

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

OF HILDA SEFTON.

CHAPTER III.—FELICITA.

The room was a small one, with a dim, many-coloured light pervading it; for the upper part of the mullioned casement was filled with painted glass, and even the pains of the lower part were of faintly-tinted green. Like all the rest of the old house, the walls were wainscoted, but here there was no piece of china or silver to sparkle; the only glitter was that of the gilding on the handsomely bound books arranged in two bookcases. In this green gloom sat Felicity Sefton, leaning back in her chair, with her head resting languidly on the cushions, and her dark eyes turned dimly and dreamily towards the quietly opening door.

"Phebe Marlowe!" she said, her eyes brightening a little, as the fresh, sweet face of the young country girl met her gaze. Phebe stepped softly forward into the dim room, and laid the finest of the golden flowers she had gathered that morning upon Felicity's lap. It brought a gleam of spring sunshine into the gloom which caught Felicity's eye, and she uttered a loud cry of delight as she took it up in her small, delicate hand. Phebe stooped down shyly and kissed the small hand, her face all aglow with smiles and blushes.

"Felicity," said Madame, her voice altering a little, "where is my son this morning?"

"Roland?" she repeated absently; "Roland? Didn't he say last night he was going to London?"

"To London!" exclaimed his mother.

"Yes," she answered, "she bade him good-by last night; I remember now. He said he would not disturb me again; He was going by the mail-train. He was sorry to be away on poor little Felix's birthday. I recollect quite distinctly now."

"He said not one word to me," said Madame. "It is strange."

"Very strange," asserted Felicity languidly, as if she were wandering away again into the reverie they had broken in upon.

"Did he say when he would be back?" asked his mother.

"In a few days, of course," she answered.

"But he has not told Acton," resumed Madame.

"Who did you say?" inquired Felicity.

"The head clerk, the manager when Roland is away," she said. "He has not said anything to him."

"Very strange," said Felicity again. It was plainly irksome to her to be disturbed by questions like these, and she was withdrawing herself into the remote and unapproachable distance where no one could follow her. Her finely-chiselled features and colorless skin gave her a singular resemblance to marble and they might almost as well have addressed themselves to a marble image.

"Come," said Madame, "we must see Acton again."

They found him in the bank parlour, where Roland was usually to be met with at this hour. There was an unspoken hope in their hearts that he would be there, and so deliver them from the undefined trouble and terror they were suffering. But only Acton was there, seated at Roland's desk, and turning over the papers in it with a rapid and reckless hand. His face was hidden behind the great flap of the desk, and though he glanced over it for an instant as the door opened, he concealed himself again, as if feigning unconsciousness of any one's presence.

"My son is gone to London," said Madame, keeping at a safe distance from him, with the door open behind her and Phebe to secure a speedy retreat. The flap of the desk fell with a loud crash, and Acton flung his arms above his head with a gesture of despair.

"I knew it," he exclaimed. "Oh, my dear young master! God grant he may get away safe. All is lost!"

"What do you mean?" cried Madame, forgetting one terror in another, and catching him by the arm; "what is lost?"

"He is gone!" he answered, "and it was more my fault than his—mine and Mrs. Sefton's. Whatever wrong he has done it was for her. Remember that, Madame, and you Phebe Marlowe. If anything happens, remember it's my fault more than his, and Mrs. Sefton's fault more than mine."

"Tell me what you mean," urged Madame breathlessly.

"You'll know when Mr. Sefton returns, Madame," he answered, with a sudden return to his usually calm tone and manner, which was as startling as his former vehemence had been; "he'll explain all when he comes home. We must open the bank now; it is striking ten."

He locked the desk and passed out of the comfortably-furnished parlour into the office beyond, leaving them nothing to do but to return into the house with their curiosity unsatisfied, and the mother's vague trouble unsoothed.

"Phebe, Phebe!" cried Felix, as they slowly re-entered the pleasant home, "my mother says we may go up the river to the osier island; and, oh, Phebe, she will go with us her own self!"

He had run down the broad staircase to meet them, almost breathless with delight, and with eyes shining with almost seriousapture. He clasped Phebe's arm, and, leaning toward her, whispered into her ear,

"She took me in her arms, and said, 'I love you, Felix,' and then she kissed me as if she meant it, Phebe. It was better than all my birthday presents put together. My father said to me one day he adored her; and I adore her. She is my mother, you know the mother of me, Felix, and I'll be down on the floor and kiss her feet every day, only she does not know it. When she looks at me her eyes seem to go through me, but, oh, she does not look at me often."

"She is so different, not like most people," answered Phebe, with her arms round the boy.

Madame had gone on sadly enough up-stairs to see if she could find out anything about her son; and Phebe and Felix

had turned into the terraced garden where the boat-house was built close under the bank of the river.

