice the man I was. My sister is my sister still, and, after all, I am not alone in the world."

Mr. Fazakerly looked at the young man aghast. He said to himself, "There *must* be madness in the family," not recollecting that nothing in the family could much affect Edgar, who did not belong to it. He sat with a certain helpless amazement looking at him, watching how the life rose in his face. He had been very weary, very pale, before, but this news, as it were, rekindled him, and gave him all his energy back.

"I thought it did not matter much what became of me," he said, with a certain joyous ring in his voice, which stupified the old lawyer. "But it does matter now. What is it, Wilkins? What do you want?"

"Please, sir, Lady Augusta Thornleigh and the young ladies is come to call," said Wilkins. "I'd have shown them into the drawing-room, but

Mr. Arthur Arden he's in the drawing-room. Shall they come here?"

Edgar's countenance paled again as suddenly as it had grown bright. His face was like a glass, on which all his emotions showed. "They must want to see my sister," he said, with a certain longing and wistfulness in his tone.

"It was you, sir, as my lady asked for, not Miss Arden. It's the second one of the young ladies as is with her—Miss Augusta I think they calls her, sir," said Wilkins, not without some curiosity. "They said special as they didn't want to see no strangers—only you."

Edgar rose up once more, his face glowing crimson, his eyes wet and full. "Wherever they please—wherever they please," he said half to himself, with a confused thrill of happiness and emotion. "I am at their orders." He did not know what he expected. His heart rose as if it had wings. They had come to seek him. Was not he receiving compensation, more than compensation, for all his pain?

But before he could give any orders, before Mr. Fazakerly could gather up his papers, or even offer to go away, Lady Augusta herself appeared at the open door.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LADY AUGUSTA came in with a disturbed countenance and traces of anxiety on her brow. She was alone, and though her good heart, and another pleader besides, had impelled her to take this step, she was a little doubtful as to the wisdom of what she was doing, and a little nervous as to the matter generally. She had her character for prudence to keep up, she had to keep the world in ignorance of the danger there had been to Gussy, and of all the pain this business had cost her. And yet she could not let the poor boy, who had been so disinterested and so honourable, go without a word from her—without once more holding out her hand. She said to herself that she could not have done it, and at all events it was quite certain that Gussy would have given her no peace, and would have herself done something violent and compromising, had her mother resisted her determination. “I will be very good,” Gussy had said. “I will say nothing I ought not to say; but he was fond of me, and I

cannot, cannot let him go without a word!" Lady Augusta's heart had spoken in the same tone; but the moment she had yielded, the other side of the question appeared to her, and a hundred fears lest she should compromise her child had taken possession of her mind. It was this which had brought her alone to the library door, leaving Gussy behind. She came forward, almost with shyness, with an air of timidity quite unlike her, and held out both her hands to Edgar, who for his part could scarcely repress an exclamation of disappointment at seeing her alone. "I am so glad to see Mr. Fazakerly with you," Lady Augusta said, taking prompt advantage of this fact, and extending her hand graciously to the lawyer. "I do hope you have dismissed that incomprehensible story you told me altogether from your mind."

"Don't be angry with me," said Edgar, gazing at her wistfully; "but was it with that idea you came here?"

She looked at him, and took in at a glance the change in his appearance, the pathetic look in his eyes, and her heart was touched. "No," she said, "no, my poor boy; it was not that. We came to tell you what we felt—what we thought. Oh, Mr. Fazakerly, have you heard this dreadful story? Is it true?"

“I decline to say what is and what is not true,” said Mr. Fazakerly, doggedly. “I am not here to define truth. Your ladyship may think me very rude, but Mr. Arden is behaving like a fool.”

“Poor boy!” said Lady Augusta; “poor boy!” Her heart was bleeding for him, but she did not know what to do or say.

“You said *we*,” said Edgar. “Some one else came with you. Some one else had the same kind thought. Dear Lady Augusta, you will not take that comfort from me now.”

Lady Augusta paused, distracted between prudence and pity. Then she drew herself up with a tremulous dignity. “Mr. Fazakerly has daughters of his own,” she said. “I am not afraid that he will betray mine. Yes, Mr. Arden, Gussy has come with me. She insisted upon coming. There has never been anything between them,” she added, turning to the lawyer. “There might have been, had he not found out this; but the moment he discovered——, like a true gentleman, as he is——” Here Lady Augusta had to pause to stifle her tears. “And my Gussy’s heart is so warm. She would not let him go without bidding him good-bye. I told her it was not prudent, but she would not listen to me. Of course, it must end here; but our

hearts are breaking, and we could not let him go without one good-bye."

She stopped, with a sob, and once more held out her hand. Poor woman! even at that moment it was more herself than him she bewailed. Standing there in his strength and youth, it did not seem possible to believe that the world could go very badly with him; but how unfortunate she was! Ada first, and then Gussy; and such a son as he would have been—somebody to trust, whatever happened. She held out her hand to him, and drew him close to her, and wept over him. How unfortunate she was!

"And Gussy?" said Edgar eagerly.

"I put her into the little morning-room, Clare's room," said Lady Augusta. "Go to her for a few minutes; Mr. Fazakerly will not think it wrong of me, I am sure. And oh, my dear boy, I know I can trust you not to go too far—not to suggest anything impossible, any correspondence—Edgar, do not try my poor child too far."

He pressed her hand, and went away, with a kind of sweet despair in his heart. It was despair: hope and possibility had all gone out of any dream he had ever entertained on this subject; but still it was sweet, not bitter. Lady Augusta sat silent for some minutes, trying to compose herself. "I beg

your pardon," she said; "indeed I can't help it. Oh, Mr. Fazakerly, could no arrangement be made? I cannot help crying. Oh, what a dear fellow he is! and going away from us with his heart broken. Could nothing be done?—could no arrangement be made?"

"A great many things could be done, if he was not behaving like a fool," said Mr. Fazakerly. "I beg your pardon; but it is too much for me. He is like an idiot; he will hear no reason. Nobody but himself would have taken any notice. Nobody but himself——"

"Poor boy—poor dear boy!" said Lady Augusta. And then she entered into the subject eagerly, and asked a hundred questions. How it had been found out—what he was going to do—what Arthur Arden's position would be—whether there ought not to be some provision made for Edgar? She inquired into all these matters with the eagerness of a woman who knew a great deal about business and was deeply interested for the sufferer. "But you must not suppose there was anything between him and my daughter," she repeated piteously; "there never was—there never was!"

In the meantime, Edgar had gone hastily, with a thrill of sadness and of pleasure which it would be difficult to describe, to the room where Gussy

was. He went in suddenly, excitement and emotion having brought a flush upon his cheeks. She was standing with her back to the door, and turned round as he opened it. Gussy was very much agitated—she grew red and she grew pale, her hands, which she extended to him, trembled, tears filled her eyes. “O Mr. Arden!” was all she was able to say. As for Edgar, his heart so melted over her that he had hard ado to refrain from taking her into his arms. It would have been no harm, he thought—his embrace would have been that of a brother, nothing more.

“It is very, very good of you to come,” he said, his own voice faltering and breaking in spite of him. “I don’t know how to thank you. It makes me feel everything so much less—and so much more.”

“I could not help coming,” said Gussy, with a choking voice. “O Mr. Arden, I am so grieved—I cannot speak of it—I could not let you go without—without——”

She trembled so that he could not help it—he drew her hand through his arm to support her. And then poor Gussy, overwhelmed, all her self-restraint abandoning her, drooped her head upon his shoulder as the nearest thing she could lean upon, and burst into tears.

There had never been a moment in her life so

sad—or in either of their lives so strangely full of meaning. A few days ago they were all but affianced bride and groom, likely to pass their entire lives together. Now they met in a half embrace, with poignant youthful feeling, knowing that never in their lives would they again be so near to each other, that never more could they be anything to each other. It was the first time, and it would be the last.

“Dear Gussy,” Edgar said, putting his arm softly round her, “God bless you for being so good to me. I will cherish the thought of you all my life. You have always been sweet to me, always from the beginning; and then I thought—— But, thank God, you are not injured. And thank you a thousand and a thousand times.”

“Oh, don’t, don’t!” cried Gussy. “Don’t thank me, Mr. Arden. I think my heart will break.”

“Don’t call me Mr. Arden; call me Edgar now; it is the only name I have a right to; and let me kiss you once before we part.”

She lifted up her face to him, with the tears still wet upon her cheeks. They loved each other more truly at that moment than they had ever done before; and Gussy’s heart, as she said, was breaking. She threw her arms round his neck, and clung to him. “O Edgar, dear! Good-bye, good-bye!” she

sobbed. And his heart, too, thrilled with a poignant sweetness, ineffable misery, and consolation, and despair.

This was how they parted for ever and ever—not with any pretence between them that it could ever be otherwise, or anything that sounded like hope. Lady Augusta's warning was unnecessary. They said not a word to each other of anything but that final severance. Perhaps in Gussy's secret heart, when she felt herself placed in a chair, felt another sudden hot kiss on her forehead, and found herself alone, and everything over, there was a pang more secret and deep-lying still, which felt the absence of any suggestion for the future; perhaps there had flitted before her some phantom of romance, whispering what he might do to prove himself worthy of her—revealing some glimpse of a far-off hope. Gussy knew all through that this was impossible. She was sure as of her own existence that no such thing could be; and yet, with his kiss still warm on her forehead—a kiss which only parting could have justified—she would have been pleased had he said it, only said it. As it was, she sat and cried, with a sense that all was finished and over, in which there lay the very essence of despair.

Edgar returned to the library while Lady Augusta was still in the very midst of her interrogations.

