

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

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

CHAPTER XXVII—Continued.

She was no countess after all; the gorgeous fabric of wealth and magnificence had crumbled to nothing beneath her feet. She was no countess—nothing but Leonie Rayner, the grand inheritance of Crown Leighton was not hers, after all; she who had lavished thousands on petty caprices and graceful fancies had not one shilling in the world that was legally her own.

"I was so happy," moaned the girl— "I was so happy, and now—"

Then rose before her the dim vista of years when poverty and privation would be her lot, hard work, toil, obscurity, her portion; and this after she had reigned queen of the bright, gay world. She was too stunned for tears—no words could describe the chaos of her thoughts, the whirl of her emotion. No longer a countess—no longer the mistress of that superb mansion—no longer a queen—no longer one of the richest heiresses in England, of whose wealth men spoke with wonder. It was as great a fall as woman ever had. Two minutes before she had reached the climax of magnificence and grandeur, peerless in her radiant beauty, dressed in the robes and jewels of a queen. Now, what was she? An usurper, an intruder, an interloper. She had no right to Crown Leighton—no right to the diamonds that crowned her—no right to the name that had been as music in her ears. A cry of despair escaped her—utter, hopeless despair.

"I will kill myself," she said, in her anguish; "for I never can go back to that life again."

How low she crouched there, her brain burning and her mind full of dark, confused thoughts. Leonie never knew, a noise upon the stairs aroused her, and she started up.

Her first honest impulse was to rush down through the crowd, to tell Paul Flemming, and to place the will in his hands. That was her first impulse. She did not know what had happened. "It was surely the sorest blow that could have befallen her, her magnificence, so well. She had enjoyed them so well—she had enjoyed them so perfectly."

"I will go and put this in his hands," she said, "and then I will go straight out from that brilliant crowd—out to cold darkness and death. I have drunk of the wine of life, and cannot taste the lees."

Was there a hot breath on her white shoulder, or was it only her fancy? Was there a voice hissing in her ear, or was it a delusion? What was the voice saying?

"Let it be as it is for one night longer. Go down and complete your triumph—go down where men wait for you, with hallowed words. Reign queen to-night—to-morrow let poverty come and do its worst. There is no need to make a sensation among all those people—no need to publish your downfall to-night."

Was there a hissing, sharp voice whispering these words, or was it her own fancy? She pushed the diadem and the golden-brown hair from her brow.

"Many a woman would have been driven mad by such a shock," she said to herself.

Then she stood hesitating, with the parchment in her hand.

"Shall I take it to him now, or shall I wait until to-morrow?"

"To-morrow will do," said the tempter. "What difference can it make? Enjoy your reign a few hours longer—make the most of the next few hours. Leave it until to-morrow."

"I might just as well wait until to-morrow," she said, piteously; "it would be so sad to spoil the fete and turn all into confusion."

Then sudden hot anger flushed in her face and flamed in her eyes.

"I would fain do as Sardanapalus did," she cried—"burn Crown Leighton to the ground, and die in the ruins." Then the fierce hot anger died. "I was so happy," she said, desparingly; "Heaven might have let me keep what I believed to be mine. Perhaps I had better take this to Paul at once—it will be less torture than keeping it by me until to-morrow."

She walked toward the door; she saw herself seeking him, placing the will in his hand, and saluting him by his title of "Lady of Charnleigh."

"Then a vivid remembrance of the time when her heart had thrilled with ecstasy at the sound of her title."

"I will not be so hasty—I will wait until to-morrow," she said; "I will enjoy these few hours, and then—"

In the anguish of the moment she even forgot her love and the lover who was waiting for her. She took the parchment, hid it in the wardrobe, locked the door, and then slowly descended the stairs.

"To-morrow," she moaned to herself, "it will be all over to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Leonie, how long you have been, my darling! What is the matter? Your face is white, your lips tremble. Leonie, have you been frightened?"

Although she loved Bertram better than her life, in the supreme anguish of that hour she had forgotten him; and now, at the sound of the kindly voice—at the sight of the frank handsome face—a keen sense of what she was feeling came over her. She went up to him, and as he stretched out his hands to her, she laid her head on his breast, forgetting everything in her sick, hopeless despair.

"My darling," he said, anxiously, "what is the matter? Ten minutes ago you were all radiance and light—now you are pale, depressed. What has happened to you, Leonie?"

She raised her colorless face. "It is only ten minutes since I left you, Bertram?"

"That is all," he said. "It seems to me ten long years—ten long, dreary, despairing years. I am so tired. Oh, Bertram, how that music wears me! Will it never stop? I am so tired."

"My darling, you have been doing too much. Your spirits carry you away, and then you are exhausted. Do not go back to the ball-room—let me bring you some wine and rest yourself. I will not even speak to you, nor will I allow any one else to tease you."

"No," she said, "I must go back—make a desperate effort to rouse herself. He looked at her in silent wonder. She remained him of a fair and blooming flower blighted by some frosty wind. The bloom and radi-

ance had left her face—even the queenly, graceful figure seemed to shrink and grow less, while the regal robes and jewels had lost half their brightness.

"Leonie," said Sir Bertram, "you frightened me. I am quite sure you are ill."

"I am not. Do as you propose—go and fetch me some wine, and bring it to me in the morning-room."

He placed her in a chair, and left her without a word. Her brain was whirling.

