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Chapter 18 - Nearer Still

BLANCHE stepped lightly into the room, through one of the open French windows.

"What are you doing here?" she said to Arnold.

"Nothing. I was just going to look for you in the garden."

"The garden is insufferable, this morning." Saying those words, she fanned herself with her handkerchief, and noticed Geoffrey's presence in the room with a look of very thinly-concealed annoyance at the discovery. "Wait till I am married!" she thought. "Mr. Delamayn will be cleverer than I take him to be, if he gets much of his friend's company _then!_"

"A trifle too hot--eh?" said Geoffrey, seeing her eyes fixed on him, and supposing that he was expected to say something.

Having performed that duty he walked away without waiting for a reply; and seated himself with his letter, at one of the writing-tables in the library.

"Sir Patrick is quite right about the young men of the present day," said Blanche, turning to Arnold. "Here is this one asks me a question, and doesn't wait for an answer. There are three more of them, out in the garden, who have been talking of nothing, for the last hour, but the pedigrees of horses and the muscles of men. When we are married, Arnold, don't present any of your male friends to me, unless they have turned fifty. What shall we do till luncheon-time? It's cool and quiet in here among the books. I want a mild excitement--and I have got absolutely nothing to do. Suppose you read me some poetry?"

"While _he_ is here?" asked Arnold, pointing to the personified antithesis of poetry--otherwise to Geoffrey, seated with his back to them at the farther end of the library.

"Pooh!" said Blanche. "There's only an animal in the room. We needn't mind _him!_"

"I say!" exclaimed Arnold. "You're as bitter, this morning, as Sir Patrick himself. What will you say to Me when we are married if you talk in that way of my friend?"

Blanche stole her hand into Arnold's hand and gave it a little significant squeeze. "I shall always be nice to _you,_" she whispered--with a look that contained a host of pretty promises in itself. Arnold returned the look (Geoffrey was unquestionably in the way!). Their eyes met tenderly (why couldn't the great awkward brute write his letters somewhere else?). With a faint little sigh, Blanche dropped resignedly into one of the comfortable arm-chairs--and asked once more for "some poetry," in a voice that faltered softly, and with a color that was brighter than usual.

"Whose poetry am I to read?" inquired Arnold.

"Any body's," said Blanche. "This is another of my impulses. I am dying for some poetry. I don't know whose poetry. And I don't know why."

Arnold went straight to the nearest book-shelf, and took down the first volume that his hand lighted on--a solid quarto, bound in sober brown.

"Well?" asked Blanche. "What have you found?"

Arnold opened the volume, and conscientiously read the title exactly as it stood:

"Paradise Lost. A Poem. By John Milton."

"I have never read Milton," said Blanche. "Have you?"

"No."

"Another instance of sympathy between us. No educated person ought to be ignorant of Milton. Let us be educated persons. Please begin."

"At the beginning?"

"Of course! Stop! You musn't sit all that way off--you must sit where I can look at you. My attention wanders if I don't look at people while they read."

Arnold took a stool at Blanche's feet, and opened the "First Book" of Paradise Lost. His "system" as a reader of blank verse was simplicity itself. In poetry we are some of us (as many living poets can testify) all for sound; and some of us (as few living poets can testify) all for sense. Arnold was for sound. He ended every line inexorably with a full stop; and he got on to his full stop as fast as the inevitable impediment of the words would let him. He began:

"Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit. Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste. Brought death into the world and all our woe. With loss of Eden till one greater Man. Restore us and regain the blissful seat. Sing heavenly Muse--"

"Beautiful!" said Blanche. "What a shame it seems to have had Milton all this time in the library and never to have read him yet! We will have Mornings with Milton, Arnold. He seems long; but we are both young, and we _may_ live to get to the end of him. Do you know dear, now I look at you again, you don't seem to have come back to Windygates in good spirits."

"Don't I? I can't account for it."

"I can. It's sympathy with Me. I am out of spirits too."

"You!"