She stopped short at sight of him, making an abrupt conclusion. She saw his eyes full of tears, the traces of emotion in his face, and thanked God that it was over. At such a moment, in such a mood, it would have been so difficult, so impossible to resist him. If he were to ask her for permission to write to Gussy, to cherish a hope, she felt that even to herself it would have been hard, very hard, to say absolutely, No. And her very soul trembled to think of the effect of such a petition on Gussy's warm, romantic, young heart. But he had not made any such prayer; he had accepted the unalterable necessity. She felt sure of that by the shortness of his absence, and the look which she dared scarcely contemplate—the expression of almost solemnity which was upon his face. She got up and went forward to meet him, once more holding out both her hands.

“Edgar,” she said, “God will reward you for being so good and so true. You have not thought of yourself, you have thought of others all through, and you will not be left to suffer alone. Oh, my dear boy! I can never be your mother now, and yet I feel as if I were your mother. Kiss me too, and God bless you! I would give half of everything I have to find out that this was only a delusion, and that all was as it used to be.”

Edgar shook his head with a faint smile. There passed over his mind, as in a dream, the under-thought—If she gave half of all she had to bring him back, how soon he would replace it; how easy, were such a thing possible, any secondary sacrifice would be! But notwithstanding this faint and misty reflection, it never occurred to him to think that it was because he was losing Arden that he was being thus absolutely taken farewell of. He himself was just the same—nay, he was better than he ever had been, for he had been weighed in the balance, and not found wanting. But because he had lost Arden, and his family and place in the world, therefore, with the deepest tenderness and feeling, these good women were taking leave of him. Edgar, fortunately, did not think of that aspect of the question. He kissed Lady Augusta, and received her blessing with a real overflowing of his heart. It touched him almost as much as his parting with Gussy. She was a good woman. She cried over him, as if he had been a boy of her own.

“Tell me anything I can do for you,” she said—“anything, whatever it is. Would you like me to take charge of Clare? I will take her, and we will comfort her as we best can, if she will come with me. She ought not to be here now, while the house is so much agitated, and everything in disorder;

and if there is anything to be done about Mr. Arthur Arden—Clare ought not to be here.”

She had not the heart to say, though it was on her lips, that Clare ought not to be with the man who was no longer her brother. She caught his wistful look, and she could not say the words, though they were on her lips. But her offer was not one to be refused. Edgar—poor Edgar—who had everything to do—to sign his own death-warrant, as it were, and separate himself from everything that was near to him, had to go to Clare to negotiate. Would she go with Lady Augusta? He spoke to her at the door of her room, not entering, and she, with a flush of pain on her face, stood at the door also, not inviting him to go in. The division was growing between them in spite of themselves.

“Would you come to see me at Thorne?” said Clare. “Upon that must rest the whole matter whether I will go or not.”

Edgar reflected, with again that sense of profound weariness stealing over him, and desire to be done with everything. No; he could not go through these farewells again—he could not wear his heart out bit by bit. This must be final, or it was mere folly. “No,” he said; “it would be impossible. I could not go to see you at Thorne.”

“Then I will not go,” said Clare. And so it was

settled, notwithstanding all remonstrances. The more she felt that distance creep between, the more she was determined not to recognise or acknowledge it. Edgar went back to the library and gave his message, and stayed there, restraining himself with an effort, while Mr. Fazakerly gave her ladyship his arm and conducted her to her carriage. Edgar would not even give himself that last gratification; he would not disturb Gussy again, or bring another tear to her eyes. It was all over and ended, for ever and ever. His life was being cut off, thread after thread, that he might begin anew. Thread after thread—only one trembling half-divided strand bound him at all to the old house, and name, and associations. Another clip of the remorseless shears, and he must be cut off for ever. One scene after another came, moving him to the depths of his being, and passed, and was over. The worst was over now—until, indeed, his final parting came, and Clare, in her turn, had been given up. But Clare, like himself, was penniless, and that last anguish might, perhaps, be spared.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CLARE left Arden that same afternoon. She came downstairs with her veil over her face, trembling, yet perhaps hoping to be met upon the way. Even Edgar was not aware of the moment when she took her flight. She had sent her maid to see that there was no one about, and even to herself she kept up the delusion that she wished to see no one—that she was able for no more agitation. So many long hours had passed—a night, a new morning, another day—yet Arthur Arden had not sought her, had not repeated those words which she had bidden him, if he would, repeat. She had made that concession to him in a moment of utter overthrow, when her heart had been overwhelmed by the sense of her own weakness and loneliness—by deepest poignant compassion and love for her brother. She had almost appealed to him to save them all—she had put, as it were, the welfare of the family into his hands. It had been done by impulse—almost against her will—for had she not grievances against

him enough to embitter the warmest love? He had deserted her (she thought) for the merest village girl—a child with a lovely face, and nothing more. He had slighted her, making vain pretences of devotion, spending the time with Jeanie which he might have passed at her side. Yet all this she had forgotten in one moment when her heart was desperate. She had turned to him as to her last hope. She had as good as said—“Because I love you, save us.” Not in words—never in words had she made such a confession. But could he be an Arden and not know that a woman of the house of Arden never asked help or succour but from a man she loved? And yet twenty-four hours had passed, and he had made no sign. She had thought of this all the night. Her heart was sore, and bleeding with a thousand wounds; there did not seem one corner of it that some sword had not stabbed. She had lost her father for ever; she could no longer think of him as she had once done; his image was driven away into the innermost depths of her heart, where she cherished, and wept over, and loved it, but could not reverence any longer. And her brother was her brother no more. He had done nothing to forfeit her love or her respect, but he was not her brother—different blood flowed in his veins. His very best qualities, his virtues and

excellences, were not like the Ardens. He was a stranger to her and her race. Thus Clare was left alone and unsupported in the world. And Arthur! He had wounded her, slighted her, failed to understand her, or, understanding, scorned. Everything seemed to close round her, every door at which she might have knocked for sympathy. Her heart was sick, and sore, and weary with suffering, but not resigned. How could she ever be resigned to give up everything that was dearest to her, and all that made her prize her life?

It was for this reason that she stole out in the dullest hour of the afternoon, when the heart is faintest, and the vital stream flows lowest. She had a thick veil over her face, and a cloak which completely enveloped her figure. She left her maid behind to explain to her brother—whom she still called her brother, though she was forsaking him—how and where she had gone. “He will give you your orders about my things,” she said to Barbara, who was in the highest state of restrained excitement, feeling, as all the household had begun to feel, that something strange must have happened. “Oh, Miss Clare, you’ve never gone and quarrelled with master?” the girl cried, ready to weep. “No; I will never quarrel with him. I could not quarrel with him,” cried Clare. “How could you think so.

Did you ever see so kind a brother?" "Never, Miss!" cried Barbara, fervently; and Clare paused and cried: but then drew the veil over her face, and set out alone—into a new world.

She paused for a moment, lingering on the steps, and gave a wistful look round her, hoping, she said to herself, that she would see nobody—but rather, poor Clare, with a wistful longing to see some one—to have her path intercepted. But no one was visible. Edgar was still in the library with Mr. Fazakerly. Arthur Arden was—no one knew where. The whole world stood afar off, still and indifferent, letting her do what she pleased, letting her leave her father's house. She stood on the doorstep, with nobody but Wilkins in sight, and took leave of the place where she was born. Had she been called upon to leave it under any other circumstances, her whole mind would have been occupied by the pang of parting from Arden. Now Arden had the lightest possible share in her pain—so little that she scarcely remembered it. She had so many more serious matters to grieve over. She forgot even, to tell the truth, that she was leaving Arden. She looked round, not to take farewell of her home, but to see if there was no shadow anywhere of some one coming, or some one going. She looked all round, deep into the shade of the trees,

far across the glimmer of the fish pond. All was silent, deserted, lonely. The moment had come when she must step forth from the shelter in which she had spent all her life.

The avenue sloped gently downward to the village, and yet Clare felt it as hard as a mountain-side. She seemed to herself to be toiling along, spending all her strength. For she was so solitary—no one to lend her an arm or a hand; no one to comfort her, or even to say the way was long. She was (she believed) a scorned and forsaken woman. Heaven and earth were made bitter to her by the thought. Once more she looked round, a final double farewell. He might even have been roused, she thought, by the sound of her step crossing the hall, by Wilkins swinging open the door for her, as he always did when any Arden went or came; for others, for the common world, it was open enough, as it stood usually at half its width. Oh, how slight a noise would have roused her, how faint a sound, had it been Arthur who was going away! She bethought herself of an expedient she had heard of—swallowing her own pride in the vehemence of her feelings. She wished for him with all her heart, making a vehement conscious exertion of her will. She cried out within herself, Arthur! Arthur! Arthur! It was a kind of Pagan prayer,

addressed not to God, but to man. Such a thing had been known to be effectual. She had read in books, she had heard from others, that such an appeal made, with all the heart, is never unsuccessful; that the one will thus exerted affects the other unerringly; and that the name thus called sounds in the ears of its owner, calling him, wherever he may be. Therefore she did it, and watched its effect with a smothered excitement not to be described. But there was no effect; the park spread out behind her, the avenue ran into two lines of living green before. She was the only human creature on the scene—the only being capable of this pain and anguish. She drew her veil close, and went her way, with an indignation, a resentment, a rush of shame, greater than anything she had felt in all her life. She had called him, and he had not come. She had stooped her pride, and humbled herself, and made that effort, and there had been no response. Now, it was, it must be, over for ever, and life henceforward contained nothing for her worth the trouble of existing for.

It was thus that Clare left Arden, the old home of her race, her birthplace, the place which was, she would have said, everything to her—without even thinking of it or caring for it, or making any more account of it than had it been the veriest hired

house. She was not aware of her own extraordinary indifference. Had any one met her, had her feelings been brought under her own notice, she would have said, beyond any dispute, that her heart was breaking to leave her home. But nobody met her to thrust any such question upon her, and the stronger feeling swallowed up the weaker, as it always does. All the way down the avenue not a creature, not even a servant, or a pensioner from the village—though on ordinary occasions there was always some one about—broke the long silent expanse of way. She was suffered to go without a remonstrance, without a question, from any living creature. Already it appeared the tie was broken between her and the dwelling so familiar to her—the place which had known her already began to know her no more.

