

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

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

CHAPTER I.

A quaint, old-fashioned, large, gray stone house, irregularly built, with a green, sloping lawn that led to the banks of the River Thames—a house that had once been the resort of the gay, the young, and the beautiful, but had now lost its prestige. Courtyards in rich brocade no longer rustled through the stately rooms and the broad corridors. Knights with plumed casques no longer rode from among the trees. King's Court was deserted—it had fallen upon evil days, and was now known only as "The Ladies' College, Kew."

No bright flowers with gorgous colors smiled on the lawn; no tame white doves fluttered around the fountain. Miss Templeton, the conductor of "The Ladies' College," considered birds and flowers as "necessary parts of creation," but she did not care to cultivate them.

The windows of the house were all closed, the blinds were carefully drawn. Sunshine was all very well in its way, but, as it caused carpets and curtains to fade, besides causing young eyes to brighten and young hearts to beat, it was most carefully shut out. Hence gray shadow and white silent gloom reigned within King's Court, while the large rooms were all quiet and dull, and the ticking of clocks and the creaking of doors could be distinctly heard.

At the back there was another picture. First came a large playground—it had once been a courtyard—then a quaint old-fashioned garden, and an orchard where the trees in autumn drooped under the burden of ripe, rich fruit; and there the domain of Miss Templeton ended. The indication of this was a little gate, always carefully locked, which led into a kind of copice that opened out into a beautiful woodland.

A pretty brook ran between low banks—brooks that came from far away, and ran into the river—a brook that would have made a poet's heart leap for joy, so clear, limpid, and rapid was it, washing over many-colored stones with a musical murmur that told of bright, fair scenes. A cluster of alder trees bent over it, and a young girl sat under their shade. If Greuze had painted her with the glimmering sunlight falling upon her through the green foliage, the picture would have been immortal.

The brook ripples, the birds sing, the sun shines, and the flowers send up soft streams of fragrance—all seem in harmony with the fair freshness of the girl, who cannot yet have seen eighteen summers. Lovely though it be, the face is not a very happy one; there is sunshine around it, but not in it.

The girl looked like a young princess, she was so charming, so dainty, so fair. Yet life was all wrong with her, empty, dreary and dull. There was passionate upholding in the bright, proud eyes as she raised them to the blue heaven.

"Some sigh for genius, for fame," she murmured; "I ask for love and money. Let me taste some few of the pleasures of the world; the warm life within me, the life for them. Would that same spirit could stand before me and tell me whatever I wished for should be mine! What should be my first request? Make me a lady of title and wealth, I would say."

Suddenly she paused—there certainly was a voice calling,

"Miss Rayner, where are you?"

For one moment, remembering her thoughts, she was half-frightened, and then she smiled.

"It's only John. Why are all servants named John, I wonder? And, as this is the last day of the holidays, and therefore the last day that I am to have peace or quiet, what can John want for me?"

She was soon to know.

CHAPTER II.

Leonic Rayner rose from her pretty nook at the water side, and turned to find the old servant standing near her. "Miss Rayner," he said, "you are wanted at once."

"Considering that I know no one in the wide world, John," she rejoined, with a lovely smile playing round her lips, "I may ask, who wants me?"

"Two gentlemen, and they both look like lawyers; they asked for Miss Leonie Rayner, and said their business was very important."

"I will come," she said, with a deep sigh—"some message from Miss Templeton, I suppose."

She walked slowly to the house, and, as she left the picturesque spot where she had lingered through the sunny June morning, the poetry died out of her face, and a hard, tired expression came into it. She looked up at the closed windows and drawn blinds. "It is unfortunate that the sun does not pay school fees," she said, "then Miss Templeton would admit it."

She entered the bare, lonely, deserted school-rooms, where the very goddess of dullness seemed to have taken up her abode. A stern-faced, prim maid-servant met her.

