

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Mr. Vivian wrote a cordial acceptance of Anthony's proposal that Rex should accompany him to Refugium, and begged that they would come at once, as he felt very anxious to know the full details of the arrangement with Dacre.

Anthony had said nothing more in his letter than that he had induced the man to give up his designs on Reginald, and finally to quit the country. He had added that he must see Mr. Vivian at once on a matter of great importance to himself, and that since Rex and he were mutually anxious not to be separated, they hoped to be allowed to come together, as Mr. Vivian had himself kindly suggested on a former occasion.

Rex's legal business did not detain him long. His career of folly had been checked in time to save Darksmere; and although the losses he had sustained would necessitate his retrenching for a year or two, nothing more than that unpalatable measure would be required to restore him to his former position.

Once more, therefore, on a dark November day, Anthony started on the now familiar journey to Penzance, with ample reason to reflect on the compensations as well as the vicissitudes of life, when he thought of his altered circumstances since he last had travelled that route. He was now on his way to undergo the greatest pain he could ever know throughout his life, as he believed, in taking his final leave of Innocentia; but, on the other hand, he had Rex with him, safe and free, delivered in a double sense from the enemy and the avenger, his own affectionate brother once more, whose future lay fair and unclouded before him, as if no shadow had ever passed over it from the fell machinations of the man who had so nearly accomplished his ruin. Sad at heart as he was, a sense of peace stole over Anthony as he gazed out into the dim winter sky, and wondered whether the spirit of his mother was permitted to look down on earth and see her darling safe by his brother's side.

If the dead can know what passes in the sphere they have quitted he felt that she must be well pleased with him at last—he had fulfilled the pledge she had exacted from him, he had accomplished his mission, and saved her son from the perils she had foreseen, and he had done this by a sacrifice greater even than that which she had accepted at his hands, while she still breathed the air of this strange sad world; now at least he would hear no more the echo of that cry which had rung in his ears unceasingly since the hour when almost with her last breath she wailed out her prayer to him—“Save him, save my son!”

“She rests in peace,” he said to himself; “and I too ought to be at rest and peaceful, for it is the will of God which has been accomplished in my brother's rescue; but oh! my Innocentia! once only shall I see her angel face, and then no more for ever!”

He bowed his head upon his hands as he thought of this, and let the flood of sad reflections overwhelm him till Rex asked anxiously if he were ill, and then he looked up, and tried to enter as cheerfully as might be into his young brother's eager anticipations of the charms of a visit paid to so interesting a spot as Refugium.

The brothers slept at Penzance, and next morning again started with the horses which had been sent by Mr. Vivian to meet them. They arrived at their destination as the daylight was fading into the early night of that gloomy season, but Rex was able to detect enough of the strangeness and beauty of the Vivians' secluded home, to be almost wild with excitement as he followed Anthony along the wooded paths to the marble steps of the house where their host stood waiting them. Mr. Vivian greeted them both most cordially, and looked with undisguised admiration on the beautiful face of Frank Erlesleigh's son; but Anthony glanced round anxiously to catch a sight of Innocentia, and was dismayed not to see her as usual at her father's side. He came quickly up to Mr. Vivian as he turned to lead them into the house, and said in a low voice, “Your daughter is not ill I trust, that she does not appear?”

“Oh no,” said Vivian, smiling, “only she was so startled when she found there was to be what she called ‘another new man,’ that she ran away and hid herself, I believe. You will see her at dinner, no doubt, which will be ready soon. I ordered it early, as I thought you would be famished after your long ride, and also because I wanted to have a long evening with you, my dear Anthony. You must have much to tell me, and I am impatient to hear it.”

“I have much to say indeed, he” answered, sadly, “and I suppose this one evening will be all the time I shall have for the purpose.”

“One evening!” said Vivian, turning round, astonished, to look in his face; “I hope you will have many. You mean to stay with us some time, I trust?”

“I do not think you will wish me to remain when you have heard all I have to tell you,” said Anthony, so gravely, that Vivian thought it best to say no more until he could learn the meaning of so strange a statement.

The young men were shown to their rooms to prepare for dinner, but Anthony was ready before the hour which had been named, and his restless longing to see Innocentia once again became so uncontrollable, that he went down-stairs without waiting for the usual summons, to try if he could find her. One of the most charming arrangements at Refugium was a large, beautiful conservatory, which opened out from the hall, and was lit with colored lamps in the winter, so that it was one of Innocentia's most favorite resorts when cold weather or the gloom of the winter evening kept her in the house. She had made it the home of some of her tropical birds; and her little gazelle was allowed to pace to and fro there, glancing with his great round eyes at the delicate leaves and flowers he would fain have feasted upon could he have reached them.