Mr. Fielding was in his study when Clare went in upon him veiled and cloaked—a figure almost funereal. She gave him a great start and shock, which was scarcely softened when she raised her veil. “Something more has happened?” he said; “something worse—Edgar has gone away? My poor child, tell me what it is——”

“It is nothing,” said Clare. “Edgar is quite safe, so far as I know. But I have left Arden, Mr. Fielding. I have left it for ever. Till my brother

can make some arrangement for me, may I come here?"

"Here!" cried the good Rector, in momentary dismay.

"Yes—you have so often said you felt me like a child of your own; I will be your child, dear Mr. Fielding. Don't make me feel I have lost everything—everything, all in a day."

"My dear! my dear!" cried Mr. Fielding, taking her into his old arms, "don't cry so, Clare; oh, my poor child, don't cry. Of course, you shall come here—I shall be too happy, too pleased to have you. Of that you may be quite sure. Clare, my darling, it is not like you—oh, don't cry!"

"It is a relief," she said. "Think—I have left Arden, where I was born, and where I have lived all my life; and you are the only creature I can come to now."

"My poor child!" said the kind Rector. Yes, she who had been so proud of Arden, so devoted to the home of her race, it was not wonderful that she should feel the parting. He soothed her, and laid his kind hand on her head, and blessed her. "My dear, you have quantities of friends. There is not a man or woman in the county, far or near, but is your friend, Clare," he said; "and Edgar will always be a brother to you; and you are young enough to

form other ties. You are very young—you have your whole life before you. Clare, my dearest child, you would have left Arden some time in the course of nature. It is hard, but it will soon be over—and you are welcome to me as the flowers in May.”

She had known he would be kind to her—it had required no wizard to foresee that ; and the old man’s tenderness made less impression upon her than if it had been unlooked for. She composed herself and dried her tears, pride coming to her aid. Yes, everybody in the county would be her friend. She was still an Arden of Arden, though Edgar was an alien. No one could take from her that natural distinction. Her retirement was a proud one—not forced. She could not be mistaken in any way. If it had been but Arden she was leaving, she would have got over it very soon, and taken refuge in her pride. But there was more than Arden in question—more than Edgar—something which she could confide to no mortal ears.

Then she was conducted by the Rector through all the house, that she might choose her room. “There are none of them half pretty enough,” he said. “If we had known we had a princess coming, we would have done our best to prepare her a bower. This one is very bright and sunny, and looks out on the garden ; and this is the best room—the one Mrs.

Solmes thinks most of. You must take your choice, and it shall be made pretty for you, Clare. I know, I once knew, how a lady should be lodged. Yes, my dear, you have but to choose."

"It does not matter," Clare said, almost coldly. She did not share the good man's pleasant flutter. It was gain to him, and only loss to her. She threw off her cloak and her hat in the nearest room, without any interest in the matter—an indifference which checked the Rector in the midst of his eager hospitalities. "Don't mind me," she said, "dear Mr. Fielding; go on with your work—don't take any notice of me. I shall go into the drawing-room, and sit there till you have finished. Never mind me——"

"I have to go out," the Rector said, with a distressed face. "There are some sick people who expect me. But Clare, you know, you are mistress here—entirely mistress. The servants will be too proud to do anything you want; and the house is yours—absolutely yours——"

"The house is mine!" Clare said to herself, when he was gone, with a despite which was partly the result of her mortification and grief. As if she cared for that—as if it was anything to her being mistress there, she who had been mistress of Arden! She sat down by herself in the old-fashioned, dingy

drawing-room—the room which Mr. Fielding had furnished for his Milly nearly fifty years before, and where, though everything was familiar, nothing was interesting. She could not read, even though there had been anything to read. She had nothing to work at, even had she cared to work. She sat all alone, idle, unoccupied—a prey to her own thoughts. There is nothing in the world more painful than the sudden blank which falls upon an agitated spirit when thus turned out of confusion and excitement into the arbitrary quiet of a strange house—a new scene. Clare walked about the room from window to window, trying vainly to see something where there was nothing to see—the gardener rolling the grass, old Simon clamping past the Rectory gate in his clogs, upon some weird mission to the churchyard. Impatience took possession of her soul. When she had borne it as long as she could, she ran upstairs for her hat, and went across the road to the Doctor's house, which irritated her, twinkling with all its windows in the slanting sunshine. Miss Somers could not be much consolation, but at least she would maunder and talk, and give Clare's irritation vent in another way. The silence, the quiet, the peace, were more than she could bear.

CHAPTER XXV.

MISS SOMERS was seated very erect on her sofa when Clare went in—more erect than she had been known to be for many a day—and was at the moment engaged in a discussion with Mercy, which her visitor could not but hear. “I don’t believe it was Clare,” Miss Somers was saying; “not that I mean you are telling a story—oh, no! I should as soon think—— But Clare will break her heart. She was always so—— And if ever a brother deserved it—— Oh, the poor dear—— I don’t mean to say a word against my brother—he is very, very—— But, then, as to being feeling, and all that—— If you are never ill yourself, how are you to know? But, Edgar, oh!—the tender heartedest, feelingest—— She never, never could—— Oh, can it be—is it—Clare?”

“Yes,” said Clare, with her haughtiest look. “And I think you were discussing us, Miss Somers—please don’t. I do not like it, nor would my brother. Talk of us to ourselves as you like, but to others—don’t, please.”

“Mercy,” Miss Somers said, hastily interrupting her, “I must have some more wool to finish these little—white Andalusian—— Mrs. Horsfall at the post-office—you must run now. Only fancy if I had not enough to finish—and that dear little—— Run—there’s a good woman, now. O Clare, my dear!” she added, out of breath, as the maid sulkily withdrew; “it isn’t that I would take upon me—— Who am I that I should find fault? but other people’s feelings, you know—though you were only a servant—— What was I saying, my dear?—that Edgar was the best, the very best—— And so he is. I never saw any one—not any one—so unselfish, and so—— O Clare! nobody should know it so well as you.”

“Nobody knows it so well as me,” said Clare. She had come with a kind of half hope of sympathy, thinking at least that it would be a relief to let her old friend run on, and talk the whole matter over as pleased her. But now her heart closed up—her pride came uppermost. She could not bear the idea of being discussed, and made the subject of talk to all the village. “But I object to being gossiped about,” she said.

“Dear,” said Miss Somers, in her soft voice, “it is not gossip when—and I love you both. I feel as if I was both your mothers. Oh, Clare! when I

used to have my little dreams sometimes—when I thought I had quite a number, you know, all growing up—there were always places for Edgar and you. Oh, Clare! I don't understand. The Doctor you know—he has so many things to think of—and then gentlemen are so strange—they expect you to know everything without—— Oh, what is it that has happened? Something about Edgar—that he was changed at nurse—or something. I am not very clever, I know, but you understand everything, Clare. Oh, what is it?—Arthur Arden and Edgar—but it is not Arthur that is your ——? It is Edgar that was—and something about that Scotch person and Mr. Fazakerly, and—oh, Clare, it makes the whole house swim, and my poor head——”

“I cannot speak of it,” said Clare. “Oh, Miss Somers, don't you understand?—how can I speak of it. I would like to forget it all—to die, or to go away——”

“Oh, hush, my dear—oh, hush,” said Miss Somers, with a scared face; “don't speak of such—and then, why should you? You will marry, you know, you will be quite, quite—and all this will pass away. Oh, as long as you are young, Clare—anything may happen. Brothers are very nice,” said Miss Somers, shaking her head softly,

“but to give yourself up, you know—and then they may marry; the Doctor never did—if he had brought home a wife, I think often—— Though, to be sure, it might have been better, far better. But a brother is never like—he may be very nice; and I am sure Edgar—— But, on the whole, Clare, my dear, a house of your own——”

Clare was silent. Her mind had wandered away to other matters. A house of her own! The Rector had said that his house was hers, and the thought had not consoled her. Was it possible that in the years to come, in some dull distant time she too might consent, like other girls, to marry somebody—that she might have a house of her own. In the sudden change that had overwhelmed her this dream had come like many others. Was it possible that she could no longer command her own destiny, that the power of decision had gone out of her hands. Bitterness filled her heart; a bitterness too deep to find any outlet in words. A little while ago she had been conscious that it was in her power to make Arthur Arden's life wealthy and happy. Now she had been tossed from her elevation in a moment, and the power transferred to him; and he showed no desire to use it. He was silent, condemning her to a blank of suspense, which chafed her beyond endurance. She said to

herself it was intolerable, not to be borne. She would think of him no more; she would forget his very name. Would he never come? would he never come?

“I don’t pretend to understand, my dear,” said Miss Somers humbly; “and if it distresses you, of course—— It is all because the Doctor is so hasty; and never, never will—— And then he expects me to understand. But, anyhow, it will stop the marriage, I suppose. The marriage, you know—— Gussy Thornleigh, of course. I am so sorry—— I think she is such a nice girl. Not like you, Clare; not beautiful nor——; but such a nice—— I was so pleased—— Dear Edgar, he will have to wait, and perhaps she will see some one else, or he—— Gentlemen are always the worst—— But, of course, Clare, the marriage must be put off——”

“I don’t know of any marriage,” said Clare.

“Oh, my dear, I heard—— I am not of much account, but still I have some friends; and in town, you know, Clare. They were always——; and everybody knew. Poor Edgar! he must be very, very—— He is so affectionate and—— He is one of the men that throw themselves upon your sympathy—and you must give him your—— Clare, my dear! are they to share Arden between

them?—or is Edgar to be Arthur, you know? Oh! I do wish you would tell me, Clare.”