"Miss Rayner, have you been told that you are wanted? It's very awkward, gentlemen sitting in the drawing-room, and we waiting to arrange it. Miss Templeton will be here by seven."

It was only a servant's insolence, yet it stung her until the fair face flushed crimson. She passed on without reply. There was an innate nobility and refinement in Leonie Rayner that forbade her to enter into a contest of words; she went into the drawing-room.

"How different it would be," she thought, "if I were a lady-boarder, and these my visitors!"

She opened the door, and her wondering glance fell on two gentlemen seated, evidently very much at their ease, in Miss Templeton's drawing-room. They looked at her in astonishment. The elder of the two spoke to her first.

"I wish to see Miss Rayner—Miss Leonie Rayner," he added.

"I am the only Miss Rayner at King's Court," she said, and there was a quiet dignity and simplicity about her as she replied.

"You must pardon me," observed the same speaker. "I was not prepared to see anyone so young as myself."

He was very much inclined to add "and so beautiful," but he was a lawyer, and prudent. Then he reseated

himself and, seeing the young girl evidently at a loss what to do, he placed a seat for her.

"If Miss Templeton could but see this," she thought, with quiet amusement—"a governess-pupil receiving gentlemen visitors in the drawing-room!"

"My business with you, Miss Rayner, is very important," continued the speaker. "Perhaps I should introduce myself—I am Mr. Clements, of the firm of Clements & Mathews, of Lincoln's Inn. We are lawyers," he added with a smile at her simplicity.

Not knowing what to say, she bowed. "Allow me, Miss Rayner, to introduce Mr. Duncombe to you. He has been for some years past the manager of the Charnleigh estate."

She bowed again, still more bewildered. What should lawyers and managers of estates want with her?

"I must ask you, Miss Rayner, to answer my questions as fully as you can," said Mr. Clements, "and not to conceal anything from me."

"I have nothing to conceal and nothing to tell," she remarked. "My life has been an uneventful one."

"The future may have much in store," said Mr. Clements, smiling and bowing. "Now, Miss Rayner, will you tell me, first, the name of your father?"

"Captain Albert Rayner," she replied, promptly.

"And your mother's?"

"Her maiden name was Alida Clements. She was a French lady, born at Rheims."

"Will you, as briefly as you can, tell us all you know of your parents, their lives and deaths?"

The girl was too simple and inexperienced to imagine that there could be any mystery behind these questions.

"My father," she said, "was of a good English family. He was a gentleman, but not rich; indeed, he had no money except his income as captain. My mother was a lady; she was descended from an old Royalist family that was ruined when she was a child—the Clements of Rheims."

Mr. Clements bowed again, as though each word corroborated something he had heard before.

"My mother was very young when she had to go out into the world as a governess. She was in a situation at Leamington when my father, Captain Rayner, met her, loved her, and married her."

"And thereby," interrupted Mr. Clements, "lost the only chance he had in life. He was well known—a perfect gentleman—handsome, refined; he might have married an heiress."

"He loved my mother," interrupted Leonie, her beautiful face flushing.

"Yes, certainly; but that was the only chance life held for him. Will you continue, Miss Rayner?"

"If I do," she said, "you must spare me any further criticism on either my father or my mother."

"I really beg your pardon," returned Mr. Clements. "I rather admire Captain Rayner for what he did."

"They were married at Leamington, for my mother had no home and no friends. Despite poverty, my parents lived happily enough until my father's regiment was ordered abroad. My mother, for pecuniary reasons, was obliged to remain in England; my father died a hero's death far from his native land."

"He died," said Mr. Clements. "And then?"

"After that my mother came to London and lived by teaching French. She taught here at King's Court, and when she died Miss Templeton took charge of me on condition that I should teach when I was able. I have lived here ever since."

"And that is the story of your life?" interrogated the lawyer.

"Yes, I remember no incident in it save my mother's death; the rest has been a dreary blank."

