

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER XXXVI.—Continued.

They were riding along a sheep-track, which rounded the shoulder of the hill, and for a few minutes had lost sight of their companions, but a turn in the path brought them into view again, where they had stopped on a little knoll to await them.

Rex was talking earnestly to Innocentia, his fine face glowing with excitement, and his splendid figure showing to advantage as he sat firmly on his fiery steed; while Innocentia, with her sweet serene countenance turned towards him, seemed listening with pleasure to his words.

"Is not that a charming picture?" said Vivian, checking his horse that he might pause a moment to look at them. "What a handsome couple they are. Your brother is a magnificent-looking fellow, Anthony. I have seldom seen a more perfect specimen of manly beauty; he is more remarkable in that respect even than his father was, and he was one of the most singularly attractive men I ever knew. I think Rex has some of the power of fascination which was so conspicuous in Francis Erlesleigh; I hope he will use it to better purpose."

"I feel sure he will," said Anthony, warmly. "Rex has admirable qualities, and the sweetest temper possible; his greatest failing is a certain weakness of character, which renders him liable to be too easily led; but so long as he remains under good influences, as I trust he always will now, that may be an advantage to him rather than the reverse."

"Scarcely that, Anthony. He cannot be in leading-strings all his days, and sooner or later we have every one of us to act on our own judgment in this difficult world. But I hope the escape he has had will be a salutary lesson to him, which will strengthen him to play his part like a man in the career that lies before him."

They galloped on then to join their companions, and Anthony succeeded in taking his place by Innocentia's side, while Vivian drew Rex back, in order that he might make more intimate acquaintance with his mind and feelings than he had yet found opportunity to do. They had taken a direction as yet unexplored by any of them, and were simply riding over the trackless mountain-side towards a point where they thought it probable they might be able to obtain a view of the distant sea, which was a great object of desire on the part of Innocentia, who had never seen it so far as her own recollection went. The fresh sweet air and the rapid movement were delightful, as the horses' hoofs bounded noiselessly over the short, crisp heather; and Anthony, entirely engrossed in his conversation with Innocentia, had forgotten time and space, and everything but the pure enjoyment of her presence.

They were a great deal in advance of Mr. Vivian and Rex, when the voice of the former was heard giving a prolonged shout, to attract Anthony's attention. He did not hear it in his complete abstraction till it had been twice repeated. Then, as the sound caught his ear in a pause of their conversation, he abruptly checked his horse, putting his hand at the same moment on Innocentia's bridle rein, to stop her progress, and looked around to know the cause of his unwelcome summons.

"Do you not see that we have lost our way? Where in the world are you taking us to?" called out Vivian, as he came, with Rex, at a quick trot towards them.

"I have not the remotest idea," Anthony shouted back, laughing.

"Look ahead of you, man," said Vivian, "is not that a steep ravine further on with a sudden descent into the heart of it, which may be dangerous?"

Anthony turned to look in front of him, and uttered an exclamation. "I do believe we are coming to an inaccessible cliff," he said; "wait a moment, dear Nina, till I ride on and see if we can advance any further this way."

Innocentia obeyed, and sat motionless, holding in her docile Arab, while Anthony darted forward to reconnoitre. Suddenly he uttered a sharp cry, as his horse plunged violently down with a sort of convulsive movement, for the ground gave way beneath its feet. A huge piece of rock, which had apparently at some recent period fallen from the upper part of the mountain, had become loosely lodged on a ledge of earth, that was gradually crumbling beneath its weight. A touch was sufficient to overbalance it, and as the forefeet of Anthony's horse struck upon it, the necessary impetus was given, which detached it from its place and sent it crashing down the steep side of the ravine, carrying with it, as an inevitable result, both horse and rider. One moment Anthony strove to fling the animal backward, at the risk of falling under him, but the effort was in vain. The poor brute fell helplessly down the jagged face of the cliff before Anthony could throw himself from the saddle, and together they rolled over and over, amid the falling earth and stones, till they lay in a motionless heap at the bottom of the ravine. Horror-stricken, Vivian and Rex saw the terrible fall from a little distance, while Innocentia, who was near the fatal spot, uttered a piercing cry that rang far and wide over the mountain slopes, while she urged her horse forward as if about to follow madly on the path of destruction which had lured Anthony to his doom.

Rex saw her intention, and galloping madly forward, seized the bridle of her horse, and drew her back to a place of safety; while Vivian, riding up with a face pale as death, bade her almost sternly not stir an inch at her peril. He flung himself off his horse, and tied it to a low stunted tree which grew near, signing to Rex to do the same, and then once more warning the young girl to remain motionless where she was, the two men hastened on foot to the spot where Anthony had fallen, and began to scramble down the face of the rock as best they might, till they reached the broken ground, where he lay perfectly still beneath his struggling horse. It was a task of no small difficulty to get the poor beast on its feet, which at last they accomplished,

and found that, although severely cut and wounded, it was able to stand. But Vivian's heart sank within him when he looked on Anthony lying utterly unconscious, if not dead, among the stones. His face was turned downwards on his arm, which was twisted under him in such fashion as to show that it must be dislocated at least, and his outstretched limbs seemed stiff and rigid.

