

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XXVI.—AFTER MANY YEARS.

The busy, monotonous years ran through their course tranquilly, marked only by a change of residence from the narrow little house suited to Felicita's slender means to a larger, more commodious, and more fashionable dwelling-place in a West End Square. Both Felicita and Phebe had won their share of public favour and a fair measure of fame; and the new home was chosen partly on account of an artist's studio with a separate entrance, through which Phebe could go in and out, and admit her visitors and sitters, in independence of the rest of the household.

Never once had Felix wavered in his desire to take orders and become a clergyman, from the time his boyish imagination had been fired by the stories of his great-grandfather's perils and labours in the Jura. Felicita had looked coldly on his resolution, having a quiet contempt for English clergymen, in spite of her friendship for Mr. Pascal, if friendship it could be called. For each year as it passed over Felicita left her in a separation from her fellow-creatures, always growing more chilly and dreary. It seemed to herself as if her lips were even losing the use of language, and that only with her pen could she find vent in expression. And these written thoughts of hers, printed and published for any eye to read, how unutterably empty of all but bitterness she found them! She almost marvelled at the popularity of her own books. How could it be that the cynical, scornful pictures she drew of human nature and human fellowship could be read so eagerly? She felt ashamed of her children seeing them, lest they should learn to distrust all men's truth and honour, and she would not suffer a word to be said about them in her own family.

But Madame Sefton, in her failing old age, was always ready to sympathize with Felix, and to help to keep him steady to her own simple faith; and Phebe was on the same side. These two women, with their quiet, unquestioning trust in God, and sweet charity toward their fellow-men, did more for Felix than all the opposing influences of college life could undo; and when his grandmother's peaceful and happy death set the last seal on her truthful life, Felix devoted himself with renewed earnestness to the career he had chosen. To enter the lists in the battle against darkness, and ignorance, and sin, wherever these foes were to be met in close quarters, was his ambition; and the enthusiasm with which he followed it made Felicita smile, yet sigh with unutterable bitterness as she looked into the midnight gloom of her own soul.

It became quite plain to Felicita as the years passed by that her son was no genius. At present there was a freshness and singleness of purpose about him, which, with the charm of his handsome young face and the genial simplicity of his manners, made him everywhere a favourite, and carried him into circles where a graver man and a deeper thinker could not find entrance; but let twenty years pass by, and Felix, she said to herself, would be nothing but a commonplace country clergyman, looking after his glebe lands and riding lazily about his parish, talking with old women and consulting farmers about his crops and cattle. She felt disappointed in him; and this disappointment removed him far away from her. The enchanted circle of her own isolation was complete.

The subtle influence of Felicita's dissatisfaction was vaguely felt by Felix. He had done well at Oxford, and had satisfied his friend and tutor, Mr. Pascal; but he knew that his mother wished him to make a great name there, and he had failed to do it. Every day, when he spent a few minutes in Felicita's library, lined with books which were her only companions, their conversation grew more and more vapid, unless his mother gave utterance to some of her sarcastic sayings, which he only half understood and altogether disliked.

But in Phebe's studio all was different; he was at home there. Though it was separate from the house, it had from the first been the favourite haunt of all the other members of the family. Madame had been wont to bring her knitting and sit beside Phebe's easel, talking of old times, and of the dear son she had lost so sorrowfully. Felix had read his schoolboy stories aloud to her whilst she was painting; and Hilda flitted in and out restlessly, carrying every bit of news she picked up from her girl friends to Phebe. Even Felicita used to steal in silently in the dusk, when no one else was there, and talk in her low, sad voice as she talked to no one else.

As soon as Felix was old enough, within a few months of Madame's death, he took orders, and accepted a curacy in a poor and densely populated London district. It was not much more than two miles from home, but it was considered advisable that he should take lodgings near his vicar's church, and dwell in the midst of the people with whom he had to do. The separation was not so complete as if he had gone into a country parish, but it brought another blank into the home, which had not yet ceased to miss the tranquil and quiet presence of the old grandmother.

"I shall not have to fight with wolves like Felix Merle, my great-grandfather," said Felix, the evening before he left home, as he and Phebe were sitting over her studio fire. "I think sometimes I ought to go out as a missionary to some wild country. Yet there are dangers to meet here in London, and risks to run; ay! and battles to fight. I shall have a good fist for drunken men beating helpless women in my parish. I couldn't stand by and see a woman ill-used without striking a blow—could I, Phebe?"

"I hope you'll strike as few blows as you can," she answered, smiling.

"How could I help standing up for a woman when I think of my mother, and you, and little Hilda, and her who is gone?" asked Felix.

"Is there nobody else?" inquired Phebe, with a mischievous tone in her pleasant voice.