“Mr. Arthur Arden has everything,” said Clare raising her head. “It all belongs to him. My brother has no right. Oh, Miss Somers, please don’t make me talk!”

“That is just what I said,” said Miss Somers; “and oh, my dear, don’t be unhappy, as if it were death or——, when it is only money. I always say—— And then he is so young; he may marry, or a hundred things. So, Arthur is Edgar now? but he is not your—— I don’t understand it, Clare. He is a great deal more like you, and all that; but he was born years before your poor, dear mamma—— Oh, I remember quite well—before the old Squire was married—so it is impossible he could be your—— I daresay I shall have it clear after a while. Edgar is found out to be Arthur, and Arthur Edgar, but only not your—— And then, Clare, if you will but think—how could they be changed at nurse? for Arthur was a big fellow when your poor, dear mamma—— You could not mistake a big boy of ten, with boots and all that, you know, for a little baby—— Oh, I am so fond of little babies! I remember Edgar, he was such a—— But Arthur was a troublesome, mischievous boy——

I can't make out, I assure you, how it could be——”

Again Clare made no reply. She sat and pursued her own thoughts, leaving the invalid in her confused musings to make the matter out as best she could. It was better to be here, even with Miss Somers' babble in her ears, than alone in the awful solitude of the Rectory, with nothing to break the current of her thoughts. Miss Somers waited a few minutes for an answer, but, receiving none, returned to her own way of making matters out.

“If Edgar is in want—of—anything, Clare—— I mean, you know—— Money is always nice, my dear. Whatever one may want—— Oh, I know very well it cannot buy——but still—— And then there is that nice chair: he was so very kind—— Clare,” she said, sitting up erect, “if it is all true about their being changed, and all that, why, it was Arthur's money, not Edgar's; and I am sure if I had been shut up for a hundred years—— I am not saying anything against your cousin—— but it would never have occurred to him, you know—— Clare, perhaps I ought to send it back——”

“I hope you don't think my cousin is a miser or a tyrant,” said Clare, flushing suddenly to her very hair.

“Oh, no, no, dear—— But then one never knows—— Mr. Arthur Arden is not a miser, I know. I should not like to say—— He is fond of what belongs to him, and—— He is not at all like—— My dear, I never knew any one like Edgar. Other gentlemen may be kind—— I daresay Mr. Arthur Arden is kind—— but these things would never come into his head—— He is a man that is very fond of—— Well, my dear, it is no harm. One ought to be rather fond of oneself—— But Edgar—— Clare——”

“Edgar is a fool!” cried Clare, with passion. “He is not an Arden; he would give away everything—his very life, if it would serve anybody. Such men cannot live in the world; it is wicked—it is wrong. When God sent us into the world, surely He meant we were to take care of ourselves.”

“Did he?” said Miss Somers, softly. She was roused out of her usual broken talk. “Oh, Clare, I am not clever, to talk to you. But if that is what God meant, it was not what our Saviour did. He never took care of Himself—— He took care—— Oh, my dear, is not Edgar more like—— Don’t you understand?”

Once more Clare made no reply. A cloud enveloped her, mentally and physically—a *sourd* misery, inarticulate, not defining itself. Why

should Edgar, why should any one, thus resign their own happiness? Happiness was the better part of life, and ought there not to be a canon against its renunciation as well as against self-murder? Self-murder was nothing to it. To give up your identity, your real existence, all the service you could do to God or man, was not that worse than simply taking your own life? So Clare asked herself. And this was what Edgar had done. He had not considered his duty at all in the matter. He had acted on a foolish, generous impulse, and thrown away more than his existence. Then, as she sat and pursued the current of her thoughts, she remembered that but for her, Edgar, in the carelessness of his security, would never have looked at those papers, would never have thought of them. It was she, and she only, who was to blame. Oh, what fancies had been in her mind—visions of wrong to Arthur, of the duty that was upon herself to right him! To right him who cared nothing for her, who was ready to let her sink into the abyss, whose heart did not impel him towards her, whose hand had never sought hers since he knew—— It was her fault, not Edgar's, after all.

“I am not one to preach,” said Miss Somers, faltering. “I know I never was clever; but oh,

Clare, when one only thinks—— What a fuss we make about ourselves, even me, a helpless creature! We make such a fuss—and then—— As if it mattered, you know. But our Saviour never made any fuss—never minded what happened. Oh, Clare! If Edgar were like that—and he is so, so—— Oh, I don't know how to express myself. Other people come always first with him, not himself. If he was my brother, oh, I would be so—— Not that I am saying a word against the Doctor. The Doctor is very, very—— But not like Edgar. Oh! if I had such a brother, I would be proud——”

“And so am I,” said Clare, rising with a revulsion of feeling incomprehensible to herself. “He is my brother. Nothing can take him away from me. I will do as he does, and maintain him in everything. Thank you, dear Miss Somers. I will never give Edgar up as long as I live——”

“Give Edgar up!” cried Miss Somers in consternation—“I should think not, indeed, when everybody is so proud—— It is so sweet of you, dear, to thank me—as if what I said could ever—— It is all Edgar's doing—instead of laughing, you know, or that—— And then it makes others think—she cannot be so silly after all—I know that is what they say. But, oh! Clare, I'm not clever—I know

it—and not one to——, but I love you with all my heart!——”

“Thanks, dear Miss Somers,” cried Clare, and in her weariness and trouble, and the revulsion of her thoughts, she sat down resolving to be very good and kind, and to devote herself to this poor woman, who certainly was not clever, nor clear-sighted, nor powerful in any way, but yet could see further than she herself could into some sacred mysteries. She remained there all the afternoon reading to her, trying to keep up something like conversation, glad to escape from her own thoughts. But Miss Somers was trying for a long stretch. It was hard not to be impatient—hard not to contradict. Clare grew very weary, as the afternoon stole on, but no one came to deliver her. No one seemed any longer to remember her existence. She, who could not move a few days since without brother, suitor, anxious servants to watch her every movement, was left now to wander where she would, and no one took any notice. To be sure, they were all absorbed in more important matters; but then she had been the very most important matter of all, both to Edgar and Arthur, only two days ago. Even, she became sensible, as the long afternoon crept over, that there had been a feeling in her heart that she must be pursued. They would

never let her go like this, the two to whom she was everything in the world. They would come after her, plead with her, remonstrate, bid her believe that whosoever had Arden, it was hers most and first of all. But they had not done so. Night was coming on, and nobody had so much as inquired where she was. They had let her go. Perhaps in all the excitement they were glad to be quit of her. Could it be possible? Thus Clare mused, making herself it is impossible to say how miserable and forlorn. Ready to let her go; glad to be rid of her. Oh, how she had been deceived! And it was these two more than any other who had taught her to believe that she was in some sort the centre of the world.

Some one did come for Clare at last, making her heart leap with a painful hope; but it was only Mr. Fielding, coming anxiously to beg her to return to dinner. She put on her hat, and went down to him with the paleness of death in her face. Nobody cared where she went, or what she did. They were glad that she was gone. The place that had known her knew her no more.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It is unnecessary to say that to one at least of the two people whose behaviour she thus discussed in her heart Clare was unjust. Edgar had neither forgotten her nor was he glad to be rid of her. It was late before he knew that she was gone. All the afternoon of that day he had spent with the lawyer, going over again all the matters which only two months ago had been put into the hands of the heir. Mr. Fazakerly had ceased to remonstrate. Now and then he would shake his head or shrug his shoulders, in silent protest against the mad proceeding altogether, but he had stopped saying anything. It was of no use making any further resistance. His client had committed himself at every step; he had thrown open his secret ostentatiously to all who were concerned—ostentatiously, Mr. Fazakerly said with professional vehemence, feeling aggrieved in every possible way. Had he been called upon to advise in the very beginning, it is most likely that the task would have tried him sorely; for his

professional instinct to defend and conceal would have had all the force of a conscience to contend with. But now that he had not been consulted, he was free to protest. When he found it no longer of any use to make objections in words, he shook his head—he shrugged his shoulders—he made satirical observations whenever he could find an opportunity. “Were there many like you, Mr. Edgar,” he said, “we lawyers might shut up shop altogether. It is like going back to the primitive ages of Christianity. Let not brother go to law against brother is, I know, the Scriptural rule; though it is generally the person who is attacked who says that—the one who has something to lose. But you have gone beyond Scripture; you have not even asked for arbitration or compensation; you have thrown away everything at once. We might shut up shop altogether if everybody was like you.”

“If I were disagreeable,” said Edgar, laughing, “I should say, and no great harm either, according to the judgment of the world.”

“The world is a fool, Mr. Edgar,” said Mr. Fazakerly.

“It is very possible,” said Edgar, with a smile. This was at the termination of their business, when he felt himself at last free from all the oft-repeated consultations and discussions of the last two or three

days. Everything was concluded. The old lawyer had his full instructions what he was to do, and what to say. Edgar gave up everything without reservation, and, at the instance of Mr. Fazakerly, consented to receive from his cousin a small sum of money, enough to carry him abroad and launch him on the world. He had been very reluctant to do this, but Mr. Fazakerly's strenuous representations had finally silenced him. "After all, I suppose the family owes it me, for having spoiled my education and career," Edgar said, with the half smile, half sigh which had become habitual to him; and then he was silent, musing what his career would have been had he been left in his natural soil. Perhaps it would have been he who should have ploughed the little farm, and kept the family together; perhaps he might have been a sailor, like Willie who was lost—or a doctor, or a minister, like others of his race. How strange it was to think of it! He too had a family, though not the family of Arden. His life had come down to him through honest hands, across the homely generations—not peasants nor gentlefolk, but something between—high-minded, righteous, severe people, like the woman who was the only representative of them he knew, his mother's mother. His heart beat with a strange sickening speed when he thought of her—a mixture

of repulsion and attraction was in his thoughts. How was he to tell Clare of her? He felt that nothing which had yet occurred would so sever him from his sister as the appearance by his side of the two strangers who were his flesh and blood. And then he remembered that in the sickness of his heart he had made no inquiry after Jeanie during that whole long day.

