

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER VIII.

Anthony Beresford had read to the last line of the document, which he felt had been written in the full belief that it would be seen by him and by him alone, and that from none other but himself would an answer be demanded to the solemn appeal with which it closed. He folded it up, laid it on a table by his side, and then, turning round towards his mother, he slowly raised his beautiful hazel eyes, and fixed them full upon her face. There had been a change during that last momentous hour when all the failing powers of her departing life had been strained to endure the tension of her terrible suspense, and the ominous grey shadow had crept now even over the eyes that seemed to look at him as through a veil. Her pale lips moved, but in her intense anxiety she failed to make any articulate sound. She joined her hands as in convulsive entreaty, and then lay silent and gasping.

It was a piteous sight, and Anthony was touched to the heart. He bent towards her, and spoke calmly and distinctly. "Mother, believe me that I feel for you in your cruel anxiety for your son with all my soul. If I do not at once relieve it by making you any promise, it is because the issues of the question as it now stands are to me of such tremendous importance that I dare not, even for your sake, answer hastily. I see perfectly well that if I accede to your demand I can only do so at the cost of a life-long sacrifice—a sacrifice that will not affect myself alone in the destruction of all my dearest hopes, but that will influence the destiny of many a hapless being, whom I might have had power to rescue from intolerable misery."

She interrupted him with a gesture of passionate entreaty, while a violent effort forced the words from her lips—"My Rex, my Rex—save him!"

He was all the world to her, in the hour of death as he had been in the days of life. She could give no thought to Anthony, or to the suffering thousands whom he had hoped to succour. She could only cling with desperate tenacity to the mortal existence that was passing from her, till she had won for her darling the boon she coveted, be the cost what it might.

"Give me a little time, dear mother," said Anthony, beseechingly. "I must weigh well all that your request involves before I answer you."

"Time!" she almost shrieked out. "What time is left to me? I am dying—soon it will be too late. Anthony—Anthony—as you would have peace when your own death hour comes, grant my prayer!"

He rose, and, tenderly placing his arms round her, he laid her back on the pillows, from which she had started, saying, gently, "Wait only a very few minutes longer, dearest mother, and you shall have my decision."

"Do not leave me," she exclaimed, clutching at his arm with the failing fingers that had no power to grasp it.

"I have no thought of doing so," he said, "I shall not quit the room;" then as she lay back passively, he went aside into the recess formed by the bow window, where he could feel himself to be alone for the few brief instants in which he must settle the question on which his whole future destiny depended. He stood with his arms folded on his breast, and his eyes almost unconsciously fixed upon the scene before him. It was about the same hour of the morning as that of the day before when he had been looking down from the mountain side over the fair Welsh landscape which had scarcely been more lovely than the view that now lay stretched beneath his gaze—far beyond the pleasure of his noble trees, and the green fields through which the river ran, he could see the sleeping waters of the deep still lake from which Darksme took its name; it lay in a hollow so that the hills on the one side, and the wood on the other, overshadowed it completely, and made it in truth a dark mere, which the sunshine seldom touched, while the solitude that surrounded it was unbroken for many miles. The contrast between this sullen gloomy lake, lying motionless within its narrow boundary, and the bright blue ocean wide and free that had sparkled beneath his eyes the day before, seemed to strike Anthony forcibly as bearing a singular analogy to the strangely different destinies which a few hours had placed before him, with the certainty that he must now make his irrevocable choice between them.

The golden vision which had shone on the horizon of his hopes when he stood on the mountain side had seemed to offer him a life of boundless energy and independent action, with sympathies wide as that ocean, and powers free as its waves that onward led to distant lands, bearing sunshine and fresh pure air upon its breast where thousands might rejoice in its brightness and its freedom; but the life to which his mother would bind him down in her exclusive care, for her youngest born would be as restricted and isolated in its power of good as was that lonely lake within its narrow bed, while the dark dead waters that never leaped up to the storm or smiled to the sunbeams were indeed a fit emblem of the dull monotony of petty cares that would make up his existence from day to day if he gave himself to be nothing more henceforward save the unwelcome guardian of one weak boy. It was very certain that Rex, already grown to an age when he had a right to liberty of action and the control of his own property, would not desire the perpetual supervision of an older brother, or easily endure it, and the whole aspect of the existence that must be his if he yielded to his mother's prayer, made Anthony Beresford grow sick at heart as he contemplated it with a certain foresight, while his eyes still rested on the solitary lake, but it was only for a moment that he allowed himself to look at the matter as it affected his own happiness. "No," he said to himself, "was not the question. God had given him a life wherewith to serve Him, and he was bound to discover after what manner he could best and most surely render it back to the Giver,

in worthy and fruitful service. He had believed that a career had opened out before him which would have been most blessed and most glorious, alike for himself and many others; and now another path was shown him by the dying hand of his mother, where he could see neither glory nor blessing, but only the passive duty of standing between his younger brother and a possible danger. Surely it was nobler and more divine to unloose the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free, to respond to the appeal of many-voiced anguish that rose forever from the slave-lands rather than to waste his youth and strength in guarding that one young man from an unseen enemy. Why should not Rex suffice to himself as other men were fain to do, and fight his own way through the trials and temptations which in some form or other dog the steps of every human being upon earth? why must Anthony fling all his life away upon him, and desert the cause of thousands for his sake? What better claim had Rex upon him than the fact that he was the son of a mother who had never loved him, and had not each one of these many slaves a stronger plea in their utterly defenceless misery?

