

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

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

CHAPTER XXXIV—Continued.

She rose at last and bent over him. "Bertram," she said, "will you forgive me?"

She never forgot the face raised to her.

"Yes," he replied, "I will forgive you as heaven forgives those who ask for forgiveness. I will forgive the most cruel treachery ever practiced on mortal man. I will not leave you in enmity, for I shall never look upon your face again, Lady Charnleigh—never again."

"You will not go away?" she pleaded, wistfully. "You will remain here, and, in the years to come, be my friend."

"How cruel—how selfish you are!"

"No, I shall not remain here, Lady Charnleigh; I shall go far away into the outer world, where your face will not haunt me."

She clung to him, pleading, trembling.

"Do not leave me, Bertram—do not go. How shall I live—dear heaven!—how shall I live without you?"

"You should have thought of that before," he replied. "Why should I remain near you? Rather let me go and forget that one so fair and false ever lured my heart from me. I shall bid you farewell forever, Lady Charnleigh."

She was weeping so bitterly that in sheer pity he unclasped the hands that held his arm so tightly, and placed her on the moss-covered fallen tree.

"I will say good-by forever. I set me look once more at the eyes I thought all truth, at the lips I thought all sweetness, at the face I thought all beauty, at the woman whom I believed to be as noble as she is beautiful, but whom I find false. Farewell, sweet face! You will haunt me until I die. Farewell, my lost love—my fair false love! Farewell forever!"

The words tumbled away abruptly; one word more, and the strength of his arm would have given away. He walked on with hurried steps, never pausing to look behind him, his face white and rigid, his lips set, all his quiet ease and carelessness gone from him—a desperate man, whose heart was broken and whose strength had left him—all unconscious that the woman for whom he would have given his life lay senseless among the harbells, wild, cold, and motionless, as though she were dead.

There was but one course for him, and that was to go abroad—to plunge at once into the midst of activity, confusion and excitement. His brain receded, his heart burned, his heart beat with great irregular throbs; he dared not stop to look his sorrow in the face. She was a'st to him—he had lured him on, yet had never intended to marry him. That one palpable fact darkened the face of the summer heavens for him. He drew a funeral pall over the fair, smiling earth, gave him a loathing for life, for friends.

She, so fair, with the sunny radiance, face and light heart—she whom he had thought half goddess, half woman, wholly charming—had proved herself as false as the lightest of her fair, false sex. Henceforth there could be no woman's love for him—no smiles, no soft words, no pretty, deceitful charms. He had done with it all. A woman's love had darkened his youth and blighted his life. He would have no more of it.

Stern, angry pride kept him from giving way to despair. He was indignant, with the wounded pride of a man who has trusted in vain. His resolve was taken even as he walked home from Crown Leighton. He would never see it more, never again look in the face of its mistress, but go far away, where his sorrow and his love would be hidden from the eyes of men.

He kept his secret. When he reached Wellton, Captain Flemings many inquiries as to his sudden departure received the most abrupt answers. Sir Bertram would say nothing but that he had received a sudden summons to go abroad, and could not delay. At first Captain Flemings was amazed, and then a glimmer of the truth dawned upon him.

"Leonic has rejected him," he said, "and it is for his sake—to save his pain—that she wishes our engagement to be kept a secret."

That conviction made him very kind and considerate to Sir Bertram. He assisted him in his preparations—he drove him to the station—he begged of him to write.

"I cannot promise," replied Sir Bertram. "A great sorrow has come to me, and it has unmanned me. If in after years I can live it down I will write to you. If you never hear from me again you will know that my sorrow can never die."

Long after he had gone those words haunted Paul.

"It seems very strange," he thought, "that there should cause so much misery. Our fair fair breaks many hearts."

He waited long weeks and months for news of his friend, but none came; and Captain Flemings knew then that he had not lived his sorrow down.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Life came back with a shock to the young girl who lay so helpless and despairing among the wild flowers. Her lips parted with a deep-drawn sigh, her eyes opened to the light, and then they closed in weariness of spirit too great for words.

He was gone—he had bidden her farewell forever; nothing could pain her after that, nothing could please her. She rose and looked round her; the heartbreaks where she had fallen were crushed and broken. She raised one or two of the leaves in her hand and looked wistfully at the broken stems.

"I need not have crushed you," she said, "even if I was crushed myself. How much I must have suffered to fall senseless there. How dearly I must love Crown Leighton and all belonging to it, when I am willing to sin so deeply and suffer so terribly in order to keep it!"

