

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESSA STRETTON.

CHAPTER I.—ABSCONDED.

Late as it was, though the handsome office clock on the chimney-piece had already struck eleven, Roland Selson did not move. He had not stirred hand or foot for a long while now; no more than if he had been bound fast by many strong cords, which no effort could break or rattle. His confidential clerk had left him two hours ago, and the undisturbed stillness of night had surrounded him ever since he had listened to his retreating footsteps. "Poor Acton!" he had said half aloud, and with a heavy sigh.

As he sat there, his clasped hands resting on his desk and his face hidden on them, all his life seemed to unfold itself before him; not in painful memories of the past only, but in terrible prevision of the black future.

How dear his native town was to him! He had always loved it from his very babyhood. The wide old streets, with ancient houses still standing here and there, rising or falling in gentle slopes, and called by quaint old names such as he had never heard elsewhere; the fine old churches crowning the hills, and lifting up delicate tall spires, visible a score of miles away; the grammar school, where he had spent the happiest days of his boyhood; the rapid river, brown and swirling, which swept past the town, and came back again as if it could not leave it; the ancient bridges spanning it, and the sharp-cornered recesses in them where he had spent many an idle hour, watching the boats row in and out under the arches; he saw every familiar nook and corner of his native town vividly and suddenly, as if he caught glimpses of them by the capricious play of lightning.

And this pleasant home of his; these walls which enclosed his birthplace, and the birth-place of his children! He could not imagine himself finding true rest and a peaceful shelter elsewhere. The spacious old rooms, with brown wainscoted walls and carved ceilings; the tall and narrow windows, with deep window-sills, where as a child he had so often knelt, gazing out on the wide green landscape, and the far distant, almost level line of the horizon. His boy, Felix, had knelt in one of them a few hours ago, looking out with grave, childish eyes on the sunset. The broad, shallow steps of the oaken staircase, trodden so many years by the feet of all who were dearest to him; the quiet chambers above, where his mother, his wife, and his children were at this moment sleeping peacefully. How unutterably and painfully sweet all his home was to him!

Very prosperous his life had been; hardly overshadowed by a single cloud. His father, who had been the third partner in the oldest bank in Riversborough, had lived until he was old enough to step into his place. The bank had been established in the last century, and was looked upon as being as safe as the Bank of England. The second partner was dead; and the eldest, Mr. Clifford, had left everything in his hands for the last few years.

No man in Riversborough had led a more prosperous life than he had. His wife was from one of the county families; without fortune, indeed, but with all the advantages of high connections, which lifted him above the ranks of mere business men, and admitted him into society hitherto closed even to the head partner in the old bank; in spite even of the fact that he still occupied the fine old house adjoining the bank premises. There was scarcely a townsman who was held to be his equal, not one who was considered his superior. Though he was little over thirty yet, he was at the head of all municipal affairs. He had already held the office of mayor for one year, and might have been re-elected if his wife had not somewhat scorned the homely bourgeois dignity. There was no more popular man in the whole town than he was.

But he had been building on the sands, and the storm was rising. He could hear the moan of the winds growing louder, and the rush of the on-coming floods drawing nearer. He must make good his escape now, or never. If he put off flight until to-morrow, he would be crushed with the falling of his house.

He lifted himself up heavily, and looked round the room. It was his private office, at the back of the bank, handsomely furnished as a bank parlour should be. Over the fireplace hung the portrait of old Clifford, the senior partner, faithfully painted by a local artist, who had not attempted to soften the hard, stern face, and the fixed stare of the cold blue eyes, which seemed fastened punitively upon him. He had never seen the likeness before as he saw it now. Would such a man overlook a fault, or have mercy for an offender? Never! He turned away from it, feeling cold and sick at heart; and with a heavy and very bitter sigh he locked the door upon the room where he had spent so large a portion of his life. The place which had known him would know him no more.

