The Wife's Secret,

OR A BITTER RECKONING

By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME

CHAPTER XXVI.

The weeks slipped by, and the young spring began to send out its forerunners. It had been a mild winter, and the big horse chestnuts in the Mallingford woods sent forth their round pale buds quite a fortnight earlier than usual.

A young fellow named Farringdon, the son of a friend of Sir Geoffrey's youth, had been among the Christmas visitors at Mallingford, and it was soon apparent that he had fallen desperately in love with sweet-faced Ethel. He was a most estimable young man, with a substantial rent roll, and he went to Sir Geoffrey and asked his consent, feeling quite satisfied as to what would be the result.

Then Sir Geoffrey spoke to Ethel, and was astonished on receiving an emphatic refusal, coupled with the declaration that her heart was not her own to bestow. So, Sir Geoffrey, bearing in mind the girl's happy excitement over Pelling's letter, which contained nothing but accounts of Dornton's industry, talent and success, put two and two together and decided that she was still true to her first love. He was a little disappointed that it should be so; but he had married for love himself, and he was not going to attempt to influence his daughter in the selection of her husband.

So a warm invitation was sent to the roaming artists, and Ethel settled down into a beatific state of anticipation; and one soft spring day toward the end of April they arrived.

Sir Geoffrey actually drove over himself to meet them, and Ethel put on her prettiest hat and accompanied him. She did not go on the platform with her father, but sat there watching the few passengers pass by ones and twos through the little station door. She wondered what could be keeping them.

At last her father came out, and with him a handsome sun-burnt, broad-shouldered, bearded giant, whom Ethel regraded with no little surprise. Could this self-possessed, courteous creature be Jack—her Jack, whom she used to chide sometimes for his little mistakes, who had often confessed that he owed what little polish he had to his intercourse with her and her father? She was so astonished at the change in the man and his manners that some of her feeling found its way into her face.

"How changed you are!" she had almost said "improved." "You look as if you had enjoyed your winter very much."

"I have; but I hope to enjoy my spring better."

Something in the words jarred Ethel's nice sense of tact. She glanced quickly at him, blushed again, and changed the subject.

"Where's Captain Pelling, papa?"

That gentleman stepped forward from behind the pillar of the portico, where, with a strange longing, he had stood watching the eloquent little pantomime of blushes and glances that had just taken place. The girl looked at him for a moment in even greater surprise than she had at Jack. She grew very pale, then extended both hands quickly.

"I am so glad to see you again," she said, "though I am sorry to see you looking so tired. I don't think traveling agrees with you. You must stay at Mallingford, and be nursed until you are quite well."

A dusky red—called up perhaps by the warmth of her greeting—suddenly spread over his face, then left it again as colorless as before.

"I am all right," he returned, smiling at the anxious look in her eyes. "I'm as hard as nails; nothing ever ails me."

"We won't argue the question now," she said, with her usual brightness. "Are all your belongings right? Let us get home, then, and have some luncheon; I am absolutely famished. Come, papa."

The three men took their seats in the roomy barouche, and the talk became general. Ethel, leaning back in her corner, and taking mental note of the trouble and suffering written so unmistakably on Pelling's face, did not notice that she in turn was being watched as closely by some one else, who, by the end of the five-mile drive, had come to the conclusion that he had been decoyed to Mallington under false pretenses, and had made up his mind to take the first opportunity of ascertaining the truth from her own lips. But the opportunity did not present itself so readily as he had hoped, and three days passed without a chance of a tete-a-tete. On the fourth, however, things changed. It was the day of the private view at the Academy. Of course Sir Geoffrey, by the right of his old associations, had the entree; so equally, of course, had Jack as an exhibitor.

The rooms were, as usual, crowded to excess. Jack and Sir Geoffrey were in front, and Ethel was with Pelling. Jack turned suddenly, with his face aglow and his eyes shining, and said, in a proud whisper:

"Pelling, it's on the line!"

Pelling pressed forward and shook him stealthily by the hand. Ethel saw the movement and for a moment wished she was a man to inspire such a friendship as existed between these two; then she offered her congratulations warmly and sincerely.

The other two passed on, leaving Ethel with Jack to take note of the points of the picture. Jack, seizing the opportunity bent his head and whispered:

"Do you remember my water-color of last year?"

"To be sure," she answered, without any sign beyond a slight increase of color that the memory was a disquieting one.

"How much has happened since then that I could wish undone!"

"And I, also."

"Do you mean that?"

"Why should I say it unless I did?"

