

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Erlesleigh's utterance became choked by the vehemence with which she had spoken, and she paused, gasping for breath. Anthony remained gazing at her in silence, while a look of dismay and almost of terror gradually stole over his face, as he pondered on her last words. He had grown very pale, when at length he spoke.

"Mother," he said, "I do not as yet of course at all understand the nature of the evils you dread for my brother, and therefore I cannot estimate the extent of the service you require at my hands on his behalf. But surely—surely—when you speak of the surrender of my life—the abandonment of all my hopes, you do not intend me to give up the work to which I have dedicated my whole existence? You do not mean that I am to desert the cause of the African slave, for which I have resolved to live, and if need be to die!"

"I do!" she answered, starting from her pillows and clasping her hands with passionate energy. "Is not my Rex more precious to me than all the races of slaves that ever trod the earth? ought he not to be so to you also—his only brother? In any case—know this—that unless you cast aside for ever all your former schemes, and give yourself up to dwell here with my darling, to guide him day by day, and hour, from all the dangers seen and unseen, which shall assail him, you will rob your mother's death-bed of all hope and peace; you will torment me even in that other world, where surely souls remember all they have loved on earth; and, crueller far than any anguish you may bring on me, you will be the destruction of my dear and noble boy; you will turn all the fair promise of his life to bitterest ashes of despair; you will make his fate such that it would have been better for him if he had never been born; aye, and for yourself, too, in your just remorse. Can you hesitate, Anthony Beresford? will you not give me the unreserved promise which I ask? I—your dying mother?"

He gave a heavy sigh, and then said, very gently, "My dear mother, it is impossible that I can make you any answer, far less give you so tremendous a pledge, while I still remain in ignorance of the secret meaning of all that you have said. Tell me what it is you fear for Rex, and how far any protection of mine can avail him, and then I shall endeavor to ascertain in what form God may will to use my life; whether for this cherished child, rich in all the world's best possessions, or for the many thousands who so long have stretched forth their chained hands in vain, appealing for pity, with a claim which I have held to be stronger upon me than any other I have ever known, because as yet, at least, they have no helper. But, dearest mother," he added, "I fear you have not power to speak more now; you seem very faint."

Mrs. Erlesleigh signed to him to give her another glass of the cordial, and when she had taken it, she said feebly, "It is true that strength fails me to tell you all I would have you learn, but death leaves me no time to postpone the revelation; it is well that, little as I thought to leave my Rex for years to come, I yet had sufficient forethought, in the uncertainties of life, to leave a record of all that I would explain to you now if only this panting breath would let me do it." She took a paper from beneath her pillow as she spoke, and put it into Anthony's hand. "You must read this here by my side," she said, "and that without delay, for I cannot bear this anguish of suspense another hour, even if I could be certain that such a space of time would yet be given me on earth. Take it, my son, and read it now, while I follow the glance of your eyes along each line with the passionate pleading of my heart that it may win your compassion for my Rex, and secure for me your pledge to give yourself to him, and to him alone, so long as life shall last for both."

She lay back then on her pillow, folded her hands in an attitude of entreaty, and fixed her eyes on Anthony's troubled face as he unfolded the paper and read the following lines, bearing a date in the summer of the previous year:—

"I, Marian Erlesleigh, write this record with the intention that it shall never be seen, excepting in the improbable event of my sudden death—improbable because I am at present in perfect health and strength—but should I be unexpectedly cut off by any accident, which would leave me no time for final preparations, I then bequeath this paper to the person who, at that time, shall stand in nearest relationship to my dearest son, Reginald Erlesleigh. I pray that it may be his brother, Anthony Beresford; but if he should not survive me, let that one who shall be most closely linked to Reginald by ties of blood read the solemn appeal I shall herein make to him, with all the fatal reasons which render it needful, and then let him show mercy to me and to my darling by granting my request, even as he himself shall hope for mercy in the world to come. Excepting as a provision for sudden death, and that on behalf of the son who is dearer to me than life, I should have never trusted to any written document the facts I am about to record; for I would, in truth, rather cut off my right hand than that they should be known, inasmuch as they refer, alas! to errors committed by my most beloved husband, Francis Erlesleigh. May it not be some excuse for him that the fatal deeds which marred his life and left a stain upon his character, none the less real because it was concealed, were accomplished during the two years of my separation from him, at the period of my marriage, when he was embittered by my dislike, not knowing the falsehood which had caused it, and reckless in all his actions from a sense of hopelessness, and distrust in his fellow-creatures. Yet, alas! I am constrained to admit that the tendency which led him on to deadly evils had been too fully developed before he ever saw me, and that he had given way to his taste for gambling from the time when he first entered the army. No one who has not had experience of this fatal vice can have the least idea of the terrible power which it seems to possess, drawing its victims on from one error to another till it leads them into such crimes as they could never

have believed it possible they should commit, and certainly this was eminently the case with my poor Frank. Up to the time of his separation from me he had never swerved in the least from honour and truth, although he had indulged in his inordinate passion for gaming to an extent which had swallowed all the money he possessed or could obtain from any available source; but there is no stopping short in that career whose fatal fascination can master in the end every principle of right, and quench all better aspirations. Stung to the quick by my abandonment, Frank found that the excitement of the gaming-table had become an imperative necessity, which he must gratify at whatever cost, although he knew then that he had already placed himself in a position which made it impossible for him to do so in any honorable manner—all that he possessed as a younger son was gone, his elder brother, who had refused to help him any more, was still alive, and engaged to be married, so that he could not even raise money on his expectations as his possible heir, and he was, besides, largely in debt.

