

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—FELICITA'S REFUSAL.

Now there was no longer a doubt weighing upon his spirit, Felix longed to tell his mother all. The slight cloud that had arisen of late years between them was so gossamer-like yet, that the faintest breath could drive it away. Though her boy was not the brilliant genius she had secretly and fondly hoped he would prove, he was still dearer to Felicitia than aught else on earth, or, indeed, in heaven; and her love for him was deeper than she supposed. On his part, he had never lost that chivalrous tenderness, blended with deferential awe, with which he had regarded her from his early boyhood. His love for Alice was so utterly different from his devotion to her, that he had never compared them, and they had not come into any kind of collision yet.

Felix sought his mother in her library. Felicitia was alone, reading in the light of a lamp which shed a strong illumination over her. In his eyes she was incomparably the loveliest woman he had ever seen, not even excepting Alice; and the stately magnificence of her velvet dress, and rich lace, and costly jewels, was utterly different from that of any other woman he knew. For Mrs. Pascal dressed simply, as became the wife of a country rector; and Phebe, in her studio, always wore a blouse or apron of brown Holland, which suited her well, making her homely and domestic in appearance, as she was in nature. Felicitia looked like a queen in his eyes.

When she heard his voice speaking to her, having not caught the sound of his step on the soft carpet, Felicitia looked up with a smile in her dark eyes. In a day or two her son was about to leave her roof, and her heart felt very soft toward him. She had scarcely realized that he was a man, until she knew that he had decided to have a place and dwelling of his own.

She stretched out both hands to him with a gesture of tenderness peculiar to herself, and shown only to him. It was as if one hand could not link them closely enough; or could not bring them so nearly heart to heart. Felix took them both into his own, and knelt down before her; his young face flushed with eagerness, and his eyes, so like her own, fastened upon hers.

"Your face speaks for you," she said, pressing one of her rare kisses upon it. "What is it my boy has to tell me?"

"Oh, mother," he cried, "you will never think I love you less than I have always done? See, I kiss your feet still as I used to do when I was a boy."

He bent his head to caress the little feet, and then laid it on his mother's lap, while she let her white fingers play with his hair.

"Why should you love me less than you have always done?" she asked, in a sweet, languid voice. "Have I ever changed toward you, Felix?"

"No, mother, no," he answered, "but to-night I feel how different I am from what I was but a year or two ago. I am a man now; I was a boy then."

"You will always be a boy to me," she said, with a tender smile.

"Yet, I am as old as my father was when you were married," he replied.

Felicitia's face grew white, and she leaned back in her chair with a sudden feeling of faintness. It was years since the boy had spoken of his father; who should he utter his name now? He had raised his head when he felt her move, and her dim and failing eyes saw his face in a mist, looking so like his father when she had known him first, that she shrank from him, with a terror and aversion too deep to be concealed.

"Roland!" she cried.

He did not speak or move, being too bewildered and wonder-struck at his mother's agitation. Felicitia hid her face in her white hands, and sat still recovering herself. The pang had been sudden and poignant; it had smitten her so unawares that she had betrayed its anguish. But, she felt in an instant, her boy had no thought of wounding her; and for her own sake, as well as his, she must conquer this painful excitement. There must be no scene to awaken observation or suspicion.

"Mother, forgive me," he exclaimed, "I did not mean to distress you."

"No," she breathed with difficulty, "I am sure of it. Go on, Felix."

"I came to tell you," he said gravely, "that as long as I can remember—at least, as long as we have been in London and known the Pascals—I have loved Alice. Oh, mother, I've thought sometimes you seemed as fond of her as you are of Hilda. You will be glad to have her as your daughter?"

Felicitia closed her eyes with a feeling of helpless misery. She could hardly give a thought to Felix and the words he uttered; yet it was those words which brought a flood of hidden memories and fears sweeping over her shrinking soul. It was so long since she had thought much of Roland! She had persuaded herself that as so many years had passed by, bringing to her no hint or token of his existence, he must be dead; and as one dead passes presently out of the active thoughts, busy only with the present, so had her husband passed away from her mind into some dim, hidden cell of memory, with which she had long ceased to trouble herself.

Her husband seemed to stand before her as she had seen him last, a haggard, wayworn, ruined man, beggared and stripped of all that makes life desirable. And this was only six months after he had lost all. What would he be after thirteen years if he was living still?

But if it had appeared to her out of the question to face and bear the ignominy and disgrace he had brought upon her thirteen years ago, how utterly impossible it was now. She could never retrace her steps. To confess the deception she had herself consented to, and taken part in, would be to

pull down with her own hands the fair edifice of her life. The very name she had made for herself, and the broader light in which her fame had placed her, made any repentance impossible. "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid." Her hill was not as lofty as she had once fancied it would be; but still, she was not on the low and safer level of the plain. She was honourably famous. She could not stain her honour by the acknowledgment of dishonour. The chief question, after all, was whether Roland was alive or dead.

