

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

## CHAPTER XXXV.—ALICE PASCAL.

Alice Pascal looked up into Jean Merle's face with the frank and easy self-possession of a well-bred Englishwoman; colouring a little with girlish shyness, yet at the same time smiling with a pleasant light in her dark eyes. The oval of her face, and the colour of her hair and eyes, resembled, though slightly, the more beautiful face of Felicity in her girlhood; it was simply the curious likeness which runs through some families to the remotest branches. But her smile, the shape of her eyes, the kneeling attitude, riveted him to the spot where he stood, and struck him dumb. A fancy flashed across his brain, which shone like a light from heaven. Could this girl be Hilda, his little daughter, whom he had seen last sleeping in her cot? 'Twas she then come, after many years, to visit her father's grave?

There had always been a corroding grief to him in the thought that it was Felicity herself who had erected that cross over the tomb of the stranger, with whom his name was buried. He did not know that it was Mr. Clifford alone who had thus set a mark upon the place where he believed that the son of his old friend was lying. It had pained Jean Merle to think that Felicity had commemorated their mutual sin by the erection of an imperishable monument, and it had never surprised him that no one had visited the grave. His astonishment came now. Was it possible that Felicity had revisited Switzerland? Could she be near at hand, in the village down yonder? His mother, also, and his boy, Felix, could they be treading the same soil, and breathing the same air as himself? An agony of mingled terror and rapture shot through his inmost soul. His lips were dry, and his throat parched: he could not articulate a syllable.

He did not know what a gaunt and haggard madman he appeared. His grey hair was ragged and tangled, and his sunken eyes gleamed with a strange brightness. The villagers, who were wont at times to call him an imbecile, would have been sure they were right at this moment, as he stood motionless and dumb, staring at Alice; but to her he looked more like one whose reason was just trembling in the balance. She was alone; her father was no longer in sight; but she was not easily frightened. Rather a sense of sacred pity for the forlorn wretch before her filled her heart.

"See!" she said, in clear and penetrating accents, full, however, of gentle kindness, and she spoke unconsciously in English, "see! I have carried this little slip of ivy all the way from England to plant it here. This is the grave of a man I should have loved very dearly."

A rapid flush of colour passed over her face as she spoke, leaving it paler than before, while a slight sadness clouded the smile in her eyes.

"Was he your father?" he articulated, with an immense effort.

"No," she answered; "not my father, but the father of my dearest friends. They cannot come here; but it was his son who gathered this slip of ivy from our porch at home, and asked me to plant it here for him. Will it grow, do you think?"

"It shall grow," he muttered.

It was not his daughter, then; none of his own blood was at hand. But this English girl fascinated him, he could not turn away his eyes, but watched every slight movement as she carefully gathered the soil about the root of the little plant, which he vowed within himself should grow. She was rather long about her task, for she wished this madman to go away, and leave her alone beside Roland Seston's grave. What her father had told her about him was still strange to her, and she wanted to familiarize it to herself. But still the haggard-looking peasant lingered at her side, gazing at her with his glowering and sunken eyes, yet neither moving nor speaking.

"You know English?" she said, as all at once it occurred to her that she had spoken to him as she would have spoken to one of the villagers in their own country churchyard at home, and that he had answered her. He replied only by a gesture.

"Can you find me some one who will take charge of this little plant?" she asked.

Jean Merle raised his head and lifted up his dim eyes to the eastern mountain peaks, which were still shining in the rays of the sinking sun, though the twilight was darkening everywhere in the valley. Only last night he had slept among some juniper bushes just below the boundary of that everlasting snow, feeling himself cast out forever from any glimpse of his old Paradise. But now, if he could only find words and utterance, there was come to him, even to him, a messenger, an angel direct from the very heart of his home, who could tell him all that last night he believed he should never know. The tears sprang to his eyes, blessed tears; and a web of uncontrollable longing overwhelmed him. He must hear all he could of those whom he loved; and then, whether he lived long, or died soon, he would thank God as long as his miserable life continued.

"It is I who take care of this grave," he said; "I was with him when he died. He spoke to me of Felix and Hilda and his mother; and I saw their portraits. You hear? I know them all."

"Was it you who watched beside him?" asked Alice eagerly. "Oh! sit down here and tell me all about it; all you can remember. I will tell it all again to Felix, and Hilda, and Phebe Marlowe; and oh! how glad and how sorry they will be to listen!"

There was no mention of Felicity's name, and Jean Merle felt a terrible dread come over him at this omission. He sank down on the ground beside the grave, and looked up into Alice's bright young face, with eyes that to her were no longer lit up with the fire of insanity, however intense and eager they might seem. It was an undreamed-of chance

which had brought to her side the man who had watched by the death-bed of Felix's father.

"Tell me all you remember," she urged.

