

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER XVI.

Anthony Beresford felt like a man in a dream, as he sat on the hill-side beside this lovely vision of beauty, who seemed, from the remarks she had made, to have dropped out of the skies into a world of which she knew nothing. It was plain that her strange speeches and free unconventional manners were due to some most unusual state of ignorance, and not to any boldness or want of modesty, for she was perfectly maidenly in every look and gesture; and as she sat quietly on the rock beside him in an attitude of unconscious grace, he thought he never had seen so charming a picture in all his life. He was silent, for he did not in the least know what to say in such circumstances; and at last the girl, who seemed to have been deep in reflection, turned her large candid eyes on his face.

"I suppose you have a name," she said; "everybody has a name in the books I read. What is it?"

"My name is Anthony Beresford."

"An-tho-n-y Ber-es-ford," she repeated, with a slow intonation, in which he detected a slight foreign accent. "There is no name like that in the Iliad or the Odyssey, or in the Fairie Queen."

"Why no," said Anthony, "I have not exactly arrived at being immortalized in the classics yet—however ancient I may seem to you—but if I have a name, no doubt you have one too; may I presume to ask leave to hear it?"

"You speak so strangely, I do not quite understand you," she answered; "but as to my name, of course you must know what to call me—I am Innocentia!"

Innocentia! As she said the word, looking at him with her large clear eyes, so like the vault of heaven in their crystalline purity, it almost seemed to him, in his bewilderment, as if she were indeed the very spirit of innocence, embodied in a mortal shape, white-robed, and golden haired, just as he could have fancied such a vision would be.

"Yes," she repeated, as he did not speak, "I am Innocentia; now you know how to name me!"

"But you have another name, of course," he said; "I could not venture to call you by that one."

"Why?—because it is so long? Then you can call me Nina, as father often does when he is hurried."

Anthony was about to ask once more if she had not a surname, when suddenly from within the enclosure there sounded a low musical call, such as in some countries the shepherds use when a lamb has strayed from the fold, and instantly the young girl bounded to her feet, answering back with a soft sweet response, and without a word or a look to Anthony she darted down the rock towards a part of the wall where the ivy hung thickly over it, and disappeared as if by magic behind it. When Anthony recovered from his surprise he followed her quickly in the hope of being able to detect the entrance by which she had passed; but in this he failed completely. Thick branches of ivy and other creepers were interlaced over nearly the whole of the wall, and he could perceive no opening amongst them anywhere. He went back to his rock, and sat down again, half vexed and half amused by the absurdity of his position; but in the midst of all his perplexities he had the certainty that this was Mr. Vivian's house, and that the lovely apparition must be in some way connected with him, so that he could not doubt she would in due time reveal the fact of his vicinity to some of the inhabitants of this strange Refugium, and that in consequence some notice would be taken of him. In this hope he was not disappointed. Very soon he saw the ivy move again near the spot where the young girl had disappeared, and a man came forth from behind it, and advanced towards Anthony. He was evidently a foreigner, so dark as to be almost copper-colored, wearing a red cap, with a long tassel, which mingled with the curls of his jet-black hair, and an embroidered jacket and tunic, while a long dagger was thrust into the crimson sash which bound his waist. He had laid his hand on the hilt of it, and his aspect was altogether very threatening, for his black eyes were full of indignant fire. He came close to Anthony, and said some words in a foreign language, which seemed to be a sort of irregular Spanish, and fortunately were not quite unintelligible to the young man, who had travelled in Spain. He understood it to be a demand, in the name of the foreigner's master, that he would explain his object in coming so near to the house, with an evident intention, on the part of the man at least, to avenge his intrusion if he could not give a sufficient reason for it. Anthony took a card bearing his name from his pocket-book, and wrote upon it in pencil, "Brother to Reginald Erlesleigh, whose mother has just departed from this life, and in whose name Anthony Beresford seeks an interview with her friend Mr. Vivian." This he placed in the hands of the foreign servant without speaking, and he saw him carry it back whence he had come. There was an interval of a few minutes, and then the man reappeared, and beckoned to Anthony to follow him. The entrance to the enclosure proved to be a door hid under the creepers, which was painted exactly the same color as the wall, and possessed no lock or handle, so that it was very difficult of detection. It turned on a pivot when a spring was touched, and closed again noiselessly when the two men had entered.

Anthony looked around quickly, with no small curiosity so soon as he found himself fairly inside this mysterious place, and then he stopped short, literally struck with amazement at the paradise of luxuriance and natural beauty which presented itself before him.

The spot had apparently been originally one of those thickly-wooded glades which are sometimes found near the base of our English mountains, and every art which the most perfect taste could devise had been used, with the aid of assiduous cultivation, to render it like an enchanted garden in its manifold charms. Tall trees, not yet stripped of their autumn colors, cast their shadows on the softest turf, where marble fountains cast their sparkling waters in the air, and lovely flowers bloomed, not set in formal beds, but

springing up here and there, as if at their own sweet will. The ground was of great extent, and Anthony saw that many a leafy arch led into winding walks, with glimpses of lovely spots that were strangely alluring to the eye, while in the foreground a graceful little building rose up among the trees, looking more like a white Grecian temple than a habitation of ordinary mortals.

