

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESDA STRETTON

## CHAPTER XLIV.—IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE.

When Phebe entered Westminster Abbey the next day the morning service was already begun. Upon the bench nearest the door sat a working-man, in worn-out clothes, whose grey hair was long and ragged, and whose whole appearance was one of poverty and suffering. She was passing by, when a gleam of recognition in the dark and sunken eyes of this poor man arrested her. Could he possibly be Roland Sefton? The night before she had seen him only in a friendly obscurity, which concealed the ravages time, and sorrow, and labour had effected; but now the daylight, in revealing them, cast a chill shadow of doubt into her heart. It was his voice she had known and acknowledged the night before; but now he was silent, and, revealed by the daylight, she felt troubled and distrustful. Such a man she might have met a thousand times without once recalling to her memory the handsome, manly presence and prosperous bearing of Roland Sefton.

Yet she sat down beside him in answer to that appealing gleam in his eyes, and as his well-known voice joined hers in the responses to the prayers, she acknowledged him again in her heart of hearts. And now all thought of the sacred place, and of the worship she had engaged in, fled from her mind. She was a girl at home again, dwelling in the silent society of her dumb father, with this voice of Roland Sefton's coming to break the stillness from time to time, and to fill it with that sweetest music, the sound of human speech. If he had lost every vestige of resemblance to his former self, his voice only, calling "Phebe" as he had done the evening before, must have betrayed him to her. Not an accent of it had been forgotten.

To Jean Merle Phebe Marlowe was little altered, save that she had grown from a simple rustic maiden into a cultivated and refined woman. The sweet and gentle face beside him, with the deep peaceful blue of her eyes, and the sensitive mouth so ready to break into a smile, was the same he had seen when, on that terrible evening so many years ago, he had craved her help to escape from his dreaded punishment. "I will help you, even to dying for you and yours," she had said. He remembered vividly how mournfully the girlish fervour of her manner had impressed him. Even now he had no one else to help him; this woman's little hand alone could reach him in the gulf where he lay; only the simple, pitiful wisdom of her faithful heart could find a way for him out of this misery of his into some place of safety and peace. He was willing to follow wherever she might guide him.

"I can see only one duty before us," she said, when the service was over, and they stood together before one of the monuments in the Abbey; "I think Mr. Clifford ought to know."

"What will he do, Phebe?" asked Jean Merle. "God knows, if I had only myself to think of I would go into a convict-prison as thankfully as if it was the gate of heaven. It would be as the gate of heaven to me if I could pay the penalty of my crime. But there are Felicia and my children, and the greater shock and shame to them of my conviction now."

"Yet if Mr. Clifford demanded the penalty it must even now be paid," answered Phebe; "but he will not. One reason why he ought to know is that he mourns over you still, day and night, as if he had been the chief cause of your death. He reproaches himself with his implacability both towards you and his son. But even if the old resentment should awaken, it is right you should run the risk. Why need it be known to any one but us two that Felicia knew you were still alive?"

"If we could save her and the children I should be satisfied," said Jean Merle.

"It would kill her to know you were here," answered Phebe, looking around her with a terrified glance, as if she expected to see Felicia; "she is not strong, and a sudden agitation and distress might cause her death instantly. No, she must never know. And I am not afraid of Mr. Clifford; he will forgive you with all his heart; and he will be made glad in his old age. I will go down with you this evening. There is a train at four o'clock, and we shall reach Riversborough at eight. Be at the station to meet me."

"You know," said Jean Merle, "that the lapse of years does not free one from trial and conviction. Mr. Clifford can give me into the hands of the police at once; and to-night may see me lodged in Riversborough gaol, as if I had been arrested fourteen years ago. You know this Phebe?"

"Yes, I know it, but I am not afraid of it," she answered.

She had not the slightest fear of old Mr. Clifford's vindictiveness. As she travelled down to Riversborough, with Jean Merle in the third-class carriage of the same train, her mind was very busy with troubled thoughts. There was an unquiet joy stirring in the secret depths of her heart, but she was too full of anxiety and unweariness to be altogether aware of it. Though it was not more than twenty-four hours since she had known him otherwise, it seemed to her as if she had never known that Roland Sefton was dead, and it appeared incredible that the report of his death should have received such full acceptance as it had everywhere done. Yet, though he had come back, there could be no welcome for him. To her and to old Mr. Clifford only could this return from the grave contain any gladness. And was she glad? she asked herself, after a long deliberation over the difficulties surrounding this strange reappearance. She had sorrowed for him and comforted his mother in her mourning, and talked of him as one talks fondly of the dead to his children, and all the sacred healing of time had softened the grief she once felt into a tranquil and grateful memory of him, as of the friend she had loved most, and whose care for her had most widely influenced her life. But she could not own yet that she was glad.