Then she walked slowly home. It was all over; she had taken the irreparable step; nothing could bring Bertram back to her again. Even should some sudden impulse of contrition seize her and urge her to confess, it would not bring him back; he had lost her. She had nothing to live for now save pleasure, brilliant gayety, the queenliness of fashion. She had willingly given up all the higher and nobler duties of life; they were as nothing to her; she had given up love of luxury and magnificence.

"I must not complain," said the girl, to herself; and yet though she loved her surroundings so dearly, they were as nothing in comparison with what she had lost. She had that which her soul loved best, but at present it brought her nothing save what was wearisome.

She fancied that in a few days she would be happier—when she had forgotten the recent terrible shock. The finding of the will, the losing of Sir Bertram—these two things had come so quickly one after the other that she had had no time to strengthen herself. She planned to herself, as she went home, how she would give another few more brilliant, more magnificent, than the last; she tried to engage for

whole fancy in thinking what she should do to give the entertainment greater eclat; and yet beneath all the bright fancies rose the dark remembrance that he would not be there. What would a fete be worth that he did not share? Of what interest would all the display of her magnificence be if he were not to see?"

She wondered at the change that seemed to have fallen over everything; there seemed to be no more light in the sunshine—no more beauty in the flowers. She had loved the lilies and roses so well that she had seldom passed them without a caressing touch; she passed them now with averted face—they only reminded her of that which now she must forever forget.

"Do let us find something amusing," she said, when, a few hours later, she and her two friends were alone in the drawing-room. "I am getting tired of this quiet existence, auntie; we must go to Paris, or Italy, or some other place where a little of what is called 'life' can be seen."

"What few of unrest is upon you, Lady Charnleigh?" asked Miss Dacre. "It is not many hours since you were queen of the most brilliant scene I ever witnessed, and now you complain of wanting something to amuse you."

"I like continual excitement, Ethel; I should like every moment of my day so fully occupied as not to leave one second for quiet or leisure. There is nothing so tiresome as feeling time hang heavy on one's hands."

"That is not a very healthy frame of mind, Leonie," said Lady Fanshawe. "Continued excitement is like fever."

"It would suit me," she returned. "What could rest and leisure bring her? Nothing but time for reflection; and that she did not want.

So a few days passed. She had to listen to all the often-expressed wonder of her companions as to why Sir Bertram never came. She had to sit, with a smile on her face, at Lady Thornbury's dinner party, while Major Shelton told how their visitor, Sir Bertram, had left them suddenly, and gone, it is believed, to Egypt. It seemed to her that the wondering comments would never end. She was obliged to listen and to join in them with a pain at her heart so sharp, so keen that it was with difficulty she could refrain from crying aloud in her anguish.

You did not tell me that Sir Bertram was going," said Miss Dacre to Leonie on the first occasion that she found herself alone with her. "You might have tried me so far. I can imagine why he has gone. Oliver, Leonie, I thought you loved him!"

"Did you?" she returned carelessly. "I am not a fit being for loving, Ethel. My heart is cold and hard as a nether-mill-stone. Sir Bertram is gone—he will never come back—I do not wish to hear his name mentioned any more. Will you bear that in mind? The greatest kindness you can show me is never to mention his name in my presence."

"I will remember," said Miss Dacre. Her fair face grew very pale. She understood, Lady Charnleigh had refused Sir Bertram, and did not care to be reminded of the pain it had cost her.

"I was so sure that she loved him," thought Ethel. "I cannot be mistaken. She has shown her preference for him in a hundred different ways. Can it be possible that she likes Paul Fleming better?"

She was soon to know the truth. They had agreed to keep the engagement a profound secret, but Paul betrayed it at every moment; it was not told in words but in actions—there was an air of proprietorship about him when he spoke to Leonie, or her, that betrayed the truth.

The day came when Ethel Dacre was certain of it. She entered the library suddenly one morning and saw Paul Fleming kissing Leonie's hand. For one-half moment she stood paralyzed—the certainty of her forebodings rushed upon her—she knew Leonie, "Oh, Leonie," she said, "I am not fit for loving, Ethel. My heart is cold and hard as a nether-mill-stone. Sir Bertram is gone—he will never come back—I do not wish to hear his name mentioned any more. Will you bear that in mind? The greatest kindness you can show me is never to mention his name in my presence."

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