"When I think of the good women I have known," he answered evasively, "the sweet, true, noble women, I feel my blood boil at the thought of any man ill-using any woman. Phebe, I can just remember my father speaking of it with the utmost contempt and anger, with a fire in his eyes and a sternness in his voice which made me tremble with fear. He was in a righteous passion; it was the other side of his worship of my mother."

"He was always kind and tender toward all women," answered Phebe. "All the Seftons have been like that; they could never be harsh to any woman. But your father almost worshipped the ground your mother trod upon; nothing on earth was good enough for her. Look here, my dear boy, I've been trying to paint a picture for you."

She lifted up a stretcher which had been turned with the canvas to the wall, and placed it on her easel in the full light of a shaded lamp. For a moment she stood between him and it, gazing at it with tears in her blue eyes. Then she fell back to his side to look at it with him, clasping his hand in hers, and holding it in a warm, fond grasp.

It was a portrait of Roland Sefton, painted from her faithful memory, which had been aided by a photograph taken when he was the same age Felix was now. Phebe could only see it dimly through her tears, and for a moment or two both of them were silent.

"My father?" said Felix, his face flushing and his voice faltering; "is it like him, Phebe? Yes, yes! I recollect him now; only he looked happier or merrier than he does there. There is something sad about his face that I do not remember. What a king he was among men! I'm not worthy to be the son of such a man and such a woman."

"No, no; don't say that," she answered eagerly; "you're not as handsome, or as strong, or as clever as he was; but you may be as good a man—yes, a better man."

She spoke with a deep, low sigh that was almost a sob, as the memory of how she had seen him last—crushed under a weight of sin and flying from the penalty of crime—flashed across her brain. She knew now why there had lurked a subtle sadness in the face she had been painting, which she had not been able to banish.

"I think," she said, as if speaking to herself, "that the sense of sin links us to God almost as closely as love does. I never understood Jesus Christ until I knew something of the wickedness of the world, and the frailty of our nature at its best. It is when a good man has to cry, 'Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight,' that we feel something of the awful sinfulness of sin."

"And have you this sense of sin, Phebe?" asked Felix in a low voice. "I have thought sometimes that you, and my mother, and men like my father and Mr. Pascal, felt but little of the inward strength of sin. Your lives stand out so clear and true. If there is a stain upon them it is so slight, so plainly a defect of the physical nature, that it often seems to me you do not know what evil is."

"We all know it," she answered, "and that shadow of sorrow you see in your father's face must bear witness for him to you that he has passed through the same conflict you may be fighting. The sins of good men are greater than the sins of bad men. One lie from a truthful man is more hurtful than all the lies of a liar. The sins of a man after God's own heart have done more harm than all the crimes of all the Pagan emperors."

"It is true," he said thoughtfully.

"If I told you a falsehood, what would you think of me?"

"I believe it would almost break my heart if you or my mother told me a falsehood," he answered.

"I could not paint this portrait while your grandmother was living," said Phebe after a short silence; "I tried it once or twice, but I could never succeed. See; here is the photograph your father gave me when I was quite a little girl, because I cried so bitterly at his going away for a few months on his wedding trip. There were only two taken, and your mother has the other. They were both very young; he was only your age, and your mother was not twenty. But Lord Riversford was dead, and she was not happy with her cousins; and your grandfather, who was living then, was eager for the match. Everybody said it was a great match for your father."

"They were very happy; they were not too young to be married," answered Felix, with a deep flush on his handsome face. "Why should not people marry young, if they love one another?"

"I would ask Canon Pascal that question if I were you," she said, smiling significantly.

"I have a good mind to ask him to-night," he replied, stooping down to kiss Phebe's cheek; "he is at Westminster, and Alice is there too. Bid me good speed, Phebe."

"God bless you, my Felix," she whispered.

He turned abruptly away, though he lingered for a minute or two longer, gazing at his father's portrait. How like him, and yet how unlike him, he was in Phebe's eyes! Then, with a gentle pressure of her hand, he went away in silence; while she took down the painting, and set it again with its face to the wall, lest Felicita coming in should catch a sight of it.

CHAPTER XXVII.—CANON PASCAL.

The massive pile of the old Abbey stood darkly against the sky, with not a glimmer of light shining through its many windows; whilst behind it the Houses of Parliament, now in full session, glittered from roof to basement with innumerable lamps. All about them there was the rush and rattle of busy life, but the Abbey seemed inclosed in a magic circle of solitude and stillness. Overhead a countless host of little silvery clouds covered the sky, with fine threads and interspaces of dark blue lying between them. The moon, pale and bright, seemed to be drifting slowly among them, sometimes behind them, and faintly veiled by their light vapour; but more often the little clouds made way for her, and clustered round, in a circle of vaguely

outlined cherub-heads, golden brown in the halo she shed about her. These child-like angel-heads, floating over the greater part of the sky, seemed pressing forward, one behind the other, and hastening into the narrow ring of light, with a gentle eagerness; and fading softly away as the moon passed by.

