

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESSA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XLII.—NO PLACE FOR REPENTANCE.

They stood silent for a few moments—moments which seemed hours to Phebe. The stranger—for who could he be so great a stranger as one who had been many years dead?—had advanced only a step or two from the threshold, and paused as if some invisible barrier was set up between them. She had shrunk back, and stood leaning against the wall for the support her trembling limbs needed. It was with a vehement effort that at last she spoke.

"Roland Sefton!" she faltered.

"Yes!" he answered, "I am that most miserable man." "But you died," she said with quivering lips, "fourteen years ago."

"No, Phebe, no," he replied; "would to God I had died then."

Once more an agony of mingled fear and joy overwhelmed her. This dear voice, so lamentable and hopeless, so well remembered in all its tones, told her that he was still living, whom she had mourned over so many years. But what could this mystery mean? What had he passed through? What was about to happen now? A tumult of thoughts thronged to her brain. But clearest of all came the assurance that he was alive, standing there, desolate, changed, and friendless. She ran to him and clasped his hands in hers; stooping down and kissing them, those hard worn hands, which he left unresistingly in her grasp. These loving, and deferential caresses belonged to the time when she was a humble country girl, and he the friend very far above her.

"Come closer to the fire, your hands are cold, Mr. Roland," she said, speaking in the old long-disused accent of her early days, as she might have spoken to him while she was yet a child. She threw a few logs on the fire, and drew up Canon Pascal's chair to the hearth for him. She felt spell-bound, and as if she had been suddenly thrust back upon the old times.

"I am no longer Roland Sefton," he said, sinking down into the chair, "he died, as you say, many a long year ago. Do not light the lamp, Phebe, let us talk by the firelight."

The flicker of the flames creeping round the dry wood played upon his face, and his eyes were fastened on it. Could this man really be Roland Sefton, or was she being tricked by her fancy? Here was a scarred and wrinkled face, blistered and burnt by the summer's sun, and cut and frost-bitten by the winter's cold; the hair was gray and ragged, and the eyes far sunk in the head met her gaze with a despairing and uneasy glance, as if he shrank from her close scrutiny. His bowed shoulders and hands roughened by toil, and worn-out mechanic's dress, were such a change, that perhaps, she acknowledged it reluctantly to herself, if he had not spoken as he did she might have passed him by undiscovered.

"I am Jean Merle," he said, "not Roland Sefton."

"Jean Merle!" she repeated in a low, bewildered tone; "not Roland Sefton, but Jean Merle?"

But she could not be bewildered or in doubt much longer. This was Roland indeed, the hero of her life, come back to her a broken-down, desolate, and hopeless man. She knelt down on the hearth beside him, and laid her hand compassionately on his.

"But you are Roland himself to me!" she cried. "Oh! be quick, and tell me all about it. Why did we ever think you were dead?"

"It was best for them all," he answered. "God knows I believed it was best. But it was a second sin, worse than the first, Phebe. I did the man who died no wrong, for he told me as he lay dying that he had no friends to grieve for him, and no property to leave. All he wanted was a decent grave; and he has it, and my name with it. The grave at Engelberg contains a stranger. And I, Jean Merle, have taken charge of it."

"Oh!" cried Phebe, with a pang of dread, "how will Felicitia bear it?"

"Felicitia has known it; she consented to it," said Jean Merle. "If she had uttered one word against my desperate plan, I should have recoiled from it. To be dead whilst you are yet in the body; to have eyes to see and ears to hear with, and a thinking brain and a hungry heart, whilst there is no sign, or sound, or memory, or love from your former life; you cannot conceive what that is, Phebe. I was dead, yet I was too keenly alive in Jean Merle, the poor wood-carver and miser. They thought I was imbecile and I was almost a madman. I could not tear myself away from the grave where Roland Sefton was buried, but oh! what I have suffered!"

He ended with a long shuddering sigh, which pierced Phebe to the heart. The joy of seeing him again was vanishing in the sight of his suffering, but the thought uppermost in her mind was of Felicitia.

"And she has known all along that you were not dead?" she said, in a tone of awe.

"Yes, Felicitia knew," he answered.

"And has she never seen you, never written to you?" she asked.

"She knows nothing of me," he replied. "I was to be dead to her and to every one else. We parted forever in Engelberg fourteen years ago this very month. Perhaps she believes me to be dead in reality. But I could live no longer without knowing something of you all, of Felix and Hilda; and I came over to England in August. I have seen all of you, except Felicitia."

"Oh! it was wicked: it was cruel!" sobbed Phebe, shivering. "Your mother died, believing she was going to rejoin you, and I, oh! how I have mourned for you!"

"Have you, Phebe?" he said sorrowfully, "but Felicitia has been saved from shame, and has been successful.

She is too famous now for me to retrace my steps, and get back into truthfulness. I can find no place for repentance, let me seek it ever so carefully and with tears."

"But you have repented?" she whispered.

