

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESSA STRETTON.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.—HIS FATHER'S SIN.

When Felix returned from his brief and clouded holiday to his work in that corner of the great vineyard, so overcrowded with busy husbandmen that they were always plucking up each other's plants, and pruning and re-pruning each other's vines, till they made a wilderness where there should have been a harvest, he found that his special plot there had suffered much damage. John Nixey, following up the impression he had so successfully made, had spread his story abroad, and found ears willing to listen to it, and hearts willing to believe it. The small Provident Club, instituted by Felix to check the waste and thriftlessness of the people, had already, in his short absence, elected another treasurer of its scanty funds; and the members who formed it, workmen and women who had been gathered together by his personal influence, treated him with but scant civility. His evening lectures in the church mission house were some times scarcely attended, whilst on other days there was an influx of hearers, among whom John Nixey was prominent, with half-a-dozen rough and turbulent fellows like himself—hangers-on at the nearest spirit-vaults—who were ready for any turn that might lead to a row. The women and children who had been accustomed to come stayed away, or went to some other of the numerous preaching-places, as though afraid of this boisterous element in his little congregation.

Now and then, too, he heard his name called out aloud in the streets by some of Nixey's friends as he passed the prospering gin-palaces with their groups of loungers about the doors; but though he could catch the sound of the laugh and the sneer that followed him, he could take no notice. He could not turn round in righteous indignation and tell the fellows and the listening bystanders that what they said of his father was a lie. The poor young curate, with his high hopes and his enthusiastic love of the work he had chosen for the sake of his fellow-men, was compelled to pass on with bowed head and silent lips, and a heart burdened with the conviction that his influence was altogether blighted and uprooted.

"It isn't true, sir, is it, what folks are tellin' about your father?" was a question put to him more than once, when he entered some squalid home in the hope of giving counsel, or help, or comfort. There was something highly welcome and agreeable to these people themselves thieves, or bordering on thievery—in the idea that this fine, handsome, gentlemanly young clergyman, who had set to work among them with so much energy and zeal, was the son of a dishonest rogue, who ought to have been sent to gaol as many of them had been. Felix had not failed to make enemies in the Brickfields by his youthful intolerance of idleness, beggary and drunkenness. The owners of the gin palaces hated him, and not a few of the rival religious sects were, to say the least, uncharitably disposed towards one who had drawn so many of their followers to himself. There was very little common social interest in the population of the district, for the tramping classes of the lowest London poor, such as were drawn to the Brickfields by its overflowing charities, have as little cohesion as a rope of sand; but Felix was so conspicuous a figure in its narrow and dirty streets, that even strangers would nudge one another's elbows, and almost before he was gone by, narrate Nixey's story, with curious additions and alterations.

It was gal' and wormwood to Felix that he was unable to contradict the story in full. He could say that his father had never been a convict; but no inducement on earth could have wrung from him the declaration that his father had never been guilty of fraud. Sometimes he wondered whether it would not be well to own the simple truth and endure the shame; if he had been the sole survivor of his father's sin this he would have done, and gone on toilsomely regaining the influence he had lost. But the secret touched his mother even more closely than himself, and Hilda was equally concerned in it. It had been sacredly kept by those over than he was, and it was not for him to betray it. "My poor mother!" he called her. Never, before he learned the secret burden she had borne, had he called her by that tender and pitiful epithet; but as often as he thought of her now, his heart said "My poor mother!"

As soon as Canon Pascal returned to England Felix took a day's holiday, and ran down by train to the quiet rectory in Essex, where he had spent the greater portion of his boyhood. Only a few years separated him from that careless and happier period of his life, yet the last three months had driven it into the far background. He almost smiled at the recollection of how young he was half-a-year ago, when he declared his love for Alice. How far dearer to him she was now than then! The one letter he had received from her, written in Switzerland, and telling him in loving detail of her visit to his father's grave, would be forever one of his most precious treasures. But he was not going to share his blemished name with her. He had had nothing worthy of her, or of his father, to lay at her feet, whilst he was yet in utter ignorance of the shame he had inherited; and now? He must never more think of her as his wife.

She was at home, he knew, but he sternly forbade himself to seek for her. It was Canon Pascal he had come down to see, and he went straight on to his well-known study. He was busy in the preparation of next Sunday's sermons, but at the sight of Felix's dejected, unsmiling face, he swept away his books and papers with one hand, whilst he stretched out his other hand, and gave him such a warm, strong, hearty grip as he might have given to a drowning man.

"What is it, my son?" he asked.

There was such a full sympathetic tone in the friendly voice speaking to him that Felix felt his burden already shared, and pressing less heavily on his bruised spirit. He

stood a little behind Canon Pascal, with his hand upon his shoulder, as he had often placed himself before when he was pleading for some boyish indulgence, or begging pardon for some boyish fault.