"Yes. After what I saw at Craig Fernie, I grow more and more uneasy about Anne. You will understand that, I am sure, after what I told you this morning?"

Arnold looked back, in a violent hurry, from Blanche to Milton. That renewed reference to events at Craig Fernie was a renewed reproach to him for his conduct at the inn. He attempted to silence her by pointing to Geoffrey.

"Don't forget," he whispered, "that there is somebody in the room besides ourselves."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"What does he matter?" she asked. "What does he know or care about Anne?"

There was only one other chance of diverting her from the delicate subject. Arnold went on reading headlong, two lines in advance of the place at which he had left off, with more sound and less sense than ever:

"In the beginning how the heavens and earth. Rose out of Chaos or if Sion hill--"

At "Sion hill," Blanche interrupted him again.

"Do wait a little, Arnold. I can't have Milton crammed down my throat in that way. Besides I had something to say. Did I tell you that I consulted my uncle about Anne? I don't think I did. I caught him alone in this very room. I told him all I have told you. I showed him Anne's letter. And I said, 'What do you think?' He took a little time (and a great deal of snuff) before he would say what he thought. When he did speak, he told me I might quite possibly be right in suspecting Anne's husband to be a very abominable person. His keeping himself out of my way was (just as I thought) a suspicious circumstance, to begin with. And then there was the sudden extinguishing of the candles, when I first went in. I thought (and Mrs. Inchbore thought) it was done by the wind. Sir Patrick suspects it was done by the horrid man himself, to prevent me from seeing him when I entered the room. I am firmly persuaded Sir Patrick is right. What do you think?"

"I think we had better go on," said Arnold, with his head down over his book. "We seem to be forgetting Milton."

"How you do worry about Milton! That last bit wasn't as interesting as the other. Is there any love in Paradise Lost?"

"Perhaps we may find some if we go on."

"Very well, then. Go on. And be quick about it."

Arnold was so quick about it that he lost his place. Instead of going on he went back. He read once more:

"In the beginning how the heavens and earth. Rose out of Chaos or if Sion hill--"

"You read that before," said Blanche.

"I think not."

"I'm sure you did. When you said 'Sion hill' I recollect I thought of the Methodists directly. I couldn't have thought of the Methodists, if you hadn't said 'Sion hill.' It stands to reason."

"I'll try the next page," said Arnold. "I can't have read that before--for I haven't turned over yet."

Blanche threw herself back in her chair, and flung her handkerchief resignedly over her face. "The flies," she explained. "I'm not going to sleep. Try the next page. Oh, dear me, try the next page!"

Arnold proceeded:

"Say first for heaven hides nothing from thy view. Nor the deep tract of hell say first what cause. Moved our grand parents in that happy state--"

Blanche suddenly threw the handkerchief off again, and sat bolt upright in her chair. "Shut it up," she cried. "I can't bear any more. Leave off, Arnold--leave off!"

"What's, the matter now?"

"That happy state," said Blanche. "What does 'that happy state' mean? Marriage, of course! And marriage reminds me of Anne. I won't have any more. Paradise Lost is painful. Shut it up. Well, my next question to Sir Patrick was, of course, to know what he thought Anne's husband had done. The wretch had behaved infamously to her in some way. In what way? Was it any thing to do with her marriage? My uncle considered again. He thought it quite possible. Private marriages were dangerous things (he said)--especially in Scotland. He asked me if they had been married in Scotland. I couldn't tell him--I only said, 'Suppose they were? What then?' 'It's barely possible, in that case,' says Sir Patrick, 'that Miss Silvester may be feeling uneasy about her marriage. She may even have reason--or may think she has reason--to doubt whether it is a marriage at all.' "

Arnold started, and looked round at Geoffrey still sitting at the writing-table with his back turned on them. Utterly as Blanche and Sir Patrick were mistaken in their estimate of Anne's position at Craig Fernie, they had drifted, nevertheless, into discussing the very question in which Geoffrey and Miss Silvester were interested--the question of marriage in Scotland. It was impossible in Blanche's presence to tell Geoffrey that he might do well to listen to Sir Patrick's opinion, even at second-hand. Perhaps the words had found their way to him? perhaps he was listening already, of his own accord?

