

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MORE THAN CONQUEROR.

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

CHAPTER XLIV.

Mr. Vivian left Anthony's room at last, greatly re-assured and comforted so far as the young man himself was concerned, but with regret greater than he had yet experienced, that his daughter's choice should have fallen upon Reginald Erlesleigh rather than upon his high-souled brother. "Anthony Beresford is one in a thousand," he said to himself, "and it would indeed have been a crown of blessing to my darling had her life been linked to his; but she has shown herself a true woman in succumbing to the fascination of Rex's beautiful face and attractive manners, without discerning how immeasurably his weak commonplace character is inferior to that of his noble brother. Well, the poor slaves in Africa may thank her for her mistaken estimate of the two men. My generous-hearted Anthony will have a far grander career amongst them than he could have had as her happy husband."

So soon as Anthony found himself alone he drew from his writing-case the two letters written by Vera Saxby, which he had not as yet taken the trouble to read. While his mind had been entirely engrossed with Innocentia he had thought nothing of Africa or the slaves, and therefore the letters had been without interest to him. But now any information which bore on the work in which he hoped soon to be engaged was important to him, and he began eagerly to read them through. Anthony had rather a prejudice against Miss Saxby, as a strong-minded, bold woman; but he could not help being pleased with her frank, unpretending account of the work she had undertaken. She told him first, with almost childish glee, that she had nearly mastered the difficulties of the Swaheli language, and could speak it now sufficiently well to be understood by the natives. Then she described how she had opened a home for the reception of young slave girls and children who might be rescued from the traders by workers in the interior, and how she tried first to make them happy, and to gain their love, and then endeavored to teach them the faith of Christ; but in both her letters she spoke with deep grief of the feebleness of the efforts that were made for the suppression of this iniquitous traffic, and the deliverance of those who had fallen victims to it already. The treaty which had been made by England with the Sultan of Zanzibar would, she said, give the greatest facilities to any who might be willing to devote themselves to this cause. "But it is men we want," she continued, "and we have not got them; nor do I see any prospect of persons devoting themselves to this work in the future. I know, from what my father told me, that you must have been right, Mr. Beresford, in remaining at home to perform some nearer duty there, only I can never cease to regret that such should have been the will of God, for even one man with such devotion and energy as I think you would have given to the work, might have saved so many from a dreadful fate. I often wish I were a man myself—women can do so little in such a struggle with the powers of evil as awaits all Christians here. But even if I had a brother under whose protection I could go—should not hesitate to travel myself into the interior, and snatch away some poor children from death or misery, to find a shelter in my home. At present I can only care for the few who come to me more as occasional waifs and strays, picked up in the streets of Zanzibar, than, as they ought to be, a steady stream of released captives, saved by systematic efforts from the great ocean of misery that lies almost unvisited in the interior of this unhappy country. Mr. Beresford, since you cannot come to the rescue yourself, will you try to find other men, earnest and true, who might be induced to emigrate to Africa, and enter on this mission of mercy under the favorable conditions which have been gained for it by the treaty? It would repay them amply in a glorious harvest of souls for any sacrifice they might make in leaving their native land. Oh, how thankful I should be if you could send us even one!"

"Well, Vera," said Anthony, smiling to himself as he folded up her last letter, which concluded with these words—"You shall have one worker at least, and that right speedily."

All his former enthusiasm had revived with re-doubled strength after he had read Miss Saxby's plain, straightforward account of the magnificent field of labor that was lying waste in that burning land for lack of Christ's servants to cultivate it in His name.

Anthony felt as if he should have liked to have sailed for Africa that same day, but he knew that some weeks must elapse before he could even have strength for the voyage, and there was much to be done before he could take a final leave of his country. He resolved, however, to waste no time in beginning at least to make his arrangements, and when Rex came in to visit him later in the day, he gently told him that he had returned to his former plan of life, and intended to settle in Africa as soon as possible. He was surprised to find how greatly his young brother was moved by the tidings. He exclaimed in dismay at the idea of Anthony thus going into voluntary exile, and being lost to them all at home.

"But, dear Rex," said Anthony, "I have only gone back to the deliberate purpose I formed in our mother's life-time. You did not object to it then."

"No, because I had not learnt half your value in those days, brother; you were always very dear to me, but all that you have done for me since then has deepened my affection for you, as it could not fail to do, and even now I do not know all that I owe to you, for no one has ever consented to tell me by what sacrifice you induced Dacre to abandon his hold on me."

"That need not trouble you, Rex, for the price such as it was—in money, at least—has been nearly all restored to me. You know that Richard Dacre is dead, do you not?"

"Yes," Mr. Vivian told me of it, and of the change which

was effected in him by his acquaintance with you. What a contrast between yourself and me, Anthony. You influenced him for good as much as he moved me to evil. I think I may well regret to part for life with such a brother."

