

Penguin



Readers

The AGE of
INNOCENCE

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CHAPTER ONE

A new face at the opera

On a January evening in the early 1870s, Newland Archer entered a box at New York's old opera house. People were talking about building an expensive new opera house, a long way up Manhattan, around 60th Street. But the **high society** of New York were happy with their first little opera house and felt no need for anything new.

The music was already playing when Archer arrived. He knew, of course, that it was not the **fashion** to get to the opera too early. And for him it was the **perfect** moment to arrive. Just as he opened the door of the box, he was met by the words "*He loves me—he loves me not—he loves me!*" coming from a singer on the stage.

Archer sat down and looked around him. Opposite was the box of old Mrs. Mingott, who was unable to come to the opera now, but who always had family there. This evening, her daughter, Mrs. Welland, and her son's wife, Mrs. Lovell Mingott, were in the box. Archer's eyes turned immediately to the beautiful young blond woman sitting behind them, Mrs. Welland's daughter, May. She was listening wide-eyed to the love song, her fingers touching the pretty white flowers lying on her knee. A picture of Archer's future came into his mind—sitting in the garden of a **fashionable** Italian hotel, reading a favorite book to his lovely young wife. He remembered the look on May Welland's **innocent**

face, just a few hours earlier, as she agreed to marry him.

“Well, really!” Mr. Jackson, a gray-haired man sitting in front of Archer, said, suddenly. “What are the Mingotts thinking?”

He was looking at a slim young woman who was coming into Mrs. Mingott’s box. She was shorter than May, with dark hair around her face, and she was wearing a most **unusual** dark blue dress. She did not seem to notice how many eyes were turned toward her as she sat down next to May.

Archer felt very **embarrassed**. Could this be May’s cousin, known by everyone in the family as “poor Ellen Olenska”? He knew that she was staying with their grandmother, old Mrs. Mingott, after arriving suddenly from Europe a day or two ago. Archer **approved** of the way the Mingotts were taking her back into the family in private, but he was very surprised to see her **in public**. What an idea—bringing her to the opera with the young woman he was to marry! He and May were planning to **announce** their **engagement** in a few weeks’ time. Mr. Jackson was right—what *were* the Mingotts thinking? But Archer knew that old Mrs. Mingott liked to be different. Who else chose to have a huge light-colored house, like one you might find in Paris, a long way up Manhattan, near Central Park?

Archer heard the voices of the other men in the box.

“Look at that, after everything that’s happened!”

“She left her husband, **Count** Olenski, didn’t she?”

“He’s a terrible man.”

“He’s the very worst. I met him in France. When he wasn’t with women, he was spending money without a thought.”

“And didn’t **Countess** Olenska run away with her husband’s secretary?”

“Maybe she did, but she was soon living alone in Venice. Mr. Lovell Mingott went there to get her. She was terribly unhappy.”

“So, was she too unhappy to be left at home during the opera?”

Everyone laughed.

“But poor May Welland, being seen in public with a woman like that!”

The first part of the opera was ending and Archer jumped up. He felt that he should be the first man to enter Mrs. Mingott’s box and stand by May’s side.

The moment he entered the box his eyes met May’s. He knew that she understood everything and there was no need for words.

“Newland, this is my niece, Countess Ellen Olenska,” said Mrs. Welland.

Archer shook the Countess’s hand and sat down next to May. “Have you told your cousin that we’re **engaged**?” he said, quietly. “I want everybody to know tonight. We should announce it this evening at the Beauforts’ ball.”

“So soon?” replied May, her eyes **shining**. “Mamma might not agree. And why change what we planned?”

Then, she smiled. “Why don’t *you* tell Ellen? She remembers playing with you when you were children.” May pushed back her chair for him to talk to Countess Olenska.

“We did play together, didn’t we?” said the Countess, turning toward him. Then, she looked at the people around her. “Ah, how all this brings the past back to me!”

“You’ve been away a very long time,” said Archer.

“It feels like hundreds of years. It’s possible that I’ve died, and this dear old place is **heaven!**”

He did not know why, but Archer did not like this unusual way of describing New York society.



Mrs. Regina Beaufort gave a ball once a year and her house was one of the few in New York with a ballroom. Having a room for dancing, which was unused every other day of the year, was thought to be very **superior**. Twenty years ago, when the Beauforts were first married, the high society of New York did not approve of the beautiful Regina Dallas's husband. No one knew anything about Julius Beaufort, the rich and handsome banker who was believed to be from England. But soon it was agreed that the Beauforts' house was one of the best in New York.

An hour after the opera, Archer arrived at the ball, afraid that the Mingotts might bring Countess Olenska here, too. From the conversation between the other men in his box he knew that they should not.

He found Mrs. Welland and her daughter standing with a group of young men and women. May looked excited, and Archer guessed that she was announcing her engagement.

Soon, he was holding May close as they danced around the room.

"I did what you asked. I've announced our engagement," she said.

"Yes, it's the right thing to do, now that your cousin is here," he answered, smiling.

"Did you tell her?" May asked.

"There wasn't time," he lied. The **truth** was that he felt too embarrassed to speak about private things to the strange foreign woman.

May looked **disappointed**. “She might think that I’ve forgotten her. She’s one of the family, you see. You must explain that I wanted you to tell her at the opera, before announcing it here.”

“Of course I’ll tell her, dear May! But I haven’t seen her yet. Is she here?”

“No, she decided that her dress wasn’t right for a ball and my aunt took her home.”

Archer looked at May, **admiring** the way she kept away from anything unpleasant. “We both understand why her cousin has stayed away,” he thought. “But I’ll never show dear May that I know about the dark cloud over poor Ellen Olenska.”