

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWERS AND CABLES.

BY HESDA STRETTON.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE SENIOR PARTNER.

Long as the daylight lasts in May, it was after nightfall when Felicia left her study and went down to the drawing-room, more elegantly and expensively furnished for her than the drawing-room at Riversdale had been. Its extravagant display seemed to strike upon her suddenly as she entered it. Phebe was gone home, and Madame had retired to her own room, having given up the expectation of seeing Felicia that day. Mr. Clifford, the servant told her, was still in the bank, with his lawyer, for whom he had telegraphed to London. Felicia sent him a message that if he was not too busy she wished to see him for a few minutes.

Mr. Clifford almost immediately appeared, and Felicia saw him for the first time. She had always heard him called old; but he was a strong, erect, stern-looking man of sixty, with keen, cold eyes that could not be avoided. Felicia did not seek to avoid them. She looked as steadily at him as he did at her. There were traces of tears on her face, but there was no tremor or weakness about her. They exchanged a few civil words as calmly as if they were ordinary acquaintances.

"Tell me briefly what has happened," she said to him, when he had taken a seat near to her.

"Briefly," he repeated. "Well! I find myself robbed of securities worth nearly £8,000; private securities, bond and scrip, left in custody only, not belonging to the firm. No one but Acton or Roland could have access to them. Acton has eluded me; but if Roland is found he must take the consequences."

"And what are those?" asked Felicia.

"I shall prosecute him as I would prosecute a common thief or burglar," answered Mr. Clifford. "His crime is more dishonourable and cowardly."

"Is it not cruel to say this to me?" she asked, yet in a tranquil tone which startled him.

"Cruel!" he repeated again; "I have not been in the habit of choosing words. You asked me a question, and I gave you the answer that was in my mind. I never forgive. Those who pass over crimes make themselves partakers in those crimes. Roland has robbed not only me, but half a dozen poor persons, to whom such a loss is ruin. Would it be right to let such a man escape justice?"

"You think he has gone away on purpose?" she said.

"He has absconded," answered Mr. Clifford, "and the matter is already in the hands of the police. A description of him has been telegraphed to every police station in the kingdom. If he is not out of it, he can barely escape now."

Felicia's pale face could not grow paler, but she shivered perceptibly.

"I am telling you bluntly," he said, "because I believe it is best to know the worst at once. It is terrible to have it falling drop by drop. You have courage and strength; I see it. Take an old man's word for it, it is better to know all in its naked ugliness, than have it brought to light bit by bit. There is not the shadow of a doubt of Roland's crime. You do not believe him innocent yourself?"

"No," she replied in a low, yet steady voice; "no. I must tell the truth. I cannot comfort myself with the belief that he is innocent."

Mr. Clifford's keen eyes were fastened upon Felicia with admiration. Here was a woman, young and pallid with grief and dread, who neither tried to move him by prayers and floods of tears, nor shrank from acknowledging a truth, however painful. He had never seen her before, though the costly set of jewels she was wearing had been his own gift to her on her wedding. He recognized them with pleasure, and looked more attentively at her beautiful but gloomy face. When he spoke again it was in a manner less harsh and abrupt than it had been before.

"I am not going to ask you any questions about Roland," he said, "you have a right, the best right in the world, to screen him, and aid him in escaping from the just consequences of his folly and crime."

"You might ask me," she interrupted, "and I should tell you the simple truth. I do so now when I say I know nothing about him. He told me he was going to London. But is it not possible that poor Acton alone was guilty?"

Mr. Clifford shook his head in reply. For a few minutes he paced up and down the floor, and then placed himself at the back of Felicia, with his hand upon her chair, as if to support him. In a glass opposite she could see the reflection of his face, gray and agitated, with closed eyes and quivering lips—a face that looked ten years older than that which she had seen when he entered the room. She felt the chair shaken by his trembling hand.

"I will tell you," he said in a voice which he strove to render steady. "I did not spare my own son when he had defrauded Roland's father. Though Sefton would not prosecute him, I left him to reap the harvest of his deed to the full; and it was worse than the penalty the law would have exacted. He perished, disgraced and forsaken, of starvation in Paris, the city of pleasures and of crimes. They told me that my son was little more than a living skeleton when he was found, so slowly had the end come. If I did not spare him, can I relent toward Roland? The justice I demand is, in comparison, mercy for him."

As he finished speaking he opened his eyes, and saw those of Felicia fastened on the reflection of his face in the mirror. He turned away, and in a minute or two resumed his seat, and spoke again in his ordinary abrupt tone.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"I cannot tell yet," she answered; "I must wait till suspense is over. If Roland comes back, or is brought back," she faltered, "then I must decide what to do? I shall keep to myself till then. Is there anything I can do?"

"Could you go to your uncle, Lord Riversdale?" suggested Mr. Clifford.

