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Chapter 22 - Gone

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BLANCHE came in, with a glass of wine in her hand, and saw the swooning woman on the floor.

She was alarmed, but not surprised, as she knelt by Anne, and raised her head. Her own previous observation of her friend necessarily prevented her from being at any loss to account for the fainting fit. The inevitable delay in getting the wine was--naturally to her mind--alone to blame for the result which now met her view.

If she had been less ready in thus tracing the effect to the cause, she might have gone to the window to see if any thing had happened, out-of-doors, to frighten Anne--might have seen Geoffrey before he had time to turn the corner of the house--and, making that one discovery, might have altered the whole course of events, not in her coming life only, but in the coming lives of others. So do we shape our own destinies, blindfold. So do we hold our poor little tenure of happiness at the capricious mercy of Chance. It is surely a blessed delusion which persuades us that we are the highest product of the great scheme of creation, and sets us doubting whether other planets are inhabited, because other planets are not surrounded by an atmosphere which we can breathe!

After trying such simple remedies as were within her reach, and trying them without success, Blanche became seriously alarmed. Anne lay, to all outward appearance, dead in her arms. She was on the point of calling for help--come what might of the discovery which would ensue--when the door from the hall opened once more, and Hester Dethridge entered the room.

The cook had accepted the alternative which her mistress's message had placed before her, if she insisted on having her own time at her own sole disposal for the rest of that day. Exactly as Lady Lundie had desired, she intimated her resolution to carry her point by placing her account-book on the desk in the library. It was only when this had been done that Blanche received any answer to her entreaties for help. Slowly and deliberately Hester Dethridge walked up to the spot where the young girl knelt with Anne's head on her bosom, and looked at the two without a trace of human emotion in her stern and stony face.

"Don't you see what's happened?" cried Blanche. "Are you alive or dead? Oh, Hester, I can't bring her to! Look at her! look at her!"

Hester Dethridge looked at her, and shook her head. Looked again, thought for a while and wrote on her slate. Held out the slate over Anne's body, and showed what she had written:

"Who has done it?"

"You stupid creature!" said Blanche. "Nobody has done it."

The eyes of Hester Dethridge steadily read the worn white face, telling its own tale of sorrow mutely on Blanche's breast. The mind of Hester Dethridge steadily looked back at her own knowledge of her own miserable married life. She again returned to writing on her slate--again showed the written words to Blanche.

"Brought to it by a man. Let her be--and God will take her."

"You horrid unfeeling woman! how dare you write such an abominable thing!" With this natural outburst of indignation, Blanche looked back at Anne; and, daunted by the death-like persistency of the swoon, appealed again to the mercy of the immovable woman who was looking down at her. "Oh, Hester! for Heaven's sake help me!"

The cook dropped her slate at her side. and bent her head gravely in sign that she submitted. She motioned to Blanche to loosen Anne's dress, and then--kneeling on one knee--took Anne to support her while it was being done.

The instant Hester Dethridge touched her, the swooning woman gave signs of life.

A faint shudder ran through her from head to foot--her eyelids trembled--half opened for a moment--and closed again. As they closed, a low sigh fluttered feebly from her lips.

Hester Dethridge put her back in Blanche's arms--considered a little with herself--returned to writing on her slate--and held out the written words once more:

"Shivered when I touched her. That means I have been walking over her grave."

Blanche turned from the sight of the slate, and from the sight of the woman, in horror. "You frighten me!" she said. "You will frighten her if she sees you. I don't mean to offend you; but--leave us, please leave us."

Hester Dethridge accepted her dismissal, as she accepted every thing else. She bowed her head in sign that she understood--looked for the last time at Anne--dropped a stiff courtesy to her young mistress--and left the room.

An hour later the butler had paid her, and she had left the house.

Blanche breathed more freely when she found herself alone. She could feel the relief now of seeing Anne revive.

"Can you hear me, darling?" she whispered. "Can you let me leave you for a moment?"

Anne's eyes slowly opened and looked round her--in that torment and terror of reviving life which marks the awful protest of humanity against its recall to existence when mortal mercy has dared to wake it in the arms of Death.

