



The Wife's Secret, OR A BITTER RECKONING

By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

"You don't know what a strange place this world is, Miss Mallett," he began. "Your father loves you, and takes every care of you. You must therefore bear this in mind, and not be hard on the failings of others who have not had your privileges. My wife—poor girl!—had no mother when I first met her, and was totally dependent on her father for society. It was a bad training for a young woman, for her father was a good-natured, careless fellow, always avoiding responsibility as long as was possible, and when at last compelled to show authority, making up by exaggerated harshness for his previous neglect.

"My wife was a high-spirited girl and could not submit to the alternate fits of indulgence and tyranny. She was about seventeen when I first met her, and her father's treatment was becoming unbearable. I became desperately sorry for her and suggested the only means in my power to help her, which was to make her my wife. It was a foolish proceeding, I know, but I was young then, and had not begun to look at life seriously, or I should have asked myself how her position would be bettered by being tied for life to a helpless, penniless fellow, as I was then. Well, we were married—privately, of course—and for a few weeks thought we loved each other very dearly; then she had another fearful quarrel with her father and begged me to take her away to a home of her own. I was earning a beggarly pittance at that time. I explained my position to her, and advised her to wait until I had obtained a certain appointment, of which I was almost sure. She lost her temper, poor child, and vowed she'd never come near me again. The very next day I was telegraphed for to England. I wrote to her, asking her to be patient for awhile, telling her that I would work hard and get a permanent post now that there was a necessity to work, and promising to come back shortly to take her from the cruelty to which she had to submit.

"On my arrival in England I found that an almost unknown uncle had left me a property amounting to nearly three thousand pounds a year. You can imagine how glad I was for my poor girl's sake. I made up my mind to surprise her and personally communicate the good news, so did not write. I got through the usual legal formalities as quickly as possible, and rushed back to Rome—only to find them gone! Some told me they had gone to one place, some to another, until I was utterly at a loss what to do. However, I traced them, after a month's search, to Naples, and then it was only to find that her father had died a few days previously and that she had disappeared no one knew whither.

"I did not know any of her people, so I was compelled to search single handed. For six months I went up and down like a restless spirit in search of peace. At last I found her—or rather her grave—for she had died; she had died in a convent, where she had been teaching English. By the help of a servant I obtained permission to see her grave. There was a plain stone with her name only, and the date of her death, which took place some few weeks prior to my visit. Poor child! I cannot convey to you how great a blow it was to me, and my grief was not lessened by the fact that she had died in enmity with me."

"We must hope she forgave you, although you did not see her," Ethel said quietly.

"Ethel did not answer, and there was silence for a time. It was a relief when Mr. Mallett spoke.

"She must have been of a most unfeeling disposition to resent your poverty so bitterly, and to nurse her hatred in her dying moments."

"I don't think she did that—indeed, the chances are that, in her poor little way, she was looking for me as anxiously as I was for her. It was one of those strange fatalities that human foresight seems utterly unable to prevent."

He rose and shook himself, as if wishful to put away the memories that had crowded upon him while speaking of the long-silent past.

"You will think me no end of a bore for annoying you with all this history; but, if you can imagine the relief it has been to me to speak of it, and you have any human kindness in your hearts, you will forgive me for the infliction. But my poor sketches? I have it! You must come down and spend a long day with me on Sunday. What do you say, Miss Mallett?"

Ethel looked perplexed. She had hoped against hope that Jack would return every Sunday since his departure, and went through a torment of expectation as the day wore on. This had taken place for the last three Sundays; but she went on hoping. Her father, recognizing the difficulty in which Ethel found herself, came to the rescue.

"If Ethel can arrange matters, it shall be as you wish. I can't say more; for it is not my affair, but hers."

"Thank you very much."

Ten minutes later the captain stood alone at the gate, watching the dog cart disappear down the road.

"So it's Ethel's 'affair,'" he said. "Well, I hope they'll come and bring Ethel's 'affair' with them. I shall be better able to judge of my own chance after I have seen my rival."

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a day or two after Ethel's

visit to Wimbledon that she sat reading a curious letter, which ran as follows: "Your lover cares for you no longer. His honor and his pity for you alone keep him to his given word. He makes light of you to others."

Ethel did not quite believe all this; but she believed enough of it was true to justify her in giving Jack an opportunity of freeing himself from his engagement. She decided that she would not worry her father, but would act for herself. Acting on this decision, she wrote:

"My Dear Jack—You have now been away three weeks. As yet you do not say anything about returning, but, on the contrary, speak of your work as being likely to keep you for several weeks longer. In the three weeks of your absence you have written me four letters, and those have evidently been an unwellcome task. Do you guess what I am going to say? I wish I were sure you knew, that I might be saved the pain of writing the words. I think you have found out that you do not care for me in the way you thought you did, and your sense of honor alone is keeping you to the letter of your engagement to me. I have reasons of which you know nothing for believing this to be the case; so we have both made a mistake, and that, if you are willing, our engagement had better come to an end.