"You have been like a true father to me, and I come to tell you a great trouble," he began in a tremulous voice.

"I know it, my boy," replied Canon Pascal; "you have found out how true it is, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Ah! Felix, life teaches us so, as well as this wise old Book."

"You know it?" stammered Felix.

"Phebe told me," he interrupted, "six months since. And now you and I can understand Felicity. There was no prejudice against our Alice in her mind; no unkindness to either of you. But she could not bring herself to say the truth against the husband whom she has wept and mourned over so long. And your mother is the soul of truth and honour; she could not let you marry whilst we were ignorant of this matter. It has been a terrible cross to bear, and she has borne it in silence. I love and revere your mother more than ever."

"Yes!" said Felix, with a sob. He had not yet seen her since coming to this fateful knowledge; for Phebe and Hilda had joined her at the seaside, where they were still staying. But if his father had gone down into the depths of darkness, his mother had risen so much the higher in his reverence and love. She had become a saint and a martyr in his eyes, and to save her from a moment's grief seemed to be a cause worth dying for.

"I came to tell you all," he went on, "and to say I cannot any more hope that you will give Alice to me. God alone knows what it costs me to give her up; and she will suffer too, for a while, a long while, I fear; for we have grown together so. But it must be. Alice cannot marry a man who has not even an unblemished name to offer to her."

"You should ask Alice herself about that," said Canon Pascal, quietly.

A thrill of rapture ran through Felix, and he grasped the shoulder, on which his hand still rested, more firmly. What! was it possible that this second father of his knew all his disgrace and dishonour, how his teeth were set on edge by the sour grapes which he had not eaten, and yet was willing that Alice should share his name and his lot? There was no fear as to what Alice would say. He recollected how Phebe spoke, as if her thoughts dwelt more on his father's sorrow and sad death than on his sin; and Alice would be the same. She would cover it with a woman's sweet charity. He could not command his voice to speak, and after a minute's pause Canon Pascal continued:

"Yes! Alice, too, knows all about it. I told her beside your father's grave. And do you suppose she said, 'Here is cause enough for me to break with Felix?' Nay, I believe if the sin had been your own, Alice would have said it was her duty to share it and your repentance. Shall our Lord come to save sinners, and we turn away from their blameless children? Yet I thought it must be so at first, I own it, Felix; at first, while my eyes were blinded and my heart hardened, and I looked at it in the light of the world. But then I bethought me of your mother. Shall not she make good to you the evil your father has wrought? If he dishonoured your name in the eyes of a few, she has brought honour to it, and made it known far beyond the limits it could have been known through him. The world will regard you as her son, not as his."

"But I came also to tell you that I wish to leave the country," said Felix. "There is a difficulty in getting men for our colonial work, and I am young and strong, stronger than most young men in the Church. I could endure hardships, and go in for work that feeble men must leave untried, you have taken care of that for me. Such a life would be more like old Felix Merle's than a London curacy. You let your own sons emigrate, believing that the old country is getting over-populated, and I thought I would go too."

"Why?" asked Canon Pascal, turning round in his chair, and looking up searchingly into his face.

In a few words, and in short, broken sentences, Felix told him of Nixey's charge, and the change it had wrought in the London curacy, upon which he had entered with so much enthusiasm and delight.

"It will be the same wherever I go in England," he said in conclusion; "and I cannot face them boldly and say it is all a falsehood."

"You must live it down," answered Canon Pascal; "go on, and take no notice of it."

"But it hinders my work sadly," said Felix, "and I cannot go on in the Brickfields. There might be a row any evening, and then the story would come out in the police courts; and what could I say? At least, I must give up that."

For a few minutes Canon Pascal was lost in thought. If Felix was right in his apprehension, and the whole story came out in the police court, there were journals pandering to public curiosity that would gladly lay hold of any gossip or scandal connected with Mrs. Roland Sefson. Her name would ensure its publicity. And how could Felicity endure this, especially now that her health was affected? If the dread of disclosing her secret to him had wrought so powerfully upon her physical and mental constitution, what would she suffer if it became a nine-days' talk for the world?

"I will get your rector to exchange curates with me till we can see our way clear," he said. "He is Alice's godfather, you know, and will do it willingly. I am going up to Westminster in November, and you will be here in my place, where everybody knows your face and you know theirs. There will be no question here about your father, for you are looked upon as my son. Now go away, and find Alice."

When Felix turned out of Liverpool street station that evening, a tall, gaunt-looking workman offered to carry his bag for him. It was filled with choice fruit from the rectory garden, grown up trees grafted and pruned by Canon Pascal's own hand, and Felix had helped Alice to gather it for some of his sick parishioners in the unwholesome dwelling-places he visited.

"I am going no further than the Mansion House," he answered, "and I can carry it myself."

"You'd do me a kindness if you'd let me carry it," said the man.