Her colourless face and closed eyes, the expression of unutterable perplexity and anguish in her knitted brows and quivering lips, filled Felix with wonder and grief. He had risen from his kneeling posture at her feet, and now his reverential awe of her yielded to the tender compassion of a man for a weak and suffering woman. He drew her beloved head on to his breast, and held her in a firm and loving grasp.

"I would not grieve or pain you for worlds," he said, falteringly, "nor would Alice. I love you better than myself; as much as I love her. We will talk of it another day, mother."

She pressed close to him, and he felt her arms strained about him, as if she could not hold him near enough to her. It seemed to him as if she was trying to draw him into the very heart of her motherhood; but she knew how deep the gulf was between her and him, and shuddered at her own loneliness.

"It is losing you, my son," she whispered with her quivering lips.

"No, no," he said eagerly; "it is not losing me, but finding another child. Don't take a gloomy view of it, mother. I shall be as happy as my father was with you."

He could not keep himself from thinking of his father, or of speaking of him. He understood more perfectly now what his father's worship of his mother had been; the tenderness of a stronger being toward a weaker one, blended with the chivalrous homage of a generous nature to the one woman chosen to represent all womanhood. There was a keener trouble to him to-night than ever before, in the thought that his mother was a widow.

"Leave me now, Felix," she said, loosing him from her close embrace, and shutting her eyes from the sight of him. "Do not let any one come to me again to-night. I must be alone."

But when she was alone, it was only to let her thoughts whirl round and round in one monotonous circle. If Roland was dead, her secret was safe, and Felix might be happy. If he was not dead, Felix must not marry Alice Pascal. She had not looked forward to this difficulty. There had been an unconscious and vague feeling in her heart that her son loved her too passionately to be easily pleased by any girl; and, almost unawares to herself, she had been in the habit of comparing her own attractions and loveliness with those of the younger women who crossed his path. Yet, there was no personal vanity in the calm conviction she possessed that Felix had never seen a woman more beautiful and fascinating than the mother he had always admired with so much enthusiasm.

She was not jealous of Alice Pascal, she said to herself, and yet her heart was sore when she said it. Why could not Felix remain simply constant to her? He was the only being she had ever really loved; and her love for him was deeper than she had known it to be. Yet, to crush his hopes, to wound him, would be like the bitterness of death to her. If she could but let him marry his Alice, how much easier it would be than throwing obstacles in the way of his happiness; obstacles that would seem but the weak and wilful caprices of a foolish mother.

When the morning came, and Canon Pascal made his appearance, Felicitia received him in her library, apparently composed, but grave and almost stern in her manner. They were old friends; but the friendship on his side was warm and genial, while on hers it was cold and reserved. He lost no time in beginning on the subject which had brought him to her.

"My dear Felicitia," he said, "Felix tells me he had some talk with you last night. What do you think of our young people?"

"What does Alice say?" she asked.

"Oh, Alice!" he answered, in an amused yet tender tone; "she would be of one mind with Felix. There is something beautiful in the innocent, unworldly love of children like these, who are ready to build a nest under any eaves. Felicitia, you do not disapprove of it?"

"I cannot disapprove of Alice," she replied, gloomily; "but I do disapprove of Felix marrying so young. A man should not marry under thirty."

"Thirty!" echoed Canon Pascal; "that would be in seven years. It is a long time; but if they do not object, I should not. I'm in no hurry to lose my daughter. But they will not wait so long."

"Do not let them be engaged yet," she said, in hurried and sad tones. "They may see others whom they would love more. Early marriages and long engagements are both bad. Tell them from me that it is better for them to be free a while longer, till they know themselves and the world better. I would rather Felix and Hilda never married. When I see Phebe so free from all the gnawing cares and anxieties of this life, and so joyous in her freedom, I wish to heaven I could have had a single life like hers."

"Why! Felicitia!" he exclaimed, "this is morbid. You have never forgiven God for taking away your husband. You have been keeping a grudge against Him all these years of your widowhood."

"No, no!" she interrupted; "it is not that. They married me too soon—my uncle and Mr. Sefton. I never loved Roland as I ought. Oh! if I had loved him, how different my life would have been, and his!"

Her voice faltered and broke into deep sobs, which cut off all further speech. For a few minutes Canon Pascal endeavoured to reason with her and comfort her, but in vain. At length he quietly went away, and sent Phebe to her. There could be no more discussion of the subject for the present.

CHAPTER XXIX.—TAKING ORDERS.