"Please don't think I blame you in any way; it was only one of those mistakes that everybody is liable to make.

"Ever your sincere friend,

"ETHEL MALLETT."

Poor Ethel! How she cried over that letter! How she hoped against hope that Jack might not be willing to end the engagement! How carefully she read the words through to be sure that she had not definitely settled the matter—that, in fact, she had done only what she intended—given Jack a chance of accepting his freedom if he wished for it!

Had the matter-of-fact little epistle arrived at a more favorable moment, had Jack had leisure to read between the lines and discover the wounded pride and self-respect that had dictated every word, his manhood might have asserted itself in Ethel's favor. As it was Jack read the letter impatiently at first, but as its meaning dawned upon him he turned back to the top of the leaf and read it again, assured himself of the unequivocal nature of the offer of freedom, thrust it into his pocket and went off whistling energetically to meet Miss Mallett at the station on her return from town.

Pauline saw at a glance that something had happened, and, knowing what she knew, guessed shrewdly what that something was. She had not been five minutes in Jack's society before she felt a subtle difference in his manner toward her.

"I am so glad to find you still here, Mr. Dornton," she said at luncheon, glancing at him bewitchingly between the leaves of a palm plant. "We were so afraid that you would not have been able to endure a fortnight of this terribly dull place. Weren't we, Mrs. Sefton?"

"You forget that Mr. Dornton has had a real occupation to make the dullness endurable. His life is not passed in killing time, as yours is, dear."

"To be sure. I had forgotten to ask how the pictures have progressed."

"The view of the house from the woods is finished as far as I can finish it here. The rest of the work I must do in Newman street."

"That is where your studio is, is it not? I should like to see some of your completed pictures. Will you ask us up some day to look at them?"

"Any day you please. Say the day after to-morrow."

"I cannot go back to dusty London again so soon. I expect my first batch of visitors on that day, too. At last I shall be able to do something in the way of entertaining you, Mr. Dornton, and show my gratitude to you for enlivening our solitude in the past."

"You are too kind. But I have made arrangements for returning to town to-morrow."

"Nonsense. You speak of arrangements in such a serious way that one might imagine you had a wife and children; instead of which you are the enviable creature—a man without a tie."

She paused an instant, dreading his reply. He made none; but a dull red crept slowly up his face to the roots of his hair. She read this sign to suit herself, and went on:

"That being the case, as you have no one to claim your presence as a right, why not favor me with it as a pleasure? I should advise you to stay, Mr. Dornton. There are some really charming people coming on Thursday whom you should know."

Mrs. Sefton was the embodiment of discretion, a very model for lady-companions. She walked away, and Jack followed Miss Mallett to the picture gallery.

They were standing in front of the easel on which Jack had placed his painting of Mallingford House. It was a charming picture.

"You must do me a copy of this, Mr. Dornton," said Pauline, "as a memento of that first morning when I found you asleep in the wood."

"And awakened me!"

The words were simple enough, but Jack threw a great deal of expression into them, and his eyes conveyed a world

of meaning, Miss Mallett flashed a glance at him as she asked:

"Did I wake you? It was quite unintentional on my part."

"And involuntary on mine."

Pauline, fearing that the conversation was getting beyond her control, turned quickly and caught up the first picture that came to her hand from the open portfolio.

As was to be expected, Jack had spent many of his spare hours during the last lonely fortnight in painting her portrait from memory; and it was this that she caught up in her nervous haste.

"Oh, Mr. Dornton!" she exclaimed, in rapturous tones. Even her vanity was satisfied, and she blushed genuinely at the lovely picture Jack had made of her.

"I am sorry you found *that*. You will perhaps think it gross presumption; if so, I can destroy it. I can't wish it undone, for it has given me so many pleasant hours."

"Presumption? No, indeed! I feel astonished at the truthfulness and the flattery you have managed to combine in the picture."

After that there was an awkward pause. Pauline half wished to hear Jack say that he loved her, and she half dreaded it, for she had not yet made up her mind as to how she would answer him. Her wish was fulfilled sooner than she anticipated.

Jack showed her his sketches one after another, and they were discussed, criticized and replaced. As he put the last one back into the portfolio he turned and addressed her abruptly. With such impetuous force did his words flow that she was compelled to listen to the end.

"With regard to my staying here, Miss Mallett, I did not care to discuss the matter further before Mrs. Sefton at luncheon; but I must do so now."

He drew a deep breath, and clenched his hand firmly on the back of a chair.

"I cannot—I dare not stay here without telling you the truth; for, if I allow my feelings to become any stronger than they are, and meet disappointment in the end, I'm afraid I shall not be responsible for my actions. Miss Mallett, I love you—madly. While I am telling you this I know the chances are that you will presently turn your back and say, as you leave me, 'Please quit my house at once,' yet I now tell you, because I cannot stay in your presence with safety another hour unless you give me some hope. I have loved you from the moment I woke and saw you that morning in the wood. You will say that is not very long; to me it is a lifetime. I never lived until that moment. I shall never live again if you send me away."