(He was listening. Blanche's last words had found their way to him, while he was pondering over his half-finished letter to his brother. He waited to hear more--without moving, and with the pen suspended in his hand.)

Blanche proceeded, absently winding her fingers in and out of Arnold's hair as he sat at her feet:

"It flashed on me instantly that Sir Patrick had discovered the truth. Of course I told him so. He laughed, and said I mustn't jump at conclusions. We were guessing quite in the dark; and all the distressing things I had noticed at the inn might admit of some totally different explanation. He would have gone on splitting straws in that provoking way the whole morning if I hadn't stopped him. I was strictly logical. I said _I_ had seen Anne, and _he_ hadn't--and that made all the difference. I said, 'Every thing that puzzled and frightened me in the poor darling is accounted for now. The law must, and shall, reach that man, uncle--and I'll pay for it!' I was so much in earnest that I believe I cried a little. What do you think the dear old man did? He took me on his knee and gave me a kiss; and he said, in the nicest way, that he would adopt my view, for the present, if I would promise not to cry any more; and--wait! the cream of it is to come!--that he would put the view in quite a new light to me as soon as I was composed again. You may imagine how soon I dried my eyes, and what a picture of composure I presented in the course of half a minute. 'Let us take it for granted,' says Sir Patrick, 'that this man unknown has really tried to deceive Miss Silvester, as you and I suppose. I can tell you one thing: it's as likely as not that, in trying to overreach _her_, _he_ may (without in the least suspecting it) have ended in overreaching himself.' "

(Geoffrey held his breath. The pen dropped unheeded from his fingers. It was coming. The light that his brother couldn't throw on the subject was dawning on it at last!)

Blanche resumed:

"I was so interested, and it made such a tremendous impression on me, that I haven't forgotten a word. 'I mustn't make that poor little head of yours ache with Scotch law,' my uncle said; 'I must put it plainly. There are marriages allowed in Scotland, Blanche, which are called Irregular Marriages--and very abominable things they are. But they have this accidental merit in the present case. It is extremely difficult for a man to pretend to marry in Scotland, and not really to do it. And it is, on the other hand, extremely easy for a man to drift into marrying in Scotland without feeling the slightest suspicion of having done it himself.' That was exactly what he said, Arnold. When _we_ are married, it sha'n't be in Scotland!"

(Geoffrey's ruddy color paled. If this was true he might be caught himself in the trap which he had schemed to set for Anne! Blanche went on with her narrative. He waited and listened.)

"My uncle asked me if I understood him so far. It was as plain as the sun at noonday, of course I understood him! 'Very well, then--now for the application!' says Sir Patrick. 'Once more supposing our guess to be the right one, Miss Silvester may be making herself very unhappy without any real cause. If this invisible man at Craig Fernie has actually meddled, I won't say with marrying her, but only with pretending to make her his wife, and if he has attempted it in Scotland, the chances are nine to one (though _he_ may not believe it, and though _she_ may not believe it) that he has really married her, after all.' My uncle's own words again! Quite needless to say that, half an hour after they were out of his lips, I had sent them to Craig Fernie in a letter to Anne!"

(Geoffrey's stolidly-staring eyes suddenly brightened. A light of the devil's own striking illuminated him. An idea of the devil's own bringing entered his mind. He looked stealthily round at the man whose life he had saved--at the man who had devotedly served him in return. A hideous cunning leered at his mouth and peeped out of his eyes. "Arnold Brinkworth pretended to be married to her at the inn. By the lord Harry! that's a way out of it that never struck me before!" With that thought in his heart he turned back again to his half-finished letter to Julius. For once in his life he was strongly, fiercely agitated. For once in his life he was daunted--and that by his Own Thought! He had written to Julius under a strong sense of the necessity of gaining time to delude Anne into leaving Scotland before he ventured on paying his addresses to Mrs. Glenarm. His letter contained a string of clumsy excuses, intended to delay his return to his brother's house. "No," he said to himself, as he read it again. "Whatever else may do--_this_ won't!" He looked round once more at Arnold, and slowly tore the letter into fragments as he looked.)