The darkness that had dwelt so long in the heart of Felicitia began now to cast its gloom over the whole household. A sharp attack of illness, which followed immediately upon her great and inexplicable agitation, caused great consternation to her friends, and above all to Felix. The eminent physician who was called in said her brain had been overworked, and she must be kept absolutely free of all worry and anxiety. How easily is this direction given, and how difficult, how impossible in many cases, is it to follow! That any soul, except that of a child, can be freed from all anxiety, is possible only to the soul that knows and trusts God.

All further mention of his love for Alice was out of the question now for Felix. Bitter as silence was, it was imperative; for while his mother's objections and prejudices were not overcome, Canon Pascal would not hear of any closer tie than that which already existed being formed between the young people. He had, however, the comfort of believing that Alice had heard so much of what had passed from her mother, as that she knew he loved her, and had owned his love to her father. There was a subtle change in her manner toward him; she was more silent in his presence, and there was a tremulous tone in her voice at times when she spoke to him, yet she lingered beside him, and listened more closely to all he had to say; and when they left Westminster to return to their country rectory, the tears glistened in her eyes as they had never done before when he bade her good-bye.

"Come and see us as soon as it will not vex your mother, my boy," said Canon Pascal; "you may always think of our home as your own."

The only person who was not perplexed by Felicitia's inexplicable conduct and her illness, was Phebe Marlowe, who believed that she knew the cause, and was drawn closer to her in the deepest sympathy and pity. It seemed to Phebe that Felicitia was creating the obstacle, which existed chiefly in her fancy; and with her usual frankness and directness she went to Canon Pascal's abode in the Cloisters at Westminster, to tell him simply what she thought.

"I want to ask you," she said, with her clear, honest gaze fastened on his face, "if you know why Mrs. Sefton left Riversborough thirteen years ago?"

"Partly," he answered; "my wife is a Riversdale, you know—Felicitia's second or third cousin. There was some painful suspicion attaching to Roland Sefton."

"Yes," answered Phebe, sadly.

"Was it not quite cleared up?" asked Canon Pascal.

Phebe shook her head.

"We heard," he went on, "that it was believed Roland Sefton's confidential clerk was the actual culprit; and Sefton himself was only guilty of negligence. Mr. Clifford himself told Lord Riversdale that Sefton was gone away on a long holiday, and might not be back for months; and something of the same kind was put forth in a circular issued from the Old Bank. I had one sent to me; for some little business of my wife's was in the hands of the firm. I recollect thinking it was an odd affair, but it passed out of my mind; and the poor fellow's death quite obliterated all accusing thoughts against him."

"That is the scruple in Felicitia's mind," said Phebe in a sorrowful tone; "she feels that you ought to know everything before you consent to Alice marrying Felix, and she cannot bring herself to speak of it."

"But how morbid that is," he answered; "as if I did not know Felix, every thought of him and every motion of his soul! His father was a careless, negligent man. He was nothing worse—was he, Phebe?"

"He was the best friend I ever had," she answered earnestly, though her face grew pale and her eyelids drooped. "I owe all I am to him. But it was not Acton who was guilty. It was Felix and Hilda's father."

"And Felicitia knew it?" he exclaimed.

"She knew nothing about it until I told her," answered Phebe. "Roland Sefton came to me when he was trying to escape out of the country, and my father and I helped him to get away. He told me all; and oh! he was not so much to blame as you might think. But he was guilty of the crime; and if he had been taken he would have been sent to gaol. I would have died then sooner than let him be taken to gaol."

"If I had only known this from the beginning," said Canon Pascal.

"What would you have done?" asked Phebe eagerly. "Would you have refused to take Felix into your home? He has done no wrong. Hilda has done no wrong. There would have been disgrace and shame for them if their father had been sent to gaol; but his death saved them from all danger of that. Nobody would ever speak a word against Roland Sefton now. Yet this is what is preying on Felicitia's mind. If she was sure you knew all, and still consented to Felix marrying Alice, she would be at peace again. And I, too, think you ought to know all. But you will not visit the sins of the father upon the son."

"Divine Providence does so," he interrupted; "if the fathers eat sour grapes, the teeth of the sons are set on edge. Phebe, Phebe, that is only too true."

"But Roland's death set the children free from the curse," answered Phebe, weeping. "If he had been taken they would have gone away to some foreign land where they were not known; or even if he had not died, we must have done differently from what we have done. But there is no one now to bring this condemnation against them. Even old Mr. Clifford has more than forgiven Roland; and if possible would have the time back again, that he might act so as to reinstate him in his position. No one in the world bears a grudge against Roland."

"I'm not hard-hearted, God knows," he answered, "but no man likes to give his child to the son of a felon, convicted or unconvicted."

"Then I have done harm by telling you."

"No, no; you have done rightly," he replied, "it was good for me to know the truth. We will let things be for a while. And yet," he added, his grave, stern face softening a little, "if it would be good for Felicitia, tell her that