"Rex, you have Innocentia!" said Anthony, in a low tone, which showed how much those words could still convey to him.

"Yes I know; I cannot pretend that even your absence will make me really unhappy while I have that precious darling; but it is just because I am myself so supremely blest that I cannot bear the idea of your going away alone to a cheerless life of hardship and toil. I should like you to stay with us and share our happiness, so far as it is possible."

"Rex, that would not be happiness for me," said Anthony, giving a convulsive shudder, as he thought of the daily agony it would be for him to live with Innocentia as his brother's wife. "I could not endure it for a day."

"But why?" said Rex, surprised.

"Do not ask me! There is much in my mind which I cannot explain to you—only if your anxiety is for my happiness, dear brother, you may rest quite satisfied that I am taking the best means to promote it by going to Africa. I look forward to it, I believe, as longingly as you do to your marriage, and I anticipate a joy and peace in my existence there which life could not have given me in any other way."

"Well, if it is indeed happiest for you, Anthony, I cannot wish it otherwise."

"There is no question on that point, and I am impatient of this weakness of body which still holds me back. If I were strong enough to follow my own pleasure I should start to-day."

"What!—before our marriage!" exclaimed Rex. "Anthony, what are you thinking of? You must be at our wedding, of course?"

A grey shade passed over Anthony's face from some sharp internal pang at these words. He did not speak for a moment, and then said, with an effort, "Rex, I had no intention of being present at your marriage; it is not necessary; you will have all your other relations and friends."

"And what are all my other relations put together in comparison with you, my only brother?" Anthony, I never before thought you unkind or wanting in affection for me, but all that you have done for me before will cease to be for me any proof of your love, if you inflict so great a slight and pain upon me as would be your refusal to be present at the greatest event of my life."

"Brother, you cannot doubt my love for you," said Anthony, taking his hand, "but I wish you would not ask this of me. Believe me, I have weighty reasons for not wishing to attend the ceremony of your marriage. My heart can be with you in all good wishes just the same."

"I do not care what reasons you have," said Rex, passionately flinging back his hand. "I shall consider it an insult to Innocentia, and an unbrotherly act towards myself, if you absent yourself on such an occasion. It is the last kindness we shall ask of you, as you are going into a final exile, and I shall conclude that you are completely indifferent to us both if you refuse me."

Indifferent! How little the shallow nature of Reginald Erlesleigh could understand the man he was torturing as he spoke; but Anthony saw that he had one more sacrifice to make to this favored brother.

"That is enough, Rex," he said, "it shall be as you wish. When is your marriage to take place?"

"In three months," he answered, eagerly. "That has just been settled to-day. We never could get Mr. Vivian to fix a time before, but now he has quite consented that we should be married on the first of July, which is Innocentia's birthday. She will be eighteen then."

"I will make my arrangements, then, to sail, if possible, on the second of July, and I will be present at your wedding on the previous day."

"Ah, now you are reasonable," said Rex. "That plan will do very well. Since you must you could not choose a better time, for Innocentia and I mean to go to Darksmere for our honeymoon."

"And it will be better that I should be out of the way," said Anthony, with a sad smile.

"We shall want the place to ourselves, you know," said Rex, laughing. "But it will only be for one fortnight; Mr. Vivian says he cannot be separated from Nina longer than that. Poor child, how surprised she will be at all she will see in the great outside world, as she calls it."

"Yes, it will be a very great change for her," said Anthony, "but she could not remain shut up here much longer."

"No, I confess it seems to me a most fantastic fancy on Vivian's part to have immured her all her life in this place, although I myself have reaped the benefit of it. Perhaps if she had mixed with her fellow-creatures like the rest of us she might have chosen to marry some other man instead of myself. It makes me almost shudder to think how I should have hated any one who had taken her from me."

"It is well that there is none such to rouse your hatred," said Anthony, with a faint smile.

"Well, I must go," said Rex; "I hear my darling singing in the garden to tell me she is waiting for me. By-the-way, Anthony, she is quite anxious to have you down-stairs amongst us all again. Are you not well enough now to leave your room?"

"Scarcely," he answered.

And on the next occasion when he saw Vivian, Anthony told him that it was his special wish not to see Innocentia again until he left the house, which he intended to do so soon as he was able to travel. He had promised, he said, to be present at the wedding, though Vivian at least would know, if none other did, what it would cost him; but to be in familiar intercourse with her as one of the family was more than he had courage to undertake.

"I will bid her farewell as I leave your door, if she is standing there so that I cannot avoid it," he said; "but more than this neither you nor Rex must ask of me."

Vivian's only desire was to spare him as much as possible in every way, so he was ready to agree to whatever he wished.

