

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

It seems best in commencing a record of the life of Anthony Beresford, to state at once, without reserve, that his character, as it is portrayed in the following pages is not that of a fictitious hero but of a real individual, who has breathed, like us, the air of this lower world, and played his difficult part, as we all must do, amid its stern realities.

We have felt this explanation to be necessary because we are quite aware that without it a faithful portrait of this man could hardly fail to draw forth the criticism that it represented an impossible human being, and thus the deep interest which attaches, as we conceive, to his noble history, would rest upon no sure foundation. While, however, we distinctly state that the portrait of the man we have named Anthony Beresford is drawn from life, with the utmost possible accuracy, we yet freely admit that for obvious reasons we have altered the actual details of his eventful career, and that trial and temptation did not meet him precisely in the fashion here described, although the real vicissitudes of his existence did in fact reveal in him the very same remarkable qualities which we have endeavoured to depict as being made manifest in his character by the circumstances in which we have placed him.

Anthony Beresford is standing, when we see him first, midway up the rugged shoulder of a picturesque mountain in North Wales. He has paused at a point where the scarce perceptible path he is treading has turned sharply round a rock, and suddenly revealed to him a landscape of striking beauty, spread out far below his feet, and stretched away for many miles into the dim blue distance.

Green woods and smiling pasture lands, with the ruins of a grand old castle in the foreground, filled up the space between the mountain's base and the undulating line of coast beyond which lay the sea, waveless and serene as an inland lake, with the purple shadows of its heath-clad islands lying motionless beneath its surface. The whole fair scene was lit up by the soft sunshine of one of those exquisitely lovely days which come to us sometimes in the later autumn, and seem to be emphatically the last smile of the dying summer. The sky was cloudless, but of a hue rather tender than brilliant, and the subdued light that lay on land and sea was like a shimmering golden veil, that toned down the bright colouring it yet served to reveal.

The air was singularly sweet and pure, and it came to Anthony Beresford laden with the scent of the wild thyme and heather that clothed the mountain slopes around him.

The moment was to him one of keen enjoyment—such a moment, in fact, in its ecstatic hope and unalloyed happiness as he was never again to know while his feet still trod the paths of earth. Many happy days were yet in store for him—times of tranquil pleasure and of special sweetness which it is sometimes given to human hearts to experience amid all the storms of life; but that hour, bright with the promise of his highest hopes fulfilled, and with the one glorious dream of his youth, the very desire of his soul, shining before him as an assured possession—an hour like that would never be his again in the deep rapture of its glowing anticipations.

He stood leaning upon a stout knotted stick he had cut for himself years before in his old home, and which had travelled with him since to many a distant region, and holding in his other hand the broad-brimmed hat he had taken off that nothing might impede his view. He gazed out with an ardent eager look towards the distant sea, ignoring all the nearer beauties of the landscape, that his eyes might rivet themselves upon the bright blue waters only—most eloquent eyes they were, with their soft hazel hue relieved by the strongly-marked black eyebrows that overshadowed them, but they constituted the chief charm of his face, for his other features were by no means faultless; he was extremely dark, the heavy masses of his black hair hanging obstinately down over his broad low forehead, and the lower part of his countenance being cast in a somewhat massive mould that was no way hidden by beard or moustache, for Anthony was conservative in many of his ideas, and adhered in this respect to the fashion of his fathers, who had considered it ungentlemanlike to appear otherwise than clean shaven every day of their lives. That which was, however, the main characteristic of the young man's outward appearance was the combination of manly firmness and power, with a sweetness of expression, which irresistibly attracted all who learnt to know him well.

He had the pleasantest smile that could well be imagined, most frank, winning manners, and a peculiarly charming voice, which, soft and kindly as it was in his ordinary intercourse with others, had yet a ring of strong determination in its tone, which told that he could be sternly severe if any wrong or cowardly deed drew forth his displeasure. Only a few minutes before we first saw him that kindly voice had sounded like awful thunder to a mischievous little shepherd-boy, whom Anthony found ill-using a sickly lamb that had lingered behind the flock, which were being led by the boy's father up the mountain-side. Straightway the delinquent had found himself seized by the collar, summarily chastised by a few well-applied strokes from the oaken stick, and then deposited on his back in the heather, while the lamb, carefully gathered up into the young man's arms, was carried on by his swift, strong steps till he overtook the elder shepherd, and gave it up to his care, with a liberal gratuity, to ensure its being properly tended. The incident was one which exactly illustrated some of Anthony's strongest characteristics—the gentleness and tenderness which was his habitual temper of mind in all his dealings with others, and the fearless, unflinching severity with which his natural sweetness was instantly replaced if any circumstance outraged his sense of right. There was no trace of anger now, however, in his clear brown eyes, as he stood there, firm as a rock, gazing out over the far blue waters, his dark face glowing with

some strong internal enthusiasm that was making his full lips quiver, and his heart beat high.

