

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XXIII.—A REJECTED SUITOR.

Six weeks later, all the arrangements for Phebe leaving her old home and entering upon an utterly new life were completed. Simon Nixey, after vainly urging her to accept himself, and to give herself and her little farm and her restored fortune to him, offered to become her tenant at £10 a year for the land, leaving the cottage uninhabited; for Phebe could not bear the idea of any farm labourer and his family dwelling in it, and destroying or injuring the curious carvings with which her father had lined its walls. The spot was far out of the way of tramps and wandering vagabonds, and there was no danger of damage being done to it by the neighbours. Mrs. Nixey undertook to see that it was kept from damp and dirt, promising to have a fire lighted there occasionally, and Simon would see to the thatch being kept in repair, on condition that Phebe would come herself once a year to receive her rent, and see how the place was cared for. There was but a forlorn hope in Mrs. Nixey's heart that Phebe would ever have Simon now she was going to London; but it might possibly come about in the long run if he met with no girl to accept him with as much fortune.

Before leaving Upfold Farm Phebe received the following letter from Felicitia:

"DEAR PHEBE: I shall be very glad to have you under my roof. I believe I see in you a freshness and truthfulness of nature on which I can rely for sympathy. I have always felt a sincere regard for you, but of late I have learned to love you, and to think of you as my friend. I love you next to my children. Let me be a friend to you. Your pursuits will interest me, and you must let me share them as your friend.

"But one favour I must ask. Never mention my husband's name to me. Madame will feel solace in talking of him, but the very sound of his name is intolerable to me. It is my fault; but spare me. You are the dearer to me because you love him, and because he prized your affections so highly; but he must never be mentioned, if possible not thought of, in my presence. If you think of him I shall feel it, and be wounded. I say this before you come, that you may spare me as much pain as you can.

"This is the only thing I dread. Otherwise your coming to us would be the happiest thing that has befallen me for the last year.

"Yours faithfully,

"FELICITA."

If Felicitia was glad to have her, Phebe knew that Madame and the children would be enraptured. Nor had she judged wrongly. Madame received her as if she had been a favourite child, whose presence was the very comfort and help she stood most in need of. Though she devoted herself to Felicitia, there was a distance between them, an impenetrable reserve, that chilled her spirits and threw her love back upon herself. But to Phebe she could pour out her heart unrestrainedly, dwelling upon the memory of her lost son, and mourning openly for him. And Phebe never spoke a word that could lead Roland's mother to think she believed him to be guilty. With a loving tact she avoided all discussion on that point; and, though again and again the pang of her own loss made itself poignantly felt, she knew how to pour consolation into the heart of Roland's mother.

But to Felix and Hilda Phebe's companionship was an endless delight. She came from her lonely homestead on the hills into the full stream of London life, and it had a ceaseless interest for her. She could not grow weary of the streets with their crowd of passers-by; and the shop windows filled with wealth and curiosities fascinated her. All the stir and tumult was joyous to her, and the faces she met as she walked along the pavement possessed an unceasing influence over her. The love of humanity, scarcely called into existence before, developed rapidly in her. Felix and Hilda shared in her childish pleasure without understanding the deep springs from which it came.

It was an education in itself for the children. A drive in an omnibus, with its frequent stoppages and its constant change of passengers, was delightful to Phebe, and never lost its charm for her. She and the children explored London, seeing all its sights, which Phebe, in her rustic curiosity, wished to see. From west to east, from north to south, they became acquainted with the great capital as few children, rich or poor, have a chance of doing. They sought out all its public buildings, every museum and picture gallery, the birthplaces of its famous men, the places where they died, and their tombs if they were within London. Westminster Abbey was as familiar to them as their own home. It seemed as if Phebe was compensating herself for her lonely girlhood on the barren and solitary uplands. Yet it was not simply sight-seeing, but the outcome of an intelligent and genuine curiosity, which was only satisfied by understanding all she could about the things and places she saw.

To the children, as well as to Madame, she often talked of Roland Sefton. Felix loved nothing more than to listen to her recollections of his lost father, who had so strangely disappeared out of his life. On a Sunday evening, when, of course, their wanderings were over, she would sit with them in summer by the attic window, which overlooked the river, and in winter by the fireside, recounting again and again all she knew of him, especially of how good he always was to her. There was a vividness and vivacity in all she said of him which charmed their imagination and kept the memory of him alive in their hearts. Phebe gave dramatic effect to her stories of him. Hilda could scarcely remember him, though she believed she did; but to Felix he remained the tall, handsome, kindly father, who was his ideal of all a man should be; while Phebe, perhaps unconsciously, portrayed him as all that was great and good.

