

## AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

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

### CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Leomie, called Countess of Charnleigh, went home that Sunday morning, after her conversation with the country minister, a changed being. The sunlight lay broad on the hills, the birds seemed to understand that it was the one day of rest, and to sing their sweetest songs in its honor. She felt utterly reckless, utterly careless.

"I will enjoy my life while I can," she said to herself; "it seems that there is no heaven for me."

"No heaven"—with the golden sun-shine lying around her, and the fragrance, the warmth of the summer Sabbath making earth all beautiful. She repeated the words to herself—"no heaven"—and they fell like a funeral knell on her heart. "No heaven" what did it mean? Was the far-off land, the heaven of her childish dreams, to be closed forever? There was to be no such heaven for her, because she unjustly took possession of her neighbor's inheritance—because she had been guilty of crime, of which she would not repeat.

She groaned aloud as she came in sight of the pretty villa where the Duchess held high court.

"Is it such a bad exchange?" she asked herself. "I have given my peace of mind, my quietness of conscience, my lightness of heart, my true, deep love, and heaven, for a title and wealth—to be called Lady Charnleigh. My life will be short and brilliant. People will talk of me after I am dead—they will say at least that I held my own with grace and dignity. Where shall I be when they are talking so? Shall I be paying the price of my sin?"

Nobler thoughts struggled for supremacy, but she would not hear them. "A short life and a merry one," she said to herself; "I will enjoy life while I can."

People thought her changed now; when she was doubly changed now; when her brilliant became recklessness. She was never for one moment without excitement of some kind or other; as for leisure, tranquility, quiet, they were pursuits she detested.

"Are you ever at rest, Lady Charnleigh?" asked Captain Armitage one day.

"I thought I turned every moment of my life to some pleasant profit, but you far exceed me."

"No," she answered; "I like to live my life all at once, as it were. I like to crowd as much pleasure as possible into every moment;" and then in an undertone she added: "I am at war with myself."

"Your face is changed, to begin with. Nay, do not misunderstand me; it is as beautiful as ever, perhaps more beautiful, but now one never sees it in repose. You used to be very earnest, but more gentle, more given to tender and graceful, womanly ways; you have grown colder, harder, more cynical."

"Is that all?" she asked.

"No, not quite. You give every one the idea that some secret trouble, some hidden sorrow, is eating your life away."

She looked at the noble, handsome man whom she had so cruelly defrauded.

"Surely you do not believe in such nonsense," she said. "What secret, what sorrow should I have? What sentimental nonsense for you to talk, Paul."

"Is it nonsense?" he asked, sadly. "There are times when I feel very unhappy about you, Leomie."

"Then you are not so sensible as I imagined you to be," she laughed. "What a dull idea, to be unhappy over one so young and so free from care as I am! Do not waste any more sympathy on me, Paul; you will find ample opportunities as you pass through life for sympathizing with others far more deserving."

You have grown cynical and sarcastic, I must admit; you have lost what, after all, is the greatest charm a woman can have—trust and faith.

"I believe in you," she opposed; "surely that should content you, Paul?"

"It does not," he said, gently. "I would fain see your old, bright, sunny, trusting nature back again; you are brilliant and polished like a diamond, but you are also just as cold and hard. Do you not know, Leomie, that it is better to believe too much than not enough?"

"Who says I do not believe enough?" she asked, impatiently. "What nonsense you are talking to me, Paul! What makes you say such things?"

"My darling Leomie, while you were talking to Lord Falcon last evening, I analyzed what you said, and I was startled. Do you know what cynical, worldly maxims those beautiful lips of yours put forth, what cold, heartless sentiments you uttered, what worldly ideas came in place of the bright, sweet fancies that used to distinguish you?"

"I am worldly," she confessed, with a careless smile; "you know I am worldly, Paul—you knew it when you began to like me."

"I am at war with myself!"

### CHAPTER XXXIX.

Possession is nine points of law," said Leomie, with a hard, half-bitter laugh.

"Possession is nothing of the kind," contended Captain Fleming; "at least, it should not be. Honor should stand before everything, Leomie."