"Before God? yes!" he answered, "and I believe He has forgiven me. But there is no way by which I can relieve the past. I have forfeited everything, and I am now shut out even from the duties of life. What ought I to have done, Phebe? There was this way to save my mother, and my children, and Felicitia: and I took it. It has prospered for all of them; they hold a different position in the world this day than they could have done if I had lived."

"In this world, yes!" answered Phebe, with a touch of scorn in her voice; "but cannot you see what you have done for Felicitia? Oh! it would have been better for her to have endured the shame of your first sin, than bear such a burden of guilt. And you might have outlived the disgrace. There are Christian people in the world who can forgive sin, even as Christ forgives it. Even my poor father forgave it; and Mr. Clifford, he is repenting now that he did not forgive you; it weighs him down in his old age. It would have been better for you and Felicitia if you had borne the penalty of your crime."

"And our children, Phebe?" he said.

"Could not God have made it up to them?" she asked.

"Did He make it necessary for you to sin again on their account? Oh! if you had only trusted Him! If you had only waited to see how Christ could turn even the sins of the father into blessings for his children! They have missed you; it may be, I cannot see clearly, they must miss you now all their lives. It would break their hearts to learn all this. Whether they must know it, I cannot tell."

"To what end should they know it?" he said. "Don't you see, Phebe, that the distinction Felicitia has won binds us to keep this secret? It cannot be disclosed either to her or to them. I came to tell it to the man who brought me here under a seal of secrecy."

"To Canon Pascal?" she exclaimed.

"Pascal?" he repeated, "ay? I remember him now. It would have been terrible to have told it to him."

"Let me think about it," said Phebe, "it has come too suddenly upon me. There must be something we ought to do, but I cannot see it yet. I must have time to recollect it all. And yet I am afraid to let you go, lest you should disappear again, and all this should seem like a dreadful dream."

"You care for me still, Phebe?" he answered mournfully. "No, I shall not disappear from you, I shall hold fast by you, now you have seen me again. If that poor wretch in he who lifted up his eyes, being in torments, had caught sight of some pitying angel, who would now and then dip the tip of her finger in water and cool his tongue, would he have disappeared from her vision? Wouldn't he rather have had a horrible dread lest she should disappear? But you will not forsake me, Phebe?"

"Never!" replied Phebe, with an intense and mournful earnestness.

"Then I will go," he said, rising reluctantly to his feet. The deep tones of the Abbey clock were striking for the second time since he had entered Canon Pascal's study, and they had been left in uninterrupted conversation. It was time for him to go; yet it seemed to him as if he had still so much to pour into Phebe's ear, that many hours would not give him time enough. Unconstrained speech had proved a source of ineffable solace and strength to him. He had been dying of thirst, and he had found a spring of living waters. To Phebe, and to her alone, he was still a living man, unless sometimes Felix a thought of him.

"If you are still my friend, knowing all," he said, "I shall no longer despair. When will you see me again?"

"I will come to morning service in the Abbey to-morrow," she answered.

CHAPTER XLIII.—WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

After speaking to Canon Pascal for a few minutes, with an agitation and a reserve which he could not but observe, Phebe left the house to go home. In one of the darkest corners of the cloisters she caught sight of the figure of Jean Merle, watching for her to come out. For an instant Phebe paused, as if to speak to him once more; but her heart was over-fraught with conflicting emotions, whilst bewildering thoughts oppressed her brain. She longed for a solitary walk homewards, along the two or three miles of a crowded thoroughfare, where she could now feel as much alone as she had ever done on the solitary uplands about her birth-place. She had always delighted to ramble about the streets alone after nightfall, catching brief glimpses of the great out-door population, who were content if they could get a shelter for their heads, during the few short hours they could give to sleep, without indulging in the luxury of a home. When talking to them she could return to the rustic and homely dialect of her childhood; and from her own early experience she could understand their wants, and look at them from their stand-point, whilst feeling for them a sympathy and pity intensified by the education which had lifted her above them.

But to-night she passed along the busy streets both deaf and dumb, mechanically choosing the right way between the Abbey and her home, nearly three miles away. There was only one circumstance of which she was conscious—that Jean Merle was following her. Possibly he was afraid in the depths of his heart that she would fail him when she came to deliberately consider all he had told her. He wronged her, she said to herself indignantly. Still whenever she turned her head she caught sight of his tall, bent figure and gray head, stealing after her at some distance, but never losing her. So mournful was it to Phebe, to see her oldest and her dearest friend thus dogging her footsteps, that once or twice she paused at a street corner to give him time to overtake her; but he kept aloof. He wished only to see where she lived, for there also lived Felicitia and Hilda.

She turned at last into the square where their house was. It was brilliantly lighted up, for Felicitia was having one of her rare receptions that evening, and in another hour or two

the rooms would be filled with guests. It was too early yet, and Hilda was playing on her piano in the drawing-room, the merry notes ringing out into the quiet night. There was a side door to Phebe's studio, by which she could go in and out at pleasure, and she stood at it trying to fit her latch-key into the lock with her trembling hands. Looking back she saw Jean Merle some little distance away, leaning against the railings that enclosed the Square garden.

