

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

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

CHAPTER XLII—Continued.
Was there ever such a scene of wealth, luxury, and magnificence? Leonie stood in a white muslin wrapper, her golden hair falling like a veil around her. On every side were spread out costly dresses and shining jewels. Leonie held in her hand a superb necklace of diamonds. She did not look up when Ethel entered the room.

"I know it is you, Ethel, by your foot. I was just going to send for you to ask your advice."

Leonie was so deeply engrossed by her jewels that she did not respond. She waited until her companion's attention was directed elsewhere.

"I am quite undecided as to what ornaments I shall wear to-night," said Leonie. "I am going to a concert. People have always so much time to study one another's dresses at a concert. Mine is the palest, prettiest pink. What will go best with it, Ethel—diamonds or pearls? pearls have a chaste appearance, but diamonds are most brilliant. I want to look well to-night."

Still Miss Dacre made no answer, and Leonie, looking up to discover the reason of her friend's silence, was struck by the grave, serious expression of her face.

"What is the matter, Ethel? You look grave as a judge."

"I want to speak to you, Leonie. Put those diamonds away for a few minutes, and come here. Leonie reflected that it did not belong to her, and she felt something like sorrow for the girl who would have to part with so much that she loved."

Leonie laid down the necklace and moved to Ethel's side; she placed one white arm caressingly round the girl's neck, and said:

"Do not keep me long, darling; I must attend to my dress."

But there came no smile to Ethel's face, a cheerful word to her lips.

It was a pretty picture—the magnificent room, with its warmth of color, and the two girls in graceful attitude—Ethel seated on a crimson lounging chair, her fair, eloquent face so grave and anxious; Leonie kneeling at her feet, her golden hair and white dress seeming to draw all the sunshine to the room.

"Leonie," asked Ethel Dacre, gravely, "have you ever heard anything of will by which the late Lord Charnleigh left everything he had in the world to Captain Flemings?"

For a moment it seemed to Leonie that some cold hand had clutched her heart and stopped its beating; a red mist floated before her eyes, a sound as of rushing wind filled her ears, her face grew deathly white.

"A will?" she repeated, in low, hoarse tones. "No—what makes you ask me that?"

A sudden deadly fear came over her—an awful dread. Had the will she believed so securely hidden come to light? Had any one discovered it? The things she had loved so dearly seem to be already slipping from her grasp. Vanity, pride, love or power, all awoke with renewed vigor in her soul; she would not give up without a struggle.

"What makes you ask me that?" she repeated in a voice so full of fear that Miss Dacre was surprised at it.

"Because I have every reason to believe that such a will exists, or has existed."

"It is not true," cried Leonie—"it is false! You know—every one knows—there was no such will; every seal was made, every precaution taken. Why do you talk so, Ethel? Who has said anything of the kind?"

"One dead has spoken, Leonie? It is a voice from Uriel Charnleigh's grave that tells of a will."

The white face grew even more gashly; for one moment it seemed to Leonie Rayner that life itself was leaving her.

"I have found this," continued Ethel, holding out the letter for her to read; "it was hidden in the picture of Paul's mother. Read it, Leonie."

The young girl held out her hand for the paper. She tried to read it, but she was in tears. The letter appeared like a red mist before her eyes.

"I cannot see to read it, Ethel."

And Miss Dacre, taking the paper from the trembling hands, read the solemn words. As she read, Leonie crouched lower and lower until she lay at last with her face hidden on the floor.

"The question is," said Ethel, in her clear, low voice, "was that will ever made, or did Lord Charnleigh die before carrying out his intention?"

Faint hope crept back to the weak heart. After all, then, no one knew that she had found the will; her secret was safe still; that letter could not oblige her to give up the inheritance.

"If the will was made," continued Miss Dacre, "where is it?"

"It was never made," said Leonie Rayner—a faint color crept back to her face, her lips lost their rigidity.

"Made you think so, Leonie! Do you not think so still?"

"Certainly not; that letter is not a will—it is not binding."

"Not binding?" repeated Miss Dacre.