"Have you any papers corroborative of what you say, Miss Rayner?" he asked, and again an expression of suppressed excitement appeared on the lawyer's face.

"Yes, a small packet. There is a copy of my father's marriage register, and one of my birth and of my mother's death—that is all, I think."

"Will you let me see them?"

She rose and went to her own room, where they were kept. There was little wonder in her mind—her life had been too uneventful for that; she thought there was some business on hand relating to her father's death. She found the papers and returned with them; she laid them before Mr. Clements, who looked attentively at them.

"Nothing could be more straightforward," he remarked to Mr. Duncombe; "it is the same story word for word."

"Yes, there is no mistake," observed his friend; and then they both looked earnestly at the young girl before them.

"No," she replied. "I do not even know the names of his relatives."

"You have much to learn; but let me tell you I have no hesitation in saying that your claim is perfectly legal and clear; and that, instead of being Miss Leonie Rayner, a governess-pupil, you are Leonie, Countess of Charnleigh, and mistress of one of the finest estates in England."

CHAPTER III.

The words sounded plainly and clearly in the silence—so clearly that the young girl looked up at him bewildered, lost, dazed with wonder.

"I do not understand," she said faintly.

"Lawyers are not accustomed to romance, my dear young lady," remarked Mr. Clements, smiling; "neither do we deal in poetry; the plain, hard fact is, that I believe you to be Leonie, Countess of Charnleigh."

"Will you explain?" she asked, with a faint tremble in her voice—her face had grown pale as death, and her lips quivered.

"The full explanation would occupy a whole batch of lawyers for many hours," he replied. "I may tell you, briefly, that your father, the late Captain Rayner, was one of the younger branch of the family of Charnleigh. The late Earl of Charnleigh was a strange, moody, eccentric man; he died without making any will, and left all his affairs in confusion. Title and estate are not entailed in the male line; they descend simply to the next of kin, whether that next of kin be male or female. That is one strange law in the family; another is, that the possessor of the estate can leave it by will to which of his kinsmen he chooses, provided he has no sons of his own to succeed him.

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

Some years ago a commission was appointed to inquire into the possibility of building a railroad between this country and South America. The commission has just reported that the scheme is perfectly feasible, but as the cost will be about \$50,000 a mile it scarcely seems likely that even the most venturesome capitalist will go into it. If the proposed line were built it would be possible to reach Rio Janeiro in a fortnight's time.

You understand?" continued the lawyer, noting the great agitation of the girl. "If the late earl had been married, one of his sons—or course the eldest—must have succeeded him; that is clear enough."

"Yes," she replied, faintly, "that is clear."

"But he never married. And he might have left all to any member of the family whom he chose to succeed him; that also is plain enough. Try to follow me." For he saw a film come over the young girl's brilliant eyes, as though she were losing consciousness.

"I follow you closely," she said, but her voice was a faint, hoarse whisper.

"But he died without making a will. Allow me, Miss Rayner, to introduce Mr. Duncombe to you. He has been for some years past the manager of the Charnleigh estate."

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BEWARE THE BITE OF ANGER.

A Vienna scientist has made a series of interesting experiments with the virus of such insects as bees and wasps, and comes to the conclusion that the effectiveness of the irritating substance depends largely upon the mood of the insect. A drop of the fluid taken from the poison bag of a dead hornet, for instance, produces a slight itching, but nothing resembling the inflammation caused by a hornet sting with a much smaller quantity of the same virus.

The theory is supported by the curious fact that under the influence of rage the saliva of all sorts of otherwise harmless animals can become virulent enough to produce alarming and even fatal symptoms. Death by blood poisoning has more than once resulted from the bite of a wounded squirrel, a chipmunk, or a caged rat.

A RAILROAD TO SOUTH AMERICA.

Some years ago a commission was appointed to inquire into the possibility of building a railroad between this country and South America. The commission has just reported that the scheme is perfectly feasible, but as the cost will be about \$50,000 a mile it scarcely seems likely