

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XL.—(CONTINUED.)

It was so great a relief to have said this much to Phebe, to have broken through so much of the icy reserve which froze her heart, that Felicia's spirits at once grew more cheerful. The dreaded words had been uttered, and the plan was settled; though its fulfilment was postponed till spring; a reprieve to Felicia. She regained health and strength rapidly, and returned to London so far recovered that her physician gave her permission to return to work.

But she did not wish to take up her work again. It had long ago lost the charm of novelty to her, and though circumstances had compelled her to write, or to live upon her marriage settlement, which in her eyes was to live upon the proceeds of a sin successfully carried out, her writing itself had become tedious to her. "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!" and there is much vexation of spirit, as well as weariness of the flesh, in the making of many books. She had made enemies who were spiteful, and friends who were exacting; she, who felt equally the irksomeness of petty enemies and of small friendships, which, like gnats buzzing monotonously about her, were now and then ready to sting. The sting itself might be trivial, but it was irritating.

Felicia had soon found out how limited is the circle of fame for even a successful writer. For one person who would read a book, there were fifty who would go to hear a famous singer or actor, and a hundred who would crowd to see a clever acrobat. As she read more, she discovered that what she had fondly imagined were ideas originated by her own intellect, was, in reality, the echo only of thought long since given to mankind by other minds—in other words, often better than her own. Her own silent claim to genius was greatly modified; she was humbler than she had been. But she knew painfully that her name was now a hundred-fold better known than it had been while she was yet only the wife of a Riversborough banker. All her work for the last fourteen years had placed it more and more prominently before the public. Any scandal attaching to it now would be blazoned farther and wider, in deeper and more enduring characters, than if her life as an author had been a failure.

The subtle hope, very real, vague as it was, that her husband was in truth dead, gathered strength. The silence that had engulfed him had been so profound that it seemed impossible he should still be breathing the same earth as herself, and wearing through its slow and commonplace days, sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, like other men. Felicia was not superstitious, but there was in her that deep-rooted, instinctive sense of mystery in this double life of ours, dividing our time into sleeping and waking hours, which is often apt to make our dreams themselves means of importance. She had never dreamed of Roland as she did of those belonging to her who had already passed into the invisible world about us. His spirit was not free, perhaps, from its earthly fetters so as to be able to visit her, and haunt her sleeping fancies. But now she began to dream of him frequently, and often in the daytime flashes of memory darted vividly across her brain, lighting up the dark, forgotten past, and recalling to her some word of his, or a voice merely. It was an inward persecution from which she could not escape, but it seemed to her to indicate that her persecutor was no more a denizen of this world.

To get rid of these haunting memories as much as possible, she made such a change in her mode of life as astonished all about her. She no longer shut herself up in her library; as she had told Phebe, she resolved to write no more, nor attempt to write, until she had been to Engelberg. She seemed wishful to attract friends to her, and she renewed old acquaintanceships with members of her own family which she had allowed to drop during these many years. No sooner was it evident that Felicia Sefton was willing to come out of the extremely quiet and solitary life she had led hitherto, and take her place in society both as Lord Riversdale's daughter and as the author of many popular books, than the current of fashion set towards her. She was still a remarkably lovely woman, possessing irresistible attractions in her refined face and soft yet distant manners, as of one walking in a trance, and seeing and hearing things invisible and inaudible to less favoured mortals. Quite unconsciously to herself she became the lion of the season, when the next season opened. She had been so difficult to know, that as soon as she was willing to be known invitations poured in upon her, and her house was invaded by a throng of visitors, many of them more or less distantly related to her.

To Hilda this new life was one of unexpected and exquisite delight. Phebe, also, with her genuine interest in her fellow-creatures, and her warm sympathy in all human joys and sorrows, enjoyed the change, though it perplexed her, and caused her to watch Felicia with anxiety. Felix saw less of it than any one, for he was down in Essex, leading the tranquil and not very laborious life of a country curate, chafing a little now and then at his inactivity, yet blissful beyond words in the close daily intercourse with Alice. There was no talk of her marriage, but they were young and together. Their happiness was untroubled.

CHAPTER XL.—THE VOICE OF THE DEAD.

In his lonely garret in the East End, Jean Merle was living in a isolation more complete even than that of Engelberg. There he had known at least the names of those about him, and their faces had grown familiar to him. More than once he had been asked to help when help was sorely needed, and he had felt, though not quite consciously, that there was still a link or two binding him to his fellow-men. But here, a unit among millions, who hustled him at every step, breathed the same air, and shared the common light with him, he was utterly alone. "Isolation is the

sum total of wretchedness to man," and no man could be more completely isolated than he.