That which, however, struck Anthony especially in this scene of beauty, was the perfect freedom and fearlessness with which birds and animals of all kinds roamed about in it, in supreme enjoyment; he could almost have fancied himself in the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, but that no dangerous or noxious creatures were among the denizens of this happy home, and that besides the foreign deer and the Angola goats, which lay under the trees, ordinary little rabbits and hares ran about unmolested, and squirrels darted up and down the branches, while birds of plumage unknown to this country seemed to live in harmony with all the well-known species which haunt our woods.

Anthony was absorbed in the contemplation of this singular garden that he did not for some time discover that his guide had left him, and that he was standing alone on the grass at some little distance from the house. He looked up, wondering if he might approach it, when he saw a man advancing towards him, whom he guessed at once to be Mr. Vivian; he was a slender, refined-looking person, with a mild, somewhat sad countenance, and silvery-grey hair, which fell to some length over his shoulders, from under the purple cap he wore on his head; he was clad in a long silk dressing gown of the same color, and on one shoulder was perched a beautiful lori, while a little gazelle followed close at his heels, side by side with an Italian greyhound.

He drew near, and held out his hand, saying, "Mr. Beresford, you are the first person I have admitted within these walls for seventeen years, and I have made this exception in your favor because of the love I bear to the memory of Francis Erlesleigh—my enemy once indeed, but always my dearest friend."

"I thank you most heartily for receiving me," said Anthony, "and I must beg you to believe that I would not have ventured to intrude upon you, were it not that my mother on her death-bed bound me to leave no means untried to secure the welfare of Francis Erlesleigh's only son. I found that I could not fulfil my promise without seeing you, Mr. Vivian, and therefore I am here."

"Yes, I know that it is on behalf of Reginald Erlesleigh you have come, or you would not have been admitted. But we will leave all details till you have had rest and refreshment. You must have walked far this morning." And with a courteous gesture he signed to him to move towards the house.

Anthony obeyed, secretly hoping that he should find himself once more in the presence of the strange and lovely girl whom he had seen outside, but in this he was disappointed.

Mr. Vivian led him up a flight of marble steps into a pretty room, where a table was spread for his repast, but it was untenanted, save by some birds in golden cages.

CHAPTER XVII.

Mr. Vivian waited on his guest himself during the meal, but he scarcely spoke at all, not certainly from any discourtesy, as his manner was perfectly kind and gentle, but apparently because the habit of silence was so strong upon him that he could not at once overcome it. "You will of course sleep here to-night," he said, when Anthony had concluded his repast; "therefore I advise you to take an hour's rest before you enter on the subject of your mission to this place. A room has been prepared for you, if you will follow me to it." He rose, and led the way without waiting for an answer, and Anthony was obliged to follow, though he felt far too much excited to think of rest. They went up another flight of steps, and along a passage with doors on either side. One of these suddenly opened, and Anthony's heart beat quickly, thinking he might see the lovely vision for which he was longing about to pass through it; but nothing more unlike the fairy of the mountain could have appeared than the old woman, bowed and wrinkled, with a handkerchief of many colors tied round her head, and wearing the costume of a French peasant, who came suddenly forward, and stood in front of Mr. Vivian, making signs with extreme rapidity on her fingers. He answered in the same manner, and pointed towards the door, whereupon the old woman nodded her head, and disappeared as quickly as she had come. Mr. Vivian caught Anthony's look of surprise, and said, quietly, "My old servant is deaf and dumb;" and Anthony saw at once that he had thus an explanation of the cabalistic signs which his guide from the village had assured him were used by the inmates of Refugium.

The little room to which Mr. Vivian conducted him was charming in the simplicity and refinement of its appointments, and his host showed him a silver bell which stood on a table near the sofa, and begged him to ring it when he was ready to join him again.

"May I ask you not to attempt to find your way to me alone," he said, in his gentle voice. "If you ring a servant will at once answer your summons." Of course Anthony assured him he would do so, and then he was left alone, and, if the truth must be told, he very soon fell fast asleep in an easy-chair.

Twilight had already set in when he awoke, for it had been late in the afternoon when his meal was concluded, so that his slumber had not really been of very long duration, but he felt somewhat ashamed of it, and speedily rang the silver bell as he had been told to do. Instantly the man he had first seen outside the wall appeared at his door, but no longer with the irate aspect he had worn at first; on the contrary he showed all his white teeth in a gracious smile, and asked if the gentleman wished to join the *Senhor Vivian*. Anthony could speak a little Spanish, and answered that he did, whereupon the man led him down-stairs to a room different from the one where he had dined, and which was fitted up as a library. Mr. Vivian was sitting there beside a reading-lamp which cast a shaded light on the book he held in his hand, and he looked up with a kindly smile as his guest approached.