For neither Madame nor Phebe could find it in their hearts to tell the boy, so proud and fond of his father's memory, that any suspicion had ever been attached to his name. Madame, who had mourned so bitterly over his premature death in her native land, but so far from his own, had never believed in his guilt; and Phebe, who knew him to be guilty, had forgiven him with that forgiveness which possesses an almost sacred forgetfulness. If she had been urged to look back and down into that dark abyss in which he had been lost to her, she must have owned reluctantly that he had once done wrong. But it was hard to remember anything against the dead.

CHAPTER XXIV.—AT HOME IN LONDON.

Every summer Phebe went down to her own home on the uplands, according to her promise to the Nixeyes. Felix and Hilda always accompanied her, for a change was necessary for the children, and Felicitia seldom cared to go far from London, and then only to some seaside resort near at hand, when Madame always went with her. Every summer Simon Nixey repeated his offer the first evening of Phebe's residence under her own roof; for, as Mrs. Nixey said, as long as she was wed to nobody else there was a chance for him. Though they could see with sharp and envious eyes the change that was coming over her, transforming her from the simple, untaught country girl into an educated and self-possessed woman, marking out her own path in life, yet the sweetness and the frankness of Phebe's nature remained unchanged.

"She's growing a notch or two higher every time she comes down," said Mrs. Nixey regretfully; "she'll be far above thee, lad, next summer."

"She's only old Dummy's daughter after all," answered Simon; "I'll never give her up."

To Phebe they were always old friends, whom she must care for as long as she lived, however far she might travel from them or rise above them. The free, homely life on the hills was as dear to her and the children as their life in London. The little house, with its beautiful and curious decorations: the small fields and twisted trees surrounding it; the wide, purple moors, and all the associations Phebe conjured up for them connected with their father, made the dumb old wood-carver's place a second home to them.

The happiest season of the year to Mr. Clifford was that when Phebe and Roland Sefton's children were in his neighbourhood. Felicitia remained firm to her resolution that Felix should have nothing to do with his father's business, and the boy himself had decided in his very childhood that he would follow in the footsteps of his ancestor, Felix Merle, the brave pastor of the Jura. There was no hope of having him to train up for the Old Bank. But every summer they spent a few days with him, in the very house where their father had lived, and where Felix could still associate him with the wainscoted rooms and the terraced garden. When Felix talked of his father and asked questions about him, Mr. Clifford always spoke of him in a regretful and affectionate tone. No hint reached the boy that his father's memory was not revered in his native town.

"There is no stone to my father in the church," he said, one Sunday, after he had been looking again and again at a tablet to his grandfather on the church walls.

"No; but I had a granite cross put over his grave in Engelberg," answered Mr. Clifford; "when you can go to Switzerland you'll have no trouble in finding it. Perhaps you and I may go there together some day. I have some thoughts of it."

"But my mother will not hear a word of any of us ever going to Switzerland," said Felix. "I've asked her how soon she would think us old enough to go, and she said never! Of course we don't expect she would ever bear to go to the place where he was killed; but Phebe would love to go, and so would I. We've saved enough money, Phebe and I; and my mother will not let me say one word about it. She says I have never, never to think of such a thing."

"She is afraid of losing you as well as him," replied Mr. Clifford; "but when you are more of a man she will let you go. You are all she has."

"Except Hilda," said the boy fondly, "and I know she loves me most of all. I do not wonder she cannot bear to hear about my father. My mother is not like other women." "Your mother is a famous woman," rejoined Mr. Clifford; "you ought to be proud of her."

For as years passed on Felicitia had attained some portion of her ambition. In Riversborough it seemed as if she was the first writer of the age; and though in London she had not won one of those extraordinary successes which place an author suddenly at the top of the ladder, she was steadily climbing upward, and was well known for her good and conscientious work. The books she wrote were clever, though cynical and captious; yet here and there they contained passages of pathos and beauty which insured a fair amount of favour. Her work was always welcome and well paid, so well that she could live comfortably on the income she made for herself, without falling back on her marriage settlement. Without an undue strain upon her mental powers she could earn a thousand a year, which was amply sufficient for her small household.

Though Roland Sefton had lavished upon his high-born wife all the pomp and luxury he considered fitting to the position she had left for him, Felicitia's own tastes and habits were simple. Her father, Lord Riversford, had been but a poor baron with an encumbered estate, and his only child had been brought up in no extravagant ways. Now that she had to earn most of the income of the household, for herself she had very few personal expenses to curtail. Thanks to Madame and Phebe, the house was kept in exquisite order, saving Felicitia the shock of seeing the rooms she dwelt in dingy and shabby. Excepting the use of a carriage, there was no luxury that she greatly missed.