Strangely enough, his Swiss proclivities seemed to have fallen from him like a worn-out garment. The narrow, humble existence of his peasant forefathers, to which he had so readily adapted himself, was no longer tolerable in his eyes. He felt all the force and energy of the life of the great city which surrounded him. His birthright as an Englishman presented itself to his imagination with a splendour and importance that it had never possessed before, even in those palmy days when it was no unthought-of honour that he might some day take his place in the House of Commons. He called himself Jean Merle, for no other name belonged to him; but he felt himself to be an Englishman again, to whom the life of a Swiss peasant would be a purgatory.

Other natural instincts were asserting themselves. He had been a man of genial, social habits, glad to gather round him smiling faces and friendly voices; and this bias of his was stirring into life and shaking off its long stupor. He longed, with intense longing, for some moral ear into which he could pour the story of his sins and sufferings, and for some human tongue to utter friendly words of counsel to him. It was not enough to pour out his confessions before God in agonizing prayer; that he had done, and was doing daily. But it was not all. The natural yearning for man's forgiveness, spoken in living, human speech, grew stronger within him. There was no longer a chance for him to make even a partial reparation of the wrong he had committed; he felt himself without courage to begin the long conflict again. What his soul hungered for now was to see his life through another man's eyes.

But his money, economized it as he might, was slowly melting away. Unless he could get work—and all his efforts to find it failed—it would not do to remain in England. At Engelberg he had secured a position as a wood carver, and his livelihood was assured. There, too, he possessed a scanty knowledge of the neighbours, and they of him. It would be his wisest course to return there, to forget what he had been, and to draw nearer to him the simple and ignorant people, who might yet be won over to regard him with good-will. This must be done before he found himself penniless as well as friendless. He set aside a certain sum; when that was spent he must once more be an exile.

Until then, it was his life to pace to and fro along the streets of London. Somewhere in this vast labyrinth there was a home to which he had a right; a hearth where he could plant himself and claim it for his own. He was master of it, and of a wife and children; he, the lonely, almost penniless man. It would be a small thing to him to pay the penalty the law could demand of him. A few years more or less in Dartmoor Prison would be nothing to him, if at the end of them he saw a home waiting for him to return to. But he never sought to look at the exterior even of that spot to which he had a right. He made no effort to see Felicia.

He stayed till he touched his last shilling. It was already winter, and the short, dark days, with their thick fogs, made the wintry months little better than one long night. To-morrow he must leave England, never to return to it. He strayed aimlessly about the gloomy streets, letting his feet bear him whither they would, until he found himself looking down through the iron railings upon the deserted yard in front of the Houses of Parliament. The dark mass of the building loomed heavily through the yellow fog, but beyond it came the sound of bells ringing in the invisible Abbey. It was the hour for morning prayer, and Jean Merle sauntered listlessly onwards until he reached the northern entrance, and turned into the transept. The dim daylight scarcely lit up the lofty arches in the roof of the farther end of the long aisle, but he gave no heed to either. He sank down on a chair and bent his grey head on the back of the chair before him; the sweet, solemn chanting of the white-robed choristers echoed under the roof, and the sacred and soothing tones of prayer floated past him. But he did not move or lift his head. He sat there absorbed in his own thoughts, and the hours seemed only as floating minutes to him. Visitors came and went, chatting close beside him, and the vergers, with their quiet footsteps, came one by one to look at this motionless, poverty-stricken form, whose face no man could see, but nobody disturbed him. He had a right to be there, as still, and as solitary, and as silent as he pleased.

But when Canon Pascal came up the long aisle to evening prayers and saw again the same grey head bowed down in the same despondent attitude as he had left it in the morning, he could scarcely refrain himself from pausing then and there, before the evening service proceeded, to speak to this man. He had caught a momentary glimpse of his face, and it had haunted him in his study in the interval, until he had half reproached himself for not answering to that silent appeal its wretchedness had made. But he had had no expectation of seeing it again.

It was dark by the time the evening service was over, and Canon Pascal hastily divested himself of his surplice, that he might not seem to approach the stranger as a clergyman, but rather as an equal. The Abbey was being cleared of its visitors, and the lights were being put out one by one, when he sat down on the seat next to Jean Merle's, and laid his hand with a gentle pressure on his arm. Jean Merle started and lifted up his head. It was too dark for them to see each other well; but Canon Pascal's voice was full of friendly urgency.

"They are going to close the Abbey," he said; "and you've been here all day, without food, my friend. Is there any special reason why you should pass a long, dark winter's day in such a manner? I would be glad to serve you if I can. Perhaps you are a stranger to London?"

"I have been seeking the guidance of God," answered Jean Merle, in a bewildered yet unutterably sorrowful voice.

"That is good," replied Canon Pascal; "that is the best. But it is good also at times to seek man's guidance. It is God, doubtless, who has sent me to you. As His servant, I earnestly desire to serve you."

"If you would listen to me under a solemn seal of secrecy," cried Jean Merle.

"Are you a Catholic?" asked Canon Pascal. "Is it a confessor you want?"

"I am not a Catholic," he answered; "but there is a strong desire in my soul to confess. My burden would be lighter if any man would share it, so far as to keep my secret."

