

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER XXXI.

For some moments after Anthony had so calmly declared that he intended to pay the sum which would leave him absolutely penniless, Dacre sat and stared at him as if he were some strange phenomenon, such as had never been seen before.

After a time he said, gravely, "May I ask how you intend to live when you have denuded yourself of everything you possess in this world?"

"That is my concern," said Anthony. "I do not think my future fate need enter into this discussion at all. If it comes to the worst I can enlist," he added, with a rather mournful smile.

"And it is really possible that you, a man come to full maturity, long past the age for training for any profession, are content, without a murmur, to strip yourself to your last shilling in order to save a foolish young fellow from becoming a confirmed gambler?"

"I am not only content, I am thankful that I have been able so to meet your requirements as to have received from you the assurance that you will in return accomplish my brother's entire rescue. I have reason indeed to be most happy that my funds, however realised, will suffice for the purpose. Had they fallen short of it, I must have hired myself out for a term of service in some profitable manner, and secured to you the proceeds till the sum was complete."

"You would have done this?" asked Dacre, strongly moved.

"Undoubtedly; I would have given my life if nothing else would have sufficed," said Anthony, simply.

Dacre started from his chair, and paced the room rapidly for some moments in deep thought. Then he came and stood before Anthony, looking down into his clear brown eyes, so beautiful in their expression of perfect integrity, joined to the tenderness of a gentle nature.

"Beresford," he said, "the contrast you have shown me between yourself and me has for the first time in all my life made me comprehend the beauty of goodness and the hideousness of vice. You have made me long, with almost frantic desire, that I could at this hour go back to the days when I was still young and comparatively blameless, that I might alter my whole course of life, and strive to be in some degree like what you are, at however immeasurable a distance. You have caused me to hate myself as heartily as I admire you. I feel that I am as vile and base in taking your money as you are noble in giving it; but, Beresford, I cannot give it up. Do you know what the alternative would be for me? Run more complete than that which would have overtaken your brother had I continued to influence him in such fashion as to levy my tax on Darkermere. I should be arrested for debt, and imprisoned. The enterprise which I confidently believe will enrich me for the remainder of my life would utterly fail, and I should come out of the debtor's prison a broken, destitute, homeless man, with no hope of escaping the beggary that would pursue me to the grave. I cannot stand such a prospect, especially when the money to which I hold I have a claim well secure to me, as I expect, the means to lead a life of luxury and splendor for the remainder of my days. Your splendid example has roused this much of grace within me that I can regret, with hearty sincerity, the necessity of robbing you; and I can assure you that this is a virtue unknown to me before, for it has never been my habit to give even a thought to the interests of any person but myself. Beyond this, however, I cannot go; I can make no sacrifice of any part of the money I have claimed from you; but this much I will do for you. I will promise you the fullest value of your money. I will so use my influence with Rex that I shall save him for you utterly. He shall see to the very depths of that pit of destruction into which I was dragging him, and he shall so discern its horrors as to turn from it with dread and dismay. He shall pledge himself to me to abandon every one of those practices which would have been his ruin, and you shall at least have the price of your sacrifice as fully as I have the price of my villainy."

"Then I am more than content," said Anthony, grasping Dacre's hand for the first time since he had known him, even under his assumed name, "and forgive me if I say that I trust, for your own sake, the fortune you hope to realize may save you from ever again dealing with any young man as you would have dealt with my brother."

"I trust it may; and this, at least, I am sure of, that if ever there is any good in me for the future it will be due to your noble example. But now, Beresford, let me thoroughly understand your wishes. I conclude that you desire to have Rex's present mode of life broken off from this hour, and that what you intend me to do must be done to-day."

"Undoubtedly," said Anthony, eagerly. "I should wish him to leave London with me to-night."

"And that he should never set eyes on me again," said Dacre, rather sadly. "Well, it shall be so. I will fulfil my pledge. I will see him at once, and I have no doubt of my success."

"In this you are generous, Mr. Dacre, for I could not have exacted that your share of the bargain should be completed before it is possible for me to accomplish mine."

"Beresford," said Dacre, quickly, "I have never had faith enough in any man's goodness before to rely on his honor. But I will trust yours without limit or reserve."

"I am very grateful for your confidence, and it is of inestimable benefit to me just now, as I am intensely anxious to see Rex safe before another night passes over him; and, of course, it is an absolute impossibility that I should do all that is necessary for the money to be placed in your hands, in available shape, without a delay of some two or three weeks—a period that might be fatal to him if you were not prepared now to act in reliance on my good faith. I propose, however, Mr. Dacre, to give you to-day a note of hand, pledging myself to the full payment within a given date; and

If you should propose to leave England, so as to require a few hundreds for immediate expenses I can furnish you that from the balance I have at my bankers'."