Felix stood still for a minute or two looking up from the dark and silent front of the Abbey to the silent and silvery clouds above it. Almost every stone of the venerable old walls was familiar and dear to him. For Phebe, when she came from the broad, grand solitude of her native moors, had fixed at once upon the Abbey as the one spot in London where she could find something of the repose she had been accustomed to meet with in the sight of the far-stretching horizon, and the unbroken vault of heaven overarching it. Felicita, too, had attended the cathedral service every Sunday morning, since she had been wealthy enough to set up a carriage, which was the first luxury she had allowed herself. The music, the chants, the dim light of the coloured windows, the long aisle of lofty arches, and the many persistent and dominant associations taking possession of her memory and imagination, made the Abbey almost as dear to Felicita as it was through its mysterious and sacred repose to Phebe.

Felix had paced along the streets with rapid and headlong haste, but now he hesitated before turning into Dean's Yard. When he did so, he sauntered round the inclosure two or three times, wondering in what words he could best move the Canon, and framing half a dozen speeches in his mind, which seemed ridiculous to himself when he whispered them half aloud. At last, with a sudden determination to trust to the inspiration of the moment, he turned his steps hurriedly into the dark, low arches of the cloisters.

But he had not many steps to take. The tall, somewhat stooping figure of Canon Pascal, so familiar to him, was leaving through one of the archways, with head upturned to the little field of sky above the quadrangle, where the moon was to be seen with her attendant clouds. Felix could read every line in his strongly-marked features, and the deep furrows which lay between his thick brows. The tinge of gray in his dark hair was visible in the moonlight, or rather the pale gleam caused all his hair to seem silvery. His eyes were glistening with delight, and as he heard steps pausing at his side, he turned, and at the sight of Felix his harsh face melted into almost a womanly smile of greeting.

"Welcome, my son," he said, in a pleasant and deep voice; "you are just in time to share this glorious sight with me. Pity 'tis it vanishes so soon!"

He clasped Felix's hand with a warm, hearty pressure, such as few hands know how to give; though it is one of the most tender and most refined expressions of friendship. Felix grasped his with an unconscious grip which made Canon Pascal wince, though he said nothing. For a few minutes the two men stood gazing upward in reverent silence, each brain busy with its own thoughts.

"You were coming to see me?" said Canon Pascal at last.

"Yes," answered Felix, in a voice faltering with eager emotion.

"On some special errand?" pursued Canon Pascal. "Don't let us lose time in beating about the bush, then. You cannot say anything that will not be interesting to me, Felix; for I always find a lad like you, and at your age, has something in his mind worth listening to. What is it, my son?"

"I don't want to beat about the bush," stammered Felix, "but oh! if you only knew how I love Alice! More than words can tell. You've known me all my life, and Alice has known me. Will you let her be my wife?"

The smile was gone from Canon Pascal's face. A moment ago, and he, gazing up at the moon, had been recalling, with a boyish freshness of heart, the days of his own happy though protracted courtship of the dear wife, who might be gazing at the same scene from her window in his country rectory. His face grew almost harsh with its grave thoughtfulness as his eyes fastened upon the agitated features of the young man beside him. A fire-looking young fellow, he said to himself; with a frank, open nature, and a constitution and disposition unspoiled by the world. He needed nobody to tell him what his old pupil was, for he knew him as well as he knew his own boys, but he had never thought of him as any other than a boy. Alice, too, was a child still. This sudden demand struck him into a mood of silent and serious thought; and he paced to and fro for a while along the corridor, with Felix equally silent and serious at his side.

"You've no idea how much I love her!" Felix at last ventured to say.

"Hush, my boy!" he answered, with a sharp, imperative tone in his voice. "I loved Alice's mother before you were born; and I love her more every day of my life. You children don't know what love means."

Felix answered by a gesture of protest. Not know what love meant, when neither day nor night was the thought of Alice absent from his inmost heart! He had been almost afraid of the vehemence of his own passion, lest it should prove a hindrance to him in God's service. Canon Pascal drew his arm affectionately through his, and turned back to pace the cloister once more.

"I'm trying to think," he said, in a gentler voice, "that Alice is out of the nursery, and you out of the schoolroom. It is difficult, Felix."

"You were present at my ordination last week," exclaimed Felix, in an aggrieved tone; "the Church, and the Bishop, and you did not think me too young to take charge of souls. Surely you cannot urge that I am not old enough to take care of one whom I love better than my own life."

Canon Pascal pressed Felix's arm closer to his side.

"Oh, my boy!" he said, "you will discover that it is easier to commit unknown souls to anybody's charge, than to give away one's child, body, soul and spirit. It is a solemn thing we are talking of; more solemn, in some respects, than my girl's death. I would rather follow Alice