

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XXXIII.—THE GRAVE AT ENGELBERG.

On the same August morning when Felix was riding up the long, lovely lanes to Phebe Marlowe's little farmstead, Canon Pascal and Alice were starting by the earliest boat which left Lucerne for Stansstad, in the dewy coolness of the dawn. The short transit was quickly over, and an omnibus carried them into Stans, where they left their knapsacks to be sent on after them during the day. The long pleasant walk of fourteen miles to Engelberg lay before them, to be taken leisurely with many a rest in the deep, cool shades of the woods, or under the shadow of some great rock. The only impediment with which Alice burdened herself was a little green slip of ivy, which Felix had gathered from the walls of her country home, and which she had carried in a little flower-pot filled with English soil, to plant on his father's grave. It had been a sacred, though somewhat troublesome charge to her, as they had travelled from place to place, and she had not permitted anyone to take the care of it off her hands. This evening, with her own hands, she was going to plant it on the foreign grave of Roland Sefton, which had been so long neglected and unvisited by those whom he had left behind him. That Felicitia should never have made a pilgrimage to this sacred spot was a wonder to her, but that she should so steadily resist the wish of Felix to visit his father's resting place filled Alice's heart with grave misgivings for her own future happiness.

But she was not troubling herself with any misgivings to-day, as they journeyed onward and upward through the rich meadows and thick forests leading to the Alpine valley which lay under the snowy dome of the Aletsch. Her father's enjoyment of the sweet solitude and changeful beauty of their pathway was too perfect for her to mar it by any mournful forebodings. He walked beside her under the arched aisles of the pine-woods bareheaded, singing snatches of song as joyously as a school-boy, or waded off through marshy and miry places in quest of some rare plant which ought to be growing there, splashing back to her further on in the winding road, scarcely less happy if he had not found it than if he had. How could she be troubled while her father was treading on enchanted ground?

But the last time they allowed themselves to sit down to rest, before entering the village, Canon Pascal's face grew grave, and his manner towards his daughter became more tender and caressing than usual. The secret which Phebe had told him of Roland Sefton had been pondered over these many weeks in his heart. If it had concerned Felix only, he would have felt himself grieved at this story of his father's sin, but he knew too well it concerned Alice as closely. This little ivy-slip, so carefully though silently guarded through all the journey, had been a daily reminder to him of his girl's love for her old playfellow and companion. Though she had not told him of its destiny he had guessed it, and now, as she screened it from the too direct rays of the hot sun, it spoke to her of Felix, and to him of his father's crime.

He had no resolve to make his daughter miserable by raising obstacles to her marriage with Felix, who was truly as dear to him as his own sons. But yet, if he had only known this dishonest strain in the blood, would he, years ago, have taken Felix into his home, and exposed Alice to the danger of loving him? Felix was out of the way of temptation, there was no stream of money passing through his hands, and it would be hard and vile indeed for him to fall into any dishonest trickery. But it might be that his children—Alice's children—might tread in the steps of their forefather, Roland Sefton, and pursue the same devious course. Thieves breed thieves, it was said, in the lowest dregs of social life. Would there be some fatal weakness, some insidious improbity, in the nature of those descending from Roland Sefton?

It was a wrong against God, a faithless distrust of Him, he said to himself, to let those dark thoughts distress his mind at the close of a day such as that which had been granted to him, almost as a direct and perfect gift from heaven itself. He looked into the sweet, tranquil face of his girl, and the trustful, loving eyes which met his anxious gaze with so open and frank an expression; yet he could not altogether shake off the feeling of solicitude and foreboding which had fallen upon his spirit.

"Let us go on, and have a quiet dinner by ourselves," said Alice, at last, "and then we shall have all the cool of the evening to wander about as we please."

They left their resting-place and walked on in silence, as if they were overawed by the snow-clad mountains and towering peaks hanging over the valley. A little way off the road they saw a poor and miserable hut, built on piles of stones, with deep, sheltering eaves, but with a broken roof, and no light except such as entered it by the door. In the dimness of the interior they just caught sight of a grey-headed man, sitting on the floor, with his face hidden in his knees. It was an attitude telling of deep wretchedness and heaviness of heart, and though neither of them spoke of the glimpse they had had, they drew nearer to one another, and walked closely together until they reached the hotel.

It was still broad day-light, though the sun had sunk behind the lofty mountains when they strolled out again into the picturesque, irregular street of the village. The clear blue sky above them was of the colour of the wild hyacinth, the simplest, purest blue, against which the pure and simple white of the snowy domes and pinnacles of the mountain ranges enclosing the valley stood out in sharp, bold outlines; whilst the dark green of the solemn pine-forests climbing up the steep slopes looked almost black against the pale grey peaks jutting up from among them, with silver lines of snow marking out every line and crevice in their furrowed and fretted architecture. Canon Pascal bared his head, as if he had been entering his beloved Abbey in Westminster.

"God is very glorious," he said in a low and reverent tone. "God is very good."