He was at this time in the full strength and vigor of his manhood—twenty-five years of age—with a stalwart, well-built frame, of which the actual height was somewhat diminished by a slight stoop which he had acquired during an illness as a boy. His health was now robust, and he was active and athletic, capable of much endurance in the way of physical fatigue, but of so sensitive a temperament that he was easily prostrated by the least touch of mental trial; of sorrow or care, however, he had seen as little as most men, and there was nothing but gladness and bright expectancy in the eyes which looked so eagerly towards the sea, because over the ocean to which these waters led he hoped very soon to pass, in order that he might reach the scene of his pure ambition—the land where centred all the generous hopes that built up the fairy fabric of his life's one dream. What that dream was in truth, we must explain at a later period, for Anthony Beresford was not long permitted to stand there revelling in the grand vision he had conjured up, as his thoughts flew over the fresh blue waves of the English sea to the burning sands of the African coast. Suddenly, as he stood there motionless, he heard far away over the mountain slopes the sound of a voice shouting out at intervals a name that seemed to be his own.

He listened for a moment with breathless attention, and heard the call repeated evidently from a point where the sheep-track by which he had ascended merged into a road that led to the nearest village. As the wind bore the cry again to his ears, he distinguished not only the syllables of his name but the voice also of his servant, whom he had left at the little Welsh inn where he had lodged the night before. He responded at once with a long musical hunting-call which he had learnt in the Tyrolean Alps, and then began to descend with rapid strides toward the point whence the summons came.

He marvelled as he went what his groom could possibly want with him; and his thoughts went no further in the line of possible chances than the fear that an accident might have happened to one of his horses, which he had left that morning in perfect security to have a day's thorough rest in the stable of the inn.

Anthony had come from his Yorkshire home to Wales a few days previously, simply in order to make a pleasure tour on horseback amid the mountain scenery. He had brought his own horses, with an old groom to attend them, and travelled in primitive fashion, with only a small valise strapped in front of his saddle, so that he was quite independent of railways, and even of coaches, as he preferred to be.

The rapid pace at which he made his way down the mountain-side soon brought him in sight of the point at which he was aiming, and his first glance showed him that at least nothing was wrong with the horses, as they both stood there, the groom mounted upon his own, and holding Anthony's, ready saddled, by the bridle, as if he clearly expected his master to require speed in his movements so soon as he should join him. Anthony hurried on, convinced now that something important must have occurred, and called out with all the power of his strong clear voice to know what was the matter, long before he reached the man.

His servant held up a paper which he saw at once from the color to be a telegram, and as at last he came within speaking distance the groom exclaimed, "This has just been brought from the nearest town, sir; and there was one for me, too, desiring me, if you were absent on any excursion, to make all haste to get it conveyed to you immediately."

"Is it from home, then, Fulton?" said Anthony, hurrying on to take the missive from his hand.

"Yes, sir; and it brings bad news, I fear," added the man, shaking his head. He was an old family servant, who had taught Anthony to ride as a boy, and who knew all the secrets of his master's home, as faithful old servants generally do.

Meanwhile the telegram was already opened, and the young man held it up, so that Fulton could read it as well as himself. It had been sent by Reginald Erlesleigh, Darksmere Castle, Yorkshire, to Anthony Beresford, at the nearest telegraph station to the inn where he was staying, and ran as follows:—"Our mother has been taken suddenly ill, and is in a most precarious state; come immediately or you may not find her alive."

The paper dropped from Anthony's hand. "My mother ill! dying! it seems impossible!" he said. The vision passed before him of her appearance as he had seen her last, scarce a fortnight before: a tall, stately woman, beautiful still in the autumn of her life, standing at the door of her bedroom to take leave of him before she went to rest for the night, as he was to start very early next day. She had been at a dinner party, and wore a long sweeping dress of purple velvet, on which the diamonds sparkled, which were the only ornaments she condescended to wear; and he remembered well how handsome she looked, with her fair complexion, and clear-cut, aristocratic features; and how he had inwardly chafed at the cold indifference of her manner as she bade him farewell, thoroughly accustomed as he was to her want of affection for himself. He had known perfectly well from the days of his childhood that all the love she had to bestow was given to his half-brother, and that he was nothing more to her than a son whom she was too proud to neglect or to shun, but to whom her heart had never opened, because he was also the son of a husband she had been unable to love. And yet Anthony's tender nature so craved for affection that each recurring evidence of her coldness came to him with a new shock of pain. The picture of her aspect, as he saw her that last time, was complete in his memory, and it seemed to him impossible that she, so calm, so dignified, so entirely self-satisfied, should now be lying in the grasp of death. But these thoughts passed only like a lightning-flash through his mind. He did not dwell on them, but, leaping on his horse, went off, full gallop, to the nearest station.

CHAPTER II.