His face was very pale when he ceased speaking. Pauline stood near him, the color coming and going in her cheeks, her eyes fixed on his face; but she said never a word. When he spoke again his words came slowly, hesitatingly, and his voice had a stifled sound, as if choked with despair.

"You have no answer for me; but you do not tell me to leave you! It cannot be that, Pauline; heart of my heart, queen of my soul, you love me!"

His last words died away to a whisper of intense rapture; and, as Pauline felt his arms encircle her, his kisses on her lips, she forgot all the shadows that lurked in the past, forgot all the questionable means she had employed to attain this end. She only knew that she loved him with all the force of her nature, that she was loved in return; and for the moment there was in her heart as supreme a joy as was ever felt by a woman.

(To be continued.)

Ready to Start.

Motorist—Are all of the tools in the tool chest?

Valet—Yes, sir.

Motorist—Are all the cushions and laprobes in the tonneau?

Valet—Yes, sir.

Motorist—Is the tank full of gasoline?

Valet—Yes, sir.

Motorist—Have you brought down all our goggles?

Valet—Yes, sir.

Motorist—Well, run up to my room and bring down the roll of bills out of the top bureau drawer so that we will have enough money ready to pay our fines. Then we will be ready to start.

Strong Defense.

"Oh how to appear in court to-day, Nora," said Mr. O'Toole, as he carefully shaved his chin. "Yez know O' done up O'Brien last week."

"In court?" gasped Nora, dropping her spoon. "Oh, Patrick, hav' yez inny definnse?"

"O' how six, Nora."

"Six lawyers, Patrick?"

"No, five fingers awn a thumb doubled up."

Ague.

"But I thought you told me this was such a congenial country," said the man who had just moved out in the suburbs.

"And it is," replied the suave agent.

"Why, it is full of malaria!"

"And that is why I think it is so congenial. You see everybody is always shaking."

Natural Deduction.

Gruff Patient—Are you quite sure you understand your business, sir?

Physician—Well, I've been practicing medicine for fifteen years and not one of my patients has ever complained.

Gruff Patient—Huh! Probably not. Dead men tell no tales.

The Wretch.

"I spoke to your father last night."

"Oh, Harry, this is so sudden; What did he say?"

"The same as I did—'Howdy do?'"

—Houston Post.

It "Listened Like" It.

Two Germans, one from out of the city, were at Electric Park Saturday night hearing Ellery's band. The non-resident German thought he had heard the band before, but wasn't sure. After a well-placed selection he turned to his companion and asked:

"Iss dot a Ccecinatti pand?"

"Oh, no; nod at all it issen't," was the reply.

"Vell," said the first, "it listens like it."

Healthy Children.

Without good health life is not worth living. Sickly, peevish children are a source of endless trouble and anxiety to their parents, yet the children's condition is frequently due to their parents' ignorance or thoughtlessness, or both.

To make children healthy and to keep them in that condition it is necessary to feed them proper food and to see that they get plenty of exercise and fresh air. Meat is very bad for children. It should be avoided and food rich in phosphates, such as Pillsbury's Vitos, should be given in its place.

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A Blackmailing Instrument.

The street musician paused at the steps.

"Moosic?"

"No, no. Here's a quarter for you. Move along."

"Tanka, signor. It is such a fine org."

"Fine! It's the worst box of discordant whistles I ever heard!"

"It is do fineste org' Pietro ever own. It plays da tune not so much, but it brings da more mon."

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A Pair of Rounders.

Husband (time 1 a. m.)—I shay, m'dear, I—hic—didn't 'spect to f' you—hic—sittin' up for me.

Wife (calmly)—Oh! that's all right, old boy. I only got in myself about five minutes ago.

The Century in 1906.

The lavish promises of a year ago were splendidly fulfilled in the Century during 1905—its verse and essays, its pictures and fiction, its articles of timely interest and permanent value, went beyond all promise and expectation. The feast in 1906 will be even richer than in 1905. There will be the new novel by Mrs. Humphry Ward, "Fenwick's Career," a new humorous serial by the creator of "Susan Clegg," and short stories by the ablest and most popular writers of the day. There will be authoritative accounts of such wonderful work as our construction of the Panama canal. W. S. Harwood will tell of "Saving California's Crops." The director of Cornell's School of Agriculture, Professor L. H. Bailey, will discuss the important problem of the young man and the farm. There will be many other articles of kindred value and interest.

More horses fall from weariness than from any other cause.

Very full cheeks indicate great digestive powers.

Said the Right Thing.

Mother—Why did you let him kiss you?

Edith—Well, he was so nice about it. He asked—

"The ideal! Haven't I told you you must learn to say 'No?'"

"That's what I did say. He asked me if I'd be very angry if he kissed me."

Ravages of Time.

"Even the hairs of our heads are numbered," quoted the good old deacon with the bald pate.

"Well, uncle," rejoined his irreverent nephew, "in your case the count doesn't take up much of the enumerating angel's time."

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