"No, no," she cried; "I will not ask any help from him. He arranged my marriage for me, and he will feel this disgrace keenly. I will keep out of their way; they shall not be compelled to forbid me their society."

"But to-morrow you had better go away for the day," he answered; "there will be people coming and going, who will disturb you. There will be a rigorous search made. There is a detective now with my lawyer, who is looking through the papers in the bank. The police have taken possession of Acton's lodgings."

"I have nowhere to go," she replied, "and I cannot show my face out of doors. Madame and the children shall go to Phebe Marlowe, but I must bear it as well as I can."

"Well," he said after a brief pause, "I will make it as easy as I can for you. You are thinking me a hard man? Yes, I have grown hard. I was soft enough once. But if I forgive any sinner now I should do my boy, who is dead, an awful injustice. I would not pass over his sin, and I dare not pass over any other. I know I shall pursue Roland until his death or mine; my son's fate cries out for it. But I'm not a hard man toward innocent sufferers, like you and his poor mother. Try to think of me as your friend; nay, even Roland's friend, for what would a few years' penal servitude be compared with my boy's death? Shake hands with me before I go."

The small, delicate hand she offered him was icy cold, though her face was still calm and her eyes clear and dry. He was himself more moved and agitated than she appeared to be. The mention of his son always shook him to the very centre of his soul; yet he had not been able to resist uttering the words that had passed his lips during this painful interview with Roland's young wife. Unshed tears were burning under his eyelids. But it had not been for that deathlike hand he might have imagined her almost unmoved.

Felicia was down stairs before Madame the next morning, and had ordered the carriage to be ready to take her and the children to Upfold Farm directly after breakfast. It was so rare an incident for their mother to be present at the breakfast-table that Felix and Hilda felt as if it were a holiday. Madame was pale and sad, and for the first time Felicia thought of her as being a sufferer by Roland's crime. Her husband's mother had been little more to her than a superior housekeeper, who had been faithfully attached to her and her children. The homely, gentle, domestic foreigner, from a humble Swiss home, had looked up to her young aristocratic daughter-in-law as a being from a higher sphere. But now the downcast, sorrowful face of the elder woman touched Felicia's sympathy.

"Mother!" she said, as soon as the children had run away to get ready for their drive. She had never before called Madame "mother," and a startled look, almost of delight, crossed Madame's sad face.

"My daughter!" she cried, running to Felicia's side, and throwing her arms timidly about her, "he is sure to come back soon—to-day, I think. Oh, yes, he will be here when we return! You do well to stay to meet him; and I should be glad to be here, but for the children. Yes, the little ones must be out of the way. They must not see their father's house searched; they must never know how he is suspected. Acton did say it was all his fault; his fault and—"

But here Madame paused for an instant, for had not Acton said it was Felicia's fault more than any one's?

"Phebe heard him," she went on hastily; "and if it is not his fault, why did he kill himself? Oh, it is an ill-fortune that my son went to London that day! It would all be right if he were here; but he is sure to come to-day and explain it all, and the bank will be opened again. So be of good comfort, my daughter; for God is present with us, and with my son also."

It was a sorrowful day at the Upfold Farm in spite of the children's unconscious mirthfulness. Old Marlowe locked himself into his workshop, and would see none of them, taking his meals there in sullen anger. Phebe's heart was almost broken with listening to Madame's earnest asseverations of her son's perfect innocence, and her eager hopes to find him when she reached home. It was nearly impossible to her to keep the oppressive secret, which seemed crushing her into deception and misery, and her own muteness appeared to herself more condemnatory than any words could be. But Madame did not notice her silence, and her grief was only natural. Phebe's tears fell like balm on Madame's aching heart. Felicia had not wept; but this young girl, and her abandonment to passionate bursts of tears, who needed consoling herself, was a consolation to the poor mother. They knelt together in Phebe's little bedroom, while the children were playing on the wide uplands around them, and they prayed silently, if heavy sobs and sighs could be called silence; but they prayed together, and for her son; and Madame returned home comforted and hopeful.

It had been a day of fierce trial to Felicia. She had not formed any idea of how searching would be the investigation of the places where any of her husband's papers might be found. Her own study was not exempt from the prying eyes of the detectives. This room, sacred to her, which Roland himself never entered without permission, was ransacked, and forever desecrated in her eyes. This official meddling with her books and her papers could never be forgotten. The pleasant place was made an abomination to her.

The bank was reopened the next morning at the accustomed hour, for a very short investigation by Mr. Clifford and the experienced advisers summoned from London to assist him proved that the revenues of the firm were almost as good as ever. The panic had been caused by the vague rumour afloat of some mysterious complicity in crime between the absent partner and the clerk who had committed suicide. It was, therefore, considered necessary for the prosperous re-establishment of the bank to put forth a cautiously worded circular, in which Mr. Clifford's return was made the reason for the absence on a long journey of Roland Sefton, whose disappearance had to be accounted for. By the time he was arrested and brought to trial the confidence of the bank's customers in its stability would in some measure be regained.