It was late in the evening before Anthony Beresford could find himself fairly started on his long railway journey to the somewhat desolate part of Yorkshire in which Darksmere

Castle was situated, and the early autumn night soon closed in around him, leaving him through all the hours of darkness to the sleeplessness consequent on his anxiety of mind. His thoughts, reverted first to the bright mountain solitude, where, a few hours previously, he had stood amid the sunlight, with the fresh sweet air of the hills blowing freely round him; and the contrast of that scene with the sights and sounds which accompanied the rushing of the train through the night was so great, that it seemed to him as though the fair scene of that last noontide had receded into a past already very far away. This feeling was enhanced, perhaps, by a dim presentiment surging vaguely in his mind that the present was a crisis in his life which would set for ever behind him the joyous time of youth, and separate him finally from the glad unfettered life which had been his only experience of this mortal existence hitherto. The one earthly pain which he had known as yet had been rather negative than positive, inasmuch as it consisted merely in that denial of his mother's love, which had brought to him a sense of loss and loneliness through all his days of youth and early manhood, and now, as he sped onwards through the gloom, there seemed to rise before his fancy weird indistinguishable shapes of unknown evils looming on the path he was henceforth to traverse; but so little could he give them form or consistency in his knowledge of existing facts, that he cast his thoughts back anxiously to the past in order to ascertain if there existed in previous events any ominous seeds of trouble which might bear fruit in pain and grief hereafter.

Anthony had never known his father, but he knew that, although the county magistrate, Mr. Beresford, whose son he was, had been his mother's first husband, he had not been either her first love or her last, for a relation of hers, with whom Anthony had travelled much, had given him an account of her early history. In the days when she was the beautiful Marian Saxby, only daughter of a distinguished peer, and the courted favorite of the most fastidious circles in London, she had become deeply attached to a young man whose name was Erlesleigh, and who was no less passionately in love with herself. Her father objected to their marriage, because, although Erlesleigh belonged to a very ancient and wealthy Yorkshire family, he was only a younger son, and at that time an officer in the Guards, who had to make his own way in the world. Marian was taken away from his vicinity, and drawn into a round of country gaieties, in order to divert her mind from her untoward attachment; and then a rumour, false as it happened, was brought to her ears, that her lover had speedily consoled himself, and was about to be married to a lady who had been somewhat her rival in the London season. In the bitterness of her wounded love and pride Marian Saxby forgot how great an iniquity it truly is to marry without affection, and accepted the proposals of Mr. Beresford, a man double her age, whose reserved, unbending character was in no way calculated to make her happy. She was miserable for the two dull uneventful years during which the ill-assorted union lasted, then Mr. Beresford died, leaving her with the one child whose birth had failed to brighten a life made wretched by her husband's stern rule—and never afterwards was she able to forget that Anthony was the son of the man whose very memory was odious to her. A year or two later she again met Frank Erlesleigh, and found not only that he had always been true to her, and had never sought any other love than hers, but that also the death of his elder brother had placed him in possession of the splendid estates and great wealth which belonged to his family. The beautiful young widow was very little changed from the Marian Saxby he remembered, and they were speedily married, and established at Darksmere Castle, the Erlesleighs' ancient home where they entered on a period of happiness such as it is not often given to any to know in this changeable life. Of course, however, perfect bliss on earth is never enduring, and it did not last long for Erlesleigh and his wife. Frank was passionately fond of hunting, as most Yorkshire Squires are to this hour, and when his first-born child Reginald was but a few years old, he was brought home lifeless one day from the field to which he had ridden forth in all the pride of his manly strength and beauty only two or three hours before.

But for the existence of that infant son Mrs. Erlesleigh would scarce have rallied after the shock which flung her from the utmost height of human happiness to the depths of desolation and despair, but Reginald Erlesleigh was not only the child in whom the highest hopes of her adored husband had been centred, and whose birth had filled him with delight, he was also now the only living representative of the Erlesleigh family, the heir to their wealth, and the sole possessor of the grand old castle which had been the home of their ancestors for many generations. It seemed to her that even to follow Frank into that world whither he had been so suddenly taken, she could not leave his son a helpless orphan to the care of hired instructors, or to the guardianship of those whose interest it might be to lead him into evil ways, for there were dark passages in her husband's vanished life which might yet cast a sinister shadow over that of his son, and there had been traits in his character, brilliant and fascinating as he was, which, if reproduced in his only child, would be fraught with elements of terrible danger.

The widow—now for the first time a widow indeed—gathered up her strength despite that new-made tomb in the Erlesleigh vault, and lived, but she lived for her son Reginald, and for him alone; to him all her love, all her care, all her thoughts, were given, and Anthony's existence was nothing to her but an unwelcome fact involving a distasteful duty.

She did not neglect him, for she was a woman of principle, who conscientiously desired to live in accordance with the religion she professed, although she had never known anything of that personal love to God which alone can make it a reality in the soul. She gave Anthony a splendid education from his earliest years, sending him for the whole period of his boyhood to Eton, and then to Oxford, where he passed through the usual University course with great distinction.

It was during his college career that Anthony experienced the effect of the strongest influence which had yet been brought to bear upon his inner life. His tutor throughout the whole time that he kept his terms, as the phrase is, had