In the mean time Blanche had not done yet. "No," she said, when Arnold proposed an adjournment to the garden; "I have something more to say, and you are interested in it, this time." Arnold resigned himself to listen, and worse still to answer, if there was no help for it, in the character of an innocent stranger who had never been near the Craig Fernie inn.

"Well," Blanche resumed, "and what do you think has come of my letter to Anne?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Nothing has come of it!"

"Indeed?"

"Absolutely nothing! I know she received the letter yesterday morning. I ought to have had the answer to-day at breakfast."

"Perhaps she thought it didn't require an answer."

"She couldn't have thought that, for reasons that I know of. Besides, in my letter yesterday I implored her to tell me (if it was one line only) whether, in guessing at what her trouble was, Sir Patrick and I had not guessed right. And here is the day getting on, and no answer! What am I to conclude?"

"I really can't say!"

"Is it possible, Arnold, that we have _not_ guessed right, after all? Is the wickedness of that man who blew the candles out wickedness beyond our discovering? The doubt is so dreadful that I have made up my mind not to bear it after to-day. I count on your sympathy and assistance when to-morrow comes!"

Arnold's heart sank. Some new complication was evidently gathering round him. He waited in silence to hear the worst. Blanche bent forward, and whispered to him.

"This is a secret," she said. "If that creature at the writing-table has ears for any thing but rowing and racing, he mustn't hear this! Anne may come to me privately to-day while you are all at luncheon. If she doesn't come and if I don't hear from her, then the mystery of her silence must be cleared up; and You must do it!"

"I!"

"Don't make difficulties! If you can't find your way to Craig Fernie, I can help you. As for Anne, you know what a charming person she is, and you know she will receive you perfectly, for my sake. I must and will have some news of her. I can't break the laws of the household a second time. Sir Patrick sympathizes, but he won't stir. Lady Lundie is a bitter enemy. The servants are threatened with the loss of their places if any one of them goes near Anne. There is nobody but you. And to Anne you go to-morrow, if I don't see her or hear from her to-day!"

This to the man who had passed as Anne's husband at the inn, and who had been forced into the most intimate knowledge of Anne's miserable secret! Arnold rose to put Milton away, with the composure of sheer despair. Any other secret he might, in the last resort, have confided to the discretion of a third person. But a woman's secret--with a woman's reputation depending on his keeping it--was not to be confided to any body, under any stress of circumstances whatever. "If Geoffrey doesn't get me out of _this_,_" he thought, "I shall have no choice but to leave Windygates to-morrow."

As he replaced the book on the shelf, Lady Lundie entered the library from the garden.

"What are you doing here?" she said to her step-daughter.

"Improving my mind," replied Blanche. "Mr. Brinkworth and I have been reading Milton."

"Can you condescend so far, after reading Milton all the morning, as to help me with the invitations for the dinner next week?"

"If you can condescend, Lady Lundie, after feeding the poultry all the morning, I must be humility itself after only reading Milton!"

With that little interchange of the acid amenities of feminine intercourse, step-mother and step-daughter withdrew to a writing-table, to put the virtue of hospitality in practice together.

Arnold joined his friend at the other end of the library.

Geoffrey was sitting with his elbows on the desk, and his clenched fists dug into his cheeks. Great drops of perspiration stood on his forehead, and the fragments of a torn letter lay scattered all round him. He exhibited symptoms of nervous sensibility for the first time in his life--he started when Arnold spoke to him.

"What's the matter, Geoffrey?"

"A letter to answer. And I don't know how."