"I should be sorry for my mother to be like other people," said Felix proudly. "She is like the evening star, my father says, and I always look out at night to see if it is shining. You know, Phebe, when we row her up the river, my father and me, we keep quite quiet, only nodding at one another which way to pull, and she sits silent with eyes that shine like stars. We would not speak for anything, not one little word, lest we should disturb her. My father says she is a great genius; not at all like other people, and worth thousands and thousands of common women. But I don't think you are a common woman, Phebe," he added, lifting up his eager face to hers, as if afraid of hurting her feelings, "and my father does not think so, I know."

"Your father has known me all my life, and has always been my best friend," said Phebe, with a pleasant smile. "But I am a working-woman, Felix, and your mother is a lady and a great genius. It is God who has ordered it so."

She would have laughed if she had been less simple-hearted than she was, at the anxious care with which the boy arranged the boat for his mother. No cushions were soft enough and no shawls warm enough for the precious guest. When at length all was ready, and he fetched her himself from the house, it was not until she was comfortably seated in the low seat, with a well-padded sloping back, against which she could recline at ease, and with a soft, warm shawl wrapped round her—not till then did the slight cloud of care pass away from his face, and the little pucker of anxiety which knitted his brows grow smooth. The little girl of five, Hilda, nestled down by her mother, and Felix took his post at the helm. In unbroken silence they pushed off into the middle of the stream, the boat rowed easily by Phebe's strong young arms. So silent were they all that they could hear the rustling of the young leaves on the trees under whose shadows they passed, and the joyous singing of the larks in the meadows on each side of the sunny reaches of water down which they floated. It was not until they landed the children on the osier island, and bade them run about to play, that then until they were some distance away, their merry young voices were heard.

"Phebe," said Felicity, in her low-toned, softly-modulated voice, always languid and deliberate, "talk to me. Tell me how you spend your life."

Phebe was sitting face to face with her, balancing the boat with the oars against the swift flowing of the river, with smiles coming and going on her face as rapidly as the shadows and the sunshine chasing each other over the fields that May morning.

"You know," she answered simply, "we live a mile away from the nearest house, and that is only a cottage where an old farm labourer lives with his wife. It's very lonesome up there on the hills. Days and days go by, and I never hear a voice speaking, and I feel as if I could not bear the sound of my own voice when I call the cattle home, or the fowls to come for their corn. If it wasn't for the living things around me, that know me as well as they know one another, and love me more, I should feel sometimes as if I was dead. And I long so to hear somebody speak—to be near more of my fellow-creatures. Why, when I touch the hand of any one I love—yours, or Mr. Sefton's, or Madame's—it's almost a pain to me; it seems to bring me so close to you. I always feel as if I became a part of father when I touch him. Oh, you do not know what it is to be alone!"

"No," said Felicity, sighing; "never have I been alone. I would give worlds to be as free as you are. You cannot imagine what it is," she went on, speaking rapidly and with intense eagerness, "never to belong to yourself, or to be alone; for it is not being alone to have only four thin walls separating you from a husband and children and a large busy household. 'What are you thinking, my darling?' Roland is always asking me; and the children break in upon me. Body, soul, and spirit, I am held down a captive; I have been in bondage all my life. I have never even thought as I should think if I could be free."

"But I cannot understand that," cried Phebe. I could never be too near those I love. I should like to live in a large house, with many people all smiling and talking around me. And everybody worships you."

She uttered the last words shyly, partly afraid of bringing a frown on the lovely face opposite to her, which was quickly losing its vivid expression and sinking back into stately coldness.

"It is simply weariness to me and vexation of spirit," she answered. "If I could be quite alone, as you are, with only a father like yours, I think I could get free; but I have never been left alone from my babyhood; just as Felix and Hilda were never left alone. Oh, Phebe, you do not know how happy you are."

"No," she said cheerfully, "sometimes when I stand at our garden-gate, and look round me for miles and miles away, and the sweet air blows past me, and the bees are humming, and the birds calling to one another, and everything is so peaceful, with father happy over his work not far off, I think I don't know how happy I am. I try to catch hold of the feeling and keep it, but it slips away somehow. Only I thank God I am happy."

"I was never happy enough to thank God," Felicity murmured, lying back in her seat and shutting her eyes. Presently the children returned, and, after another silent row, slower and more toilsome, as it was up the river, they drew near home again, and saw Madame's anxious face watching for them over the low garden wall. Her heart had been too heavy for her to join them in their pleasure-taking, and it was no lighter now.

CHAPTER IV.—UPFOLD FARM.

Phebe rode slowly homeward in the dusk of the evening, her brain too busy with the varied events of the day for her to be in any haste to reach the end. For the last four miles her road lay in long Ly lanes, shady with high hedges and trees which grew less frequent and more stunted as she rose gradually higher up the long spurs of the hills, whose rounded outlines showed dark against the clear orange tint of the western sky. She could hear the brown

cattle chewing the cud, and the bleating of some solitary sheep on the open moor, calling to the flock from which it had strayed during the daytime, with the angry yelping of a dog in answer to its cry from some distant farmyard. The air was fresh and chilly with dew, and the low wind, which only lifted the branches of the trees a little in the lower land she had left, was growing keener, and would blow sharply enough across the unsheltered table land as she was reaching. But still she loltered, letting her rough pony snatch tufts of fresh grass from the banks, and shamble leisurely along as he strayed from one side of the road to another.