Old Mr. Clifford was sitting in the wainscoted dining-room, his favourite room, when Phebe opened the door silently, and looked in with a pale and anxious face. His sight was dim, and a blaze of light fell upon the dark old panels, and the old-fashioned silver tankards and bright brass salvers on the carved sideboard. Two or three of Phebe's sunniest pictures hung against the oaken panels. There was a blazing fire on the hearth, and the old man, with his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, and his hands clasped lightly, was watching the play and dance of the flames as they shot up the chimney. Some new books lay on a table beside him, but he was not reading. He was sitting there in utter loneliness, with no companionship except that of his own fading memories. Phebe's tenderness for the old man was very great; and she paused on the threshold gazing at him pitifully; whilst Jean Merle, standing in the hall behind her, caught a glimpse of the hearth so crowded with memories for him, but occupied now by one desolate old man, before the door was closed, and he was left without.

"Why, it's little Phebe Marlowe!" cried Mr. Clifford gladly, looking round at the light sound of a footstep, very different from Mrs. Nixey's heavy tread; "my dear child, you can't tell what a pleasure this is to me."

He had risen up, and stood holding both her hands and looking fondly into her face.

"This moment I was thinking of you, my dear," he said; "I was inditing a long letter to you in my head, which these lazy old fingers of mine would have refused to write. Sandon, the bookseller, has been in here, bringing these books; and he told me a queer story enough. He says that in August last a relation of Madame Sefton's was here, in Riversborough; and told him who he was, in his shop, where he bought one of Felicia's books. Why didn't Sandon come here at once and tell us then, so that you could have found him out, Phebe? You and Felix and Hilda were here. He was a poor man, and seemed badly off; and I guess he came to enquire after Madame. Sandon says he reminded him of Roland—poor Roland! Why, I'd have given the poor fellow a welcome for the sake of that resemblance; and I was just thinking how Phebe's tender heart would have been touched by even so faint a likeness."

"Yes," she murmured.

"And we could have lifted him up a little; quite a poor man, Sandon says," continued Mr. Clifford. "But sit down, my dear. There is no one in the wide world would be so welcome to me as little Phebe Marlowe, who refused to be my adopted daughter."

He had drawn a chair close beside his own, for he would not loose her hand, but kept it closely grasped by his thin and crooked fingers.

"You have altogether forgiven Roland?" she said tremulously.

"Altogether, my dear," he answered.

"As Christ forgives us, bearing away our sins Himself?" she said.

"As Christ forgave us," he replied, bowing his head solemnly.

"And if it was possible—think it possible," she went on, "that he could come back again, that the grave in Engelberg could give up its dead, he would be welcome to you?"

"If my old friend Sefton's son could come back again," he said, "he would be more welcome to me than you are, Phebe. How often do I fancy him sitting yonder in Sefton's chair, watching me with his dear eyes!"

"But suppose he has deceived us all," she continued. "If he had escaped from your anger by another fraud; a worse fraud! If he had managed so as to bury some one else in his name, and go on living under a false one! Could you forgive that?"

"If Roland could come back a repentant man, I would forgive him every sin," answered Mr. Clifford, "and rejoice that I had not driven him to seek death. But what do you mean, Phebe? why do you ask?"

"Because," she answered, speaking almost in a whisper, with her face close to his, "Roland did not die. That man who was here in August, and called himself Jean Merle, is Roland himself. He saw you, and all of us, and did not dare to make himself known. I can tell you all about it. But, oh! he has bitterly repented; and there is no place of repentance for him in this world. He cannot come back amongst us, and be Roland Sefton again."

"Where is he?" asked the old man, trembling.

"He is here; he came with me. I will go and fetch him," she answered.

Mr. Clifford leaned back in his arm-chair, and gazed towards the half-open door. His memory had gone back twenty years, to the last time he had seen Roland Sefton, in the prime of his youth, handsome, erect and happy, who had made his heart ache as he thought of his own abandoned son, lying buried in a common grave in Paris. The man whom he saw entering slowly and reluctantly into the room behind Phebe, was grey-headed, bent and abject. This man paused within the doorway, looking not at him but round the room, with a glance full of grief and remembrance. The eager, questioning eyes of old Mr. Clifford did not arrest his attention, or divert it from the aspect of the old familiar place.

"No, no, Phebe!" exclaimed Mr. Clifford, "he's an impostor, my dear. That's not my old friend's son Roland."

"Would to God I were not!" cried Jean Merle bitterly, "would to God I stood in this room as a stranger! Phebe Marlowe, this is very hard, my punishment is greater than I can bear. All my life comes back to me here. This place, of all other places in the world, brings my sin and folly to remembrance."

He sank down on a chair, and buried his face in his hands, to shut out the hateful sight of the old home. He was inside his paradise again; and behold it was a place of torment. There was no room in his thoughts for Mr. Clifford; it was nothing to him that he should be called an impostor. He came to claim nothing, not even his own name. But the avenging memories of the past claimed him and held him fast bound. Even last night, when in the chill darkness of the November night he had watched the house which held Felicia and their children, his pain had been less poignant than now, within these walls, where all his happy

life had been passed. He was unconscious of everything but his pain. He could not hear Phebe's voice speaking for him to Mr. Clifford. He saw and felt nothing, until a gentle and trembling hand pressing on his shoulder feebly and as tenderly as his mother's made him look up into the gray and agitated face of Mr. Clifford bending over him.

