

## PARADISE RELOST

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"What the deuce," said SHAKESPEARE, peering down from the walls of Elysium, "are they up to?"

The walls of Elysium, of course, are clouds. This particular cloud rested on the summit of Lliwedd.

"Climbers," asserted MILTON with a superior air. He leaned over beside the Swan of Avon. "A man and a woman—with a rope, you observe. They are preparing to climb this precipice. The man is consulting a Guide Book. They are also called mountaineers."

"Nonsense!" snorted SHAKESPEARE. "Mountaineers are dew-lapp'd like bulls. These aren't. You know nothing about it."

"You ought to read more," said MILTON severely. "I got a book out of the Celestial Library that tells you all about it. Climbing's a kind of sport, or a penance—anyway, it's a Manly Exercise."

"There are some sports be painful," remarked SHAKESPEARE, smirking.

"As you say. It seems these people give whimsical names to their climbs. Those two below us are at the foot of a climb called Paradise."

"Right up your street, John!" cried SHAKESPEARE. He paused, fingering his beard thoughtfully. "There are possibilities, though—for the Drama, I mean."

MILTON put on a Puritanical scowl.

"This new sport presents us with an excellent symbol of Man's brief struggle," he said loftily. "I think it hardly suitable for your godless theatricals."

"I like that!" exploded SHAKESPEARE. "What about 'Comus'? What about —"

A fine curling beard, poking suddenly between the two, made them both jump and checked the Bard's wrath.

"Well!" MILTON exclaimed. "Lap me in soft Lydian airs if it isn't Alf. Where did you come from?"

"Oh, haunts of coot and hern," said TENNYSON airily. "What's all the fuss about?"

They told him.

"You're both wrong," he announced at once. "This is a subject for me. Yes. Iambic pentameters, I think, somewhat in the manner of my 'Passing of Arthur,' or perhaps —"

The others shouted him down. For some moments a sharp argument raged. It was SHAKESPEARE who found a solution.

"Let's all have a shot," he suggested. "We can all write blank verse—two of us after a fashion—so we'll make it that."

"It's an idea," conceded MILTON. "Limit each man to twenty-four lines. Any competitor falling into rhyme —"

"Pays for drinks before lunch," finished TENNYSON.

They agreed.

"Bags I start," said MILTON. "After all, it is Paradise they're after."

They agreed again. MILTON struck an attitude and began:

Hail, holy Guide! offspring of Messrs Noyce  
And Edwards! Lliwedd's glories lie display'd  
Between thy covers green, as Hesperus  
Shone before Ercles: set my nailèd boot  
Upon the earliest holds of Paradise.  
—Thus Adam spake, upon the Heather Shelf  
Expectant, while his Spouse about her waist  
Entwined the sinuous rope, and wond'ring eyed  
The god-like Shape, who o'er his Book did brood  
Like Chaos o'er th' Abyss, and, brooding, said:  
—Here saith the Book, that by the yellow rib  
Of Yellow Slab and leftward of the bulge  
Are shallow ribs and grooves for fifty feet  
Upsurgent towards the crest; of these the rib  
Most central we should take; Severe it is,  
But Just. Fair Consort, turn thy lucent orbs  
Upon the adamantine faces of the crag  
And say if in their groovèd lineaments  
Thou seest aught vouchsafing charity.  
—To which his erstwhile Rib in answer spake:  
O Blind! The sacred Book thou hold'st should prove  
Sufficient to thy need, and—

Here the speaker paused.

"That's about twenty-four lines, isn't it?" he said.

"Twenty-one and a half," replied SHAKESPEARE, "but it's plenty. Beats me why you don't cut out all those 'spakes' and 'thuses' and just stick 'Adam' or 'Eve' in the margin to show who's speaking. Think how it would have improved those epics of yours—especially if you put in a few stage directions as well, like 'Trumpet sounds; enter Gabriel,' or 'Exit Mammon jingling his loose change,' or —"

"Suppose you stop carping," said MILTON irritably, "and go on from where I left off."

"Not me," said SHAKESPEARE. "I'm only a Gentleman—though mind you, I've got a coat of arms. No, I think our Baron should come next. After you, Alf."