"You do not disguise your wish that I should leave this country, Mr. Beresford," said Dacre, with a smile, "but I cannot be surprised at it; and, as it happens, it accords with my own desire. I have to see a man in Paris who is connected with our great venture, and I am quite willing to go there at once, so soon as Rex is safe in your hands, and there also I can wait till you send me the full measure of my bond. Ultimately I shall return to Mexico, and neither you nor Rex will ever hear of me more."

A great sigh of relief burst from Anthony's lips for the charge his mother had imposed upon him had weighed as a heavy load on his heart ever since the hour of her death, and now he could almost feel that her heart's desire had been accomplished, and her darling saved from the evils she had so dreaded for him. He rose from his seat.

"I will lose no more time than, Mr. Dacre. I will go at once and do what is needful, so that you may have my note and the money you require in the course of a few hours. Can I hope to have Rex with me this evening? He does not at present know that I am in town."

"Write your address there," said Dacre, pushing some paper towards Anthony, "and Rex shall go to you before nightfall. I know what my power over him really is, and I feel certain of the result."

"I will rely on it, then," said Anthony, "and with that assurance, my last word to you may well be one of thanks."

He held out his hand, and Dacre clasped it warmly between his own, as he said, "Anthony Beresford, I shall be the better as long as I live for having known you, and for the noble example of a pure self-sacrifice which you have given me this day."

So they parted. Anthony went down the stairs and out into the open air, and then walked along the street to his hotel like a man in a dream.

Throughout the whole of this interview with Dacre he had kept steadily before him the one solemn purpose of saving Rex at any cost, and in the upper region of his thoughts, where his spirit rested on the divine principle of sacrifice, he rejoiced with purest joy in the success of his endeavors, and in his own power to pay the heavy price which his brother's rescue cost him; but from beginning to end of that long conversation he had heard underneath it all the cry of his own wrung heart, that mourned in anguish for the love that must be immolated too, as all his earlier hopes and dreams had been, for the sake of his young brother; and now, when the tension of his energies, which had been bent on the conquest of this man Dacre was relaxed; when, his purpose being accomplished, he could cease to concentrate his whole mind upon it, the overwhelming thought that he had lost Innocentia took possession of his whole being, and flooded his soul as it were with bitterest pain. He walked on, hardly knowing where he was going; stunned as if he had received some physical blow. He knew, as he staggered along, that he had deprived himself of even the barest means of subsistence, and that he had rendered marriage a final impossibility for himself. He had been trained to no profession, and if ever he were to obtain even the merest livelihood for himself, it could only be in some hard service as a soldier or a sailor, where he would have to battle alone in life's roughest ways. He might never now so long as he lived be able to support a wife, and certainly not till he was old and broken down, and his beautiful Innocentia had probably for years been the light of some other man's home, and the darling of his heart, though not loved, surely, thought Anthony, not loved as he would have loved her.

Yes, she was lost to him. He would see her once more, for he would go to tell her father that he gave up all hope of ever winning her, that he must bid her farewell, and look on her lovely face no more, since she never could be his, and then he would turn away from Refugium and go into hard labor in some service where he could still to some extent watch over Rex; or, perhaps, if his brother yet needed his care, he could take some inferior position on the estate where he could earn a pittance for his own support; happen what might he would be independent, he would owe nothing to his brother; but in what manner soever his life might shape itself now, one point only was certain, he had lost Innocentia—his darling, his love was lost to him for ever; and with this thought tearing at his heart, Anthony Beresford went from place to place that day making all the needful arrangements for delivering up to Richard Dacre the entire sum of his earthly possessions.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Towards evening Anthony Beresford returned to his hotel, jaded and weary, feeling as if life could never more be anything to him but a joyless endurance, in which he would still be bound by the chain of his duty to Rex, without a hope of happiness or even freedom for himself.

He had flung himself down in an easy-chair in the large gloomy sitting-room, where the light of a pair of candles struggled dimly with the November fog that penetrated even into the house, and he was trying, as he sat there with his eyes closed, to prevent his thoughts from dwelling on the fact that, beyond a very few pounds he had retained for immediate use, he had that day stripped himself of everything he possessed in the world.

He had sent a cheque to Richard Dacre for the whole of the balance he had at his bankers', with a note securing to him his entire property so soon as it could be realized, and this was not likely to prove a difficult or even tedious matter, as he had already taken steps to make his capital available at the time when he hoped to have gone to Africa. He was utterly destitute then, and that in the cruellest sense of the word, since, in addition to all his actual possessions, he had lost also that one fair pearl hidden in the Cornish mountains, which was more precious to him than life itself.

In vain he strove to shake himself free from the sense of desolation which was quite intolerable. It crushed him down with a pain that made him almost wish that he might never open his eyes to the light again. But we none of us can thus cast off our burden when it grows too heavy, and in

five minutes more Anthony was rudely shaken out of his stupor of depression, and compelled to face the trials of his mortal existence once more. The door opened, and Reginald Erlesleigh burst into the room evidently in the state of passionate excitement into which those who are still young in their experience of life are apt to be flung by strong emotions. His fair face was crimson to the temples, his lips quivering, and his eyes flashing, with yet a suspicious moisture on the long lashes which showed that he had been deeply agitated. He came forward quickly to the fireplace, near which Anthony was sitting, and leant his forehead on the marble slab above it, while he clasped his hands tightly; as if to repress his nervous restlessness.