When he went out into the hall he found boxes standing about, a sight which struck him with surprise, and Barbara standing, bonneted and cloaked, among them. She turned to him the moment he appeared, with an eager appeal. "Please, sir, Miss Clare said as I was to ask you what to do."

"I will speak to my sister," said Edgar in his ignorance; but Barbara put out her hand to detain him.

"Oh, sir, please! Miss Clare has gone down to the Rectory. She said to me as I was to ask you what to do with all these things. There are a deal of things, sir, to go to the Rectory. The rooms is small—and you was to tell me, please, what to do. Don't you think, sir, if I was to leave the heavy things here——"

"Nothing must stay here," said Edgar peremptorily. He was more angry at this suggestion than at anything which had yet been said. "Take them

all away — to the Rectory — where Miss Arden pleases ; everything must go.” He was not aware while he spoke that Arthur Arden had made his appearance and stood looking at him, listening with a certain bitterness to all he said.

“That seems hard laws,” said Arthur. “I am Miss Arden’s nearest relative. It may be necessary that she should go at present ; but why should you take upon you to pronounce that nothing shall stay ?”

“I am her brother,” said Edgar gravely. “Mr. Arden, you will find Mr. Fazakerly in the library with a communication to make to you. Be content with that, and let me go my own way.”

“No, by Jove !” cried Arthur ; “not if your way includes that of Clare. What business have you, who are nothing to her, to carry her away ?”

The servants stood gaping round, taking in every word. Mr. Fazakerly, alarmed by the sound of the discussion, came to the door ; and Edgar made the discovery then, to his great surprise, that it hurt him to have this revelation made to the servants. It was a poor shabby little remnant of pride, he thought. What was the opinion of Wilkins or of Mrs. Fillpot to him ? and yet he would rather these words had been spoken in his absence. But the point was one in which he was resolute not

to yield. He gave his orders to Wilkins peremptorily, without so much as looking at the new heir. And then he himself went out, glad—it is impossible to say how glad—to escape from it all. He gave a sigh of relief when he emerged from the Arden woods. Even that avenue he had been so proud of was full of the heavy atmosphere of pain and conflict. The air was freer outside, and would be freer still when Arden itself and everything connected with it had become a thing of the past. When he reached the Rectory, Mr. Fielding was about sitting down to dinner, with Clare opposite to him—a mournful meal, which the old man did his best to enliven, although the girl, worn out in body and mind, was incapable of any response. Things were a little better, to Mr. Fielding at least, when Edgar joined them; but Clare could scarcely forgive him when she saw that he could eat, and that a forlorn inclination for rest and comfort was in her brother's mind in the midst of his troubles. He was hungry. He was glad of the quiet and friendly peace of the familiar place. Oh, he was no Arden! every look, every word bore out the evidence against him.

“It looks unfeeling,” he said, “but I have neither eaten nor slept for two days, and I am so sick of it all. If Clare were but safe and com-

fortable, it would be the greatest relief to me to get away——”

“Clare is safe here. I don't know whether she can make herself comfortable,” said the Rector looking at her wistfully. “Miss Arden, from Estcombe, would come to be with you, my dear child, I am sure, if that would be any advantage—or good Mrs. Selden——”

“I am as comfortable as I can be,” said Clare, shortly. “What does it matter? There is nothing more necessary. I will live through it as best I can.”

“My dear child,” said good Mr. Fielding, after a long pause; “think of Edgar—it is worse for him than for you——”

“No,” cried Clare passionately; “it is not worse for him. Look, he is able to eat—to take comfort—he does not feel it. Half the goodness of you good people is because you don't feel it. But I—— It will kill me——”

And she thrust back her chair from the table, and burst into passionate tears, of which she was soon ashamed. “Edgar does not mind,” she cried; “that is worst of all. He looks at me with his grieved face, and he does not understand me. He is not an Arden, as I am. It is not death to him, as it is to me.”

Edgar had risen and was going to her, but he stopped short at the name of Arden. It felt to him like a stab—the first his sister had given him. “I hope I shall not learn to hate the name of Arden,” he said between his closed lips; and then he added gently, “So long as I am not guilty, nothing can be death to me. One can bear it when one is but sinned against, not sinning; and you have been an angel to me, Clare——”

“No,” she cried, “I am no angel; I am an Arden. I know you are good; but if you had been wicked and concealed it, and stood by your rights, I should have felt with you more!”

It was in the revulsion of her over-excited feelings that she spoke, but yet it was true. Perhaps it was more true than when she had stood by Edgar and called him her dearest brother; but it was the hardest blow he had yet had to bear. He sat down again, and covered his face with his hands. Poor fellow! the little comfort he had been so ready to enjoy, the quietness and friendliness, the food and rest, had lost all savour for him now. Mr. Fielding took his hand and pressed it, but that was only a mild consolation. After a moment he rose, rousing himself for the last step, which up to this moment he had shrunk from. “I have a further revelation to make to you,” he said in an altered voice; “but

I have not had the courage to do it. I have to tell you who I really belong to. I think I have the courage now."

"Edgar!" she cried, in alarm, raising her head, holding out her hand to him with a little cry of distress, "Will you not always belong to me?"

He shook his head; he was incapable of any further explanation. "I will go and bring my mother——" he said, with a half sob. The other two sat amazed, and looked after him as he went away.

"Do you know what he means?" asked Clare, in a voice so low as to be scarcely audible. Mr. Fielding shook his head.

"I don't know what he means, or if his mind is giving way, poor boy—poor boy, that thinks of everybody but himself; and you have been hard, very hard upon him, Clare."

Clare did not answer a word. She rose from the table, from the fruit and wine which she had spoiled to her gentle host, and went to the deep, old-fashioned window which looked down the village street. She drew the curtain aside, and sat down on the window-seat, and gazed into the darkness. What had he meant? Whom had he gone to seek? An awful sense that she had lost him for ever made Clare shiver and tremble; and yet what she had said in her petulance was true.

As for Edgar, he hastened along through the darkness with spasmodic energy. He had wondered how he could do it; he had turned from the task as too difficult, too painful; he had even thought of leaving Clare in ignorance of his real origin, and writing to tell her after he had himself disappeared for ever. But here was the moment to make the revelation. He could do it now; his heart was very sore and full of pain—but yet the very pain gave him an opportunity. He reflected that though it was very hard for him, it was better for Clare that the severance between them should be complete. He could not go on, he who was a stranger to her blood, holding the position of her brother. Years and distance, and the immense difference which there would most likely be between them would gradually make an end of any such visionary arrangement. He would have liked to keep up the pleasant fiction; the prospect of its ending crushed his heart and forced tears into his eyes; but it would be best for Clare. She was ready to give him up already, he reflected, with a pang. It would be better for her to make the severance complete.

He went into the cottage in the dark, without being recognised by any one. The door of the inner room was ajar, and Mrs. Murray was visible within by the light of a candle, seated at some distance

from her child's bedside. The bed was shaded carefully, and it was evident that Jeanie was asleep. The old woman had no occupation whatever. A book was lying open before her on the little table, and her knitting lay in her lap; but she was doing nothing. Her face, which was so full of grave thoughtfulness, was fully revealed by the light. It was the face of a woman of whom no king need have been ashamed; every line in it was fine and pure. Her snow-white hair, her dark eyes, which were so full of life, the firm lines about her mouth, and the noble pose of the head, gave her a dignity which many a duchess might have envied. True, her dress was very simple—her place in the world humble enough; but Edgar felt a sense of shame steal over him as he looked at her. He had shrank from calling such a woman his mother, shrank from acknowledging her in the face of the day; and yet there was no Arden face on the walls of the house he had left which was more noble in feature, or half so exalted in expression. He said this to himself, and yet he shrank still. It was the last and highest act of renunciation. He went in so softly that she was not disturbed. He went up to her, and laid his hand on her shoulder. His heart stirred within him as he stood by her side. An unwilling tenderness, a mixture of pride and shame, thrilled through

him. "Mother!" he said. It was the first time he had ever, in his recollection, called any one by that sacred name.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MRS. MURRAY started violently, and uttered a low cry. She turned to him with a look of sudden joy, that made her dark eyes expand and dilate. But when she saw Edgar's face, a change came over her own. She rose up, half withdrawing from his touch, and signed to him to leave the room, with a gesture towards the bed in which Jeanie lay asleep. She followed him to the door, where they had had so many broken interviews. The silence and the darkness, and the faint stars above, seemed a congenial accompaniment. She put her hand upon Edgar's arm as he stepped across the threshold. "What is your will; what is your will?" she said, in an agitated voice. It seemed to the young man that even this last refuge—the affection to which he had a right—had failed him too.

"My will?" he said. "It is for me to ask yours, you that are my mother. My life has changed like a dream, but yours is as it always was. Do you want nothing of me?"

“Na,” said Mrs. Murray, with a voice of pain; “nothing, lad! nothing, lad! You’ve been good to me and mine without knowing. You’ve saved my Jeanie’s life. But we’re proud folk, though we were not brought up like you. Nothing will we take but your love; and I’m no complaining. I bow to nature and my own sin. I’ve long repented, long repented; but that is neither here nor there; it cannot be expected that you should have any love to give.”

“I don’t know what I have to give,” said Edgar. “I am too weary and heart-broken to know. Can you come with me now to see my sister?—I mean Miss Arden. I must tell her. Don’t be grieved or pained, for I cannot help it. It is hard.”

“Ay, it is hard,” said Mrs. Murray; “Oh, it’s hard, hard! You were but a babe when I put you out of my arms; but I’ve yearned after you ever since. No, I’m asking no return; it’s no natural. You are more like to hate us than to love us. I acknowledge that.”