In silence they sauntered on, with loitering steps, to the little cemetery, where lay the grave they had come to seek. They found it in a forlorn and deserted corner, but there was no trace of neglect about the grey unpolished granite of the cross that marked it. No weeds were growing around it, and no moss was gathering upon it; the lettering, telling the name, and age, and date of death, of the man who lay beneath it, was as clear as if it had just come from the chisel of the graver. The tears sprang to Alice's eyes as she stood before it with reverently bowed head, looking down on Roland Sefton's grave.

"Did you ever see him, father?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"I saw him once," he answered, "at Riversdale Towers, when Felix was still only a baby. He was a finer and handsomer man than Felix will ever be; and there was more foreign blood in his veins, which gave him greater gaiety and simpler vivacity than Englishmen usually have. I remember how he watched over Felicitia, and waited on her in an almost womanly fashion; and fetched his baby himself for us to see, carrying him in his own arms with the deft skill of a nurse. Felix is as tender-hearted, but he would not make a show of it so openly."

"Cousin Felicitia must have loved him with her whole heart," sighed Alice, "yet if I were in her place, I should come here often; it would be the one place I loved to come to. She is a hard woman, father; hard, and bitter, and obstinate. Do you think Felix's father would have set himself against me as she has done?"

She turned to him her sad and pensive face, almost the dearest face in the world to him; and he gazed into it with penetrating and loving eyes. Would it not be best to tell the child the secret this grave covered, here, by the grave itself? Better for her to know the truth concerning the dead, than cherish hard and unjust thoughts of the living. Even if Felicitia consented, he could not let her marry Felix ignorant of the facts which Phebe had disclosed to him. Felix himself must know them some day; and was it this the hour and the place for revealing them to Alice?

"My darling," he said, "I know why Felicitia never comes here, nor lets her children come; and also why she is at present opposed to the thought of Felix marrying. Roland Sefton, her husband, the unhappy man whose body lies here, was guilty of a crime, and died miserably while a fugitive from our country. His death consigned the crime to oblivion, no one remembered it against her and her children. But if he had lived, he would have been a convict; and she, and Felix, and Hilda would have shared his ignominy. She feels that she must not suffer Felix to enter our family until she has told me this, and it is the mere thought and dread of such a disclosure that has made her ill. We must wait till her mind recovers its strength."

"What was it he had done?" asked Alice, with quivering lips.

"He had misappropriated a number of securities left in his charge," answered Canon Pascal; "Phebe says to the amount of over £10,000, most of it belonging to Mr. Clifford."

"Is that all?" cried Alice, the colour rushing back again to her face, and the light to her eyes; "was it only money? Oh, I thought it was more dreadful than that. Why I should never blame cousin Felicitia because her husband misappropriated some securities belonging to old Mr. Clifford. And Felix is not to blame at all; how could he be? Poor Felix!"

"But Alice," he said, with a half smile, "if, instead of being buried here, Roland Sefton had lived, and been arrested, and sent to a convict prison for a term of imprisonment, Felicitia's life and the life of her children would have been altogether overshadowed by the disgrace and infamy of it. There could have been no love between you and Felix."

"It was a good thing that he died," she answered, looking down again on the grave almost gladly. "Does Felix know this? But I am sure he does not," she added quickly, and looking up with a heightened colour into her father's face, "he is all honour, and truth, and unselfishness. He could not be guilty of a crime against anyone."

"I believe in Felix; I love him dearly," her father said, but if I had known of this I do not think I could have brought him up in my own home, with my own boys and girls. God knows it would have been a difficult point to settle; but it was not given to my poor wisdom to decide."

"I shall not love Felix one jot less," she said, "or reverence him less. If all his forefathers had been bad men, I should be sure still that he was good. I never knew him do or say anything that was mean or selfish. My poor Felix! Oh, father! I shall love him more than ever now I know there is something in his life that needs pity. When he knows it he will come to me for comfort, and I will comfort him. His father shall hear me promise it by this grave here. I will never, never visit Roland Sefton's sin on his son; I will never in my heart think of it as a thing against him. And if all the world came to know it, I would never once feel a moment's shame of him."

Her voice faltered a little, and she knelt down on the parched grass at the foot of the cross, hiding her face in her hands. Canon Pascal laid his hand fondly on her bowed head, and then he left her that she might be alone with the grave, and God.

CHAPTER XXXIV.—THE LOWEST DEEPS.

The miserable, dilapidated hut at the entrance of Engelberg, with no light save that which entered by the doorway, had been Jean Merle's home since he had fixed his abode in the valley, drawn thither irresistibly by the grave which bore Roland Sefton's name. There was less provision for comfort in this dark hovel than in a monk's cell. A log of rough, unbarked timber from the forest was the only seat, and a rude framework of wood, filled with straw or dry ferns, was his bed. The floor was bare, except near the door, the upper half of which usually stood open, and here it was covered with fine chips of box and oak-wood, and the dust which fell from his busy graver, the tool which was never out of his fingers while the light served him. There was no more decoration than there was comfort, except that on the

smoke-stained walls the mildew had pencilled out some strange and grotesque lines, as if some mural painting had mouldered into ruin there. Two or three English books alone, of the cheap continental editions, lay at one end of the clumsy shelf; with the few cooking utensils which were absolutely necessary, piled together on the other. There was a small stove in one corner of the hovel, where a handful of embers could be seen at times, like the eye of some wild creature lurking in the deep gloom.