Blanche rested Anne's head against the nearest chair, and ran to the table upon which she had placed the wine on entering the room.

After swallowing the first few drops Anne begun to feel the effect of the stimulant. Blanche persisted in making her empty the glass, and refrained from asking or answering questions until her recovery under the influence of the wine was complete.

"You have overexerted yourself this morning," she said, as soon as it seemed safe to speak. "Nobody has seen you, darling--nothing has happened. Do you feel like yourself again?"

Anne made an attempt to rise and leave the library; Blanche placed her gently in the chair, and went on:

"There is not the least need to stir. We have another quarter of an hour to ourselves before any body is at all likely to disturb us. I have something to say, Anne--a little proposal to make. Will you listen to me?"

Anne took Blanche's hand, and pressed it gratefully to her lips. She made no other reply. Blanche proceeded:

"I won't ask any questions, my dear--I won't attempt to keep you here against your will--I won't even remind you of my letter yesterday. But I can't let you go, Anne, without having my mind made easy about you in some way. You will relieve all my anxiety, if you will do one thing--one easy thing for my sake."

"What is it, Blanche?"

She put that question with her mind far away from the subject before her. Blanche was too eager in pursuit of her object to notice the absent tone, the purely mechanical manner, in which Anne had spoken to her.

"I want you to consult my uncle," she answered. "Sir Patrick is interested in you; Sir Patrick proposed to me this very day to go and see you at the inn. He is the wisest, the kindest, the dearest old man living--and you can trust him as you could trust nobody else. Will you take my uncle into your confidence, and be guided by his advice?"

With her mind still far away from the subject, Anne looked out absently at the lawn, and made no answer.

"Come!" said Blanche. "One word isn't much to say. Is it Yes or No?"

Still looking out on the lawn--still thinking of something else--Anne yielded, and said "Yes."

Blanche was enchanted. "How well I must have managed it!" she thought. "This is what my uncle means, when my uncle talks of 'putting it strongly.'"

She bent down over Anne, and gayly patted her on the shoulder.

"That's the wisest 'Yes,' darling, you ever said in your life. Wait here--and I'll go in to luncheon, or they will be sending to know what has become of me. Sir Patrick has kept my place for me, next to himself. I shall contrive to tell him what I want; and _he_ will contrive (oh, the blessing of having to do with a clever man; these are so few of them!)--he will contrive to leave the table before the rest, without exciting any body's suspicions. Go away with him at once to the summer-house (we have been at the summer-house all the morning; nobody will go back to it now), and I will follow you as soon as I have satisfied Lady Lundie by eating some lunch. Nobody will be any the wiser but our three selves. In five minutes or less you may expect Sir Patrick. Let me go! We haven't a moment to lose!"

Anne held her back. Anne's attention was concentrated on her now.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Are you going on happily with Arnold, Blanche?"

"Arnold is nicer than ever, my dear."

"Is the day fixed for your marriage?"

"The day will be ages hence. Not till we are back in town, at the end of the autumn. Let me go, Anne!"

"Give me a kiss, Blanche."

Blanche kissed her, and tried to release her hand. Anne held it as if she was drowning, as if her life depended on not letting it go.

"Will you always love me, Blanche, as you love me now?"

"How can you ask me!"

"_I_ said Yes just now. _You_ say Yes too."

Blanche said it. Anne's eyes fastened on her face, with one long, yearning look, and then Anne's hand suddenly dropped hers.

She ran out of the room, more agitated, more uneasy, than she liked to confess to herself. Never had she felt so certain of the urgent necessity of appealing to Sir Patrick's advice as she felt at that moment.

The guests were still safe at the luncheon-table when Blanche entered the dining-room.

Lady Lundie expressed the necessary surprise, in the properly graduated tone of reproof, at her step-daughter's want of punctuality. Blanche made her apologies with the most exemplary humility. She glided into her chair by her uncle's side, and took the first thing that was offered to her. Sir Patrick looked at his niece, and found himself in the company of a model young English Miss--and marveled inwardly what it might mean.