"That's most frightfully decent of you, Will," said TENNYSON.

"Here goes then":

Then slowly answer'd Adam from the crag—

"Wait a bit!" interrupted MILTON. "Adam hadn't got on to the crag when I left him."

"Well, he has now," retorted TENNYSON snappishly. "He's twenty feet up, see? I'll put him where I like, see?"

"All right, all right," said SHAKESPEARE hastily. "Poetic licence. Objection overruled. Begin again."

TENNYSON began again:

Then slowly answered Adam from the crag:  
The old valour changeth, yielding place to qualms,  
And one good clutch-hold would transform the world  
From peril into safety. Let me pause;  
For what are men better than sheep or goats  
That nourish a blind hope within the brain  
If, knowing they are in a sticky place,  
They turn not back? More lives are saved by care  
Than this world dreams of. Eve, I'm feeling sick,  
For all my mind is clouded with a doubt  
That this is not the proper route at all—  
We are on Purgat'ry, not Paradise.  
It's raining, too—Great God! I'd rather be—

"Oh, you sneak!" cried a new voice. "You pinched that from my Sonnet!"

It was WORDSWORTH. The others yelled at him to shut up. He quailed. His lip trembled as though he were seven.

"I only happened to be wandering about," he began plaintively.

"Well, you can jolly well wander off again," snarled SHAKESPEARE.

He wandered, lonely as a cloud . . .

"These interruptions!" sighed TENNYSON, and continued:

It's raining, too—Great God! I'd rather be  
In the island-valley of Avilion,  
Where falls not hail, nor rain, nor any snow,  
Than on this blasted cliff. I'm coming down.  
Then loudly cried the bold and beauteous Eve,  
Clothed in patch'd breeches, mystic, wonderful:  
Ah! My Lord Adam, whither shall I go?  
For now I see the true old times are dead,  
When every morning brought a new Severe,  
And each Severe a smooth and certain lead.  
Yet once more, O ye Digits, and once more  
You bright tricounis—

"Hey!" said MILTON suspiciously. "Don't I know the sound of that?"

"You do," nodded SHAKESPEARE. "Alf pinched it from your 'Lycidas.' Alf, I'm ashamed of you—and anyway you've had your two dozen lines. It's my turn now, and I want you to note the delicate stresses and falls of my lines, the exquisite —"

"Press on," urged TENNYSON. "It's nearly lunch time."

"All right," said SHAKESPEARE. "Wait till I get set."

He built a piece of cloud into a column, rested his right elbow on the column, placed his forefinger against his forehead, rolled up his eyes, and commenced:

Ad. "My efforts now are—"

"What d'you mean—'Ad'?" demanded TENNYSON.

SHAKESPEARE sighed and relaxed.

"Adam, of course!" he explained resignedly. "I always cut the *Dramatis Personæ* in half—like *Ham* and *Hor* and *Oph*. Saves ink."

"How would you manage with a character named Joe?" wondered TENNYSON.

SHAKESPEARE took no notice. He carefully resumed his attitude and began again:

Ad. My efforts now are ended. These our handholds,  
As I foretold you, were all fancy, and  
Are faded into air, into thin air;  
Likewise the baseless fabric of my footholds.  
The cloud-capped slabs, the tortuous passages,  
The airy traverses—the whole darned climb  
Can fall to bits as far as I'm concerned.  
Yea, I am fain to let the plan dissolve,  
And, since this unsubstantial route has faded,  
Leave Paradise behind. I tell you, Eve,  
I do not trust my boots. They are such stuff  
As compost-heaps are made of, and their nails  
Are rounded with much wear. I will descend.  
[He comes down. Tucket sounds. Thunder and Lightning]

Eve. We can't go home with nothing in the bag;  
Adam, at least we'll go and do Horned Crag!

[Exeunt.]

"You rhymed! You rhymed!" shouted MILTON and TENNYSON together. "Drinks on you, sweet William!"

SHAKESPEARE opened his mouth to protest and then thought better of it.

"Ring the bell for Ganymede, will you, John," he sighed. "What's it to be? Small beer?"

"Double nectar, please," grinned MILTON.

"Ditto, with soda," added TENNYSON.

"As you like it," groaned SHAKESPEARE.