

SQUIRE ARDEN.

VOL. I.

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER XX.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHAPTER XXV.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SQUIRE ARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

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

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

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

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

She was a tidy fresh old woman, with cheeks of a russet colour, half brown half red, yet soft, despite all their wrinkles—cheeks that children laid their little faces up to without feeling any difference of texture; and eyes which had stolen back during these years deeper into their sockets, but yet were bright and full of suppressed sunshine. She had a little shawl pinned over her print gown, and a great white apron, which shone in the sun, and made the chief light in the little picture. Simon’s rugged countenance looking at her

was all brown, with a deep dusky red on the tops of the cheekbones; his face was as full of cross-hatching as if he had been an old print. His eyes were deeper than were hers, but still at the bottom of the wrinkled caves they abode in had a spark of light in each of them. In short, there was sufficient resemblance between them still to show that Simon and Sarah were brother and sister. A young woman of four and twenty came to the door of the next cottage at the sound of his voice, and opening it, went in again, as if her duty was done. She was Simon's daughter and housekeeper, who was not fond of gossip, and the two kindred households were next door to each other. It was a very pretty village, much encouraged to keep itself tidy, and to cultivate flowers, and do everything that is proper in its condition of life, by the young lady at the Hall. The houses had been improved, but in an unobtrusive way. They were not painfully white-washed, but showed here and there a gleam of red brick in a thin place. The roses and the honeysuckles were not always neatly trained, and there was even an old shawl thrust into a broken pane in the window of Sally Timms, who was so much trouble to Miss Arden with her untidy ways. Old Simon had nothing but wallflower and southernwood (which was called lad's love in that region), and red and white daisies in his garden. But next door, if you came at the proper season, you might see picottees that were exhibited at the Holmfirth flower show, and floury auriculas, such as were the height of the fashion in the floral world a good many years ago. In short there was just that mixture of perfection and imperfection which kept the village of Arden a natural spontaneous village, instead of an artificial piece of luxury, cultivated like any other ornament, in consequence of the very close vicinity of the Hall gates.

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

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

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

“It was off his mother he got ’em, as was natural,” said the old clerk. “I saw her when old Master he brought her home first, and she was as fair as fair. But, Squire or no Squire, I’m going to my breakfast. Them bell-ringing boys they’re at the Arden Arms already, drinking the Squire’s sovereign, the fools, instead of laying it up for a rainy day. If they had the rheumatiz as bad as me they’d know what it was to have a penny laid by; but I don’t know what young folks is coming to, I don’t,” said Simon, opening his own gate, and hobbling towards the open door. He had a large white handkerchief loosely tied about his shrivelled brown throat, and an old black coat, which had been an evening coat of the old

Squire's in former days. Simon preferred swallowtail coats, chiefly because he thought they were more dignified, and became his position; but partly also because experience had taught him that coats which were only worn in the evening by their original proprietor had a great deal more wear in them than those which the Squire or the Rector walked about in all day.

Sarah went in also to her own cottage, where for the moment she was all alone. She spread down her white apron, and smoothed out the creases which she had made when she dried her eyes; but, notwithstanding, her eyes required to be dried again. "Poor lad," she said at intervals, as she "tidied" her already tidy room, and swept some imperceptible dust into the fireplace. The fire was made up. The cat sat winking by it. The kettle feebly murmured on the hob. It was not the moment for that kettle to put itself in evidence. It had made the breakfast, and had helped in the washing of the solitary cup and saucer, and it was only just now that it should retire into the background till the afternoon, when tea was again to be thought of. Its mistress was somewhat in the same condition. She walked round the room two or three times, trying apparently to find some piece of active work which required to be done, and poked into all the corners. "I done my scouring only yesterday," she said to herself in a regretful and plaintive tone; but, after a little interval, added energetically, "and I cannot settle down to plain sewing, not to-day." She said this as if somebody had commanded her to take to her plain sewing, which lay all ready in a basket on the table, and the command had roused her to sudden irritation. But it was only the voice of duty which gave that order. Even after this indignant protest, however, Sarah took her work, and put in three stitches, and then picked them carefully out again. "I think I'm a losing of my seven senses," she said to herself

plaintively. "It aint no use a struggling." And with that the old woman rose, tied on her big old bonnet, and set out through Arden village in the sunshine on her way to Arden Hall.