"Roland! Roland!" he said, in a voice broken by sobs, "my old friend's son, forgive me as I forgive you. God be thanked, you have come back again in time for me to see you and bid you welcome. I bless God with all my heart. It is your own home, Roland—your own home."

With his feeble but eager old hands he drew him to the hearth, and placed him in the chair close beside his own, where Phebe had been sitting, and kept his hand upon his arm lest he should vanish out of his sight.

"You shall tell me nothing more to-night," he said; "I am old, and this is enough for me. It is enough that to-night you and I have pardoned one another from 'the low depths of our hearts.' Tell me nothing else to-night."

Phebe had slipped away from them, to help Mrs. Nixey to prepare a room for Jean Merle. It was the one that had been Roland Sefton's nursery, and the nursery of his children, and it was still occupied by Felix, when he visited his old home. The homely hospitable occupation was a relief to her; but in the room that she had left the two men sat side by side in unbroken silence.

## CHAPTER XLV.—AS A HIRED SERVANT.

From a profound and dreamless sleep Jean Merle awoke early the next morning, with the blessed feeling of being at home again in his father's house. The heavy cross-beams of black oak dividing the ceiling into panels; the low broad lattice window with a few upper panes of old stained glass; the faded familiar pictures on the wall; these all awoke in him memories of his earliest years. In the corner of the room, hardly to be distinguished from the wainscot, was the high narrow door communicating with his mother's chamber, through which he had often, how often! seen her come in softly, on tiptoe, to take a look at him. His own children, too, had slept there; and it was here that he had last seen his little son and daughter before fleeing from his home a self-accused criminal. All the happy, prosperous life of Roland Sefton had been encompassed around by these walls.

But the dead past must bury the dead. If there had ever been a deep, buried, hidden hope, that a possible return to something of the old life lay in the unknown future, it was now utterly uprooted. Such a return was only possible over the ruined lives and broken hearts of Felicia and his children. If he made himself known, though he was secure against prosecution, the story of his former crime would revive, and spread wider, joined with the fair name of Felicia, than it would have done when he was merely a fraudulent banker in a country town. However true it might be what Phebe maintained, that he might have suffered the penalty of his sin, and afterwards retrieved the past, whilst his children were too young to feel the full bitterness of the shame, it was too late to do it now. The name he had dishonoured was forever forfeited. His return to his former life was hedged up on every hand.

But a new courage was awakening in him, which helped him to grapple with his despair. He would bury the dead past, and go on into the future making the best of his life, maimed and marred as it was by his own folly. He was still in the prime of his age, thirty years younger than Mr. Clifford, whose intellect was as keen and clear as ever, there was a long span of time stretching before him, to be used or misused.

"Come unto me all ye that are weary, and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He seemed to see the words in the quaint upright characters in which old Marlowe had carved them under the crucifix. He had fancied he knew what coming to Christ meant in those old days of his, when he was reputed a religious man, and was first and foremost in all religious and philanthropic schemes, making his trespass more terrible and pernicious than if it had been the transgression of a worldly man. But it was not so when he came to Christ this morning. He was a broken-hearted man, who had cut himself off from all human ties and affections, and who was longing to feel that he was not forsaken of the universal Brother and Saviour. His cry was, "My soul thirsteth for Thee; my flesh longeth for Thee, in a dry and weary land, where no water is." It was his own fault, that he was in a dry and weary wilderness; but oh! if Christ would not forsake him then, would dwell with him even in this desert made desolate by himself, then at last he might find peace to his soul.

There was a deep inner consciousness, the forgotten but not obliterated faith of his boyhood and youth, before the world with its pomps and ambitions had laid its iron hand upon him, that Christ was with him, leading him day by day, if he would but follow nearer to God. Was it impossible to follow His guidance now? Could he not, even yet, take up his cross, and be willing to fill any place which he could yet fill worthily and humbly; expiating his sin against his fellow-men by true devotion to their service, as Jean Merle, the working-man; not as Roland Sefton, the prosperous and fraudulent banker?

This return to his father's house, and all its associations, solemn and sacred with a peculiar sacredness and solemnity, seemed to him a pledge that he could once more be admitted into the great brotherhood and home of Christ's disciples. Every object on which his eyes rested smote him, but it was with the stroke of a friend. A clear and sweet light from the past shed its penetrating rays into the darkest corners of his soul. Forgiven! God had forgiven him, and man had forgiven him. Before him lay an obscure and humble path, but the heaviest part of his burden was gone. He must go heavy-laden to the end of his days, treading in rough paths; but despair had fled, and with it the sense of being separated from God and man.

He heard the feeble yet deep old voice of Mr. Clifford outside his door inquiring from Mrs. Nixey if Mr. Merle was gone down-stairs yet. He made haste to go down, treading the old staircase with something of the alacrity of former days. Phebe was in the dining-room, and the ser-