There was thus a good deal of conjecture and of contradictory opinion abroad in Riversborough concerning Roland Sefton, which continued to be the town's talk for some weeks. Even Madame began to believe in a half-bewildered manner that her son had gone on a journey of business connected with the bank, though she could not account for his total silence. Sometimes she wondered if he and Felicia could have had some fatal quarrel, which had driven him away from home in a paroxysm of passionate disappointment and bitterness. Felicia's coldness and indifference might have done this. With this thought, and the hope of his return some day, she turned for relief to the discharge of her household duties, and to the companionship of the children, who knew nothing except that their father was gone away on a journey, and might come back any day.

Neither Madame nor the children knew that whenever they left the house they were followed by a detective, and every movement was closely watched. But Felicia was conscious of it by some delicate sensitiveness of her imaginative temperament. She refused to quit the house except in the evening, when she rambled about the garden, and felt the fresh air from the river breathing against her often-aching temples. Even then she fancied an eye upon her—an unsleeping, unblinking eye; the unwearied vigilance of justice on the watch for a criminal. Night and day she felt herself living under its stony gaze.

It was a positive pain to her when reviews of her book appeared in various papers, and were forwarded to her with congratulatory letters from her publishers. She was living far enough from London to be easily persuaded, without much vanity, that her name was upon everybody's lips there. She read the reviews, but with a sick heart, and the words were forgotten as soon as she put them away; but the Riversborough papers, which had been very guarded in their statements about the death of Acton and the events at the Old Bank, took up the book with what appeared to her fulsome and offensive enthusiasm. It had never occurred to her that local criticism was certain to follow the appearance of a local writer; and she shrank from it with morbid and exaggerated disgust. Even if all had been well, if Roland had been beside her, their notices would have been well-nigh intolerable to her. She could not have endured being stared at and pointed out in the streets of her own little town. But now fame had come to her with broken wings and a cracked trumpet, and she shuddered at the sound of her own name harshly proclaimed through it.

It soon became evident that Roland Sefton had succeeded in getting away out of the country. The police were at fault; and as no one in his own home knew how to communicate with him, no clue had been discovered by close surveillance of their movements. Such vigilance could be kept up only for a few months at longest, and as the summer drew toward the end it ceased.

CHAPTER IX.—FAST BOUND.

Roland Sefton had met but with few difficulties in getting clear away out of England, and there was little chance of his being identified, from description merely, by any of the foreign police, or by any English detective on the continent who was not as familiar with his personal appearance as the Riversborough force were. In his boyhood he had spent many months, years even, in his mother's native village with her father, M. Roland Merle, the pastor of a parish among the Jura Mountains. It was as easy for him to assume the character of a Swiss mountaineer as to sustain that of a prosperous English banker. The dress, the patois, the habits of the peasant were all familiar to him, and his disguise in them was as complete as disguise ever can be. The keen eye either of love or hate can pierce through all disguises.

Switzerland was all fatherland to him, as much so as his native country, and the county in which Riversborough was situated. There was no ignorance in him of any little town, or the least known of the Alps, which might betray the stranger. He would never need to attract notice by asking a question. He had become a member of an Alpine club as soon as his boyish thews and sinews were strong enough for stiff and perilous climbing. He had crossed the most difficult passes and scaled some of the worst peaks. And there had been within him that passionate love of the country common to the Swiss which an English Alpine climber can never feel. His mother's land had filled him with an ardent flame, smouldering at times amid the absorbing interests of his somewhat prominent place in English life, but every now and then breaking out into an irrepressible longing for the sight of its white mountains and swift, strong streams. It was at once the safest and the most dangerous of refuges. He would be certainly sought for there; but there he could most effectually conceal himself. He flew thither with his burden of sin and shame.

Roland adopted at once the dress of a decent artisan of the Jura—such a man as he had known in his boyhood as a watchmaker of Locle or the Doubs. For a few days he stayed at Geneva, lodging in such a street as a Locle artisan would have chosen. But he could not feel secure there, in spite of his own certainty that his transformation was complete. A restless dread haunted him. He knew well that there are in everyone little personal traits, tricks of gesture, and certain tones of voice, always ready to betray us. It was yet too early in the year for many travellers to be journeying to Switzerland; but already a few straggling pioneers of the summer flight were appearing in the larger towns, and what would be his fate if any one of them recognised him? He quitted Geneva, and wandered away into the mountain villages.

It was May-time, and the snow-line was still lingering low down on the steep slopes, though the flowers were springing into life up to its very margin, seeming to drive it higher and higher every day. The High Alps were still fast locked in midwinter, and with untrodden wastes and plains of snow lying all around them. The deserted mountain farms and great solitary hotels, so thronged last summer, were empty. But in the valleys and the little villages lying on the warm southern slopes, or sheltered by precipitous rocks from the biting winds, there was everywhere a