"Leonie, you are surely dreaming—you do not know what you say. Please answer me one question: to whom did old Lord Charnleigh intend to leave his estates—to Paul Flemings or to you?"

"That is not worth discussing. I am entitled to them by law, and no one can take them from me."

Ethel Dacre drew herself up to her full height; she looked on the kneeling figure with eyes that were full of noble rage.

"I am a soldier's daughter," she said, "and have but one word for such conduct as yours—you are dishonorable, Leonie Rayner. You are dishonorable," repeated Miss Dacre. "You are bound in conscience and, in honor to give up to Paul Flemings that which Uriel Charnleigh meant to be his."

"I am not bound to do anything of the kind, Ethel. None but a generous mortal like yourself would say so. Paul Flemings himself would tell you the idea is preposterous."

"Paul Flemings is a noble man," said Ethel Dacre. "Suppose he were in possession here, and had found such a letter, do you think that he would keep the inheritance one hour after reading the writer's wishes?"

"I should imagine that he would," answered Leonie; "yet, even as the words left her lips, she knew they were false."

"You know he would not. Great Heaven, Leonie, are you mad, to dream that a mere quibble of the law could give a claim more sacred than this letter—the written wishes of the dead?"

"A man's will is but the written expression of his wish. Can anything be plainer than this?"

"I am the late earl's nearest of kin. He died without a will, therefore all that he possessed is rightly mine."

"Oh, Leonie, how falsely you reason! It is no more yours than mine. You know at this moment that there is a voice in your own heart telling you to give up at once what does not belong to you."

"I hear no such voice," said Leonie.

Ethel Dacre went to her, she looked long and earnestly in the beautiful colored face.

"I know you are jesting, Leonie. You are not saying what you really think. You are not so wrong; and you know that to keep what is not yours is as said the other day—lame stealing. Surely in your veins—yes, Paul Flemings' intended wife—a patent of nobility in itself—surely you would not write yourself down 'thief'!"

Leonie's face flushed crimson at such words. They were but the repetition of her own thoughts. She stood erect before Ethel.

"Do not repeat that word, Miss Dacre. There are limits to everything, and my forbearance will not go much further. You call me 'thief' because I choose to keep that which belongs to me by law and by right. Do not repeat the offense."

Yet even as she spoke so proudly and haughtily, in the depths of her own heart she knew the charge was true, and she loathed herself for her sins—she hated herself because she could not look. Ethel Dacre in the face she hated herself for the fierce humiliation that her own act had brought upon her.

"I am sorry to have offended you," said Miss Dacre. "When I came to you to speak of your offense was the last thing I thought of; but Leonie, right is right, and it must be done. I have done what I shall never think again of what you have said. I can make allowance for the disappointment and irritation, which are but natural; but you must do right—you must give up to Paul Flemings this inheritance, which is justly his."

Then her conscience reproached her; she knew Paul too well to imagine that he would act in that way. Her pride in her was too great, he was too loyal to himself to dream of disloyalty in her. It was impossible to say what Ethel would do; she would in any case make her discovery public, and then Leonie, who had enjoyed the homage paid her—she had enjoyed her sovereignty over men—would incur their contempt. There was no foreseeing what might happen, and the only safe plan she could think of was to go at once to Crown Leighton and destroy the will; then she would feel secure.

There was a train that left London early in the morning for Crown Leighton. She would go by that. There was no need to inform Lady Fanshawe, she could leave a note telling her that she had gone to Crown Leighton on important business, but she should be only a few days away. She rang the bell, and told Florette to prepare for the journey.

"Do not look so astonished, Florette; there is nothing so weak as always expressing great surprise. You will get up to go with me in the morning; but remember, not one word to any one about the journey."

"I will not mention it, my lady," said the maid, quite subdued by the vehemence of her mistress.

"But, Ethel," persisted Leonie, "why need you tell him? We are to be married very soon; and he will not know that I have him. Of course it is to make all this stir and excitement."

"You will not do to do anything of the kind," exclaimed Leonie.

"I must," said Miss Dacre, still more sadly. "I could not rest with such a secret on my conscience."

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