“I don’t hate you,” said Edgar. He was torn asunder with conflicting feelings. Was it hatred or was it love? He could not tell which.

“I’m ready to put my hands on my mouth, and my mouth in the dust,” she went on. “I’ve sinned and sinned sore against the Lord and against you.

You were the only one left of all your mother's bairns; and she was dead, and he was dead—all gone that belonged to you but me—and my hands full, full of weans and of troubles. I had the love for you, but neither time nor bread, and I was sore, sore tempted. They said to me there was none to be wronged, but only a house to be made glad. Oh, lad, I sinned; and most I have sinned against you."

He could not say no. His heart seemed shut up and closed against her. He could utter no forgiveness. It was true—quite true. She had sinned against him. Squire Arden was deeply to blame, but she, too, had sinned. There was not a word to say.

"When you said mother, I thought my heart would burst with joy. I thought the Lord had sent to you the spirit to forgive. But I canna expect it; I canna look for it. Oh, no! I wouldna be ungrateful, good Lord! He has his bonnie mother's heart to serve his neighbour, and his father's that died for the poor, like Christ. I maunna complain. He has a heart like his kin though no for me!"

"Tell me what you mean," cried Edgar, with a thrill of emotion tingling to his very finger-points; "or rather come with me, come with me. Clare must know all now——"

“And Jeanie is sleeping,” she said. “I’ll cry upon that good woman to watch her, and I’ll do you’re bidding. God bless you, lad, for Jeanie’s life!”

He stood and waited for her outside with a new life, it seemed, thrilling through him. His father? He had once had a father, then—a man who had done his duty in the world—not a tyrant, who hated him. The idea of his mother did not so much move him; for somehow the dead woman whose reputation he had vindicated, the sweet young face in Clare’s picture, was his mother to Edgar in spite of all. He could not turn her out of his imagination. But his father! A new spring of curiosity, which was salvation to him, sprang up in his heart. Presently Mrs. Murray came out again, in her old-fashioned shawl and bonnet. Her dress veiled the dignity of her head. It gave him a sort of shudder to think of Clare looking at this woman, whom she had wanted to be kind to—to treat as a dependent—and knowing her to be his grandmother. She looked a little like Mrs. Fillpot, in her old-fashioned bonnet and shawl—he scorned himself for the thought, and yet it came back to him—very much like Mrs. Fillpot until you saw her face; and Edgar was made of common flesh and blood, and it went to his heart. He walked up the

village street by her side with the strangest feelings. If she wanted him, it would be his duty, perhaps, to go with her—to provide for her old age—to do her the service of a son. She had a hold on him which nobody else in the world had. And yet—— To be very kind, tender-hearted, and generous to your conventional inferiors is so easy; but to take a family among them into your very heart, and acknowledge them as your own!—— Edgar shivered with a pang that ran through every nerve; and yet it had to be done!

He was more reconciled to it by the time he reached the Rectory. Mrs. Murray did not say another word to conciliate or attract his regard, but she began a long soft-voiced monologue—the story of his family. She told him of his father, who had been a doctor, and had died of typhus fever, caught among the poor, to whom he had dedicated his life; of his mother, who had broken her heart; of all her own children, his relations, who were scattered over the world. “We’re no rich nor grand, but we are folk that none need think shame of,” she said, “no one. We’ve done our duty by land and by sea, and served God, and wronged no man—all but me; and the wrong I did is made right, oh my bonnie lad, thanks to you.”

Thus a certain comfort, a certain bitterness

distilled into his heart with every word. He made her take his arm as he entered the Rectory. He had seen the curtain raised from the window, and some one looking out, and felt that it was Clare watching, with perhaps a suspense as great as his own. He led his grandmother into the dining-room, which he had left so suddenly, leaning on his arm. Clare rose from her seat at the window as they entered, and so did Mr. Fielding, who, really unhappy and distressed, had been dozing in his chair. The Rector stumbled up half asleep, and recollected the twilight visit he had received only a few days before, and said "God bless me!" understanding it all in a moment. But Clare did not understand. She walked forward to meet them, her face blazing with painful colour. A totally different fancy crossed her mind. She made a sudden conclusion, not like the reasonable and high-minded being she desired to be, but like the inexperienced and foolish girl she was. An almost fury blazed up in her eyes. Now that he had fallen, Edgar was making haste to unite himself to that girl who had been the bane of her life. He had brought the mother here to tell her so. It was Jeanie, Jeanie, once more—the baby creature with her pretty face—who was continually crossing her path.

“What does this mean?” she cried haughtily. “Is this a time for folly, for forming any miserable connexion—why do you bring this woman here?”

“You must speak of her in other tones, if you speak of her to me,” said Edgar. “I have shrunk from telling you, I can’t tell why. It seemed severing the last link between us. But I must not hesitate any longer. Miss Arden, this is Mrs. Murray, who wrote the letters you found in your father’s room, who shared with him the guilt of the transaction which has brought us all so much pain; but she is my mother’s mother, my nearest relative in the world, and any one who cares for me will respect her. This is the witness I told you of—her testimony makes everything clear.”

Clare stood thunderstruck, and listened to this revelation; then she sank upon the nearest seat, turning still her pale countenance aghast upon the old woman, who regarded her with a certain pathetic dignity. Horror, dismay, shame of herself, sudden lighting up of a hundred mysterious incidents—light glimmering through the darkness, yet confounding and confusing everything, overwhelmed her. His mother’s mother. Good Heavens! is she mine too? Clare asked herself in her dismay, and then paused and tried to disentangle herself from that maze of old habit and new bewildering know-

ledge. She could not speak nor move, but sat and gazed upon the Scotchwoman who had been somehow painfully mixed up in all the story of the past two months and all its difficulties. Was this an explanation of all? or would Arthur Arden come in next, and present this woman to her with another explanation? Clare's heart seemed to stand still—she could not breathe, but kept her eyes fixed with a painful mechanical stare upon Mrs. Murray's face.

“Yes, Miss Arden,” said the old woman, “he says true. I was tempted and I sinned. He was an orphan bairn, and it was said to me that no person would be wronged by it—though it may be a comfort to you to hear that your mother opposed it with all her might. She knew better than me. She was a young thing, no half my age; but she knew better than me. For all her sweetness and her kindness, she set her face against the wrong. It was *him* that sinned, and me——”

And then there was a long pause. Clare seemed paralysed—she neither moved nor spoke; and Edgar stood apart, struggling with his own heart, trying not to long for the sympathy of the sister who had been his all his life—trying to enter into the atmosphere of love towards the other through whom his very life had come to him. Mr. Fielding, who was not at the same pitch of excitement, bethought

himself of those ordinary courtesies of life which seem so out of place to the chief actors in such a scene. He offered Mrs. Murray a chair; he begged her to take some wine; he was hospitable, and friendly, and courteous—till Clare and Edgar, equally moved, interposed in the same breath—"Oh, don't, please, don't say anything," Clare cried, "I cannot bear it." And Edgar, to whom she had not spoken a word, whom she had not even looked at, came forward again and gave the stranger his arm.

"Thanks," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness; "but now that all is said that need be said, I must take my mother away."

"My dear Edgar, stop a little," cried Mr. Fielding, in much agitation. "This must not be permitted. If this—lady is really your—your grandmother, my dear boy. Pardon me, but it is so hard to realise it—to imagine; but she cannot be left in that poor little cottage—it is impossible. I am amazed that I could have overlooked—that I did not see. The Rectory is small, and Clare perhaps might not think—or I should beg you to come here—but some other place, some better place."

Mrs. Murray's face beamed with a sudden smile. Edgar looked on with terror, fearing he could not tell what. Was she about to seize this social elevation with vulgar eagerness? Was she about to

make it impossible for him even to respect her? "Sir," she said, holding out her hand to the Rector, "I thank you for my lad's sake: Every time I see or hear how he's respected, how he's thought of, my heart leaps like the hart, and my tongue is ready to sing. It's like forgiveness from the Lord for the harm I've done—but we're lodged as well as we wish for the moment, and I desire nothing of any man. We're no rich, and we're no grand, but we're proud folk."

"I beg your pardon, madam," said Mr. Fielding, bowing over her hand as if she had been a duchess. And Edgar drew the other through his arm. "Folk that none need think shame of," he said in his heart, and for the first time since this misery began that heart rose with a sensation which was not pain.

"And good night, Miss Arden," she said, "and God bless you for being the light of his eyes and the comfort of his life. Well I know that he owes all its pleasantness to you. An old woman's blessing will do you no harm, and it's likely that I will never in this life see you more."

Thus Clare was left alone in the silence. Mr. Fielding hastened to the door to attend his visitor out, with as much respect as if she had been a queen. Clare remained alone, her whole frame and heart tingling with emotion. She was ashamed,

humbled, and mortified, and cast down. Her brother!—and this was his true origin—these his relations. She, too, had remarked that Mrs. Murray was like Mrs. Fillpot at the first glance—a peasant woman—a farmer's wife at the best. It was intolerable to Clare. And yet all the while he was Edgar—her brother, whom she had loved—her companion, whom she had kissed and hung upon—who had been her support, her protector, her nearest and closest friend. She rose and fled when she heard the sound of the closing door, and Mr. Fielding's return. She could not bear to see him, or to have her own dismay and horror brought under remark. He would say they were unchristian, wicked; and what if they were? Could she help it? God had made her an Arden—not one of those common people without susceptibilities, without strong feeling. Had Edgar been an Arden he never could have done it. He did it, because he was of common flesh and blood; he had not felt it. All was explained now.

