

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

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

CHAPTER XXXVI—Continued.

"Do not doubt me, Paul," she whispered. "My life is so novel to me. Let me enjoy it undisturbed for some time longer."

He was satisfied: he was beside himself with joy that she had volunteered this little confession, who was so distant and reserved. Her manner had often puzzled him. He had no right to doubt her, yet there was something so strange about her conduct. She seemed always as though she were trying to make amends to him for something—as though all her affection and kindness came from a desire to make atonement. He could not understand her. She had never wronged him; it was not her fault that she was the nearest of kin. There was no reason why she should accept him if she did not love him. She had offers from some of the most distinguished men in England, and had refused them for his sake. She must love him after all, but he wished that she would show her affection in a fashion that he could better understand. He had often—

—a ride over from Weldon every day—but in some strange kind of way, he never seemed to draw nearer to her or to understand her inner life better than he had at first.

Ethel Dacre was still at Crown Leighton, although it was sorely against her will that she remained there; but General Dacre had gone abroad, and he had said that he should much prefer his daughter's residing with her friend during his absence than keeping house all alone at Westfield. Ethel could offer no reasonable objection, therefore she remained.

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One bright morning in September Leonie stood at the library window alone. The lilies were dead, the roses faded, and in their place great sunflowers turned their bright faces upward, and tall dahlias reared their heads with handsome flowers. The leaves were falling from the trees; they lay, crimson, brown, and gold, on the grass; the wind whirled them along, and then moaned over them.

The fair face looking wistfully from the window at the falling leaves had changed most remarkably. It was not less beautiful; but the brightness and radiance were gone—there was a worn look that did not belong to youth—the eyes were very bright, but there was somewhat of fever in their brightness—there was a flush on the beautiful face, but it told more of unrest than of health—there was a tremulous movement about the white jeweled hands, a sudden quivering of the lips, both tokens of a mind ill at ease.

No one saw Lady Charnleigh without remarking the change. Miss Templeton had been from Kew to spend the summer vacation, as she told the parents of her pupils, with the Countess of Charnleigh of Crown Leighton, and when she had seen Leonie, she had cried out in wonder:

"This gay life does not suit you, Lady Charnleigh; you are so changed. You look as though you had had long years of incessant gaiety—you want rest."

"Rest?" the girl had re-echoed mournfully. "There is no rest in this world."

And after Miss Templeton had been there for a few days, and had noticed, to her dismay, the fever of unrest in which the girl lived, her surprise had become greater still.

"You cannot sleep in the dark," she had said, one day, after overhearing a conversation between Leonie and her maid; "you do not like the twilight: you cannot endure to be left alone, you crave for continual excitement as children do for food. My dear Lady Charnleigh, you give me the impression that you are at war with yourself."

How the words had taunted her.

How they taunted her still! They described a state of mind as no other words could have done. It was not a tempest, not a struggle, but a continual warfare—and the warfare was self against self. There was hardly a single moment, night or day, during which her better, nobler, higher self was not crying out in rebellion against the dead she had done. There was hardly a single moment in which heart or soul was free from that war. She was swayed by impulse as were the leaves by the wind. She would rise one morning determined to write to Paul Fleming, and tell him all—determined to undo her great wrong—to give up the wealth she was so unjustly keeping from him—to be honest, loyal and true. The resolution would last until she went downstairs and saw the magnificence that surrounded her.

"I cannot give it up," the unhappy girl would say, "it is the best part of my life; I could not endure poverty after this."

At other times, the memory of the lover she had lost would be so strong within her that she would be ready to give up everything she had in the world only to see him again. At such times she loathed even the name of Paul Fleming; she avoided seeing him when he came; she went out into the green solitude of the woods and called by name him whom she had sent from her with a lie. No wonder that the radiant face grew worn-looking, and that the bright eyes lost their clear light; no wonder that sweet snatches of song and sunny laughter were no longer heard.

Lady Charnleigh stood watching the falling leaves. The wind no longer wafted to her rich, warm gusts of perfume; it was wailing over the dead flowers.