"Oh! I must run back to him! I must speak to him again!" she cried to her own heart. In another instant she was at his side, with her hands clasping his.

"Oh!" she sobbed, "what can I do for you? This is too miserable for you; and for me as well. Tell me what I can do."

"Nothing," he answered. "Why, you make me feel as if I had sinned again in telling you all this. I ought not to have troubled your happy heart with my sorrow."

"It was not you," she said; "you did not even come to tell me; God brought you. I can bear it. But oh! to see you shut out, and inside, yonder, Hilda is playing, and Felix, perhaps, is there. They will be singing by-and-by, and never know who is standing outside, in the foggy night, listening to them."

Her voice broke into sobs, but Jean Merle did not notice them.

"And Felicitia?" he said.

Phebe could not answer him for weeping. Just yet she could hardly bring herself to think distinctly of Felicitia, though in fact her thoughts were full of her. She ran back to her private door, and this time opened it readily. There was a low light in the studio from a shaded lamp standing on the chimney-piece, which made the hearth bright, but left all the rest of the room in shadow. Phebe threw off her bonnet and cloak with a very heavy and troubled sigh.

"What can make you sigh, Phebe?" asked a low-toned and plaintive voice. In the chair by the fire-place, pushed out of the circle of the light, she saw Felicitia leaning back, and looking up at her. The beauty of her face had never struck harshly upon Phebe until now; at this moment it was absolutely painful to her. The rich folds of her velvet dress, and the soft and costly lace of her head-dress, distinct from those resembling a widow's cap, set off both her face and figure to the utmost advantage. Phebe's eyes seemed to behold her more distinctly and vividly than they had done for some years past; for she was looking through them with a dark background for what she saw in her own brain. She was a strikingly beautiful woman; but the thought of what anguish and dread had been concealed under her reserved and stately air, so cold yet so gentle, filled Phebe's soul with a sudden terror. What an awful life of self-approved, stoical falsehood she had been living! She could see the man, from whom she had just parted, standing, without, homeless and friendless, on the verge of pennilessness; a dead man in a living world, cut off from all the ties and duties of the home and the society he loved. But to Phebe he did not appear so wretched as Felicitia was.

She sank down on a seat near Felicitia, with such a feeling of heart-sickness and heart-faintness as she had never experienced before. The dreariness and perplexity of the present stretched before her into the coming years. For almost the first time in her life she felt worn out; physically weary and exhausted, as if her strength had been overtaxed. Her childhood on the fresh, breezy uplands, and her happy, tranquil temperament had hitherto kept her in perfect health. But now she felt as if the sins of those whom she had loved so tenderly and loyally touched the very springs of her life. She could have shared any other burden with them, and borne it with an unbroken spirit and an uncrushed heart. But such a sin as this, so full of woe and bewilderment to them all, entangled her soul also in its poisonous web.

"Why did you sigh so bitterly?" asked Felicitia again.

"The world is so full of misery," she answered, in a tremulous and troubled voice; "its happiness is such a mockery!"

"Have you found that out at last dear Phebe?" said Felicitia. "I have been telling you so for years. The Son of Man fainting under the Cross—that is the true emblem of human life. Even He had not strength enough to bear His cross to the place called Golgotha. Whenever I think of what most truly represents our life here, I see Jesus, faltering along the rough road, with Simon behind Him, whom they compelled to bear His cross."

"He fainted under the sins of the world," murmured Phebe. "It is possible to bear the sorrows of others; but oh! it is hard to carry their sins."

"We all find that out," said Felicitia, her face growing wan and white even to the lips. "Can one man do evil without the whole world suffering for it? Does the effect of a sin ever die out? What is done cannot be undone through all eternity. There is the wretchedness of it, Phebe."

"I never felt it as I do now," she answered.

"Because you have kept yourself free from earthly ties," said Felicitia mournfully, "you have neither husband nor child to increase your power of suffering a hundredfold. I am entering upon another term of tribulation in Felix and Hilda. If I had only been like you, dear Phebe, I could have passed through life as happily as you do; but my life has never belonged to myself, it has been forced to run in channels made by others."

Somewhere in the house behind them a door was left open accidentally, and the sound of Hilda's piano and of voices singing broke in upon the quiet studio. Phebe listened to them, and thought of the desolate, broken-hearted man without, who was listening too. The clear young voices of their children fell upon his ears as upon Felicitia's; so near they were to one another, yet so far apart. She shivered and drew nearer to the fire.

"I feel as cold as if I was a poor outcast in the streets," she said.

"And I, too," responded Felicitia; "but oh! Phebe, do not you lose heart and courage, like me. You have always seemed in the sunshine, and I have looked up to you and felt cheered. Don't come down into the darkness to me."

Phebe could not answer, for the darkness was closing round her. Until now there had happened no perplexity