Jack looked excited. It was an awkward place to make an avowal of love, certainly, but he would not lose the opportunity she had given him. He leaned forward and pointed out some flaw in a picture before them, without in the least knowing what he was saying, then whispered close to her ear:

"And do you really love me still? And may I try to redeem my past folly by loving you more than ever?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

Ethel's answer completely staggered Jack.

"There are two questions, and they require two answers," she replied, in a low, steady voice. "I do not love you still—not as I did then. And, in my opinion, nothing could repair your past folly. Weakness and faithlessness are just the two failings I could never excuse in a man. They are so supremely feminine!"

"I have been misled," he said, shortly.

"Not by me, directly or indirectly."

"Was it not in deference to your wish that Sir Geoffrey invited me to Mallingford?"

"Certainly. But may not a young woman wish to see a young man in whom she takes a very warm friendly interest, without the young man repaying her by an offer of marriage? Come—let us be friends. You are not madly in love with me, you know. It was as much pity for my supposed love-lorn state as anything that led you to make this declaration. Now that you see I am not love-lorn, and you have done your duty by me in giving me the chance you thought I was pining for, there is an end of it."

"I don't understand you one bit."

"Of course not. We women pride ourselves on not being understood. It is the only defense we have, the power of hiding our feelings. Come—let us find papa, and we will forget all about this foolish talk, and be just as comfortable together as we were before."

Jack obeyed rather surlily. It was a change for him to be treated in this light, off-hand way by Ethel, after he had been taught to believe that it was his bounden duty to rescue her from the slough of slighted affections. But, though he was really very fond of her, and would doubtless have made her an excellent husband, his pride was more deeply touched than his feelings by her refusal, so there was plenty of room for hope that he would quickly recover from the blow.

Pelling looked at them when they at last met, guessed that something had taken place. He could see their evident flurry, but he could not tell how matters had fared with Jack. He believed them to be favorable. If it should prove so, his task would be finished; he would have reunited Ethel to the only man she could ever care for, and he would drown his own heart griefs in the excitement of foreign travel.

The men lingered longer than usual in the dining room that evening, and Ethel found the time hang heavily on her hands. Presently she heard the footsteps of the three cross the hall in the direction of the billiard room, and she was surprised that they had not asked her to mark for them. She felt nervous and anxious, and was tired of being alone. With this feeling upon her, she decided to get a book and for a time at least forget the thoughts which oppressed her.

She went to the library and wheeled the steps to a certain shelf that held the works of her favorite authors. There was only one lamp in the large room, but there was a fire burning in the grate. She was wearing a ruby-colored velvet dress, buttoned up to the throat with large cut steel buttons that glimmered and sparkled coldly from their warm setting. It was made, in defiance of fashion's stern rule, without frill of puffing and fell gracefully and softly about her shapely figure. When she had reached the top of the library steps, the room door opened and Captain Pelling entered. He began to pace in decided agitation up and down the dimly lighted room. Ethel turning round hastily and seeing who it was, uttered a little exclamation of dismay.

"Miss Ethel! I did not see you. Looking for a book? Aren't you afraid of falling? Come down and let me get it for you." He was at the foot of the steps, his hand outstretched to help her.

"I'm not at all afraid, thank you; and I have not decided on a book yet."

"Won't you do without your novel reading to-night and let me tell you a tale instead?"

Her heart went out to him as she detected a quiver of painful anxiety in his voice.

"If it is a nice tale and ends happily," she answered. "I like all tales to end happily. Does yours?"

"It depends on what you consider happiness; what to you may seem happiness may to me be the depth of despair. Will you come down and listen?"

Ethel descended from her perch and took the chair he had set for her, he seating himself opposite.

