

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Reginald Erlesleigh had fallen under the fascination of Innocentia's charming character quite as speedily as Anthony had done; but, in spite of the strong attraction her presence had for him, his anxiety about his brother was too great to allow of his lingering by her side even for a moment after they arrived at Refugium. He sent Juan at once to the stables for a fresh horse, and was gone in quest of a doctor some time before the mournful procession arrived bearing Anthony Beresford, still insensible, on the rough litter which the shepherds carried slowly and carefully along.

Mr. Vivian galloped on in front as they approached the walls, and found Innocentia waiting just within the gate, straining her sad eyes through the gloom to distinguish, if possible, the motionless form of her friend. He dismounted, and, taking his daughter by the hand, drew her into her own little sitting-room, where her entrance produced a chorus of welcome from warbling throats and fluttering wings, as the tame birds flew to meet her. She scarce responded to their greeting, however, and turned an inquiring look upon her father.

"My darling," he said, "no doubt you are feeling very anxious, but you must set your mind at ease. Anthony still lives, and he is young and strong, so that, although he is evidently much hurt, I feel confident he will quite recover, and we shall have him with us again as well as ever."

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Innocentia, with a sigh of relief. "Can I see him, father?"

"No, dear child, it would not be fitting that you should. I brought you here on purpose to explain to you that I wish you to stay, for some time to come, quite away from the part of the house where Anthony's rooms are. You know that Rex has gone to bring a doctor, and I asked him also to get an experienced nurse to take care of the poor patient; so that there will be more than one stranger coming to the house, and I do not wish you to get acquainted with them, or to come in contact with them at all."

"I do not want to see strangers indeed," said Innocentia, with a slight shiver; "but I should have liked to have been able to help Anthony, if you would let me nurse him, instead of having an unknown person here."

"Impossible, my child; you cannot understand all my reasons, but it is best you should know at once that you cannot go to see Anthony at all until he is quite convalescent."

"And yet he called me his friend," she said.

"So he is," said Vivian, smiling, "and when your friend is well you shall see him, but not till then."

"As you please, father, of course; but it seems to me so sad that I cannot be of use—that I never have been of use to any one all my life."

"Ah, my darling, you have been of use to me in making life tolerable for me, which it would not have been assuredly without you, and you need not doubt, alas, that the burdens and cares of this mortal existence will fall upon you soon enough! I have tried to keep them from you—longer than is possible in ordinary cases, and so you must not ask to rush into the thick of them before you are compelled to do so by the inexorable power of fate. Let me keep you in brightness and peace a little longer, my sweet Nina," and a certain sadness in his tone touched Innocentia's sensitive heart at once.

"Dear father," she said, flinging her arms round his neck, "of course you always know best, and you cannot doubt that I shall never fail to do whatever you desire."

"No, darling, I do not doubt you," he answered; "you have been the sweetest and most docile child ever man was blessed with—stay here then for the present. I hope we shall not require more than one visit from the doctor, so tomorrow you will be free to go where you will, excepting to the part of the house where Anthony is."

He left her then, and went to superintend the removal of the wounded man to his bed, in which he found Manuela a very expert assistant, and Vivian saw that she would be quite able to take care of the patient till another nurse should come.

Anthony had moved, showing manifest uneasiness in the broken arm, which Vivian had set and bound in rough splints before he moved him from the ravine. His pulse was also very high, and he muttered from time to time incoherently, as if he were delirious.

Vivian watched by him in considerable anxiety during the long interval which elapsed before it was possible for the doctor to arrive. It was, in fact, nearly midnight before he and Rex appeared, bringing with them a respectable-looking elderly nurse, who had made no small demand to being placed on a horse, which was the only mode of transit possible over the mountain paths that led to Refugium. She had accomplished her perilous journey safely, however, and was soon installed in charge of her patient.

The doctor's examination proved that none of Anthony's injuries were fatal, but that the chief risk for him was in the fact that the shock, joined to the pain of the wound in his forehead, was rapidly bringing on an attack of brain-fever, of which the termination could in no way be foreseen. Still, the doctor was hopeful; there were no bad symptoms, and, though it would probably be a tedious illness, he was quite of opinion that Anthony's strong constitution would triumph, and that he would ultimately recover.

Vivian was strongly of opinion that the mere injuries sustained in the fall would have passed away in due time, without fever supervening, had not Anthony's system been to some extent exhausted and disturbed by the mental anxiety and distress he had been enduring previously. Even the excitement of the sudden joy that had followed his despair when he found that Innocentia was not lost to him, as he had feared, was quite sufficient to make him for the time a

ready victim to any form of fever which might from other circumstances be likely to fasten on him.

The doctor quite concurred in this view when Vivian hinted that Anthony had been subjected to unusual mental disturbances just before his accident. The only effectual treatment for such a case was of course to keep the patient in the most absolute quiet, excluding light and noise from the room, and applying ice to the head.