"My life was virtually over," she was thinking to herself; "this world has no more to give me. I have lost my lover; nor spring nor summer will ever bring him back again. Some time sooner or later, I shall marry Paul Fleming. I shall live and die Countess of Charnleigh. I shall live and die one of the fairest and richest women in England. But my life will not have been a happy one, though I have my heart's wish granted to me. Oh, if I had never found that will, or if, on finding it, I had but acted loyalty, Bertram would have been mine, and I should have been happy."

She had made herself believe that in a short time she should forget all that was unpleasant and enjoy her wealth as she had been wont to do. She had believed herself capable of growing hardened in her sin; but the conscience she had done her best to trample under foot seemed to grow more vigorous in its opposition day by day.

"I am at war with myself," she said, "and peace will come to me never more. War, the bitterest death the soul can know! It is too late now. I cannot change what I have done. I must take my life as it comes, and make the best of it."

She did her best to drown all regrets. Even Lady Fanshawe, who enjoyed gaiety as much as any one, was almost astounded. There was no cessation to her young relative's dissipation; balls, fêtes, charade parties, dinner parties, archery meetings, croquet parties, picnics, every variety of amusement that it was possible to imagine, followed each other in rapid succession. No

day passed without some kind of entertainment. Leonie seemed to dread only one thing, and that was time and leisure and thought.

Lady Fanshawe and Miss Dacre had grown tired of asking each other what had come over her. Ethel thought she had been deceived in her first estimate of her character. She seemed to live only to kill time, and not to turn it to profit. Even those who shared her hospitality began to talk of her and say that it was sad to see one so young giving up her heart and soul to the pursuit of pleasure.

Paul Fleming was the only one who saw no faults in her; he made all allowances. It was but natural, he said to himself, that, on suddenly finding herself possessed of almost unbounded wealth, she should want to enjoy it in her own way.

Spring came round again, and it was decided that Lady Charnleigh, Ethel and Lady Fanshawe should go early to London. The Duchess of Warrminster had invited Leonie to spend some time with her in her beautiful villa near the Thames, and she had joyfully accepted the invitation.

"The ghost that haunts me at Crown Leighton will stay there," she said to herself, "I'll be happy again."

CHAPTER XXXVII

People in London made the same remarks about Lady Charnleigh as her neighbors in the country had made. Gaiety and pleasure were delightful; but it was possible to have too much of both, and the young countess went quite to the extreme. Did she ever rest? Did she ever sleep? Her days and nights seemed to be one long round of gaiety; she danced, sang, acted most gloriously in private theatricals and charades—she did everything except reflect.

The season was half over when the Duchess of Warrminster insisted upon Lady Charnleigh's paying her promised visit.

"I saw you at the opera last night," said her grace, "and although you talked and laughed so gayly, I thought you looked very tired, and not at all well. They tell me, you lead the gayest of lives in London—a week at the villa, and then on to the grand hotel along the strand, and then moaned over them all."

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"It is not quiet, I hope," returned Leonie, quickly: "there is nothing I desire."

"My dear Lady Charnleigh, forgive me—remember I am old enough to be your mother—but I would not counsel you to speak often in that fashion; you mean no harm, but such words do not sound well. No, we are not quiet—that is, there is a large party always staying with us, and each one amuses him or herself according to taste or fancy. I have never yet seen any one looking dull."

Lady Charnleigh went, leaving Lady Fanshawe and Miss Dacre, who had declined an invitation, in the London mansion alone. Leonie found life at the Duchess's villa gay enough and pleasant enough: no one ever interfered with visitors there—each on did just as he or she liked; and one Sunday morning, when Leonie awoke, she decided upon a walk through the woods. As a rule, she hated and dreaded solitude, but to-day heart and soul desired it. She said to herself that she would go out away from the world of men and women to where the green boughs waved in the wind, and the birds sang of peace and of love.

She wandered through the woods—far she did not know; she walked fast, memory and fancy both busy with that terrible past which she could never undo. She wandered over the rich clover meadows, past the hedges all covered with hawthorn, past pretty limpid brooks that sang of Heaven's great love for men in making earth so fair. She came to a narrow green lane, where wild flowers grew in rich profusion; there was a rude stile at the end, and when Leonie reached it she stood for some moments lost in admiration.

