

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER XII.

Anthony Beresford fell back on the cushions of the sofa where he lay, and closed his eyes, muttering to himself, "Why did I not die? why did not they let me die when I lay beneath my horse in the desolate ravine?" He had then been at the summit of his hopes, happier than he had ever been in his life before, and it had been as truly the last moment of joy for him as if he had died indeed in his terrible fall. Then had he never known the cruel bitterness of the hour that had come upon him now, or battled with the agony that tore at his heart as he thought how, while he lay unconscious in his darkened room, Rex and Innocentia had been combining to steal away from him all that was most precious to him on earth, all that made the sum of his life's happiness.

Yet Anthony was too true and generous to blame either of them, stricken to the soul as he was. He recognised the truth that they were both altogether guileless in the matter. Rex had scarcely known of the existence of Vivian's daughter before he came to Refugium, where he had been only a very few days when Anthony's accident shut him away into silence and oblivion, nor had he ever heard one word of his brother's hopes and wishes with regard to Innocentia. It was natural that he should love her, most natural that he should seek to win her; and as to the young innocent girl who had been brought up in such singular ignorance of all ordinary conditions of life, it was plain that she had never understood that Anthony thought of her otherwise than as a friend, or that he had any affection for her which could make him wish to be more to her than he was already. Her heart had slept in its childish guilelessness and peace till Rex awoke within it the full power of a woman's love, and she had given herself to him then with the unreserved surrender of a pure and ardent nature, and without dreaming for a moment that there was any other upon earth who even thought he had a claim to her. Anthony owned to himself that, bitter as it was to feel that his helplessness in illness had given them so favourable an opportunity of learning to know and love each other, yet there had been no treachery in their taking advantage of it, he could even feel that it had been best so, for no doubt the same deep affection would have sprung up between them had he still been present with them, and he should but have suffered the slow agony of watching the growth of a love which he would have been too noble and righteous to interfere, although he must have known but too well that it was fatally undermining all his best and dearest hopes. There was one, however, who had fully known what Innocentia was to him, and who must have been aware how utterly his happiness was being wrecked while he lay senseless in the grasp of the cruel fever.

"Innocentia," said Anthony in his faint, sad voice, "your father knows, I suppose, that you are engaged to marry Rex?"

"Oh yes; of course I do nothing without his knowledge. When Rex first told him that we could never more be happy apart from each other, he came to me, and seemed grieved, so that I was very sorry. He asked me if I did not love you best, and said he had meant me to belong to you alone; but he understood it all when I told him that could never have been possible, for I had merely felt a simple friendship for you, and Rex was the only one in all the world for me, to whom the love of my whole heart and soul was given. I told father I could not live if he took my darling from me, and reminded him that he had always promised me I should have happiness if he could secure it for me. I told him it was no longer a question of happiness only, but of very life; and when I said that he sighed, and answered, 'Be it as you will, then, Nina; be happy in your own way; you are my only one, and you must come first with me.' Since then he has been quite pleased in the prospect of our marriage, and smiles when he sees us looking so happy together."

"And he is right," said Anthony, mournfully; "I will say to you, as he did—be happy in your own way; you come first with me, as well as with your father, and your happiness must ever be that which I desire the most on earth. Since Rex alone can give it to you, I resign you to him freely, and I pray that you may both be blessed with every joy!" His face became the colour of ashes as he spoke, and with difficulty he gasped out, "Ring for the nurse!" and gently waved Innocentia back, when she would have applied some restorative. She shrunk aside, pained by the movement, and stood looking at him timidly, with tears in her great blue eyes, as the nurse, hurrying in, began to bathe his hands and face, exclaiming at the same time at his imprudence in having ventured to leave his room. "It is enough to kill you," she said.

"Small matter if it did," he answered with a wan smile. "Take me back, nurse, and put me to bed like a tired child; oh, how tired I am of living!"

"You are just so worn-out that you hardly know what you are saying, sir," said the good woman, bluntly; "but you shall go to bed, sure enough, it is the only place fit for you; and raising him with her strong arm from the couch, she made him lean upon her heavily, and so half led, half carried him from the room. As he passed Innocentia, who did not dare to interfere, or even speak, he saw the wistful beseeching gaze of her soft eyes, and he held out his hand to her, saying, "All is well, Nina; you have only to be happy, and in perfect peace."

Then she caught his hand impulsively, saying, "Have I done or said anything wrong, Anthony? I do not understand. I am very sorry if I have grieved you, but I do not know how it has been."

"You have done quite right, darling; there is nothing to regret; only be happy, and I shall be very thankful to have you for my sister."

It was the last effort he could make; his head sank on

the nurse's shoulder, and by the time she got him down upon the bed he had fainted quite away. The kind woman was much disturbed, for she had grown greatly attached to Anthony during the many weeks that she had tended him. She succeeded, with some difficulty, in restoring him to consciousness, and then kept guard over him most assiduously for the remainder of the day. She refused to allow either Mr. Vivian or Rex to see him when they returned home, telling them that Mr. Beresford had been extremely imprudent, and had over-exerted himself, so that he must now be kept perfectly quiet.