Rex was trembling so violently as to be almost incapable of assisting Vivian, but together they succeeded at length in raising the prostrate form, and placing it leaning against the bank, so that they could see the white death-like face, with the closed eyes and pallid lips, that formed indeed a piteous contrast to the bright glowing countenance Anthony had turned towards them not half-an-hour before. There was a blue livid mark on the forehead, and a thin stream of blood trickled down from under his dark hair.

Rex uttered a sharp cry as this sad sight was revealed to him. "My brother, my brother, oh, he is dead!" he exclaimed, covering his eyes with his hand as if to shut out the mournful scene on which he had no courage to look.

"Rex," said Vivian sternly, "this is no time for hysterical weakness, but for action, if any succour is to be given to your brother. There is water down there in the brook, go and dip these handkerchiefs in it, and you have a wine flask with you, I think, open it quickly and give it to me." Rex obeyed without a word; he left Vivian wetting Anthony's lips with wine while he ran to the little stream that was flowing near, and soon came back with an ample supply of water. Vivian bathed the pale face and hands, and having loosened Anthony's collar and coat, laid his ear against the young man's heart, to ascertain if it still beat. After a few minutes of agonising suspense, he rose from his knees beside the motionless form, and said, "Thank God, he still lives!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Vivian had studied medicine to some extent, in order to be able to meet the requirements of his household in that respect, and render it unnecessary that any doctor should ever invade his retreat at Refugium. He had therefore quite sufficient skill to ascertain that Anthony still lived, and also to satisfy himself, after a hurried and cursory examination, that, besides a fracture of the arm, the chief injury he sustained was the blow on the head which had rendered him insensible.

Vivian was a man of practical resources, and, in spite of his retiring nature and love of ease and quiet, he could always summon up an abundant stock of energy in any sudden emergency.

He let fall poor Anthony's nerveless hand after he had succeeded in feeling the faint fluttering of a pulse not yet extinct, and stood for a moment looking round, that he might discover the position of the ravine in which the accident had happened, and its distance from Refugium.

He knew the surrounding country well, and therefore soon perceived that they were not so far from home as he had feared, and he also recollected, with great thankfulness, that there was a shepherd's hut not very far from the spot, where he would probably find several men, whose services he could procure to assist him in conveying the wounded sufferer to Refugium.

"Rex," he said, impatiently, to the young man, who was kneeling beside his brother, vainly beseeching him to look up and speak, "leave off these useless lamentations, and bestir yourself. I have decided what we are to do."

"Oh tell me then!" said Rex, starting to his feet, "for I cannot conceive how we are to get poor Anthony home, insensible as he is. You say that he is still alive, and I am thankful to believe you, but surely he will soon die if we cannot move him from this place."

"We shall move him very speedily. Listen to me, Rex. You see that clump of trees up there on the hill-side at right angles from where we stand? A short way beyond that there is a shepherd's hut, where several of the men in charge of the mountain flocks assemble about this hour to find shelter for the night. You must go there at once, while I keep watch here beside your brother. You must collect as many men as you can find, and bring them back with you, to help us in carrying Anthony to Refugium. Tell them to wrench a doc, or shutter off their hut, and carry it here; it will make our task much easier. Of course you can promise them ample reward for their assistance in every way."

"Thank heaven, then, there is succour at hand," said Rex. "I will make all speed, and return as quickly as possible. But, Mr. Vivian, Innocentia must be in dreadful anxiety."

"Yes, I know, poor child. You will have to pass the spot where she is in order to get your horse, which will take you more quickly to the hut than you could go on foot. Just give her a few words of comfort; tell her that Anthony is alive, and that we hope to take him safely home. Bid her remain where she is; she must not attempt to come here or to move from the spot where I left her."

Rex darted away at once, and scaled the steep side of the cliff with all the activity of his youth and strength; anxious as he was concerning his brother, he was panting to be with Innocentia, whom he felt must be in an agony of suspense. He found that, in obedience to her father's commands, she had remained perfectly motionless; and horse and rider alike seemed cut from a block of pure white marble, as they stood out in strong relief against the western sky, where the sun was setting in a lake of crimson light.

Innocentia's sweet face was colorless as drifted snow, and her blue eyes were, for the first time in all her life, dark with a look of anguish as she turned them on Rex. "Anthony, Anthony," she murmured faintly, as the young man approached; "where is he? what has happened? will he not come back to us?"

"Yes, yes; I trust he will!" exclaimed Rex; "there is no present fear of death, your father says; he is only grievously hurt."

"Death! I do not know what it is!" said Innocentia. "I have never seen it, scarce even heard of it; my father never liked to speak of it; only I know it takes those we love quite away from us, and we see them no more. Oh, Rex,

you have frightened me! I do not want Anthony to be taken away by that dark mysterious death!"

