

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XVII.—WAITING FOR THE NEWS.

Felicita hurried homeward night and day without stopping, as if she had been pursued by a deadly enemy. Madame and the children were not at Scarborough, but at a quiet little fishing village on the eastern coast; for Felicita had found Scarborough too gay in the month of August, and her cousins, the Riversfords, having appeared there, she retreated to the quietest spot that could be found. To this village she returned, after being absent little more than a week.

Madame knew nothing of her journey; but the mere fact that Felicita was going away alone had roused in her the hope that it was connected in some way with Roland. In some vague manner this idea had been communicated to Felix, and both were expecting to see the long-lost father and son come back with her. Roland's prolonged and mysterious absence had been a sore trial to his mother, though her placid and trustful nature had borne it patiently. Surely, she thought, the trial was coming to an end.

Felicita reached their lodgings utterly exhausted and worn out. She was a delicate woman, in no way inured to fatigue, and though she had been insensible to the overstrain of the unbroken journey as she was whirled along railways and passed from station to station, a sense of complete prostration seized upon her as soon as she found herself at home. Day after day she lay in bed, in a darkened room, unwilling to lift her voice above a whisper, waiting in a kind of torpid dread for the intelligence that she knew must soon come.

She had been at home several days, and still there was no news. Was it possible, she asked herself, that this unknown traveller and his calamitous fate should pass on into perfect oblivion, and leave matters as they were before? For a cloud would hang over her and her children as long as Roland was the object of pursuit. While he was a fugitive criminal, of interest to the police officers of all countries, there was no security for their future. The lie to which she had given a guilty consent was horrible to her, but her morbid dread of shame was more horrible. She had done evil that good might come; but if the good failed, the evil would still remain as a dark stain upon her soul, visible to herse, if to no one else.

"I will get up to-day," she said at last, to Madame's great delight. She had never ventured to exert any authority over her beautiful and clever daughter-in-law—not even the authority of a mildly expressed wish. She was willing to be to Felicita anything that Felicita pleased—her servant and drudge, her fond mother, or her quiet, attentive companion. Since her return from her mysterious journey she had been very tender to her—as tenderly and gently demonstrative as Felicita would ever permit her to be.

"Have you seen any newspapers lately?" asked Felicita. "I never read the papers, my love," answered Madame. "I should like to see to-day's 'Times,'" said Felicita.

But it was impossible to get it in this village without ordering it be orchard, and Felicita gave up her wish with the listless indifference of an invalid. When the late sun of the November day had risen from behind a heavy bank of clouds, she ventured down to the quiet shore. There were no visitors left beside themselves, so there were no curious eyes to scan her white, sad face. For a short time Felix and Hilda played about her; but by-and-by Madame, thinking she was weary and worried, allured them away to a point where they were still in sight, though out of hearing. The low, cold sun shed its languid and watery rays upon the rocks and creeping tide, and, unnoticed, almost unseen, Felicita could sit there in stillness, gazing out over the chilly and mournful sea. There was something so unutterably sad about Felicita's condition that it awed the simple, cheerful nature of Madame. It was more than illness and exhaustion. The white, unsmiling face, the drooping head, the languor of the thin long hands, the fathomless sorrow lurking behind her dark eyes—all spoke of a heart-sickness such as Madame had never seen or dreamed of. The children did not cheer their mother. When she saw that, Madame felt there was nothing to be done but to leave her in the cold solitude she loved.

But as Felicita sat alone on the shore, looking listlessly at the fleeting sails which were passing to and fro upon the sea, she saw afar off the figure of a girl coming swiftly towards her from the village, and before many moments had passed she recognized Phebe Marlowe's face. A great throb of mingled relief and dread made her heart beat violently. Nothing could have brought Phebe away, so far from home, except the news of Roland's death.

The rosy colour on Phebe's face was gone, and the brightness of the blue eyes was faded; but there was the same out-looking, simple, unselfish soul shining through them. As she drew near to Felicita she stretched out her arms with the instinctive gesture of one who was come to comfort and support, and Felicita, with a strange, impulsive feeling that she brought consolation and help, threw herself into them.

"I know it all," said Phebe in a low voice. "Oh, what you must have suffered! He was going to Engelberg to meet you, and you never saw him alive! Oh, why did not God let you meet each other once again? But God loved him. I can never think that God had not forgiven him, for he was grieved because of his sin when I saw him the night he got away. And in all things else he was so good! Oh, how good he was!"

Phebe's tears were falling fast, and her words were choked with sobs. But Felicita's face was hidden against her neck, and she could not see if she was weeping.

"Everybody is talking of him in Riversborough," she went on, "and now they all say how good he always was, and how unlikely it is that he was guilty. They will forget it soon. Those who remember him will think kindly of

him, and be grieved for him. But oh, I would give worlds for him to have lived and made amends! If he could only have proved that he had repented! If he could only have outlived it all, and made everybody know that he was really a good man, one whom God had delivered out of sin!"