The talk, interrupted for the moment (topics, Politics and Sport--and then, when a change was wanted, Sport and Politics), was resumed again all round the table. Under cover of the conversation, and in the intervals of receiving the attentions of the gentlemen, Blanche whispered to Sir Patrick, "Don't start, uncle. Anne is in the library." (Polite Mr. Smith offered some ham. Gratefully declined.) "Pray, pray, pray go to her; she is waiting to see you--she is in dreadful trouble." (Gallant Mr. Jones

proposed fruit tart and cream.) "Take her to the summer-house: I'll follow you the chance. And manage it at once, uncle, if you love me, or you will be too late."

Before Sir Patrick could whisper back a word in reply, Lady Lundie, cutting a cake of the richest Scottish composition, at the other end of the table, publicly proclaimed it to be her "own cake," and, as such, offered her brother-in-law a slice. The slice exhibited an eruption of plums and sweetmeats, overlaid by a perspiration of butter. It has been said that Sir Patrick had reached the age of seventy--it is, therefore, needless to add that he politely declined to commit an unprovoked outrage on his own stomach.

"MY cake!" persisted Lady Lundie, elevating the horrible composition on a fork. "Won't that tempt you?"

Sir Patrick saw his way to slipping out of the room under cover of a compliment to his sister-in-law. He summoned his courtly smile, and laid his hand on his heart.

"A fallible mortal," he said, "is met by a temptation which he can not possibly resist. If he is a wise mortal, also, what does he do?"

"He eats some of My cake," said the prosaic Lady Lundie.

"No!" said Sir Patrick, with a look of unutterable devotion directed at his sister-in-law.

"He flies temptation, dear lady--as I do now." He bowed, and escaped, unsuspected, from the room.

Lady Lundie cast down her eyes, with an expression of virtuous indulgence for human frailty, and divided Sir Patrick's compliment modestly between herself and her cake.

Well aware that his own departure from the table would be followed in a few minutes by the rising of the lady of the house, Sir Patrick hurried to the library as fast as his lame foot would let him. Now that he was alone, his manner became anxious, and his face looked grave. He entered the room.

Not a sign of Anne Silvester was to be seen any where. The library was a perfect solitude.

"Gone!" said Sir Patrick. "This looks bad."

After a moment's reflection he went back into the hall to get his hat. It was possible that she might have been afraid of discovery if she staid in the library, and that she might have gone on to the summer-house by herself.

If she was not to be found in the summer-house, the quieting of Blanche's mind and the clearing up of her uncle's suspicions alike depended on discovering the place in which Miss Silvester had taken refuge. In this case time would be of importance, and the capacity of making the most of it would be a precious capacity at starting. Arriving rapidly at these conclusions, Sir Patrick rang the bell in the hall which communicated with the servants' offices, and summoned his own valet--a person of tried discretion and fidelity, nearly as old as himself.

"Get your hat, Duncan," he said, when the valet appeared, "and come out with me."

Master and servant set forth together silently on their way through the grounds. Arrived within sight of the summer-house, Sir Patrick ordered Duncan to wait, and went on by himself.

There was not the least need for the precaution that he had taken. The summer-house was as empty as the library. He stepped out again and looked about him. Not a living creature was visible. Sir Patrick summoned his servant to join him.

"Go back to the stables, Duncan," he said, "and say that Miss Lundie lends me her pony-carriage to-day. Let it be got ready at once and kept in the stable-yard. I want to attract as little notice as possible. You are to go with me, and nobody else. Provide yourself with a railway time-table. Have you got any money?"

"Yes, Sir Patrick."

"Did you happen to see the governess (Miss Silvester) on the day when we came here--the day of the lawn-party?"

"I did, Sir Patrick."

"Should you know her again?"

"I thought her a very distinguished-looking person, Sir Patrick. I should certainly know her again."

"Have you any reason to think she noticed you?"

"She never even looked at me, Sir Patrick."

"Very good. Put a change of linen into your bag, Duncan--I may possibly want you to take a journey by railway. Wait for me in the stable-yard. This is a matter in which every thing is trusted to my discretion, and to yours."

"Thank you, Sir Patrick."

With that acknowledgment of the compliment which had been just paid to him, Duncan gravely went his way to the stables; and Duncan's master returned to the summer-house, to wait there until he was joined by Blanche.