"Precisely at this juncture, by that fatality which causes a sudden temptation to start up at the very moment when it is calculated to be most attractive and most easy of execution, an opportunity offered itself to my poor husband of obtaining a large sum of money with which he imagined he could repair all his losses; according to the gambler's hopeful creed, which satisfied him that the tide of fortune was certain to turn in his favor after the long continued ill-luck which had brought him down so low. He could not resist the mad imperious longing to become possessed of this sum that seemed to be his only chance of salvation from utter ruin; but—oh, that I should have to write it!—the mode by which it was to be obtained was nothing less than a fraud, involving not himself only, but also, without their knowledge, two of his most intimate friends. One of these—Henry Vivian—was the person whom, next to myself, he had perhaps always loved the best. They had been companions at school and college, and were then brother officers, and the attachment which bound Vivian to Frank was especially deep and tender, such as a man might feel for a favorite brother, to whom all his confidence and trust was given. With Dacre, Frank's friendship was of a more ordinary kind, though circumstances had drawn them into a good deal of intimacy; but my darling husband was indeed beloved by the whole of his brother officers, and by all who knew him, for there never was a man who exercised greater fascination upon others, or who possessed more charming qualities, despite his one great fault.

"I cannot bring myself to enter into the details of the fraud by which my poor misguided Frank did, after long struggling with his sense of honor, at last obtain the money he coveted. His own name was sheltered by the nature of the transaction; and of this I am certain—that if he had been aware that greater risk attached to the reputation of his friends, he never would have let himself be drawn into the fatal net, whatever might have been his doom without the help it gave; he believed, in truth, that his friends would never know their names had been used—that he should gain a hundredfold more than he had taken, and would repay to all the double of what they had lost, till there remained not a trace of his secret swiftly repaired crime; all these expectations failed most hopelessly; a few nights' play, when his persistent ill-luck followed him, and his own recklessness, increased with every disappointment, was sufficient to deprive him of the vast sum for which he had sinned so deeply; and ruin, dire and complete, came down on him alone, but on his two friends, who by some untoward circumstances were believed to be the really guilty persons, while Frank was supposed to be only innocently made to share in their machinations. He attempted to make the truth known, that the reprobation freely given to them might fall upon himself, but his self-accusations were not believed, and just at that time the death of his elder brother from an accident in Egypt, where he was travelling, obliged Frank to leave England suddenly for the East, and when he returned—no longer the ruined younger son, but the possessor of Darksmeare and all its wealth—the false results of his fault had overtaken both Dacre and Vivian, they had been dismissed the service, and had disappeared, overwhelmed with ruin and disgrace."

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Erlesleigh had been watching the expression of Anthony's face with increasing anxiety as he read the painful record it had cost her so much to write, and at this point in her narrative there was no mistaking the look of indignation and disgust with which he learnt that his stepfather had not only perpetrated a fraud, but one of which the discovery had brought punishment upon the innocent and left unscathed the guilty. She trembled before the just wrath that gleamed from his clear, honest eyes, and caught his hand suddenly in hers. "Anthony, Anthony! it is not for man to avenge the sins of the fathers on the children. Oh, let not the errors of my husband, buried with him long since in the grave—let them not steel your heart against my Rex; he is innocent—as yet, at least!"

"Do you not know, mother, that I hate injustice?" said Anthony, almost sternly. "I trust that I shall never deal unjustly by any one, far less by my brother and your son."

"Read on then," she said, falling back on her pillow, "it is only Rex that I can hope to shelter now. You will condemn my poor husband, I know; but I am going to him," she continued, stretching out her arms with a gesture of longing. "I who have never ceased to love him, who ever forgot that he was guilty to remember only that he was intensely dear, my faithfulness can reach him still, although no earthly censure can disturb him any more. I yield his memory, then, to your severity, if only you will be tender to my helpless living son."