"Oh, Anthony!" he burst out, "it is well that you are left to me, whom I can trust, in whom I may believe, or the world would seem hideous to me after all that I have learnt this day. Had it not been that Gascoigne made his own confession, and so disarmed me, I must have hurled him to the earth for making me thus the tool of his wickedness."

"He has told you all, then!" said Anthony eagerly.

"All as regards his own unprincipled schemes upon me, but not all that concerns you. He told me that you had saved me; that by some means, incomprehensible to me, you had discovered his hateful designs to make of me a confirmed gambler, and so compass my ruin. He refused to tell me his motive for such malignant cruelty towards one who never injured him; but he said he had a reason for it, which would have made me forgive him had I known it. I cannot believe it. Nothing can excuse a man for seeking to accomplish the utter destruction of a fellow-creature. Anthony, would you credit it? in order to deter me from continuing the very practices into which he himself led me, he drew me a picture of what I should have become had I continued to the end in the course he had opened out before me, and it was a picture of the most hideous ruin it is possible to conceive—not of my property alone, but of my life, my soul. A career of wretchedness and sin, ending, perhaps, in the suicide's grave. Ah, it is horrible!" continued the young man, while his frame shook with strong shuddering, "and it is to this he would have brought me—that man whom I counted upon as a true and devoted friend for life, for whom I had an affection scarcely second to what I felt for you, who knew that he had gained an influence over me which he might have used for good, and did use for uttermost evil. It was hard to keep my hands from his throat; and I could not have done so had I learnt his iniquitous conduct from any lips but his own."

"Yet, Rex, he never was so worthy of the affection you say you once felt for him as in the hour when he lost it; he was laboring then to undo the evil he had worked, and trying his best to save you from its results," said Anthony.

"It is true," said Rex, turning to look down on his brother's face, "but he told me he did this one good action far more for your sake than for mine. He said you were the noblest man he had ever met, and that he did not know human nature was capable of such qualities as you had displayed. He said that you had made him abandon his scheme of ruining me, and seek rather to save me, by a great sacrifice on your part, which, he said, was the grandest act of devotion he had ever heard of. What is it you have done for me, brother?" Rex continued, affectionately; "tell me, this I may know how to thank you; and if it has involved any loss of money let me repay you, although I have to own to you that even in these few weeks I have seriously embarrassed Darkermere. Can money repay what you have given up for me, Anthony?"

"Not all the money that ever was coined!" he answered, as the vision of Innocentia, in her loveliness, passed before his mind. Innocentia lost for ever! Once, even to win her he would not impoverish his brother. "But there need be no question of repaying me, Rex. I shall be amply rewarded if you can tell me that Gascoigne succeeded in his mission, and that you have renounced utterly and finally the fatal passion for gambling on which he was working for your destruction. Have you promised him to abandon it?"

"I have abandoned it, Anthony. I think of it with the utmost dread and horror. Gascoigne wanted me to give him a solemn pledge to that effect, but I told him I would give that pledge not to him, the traitor, but to you. And I will do so now at once if you will, and in any terms you like to prescribe."

"Then am I indeed more than repaid!" said Anthony, rising, and taking his brother by the hand. "You can never know, Rex, the anguish of mind with which I have seen you drawn, step by step, into the gulf of misery which is the sure end of every gambler's career. Yes, for your own sake I do ask of you this pledge. Use your own words, but bind yourself now as in the sight of God, with your brother as your witness, to abstain for evermore from this fatal temptation, and to avoid religiously all such places and associates as might allure you to indulge in it again."

And Reginald did so. Holding his brother by the hand, he raised his eyes to the unseen presence of his Maker, and solemnly gave his promise in the terms Anthony had used, and that with a fervor and sincerity which left no doubt that he purposed to hold it as a most sacred obligation. When this had been done, and Anthony had given great thanks in the secret of his own heart for so signal a mercy, the two brothers sat down together, with all their former confidence in each other fully restored, and insensibly fell into the free, familiar intercourse which had always subsisted between them till Gascoigne had come, like a dark shadow, to cloud the lives of both, and hide their hearts, as it were, the one from the other.

Rex spoke to his brother of the temporary embarrassment in his affairs which the drain of the last few weeks on his property had caused, and Anthony, well as he knew what nightly gambling can do in swallowing up vast sums, was amazed at the extent to which Rex's "debts of honor" had already taxed his income. He found that both the bailiff at Darkermere and the family solicitor had been greatly troubled at the state of matters, and began to make difficulties when required by Rex to meet his ever-increasing demands. The brothers consulted over the best means of settling all straight