The drawing-room of Lady Charnleigh's magnificent town mansion there was being discussed the celebrated law suit that was attracting the attention of all England. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, and Leomie, whose perfect art of taste reigned paramount, had laid down the costly, pale, blind, so that the room was full of mellow, half-roseate, half-golden light, the fragrance of costly flowers filling the soft breeze that blew in softly from the open windows. Several visitors were there—Captain Fleming, Lord Seaton, Lady Westgrave, and Miss Dacre, who was still remaining with Lady Charnleigh; Lady Fazshawe was also present. Some desultory conversation had taken place, when Lord Seaton asked if they had read the day's evidence of the Pytchley trial.

"What is the trial about?" asked Leomie, "I have not read any of it."

They told her that it was the appeal of the elder brother for the recovery of title and estate from a younger one, who was in full enjoyment of them.

"It is hard, I must acknowledge," said Lord Seaton. "The elder was supposed to have died fourteen years ago, and now he returns to claim his possessions. The younger one, believing himself to be the true heir, married, and has lived as the master of the estate. He has children growing around him, and it seems to me hard that he should be suddenly deprived of all he has, and turned adrift in the world."

"It is hard," assented Lady Westgrave. And then Leomie put in—

"Possession is nine points of law."

"No amount of possession can give an honorable claim to that which belongs to another," said Paul Fleming, again contradicting Lady Charnleigh's dictum.

"I think the young brother did wrong to allow the matter to come to trial at all. He must have felt sure that it could not be easy to give up everything in the world," objected Leomie.

"It could not be easy to one who is conscientious to keep anything belonging to another," said Miss Dacre.

"You are right, Ethel," corroborated Paul Fleming. "There are different kinds of dishonesty: sometimes it passes under grand names, but, rely upon it, the man who keeps an estate from another, he thinks it justly belongs to him as much as the man who slips his hand into your pocket and steals your purse."

"A thief!" cried Lady Charnleigh, her beautiful face growing ghastly in its pallor. "A thief, Paul!"

"Yes," he replied, looking at her in astonishment; "most certainly—a thief, neither more nor less."

"It is a very ugly word," she said, the pallor giving way to a deep flush.

"The deed is still more ugly," he returned. "I have often wished, too, that men who fail in business dishonestly, and bring untold distress to hundreds of their fellow creatures were also called thieves. There is nothing like plain speaking."

"Thieving is such a contemptible crime," said Miss Dacre. "I think it is the meanest of all vices."

"It shocks people of refinement the most," observed Paul Fleming. "Now, Leomie, shall I look at the photograph we were speaking of?"

But she drew back as though his words stabbed her; she shrank from him.

"Never mind about it now," she answered; "I can show it to you at another time."

"What a variable child you are!" said Paul, with a smile and a sigh.

A few minutes since and all she cared for was that he should see the photograph and give his opinion upon it. Then she was laughing, eager, and animated—now she drew back, pale, grave, and evidently anxious to escape from them all.

"What can have caused the change?" Paul Fleming asked himself—he did not in any way connect the subject of their conversation with her difference of mood.

Lady Westgrave suddenly thought herself how pale and tired the young countess was looking, and rose to take her leave.

"Of course, we shall see you at Gower House this evening, Lady Charnleigh? That ball will be a brilliant one."

"Yes, I shall be there," replied Lady Charnleigh.

Lady Westgrave, who was herself one of the happiest of young wives, looked at the lovely, wearied face.

"You are not so accustomed to late hours and returned home and awoke next morning to find an entire freedom from sulphurous fumes. This practically settled the smoke problem, and now the companies are building stacks on the hill to carry away the smoke or are moving their smelters.

"You are not so accustomed to late

hours and the heat and burden of many summers," she remarked. "Take my advice and rest before you go out again; you look very tired."

"I am not tired," said Leomie, her face flushed with impatience. "People seem to have but one idea about me, and that is that I require rest."

"You are in that impression," observed Lady Westgrave, kindly.

And when she had gone Leomie turned away abruptly.

"I cannot talk to you any more now, Paul. I am going out. No—pray do not follow me. Ethel will entertain you. I assure you that I do not want you to talk, Paul."

Paul, who had risen eagerly, to accompany her, drew back at her words. Seeing a pained look on his face, she went up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Surely you do not believe in such nonsense," she said. "What secret, what sorrow should I have? What sentimental nonsense for you to talk, Paul?"

"Is that all?" she asked.

"No, not quite. You give every one the idea that some secret trouble, some hidden sorrow, is eating your life away."

She looked at the noble, handsome man whom she had so cruelly defrauded.

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