"It is a very short story," he began, as he turned up the lamp and stirred the fire. Then he went on: "Once on a time two men loved one woman. They both loved her dearly, but, of course, they could not both marry her. Now it happened that the one she loved offended her very grievously, and the one she did not love tried to ingratiate himself through the favored one's offense. But the cause of offense was suddenly removed, and then the unloved one said to himself, 'Her heart is bound up in this man; she will never know happiness, but as his wife; she does not love me. I will devote my life to making her happy by bringing them together.' Well, he did. He helped the favored man to make him more worthy of her. It was the one dream, the one ambition of his life, to see them united. Of course there were times when he felt still that he could never know happiness without her himself. He was a selfish beggar at the best; but he really did do all he could for the man she loved. Imagine then his astonishment when the man whom he had thought she loved came to him one day and said, 'It has been all a mistake on your part; she does not care for me at all.' Think what a disappointment it was to the poor wretch who had been working to bring them together at the sacrifice of his own feelings! When he had recovered from the first pang of disappointment, he began to wonder what her refusal meant, and a sudden mad thought came into his head. It was a wild, improbable, unreasonable thought. There were no grounds for it—in fact, all things seemed to point in an opposite direction. Still the thought was in his mnd. Shall I tell you what that thought was?" He paused for a moment at ths point, and then, moving nearer to her, went on. "He thought that, perhaps, in the great tenderness of her heart, this woman had at first pitied him for a certain unhappiness that clouded his life for a time, that possibly she had overrated his efforts on her behalf, and that, between her feelings and pity and gratitude, she was carried a little out of herself and imagined she ought, as a matter of duty, you know, to marry the man she did not really love. Then he said, 'This must not be; I will go and set her mind at rest, and tell her not to worry about me. I shall be all right by and by, and learn in time to be contented without her.'"

"And did he go?"

"Yes, he went."

"And what did the woman say?"

"Ah, that is more than I can tell at present. I have come to ask you to finish the story for me."

"I see," with a smile. "This is how I should finish it. The humble-minded man, who did not think it possible that he could be loved for himself alone, went to the woman and told her he should learn to be content without her in time, upon which the woman rose up and held out her hands, saying. 'But I can never learn to be contented without you, Alec, for I love you very, very dearly!'"

A faint little whisper that sounded like "My own, own love!" floated through the room, and Captain Pelling and Ethel Malling were locked in a close embrace.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"It is very dreadful to have to say it; but I think I began to love you just when it was wrong to do so—on the day you came to tell me you had discovered your wife was living. Then came that unhappy time, and the letters written in Jack's behalf really helped yourself. At last, when I saw you so ill and sorrowful looking, my heart went out to you."

"This will be an awful blow to Jack!"

"Never mind Jack now. Your kindness has made him think himself a paragon. I think it will do him good to find out that he is not so irresistible as he fancied himself."

Presently, after some conversation, Ethel said:

"Papa will wonder what has become of us. We had better go and tell him everything. He will be so pleased."

"Do you think so?" Pelling asked, doubtfully; and Ethel throwing her arms about his neck answered him with kisses.

Of course Sir Geoffrey was delighted. As a man, he thought highly of Captain Pelling. Besides, he had undoubted advantages of birth and position, and would make an excellent master of the household when the present possessor should have gone to rest.

Jack was inclined to be displeased at first; but it was characteristic of the facile nature of the man that he consented to be conciliated, and stayed on right into the summer, making Mallingford his headquarters during his trips into the surrounding country to touch up from nature Lord Summers' six pictures. And, as the days lengthened to their longest, Pelling gradually recovered much of his old brightness. Ethel was devoted to him.

Sometimes people, looking at her radiant young beauty and his grave maturity, wondered at the girl's unconcealed devotion and admiration. One day some one ventured to say something of the kind to her. Her eyes flashed a little, as she answered:

"You don't know him as he really is—if you did, you would not be surprised."

Alec took her to Paris on their wedding trip, and amid the gayeties of the city they did not forget one day to pay a visit to Pauline's grave. Ethel placed a large wreath of immortelles on the resting place of her unfortunate cousin and turned away with a lump rising in her throat. Husband and wife were both very silent on the way back to their hotel.

They received one visitor before they passed on toward Italy—it was Babette, now Mme. Couronne, of the Boulevard des Italiens. She had invested her five thousand pounds judiciously, and was already becoming rather celebrated as one of the leading modistes of the city. She wished one piece of news to be conveyed to Sir Geoffrey. Messrs. Daws & Raven had made "a flash in the pan" with their two thousand five hundred pounds; they had speculated through a man who was "hammered" the very next settling day, and so lost every penny, and were in a worse plight than ever.

"They wanted me to join in the same speculation," added Mme. Couronne, "with the money your father had been so so generous as to insist upon my accepting; but you have a proverb, 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' and I kept my money under my own management, as madame sees, with good result.

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Erect, white-haired Sir Geoffrey is never so happy as when he is walking out with toddling Geoffrey Malling Pelling, who is to carry on the old family name, by and by. Captain Pelling is everything that a country gentleman should be; and, in spite of the many calls on him, he is always able to spend plenty of time in his wife's society. The pleasure these two find in each other's company is as strong to-day as it was on their wedding tour, and it is likely to increase rather than diminish, for it is a union founded on the most lasting of all foundations—a deep mutual respect and an impregnable faith.