Anthony saw that the door of the conservatory stood open

as he came down-stairs, and advancing towards it he suddenly stopped, transfixed by the sight which presented itself before him. His brother Rex was standing at the open door, gazing on some object which seemed to have called forth his most rapturous admiration, for his eyes were brilliant with excitement, his cheeks flushed, and his lips parted in an expression of wonder and delight. Looking a little beyond him, Anthony speedily discovered the cause of the young man's agitation. In the midst of all the rainbow-hued flowers that filled the conservatory, Innocentia stood, with her fair flowing hair, and robes of spotless white, on which the many-colored lamps cast gleams of violet or ruby light. Just behind her a fountain sent its waters high into the air, to fall again like a shower of diamonds as each drop sparkled in the light; and round her fluttered birds with gorgeous plumage, that stooped their red and purple crests to caress her as they passed; while she, surrounded by all this brilliant coloring, white and pure as a lily, looked like some lovely spirit come from a happier world to smile a little while among the flowers of earth.

She, too, was looking towards Rex with a charming expression of innocent pleasure on her fair sweet face, while her blue eyes, half shy, half startled, shone like stars in the brilliant light. How long those two had stood absorbed in admiring contemplation the one of the other it would be hard to say, but the sound of Anthony's footfall broke the spell. Rex turned round, and seeing him, darted towards him, and caught him by the arm.

“Anthony! look—look there at that lovely vision! Who is she? what is she? Not a mere human being surely—a spirit—a fairy! Oh, tell me what she is!” He spoke breathlessly, quite unable to control his excitement, and his brother answered, somewhat impatiently, “It is Miss Vivian, of course. Surely you might have guessed that without talking absurdly of fairies and spirits.”

“But, Anthony,” said Rex, drawing a long breath, “what marvellous beauty! Was there ever anything like her on earth before?”

“She is lovely indeed; but pray do not stand staring at her in that bold fashion; it must be unpleasant to her.”

And at this hint Rex shrunk back with a look of annoyance, remembering that his long fixed gaze at the beautiful girl might really be considered rude.

Anthony, freed from his brother's grasp, went slowly forward into the conservatory to greet Innocentia. His heart was so heavy with the weight of the coming parting which must so soon shut her out in her loveliness from his longing eyes, that he could not hasten to her with the eager joyousness of happier meetings. She, however, was aware of no cause for change, and ran lightly along the marble floor of the conservatory to meet him.

“Oh, Anthony, how happy it makes me to see you again,” she said, as she put both her hands in his; “but tell me quick if that was your brother who stood there just now. Father told me one who is called your brother was coming; but he is not like you. Oh, how different he is! I cannot think he belongs to the same race as the three men I have seen already.”

“Nevertheless, Nina, he is my brother, Reginald Erlesleigh!”

“Then you are happy to have one so beautiful belonging to you,” she said, with her childlike candour.

“You admire him then?” said Anthony, looking into her fair innocent face.

“Oh yes! who could help it? He is like a picture—like that picture my father has of the angel Raphael walking with the young Israelite along the weary road. I have copied it, so I know it well, and your brother's face is fair as that of the angel.”

“Well, Nina, he is a new friend for you,” said Anthony, with a sigh, “let me introduce him to you,” and, as he was turning to call Rex, she caught him by the hand—“Stay, Anthony, you are my friend, and you are very good, and very dear to me. Ought I to have another? Does any person have more than one friend in the world?”

“You will never have one who will be such a friend to you as I am, Nina, though many will claim you by that same sweet name.”

“If it is allowed in the world to have many friends,” she said, half timidly, “I should like your brother to be one—he must be good because he is so beautiful!”

“I am afraid that logic will not hold,” said Anthony, smiling; “but if you wish him to be your friend you will find him thankful to be so with all his power. Rex,” he added, calling his brother, “come and make Miss Vivian's acquaintance,” and the young man came forward, and stood before the girl, devouring every line of her fair face with his admiring eyes.

“I do not understand that name—Miss Vivian!” she said, with a slight air of annoyance. “None have ever called me so—I am Innocentia.”

How well Anthony remembered her saying the same words to him the first day he ever saw her.

“Innocentia?” stammered Rex, looking bewildered.

“Yes,” she said, “and your name is Rex, is it not? Anthony has spoken of you, and now he says we are to be friends—do you agree?” And she held out her delicate hand, which he quickly grasped in his own.

“Oh yes! I am happy beyond words to bear such a name,” he answered, and they stood there a moment clasping each other's hands in silence.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Reginald Erlesleigh and Innocentia Vivian, as they stood hand in hand amid the flowers and lights, certainly formed as charming a living picture as could have been imagined by the most artistic genius. Both were endowed with beauty far above the average, and of much the same type, with their fair hair, blue eyes, and clear, transparent complexion. Yet there was no individual likeness between them. Rex's handsome, well-defined features were essentially manly, while Innocentia looked fragile and delicate beside him. He towered above her in height, and stood bending down to look at her with eloquent admiration in his expressive gaze while she, with her sweet candid face upraised to him,

smiled brightly on the new friend she was so willing to adopt.