As she became more widely known, Felicitia was almost compelled to enter into society, though she did it reluctantly. Old friends of her father's, himself a literary man, sought her out; and her cousins from Riversford insisted upon visiting her and being visited as her relations. She

could not altogether resist their overtures, partly on account of her children, who, as they grew up, ought not to find themselves without friends. But she went from home with unwillingness, and returned to the refuge of her quiet study with alacrity.

There was only one house where she visited voluntarily. A distant cousin of hers had married a country clergyman, whose parish was about thirty miles from London, in the flat, green meadows of Essex. The Pascals had children the same age as Felix and Hilda; and when they engaged a tutor for their own boys and girls they proposed to Felicitia that her children should join them. In Mr. Pascal's quiet country parsonage were to be met some of the clearest and deepest thinkers of the day, who escaped from the conventionalities of London society to the simple and pleasant freedom they found there. Mr. Pascal himself was a leading spirit among them, with an intellect and a heart large and broad enough to find companionship in every human being who crossed his path. There was no pleasure in life to Felicitia equal to going down for a few days' rest to this country parsonage.

That she was still mourning bitterly for the husband whose name could never be mentioned to her, all the world believed. It made those who loved her most feel very tenderly toward her. Though she never put on a widow's garb, she always wore black dresses. The jewels Roland had bought for her in profusion lay in their cases, and never saw the light. She could not bring herself to look at them, for she understood better now the temptation that had assailed and conquered him. She knew that it was for her chiefly, to gratify an ambition cherished on her account, that he had fallen into crime.

"I worship my mother still," said Felix one day to Phebe, "but I feel more and more awe of her every day. What is it that separates her from us? It would be different if my father had not died."

"Yes, it would have been different," answered Phebe, thinking of how terrible a change it must have made in their young lives if Roland Sefton had not died. She, too, understood better what his crime had been, and how the world regarded it; and she thanked God in her secret soul that Roland was dead, and his wife and children saved from sharing his punishment. It had all been for the best, sad as it was at the time. Madame also was comforted, though she had not forgotten her son. It was the will of God; it was God who had called him, as He would call her some day. There was no bitterness in her grief, and she did not perplex her soul with brooding over the impenetrable mystery of death.

CHAPTER XXV.—DEAD TO THE WORLD.

In an hospital at Lucerne a peasant had been lying ill several weeks of a brain fever, which left him so absolutely helpless that it was impossible to turn him out into the streets on his recovery from the fever, as he had no home or friends to go to. When his mind seemed clear enough to give some account of himself, he was incoherent and bewildered in the few statements he made. He did not answer to his own name, Jean Merle; and he appeared incapable of understanding even a single question. That his brain had been, perhaps, permanently affected by the fever was highly probable.

When at length the authorities of the hospital were obliged to discharge him, a purse was made up for him, containing enough money to keep him in his own station for the next three months.

By this time Jean Merle was no longer confused and unintelligible when he opened his lips, but he very rarely uttered a word beyond what was absolutely necessary. He appeared to the physicians attending him to be bent on recollecting something that had occurred in the past before his brain gave way. His face was always preoccupied and moody, and scarcely any sound would catch his ear and make him lift up his head. There must be mania somewhere, but it could not be discovered.

"Have you any plans for the future, Merle?" he was asked the day he was discharged as cured.

"Yes, Monsieur," he replied; "I am a wood-carver by trade."

"And where are you going to now?" was the next question.

"I must go to Engelberg," answered Merle, with a shudder.

"Ah! to Monsieur Nicodemus; then," said the doctor; "you must be a good hand at your work to please him, my good fellow."

"I am a good hand," replied Merle.

The valley of Engelberg lies high, and is little more than a cleft in the huge mass of mountains; a narrow gap where storms gather, and bring themselves into a focus. In the summer thunder-clouds draw together, and fill up the whole valley, while rain falls in torrents, and the streams war and rage along their stony channels. But when Jean Merle returned to it in March, after four months' absence, the valley was covered with snow stretching up to the summits of the mountains around it, save only where the rocks were too precipitous for it to lodge.

He had come back to Engelberg because there was the grave of the friendless man who bore his former name. It had a fascination for him, this grave, where he was supposed to be at rest. The handsome granite cross, bearing only the name of Roland Sefton and the date of his death, attracted him, and held him by an irresistible spell. At first, the strange weakness of his mind, he could hardly believe that he was dead, and this inexplicable second life of Jean Merle was an illusion. It would not have amazed him, if he had been invisible and inaudible to those about him. That which filled him with astonishment and terror was the fact that the people took him to be what he said he was, a Swiss peasant, and a wood-carver.

He had no difficulty in getting work as soon as he had done a piece as a specimen of his skill. Monsieur Nicodemus recognized a delicate and cultivated hand, and a faithful delineator of nature. As he acquired more skill with steady practice, he surpassed the master's most dexterous