Almost had Anthony turned round to tell his mother that he would warn Rex, and send him earnest counsel from his distant home, but that even at her prayer he could not give up his cherished dream, when it seemed to him as if a voice whispered in his ear, with mocking emphasis—"Am I my brother's keeper?" He started, as he remembered by whom those words were uttered, and while he stood irresolute, another sentence came sounding through his soul in that mysterious manner which most of us have experienced in the hour of temptation—"It is not the wish of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." "One of these little ones!" Even so. Was it not certain that one single soul was so precious in the sight of God that a thousand lives were well bestowed to rescue it from sin? Had not the one Life, which was of more value than that of all the human race, been given for each single soul? and was Anthony to withhold his own when it was claimed from him by the close tie of blood, wherewith God had bound them to each other, and the solemn obligation of a mother's death-bed prayer? Had there not been pride and arrogance in the idea that his work was required for the deliverance of the slaves whom their Father in heaven could set free at a word, if such were his good pleasure? "The work that is done upon earth He doeth it Himself." He might have permitted to Anthony the privilege of serving him by acts of mercy to the slave, if he had set no nearer duty before him to hold him with a prior and an irresistible claim. Rex had been given him as a brother, who sorely needed his support, before ever his eyes had fallen upon the dusky faces of the alien race that could claim no kindred with him. For a moment Anthony bowed his face on his hand, while his breast heaved with the struggle his inward resolution cost him; but when, with determined will, he had cast out of his heart the golden dream, the generous hope, that had been his light of life for three bright years, he slowly raised his eyes to heaven, and, folding his hands in calm submission, said, softly—"So be it, Father; I will be my brother's keeper."

Anthony Beresford's face was very pale when he turned to go back to the bedside of his dying mother, but it was beautiful with a serenity of peace such as it had never worn before—the peace of self-renunciation and pure devotion.

Mrs. Erlesleigh was lying just as he had left her, with such an agony of suspense marked in every line of her wan face that he blamed himself for his delay, short as had really been the interval in which so momentous a decision had been made. She turned her failing eyes toward him with a mute questioning, piteous in its entreaty, but she did not speak.

Then he knelt down at her side and pressed his lips upon her cold white hand, as he said, in a clear, sweet voice, "Be at rest, my dearest mother, with all the rest that I can give you; for I grant your request to its fullest extent. I renounce now and for ever all other hopes and schemes of life, and I give myself to you to be the guardian and friend and protector of your son, my only brother, so long as we both shall live."

A flood of joy, like the light of morning breaking on the cold grey sky, lit up the face of the dying woman as she raised her arms, and cried out aloud, "Oh Anthony, my son, may God for ever bless you!"

CHAPTER IX.

For a moment there was silence between those two—the son who in the prime of his youth and strength had surrendered all he held most dear to give that death-bed peace, and the mother who in the last hour of her mortal existence had not scrupled to take from his young life the one pure hope that gave it brightness.

Anthony remained kneeling, with his head bowed upon the dying woman's hand, and she was struggling with the emotion which made her failing heart beat so convulsively as almost to stop her breathing, in order that she might give him some last instructions, now that his obedience was secured. After a time she gathered up all her remaining strength, and spoke.

"I must see Rex in your presence, Anthony, but before you call him, I must ask of you a pledge that you will never reveal to him the contents of the paper you have read. I have been compelled to reveal to you the errors of my darling husband, though it was agony to do it—but it would be the cruellest treachery to him if I ever let that fatal knowledge come to his own young son. I have taught Rex unceasingly to love and revere his father's memory, and by no act of mine, living or dead, shall it ever be darkened for him with the faintest shadow of dishonour. Give me this promise also, Anthony, my good dear son, in addition to that which has made my last hour happy."

"After what you have won from me already, mother," he said, with a sad smile, "there can remain nothing I should wish to refuse you. Only I would have you consider for a moment whether it is wise to exact this pledge from me. Is not his danger likely to be much greater if he never knows he has an enemy? May it not become necessary for his

own safety that I should warn him of Dacre's insidious plans?"