It was not the tone of a common loafer, hanging about the station for any chance job, and Felix turned to look at him in the light of the street-lamp. It was the old story, he thought to himself: a decent mechanic from the country out of work, and lost in this great labyrinth of a city. He handed his bag to him and walked on along the crowded thoroughfare, soon forgetting that he was treading the flagged streets of a city; he was back again, strolling through dewy fields in the cool twilight, with Alice beside him, accompanying him to the quiet little station. He thought no more of the stranger behind him, or of the bag he carried, until he hailed an omnibus travelling westward.

"Here is your bag, sir," said the man.

"Ah! I'd forgotten it," exclaimed Felix. "Good-night, and thank you."

He had just time to drop a shilling into his hand before the omnibus was off. But the man stood there in front of the Mansion House, motionless, with all the busy sea of life roaring around him, hearing nothing and seeing nothing. This coin that lay in his hand had been given to him by his son; his son's voice was still sounding in his ears. He had walked behind him, taking note of his firm, strong step, his upright carriage and manly bearing. It had been too swift a march for him, full of exquisite pain and pleasure, which chance might never offer to him again.

"Move on, will you?" said a policeman authoritatively; and Jean Merle, rousing himself from his reverie, went back to his lonely garret.

## CHAPTER XL.—HAUNTING MEMORIES.

Felicity was slowly recovering her strength at the seaside. She had never before felt so seriously shaken in health as since she had known of the attachment of Felix to Alice Pascal; an attachment which would have been quite to her mind if there was no loss of honour in allowing it whilst she held a secret which, in all probability, would seem an insuperable barrier in the eyes of Canon Pascal.

This secret she had kept resolutely in the background of her own memory, conscious of its existence, but never turning her eyes towards it. The fact that it was absolutely a secret, suspected by no one, made this more possible; for there was no gleam of cognizance in any eye met hers which could awaken even a momentary recollection of it. It seemed so certain that her husband was dead to every one but herself, that she came at last almost to believe that it was true.

And was it not most likely to be true? Through all these long years there had come no hint to her in any way that he was living. She had never seen or heard of any man lingering about her home, where she and her children lived, all whom Roland loved, and loved so passionately. Certainly she had made no effort to discover whether he was yet alive; but though it would be well for her if he was dead—a case of rest almost amounting to satisfaction—it was not likely that he would remain content with unbroken and complete ignorance of how she and her children were faring. If he had been living, surely he would have given her some sign.

There was a terrible duty now lying in her path. Before she could give her consent to Felix marrying Alice, she must ascertain positively if her husband was dead. Should it be so, her secret was safe, and would die with her. Nobody need ever know of this fraud, so successfully carried on. But if not? Then she knew in herself that her lips could never confess the sin in which she had shared; and nothing would remain for her to do but to oppose with all the energy and persistence possible the marriage either of her son or daughter. And she fully believed that neither of them would marry against her will.

Her health had not permitted her hitherto to make the exertion necessary for ascertaining this fact, on which her whole future depended—her's and her children's. The physician whom she had consulted in London had urged upon her the imperative necessity of avoiding all excitement and fatigue, and had ordered her down to this dull little village of Freshwater, where not even a brass band on the unfinished pier or the arrival of an excursion steamer could disturb or agitate her. She had nothing to do but to sit on the quiet downs, where no sound could startle her, and no spectacle flutter her, until the sea-breezes had brought back her usual tone of health.

How long this promised restoration was in coming! Phebe, who watched for it anxiously, saw but little sign of it. Felicity was more silent than ever, more withdrawn into herself, gazing for hours upon the changeless surface of the sea with absent eyes, through which the brain was not looking out. Neither sound nor sight reached the absorbed soul, that was wandering through some intricate mazes to which Phebe had no clue. But no colour came to Felicity's pale face, and no light into her dim eyes. There was a painful and weird feeling often in Phebe's heart that Felicity herself was not there; only the fair, frail form, which was insensible as a corpse, until this spirit came back to it. At such times Phebe was impelled to touch her, and speak to her, and call her back again, though it might be to irritability and displeasure.

"Phebe," said Felicity, one day when they sat on the cliff, so near the edge that nothing but the sea lay within the range of their sight, "how should you feel, instead of helping a fellow-creature to save himself from drowning, you had thrust him back into the water, and left him, sure that he would perish?"

"But I cannot tell you how I should feel," answered Phebe, "because I could never do it. It makes me shudder to think of such a thing. No human being could do it."

But if you had thrust the one fellow-creature nearest to you, the one who loved you the most," pursued Felicity, "into sin, down into a deeper gulf than he could have fallen into but for you—"

"My dear, my dear!" cried Phebe, interrupting; but in a tone of the tenderest pity. "Oh! I know now what you are preying upon you. Because Felix loves Alice it has brought