"It was impossible!" murmured Felicita.

"No, not impossible!" she cried earnestly; "it was not an unpardonable sin. Even if he had gone to prison, as he would, he might have faced the world when he came out again; and if he'd done all the good he could in it, it might have been hard to convince them he was good, but it would never be impossible. If God forgives us, sooner or later our fellow-creatures will forgive us if we live a true life. I would have stood by him in the face of the world, and you would, and Madame and the children. He would not have been left alone, and it would have ended in every one else coming round to us. Oh, why should he die when you were just going to see each other again?"

Felicita had sunk down again into the chair which had been carried for her to the shore, and Phebe sat down on the sands at her feet. She looked up tearfully into Felicita's wan and shrunken face.

"Did anyone ever win back their good name?" asked Felicita with quivering lips.

"Among us they do sometimes," she answered. "I knew a working-man who had been in goal five years, and he became a Christian while he was there, and he came back home to his own village. He was one of the best men I ever knew, and when he died there was such a funeral as had never been seen in the parish church. Why should it not be so? If God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, why shouldn't we forgive? If we are faithful and just, we shall."

"It could never be," said Felicita; "it cannot be the same as if Roland had not been guilty. No one can blot out the past; it is eternal."

"Yes," she replied, covering Felicita's hand with kisses and tears; but oh, we love him more now than ever. He is gone into the land of thick darkness, and I cannot follow him in my thoughts. It is like a gulf between us and him. Even if he had been farthest away from us in the world—anywhere—we could imagine what he was doing; but we cannot see him or call across the gulf to him. It is all unknown. Only God knows!"

"God!" echoed Felicita; "if there is a God, let Him help me, for I am the most wretched woman on His earth to-day."

"God cannot keep from helping us all," answered Phebe. "He cannot rest while we are wretched. I understand it better than I used to do. I cannot rest myself while the poorest creature about me is in pain that I can help. It is impossible that He should not care. That would be an awful thing to think; that would make His love and pity less than ours. This I know, that God loves every creature He has made. And oh, He must have loved him, though he was suffered to fall over that dreadful precipice, and die before you saw him. It happened before you reached Engelberg?"

"Yes," said Felicita, shivering.

"The papers were sent on to Mr. Clifford," continued Phebe, "and he sent for me to come with him, and see you before the news got into the papers. It will be to-morrow. But I knew more than he did, and I came on here to speak to you. Shall you tell him you went there to meet him?"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Felicita; "it must never be known, dear Phebe."

"And his mother and the children—they know nothing?" she said.

"Not a word, and it is you who must tell them, Phebe," she answered. "How could I bear to tell them that he is dead? Never let them speak about it to me; never let his name be mentioned."

"How can I comfort you?" cried Phebe.

"I can never be comforted," she replied despairingly; "but it is like death to hear his name."

The voices of the children coming nearer reached their ears. They had seen from their distant playground another figure sitting close beside Felicita, and their curiosity had led them to approach. Now they recognised Phebe, and a glad shout rang through the air. She bent down hurriedly to kiss Felicita's cold hand once again, and then she rose to meet them, and prevent them from seeing their mother's deep grief.

"I will go and tell them, poor little things!" she said, "and Madame. Oh, what can I do to help you all? Mr. Clifford is at your lodgings waiting to see you as soon as you can meet him."

She did not stay for an answer, but ran to meet Felix and Hilda; while slowly, and with much guilty shrinking from the coming interview, Felicita went back to the village, where Mr. Clifford was waiting her.

CHAPTER XVIII.—THE DEAD ARE FORGIVEN.

Roland Sefton's pocket-book, containing his passport and the papers and photographs, had reached Mr. Clifford the day before, with an official intimation of his death from the consulate at Berne. The identification was complete, and the inquiry into the fatal accident had resulted in blame to no one, as the traveller had declined the services of a trustworthy guide from Meiringen to Engelberg. This was precisely what Roland would have done, the whole country being as familiar to him as to any native. No doubt crossed Mr. Clifford's mind that his old friend's son had met his untimely end while a fugitive from his country, from dread chiefly of his own implacable sense of justice.

Roland was dead, but justice was not satisfied. Mr. Clifford knew perfectly well that the news of his tragic fate would create an immediate and complete reaction in his favour among his fellow-townsmen. Hitherto he had been only vaguely accused of crime, which his absence chiefly had tended to fasten upon him; but as there had been no opportunity of bringing him to a public trial, it would soon be believed that there was no evidence against him. Many persons thought already that the junior partner was away

either on pleasure or business, because the senior had taken his place. Only a few—himself and the three or four obscure persons who actually suffered from his delinquencies—would recollect them. By-and-by Roland Sefton would be remembered as the kind, benevolent, even Christian man, whose life, so soon cut short, had been full of promise for his native town.