"It is a strange sensation for me to see the face of any other man than Juan, my Mexican servant, who showed you in," he said; "but I find it a very pleasant experience if a new one. And now, Mr. Beresford," he continued, as Anthony took the chair to which he pointed, "I wish you to understand that by admitting you into this house I have proved my desire to treat you as a friend far more emphatically than you can imagine, so I hope that you will respond to my trust in you by giving me in return your full confidence—at least, concerning the matter which brings you here."

"I can desire nothing better," said Anthony, "for my purpose in seeking you is to ask your help and advice in the guardianship of my brother, and this you cannot give me unless you know every detail of his position."

"Tell me all, then," said Vivian, "and do not hesitate to speak at length; we have the evening before us, and we shall not be disturbed."

Then Anthony began, and described his return home to find his mother on her death-bed, and the momentous interview he had held with her when she had shown him the document which explained the fears she entertained for the future welfare of Frank Erlesleigh's son. Anthony had brought this paper with him, and he read it aloud to Mr. Vivian as the easiest way of explaining to him the complicated difficulties which surrounded him in the trust he had undertaken. He ended by detailing, with some emotion, all the particulars of the solemn abjuration by which Mrs. Erlesleigh had bound him to give himself up henceforward to the care and protection of his young brother. He suppressed nothing but the fact of the cruel sacrifice it had involved, for it was not necessary on Rex's account that Vivian should learn a matter so entirely personal to himself, and it was one of Anthony's special characteristics to be absolutely free from vanity or self-consciousness.

"You see, then, Mr. Vivian," he continued, "that while I had the fullest knowledge of the perils likely to menace my brother's happiness, I had no means whatever of detecting their approach; you said distinctly that his enemy would make his attempt upon his peace under the disguise of a false name, and the only hope I had of obtaining any information whereby I might recognize him, was in the permission you gave Mrs. Erlesleigh to apply to you for help if at any time she should require it."

"Yes," said Vivian, "and I have always had a strange superstitious conviction that the day would come when my assistance would be not only required, but given, although there were a hundred chances against it at the time—I might not have been alive, or I might have ceased all communication with my London agent, or many other contingencies might have arisen—yet the motive which prompted me to offer my help made me feel certain it would be demanded of me."

"Can you, then, tell me anything of Richard Dacre now," said Anthony, eagerly, "especially the name by which he is known? I am the more anxious because a faint suspicion—which I feel sure must have been groundless—took possession of me respecting a gentleman who appeared at my mother's funeral as one who had been an old friend of Mr. Erlesleigh's, and whose name I had never heard before."

"What was it?" asked Vivian, quickly.

"Gascoigne," answered Anthony. "I had no better reason for doubting him than that I caught him looking at my brother in a peculiarly earnest manner while the burial service was proceeding; but it may have been quite accidental, for I had some conversation with him afterwards, when he impressed me very favorably."

"Gascoigne!" said Vivian, thoughtfully. "No; I am not acquainted with the name; yet that does not render it certain that you have no reason to fear him; for I do not know under what designation your brother's enemy may be passing now."

"Are you, then, unable to help me?" said Anthony, with great disappointment in his tone.

"At this moment I am, but I think that in an interval of a few weeks I may be able to give you all the information you require. Anticipating that your mother might one day turn to me for help against Dacre's machinations, I have purposely kept up a certain measure of acquaintance with a man who was intimate with him in Mexico, as well as with myself, and I feel sure he could tell you all it imports you to know. I will write to him at once, asking for an answer by the return mail, which, of course, I will immediately communicate to you. I hope that the delay will not be long enough to cause any risk to your brother, even if Gascoigne should prove to be the man. You have not left him anywhere in his vicinity, I hope."

"Oh, no, Rex is in very safe hands with some old friends of the family, and Mr. Gascoigne has quite left the neighborhood of Darkmere for the present at least. I shall be very thankful, however, when your letter is on its way; had I not better take it with me to-morrow, and despatch it from the nearest town? You have no means, I believe, of sending a letter to the post?"

"Matters are not quite so bad as that," said Vivian, smiling. "I suppose my agent told you so, because I do not wish my solitude to be disturbed by correspondence, but I send letters whenever I like; Juan rides with them to the nearest post-office. When you have had time to explore Refugium thoroughly you will find that it contains a stable of very good horses. I hope that you will give yourself an opportunity of doing so by remaining with me for a few days."

"I shall be delighted to stay, if it is not too great an intrusion," said Anthony, enchanted to find that he would have an almost certain prospect of seeing again the mysterious lady, for she was undoubtedly somewhere within the enclosure, and it seemed hardly possible that she could remain concealed for any length of time.

"You do not intrude," said Vivian. "You relieve very pleasantly the monotony of a long solitude, and it is a pleasure to me, too," he added, with a sigh, "to find that I can again be of use to any one, as I trust I shall be to you in assisting you to guard against Dacre."

"If you have kept up a correspondence with a friend of his," said Anthony, "perhaps you have learned some details of his proceedings during the last few years."