As for Edgar, he walked down again to Sally Timms's cottage, with his old mother on his arm. "Lean on me," he said to her as they went along in the dark. He could not be fond of her all at once, stranger as she was; but he was—could it be possible?—proud of her, and it was a pleasure to

him to feel that he supported her, and did a son's natural duty so far. And then it went to his heart when he saw all at once in the light of a cottage window which gleamed on her as they passed, that she was weeping, silently putting up her hand to wipe tears from her face. "It's no for trouble, it's for gladness," she said, when he looked up at her anxiously. "I canna think but my repentance is accepted, and the Lord has covered over my sin."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“THESE are our terms, Mr. Arden,” said Mr. Fazerly. “It is, of course, entirely in your own hands to accept or reject them: a provision such as has been usually made for the daughters of Arden, for Miss Clare; and a certain sum—say a few hundreds—he would not accept anything more—for—your predecessor— These are our conditions. If you accept them, he offers (much against my will—all this surrender is against my will) immediate possession, without any further trouble. My own opinion is quite against this self-renunciation, but my client is obstinate——”

“Your client!” said Arthur Arden, with a tone of contempt. “Up to this time your clients have always been the lawful owners of Arden.”

“Understand, sir,” said the old lawyer, with a flush of irritation on his face, “that I do not for a moment admit that Mr. Edgar is not the lawful owner of Arden. That rests on your assertion merely; and it is an assertion which you might

find it amazingly difficult to prove. He offers you terms upon his own responsibility, against my advice and wish, out of an exaggerated sense of honour, such as perhaps you don't enter into. My wish would have been to let you bring your suit, and fight it out."

Arthur Arden was in great doubt. He paced the long library up and down, taking council with himself. To make conditions at all—to treat with this beggar and impostor, as he called him in his heart—was very galling to his pride. Of course he would have been kind to the fellow after he had taken possession of his own. He would have made some provision for him, procured him an appointment, given him an allowance, out of pure generosity; but it was humiliating to pause and treat, or to acknowledge any power on the part of the usurper to exact conditions. It was astonishing how fast and far his thoughts had travelled in the last twenty-four hours. He had scarcely allowed the bewildering hope to take hold of his mind then—he could not endure to be kept for another hour out of his possessions now. He walked up and down heavily, pondering the whole matter. It appeared to him that he had nothing to do but to proclaim himself the reigning monarch in place of the usurper found out, and to expel him and his

belongings, and begin his own reign. But the old lawyer stood before him, vigilant and unyielding, keeping an eye upon him—cowering him by that glance. He came forward to the table again with reluctant politeness. "I don't understand it," he said. "It stands to reason that from the moment it is found out, everything becomes mine as the last Squire Arden's next of kin."

"You have to prove first that you are nearer of kin than his son."

"His son! "Do you venture to keep up that fiction? How can I consent for a moment to treat with any one who affirms a lie?"

"Your conscience has become singularly tender, Mr. Arden," said the lawyer, with a smile. "I don't think you were always so particular; and remember you have to prove that it is a lie. You have to prove your case at every step against all laws of probability and received belief. I do not say that you will fail eventually, but it is a case that might occupy half your remaining [life, and consume half the value of the estate. And I promise you you should not gain] it easily if the defence were in my hands."

"When I did win you should find that no Arden papers found their way again to your hands," said Arthur, with irritation.

Mr. Fazakerly made him a sarcastic bow. "I can live without Arden," he said; "but the question is, can you?"

Then there was another pause. "I suppose I may at least consult my lawyer about it," said Arthur, sullenly; and once more Mr. Fazakerly made him a bow.

"By all means; but should my client leave the country before you have decided, it will be necessary to shut up the house and postpone its transference. A few months more or less will not matter much. I will put down our conditions, that you may submit them to your lawyer. A provision such as other daughters of Arden have had, for Miss Clare——"

"I will not have Miss Arden's name mentioned," said Arthur, angrily; "her interests are quite safe in my hands."

"That may or may not be," said Mr. Fazakerly; "but my client insists absolutely on this point, and unless it is conceded, all negotiations are at an end. Fit provision for Miss Clare; and a sum of money—say a thousand pounds——"

"You said a few hundreds," interposed the other with irritation. Mr. Fazakerly threw down his pen, and looked up with amazement into Arthur's face.

"Good Lord," he said, "is it the soul of a shop-

keeper that you have got within you? Do you understand what Edgar Arden is giving up? And he was not called upon to give it up. He was not called upon to say a word about it, to furnish you with any information. What Edgar Arden would have done had he been guided by me——”

“He is not Edgar Arden,” said Arthur sharply.

“By the Lord,” cried Mr. Fazakerly, wrought up to a pitch of excitement which would have vent, “he is by a hundred times a better man than——” you, he was going to say, but resisted the temptation—“than most men that one meets,” he added hastily. And then, subduing himself, sat down and wrote the conditions fully out. He handed them to the other without adding a word, and immediately unlocked a box full of papers which stood on the table by him, and began to work at them, as if he were unconscious of the presence of any stranger. Arthur stood by him for some minutes with the paper in his hand, and then went out with a mortification which he had to conceal as best he could. It was the morning after Clare had left the house, and Edgar, though he had not appeared that day was still master of the house, acknowledged by everybody in it as its legitimate head. It is impossible to say how much this chafed the true heir. He was so angry that he gave Wilkins to under-

stand the real state of affairs, to the private consternation but well-enacted unbelief of that family retainer. Wilkins did not like Arthur Arden—none of the servants liked him. Edgar's kindly sway had given them a glimpse of something better; and the butler and the housekeeper had long entertained matrimonial intentions, and were too well off and too much used to comfort to put up with a less satisfactory *regime*. "I'll ask master, sir," was all Arthur Arden could elicit from Wilkins. Master!—the word made him almost swear. Arthur went out, with the conditions of surrender in his pocket, and pondered over them like a general who is victorious yet baffled, and whose army has won the external but not the moral victory. Of course there could be no real question as to these conditions; under any circumstances public opinion, or even his own reluctant sense of what was fit and necessary, would have bound him to do as much or more. But he was irritated now, and if he had been able, he would have liked to punish his rival for his usurpation; while, on the contrary, that rival claimed to march out with all the honours of war, his reputation unimpeached, his fame spread. It galled the new Lord of Arden more than it is possible to describe. He gnawed his moustache and his nails as he pondered, and then his thoughts took a sudden

likely it was Edgar, and she did not wish to see him; or Mr. Fielding, with his grieved, disapproving looks. Clare was in such a state of mind that even a look of reproof drove her wild. She could not bear it. Therefore she kept her back turned persistently, and gave no heed to the opening of the door.

“Clare!”

She looked up with a violent start, rising from her seat, and perceived him standing over her—he whom she had tried to put out of her calculations, and think of no more. She had been planning a proud miserable life retired out of sight of all men, specially hidden from him. She had resolved he should not even know where she was to insult her with his pity—neither he nor Edgar should know; for Clare was quite unaware that the discovery which lost her a brother lost her a fortune too. But now at the moment when she was most miserable, most forlorn, forming the most dreary plans, here he was! The sight of him took away her breath, and almost her senses, for the moment. She said, “Is it you?” faintly, gazing at him with dilated eyes and parched lips, as if he had been a ghost. The surprise was so great that it threw down all her defences, and brought her back to simple reality. She was not glad to see him—these

were not the words; but his sudden coming was like life to the dead.

And he too was touched by the sight of her utter dejection and solitude. He dropped down on one knee beside her as she reseated herself, and took her hand. "My Clare!" he said, "my Clare! why did you fly from me? Is not my house your house, and my life yours? Is there any one so near to you as me? Even now I have the only claim upon you; and when you are my wife——"

"No such word has ever been spoken between us," said Clare, making an effort to resume her old dignity. "Mr. Arden, rise—you forget——"

"I don't forget anything," said Arthur. "There was one between us that took it upon him to keep me away, that prevented me from seeing you, prejudiced you against me, and has all but beguiled you away from me. But, Clare, you see through it now. Are words necessary between you and me? When I was a beggar I might hesitate to ask you to share my poverty, but now—— Don't you know that I would rather have you without Arden than Arden without you——"

Let him take everything else, as long as he leaves me you—these had been the words Arthur Arden had spoken two days ago. They rang in Clare's ears as clearly as if he had just pronounced them,

and they had an echo in his own memory. But neither of them referred to that vain offer now—neither of them said a syllable of Edgar. “If he had not so shocked me, so repelled me, brought in that woman,” Clare said to herself in faint self-apology—but not a word did she say aloud. She laid down her head on Arthur Arden’s shoulder, and wept away the accumulated excitement and irritation and misery of the past night. She did not reproach him for his delay or ask a single question. She had wanted him, oh, so sorely! and he had come at last.

“It is too great happiness,” said Arthur, when they had sat there all the bright morning through and made their plans, “that you and I should spend all our lives together in Arden, Clare. To have you anywhere would have seemed too much joy a month ago; but you and Arden! which I have been kept out of, banished from, treated as a stranger in——”

“Do not think of that now, do not think of that now! Oh, Arthur, if you love me, be kind to him.”

“Kind to him! when he had all but succeeded in severing you from me, in carrying you away, with Heaven knows what intention. But, my Clare,” said the new Squire Arden, with that paper in his pocket, of which he did not say a word to her, “for your sake!”

And Clare believed him, every word—she who

was not credulous, nor full of faith, and who prided herself that she knew the world—her own world, in which people were moved by comprehensible motives, not visionary impulses. Clare believed her lover. He would be kind, he would not be too hard or unmerciful. He would forgive the usurper, the Edgar who was Mrs. Murray's son. She stifled every other feeling in that moment of love and intoxication—if, indeed, at such a time there was room for any other feeling towards the Edgar who had been the brother of her youth.