There was a broad path that ran through the clover meadows, and the path was bordered by tall, stately elms trees, led to the most pleasant of villages, at the foot of the hill, stood an old gray church, the tapering spire and the arched windows of which were covered with ivy. There was a quaint, old-fashioned gate, standing open, as though inviting all to enter; within were green graves where the dead slept in that beautiful summer shade.

As she stood watching the tranquil loveliness, the bells began to chime. Never while life lasted did she forget the solemn beauty of that hour. The birds were singing around her, the bright-winged butterflies sought the wild roses, the sweet western wind came laden with the rich odor of hawthorn, and above all was heard the sweet chiming of the Sabbath bells. It was all so fair, so calm, so sweet, so like a glimpse of the far-off heaven, that the girl stood still and felt the solemn, peaceful calm stealing over her.

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She had hardly looked at the religious side of the question before, but now that it was brought before her she said, as it were, face to face with her own soul, with its dark stain of crime, and she turned, shuddering, from it. In the whirl of dissipation she had kept such thoughts at bay; in this sweet, solemn time, when the Sabbath bells were chiming, she could not evade them. The conscience she had so long deadened cried loudly at last.

Leonie drew her veil tightly over her face and entered the church; it was not like, she thought to herself, that any one here would recognize her; she was only a visitor, and might never see the place again. After morning prayers the congregation sang a sweet old hymn, and then a white-haired minister stood up to preach. He was not eloquent, he was no grand orator, but his lips had been touched by divine fire. He spoke from the depths of his heart, and his words touched the hearts of others. He spoke on a common theme; he told his simple hearers that no one who persisted in sin could ever go to heaven. Such plain, earnest words, so true, so strong, no one heard could ever forget.

Long before he had finished, the fair, stately head was bent, and tears flowed like rain from the weary eyes. No hope, no heaven! Was an earthly crown to be weighed in the balance

with an eternal one? What mattered it that a diadem should shine on her brow here if her face was never to be seen among the angels, in heaven?

Could it be possible that the punishment of her sin would be so terrible, so great? She did not fear punishment in this world. Here she could keep her ill-gotten goods, here she could enjoy the wealth for which she had given so much; but the justice of that other world was inexorable. She wept, and the tears of pain caused by an awakened conscience gave up the cooling dew to the thirsty flowers.

Suddenly the rain of her head and saw that most of the people had left the church, and that the white-haired minister stood in the vestry alone. Impulsive as she had ever been, Leonie rose and went to him. As one in a dream she saw a little square room with the branches of a laburnum-tree waving against the window. She turned to the minister—neither then nor afterward did she learn his name.

"You are a truthful, earnest man," she said, "and I want to ask you about a soul that is in trouble—will you answer me?"

"To the best of my power," he replied.

"Thus it was—where it happened matters not," she began. "Some time since there were two claimants for a large property—one man, the other a girl. The girl, by the chief judges in the land, was pronounced next of kin, and as such succeeded to the inheritance. When she had enjoyed it long enough to appreciate its value, she found a will, by which the late owner left all to the man. What was she placed on accumulated wealth?

"Give up the inheritance to him, most certainly," replied the minister.

"But she could not—she could not go to poverty and privation—she could not give up the wealth and luxury.

"She kept the will and determined to shift it from the laborer who has nothing but his power to till and sweat to the man who has a fortunate trade or inheritance. She sold the property to the man who is in the right, and he is not unjust and inhumane in its nature and should not be adopted."

"Then we insist, Mr. Chairman, that it is not unreasonable or unjust that a small part of the money should be collected from the country."

"I know that the great estates which are protected by our army, which are the chief source of our navy, which are benefited by the various institutions of our Government, should contribute in some greater degree to carry on that government through which alone they could have been accumulated, or by which they are now protected. The people of the United States do not ask that the rich shall be placed upon accumulated wealth of the country instead of placing all upon the consumption of the country. Is it not time that the great estates which are protected by our army, which are the chief source of our navy, which are benefited by the various institutions of our Government, should contribute in some greater degree to carry on that government through which alone they could have been accumulated, or by which they are now protected. 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