The doctor himself watched Anthony during the first night, and then, having seen that the nurse was quite capable of carrying out his directions efficiently, he left Refugium on the following day, promising to return from time to time until the patient was convalescent.

Then commenced a long, tedious period of time, during which Anthony was as completely shut out from all knowledge of the living world as if he had been already dead. That moment when, turning round on the hill-side at Vivian's summons, he had seen all the fair landscape bathed in the soft light of the pale winter sun, and Innocentia by his side, her snow-white garments shining in the golden radiance, and her sweet face, bright with serene joy, was the last of conscious existence for him, over which it seemed as if a great black curtain had been dropped, leaving the scene on which his eyes had closed indelibly fixed on his memory in all his years of life to come.

Days passed into weeks, and weeks into months, while still he lay in that mysterious border-land between life and death, when the soul seems to have no knowledge of its own identity, and the mind has no power to act, although the body feels and suffers, and even in all his delirious wanderings it was of a shining snow-white figure he spoke, and of a mountain bathed in light beneath a cloudless sky; but it was only at rare intervals that he muttered a few disconnected words alluding to visions of this nature, for the most part he lay in a stupor, when only his hurried breathing told that he lived. The nurse cared for him assiduously, relieved at times by Manuela, and Vivian was never many hours absent from his side; while Rex, morning and evening came and looked at him, anxiously asking always if there was nothing he could do for him, and receiving the same reply that no one could do more for him than was being done, and that they could but wait patiently for a change, and hope the best. The doctor came occasionally, and always said that the patient was progressing as favorably as could be expected, but still there was little change as the winter days rolled on; and spring was well advanced before full consciousness returned by slow degrees to Anthony Beresford. At first, when the fever had subsided, and the cloud rolled away from his brain, he was capable of feeling little more than a sense of weakness and of grateful repose. It was a weariness to him to be obliged to open his lips to receive the nourishment they compelled him to take, and he seemed not to have strength to utter a word; gradually, however, he began to open his heavy eyes, and to gaze with the same sort of vacant indifference on the familiar countenances of Rex and Vivian and the strange face of the nurse, which mingled with all the fantasies that had haunted his bewildered brain during the long course of his illness. At last, as the days went on, and each morning found him a little stronger than the last, he began to smile faintly when Rex paid his daily visit, and finally one bright spring-day, when Vivian went to see him, Anthony looked up into his face, and said, feebly, "Innocentia." The first conscious word he had spoken since his accident was her beloved name. Vivian thought of this with a heavy sigh, as he answered that she was well; and then strove at once to draw the patient's attention to some other subject.

It was not long after this when Anthony, improving rapidly as his youth and strength conquered his malady, became able to speak in coherent sentences, and to show that his interest in life had revived, bringing back all the thoughts and feelings that had been dormant with him, before even the sense of personal identity was driven out of him in the crash of his terrible fall. He began to ask Vivian many questions as to the length of time which had elapsed since his accident, and the manner in which the interval had been passed by the inhabitants of Refugium; but the one theme to which he ever returned with intense eagerness and anxiety was still Innocentia, and that was precisely the subject on which Vivian seemed least disposed to give him any information. He always managed to change the conversation when Anthony spoke of her, which seemed particularly hard to the poor convalescent, who was longing with all his heart for tidings of her, and looking forward with an impatience which almost retarded his recovery to the moment when he should be allowed to see her again, and hear the sound of her soft sweet voice. It seemed very strange to him that Vivian was so unwilling to speak of her, for he knew certainly that no illness or other calamity had befallen her, as he had heard that much from his nurse, who told him, in answer to his inquiries, that she saw Miss Vivian every day, and that she was quite well, and, further, that she was, without exception, the most beautiful young lady she had ever beheld. Why was it, then, that her father only answered so very shortly when he spoke of her? and why, also, did he seem so unwilling that Rex should ever remain alone in the room with him? Vivian always managed to be present during the young man's daily visits, and on these occasions Innocentia's name was never mentioned. All this perplexed poor Anthony in his weakness very much, and often made his head ache much more than it ought to have done, yet he felt that it could be no unkindness on Vivian's part, who showed his deep affection for him in every possible way.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

One morning, when Vivian came into Anthony's room as usual, he found that with the help of his nurse he had been able to don a very elaborate silk dressing-gown, and that he had been lifted to a couch placed near the open window, through which the pleasant air of a mild spring day came freely blowing, laden with the scent of violets and other early flowers already blooming in the garden. Vivian warmly congratulated Anthony on so great a step having been gained in his recovery, though he expressed some doubt as to whether the doctor would have sanctioned the exertion while he was still so weak.