And thus the last link was broken which bound Edgar to his old life. The moment when his sister and his successor clasped hands was the conclusion, as it were, of his career. Had Clare clung to him, and sought to detain him, he might have held on somehow, sadly and reluctantly, by some shadow of the former existence, trying to do impossibilities, and to reconcile the adverse elements. Her sudden decision was a cruel blow to him: it was his final extinction as Edgar Arden; but at the same time, no doubt, it was a relief. It settled her in the position which in all the world was the one most suitable for her, which she herself preferred; and at once and for ever it severed the bond which was now no better than a fictitious and sentimental tie. It was best so, he said to himself, even when

he felt it most sorely. They could not have continued together: they were no longer brother and sister. It was best for both that the severance should be complete.

And thus it was that Edgar Arden's life came to an end. Had he died it could not have finished more completely. His life, his career, his very name were gone. He existed still, and might for aught he knew continue to exist for many years, and even make for himself another history, new hopes, new loves, a renewed career. But here the man who has been the hero of this story, the only Edgar known to his friends and to himself—concluded. The change was like Death—a change of condition, place, being, everything that makes a man. And here the story of Squire Arden must perforce come to an end.

CHAPTER XXIX.

POSTSCRIPT.

TIME flies in the midst of great events ; and yet it is long to look back upon, doubling and redoubling the moments which have been great with feeling—filling the spectator with wonder that in so short a time a human creature could live so long or undergo so much. But after a great crisis of life, time becomes blank, the days are endless as they pass, and count for nothing when they have gone. Flatly they fall upon the memory that keeps no record of them—so much blank routine, so many months ; in ordinary parlance, the fallow season, in which brain and heart have to recover, as the earth has, under her veil of rain and snow—chill days and weeks without a record ; or bright days and weeks which are almost as blank—for even happiness keeps no daybook—until the time of exhaustion is over, and life moves again, most often under the touch of pain.

The episode of personal history, which we have

just concluded, was fully known to the world only after it was over. Then the county, and almost the country—for the report of such a “romance of real life” naturally afforded food for all the newspaper readers in the kingdom—was electrified by the Arden case. It was rumoured at first that a great lawsuit was to be brought, with an exciting trial and all the delightful exposure of family secrets and human meanness which generally attends a law plea between near relations. Then, Mr. Fazakerly published a solemn statement of the facts. Then somebody in Arthur Arden’s interest attempted to prove that Edgar had been in the secret all along; then this imputation was indignantly contradicted by the solicitor of Arthur Arden, Esq. of Arden, but left a sting notwithstanding, and made many people shake their heads, and doubt the romantic tale of generosity, which they held to be contrary to human nature. Then the clever newspapers—those which are great in leading articles—took the matter up, and gave each a little treatise on the subject; and then the story was suddenly suffered to drop, and was heard of no more. At least it was not heard of for a month, when it was all revived by the marriage of Clare Arden to her cousin—a marriage which rent the county asunder, making two parties for and against. “How she could ever do it!” and

“it was the very best thing she could do.” These two events had a great effect upon Arden parish and village. They aged Mr. Fielding, so that he was scarcely ever able for duty again, and had to devolve almost the whole service on Mr. Denbigh, feebly uttering the absolution only, or a benediction from the altar. They brought upon Miss Somers that bad illness which brought her almost to death’s door; and it is said the poor lady cried so much that she never could see very well after, and never was seen abroad more. And they utterly crushed the Pimpernels. Mrs. Pimpernel’s face of horror, when she found that she had actually turned out from her house the rightful owner of Arden, was a thing talked of all over the county; and the family never recovered the shock. They left the Red House that summer, and removed to the other side of the county, at least twenty miles away, and conveniently close to a railway station. “After that accident, when my Alice was so nearly killed, I could not bear it,” Mrs. Pimpernel said, though people maliciously misunderstood which accident it was.

And Jeanie, the real victim of the accident, after a long illness, recovered sufficiently to be taken home. Dr. Somers believed, with professional pride and a little human sympathy, that he had effected a cure on Jeanie mentally as well as physically; but

whether her gentle mind was quite restored was, of course, a matter which time alone could prove. Edgar, who had been absent since the day after he received intelligence of Clare's engagement, returned to take his relations home. But it was not till a month after Clare's marriage that he reappeared finally in Arden to say good-bye to all his friends. The bride and bridegroom had not yet returned, which was a relief to him; and his company was a great solace and consolation to the feeble Rector, with whom he lived. "Ah, Edgar, if you would but stay with me and be my son," the old man would say wistfully, as he leaned upon his vigorous arm. "I have no one now whom I can lean upon, who will close my eyes and see me laid in my grave. Edgar, if it were God's will, before you go away I should be glad to be there."

"Don't say so," said Edgar. "Everybody loves you; and my—I mean Mrs. Arden—you must not withdraw your love from her."

Mr. Fielding shook his head. "She will not want my love," he said. "Never could I give up Clare, however I might disapprove of her; but she will not want me. Nobody wants me; and the last fag-end of work is dreary, just before the holiday comes; but I am grumbling, Edgar. Only I'll be sadly dull when you go, that's all."

“And I cannot stay, you know,” said Edgar, with a sigh.

“No,” said the old man, echoing it. That was the only thing that was impossible. He could not stay. The Thornleighs were at Thorne, and Lady Augusta had written him an anxious, affectionate note, bidding God bless him, but begging him, by all he held dear, not to show himself to Gussy, who was ill and nervous, and could not bear any shock. Poor Edgar put the letter in his pocket and tried to smile. “She might have trusted me,” he said. He was not to go near Thorne; he could not approach Arden; but he went to the poor folk in the village, and received many tearful adieus. Old Miss Somers threw her arms round him and cried. “Oh, Edgar, my dear, my dear!—” she said, “how shall I ever—; and I who thought you would be always—, and meant to leave you what little I have. It is all left to you, Edgar, all the same. Oh, if you would not go! I daresay now they will never return. Though she is your sister, my dear, I must say— If I were Clare I would never more come back to the Hall—”

“But I trust she will, and be very happy there, and that you will be all to her you have ever been,” said Edgar, kissing the wrinkled old hand.

“Oh, my dear boy! Oh, Edgar, God will re-

ward—— Kiss me, my dear; though you are a gentleman, I am so old, and ill; it can't matter, you know. Kiss me, Edgar! and God bless——; and if ever there was one in this world that should have a reward——”

A reward! Edgar smiled mournfully as he went away. The reward he had was abandonment, banishment, solitude, the love and tears of a few old people for whom he had done nothing and could do nothing, who loved him because they had been good to him all his life. As he drove over to the station in Mr. Fielding's old gig, with Jack, silent and respectful, by his side, he passed all the rich woods of Arden, clouds of foliage almost as rich in colour as were the sunset clouds above them—the woods which he had once looked at with so much pride and called his own. He passed the little lodge on the common where he had seen old John lying dead, and had wondered (he recollected as if it were yesterday) if that was the end of all life's struggles and trials? It was not the end; what a poor joke life would be if it was!—weary days, not few, as the patriarch complained, but oh, so weary, so endless, so full of pain to come, as they seemed to the young man—struggles through which the soul came only half alive. But Edgar felt alive all over as he took farewell of all

the familiar places, and remembered the human creatures, much more dear, of whom he could not take farewell. Poor, sweet little Gussy, "ill and nervous"—was it for him? and Clare, who had been silent to him since her marriage, taking no notice of his existence. He brushed away a tear from his eyes as he drove on. He was going he knew not where—to seek his fortune—— But that was no grievance; rather his heart rose to the necessity with a vigorous impulse, which would have been gay, had it been less sore. God bless them!—the one who thought of him still, and the one who had cast him off. They were alike, at least, in this—that he loved them, and would never see them more.

Jack had been sent away with a good-bye and a sovereign, and a sob in his throat which almost choked him; and Edgar was alone. The train was a little late, and he stood on the platform of the small country station waiting for it, longing to be gone. He saw without noticing a little brougham drawn up close to the roadside, so as to enable its occupants to see the train as it passed. While he waited, he was attracted by the flutter of a white handkerchief from the window. He went as close as he could reach, and looked over the paling, wondering, yet not thinking that this signal could

be for him. There was no expectation in his mind, only a certain sad surprise. Then suddenly Lady Augusta's face appeared at the window, full of anxiety and distress; and, in the corner behind her, a little pale face—a worn little figure. “Good-bye, Edgar!—dear Edgar, good-bye!” cried a faltering voice. “We could not let you go without one word. God bless you!” said Lady Augusta, pulling the check in her hand. The coachman turned his horses before Edgar could approach a step nearer; and at the same moment the train came up like a roll of thunder behind——

Edgar went back with his heart and his eyes so full that he saw nothing. He gathered his small possessions together mechanically. His whole being was moved by the sweetness and the bitterness of this last parting and blessing. There was an unusual stir and commotion on the platform, but he took no notice. What was it to him who came or went? She might have been his bride—that tender creature with her soft voice, which came to him like a voice from heaven. So faithful, so tender, so sweet! It was all he could do to keep the tears which blinded him from falling. He threw his bag into the carriage; he had his foot on the step——

What was that cry? Once more, “Edgar! Edgar!” The party arriving had stopped and

broken up. He turned round; through the mist in his eyes he saw who it was. They were standing at a distance in their bridal finery: he with a cloud on his face, with his hand upon her arm holding her back—yet not arbitrarily nor unkindly. And even in Arthur Arden's face there was a certain emotion. They stood looking at each other as if across an ocean or a continent—more than that—a whole world. Then all at once she rushed to him, and threw her arms round his neck. "O Edgar, speak to me, speak to me!—forgive me! I am your sister still—your only sister; don't go away without a word to me!"

"God bless you, my dearest sister, my only Clare!" he cried. The tears rained down on his cheeks. He gave her one convulsive kiss, and put her into her husband's arms.

So all was over! The train rushed on, tearing wildly across the familiar country. And Edgar fell back in the solitude, the silence, the distance, parted from everything that was his; but not without a little of that reward Miss Somers had prayed for—enough of it to keep his heart alive.

THE END.

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