When Vivian heard from Innocentia the history of her conversation with him, although she told it in most guileless ignorance of its import to Anthony, her father understood at once how it had all been, and deeply as he felt for the young man who was only less dear to him than his own child, he felt thankful to have been spared the pain of making the revelation himself, to which he had looked forward with exceeding grief and dread for many weeks past. He fully concurred with the nurse in thinking that perfect solitude in a darkened room was best for Anthony that day, and made no attempt to go near him.

So, while Rex and Innocentia spent the hours together in a delight that was more than usually rapturous because they had been separated for a little time in the morning, Anthony lay, with his crushed heart and broken spirit, on his bed, with all the blinds drawn down as though one newly dead were lying in that room, and with his face pressed against the pillow to shut out the very sights and sounds of the life that had become for him so dark and sad.

Yet who shall say that he was not after all the happiest, as happiness is measured in the True Home to which all three alike would one day come. Rex and Innocentia had indeed the sunshine of earth's brightest joy around them, and hope for the future that lay on this side of the grave was shedding golden gleams on all the years that might yet be for them below. But Anthony, in his noble self-surrender, his pure and generous offering of all that was most precious to him for the happiness of others, was drawing closer and closer the sacred links that bound him to the one divine Example of perfect sacrifice, in whose adorable Presence he should enjoy, when this brief life was over, throughout the eternal years, that blessedness which passes all men's understanding.

That night, when the nurse was about to leave Anthony, with many anxious expressions of her hope that he would sleep till morning, he gave her a little note, addressed to his brother, which he had written in pencil, and asked her to take it to Mr. Edlesleigh before she went to bed. The nurse obeyed, and found Rex in his room, having just left Innocentia after a most especially happy evening, for she had whispered to Rex that Anthony now knew she was to be his sister, and that he was so pleased!

Rex had felt a vague uneasiness, he hardly knew why, at thought of making the announcement of his engagement to his brother, and so it was a relief to him, as well as to Vivian, to find that Innocentia, in her guileless candour, had told him all without reserve or fear.

Anthony's note to his brother contained only these words: DEAR REX,—Come to my room this evening after they are all gone to bed. I must speak to you.—Yours ever,

ANTHONY.

The young man was glad of the opportunity of talking with his brother, as they had not been alone together since the commencement of his illness; and so soon as all was quiet in the house, he went noiselessly along the passage to Anthony's room.

It was dimly lighted by a shaded night-lamp, which the nurse had placed on a table behind Anthony's bed, that it might not shine on his eyes, and he therefore lay in the shadow, while Rex, when he came and stood by the bedside, was in the full glow of all the radiance it gave out.

The brothers were a strange contrast as they thus met for the first time alone. Anthony, propped up against his pillows, was deadly pale, while his large eyes seemed to have grown darker from the mournful expression with which they looked out from under their white lids; while Rex, with his fair hair tossed back, and his beautiful face bright with happiness, seemed a perfect picture of joyous youth and strength.

CHAPTER XII.

The brothers remained for a moment in silence, looking on each other, unconscious how apt a symbol of their destiny the scene presented; for Anthony had indeed been truly consigned to life's deepest shadows, while Rex—for the present at least—stood in its fairest glow of light.

Anthony held out his hand, with a faint smile, to his brother, saying, "You look very bright and joyous, Rex, but no doubt you have good cause to be so."

"Yes, indeed I have; but, dear old fellow, it seems heartless in me to be feeling so rapturously happy when you are still so ill and mournful-looking," said the young man, struck with a sudden compunction. "Are you worse to-night, Anthony?" he continued, anxiously.

"No, only very weary," he answered, with a piteous quiver of his pale lips.

"Will it be too much for you to have me with you to-night?" said Rex. "Shall I come another time?"

"By no means," said Anthony, rousing himself; "I must speak to you at once. Sit down, dear Rex."

The young man obeyed, and drew a chair close to the bed.

Then his brother raised himself, and looked him full in the face. "Rex," he said, "is it true that you love Innocentia Vivian?"

"It is indeed. I love her with all the powers of my being," said Rex, fervently; "and, to my infinite happiness, she returns my affection."

"Yes, I know she does," said Anthony; "of her tender devotion there can be no question."

"You do not doubt mine, surely!" exclaimed Rex, his eyes flashing.

"I do not doubt the sincerity and warmth of your love for one moment, Rex; but I want you to reflect that she whom you have won is very precious—a peerless jewel which no

breath from the world has ever tarnished. She is very different from ordinary women. She knows nothing of evil, or inconstancy, or change, and if she lived to find her idol less pure and perfect than she believed him, she would wither and die like a white flower in poisoned air. You mean to marry her, do you not? to have her for your own exclusively, so that none other may have a right to help and succor her if you should fail her?"