"I have been longing to accomplish this much for days past," said Anthony, "because I hope that now you will consider me sufficiently respectable-looking to receive a visit from Innocentia. Surely there can be no reason why she should not come, were it only for five minutes, to see me now." And Anthony lifted up his earnest brown eyes, which looked so large in his thin pale face, with a most wistful expression, to await Vivian's answer. His friend seemed to shrink from his gaze, and answered, curtly and almost as it seemed to Anthony, unfeelingly. "Impossible, my dear fellow, I could not think of such a thing; you must not ask to see my daughter till you are able to go down-stairs."

"Mr. Vivian, have you forgotten that she is to be my wife? Surely I have a right to see her. Think how I must long for the sight of her dear face after all these weary weeks. Just remember that I have never seen her since that moment when I last beheld her like a shining white angel bathed in the glory of the sunset, before the darkness came down upon me which has so nearly been the night of death."

"I know, I know," said Vivian, uneasily. "But, my dear Anthony, you must not think me hard-hearted if I refuse you; believe me," he added, emphatically, "it is entirely for your own sake I do so."

"But why?" said Anthony, eagerly; "I am quite strong enough to bear a visit now."

"I cannot say much for your strength," said Vivian, "as the small excitement of mentioning her name has brought a feverish flush into your cheeks, and you know how you still start at the slightest sound."

"It is the disappointment that tries me, and makes my heart beat. I am sure that to see her would do me more good than anything else; joy never does harm," pleaded Anthony.

"Anthony, you cannot think I would willingly pain you," said Vivian, gravely; "trust me that it would not be good for you to see Innocentia just now; and let us leave the subject. Do you know that there are a great many letters lying waiting for you to get well enough to read them? Some of them have been here for weeks. I think you might be well enough to-day to look over some of them."

"I do not care about letters or anything else if I cannot see Innocentia," said Anthony, somewhat irritably.

But Vivian appeared not to notice this, and said he would go and bring the packet from his study. He soon returned, and sitting down by Anthony, gave him several letters, some of which were apparently of old date.

Anthony listlessly turned them over, and glanced at the envelopes. "I wish you would open them for me, Mr. Vivian, I do not care enough about them to make the exertion; I see by the post-marks that there are two from Vera Saxby."

"Vera Saxby? Who is she?" exclaimed Vivian, quickly.

"Is she a young lady, Anthony?"

"She is a distant cousin whom I have never seen," he answered, "the daughter of my dear old friend Captain Saxby, with whom I sailed so long. She went out to Africa, to take up some work among the slaves which interests me very much, and her father begged me to write her some information she required, and it has involved me in a correspondence with her; her letters can wait, however. There is one in a handwriting I do not know," he added, "will you open it, and look to see who it is from?"

Vivian opened the letter, to which Anthony had pointed, and as he glanced it over he gave a sudden exclamation. "Here is good news for you, my dear fellow, and such as I should never have expected!"

"I do not know what news can be good for me outside the walls of Refugium," said Anthony, "for I certainly care for nothing beyond them; but what is it?"

"It is from a lawyer, who writes to let you know that Richard Dacre died, after a very short illness, in Paris, about a month ago; and that on his death-bed he made a will leaving to you everything he possessed, which, however, consisted simply of your own money, with the exception of a certain portion of it which he had already spent. Enough remains, however, to place you once again in very good circumstances, Anthony, and I am heartily glad of it."

"Richard Dacre dead!" exclaimed Anthony; "it seems terrible that he should have been taken so suddenly, considering the life he has led."

"There is comfort for you in that respect too in this letter," said Vivian; "the lawyer goes on to quote a clause in Dacre's will, in which he says that he is only restoring to you that which is yours by right; but that he owes you more than he can ever repay for the change your example wrought in him. It made him, he says, believe that the religion which had braced you to such noble self-sacrifice must be divine; and, therefore, when he found himself face to face with death, he was able to turn to the Saviour he had never acknowledged before, and cast himself upon His loving mercy, if yet there might be a hope of forgiveness even for so grievous a sinner as himself."

"Ah, that is indeed good news!" said Anthony, bowing his head reverently, with a deep inward thanksgiving, for the happiness of knowing that he had been instrumental in bringing this poor wandering soul back to his God.

"Yes, it is indeed," said Vivian, gravely. "It is no light blessing, my dear Anthony, to know that by the simple power of your own righteous example you have saved this man from a death of hopeless unbelief; and if you had indeed finally lost all your fortune as you intended, it would have been well bestowed to ensure such a result; but, since this happy result has been attained, I am worldly enough to feel very glad that your capital is restored to you, and that your income will be very little less than it was before."

"Oh yes, indeed! and I am most thankful too," said Anthony, raising his head eagerly from his pillows; "for I shall now be able to do any work you may require without being paid for it, which will be a great pleasure to me; and, Mr. Vivian, best of all," he continued, his eyes sparkling, "now that I have once more independent means there need be no cause for delay in my marriage with your daughter. All difficulty is at an end on my side, and you have been so kind in promising her to me freely that I think I need fear none on yours."

An expression of great pain and perplexity passed over