Mr. Clifford himself felt a pang of regret and sorrow when he heard the news. Years ago he had loved the frank, warm-hearted boy, his friend's only child, with a very true affection. He had an only boy, too, older than Roland by a few years, and these two were to succeed their fathers in the long-established firm. Then came the bitter disappointment in his own son. But since he had suffered his son to die in his sins, reaping the full harvest of his transgressions, he had felt that any forgiveness shown to other offenders would be a cruel injustice to him. Yet as Roland's passport and the children's photographs lay before him on his office desk—the same desk at which Roland was sitting but a few months ago, a man in the full vigour of life, with an apparently prosperous and happy future lying before him—Mr. Clifford for a moment or two yielded to the vain wish that Roland had thrown himself on his mercy. Yet his conscience told him he would have refused to show him mercy, and his regret was mingled with a tinge of remorse.

His first care was to prevent the intelligence reaching Felicita by means of the newspapers, and he sent immediately for Phebe Marlowe to accompany him to the seaside, in order to break the news to her. Phebe's excessive grief astonished him, though she had so much natural control over herself, in her sympathy for others, as to relieve him of all anxiety on her account, and to keep Felicita's secret journey from being suspected. But to Phebe, Roland's death was fraught with more tragic circumstances than any one else could conceive. He was hastening to meet his wife, possibly with some scheme for their future, which might have hope and deliverance in it, when this calamity hurried him away into that awful, unknown world, on whose threshold we are ever standing. But for her ardent sympathy for Felicita, Phebe would have been herself overwhelmed. It was the thought of her, with this terrible and secret addition to her sorrow, which bore her through the long journey and helped her to meet Felicita with something like calmness.

From the bay-window of the lodging house Mr. Clifford watched Felicita coming slowly and feebly toward the house. So fragile she looked, so unutterably sorrow-stricken, that a rush of compassion and pity opened the floodgates of his heart, and suffused his stern eyes with tears. Doubtless Phebe had told her all. Yet she was coming alone to meet him, her husband's enemy and persecutor, as it he was a friend. He would be a friend such as she had never known before. There would be no vain weeping, no womanish wailing in her; her grief was too deep for that. And he would respect it; he would spare her all the pain he could. At this moment, if Roland could have risen from the dead, he would have clasped him in his arms and wept upon his neck, as the father welcomed his prodigal son.

(To be continued.)

HOW TO SPEND WINTER EVENINGS.

Daisy Eyebright, a very sprightly and sensible writer, discusses the above subject at some length in a recent number of the *Country Gentleman*. At the outset, she urges parents to devise plans of entertainment and instruction, in which the whole household can join; well observing that it is a common fault in families, both in town and country, to leave each member to go its own way. What she says on this point is so excellent as to deserve being quoted *verbatim*:

"The father reads the newspaper beside the centre table, and wishes no disturbance in his vicinity; the mother, perhaps, is busy in the nursery with the younger children, or engaged in household duties, or absorbed in the pages of a magazine or book, and takes little heed to the occupations of the older members of the family. Perhaps the young men seek amusements abroad, and are allowed to return home when they please, unquestioned concerning their method of passing the long evenings. The older girls receive their friends in the parlour, or gather around the table or piano, occupied with fancy work or music. Each one is independent of the other, and there is no community of interest, which makes the bond of home happiness and increases the love of its inmates. In families thus managed, what wonder that the sons seek questionable amusements, the daughters make ill-assorted marriages and lead unhappy lives, and the parents find little happiness in their children. In their youth they gave them shelter and food, and cared for their health; but they did not interest themselves in making *home happy*; they did not give them real heart love, and teach them that in their society they could always be entertained."

Let every father and mother note this paragraph also, for there is a world of wisdom in it:

"Every evening there should be an hour given up to the little folks, when old and young play together. The wise man is he who keeps his child-heart, has been truly said; and the man who cannot frolic with his children is really to be pitied. No matter how high his station, a good romp is the best exercise for him and for his children; and the father who joins in his son's sports, plays football with him, slides down the hill and skates on the pond, is the father whose old age is the most tenderly cherished, and whose grey head is rarely dishonoured."

Music is naturally assigned a prominent place among the occupations for winter evenings. It should be introduced early enough for the little folks to have a share in it before bed-time. The simpler songs can be taken first for their benefit, and harder ones later on in the evening. But what is called "scientific music" is not needed at all. It is home songs, songs of the heart, songs embodying sentiment, moral and religious truth, songs that linger in the memory and hold the affections to the domestic hearth and altar, that are wanted. If the father cannot sing, and has no ear for music, let him not throw a wet blanket over the enjoyment, by