"To-morrow," she said—"all this will be over to-morrow. I shall be flattered and loved—I shall be mistress of a brilliant fate—I shall be mistress of Crown Leighton until to-morrow; and then I will be over, and the sun of my life set. To-morrow! Shall I live to face it all—the comments, the gossips, the sneers! These fine ladies who protest that I am model of graceful manners, will find out then that I am low-bred and very deficient—what has passed her mind will be vulgarities. I know the world, and hate it well. I love it. Its triumph over me will not begin to-night. For this one night shall be at my feet, and I will trample on it."

Then Sir Bertram came in with the wine, and she drank it. It brought the warmth and color back to her face. He was much relieved.

"You are better, Leonie. Oh, my darling, you must never look that way again! Promise to be careful of yourself; you are not strong. You alarmed me when I saw you. I thought the ghost that haunts the oak room had appeared to you."

A deep, tearless sob broke from her lips.

"The ghost of the oak-room," she repeated, wearily—"I saw it, and it has nearly killed me."

He thought her manner strange, but this lit again.

How low she crouched there, her brain burning and her mind full of dark, confused thoughts. Leonie never knew, a noise upon the stairs aroused her, and she started up.

Her first honest impulse was to rush down through the crowd, to tell Paul Flemming, and to place the will in his hands. That was her first impulse. She did not know what had happened.

"It was the most brilliant ball," she said, "and the most brilliant—"

"I am tired, my dear," said Leonie, seeing the startled look; "remember that I have been making myself amiable ever since nine o'clock this morning, and to be constantly amiable is the hardest task in the world."

Sir Bertram came up to say farewell.

"I shall come for my answer to-morrow, Leonie; you have given me hope this evening."

"Not to-morrow, Bertram," she pleaded, pitifully. "I am so tired—wait until Thursday. I shall have recovered then."

"I will wait just as long as you please," he said. "You will be mine in the end, Leonie; that is all I care for."

A sudden impulse came over her to throw herself into his arms, and tell him all—he would console and comfort her; but she set her foot resolutely upon the impulse. This night should pass over without her secret being known.

About this time a general election occurred, and during the day somebody suggested that George Bentley be voted for Justice of the Peace for Weston Beat.

The suggestion being acted on, that individual returned home about sunset, and with pardonable elation informed his wife that he had been elected a magistrate without opposition.

"Yes—but why not stay here? It won't cost you a cent, and I'd rather you'd stay."

"Give me your arm, Bertram. I must go to the ball-room. Hark! that is my favorite waltz. Tell me before you go—do you love me very much?"

"A beautiful light came into his face. "You will never know how much sweet."

"Would you care just as much for me if I were very poor, and you knew me only as Leonie Rayner?"

"Just as much," he replied, "my love does not depend on your circumstances. If you were made queen to-morrow, I should love you just as dearly; and if to-morrow you became a beggar, it would make no difference in my affection—nay, I am wrong—I should love you all the better."

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Most assuredly it is; the only thing I should regret in that case would be that I am not a rich man; that I could not surround you with all the luxury and magnificence to which you have been accustomed."

"Are you not rich, Bertram?" she asked, wistfully.

He laughed.

"No, my queen—not what people call rich, in these luxurious times; my estates are mortgaged. I wish that I were rich enough to purchase the whole world, so that I might endow you with it."

"You shall not spoil that compliment by any other," she said; "we will go."

What would she say? I have missed two dances. I have to apologize to two gentlemen. The next is the 'Lancers,' and I am engaged to Lord Holdene. He ought to thank me for these silver buckles."

Then from the very depths of her young heart there came most woe-begone sighs. If he had never asked for those buckles, the will would perhaps never have come to light.

For a few minutes after she re-entered the ball-room Leonie stood bewildered. Then she recovered her breath. Lord Holdene came up and offered a hundred apologies for having mentioned the silver buckles. She looked up at him with a vague, dreamy smile, as though she did not even understand the words. She was thinking to herself that it was not his fault—that it was not what people would call fate or chance that had led her to the oak-room, but the very hand of Providence, and he had been led thither in order that justice might be done.

Then Captain Flemming saw her and hastened to her.

"I could not imagine what made the ball-room so suddenly grow cold and dim, Lady Charnleigh," she said. "Why have you been so long absent?"

"I have been searching in a haunted room for silver buckles," she replied, trying to still the quivering of her lips and speak in her natural voice.

But something in the tone struck her as strange—a weary, hopeless ring that told of pain and sorrow. He looked at her and said, "Lady Charnleigh."

"You are over-tired, Lady Charnleigh. Let me persuade you not to have a bath, sit down and rest."

She laughed.

"No, I could not sit still; I like continual movement. Where is Ethel? Is she enjoying herself?"

"Yes; and so is every one else. The young ladies of the county ought to be deeply grateful to you; I have heard many of them say that they never enjoyed an evening so much before. Lady Charnleigh, and more balls."

She laughed again. How little he knew that this was the last night of her reign—that with the sunrise of the morrow all her wealth and magnificence would vanish into thin air—that he beforeward he would rule at Crown Leighton, and give "balls and parties" that would bequeath to the glorious inheritance she had valued so little.

"They shall remember me last night at Crown Leighton," she said to herself; "they shall talk of it, and tell each other that I died a queen."

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