Phebe was not so much thinking as pondering in a confused and unconnected manner over all the circumstances of the day, when suddenly the tall figure of a man rose from under the black hedgerow, and laid his arm across the pony's neck, with his face turned up to her. Her heart throbbed quickly, but not altogether with terror.

"Mr. Roland!" she cried.

"You know me in the dark, then," he answered. "I have been watching for you all day, Phebe. You come from home?"

She knew he meant his home, not hers.

"Yes, it was Felix's birthday, and we have been down the river," she said.

"Is anything known yet?" he asked.

Though it was so solitary a spot that Phebe had passed no one for the last three miles, and he had been haunting the hills all day without seeing a soul, yet he spoke in a whisper, as if fearful of betraying himself.

"Only that you are away," she replied; "and they think you are in London."

"Is not Mr. Clifford come?" he asked.

"No, sir, he comes to-morrow," she answered.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, in a louder tone. When he spoke again he did so without looking into her face, which indeed was scarcely visible in the deepening dusk.

"Phebe," he said, "we have known each other for many years."

"All my life, sir," she responded eagerly; "father and me, we are proud of knowing you."

Before speaking again he led her pony up the steep lane to a gate which opened on the moorland. It was not so dark here, from under the hedgerows and trees, and a little pool beside the gate caught the last lingering light in the west, and reflected it like a dim and dusty mirror. They could see one another's faces; his was working with strong excitement, and hers, earnest and friendly, looked frankly down upon him. He clasped her hand with the strong, desperate grip of a sinking man, and her fingers responded with a warm clasp.

"Can I trust you, Phebe?" he cried. "I have no other chance."

"I will help you, even to dying for you and yours," she answered. The gulish fervour of her manner struck him mournfully. Why should he burden her with his crime? What right had he to demand any sacrifice from her? Yet he felt she spoke the truth. Phebe Marlowe would rejoice in helping, even unto death, not only him, but any other fellow-creature who was sinking under sorrow and sin.

He placed himself at the pony's head again, and trudged on speechlessly along the rough road, which was now nothing more than the tracks made by cart-wheels across the moor, with deep ruts over which he stumbled like a man who is worn out with fatigue. In a quarter of an hour the low cottage was reached, surrounded by a little belt of fields and a few storm-beaten fir-trees. There was a dull glow of red to be seen through the lattice window, telling Phebe of a smouldering fire, made up for her by her father before going back to his workshop at the end of the field behind the house. She stirred up the wood-ashes and threw upon them some dry, light faggots of gorse, and in a few seconds a dazzling light filled the little room from end to end. It was a familiar place to Roland Sefton, and he took no notice of it. But it was a curious interior. Every niche of the walls was covered with carved oak; no wainscoted hall in the country could be more richly or more fancifully decorated. The chimney-piece, over the open hearthstone, a wide chimney-piece was deeply carved with curious devices. The doors and window-frames, the cupboards and the shelves for the crockery, were all of dark oak, fashioned into leaves and ferns, with birds on their nests, and timid rabbits, and still more timid wood-mice peeping out of their coverts, cocks crowing with uplifted crest, and chickens nestling under the hen-mother's wings, sheaves of corn, and tall, club-headed bulrushes—all the objects familiar to a country life. The dancing light played upon them, and shone also upon Roland Sefton's sad and weary face. Phebe drew father's carved arm-chair close to the fire.

"Sit down," she said, "and let me get you something to eat."

"Yes," he answered, sinking down wearily in the chair, "I am nearly dying of hunger. Good Heavens! is it possible I can be hungry?"

He spoke with an indescribable expression of mingled astonishment and dread. Suddenly there broke upon him the possibility of suffering want in many forms in the future, and yet he felt ashamed of foreseeing them in this, the first day of his great calamity. Until this moment he had been too absorbed in dwelling upon the moral and social consequences of his crime, to realize how utterly worn out he was; but all his physical strength appeared to collapse in an instant.

And now for the first time Phebe beheld the change in him, and stood gazing at him in mute surprise and sorrow. He had always been careful of his personal appearance, with a refinement and daintiness which had grown especially fastidious since his marriage. But now his coat, wet through during the night, and dried only by the keen air of the hills, was creased and soiled, and his boots were thickly covered with mud and clay. His face and hands were unwashed, and his hair hung unbrushed over his forehead. Phebe's whole heart was stirred at this pitiful change, and she laid her hand on his shoulder with a timid but affectionate touch.

"Mr. Roland," she said, "go up-stairs and put yourself to rights a little; and give me your clothes and your boots