"From Miss Silvester?" asked Arnold, dropping his voice so as to prevent the ladies at the other end of the room from hearing him.

"No," answered Geoffrey, in a lower voice still.

"Have you heard what Blanche has been saying to me about Miss Silvester?"

"Some of it."

"Did you hear Blanche say that she meant to send me to Craig Fernie to-morrow, if she failed to get news from Miss Silvester to-day?"

"No."

"Then you know it now. That is what Blanche has just said to me."

"Well?"

"Well--there's a limit to what a man can expect even from his best friend. I hope you won't ask me to be Blanche's messenger to-morrow. I can't, and won't, go back to the inn as things are now."

"You have had enough of it--eh?"

"I have had enough of distressing Miss Silvester, and more than enough of deceiving Blanche."

"What do you mean by 'distressing Miss Silvester?' "

"She doesn't take the same easy view that you and I do, Geoffrey, of my passing her off on the people of the inn as my wife."

Geoffrey absently took up a paper-knife. Still with his head down, he began shaving off the topmost layer of paper from the blotting-pad under his hand. Still with his head down, he abruptly broke the silence in a whisper.

"I say!"

"Yes?"

"How did you manage to pass her off as your wife?"

"I told you how, as we were driving from the station here."

"I was thinking of something else. Tell me again."

Arnold told him once more what had happened at the inn. Geoffrey listened, without making any remark. He balanced the paper-knife vacantly on one of his fingers. He was strangely sluggish and strangely silent.

"All that is done and ended," said Arnold shaking him by the shoulder. "It rests with you now to get me out of the difficulty I'm placed in with Blanche. Things must be settled with Miss Silvester to-day."

"Things shall be settled."

"Shall be? What are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting to do what you told me."

"What I told you?"

"Didn't you tell me to consult Sir Patrick before I married her?"

"To be sure! so I did."

"Well--I am waiting for a chance with Sir Patrick."

"And then?"

"And then--" He looked at Arnold for the first time. "Then," he said, "you may consider it settled."

"The marriage?"

He suddenly looked down again at the blotting-pad. "Yes--the marriage."

Arnold offered his hand in congratulation. Geoffrey never noticed it. His eyes were off the blotting-pad again. He was looking out of the window near him.

"Don't I hear voices outside?" he asked.

"I believe our friends are in the garden," said Arnold. "Sir Patrick may be among them. I'll go and see."

The instant his back was turned Geoffrey snatched up a sheet of note-paper. "Before I forget it!" he said to himself. He wrote the word "Memorandum" at the top of the page, and added these lines beneath it:

"He asked for her by the name of his wife at the door. He said, at dinner, before the landlady and the waiter, 'I take these rooms for my wife.' He made her say he was her husband at the same time. After that he stopped all night. What do the lawyers call this in Scotland?--(Query: a marriage?)"

After folding up the paper he hesitated for a moment. "No!" he thought, "It won't do to trust to what Miss Lundie said about it. I can't be certain till I have consulted Sir Patrick himself."

He put the paper away in his pocket, and wiped the heavy perspiration from his forehead. He was pale--for him, strikingly pale--when Arnold came back.

"Any thing wrong, Geoffrey?--you're as white as ashes."

"It's the heat. Where's Sir Patrick?"

"You may see for yourself."

Arnold pointed to the window. Sir Patrick was crossing the lawn, on his way to the library with a newspaper in his hand; and the guests at Windygates were accompanying him. Sir Patrick was smiling, and saying nothing. The guests were talking excitedly at the tops of their voices. There had apparently been a collision of some kind between the old school and the new. Arnold directed Geoffrey's attention to the state of affairs on the lawn.

"How are you to consult Sir Patrick with all those people about him?"

"I'll consult Sir Patrick, if I take him by the scruff of the neck and carry him into the next county!" He rose to his feet as he spoke those words, and emphasized them under his breath with an oath.

Sir Patrick entered the library, with the guests at his heels.