And, oppressed by a nameless terror, the young girl let her head fall on Rex's shoulder, as he stood by her, looking up with his kind soft eyes into her sad face; he could not resist the temptation of passing his arm around her waist, and pressing her closely to him. "Do not grieve, dearest Innocentia," he said, "I think—I hope he will recover;" and then an impulse of pain he hardly understood prompted him, hurried as he was, to pause, and say, "You love Anthony very much, then, Nina?"

"He is my friend, and he has been very kind to me," she answered, simply. "I do not want him to be hurt and taken quite away for ever."

And somehow her answer gave Rex a sense of peace from his momentary mysterious trouble; but for the moment the brother he loved so well was really foremost in his thoughts, and he said, hastily, "I must go now, Innocentia; I ought not to have lingered even an instant while poor Anthony lies there wounded. Your father bade me tell you to remain quite calm and still until we come for you."

Then he mounted his horse, and galloped off in the direction of the shepherd's hut.

Innocentia remained alone in the midst of the fair mountain solitude, which had been suddenly filled for her with images of gloom and terror. She watched the sunset glow fading slowly away from the summit of the hills, while already the spot where she stood was in deep shadow; and a strange conviction took possession of her that she had passed in that sad hour a great crisis in her destiny; that all her life hitherto had been but an unreal dream, such as in the old legends the dwellers in fairyland were wont to exist in for years and years. It seemed to her as if now her real existence was about to begin, and that she was to live no more, as it were, in a perpetual sunshine among her birds and flowers, but take her share with other mortals in the chequered scenes of fitful joys and frequent griefs which make up the sum of years for most of us on earth. Innocent and childlike as the young girl was she had no lack of mental capacity, and many strange thoughts and feelings chased each other through her mind during the time (which seemed to her interminable) that she was left to wait there alone in her suspense. She had seen Rex, accompanied by several men, hurrying down into the ravine, and she had heard voices and sounds which convinced her that they must be already moving Anthony, and yet no one came to her as the slow moments dragged on, and in her gentle habit of obedience it never occurred to her to move from the spot where her father had desired her to stay. It was almost dark when at last she saw Rex riding quickly towards her by a circuitous path from the bottom of the ravine. He was breathless and almost incoherent in his anxiety and excitement.

"Anthony has moved!" he exclaimed. "He will live, and quite recover, your father thinks, though he is still unconscious. We have managed admirably about taking him home; the men have made a sort of litter, and laid some sheep-skins on it, and he is lying comfortably as they carry him."

"But where is he?" said Innocentia, looking towards the spot where he had disappeared. "Was it not there he fell?"

"Yes, but they could not carry him up that steep ascent; they have been obliged to go out by the end of the ravine, and they will bring him home by a path which leads easily to Refugium, though it is a little further round. I am going to take your father's horse to him; I shall not be two minutes absent, and then I am coming back to ride home with you by a short cut. That is your father's arrangement—he is going to follow the men who carry my brother, and lead his poor wounded horse. But we shall be at Refugium long before they arrive, and have everything ready for them. Wait just one moment longer, dear Miss Vivian," he added, calling her by that name in remorse for the freedom he had been betrayed into when he first came to her in his agitation, and, seizing Mr. Vivian's horse by the bridle, he galloped quickly down the slope, and disappeared.

It was, however, in truth, but a moment before he was again by her side, and then they started to ride home together, as Vivian had desired. They were obliged to go slowly and cautiously in the gathering darkness, and both felt keenly the contrast of this sad return with their merry going forth in the morning, when the sunshine was bright around them, and Anthony's pleasant voice sounded gaily in their ears as they sped along.

Rex began to talk rapidly, to relieve the gloom that oppressed the spirits of both, and he told her that so soon as he had placed her in safety at home he was going to start off on horseback to the nearest country town to bring back a doctor for Anthony.

"A doctor!" said Innocentia; "then there is another man coming to Refugium?" she said, in a tone of alarm which made Rex smile in spite of all his grief for his brother.

"I am afraid it cannot be avoided," he answered; "we must have medical help for dear Anthony."

"But my father knows how to cure those who are ill," said Innocentia. "Juan had a fever, and he took care of him, and soon made him quite well; and I fell down once and hurt my ankle very much, and he knew how to take away all the pain in a very little while."

"Yes, I know Mr. Vivian is very skilful, and he says he hopes he may be able to manage Anthony's case himself when once the doctor has examined him and ascertained the extent of his injuries; but your father thinks it too serious a matter to be trusted to his unprofessional opinion only, at least in the first instance. Perhaps the doctor will only come once. But do you so much dislike to see another man, Innocentia?"

"Rex," she answered, gravely. "I know quite well that I must soon become like other people, and mix with my fellow-creatures, and I do not wish to rebel against the necessity, or to hold back from fulfilling the ordinary conditions of existence because my dear father has kept me hitherto in a beautiful seclusion and peace which has made my home like a paradise; but it is impossible that I should not shrink with terror and bewilderment from the change that is taking