"She is to be my wife, assuredly, and that as soon as may be. But, Anthony, what is it that you fear? can you doubt that I will guard her carefully, as my one best and dearest treasure?"

"Rex," said Anthony, grasping him by the arm, "do you know all that is implied in the guardianship of that pure pearl? Not only must you preserve her from the contamination of the world, but you must shield her from all evil in yourself. Well did Vivian call her his white-souled child, her mind and spirit are like unsullied snow in their innocence and purity. If ever taint of vice came to her knowledge through the one most near and dear to her, I tell you again she would droop and die."

"I think I understand you, Anthony; you cannot forget how easily I was led astray by Dacre, and you dread my inherent tendency to at least the one vice of gaming," said Rex, humbly; "but, brother, believe me, I have had a lesson sufficiently strong to effect a radical cure; and even if it were not so—as I can pledge you my honor it is—Innocentia herself will be my guard; for I can appreciate her pure nature as thoroughly as you can, and I would rather die than shock her unsuspecting innocence by any revelation of the evils that lurk in the hearts of men. For her sake, as well as for my own and yours, who have done so much for me, you need not fear but that I will struggle unceasingly to be as little unworthy of her as any man may be."

"That is well," said Anthony. "But, Rex, it is not all; remember this also, Innocentia has never so much as heard that the love once given can ever change or fail. She believes that in your affection she has a stronghold where she may rest in joy and security all her days. If ever you failed her in this respect it would be worse to her than death. Rex, Rex, can you say to me that you will be true to her in heart and soul and life? that she shall never to the hour of your death be less intensely dear to you than she is now? Oh, beware how you take her to yourself away from all others, unless indeed you can guard and care for her even to your life's end, with devotion as deep, as entire, as lasting as theirs might have been!"

Anthony sank back, pale and agitated, and Rex knelt down by his side.

"My dear brother," he said, "I can most solemnly promise and vow to you that I will be to Innocentia—my love, my wife, my treasure—all that one human being may be to another; that I will devote my life, my heart, to her alone, and strive, with all the power that is given me, to make her happy and blessed. Are you content now, dearest Anthony?"

"Yes," he answered, faintly, "and I am grateful to you, Rex, for the peace you give me for that dear child's sake."

"Then, Anthony, if you can, will you remove a fear that has come into my mind since you have been speaking so earnestly on her behalf. Can it be that you yourself have loved her? have dreamt of happiness with her as your own? I trust with all my soul it has not been so! I never dreamt of it; I thought you were only her friend, as she said. Oh, tell me, if you can, that you have not been injured by me unconsciously; for there can be no change now, Anthony. I cannot give her up; she loves me."

"Yes," said Anthony, with a smile of strange beauty, "she loves you, and you alone; you need not fear that I have any desire to take her from you. I wish nothing on earth so much as that you and she should be happy together ever while you live—happy without regret or alloy."

"Then you have not loved her, Anthony, too well?" said Rex, still anxiously.

"Who could know Innocentia Vivian and not love her?" he answered, calmly. "But be at rest, dear Rex, I have not loved her too well, either for your sake or hers. I shall love her now as my sister, and your dear wife."

The young man drew a long breath of relief.

"Now you have made me entirely happy, brother. If you will only get well now, and be as strong as you were before, I shall have nothing left to wish for."

"That is not in my hands, dear Rex; but I am content however it may be for myself. Now, tell me, has anything yet been fixed—as to the time?" He paused, and then, with an effort, resumed—"the time of your marriage?"

"I have asked Mr. Vivian to let it be as soon as possible, for there is no reason that I can see to cause any delay. Darksmere is ready for my darling whenever he may give her to me, and I think it will be better for herself to feel that we are united beyond the possibility of any further parting."

"Rex," said Anthony, anxiously, "you do not contemplate parting Vivian from his child, I hope; under their peculiar circumstances I think he ought to live with you."

"Of course; I never dreamt of any other arrangement. It would grieve my darling to be separated from her father, and that is quite enough for me. I thought we might make Darksmere our headquarters, and come to Refugium in the summer; and you will be with us, too, Anthony, will you not?"

Anthony shook his head. "You must set me aside out of your calculations," he said.

"I cannot do that even if I wished it," answered Rex; "for when I pressed Mr. Vivian to say what arrangements could be made as to our marriage, he always answered that he could say nothing at all on the subject till you were well enough to be spoken to about it. I thought it rather hard. I must say, for after all, it does not concern you especially; but he was immovable. I hope, now that you are better, all needless delays may come to an end."

"You may be sure, at all events, that I shall do my best to promote your wishes and Innocentia's. I will speak to Vivian to-morrow."

"Oh, thank you, Anthony!" said Rex, warmly; "there never was a brother like you in all the world."