Anthony did not answer, but silently resumed his task. The record continued thus:—

"My husband returned from the Continent, to be received by his tenants with enthusiasm. They were well pleased to exchange his brother, who had always been an absentee, for a squire who promised to reside permanently amongst them. The sad error of which I have spoken had been committed

in a remote part of Ireland, where he had been stationed with his regiment, and while still abroad he had heard indirectly of the discovery of the whole affair; of the ruin which had overtaken his friends, and the singular chance by which he himself had escaped detection, and, finally, of the total disappearance of both Vivian and Dacre. Had these two men not placed themselves thus absolutely beyond his reach, my husband assured me that he would have confessed the whole truth, to his own utter misery, in order to clear them from the cruel disgrace which had fallen upon them so unjustly; but, although he secretly made every possible effort to find them, he could obtain no clue whatever to their place of concealment. The affair had been but a nine days' wonder even in the locality where it had taken place, and soon the whole circumstances, and even the very names of Dacre and Vivian, ceased to be mentioned or remembered. Frank believed, therefore, that no confession of his could reach them or benefit them any more, and he had not the moral courage to criminate himself with no result so far as they were concerned; and with the certainty that he would thereby put an end for ever to all the hopes of happiness that were even then opening out so brightly before him—for he and I had met again—both free, both faithful, and we had learnt the unworthy falsehoods which had kept us apart, and were looking forward to a life of unutterable joy together; but lest those who may read this record after my death, should too harshly condemn my beloved husband, let me state in his favor that to me he confided all the truth of his past errors. Surely it is a trait that speaks well for him, despite his faults, that he told me plainly he would not marry me unless I knew him in his worst aspect, though to lose me would be more terrible to him than death itself.

"I was shocked indeed when I heard of what he had been guilty, but ah! I loved him so devotedly that even greater crimes than his could not have availed to tear my heart away from him. I had known of his fatal taste for gambling from the commencement of my acquaintance with him, and if it had not then deterred me from yielding to the intense fascination which he exercised over me, it was not likely that even the knowledge of the dark fruit it had borne, would estrange me from him just when I was revelling in the happiness of having found him all my own once again, after our cruel separation. I did, however, make one condition, in consequence of his confession, before I consented to our union, and that was that he should take a solemn vow to abstain from gambling for the rest of his life. He took the oath, and he kept it; but I must, for my Rex's dear sake, tell all the truth, and, therefore, I own that Frank's passion for this fatal vice was so irresistible that I believe he would have yielded to it again had I not literally put it out of his power to do so, by guarding him incessantly through my own constant presence from the slightest power of indulging his terrible desire to have the dice in his hand once more. I insisted that we should live always at Darksmeare, knowing that in London I could not have watched over him with the same persistent care, and I would not allow a single person to be invited to the house who would have been capable of tempting him to gamble. I offended many of his old friends by this conduct; and he himself would have resented it had he not loved me so fondly that all I did seemed right in his eyes; but I gained my object, I did keep him from his terrible vice during the remainder of his life. Had his term of existence been less sadly brief I doubt if even I should have had power to restrain him. But, alas! our perfect happiness was destined to be fleeting as the summer sunshine, and in the very midst of its cloudless brightness that dark day dawned which consigned my darling to the grasp of a cruel death, and me to a living wretchedness which has known no abatement of its passionate regret up to this hour. He was gone—the light of my eyes and desire of my heart—and I was fain to have followed him and joined him swiftly in his tomb, but for his son's sake I lived, and for that son alone I have told the secret of his errors, which no tortures should have wrung from me for any other reason; but without this explanation the dangers which threaten Rex would never be understood in all their significance.

"I knew nothing of the perils lurking in the future for my beloved son till one day, when Francis Erlesleigh had lain in the grave about three weeks, I received a letter in a handwriting which I did not know, and found, to my amazement that it was from Henry Vivian. I had known both him and Richard Dacre at the time of my acquaintance with Frank, before my first marriage, and I knew that they presented a singular contrast to each other in every respect. Vivian was a noble character, generous, open-handed, confiding, a thorough gentleman in mind as well as by birth, but with a most sensitive disposition, and a good deal of eccentricity in his tastes and fancies. Dacre, on the contrary, had begun life in a somewhat low station, without fortune or connections who could help him, and by his own exertions and an indomitable resolution, which he was prepared to carry out with a total disregard of principle, he rose from the ranks to the position he then occupied as an officer in the army; he was clever and cunning, heartless and perfectly unscrupulous, and I well remember my poor Frank telling me one day that he had never known any man who could exercise such a concentrated power of malignant hatred against those who offended him as Richard Dacre. Well was it for my husband that he died before he learnt, as I did, how terribly this statement was to be verified in his own case.

"Henry Vivian commenced his letter to me without any date, and he had taken care to have it sent to me through some private medium, so that I should not know from what part of the world it came. He said that tidings had reached him of the death of Francis Erlesleigh; and since the grave had closed in such sad and sudden fashion over the man who had been first his dearest friend, and then his cruellest enemy, he would not address to me, a widow, and desolate, the words of just opprobrium and abhorrence which my husband's conduct had so justly deserved. Only, in defence of such peace as that treacherous fraud had left him, he must explain to me what the consequences of it had been to himself, and the position to which it had reduced him now. The baneful effects of a crime, once committed, he said, were never limited to what might be supposed to be their immediate result, but went on in still widening circles, as