Sir Patrick showed signs of failing patience during the interval of expectation through which he was now condemned to pass. He applied perpetually to the snuff-box in the knob of his cane. He fidgeted incessantly in and out of the summer-house. Anne's disappearance had placed a serious obstacle in the way of further discovery; and there was no attacking that obstacle, until precious time had been wasted in waiting to see Blanche.

At last she appeared in view, from the steps of the summer-house; breathless and eager, hastening to the place of meeting as fast as her feet would take her to it.

Sir Patrick considerably advanced, to spare her the shock of making the inevitable discovery. "Blanche," he said. "Try to prepare yourself, my dear, for a disappointment. I am alone."

"You don't mean that you have let her go?"

"My poor child! I have never seen her at all."

Blanche pushed by him, and ran into the summer-house. Sir Patrick followed her. She came out again to meet him, with a look of blank despair. "Oh, uncle! I did so truly pity her! And see how little pity she has for _me!_"

Sir Patrick put his arm round his niece, and softly patted the fair young head that dropped on his shoulder.

"Don't let us judge her harshly, my dear: we don't know what serious necessity may not plead her excuse. It is plain that she can trust nobody--and that she only consented to see me to get you out of the room and spare you the pain of parting. Compose yourself, Blanche. I don't despair of discovering where she has gone, if you will help me."

Blanche lifted her head, and dried her tears bravely.

"My father himself wasn't kinder to me than you are," she said. "Only tell me, uncle, what I can do!"

"I want to hear exactly what happened in the library," said Sir Patrick. "Forget nothing, my dear child, no matter how trifling it may be. Trifles are precious to us, and minutes are precious to us, now."

Blanche followed her instructions to the letter, her uncle listening with the closest attention. When she had completed her narrative, Sir Patrick suggested leaving the summer-house. "I have ordered your chaise," he said; "and I can tell you what I propose doing on our way to the stable-yard."

"Let me drive you, uncle!"

"Forgive me, my dear, for saying No to that. Your step-mother's suspicions are very easily excited--and you had better not be seen with me if my inquiries take me to the Craig Fernie inn. I promise, if you will remain here, to tell you every thing when I come back. Join the others in any plan they have for the afternoon--and you will prevent my absence from exciting any thing more than a passing remark. You will do as I tell you? That's a good girl! Now you shall hear how I propose to search for this poor lady, and how your little story has helped me."

He paused, considering with himself whether he should begin by telling Blanche of his consultation with Geoffrey. Once more, he decided that question in the negative. Better to still defer taking her into his confidence until he had performed the errand of investigation on which he was now setting forth.

"What you have told me, Blanche, divides itself, in my mind, into two heads," began Sir Patrick. "There is what happened in the library before your own eyes; and there is what Miss Silvester told you had happened at the inn. As to the event in the library (in the first place), it is too late now to inquire whether that fainting-fit was the result, as you say, of mere exhaustion--or whether it was the result of something that occurred while you were out of the room."

"What could have happened while I was out of the room?"

"I know no more than you do, my dear. It is simply one of the possibilities in the case, and, as such, I notice it. To get on to what practically concerns us; if Miss Silvester is in delicate health it is impossible that she could get, unassisted, to any great distance from Windygates. She may have taken refuge in one of the cottages in our immediate neighborhood. Or she may have met with some passing vehicle from one of the farms on its way to the station, and may have asked the person driving to give her a seat in it. Or she may have walked as far as she can, and may have stopped to rest in some sheltered place, among the lanes to the south of this house."

"I'll inquire at the cottages, uncle, while you are gone."

"My dear child, there must be a dozen cottages, at least, within a circle of one mile from Windygates! Your inquiries would probably occupy you for the whole afternoon. I won't ask what Lady Lundie would think of your being away all that time by yourself. I will only remind you of two things. You would be making a public matter of an investigation which it is essential to pursue as privately as possible; and, even if you happened to hit on the right cottage your inquiries would be completely baffled, and you would discover nothing."

"Why not?"