For another fortnight Anthony remained in his own rooms at Refugium, occupying himself in writing to Vera, Captain Saxby, and others, in order to get all in readiness for his immediate departure for Africa so soon as the wedding was over. He had resolved to spend the interval at Darksmere, where he had a good deal of personal property to dispose of, and when at last a day came on which he felt equal to the journey, he prepared to leave Refugium for ever.

CHAPTER XLV.

Vivian knew how much Anthony dreaded the idea of seeing Innocentia, and kept her in ignorance of the time of his departure. Rex had ridden down to the village whence the coach started for Penzance, to secure places for his brother in the early morning, as Anthony, though quite convalescent, was not yet strong enough to do more than ride the distance between Refugium and the village.

Vivian left Innocentia in her own sitting-room when he came to tell Anthony that his horse had been brought round; and in silence they walked together through the hall and down the flight of marble steps that led to the grounds. Anthony mounted at once, and Vivian went by his side, with his hand on the horse's neck, as far as the gate, feeling too keenly the pain of losing him to be able to speak. There he parted from him, trying to look cheerful as he reminded him that they would at least meet once again when the wedding took place. Then Vivian went back, and closed the gate.

Anthony went on alone. He was leaving Refugium for ever, and he had not courage to take so much as a last look of the beautiful spot that had been to him as an earthly paradise. His head drooped on his breast, and he rode on without raising his eyes.

Suddenly he heard a soft, sad cry, and the sound of the gate swung open by a hasty hand; then the rushing of light feet along the way by which he had come, in another instant a flying white figure had caught his horse's bridle, and stopped its progress, while Innocentia's little hand was clapping his, and her blue eyes looking up reproachfully in his face.

"Oh, Anthony, is it possible you could mean to go away without taking leave of me—you, my friend?"

"Dear Innocentia," he said, his voice trembling, "farewells are very sad, and do no good. I did not forget you; and you know we shall meet again—at your wedding."

"Yes; but they say it will be the very last time, and that you are going quite away after that—to a distant country where we shall never see you any more. I do not want you to go, Anthony. You know I asked you long ago to stay with me always, to be my friend, and now much more, my brother, and you promised you would."

"That was before you had Rex, Nina. Have you not all you require for your happiness when you have him?"

"Ah yes, indeed I have. My own Rex! You cannot suppose I meant that he is not all in all to me. Only for yourself it seems sad that you should go away from us all, and never see your own land again."

"For me it is best and happiest, Innocentia. I wished to go long before I ever knew you, and I wish it now far more."

"Do you?" she said, "then I must wish it too, for I only want you to be happy. As to me, I am happy beyond what words can ever tell, because I have my Rex. It is to you I owe him, dear Anthony; but for you I should never have known him. You brought him here, and gave him to me, and for that I shall ever thank you in my heart."

"Yes, he has been my gift to you," said Anthony, softly, "and may he bring you all that life can know of happiness!" For one moment he laid his hand gently on her fair head, as she leant against his horse's neck, with all her shining hair sweeping over it—one last look he bent down into her beautiful eyes, and then he said, more to himself than to her, "Here it must end—farewell, Innocentia!"

She seemed to feel that she must detain him no longer; she stood back from the path and watched wistfully, as, without another word, he urged his horse onwards, and went his way.

He did not turn his head again till he reached a point where the walls of Refugium were visible for the last time; then he looked back, and saw that the lovely white figure had disappeared from the path. There was only the barren heath and the white line of the enclosure which he had first seen from that spot before he had looked on the beautiful face of Innocentia Vivian. He strained his eyes towards it till they grew dim with a mist of tears, and something like a sob was wrung from him by the pang that went through his brave, true heart, as he turned away at last to see the home of his lost love no more forever.

Anthony's parting with Rex before the coach started which was to take him to Penzance was much less trying than these last words with Innocentia. Rex could think of nothing but the blissful fact that when he saw his brother again it would be on the day of his wedding; and it was evident enough that he was far too entirely occupied with the prospect of then carrying off his beautiful bride, to feel even the smallest pang in the knowledge that his marriage-day would be also that on which he would take a final leave of his only brother.

There was a great sense of peace for Anthony in the conviction, which formed itself upon him, that his departure for Africa, never, as he believed, to return, would take nothing whatever from the happiness of those he left behind him. The certainty that if any one suffered from the separation it would be himself alone, seemed to take away the sting from his own great pang, and from that moment Anthony set himself cheerfully to make his preparations for the journey, and allowed himself no more regrets, even in his secret heart.

He went to Darksmere, and took up his abode again in the pretty rooms which he had occupied for so few nights, and where he had thought to spend his life. He remembered with what a strange foreboding he had looked back at the old castle when he was on his way to London, following Rex and Dacre, and expecting to return in a day or two. He had experienced a sensation then as if he were to return no more, and so it was that he did but come back to bid the