Jean Merle, though still two or three years under fifty, was looked upon by his neighbours as being a man of great, though unknown age. Yet, though he stooped in the shoulders a little, and walked with his head bent down, he was not infirm, nor had he the appearance of infirmity. His long mountain expeditions kept his muscles in full force and activity, but his grey face was marked with many lines, so fine as to be seen only at close quarters; yet, on the whole, forming a wrinkled and aged mask as of one far advanced in life. In addition to this singularity of aspect, there was the extraordinary seclusion and sordid miserliness of his mode of existence, more in harmony with the passiveness of extreme old age than with the energy of a man still in the prime of his days. The village mothers frightened their children with tales about Jean Merle's gigantic strength, which made him an object of terror to them. He sought acquaintance with none of his neighbours; and they avoided him as a heretic and a stranger.

The rugged, simple, narrow life of his Swiss forefathers gathered around him, and hedged him in. They had been peasant-farmers, with the exception of the mountain pasturage, his grandfather, and he still well remembered Felix Merle, after whom his boy had been called. All of them had been men toiling with their own hands, with a never ceasing bodily activity, which had left them but little time or faculty for any mental pursuit. This half of his nature fitted him well for the life that now lay before him. As his Swiss ancestors had been for many generations toil-worn and weather-beaten men, whose faces were sun-burnt and sun-blistered, whose backs were bent with labour, and whose weary feet dragged heavily along the rough paths, so he became. The social refinement of the prosperous Englishman, skin deep as it is, vanished in the coarse and narrow life to which he had partly doomed himself, had partly been doomed, by the dull, despondent apathy which had possessed his soul when he first left the hospital in Lucerne.

His mode of living was as monotonous as it was solitary. His work only gave him some passing interest, for in the bitterness of his spirit he kept himself quite apart from all relation with his fellow-men. As far as in him lay, he shut out the memory of the irrevocable past, and forbade his heart to wander back to the years that were gone. He strove to concentrate himself upon his daily toil and the few daily wants of his body, and after a while a small degree of calm and composure had been won by him. Roland Sefton was dead; let him lie motionless, as a corpse should do, in the silence of his grave. But Jean Merle was living, and might continue to live another twenty years or more, thus solitarily and monotonously.

But there was one project which he formed early in his new state of existence, which linked him by a living link to the old. As soon as he found he could earn handsome wages for his skilled and delicate work, wages which he could in no way spend, and yet continue the penance which he pronounced upon himself, the thought came to him of resuming the money which had been intrusted to him by old Marlowe, and the other poor men who had placed their savings in his care. To repay the larger amount to which he was indebted to Mr. Clifford would be impossible, but to earn the other sums, though it might be the work of years, was still practicable, especially if from time to time he could make safe and prudent speculations, such as his knowledge of the money market might enable him to do, so as to insure more rapid returns. At the village inn he could see the newspapers, with their lists of the various continental funds, and the share and stock markets; and without entering at all into the world, he could direct the buying in and selling out of his stock through some bankers in Lucerne.

Even this restitution must be made in secret, and be so wrapped up in darkness and stealth that no one could suspect the hand from which it came. For he knew that, as yet he had woven about himself was too strong and intricate to be broken through without deadly injury to others, and above all to Felicitia. The grave yonder, and the stone cross above it, barred the way to any return by the path he had come. But would it be utterly impossible for him to venture back, changed as he was by these many years, to England? It would be only Jean Merle who would tread thither; there could be no resurrection for Roland Sefton. But could not Jean Merle see from afar off the old home, or Phebe Marlowe's cottage on the hill-side, or possibly his mother, or his children; nay, Felicitia herself? Only afar off; as some banished, repentant soul, drawing a little nearer to the walls of the eternal city, might be favoured with a glimpse of the golden streets, and the white-robed citizens therein, the memory of which would dwell within him for evermore.

As he drew nearer the end he grew more eager to reach it. The dull apathy of the past thirteen years was transformed into a feverish anticipation of his secret journey to England with the accumulated proceeds of his work and his speculations, which in some way or other must find their way into the hands of the men who had trusted him in time past. But at this juncture the bankers at Lucerne failed him, as he had failed others. It was not simply that his speculations turned out badly; but the men to whom he had intrusted the conduct of them, from his solitary mountain home, defrauded him, and the bank broke. The measure he had meted out to others had been measured to him again. Whatever he had done unto men, they had done unto him.

For three days Jean Merle wandered about the eternal frosts of the ice-bound peaks and snow-fields of the mountains around him, living he did not himself know how. It was not money he had lost. Like old Marlowe, he realised how poor a symbol money was of the long years of ceaseless toil, the days of self-denial, the hours of anxious thoughts represented. And besides this darker side, it stood also for