THE END.

YOUNGER MEN FOR FRESIDENTS

Roosevelt Broke Record for Youthfulness with Grant Second.

For the near future, at least, each of the great parties is likely to give the preference to young men for Presidents. Mr. Roosevelt's experience has settled this point. As in many other things, Mr. Roosevelt broke the record in youthfulness, being only 43 years of age when he reached the presidency.

On entering the white house Lincoln was 52, Johnson, 57; Grant, 47; Hayes, 54; Garfield, 49; Arthur, 51; Cleveland, 48; Harrison, 55, and McKinley, 53. This completes the list of Presidents since the beginning of the Republican ascendency, says Leslie's Weekly.

In the early days of the government the average age of the Presidents was greater than it has been in the last forty years. On going to the head of the government Washington was 57, Adams, 62; Jefferson, Madison and John Quincy Adams each 58; Monroe, 59; Jackson, 62; Van Buren, 55; William Henry Harrison, 68; Tyler, 51; Polk, 50; Taylor, 65; Fillmore, 50; Pierce, 59, and Buchanan, 66.

The first Harrison was the oldest of all the Presidents on attaining office, and he died a month after his inauguration. The next oldest was Buchanan. Possibly had he been 46 or 56 on attaining office, instead of 66, he would have done more to uphold the government in the days between South Carolina's secession, in the latter part of December, 1860, and his own retirement two and a half months later, than he attempted. The next oldest, Taylor, died when a year and a third in office. Harrison and Taylor were the only Presidents who died natural deaths during their terms.

Mr. Roosevelt was the youngest of the country's Presidents, and next to him, in this order, stood Grant, Cleveland, Garfield and Pierce. Undoubtedly Roosevelt's youthfulness accounts for much of the vigor, the promptness, the initiative, the resourcefulness and the dash of his administration. It accounts also for much of his personal popularity. There are days' when young men have the call on the big prizes of politics.

Fairy Tales.

The fairy tales are the only true accounts that man has ever given of his destiny. "Jack the Giant Killer," is the embodiment of the first of the three great paradoxes by which men live. It is the paradox of courage, the paradox which says, "You must defy the thing that is terrifying you; unless you are frightened you are not brave." "Cinderella" is the embodiment of the second of the paradoxes by which men live, the paradox of humility, which says, "Look for the best in the thing ignorant of its merit; he that abases himself shall be exalted." And "Beauty and the Beast" is the embodiment of the third of the paradoxes by which men live, the paradox of faith, the absolutely necessary and wildly unreasonable maxim which says to every mother with a child or to every patriot with a country, "You must love the thing first and make it lovable afterward." These tales are far truer than the rhinoceros at the zoo, for you know what these mean. And you can guess what the rhinoceros means!—G. K. Chesterton.

What's the Use?

"Do you ever get discouraged?" asked the intimate friend.

"No," answered Mr. Comstock, "I don't. I know that if it comes to the worst I can let my hair grow long, show a band of religious enthusiasts the only true path to heaven, and live without work in the finest house in the colony."—Detroit News.

Preparing for the Wedding.

"I suppose," said the facetious stranger, watching a workman spread a carpet from the church to the curb, "that's the high road to heaven you're fixing there?"

"No," replied the man, "this is merely a bridal path."—Philadelphia Press.

Alaska's canned salmon output is estimated this year at $10,000,000.

Could Not Trust Him.

After a wordy argument in which neither scored two Irishmen decided to fight it out. It was agreed, says the Washington Post, that when either said "I've enough" the fight should cease.

After they had been at it about ten minutes one of them fell, and immediately yelled, "Enough, I've enough!"

But his opponent kept on pounding him until a man who was watching them said:

"Why don't you let him up? He says he's got enough."

"I know he says so," said the victor, between punches, "but he's such a liar you can't believe a word he says!"

Was Too Honest.

Honesty is one of the leading principles taught in the public schools, and the teachers begin early to impress the value of this trait in character on the minds of the youngest pupils. A South Chicago teacher had a pupil who gave her much sorrow by his unfortunate habit of fibbing on every possible occasion. One day she kept him after school and gave him a serious "talking to." "Just look at the life of George Washington," she said, "he couldn't tell a lie." "Huh," remarked the unregenerate youth, "what was the matter with him?"

Danger in Being Reformer.

"A reformer has many difficulties to face."

"Yes," answered Senator Sorghum. "As soon as the public discovers a reformer it makes so much of him that his personal vanity is in danger of being developed until it destroys his usefulness."—Kansas City Star.