"I know the Scottish peasant better than you do, Blanche. In his intelligence and his sense of self-respect he is a very different being from the English peasant. He would receive you civilly, because you are a young lady; but he would let you see, at the same time, that he considered you had taken advantage of the difference between your position and his position to commit an intrusion. And if Miss Silvester had appealed, in confidence, to his hospitality, and if he had granted it, no power on earth would induce him to tell any person living that she was under his roof--without her express permission."

"But, uncle, if it's of no use making inquiries of any body, how are we to find her?"

"I don't say that nobody will answer our inquiries, my dear--I only say the peasantry won't answer them, if your friend has trusted herself to their protection. The way to find her is to look on, beyond what Miss Silvester may be doing at the present moment, to what Miss Silvester contemplates doing--let us say, before the day is out. We may assume, I think (after what has happened), that, as soon as she can leave this neighborhood, she assuredly will leave it. Do you agree, so far?"

"Yes! yes! Go on."

"Very well. She is a woman, and she is (to say the least of it) not strong. She can only leave this neighborhood either by hiring a vehicle or by traveling on the railway. I propose going first to the station. At the rate at which your pony gets over the ground, there is a fair chance, in spite of the time we have lost, of my being there as soon as she is--assuming that she leaves by the first train, up or down, that passes."

"There is a train in half an hour, uncle. She can never get there in time for that."

"She may be less exhausted than we think; or she may get a lift; or she may not be alone. How do we know but somebody may have been waiting in the lane--her husband, if there is such a person--to help her? No! I shall assume she is now on her way to the station; and I shall get there as fast as possible--"

"And stop her, if you find her there?"

"What I do, Blanche, must be left to my discretion. If I find her there, I must act for the best. If I don't find her there, I shall leave Duncan (who goes with me) on the watch for the remaining trains, until the last to-night. He knows Miss Silvester by sight, and he is sure that _she_ has never noticed _him._ Whether she goes north or south, early

or late, Duncan is my factotum; and the course I am taking is the obvious course which would have occurred to any body. Let us get to the really difficult part of it now. Suppose she hires a carriage?"

"How clever of you to think of Duncan!"

"Not in the least, my dear. Duncan is my factotum; and the course I am taking is the obvious course which would have occurred to any body. Let us get to the really difficult part of it now. Suppose she hires a carriage?"

"There are none to be had, except at the station."

"There are farmers about here - and farmers have light carts, or chaises, or something of the sort. It is in the last degree unlikely that they would consent to let her have them. Still, women break through difficulties which stop men. And this is a clever woman, Blanche--a woman, you may depend on it, who is bent on preventing you from tracing her. I confess I wish we had somebody we could trust lounging about where those two roads branch off from the road that leads to the railway. I must go in another direction; _I_ can't do it."

"Arnold can do it!"

Sir Patrick looked a little doubtful. "Arnold is an excellent fellow," he said. "But can we trust to his discretion?"

"He is, next to you, the most perfectly discreet person I know," rejoined Blanche, in a very positive manner; "and, what is more, I have told him every thing about Anne, except what has happened to-day. I am afraid I shall tell him _that_ when I feel lonely and miserable, after you have gone. There is something in Arnold--I don't know what it is--that comforts me. Besides, do you think he would betray a secret that I gave him to keep? You don't know how devoted he is to me!"

"My dear Blanche, I am not the cherished object of his devotion; of course I don't know! You are the only authority on that point. I stand corrected. Let us have Arnold, by all means. Caution him to be careful; and send him out by himself, where the roads meet. We have now only one other place left in which there is a chance of finding a trace of her. I undertake to make the necessary investigation at the Craig Fernie inn."

"The Craig Fernie inn? Uncle! you have forgotten what I told you."

"Wait a little, my dear. Miss Silvester herself has left the inn, I grant you. But (if we should unhappily fail in finding her by any other means) Miss Silvester has left a trace to guide us at Craig Fernie. That trace must be picked up at once, in case of accidents. You don't seem to follow me? I am getting over the ground as fast as the pony gets over it. I have arrived at the second of those two heads into which your story divides itself in my mind. What did Miss Silvester tell you had happened at the inn?"

"She lost a letter at the inn."