To see that pretty rural place, you would never have supposed it was within a dozen miles of the great, vulgar, bustling town of Liverpool—nay, within half a dozen miles of the straggling, dreary outskirts of that big beehive. But yet so it was; from the tower of Arden Church you could see the mouth of the Mersey, with all its crowds of ships; and, but for the haughty determination of the old Squire to grant no building leases on his land, and the absence of railway communication consequent thereupon, no doubt Arden would have been by this time full of villas, and would have sent a stream of commercial gentlemen every morning out of its quiet freshness by dint of a ten o'clock train. But there was no ten o'clock train, and no commercial gentlemen, and no bright shining new villas; but only the row of houses, half whitewash half red brick, with lilac bushes all in flower, and traveller's joy bristling over their porches, and all the little gardens shining in the sun. The Church was early English; the parsonage was red brick of Queen Anne's time. And there was a great house flush with the road, disdaining any petty interposition of garden between it and the highway, with white steps and a brass knocker, and rows upon rows of brilliant dazzling windows, which was the doctor's house. The parson and the doctor were the only gentlemen in Arden village; there was nobody else above the rank of an ordinary cottager. There was a little shop where everything was sold; and there was the post office, where stationery was to be had as well as postage stamps; and the Arden Arms, with a little green before it, and a great square sign-post standing out in the midst. A little way beyond the Church, which stood on the other side of the road,

opposite but higher up than the Arden Arms, were the great Hall gates. They had a liberal hospitable breadth about them which was suggestive somehow of guests and good cheer. Two carriages could pass, the village folks said, with natural pride, through those wide portals, and the breadth of the great splendid old avenue, with its elms and limes, was in proportion. There were two footpaths leading on either side of the avenue, like side aisles in a great cathedral, under the green-arched splendour of meeting trees; and so princely were the Ardens, with all their prejudices, that not only their poor neighbours, but even Liverpool folks pic-nicing, had leave to roam about the park, and take their walks even in the side aisles of the avenue. The Squire, like a great monarch, was affable to the populace—so long as it allowed that it was the populace, and kept in its right place.

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

coming, a man and a maid; and I canno' see who they are with my bad eyes. Eb, but I could once see as good as the best. I mind that time I was in Cheshire, afore I came home here—Lord bless us, it's Miss Clare and the young Squire!”

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

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

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

“There are no improvements,” said his sister. “Oh, Edgar, I do hope you hate that sort of thing as I do. Let us keep it as it was.”

Our own people are so pleasant, and will do what we want them. The only thing I was afraid of you for was lest you should turn radical, like the rest of the young men. But then you have not been in the way of it—like the Oxford men, you know.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

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

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

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

“The young master don’t know the village, Miss Clare, as he ought to have done,” said old Sarah, shaking her head. She had said such words often before, but never with the same result as

now; for Clare was divided between allegiance to the father whom she loved, who was dead, and whom she could not now admit to have ever done any wrong—and the brother whom she loved, who was there by her side, and of whose injuries she was so keenly sensible. The blood rushed to her cheek—her fine blue eyes grew like steel—the lines of her beautiful face hardened. Poor old Sarah shrank back instinctively, almost as if she expected a blow. Clare's lips were formed to speak when her brother interrupted her, and probably the words would not have been pleasant which she was about to say.

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

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

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

“What others?”

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

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

"What did you forget?" he said gently—"that I have been brought up as never any Arden was before me, and am not an Arden at all, so to speak? Perhaps on the whole it is better, for Arden ways are not the ways of our time. They are very splendid and very imposing, and, in you, dear, I don't object to them, but—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