"Not if he has you to guard him; you know all, and will stand between him and his secret foe. He will be safer when you have the responsibility of his well-being than he could be acting for himself, with his weak judgment and confiding disposition; nor could I ever consent that his young life should be poisoned by the knowledge that a deadly enemy was for ever following him unseen, and mysterious perils lurking about his path with which he could not grapple. Had I not the far stronger motive of sheltering my husband's memory from the contempt, and, it may be, the abhorrence of his son, I still could not endure to quench all the brightness of my poor boy's youth, and crush his buoyant unsuspecting nature by the cruel revelations I have been constrained to make to you. Let him enjoy his light-hearted freedom, his unclouded hopes, while still the radiant dreams of youth can deck his unknown destiny with golden light. Not long will either youth or hope endure for any on this earth; let my poor Rex smile out his time unassayed by the clouds which we can see afar off gathering together to assail him."

"So be it, mother, I will obey you," said Anthony, calmly, feeling that this last request did but render somewhat heavier the burden she had laid upon him. Rex was to be left free and happy in his thoughtless youth, while Anthony, weighted with a terrible secret, was to have no respite night nor day from sleepless anxiety and unceasing watchfulness, lest evil should creep unseen into his brother's joyous life, but he was too true, in his generous devotion, to shrink from any condition that would make his sacrifice more complete, and he was rewarded by the look of complete rest with which his mother sunk back and closed her eyes.

Presently, however, she said, in a faint voice, "I feel very weak, and my sight is growing dim, let Rex come to me without delay."

Anthony went quickly to the door, and bade the nurse call his brother.

She had not far to go, for Rex had been waiting in an adjoining room, impatient and miserable, and, in spite of himself, jealous of his brother for monopolizing so exclusively their mother's last hours on earth.

Mrs. Erlesleigh's fatal illness had brought to her youngest born the first pang of real sorrow he had ever known. Hitherto he had led a careless, happy life, thinking of nothing save his own amusement, and feeling himself so absolutely—as his mother often playfully called him—the king of Darksme, that he appeared to expect even the vicissitudes of human destiny to be subject to his will, and that his whole existence was to pass in cloudless sunshine, as his early years had passed already. He had scarcely known, perhaps, how much his mother's ceaseless devotion to his happiness had really added to it, or how sharp would be the pain of final severance from the one person who had drawn out his affections, till he found himself about to lose her, and then he rebelled like a child against the unwonted suffering that had come upon him, and secretly held himself to be unjustly treated in being made to endure it.

Rex Erlesleigh was habitually swayed by feelings rather than by principles, for he had a loving, impulsive nature, without either strength of character or intellectual power, and although hitherto, under his mother's watchful care, it had mattered little that his actions never sprang from any deeper source than the fancy of the moment, it was very certain that when at last he had to engage in the real battle of life, it would depend entirely on the influences that had most attraction for him whether his impulses would tend to good or evil.

He came hurrying along the passage towards his mother's room so soon as he was called, with his fair face flushed with anger and impatience, and his blue eyes full of tears. He pushed aside the nurse, who had opened the door for him, and went quickly up to his mother's bedside, exclaiming, petulantly, "I think you are very unkind, Anthony, to have kept me away from our mother so long."

"Ah, not unkind, my darling," said Mrs. Erlesleigh, turning her dim eyes upon him with a passionate fondness in their gaze, which seemed piteous indeed in that parting hour; "he has been kinder than words can tell to me, and he will be to you, too, my Rex; in future he will take my place in caring for you when I am gone."

"I do not want any one but you," he answered, with a burst of grief. "Why are you taken from me when I need you so much; it is all very hard upon me, and I do not know how to bear it!"

The dying woman sighed heavily.

"Darling, heaven knows I do not leave you willingly. I scarce believed that any power could tear me from you; but Death is too strong for me, his grasp is on my heart; I must go. My Rex, my son, I shall see your angel face no more. I scarce can see it now. I have called you to hear my last words, to receive my last injunctions. I may trust you to remember them, may I not, my child?"

"Oh yes, mother, if there is anything I can do to please you still, I gladly will, tell me only what you wish."

"I wish that you should take your brother Anthony to be your friend and guide and counsellor, to trust him as you have trusted me, and follow his advice in all respects, as if my voice still spoke to you through his lips; he will love you truly, Rex—though it cannot be with such a love as I have given you—and he will labor wisely for your happiness; if only you will let him walk ever by your side through all the years of life that yet may wait upon you. Promise me, my Rex, that you will never part from your brother Anthony."

"I should be ready enough to promise that, dear mother, for I shall be so lonely and wretched without you I should be thankful indeed to have him near me, but you know I cannot hold him here against his will, and he means to spend his life in Africa, do you not, Anthony?"

"Not now," said Anthony, softly.

"No, Rex," said Mrs. Erlesleigh, "your noble brother has given up his cherished scheme for your dear sake. I could not die in peace until I had his pledge to stay always by your side, for you will find that life is harder and more difficult by far than you imagine, and you will surely need a friend, let him be that to you, my Rex, in every hour that