It was thus that Vivian saw them as he came into the hall, and he paused for a moment to contemplate the scene, struck with the contrast between that fair young couple standing in the light, and Anthony Beresford, who had drawn back into the shadow, and who seemed with his dark hair and eyes, and bronzed complexion, to belong indeed to another race, as Innocentia had supposed his brother did.

“So you have seen another specimen of the human race, my Nina,” said Vivian, taking her little hand, and drawing her gently towards himself.

“Yes,” she said as Rex loosed his hold; “and, dear father, am I not happy? he too has become my friend.”

“That is well,” said Vivian, lightly, “but, my darling, when the time comes for you to go out into the cold, cruel world, it will not be wise for you to adopt any one as a friend on five minutes' acquaintance.”

“Why not?” she said, while an expression almost of terror stole into her sweet eyes; “are not all friends true? Would any of them hurt me? Oh, father, I hope I shall not soon go into the world, I am so afraid of it!”

“Never mind, dear child, you are safe in Refugium now, and when you do go into the world it shall be under strong protection. Come, in the meantime we must not famish the friends we have got, and these travellers have had nothing to eat yet. Dinner is waiting.”

They all passed together into the pretty room, where the table was spread with every refinement of artistic arrangement which Innocentia's graceful fancy could suggest, and the meal passed off with much gentle merriment, which was due chiefly to Rex's presence. He had a gift of playful humor and brilliant conversational powers which made him a most pleasant companion, and Innocentia's gay laugh rang like soft music in Anthony's ears, as he sat more than usually silent between her and his brother.

When dinner was over, Vivian rose, and begged that Anthony would come with him to his study. “Those two will be very good company to each other for this evening,” he said looking with a smile towards Rex and Innocentia, “and I must have you to myself for some hours. Rex, I must ask you not to startle my child with any revelations from the world, of which she knows nothing. You have much in common without going beyond the walls of Refugium for subjects of conversation. I think you are fond of music, and my Nina sings like a bird.”

“Oh what pleasure it will be to hear her!” exclaimed Rex. “But, Mr. Vivian, you need not fear,” he added, in a whisper unheard by Innocentia, “that I could even dare to say one word which would bring any knowledge of the world to such an angel as she is; it would be like flinging earth's dust on a spotless lily.”

Vivian nodded and smiled, well satisfied by the young man's enthusiasm, and followed Anthony into the study, where he had already gone. He closed the door, and came forward, to find his guest seated in a chair, leaning his head on his hand with an air of deep depression. Vivian sat down, moved away the lamp which stood between them on the table, and looked anxiously for a few moments at Anthony before he spoke.

“Beresford,” he said at last, “I cannot understand you. The fact that you have brought your brother here, evidently full of confidence in yourself, and with a mind most clearly quite at ease, is a sufficient proof that you have perfectly succeeded in your anxious mission, and saved him, not only from Dacre, but from all the evils that were gathering around him. Such being the case, I should have expected to find you radiant with joy and thankfulness, and delighting in your freedom from all the care and anxiety that have weighed on you so long. Instead of that you look like a man crushed down with misery and almost in despair. Tell me what it all means.”

“Only this,” said Anthony, raising his sad eyes to Vivian's face, “that in saving Rex I have lost Innocentia, hopelessly and finally lost that one precious treasure which has become my very light of life. I am thankful for my brother's rescue Heaven knows, and I have shown at what a price I value it by giving as his ransom all that made my hope of happiness on earth; but though I am content it should be so, though I would not undo what I have done for Rex, yet do you think I can look upon the angel face of your dear child knowing that after this night I shall see her never more, without suffering so intensely that I scarce know how I am to endure it.”

“Anthony, Anthony, what on earth do you mean!” exclaimed Vivian, pained beyond measure at the mental agony which was so evidently keenly trying the young man as he spoke. “How can you have lost Innocentia? Surely that depends on me whatever you may have done. Speak, tell me all.”

Then, slowly, Anthony began, and retailed every circumstance of his interview with Dacre, the tremendous price which had been fixed for his brother's rescue, and how he had paid it by giving up every penny he had in the world. “This, then, is the end of the matter,” he continued, turning round his face, haggard with pain, towards Vivian. “I have won my brother's deliverance, and for that I am grateful to the heavenly mercy which has given him into my hand; but I stand before you this day, not a beggar, because I will ask nothing of any man, yet utterly destitute. I have not even the means of a living for myself; that I may gain, perhaps, by breaking stones on the road,” he said, smiling grimly, “or I may scarce take the trouble to support a life which has lost its value; but whatever becomes of me in my abject poverty, I can ask no woman to be my wife either now or in the future. It would be hate, not love, that I should bear your Innocentia, Mr. Vivian, if I dared to mock her by seeking to bind her to my homelessness and misery”—and then he let his head fall on his hand again, and said no more.

Vivian sat looking at him for some time in silence, while his features worked with strong emotion.

“Beresford,” he said at length, “you have restored to me my faith in human nature, which was destroyed by the sin of Francis Erlesleigh so many years ago. I ceased then to