"Exactly. She lost a letter at the inn; that is one event. And Bishopriggs, the waiter, has quarreled with Mrs. Inchbare, and has left his situation; that is another event. As to the letter first. It is either really lost, or it has been stolen. In either case, if we can lay our hands on it, there is at least a chance of its helping us to discover something. As to Bishopriggs, next--"

"You're not going to talk about the waiter, surely?"

"I am! Bishopriggs possesses two important merits. He is a link in my chain of reasoning; and he is an old friend of mine."

"A friend of yours?"

"We live in days, my dear, when one workman talks of another workman as 'that gentleman.'--I march with the age, and feel bound to mention my clerk as my friend. A few years since Bishopriggs was employed in the clerks' room at my chambers. He is one of the most intelligent and most unscrupulous old vagabonds in Scotland; perfectly honest as to all average matters involving pounds, shillings, and pence; perfectly unprincipled in the pursuit of his own interests, where the violation of a trust lies on the boundary-line which marks the limit of the law. I made two unpleasant discoveries when I had him in my employment. I found that he had contrived to supply himself with a duplicate of my seal; and I had the strongest reason to suspect him of tampering with some papers belonging to two of my clients. He had done no actual mischief, so far; and I had no time to waste in making out the necessary case against him. He was dismissed from my service, as a man who was not to be trusted to respect any letters or papers that happened to pass through his hands."

"I see, uncle! I see!"

"Plain enough now--isn't it? If that missing letter of Miss Silvester's is a letter of no importance, I am inclined to believe that it is merely lost, and may be found again. If, on the other hand, there is any thing in it that could promise the most remote advantage to any person in possession of it, then, in the execrable slang of the day, I will lay any odds, Blanche, that Bishopriggs has got the letter!"

"And he has left the inn! How unfortunate!"

"Unfortunate as causing delay--nothing worse than that. Unless I am very much mistaken, Bishopriggs will come back to the inn. The old rascal (there is no denying it) is a most amusing person. He left a terrible blank when he left my clerks' room. Old customers at Craig Fernie (especially the English), in missing Bishopriggs, will, you may rely on it, miss one of the attractions of the inn. Mrs. Inchbare is not a woman to let her dignity stand in the way of her business. She and Bishopriggs will come together again, sooner or later, and make it up. When I have put certain questions to her, which may possibly lead to very important results, I shall leave a letter for Bishopriggs in Mrs. Inchbare's hands. The letter will tell him I have something for him to do, and will contain an address at which he can write to me. I shall hear of him, Blanche and, if the letter is in his possession, I shall get it."

"Won't he be afraid--if he has stolen the letter--to tell you he has got it?"

"Very well put, my child. He might hesitate with other people. But I have my own way of dealing with him - and I know how to make him tell me.--Enough of Bishopriggs till his time comes. There is one other point, in regard to Miss Silvester. I may have to describe her. How was she dressed when she came here? Remember, I am a man--and (if an Englishwoman's dress _can_ be described in an Englishwoman's language) tell me, in English, what she had on."

"She wore a straw hat, with corn-flowers in it, and a white veil. Corn-flowers at one side uncle, which is less common than cornflowers in front. And she had on a light gray shawl. And a _Piqué_--"

"There you go with your French! Not a word more! A straw hat, with a white veil, and with corn-flowers at one side of the hat. And a light gray shawl. That's as much as the ordinary male mind can take in; and that will do. I have got my instructions, and saved precious time. So far so good. Here we are at the end of our conference--in other

words, at the gate of the stable-yard. You understand what you have to do while I am away?"

"I have to send Arnold to the cross-roads. And I have to behave (if I can) as if nothing had happened."

"Good child! Well put again! you have got what I call grasp of mind, Blanche. An invaluable faculty! You will govern the future domestic kingdom. Arnold will be nothing but a constitutional husband. Those are the only husbands who are thoroughly happy. You shall hear every thing, my love, when I come back. Got your bag, Duncan? Good. And the time-table? Good. You take the reins--I won't drive. I want to think. Driving is incompatible with intellectual exertion. A man puts his mind into his horse, and sinks to the level of that useful animal--as a necessary condition of getting to his destination without being upset. God bless you, Blanche! To the station, Duncan! to the station!"