"I remember nothing," he answered, pressing his dark hand hard against his forehead; "it is more than thirteen years ago. But he showed to me their portraits. Is his wife still living?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered, "but she will not let either of them come to Switzerland; neither Felix nor Hilda. Nobody speaks of this country in her hearing; and his name is never uttered. But his mother used to talk to us about him; and Phebe Marlowe does so still. She has painted a portrait of him for Felix."

"Is Roland Seston's mother yet alive?" he asked, with a dull, aching foreboding of her reply.

"No," she said. "Oh! how we all loved dear old Madame Seston! She was always more like Felix and Hilda's mother than Cousin Felicity was. We loved her more a hundred times than Cousin Felicity, for we are afraid of her. It was her husband's death that spoiled her whole life, and set her quite apart from everybody else. But Madame—she was not made so utterly miserable by it; she knew she would meet her son again in heaven. When she was dying, she said to Cousin Felicity, 'He did not return to me, but I go to him; I go gladly to see again my dear son.' The very last words they heard her say were, 'I come, Roland!'"

Alice's voice trembled, and she laid her hand caressingly on the name of Roland Seston graved on the cross above her. Jean Merle listened, as if he heard the words whispered a long way off, or as by some one speaking in a dream. The meaning had not reached his brain, but was travelling slowly to it, and would surely pierce his heart with a new sorrow and a fresh pang of remorse. The loud chanting of the monks in the abbey close by broke in upon their solemn silence, and awoke Alice from the reverie into which she had fallen.

"Can you tell me nothing about him?" she asked.

"Talk to me as if I was his child."

"I have nothing to tell you," answered Jean Merle. "I remember nothing he said."

She looked down on the poor ragged peasant at her feet, with his gaunt and scarred features, and his slowly articulated speech. There seemed nothing strange in such a man not being able to recall Roland Seston's dying words. It was probable that he barely understood them; and most likely he could not gather up the meaning of what she herself was saying. The few words he uttered were English, but they were very few and forced.

"I am sorry," she said gently, "but I will tell them you promised to take care of the ivy I have planted here."

She washed the dull, grey-headed villager would go home, and leave her alone for awhile in this solemn and sacred place; but he crouched still on the ground, stirring neither hand nor foot. When at last she moved as if to go away, he stretched out a toil-worn hand, and laid it on her dress.

"Say," he said, "tell me more about Roland Seston's children; I will think of it when I am tending this grave."

"What am I to tell you?" she asked gently; "Hilda is three years younger than me, and people say we are like sisters. She and Felix were brought up with me and my brothers in my father's house; we were like brothers and sisters. And Felix is like another son to my father, who says he will be both good and great some day. Good he is now; as good as man can be."

"And you love him!" said Jean Merle, in a low and humble voice, with his head turned away from her, and resting on the lowest step of the cross.

Alice started and trembled as she looked down on the grave and the prostrate man. It seemed to her as if the words had almost come out of this sad, and solitary, and forsaken grave, where Roland Seston had lain unvisited so many years. The last gleam of daylight had vanished from the snowy peaks, leaving them wan and pallid as the dead. A sudden chill came into the evening air which made her shiver; but she was not terrified, though she felt a certain bewilderment and agitation creeping through her. She could not resist the impulse to answer the strange question.

"Yes, I love Felix," she said simply. "We love each other dearly."

"God bless you!" cried Jean Merle, in a tremulous voice. "God in heaven bless you both, and preserve you to each other."

He had lifted himself up, and was kneeling before her, eagerly scanning her face, as if to impress it on his memory. He bent down his grey head and kissed her hand humbly and reverently, touching it only with his lips. Then starting to his feet he hastened away from the cemetery, and was soon lost to her sight in the gathering gloom of the dusk.

For a little while longer Alice lingered at the grave, thinking over what had passed. It was not much as she recalled it, but it left her agitated and disturbed. Yet after all she had only uttered aloud what her heart would have said at the grave of Felix's father. But this strange peasant, so miserable and poverty-stricken, so haggard and hopeless-looking, haunted her thoughts both waking and sleeping. Early the next morning she and Canon Pascal went to the hovel inhabited by Jean Merle, but found it deserted and locked up. Some labourers had seen him start off at day-break up the Trübsee Alp, from which he might be either ascending the Titlis or taking the route to the Joch-Pass. There was no chance of his return that day, and Jean Merle's absence might last for several days, as he was eccentric, and bestowed his confidence on nobody. There was little more to be learned of him, except that he was a heretic, a stranger, and a miser. Canon Pascal and Alice visited once more Roland Seston's grave, and then they went on their way over the Joch-Pass, with some faint hopes of meeting with Jean Merle on their route—hopes that were not fulfilled.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.—COMING TO HIMSELF.