"Does it touch the life of any fellow-creature?" inquired Canon Pascal; "is there any great crime in it?"

"No; not what you are thinking," he said; "there is sin in it; aye, and crime; but not crime like that."

"Then I will listen to it under a solemn promise of secrecy, whatever it may be," replied Canon Pascal. "But the vergers are waiting to close the Abbey. Come with me; my home is close by, within the precincts."

Jean Merle had risen obediently as he spoke, but, exhausted and weary, he staggered as he stood upon his feet. Canon Pascal drew his arm within his own. This simple action was to him full of a friendliness to which he had been long a stranger. To clasp another man's hand, to walk arm-in-arm with him, he felt keenly how much of implied brotherhood was in them. He was ready to go anywhere with Canon Pascal, almost as a child guided and cared for by an older and wiser brother.

They passed out of the Abbey into the cloisters, dimly lighted by the lamps, which had been lit in good time this dark November evening. The low, black-browed arches, which had echoed to the footsteps of sorrow-stricken men for more than eight hundred years, resounded to their tread as they walked beneath them in silence. Jean Merle suffered himself to be led without a question, like one in a dream. There seemed some faint reminiscence from the past of this man, with his harsh features, and kindly, genial expression, the deep-set eyes, beaming with a benign light from under the rugged eyebrows, and the firm yet friendly pressure of his guiding arm; and his mind was groping about the dark labyrinth of memory to seize his former knowledge of him, if there had ever been any. There was a vague apprehension about him lest he should discover that his friend was no stranger, and his tongue must be tied, even though what he was about to say would be under the inviolable seal of secrecy.

They had not far to go, for Canon Pascal turned aside into a little square, open to the black November sky, and stopping at a door in the gray, old walls, opened it with a latch-key. They entered a narrow passage, and Canon Pascal turned at once to his study, which was close by. As he pushed open the door he said, "Go in, my friend; I will be with you in a moment."

Jean Merle saw before him an old-fashioned room with a low ceiling. There was no light besides the warm, red glow of a fire, which was no longer burning with yellow flame, but which lit up sufficiently the figure of a woman seated on a low stool on the hearth, with her head resting on the hand that shaded her eyes. It was a figure familiar to him in his old life—that life which lay on the other side of Roland Sefton's grave. He had seen the same well-shaped head, with its soft brown hair, and the round outline of the averted cheek and chin, a thousand times in old Marlowe's cottage on the uplands, sitting in the red firelight as she was sitting now. All the intervening years were swept away in an instant—his bitter anguish and unavailing repentance—the long solitude and gnawing remorse—all was swept clean away from his mind. He felt the strength and freshness of his boyhood come back to him, as if the breeze of the uplands was blowing softly yet keenly across his throbbing and fevered temples. Even his voice caught back for the moment the ring of his early youth as he stood on the threshold, forgetting all else but the sight that filled his eyes. "Phebe!" he cried; "little Phebe Marlowe!"

The cry startled Phebe, but she did not move. It was the voice of one long since dead that rang in her ears—dead, and faithfully mourned over; and every nerve tingled, and her heart seemed to stay its beating. Roland Sefton's voice! She did not doubt it or mistake it. The call had been too real. She had answered to it too many times to be mistaken now. In those days of utter silence, when dumb signs only had passed between her and her father, Roland's pleasant voice had sounded too gladly in her ears ever to be forgotten or confounded with another. But how could she hear it now? The voice of the dead! how could it reach her? A strange pang of mingled joy and terror paralyzed her. She sat motionless and bewildered, with a thrill of passionate expectation quivering through her. Let Roland speak again; she could not answer his first call!

"Phebe!" She heard the cry again; but this time the voice was low, and lamentable, and despairing. For in the few seconds he had been standing, arrested on the threshold, the whole past had flitted through his brain in dismal procession. She lifted herself up slowly and mechanically from her low seat, and turned her face reluctantly towards the spot from which the startling call had come. In the dusky, red light stood the form of the one friend to whom she had been faithful with the utter faithfulness of her nature. Whence he came she knew not—she was afraid of knowing. But he was there, himself, and not another like him. There was a change, she could see that dimly; but not such a change as could disguise him from her. Of late, whilst she had been painting his portrait from memory, every recollection of him had been revived with keener vividness. Yet the terror of beholding him again on this side of death struck her dumb. She stretched out her hands toward him, but she could not speak.

"I must speak to Phebe Marlowe alone," said Jean Merle to Canon Pascal, and speaking in a tone of irresistible earnestness. "I have that to say to her which no one else can hear. She is God's messenger to me."

"Shall I leave you with this stranger, Phebe?" asked Canon Pascal.

She made a gesture simply; her lips were too parched to open.

"My dear girl, I will stay, if you please," he said again.

"No," she breathed, in a voice scarcely audible.

"There is a bell close at your hand," he went on, "and