

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

The Story of a Woman's Atonement,
by Charlotte M. Braeme.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Sir Bertram bent forward and tried to look in the beautiful face, but it was averted from him. Lady Charnleigh would not let him see the happiness so plainly written there.

"I wish," he said, "that you were not so wealthy, Leonie. I should have liked to prove the purity and disinterestedness of my love. I wish there were a thousand difficulties in the way, that by beating them down, one after another, I might show how dearly I love you. I would serve twice seven years for you, as Jacob did for Rachel, he loved so dearly. I would be content, sweet, to wait upon you all my life if I might call you my own in death. Oh, Leonie, say one little word to me!"

Then the lovely face bent half shyly over him.

"Do you love me so well, Bertram?" she asked, in a low voice.

"You can never know how well, sweet. I might spend my life with you—I might give to your service every moment of it, fill it with thoughts of you—know no other care or interest; and yet, when I came to die, you would not know how much I loved you. It is not given to all men to tell what they feel!"

"I do not think you are very deficient in eloquence," she said, with a happy smile.

"Ah, my darling, if I were a poet, I might put my love into song—a song so beautiful, so full of divine harmony, that the world in reading it would know how I had loved you. If I were an artist I could paint you, and show to the world that form which to me is peerless. But not being either, I cannot do so. I can only tell you in plain words that I love you better than fame, fortune or life; and I plead to you, Leonie, for some little love in return."

"I am full of facts," said the girl. "I am not so perfect; you think me, Bertram. You might, perhaps, be disappointed in me after all."

"There is no fear of that; I know you have faults, but, Leonie, they are such as I cannot but love."

"You do not know what they are," she said. "I am so worldly, Bertram—I love rank, wealth, position, money, gayety, life, fashion, and those things which the wise despise. I love them, and should never be willing to live without them."

"Love me with them," said Sir Bertram. "And I shall not care; those are very venial faults, Leonie, in one so young and beautiful as you."

"I am not very patient, either," she continued; "and in me there is a great want. I can give it no name, and know no name for it; but I want something that Ethel Dacre, for instance, has in perfection. I am changeable, as the wind—grave, gay, idle, industrious, good and wicked, all in one."

"I can only repeat that I love your faults, Leonie. I believe they are dearer to me than the virtues of other women. But, Leonie, sweet, have you heard what I asked you? Tell me—will you care for me, will you be my wife?"

It was the question that she had heard in her dreams a thousand times.

"Will you be my wife, Leonie? My love shall shield you—my heart shelter you. Do not turn from me. Never mind those lilles—it they could speak, each leaf would urge a prayer for me. Look at me—tell me, will you be my wife?"

Her fair head drooped near him; the passion of his words had conquered her. She could make no answer.

He took her little white hands and covered them with passionate kisses. She made no resistance. She did not draw them from him. Then raising the face so beautiful in its natural goodness, he kissed the white brow, his lips murmuring the while words so full of tenderness that she never forgot them.

"Say only one word, Leonie. Tell me that you love me—even so little. I will hope for more in time."

"I can tell you that," she whispered.

"Yes—just in the smallest possible degree," she replied, with a smile of perfect happiness.

"And will you try really to love me more?"

"I will try," she answered. "Do you think the lesson will be a hard one to learn, Bertram?"

He kissed the fair hands again, telling her she was as peerless as a queen. She tried to hide the happiness that surged through heart and brain, thinking that it was not maidenly for her lover to see how well he was loved.

"My head is not a very firm one," she said, suddenly, looking up at him. "It is a very beautiful one," he put in, drawing the blushing face nearer to his own.

"What should you do?" she asked, anxiously.

"Not kill myself," he replied, slowly. "Death is coward's resource. But from my life every gleam of brightness should die out, should go far to some stranger far-off land where nothing could remind me of you. You should lose everything that makes life dear in losing you. And no face ever charmed me save yours. You hear how sweetly the birds are singing; there is more music to me in a single word of yours than in all their song. See how fair the lilles are; there is more beauty to me in this one white hand of yours than in all the flowers that ever bloomed. Your face to me shines more brightly than all the stars in heaven. I believe that if I died it would be found on my heart."

The impulse was strong upon her to tell him that she loved him just as dearly—that he was all the world to her, the soul and center of her being—but some strange instinct made her restrain.

"A fortress that is easily stormed is never considered a great conquest," she said to herself. "Bertram must ask me again and again—he will love me all the better for the effort."

"After the ball, remember," said Sir Bertram. "Leonie, I shall count the hours until it is over, and yet I cannot help hoping. You are too good to torture me; if you meant to send me from you, you would do so at once. You are too good and generous to be cruel."

She looked at him with a smile. How little he knew, how little he guessed that he was the very sun of her existence—if anything could surpass his love for her, it was her love for him.

"See," she said, suddenly, "the lilles

are closing, and the dew is beginning to fall. Bertram, we must go in."

"I wonder," he said, slowly, "how I shall live through these hours. I could hardly do so but that I believe in the ball you will be my wife. When is the ball to take place, Leonie?"

"On Tuesday week—Tuesday, the nineteenth of June."

"I shall remember the date; that ball has suddenly become most important to me."

Sir Bertram rode off again. It was useless to remain at Crown Leighton, as he could not talk to its beautiful mistress, he was quite as well away. He had not been gone long before Captain Fleming arrived and sent to request five minutes with Lady Charnleigh.

"She is so beautiful, so peerless, so eagerly sought after, I could not expect her to say 'yes' all at once, but I know she loves me—she would have sent me from her if she did not."

"Remember," said Lady Charnleigh, "as they drew near the long open window, 'you are not to speak of this, Bertram, until—'"

"Until your brain is clear and the ball is over. I will remember." He promised, with a smile. "You like to entertain the idea at a time, Leonie, and I do."

"You understand perfectly. See there is Lady Fanshawe. Have you any idea, Bertram, whether it is etiquette for a countess of eighteen to linger among the lilles with a Saxon prince?"

It was the first time she had ever flattered him, and the fair, frank face flushed hotly.

"For your sake I wish I were a prince," he said.

She looked at him with an assumption of perfect gravity.

"You please me best as you are," she returned, and when he would have caught that white jeweled hand she turned away.

"My dear Lady Charnleigh," said Lady Fanshawe; "do you not think it is etiquette for a countess to be with me?"

"Please blame Sir Bertram, auntie—he has beguiled the time."

Lady Fanshawe looked keenly at that gentle face.

"Has he anything to say to you, Lady Charnleigh," began Paul. "I know that I must not detain you now, but, when all this is over, you will grant me an interview? All my future depends upon it." His face flushed and his eyes were full of suppressed fire. He took one of her hands in his. "I will not detain you, Leonie; but the hours will be full of painful suspense until I see you again and have your answer."

She liked him so well that long after he had gone away she stood with tears in her eyes, knowing the pain she must inflict on him.

"I would have done anything to prevent this," she said. "I have robbed him of his inheritance, and now I must rob him of his peace and happiness. Oh, Paul, you should hate me!"

She liked him so well that, although it was the day of her magnificence, she wept bitterly for the sorrow that must be his.

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