When he left the cemetery, Jean Merle went home to his wretched chalet, flung himself down on his rough bed, and slept for some hours the profound and dreamless sleep of utter exhaustion. The last three nights he had passed under

the stars, and stretched upon the low juniper-bushes. He awoke suddenly, from the bright, clear moonlight of a cloudless sky and dry atmosphere streaming in through his door, which he had left open. There was light enough for him to withdraw some money from a safe hiding-place he had constructed in his crazy old hut, and to make up a packet of most of the clothing he possessed. There were between twenty and thirty pounds in gold pieces of twenty francs each—the only money he was master of now his Lucerne bankers had failed him. A vague purpose, dimly shaping itself, was in his brain, but he was in no hurry to see it take definite form. With his small bundle of clothes and his leather purse he started off in the earliest rays of the dawn to escape being visited by the young English girl whom he had seen at the grave, and who would probably seek him out in the morning with her father. Who they were he could find out if he himself returned to Engelberg.

If he returned; for, as he ascended the steep path leading up to the Trübsee Alp, he turned back to look at the huge mountain-valley where he had dwelt so long, as though he was looking upon it for the last time. It seemed to him as if he was awakening out of a long lethargy and paralysis. Three days ago the dull round of incessant toil and parsimonious hoarding had been abruptly broken up by the loss of all he had toiled for and hoarded up, and the shock had driven him out like a maniac to wander about the desolate heights of Engelberg in a mood bordering on despair, which had made him utterly reckless of his life. Since then news had come to him from home—stray gleams from the Paradise he had forfeited. Strongest of them all was the thought that these fourteen years had transformed his little son Felix into a man, loving as he himself had loved, and already called to take his part in the battle of life. He had never realized this before, and it stirred his heart to the very depths. His children had been but soft, vague memories to him; it was Felicity who had engrossed all his thoughts. All at once he comprehended that he was a father, the father of a son and daughter who had their own separate life and career. A deep and poignant interest in these beings took possession of him. He had called them into existence, they belonged to him by a tie which nothing on earth, in heaven, or in hell itself, could destroy. As long as they lived there must be an indestructible interest for him in this world. Felicity was no longer the first in his thoughts.

The dim veil which time had drawn around them was rent asunder, and they stood before him bathed in light, but placed on the other side of a gulf as fathomless, as impassable, and as death-like as the ice-crevasses yawning at his feet. He gazed down into the cold, gleaming abyss, and across it to the sharp and slippery margin where there could be no foot-hold, and he pictured to himself the springing across that horrible gulf to reach them on the other side, and the falling, with outstretched hands and clutching fingers, into the unseen icy depths below him. For the first time in his life he shrank back shivering and terror-stricken from the edge of the crevasse, with palsied limbs and treacherous nerves. He felt that he must get back into safer standing-ground than this solitary and perilous glacier.

He reached at last a point of safety, where he could lie down and let his trembling limbs rest awhile. The whole slope of the valley lay below him, with its rich meadows of emerald green, and its silvery streams wandering through them. Little farms and chalets were dotted about, some of them clinging to the sides of the rock opposite to him, or resting on the very edge of precipices thousands of feet deep, and looking as if they were about to slip over them. He felt his head grow giddy as he looked at them, and thought of the children at play in such dangerous playgrounds. There were a few grey clouds hanging about the Titlis, and caught upon the sharp horns of the rugged peaks around the valley. Every peak and precipice he knew; they had been his refuge in the hours of his greatest anguish. But these pained limbs and this giddy head could not be trusted to carry him there again. He had lost his last hope of making any atonement. Hope was gone; was he to lose his indomitable courage also? It was the last faculty which made his present life endurable.

He lay motionless for hours, neither listening nor looking. Yet he heard, for the memory of it often came back to him in after years, the tinkling of innumerable bells from the pastures below him, and around him; and the voices of many waterfalls rushing down through the pine forests into the valley; and the tossing to and fro of the interwoven branches of the trees. And he saw the sunlight stealing from one point to another, chased by the shadows of the clouds, that gathered and dispersed, dimming the blue sky for a little time, and then leaving it brighter and deeper than before. He was unconscious of it all; he was even unaware that his brain was at work at all, until suddenly, like a flash, there rose upon him the clear, resolute, unchangeable determination, "I will go to England."

He started up at once, and seized his bundle and his alpenstock. The afternoon was far advanced, but there was time enough to reach the Engadinalp, where he could stay the night, and go on in the morning to Merongen. He could be in England in three days.

Three days!—so short a time separated him from the country and the home from which he had been exiled so many years. Any day during those fourteen years he might have started homeward as he was doing now; but there had not been the irresistible hunger in his heart that at this moment drove him thither. He had been vainly seeking to satisfy himself with husks; but even these, dry and empty, and bitter as they were, had failed him. He had lost all, and having lost all, he was coming to himself.

There was not the slightest fear of detection in his mind. A grey-haired man with bowed shoulders, and scamed and marred face, who had lost every trace of the fastidiousness which had verged upon foppishness, in the handsome and prosperous Roland Seston, ran no risk of recognition, more especially as Roland Seston had been reckoned among the dead and buried for many a long year. The lineaments of the dead die with them, however cunning the art may have used his skill to preserve them. The face is gone, and the memory of it. Some hearts may long to keep it engraved sharp and clear in their remembrance; but oh, when it