As noiselessly and warily as if he was a thief breaking into the quiet house, he stole up the dimly-lighted staircase, and paused for a minute or two before a door, listening intently. Then he crept in. A low shaded lamp was burning, giving light enough to guide him to the cot where Felix was sleeping. It would be his birthday to-morrow, and the child must not lose his birthday gift, though the relentless floods were rushing on toward him also. Close by was the cot where his baby daughter, Hilda, was at rest. He stood between them, and could lay a hand on each. How soundly the children slept while his heart was breaking! Dear as they had been to him, he had never realized till now how priceless beyond all words such little tender creatures could be. He had called them into existence, and now the greatest good that could befall them was his death. It was unutterable agony to him.

His gift was a Bible, the boy's own choice; and he laid it on the pillow where Felix would find it as soon as his eyes opened. He bent over him, and kissed him with trembling lips. Hilda stirred a little when his lips touched her soft, rosy face, and she half opened her eyes, whisper-

ing "Father," and then fell asleep again, smiling. He dared not linger another moment, but passing stealthily away, he paused listening at another door, his face white with anguish. "I dare not see Felicity," he murmured to himself, "but I must look upon my mother's face once again."

The door made no noise as he opened it, and his feet fell noiselessly on the thick carpet; but as he drew near his mother's bed, her eyes opened with a clear, steady gaze, as if she had been awaiting his coming. There was a light burning here as well as in the night-nursery adjoining, for it was his mother who had charge of the children, and who would be the first the nurse would call if anything was the matter. She awoke as one who expects to be called upon at any hour; but the light was too dim to betray the misery on her son's face.

"Roland!" she said, in a slightly foreign accent. "Were you calling, mother?" he asked. "I was passing by, and I came in here to see if you wanted anything."

"I did not call, my son," she answered, "but what have you the matter? Is Felicity ill? or the babies? Your voice is sad, Roland."

"No, no," he said, forcing himself to speak in a cheerful voice. "Felicity is asleep, I hope, and the babies are all right. But I have been late at bank-work; and I turned in just to have a look at you, mother, before I go to bed."

"That's my good son," she said, smiling, and taking his hand between her own in a fond clasp.

"Am I a good son?" he asked.

His mother's face was a fair, sweet face still, the soft brown hair scarcely touched with white, and with clear, dark gray eyes gazing up frankly into his own. They were eyes like these, with their truthful light shining through them, inherited from her, which in himself had won the unquestioning trust and confidence of those who were brought into contact with him. There was no warning signal of disloyalty in his face to set others on their guard. His mother looked up at him tenderly.

"Always a good son, the best of sons, Roland," she replied, and a good husband, and a good father. Only one little fault in my good son: too spendthrift, too lavish. You are not a fine, rich lord, with large lands, and much, very much money, my boy. I do my best in the house; but women are only save pennies, while men fling about pounds."

"But you love me with all my faults, mother?" he said.

"As my own soul," she answered.

There was a profound solemnity in her voice and look, which penetrated to his very heart. She was not speaking lightly. It was in the same spirit in which Paul wrote, after saying, "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord;" "I could wish that myself were separate from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." His mother had reached that sublime height of love for him.

He stood silent, looking down on her with dull, aching eyes, as he said to himself it was perhaps for the last time. It was the last time she would ever see him as her good son. With her, in her heart and memory, all his life dwelt; she knew the whole of it, with no break or interruption. Only this one hidden thread, which had been woven into the web in secret, and was about to stand out with such clear and open disclosure; of this she had no faint suspicion. For a minute or two he felt as if he must tell her of it; that he must roll off this horrible weight from himself, and crush her faithful heart with it. But what could his mother do? Her love could not stay the storm; she had no power to bid the winds and waves be still. It would be best for all of them if he could make his escape secretly, and be altogether lost in impenetrable darkness.

At that moment a clock in the hall struck one.

"Well," he said wearily, "if I'm to get any sleep to-night I must be off to bed. Good-bye, mother."

"Good-bye?" she repeated, with a smile.

"Good-night, of course," he replied, bending over her and kissing her tenderly.

"God bless you, my son," she said, putting both her hands upon his head, and pressing his face close to her own. He could not break away from her fond embrace, but in a few moments she let him go, bidding him get some rest before the night was past.

Once more he stood in the dimly lighted passage, listening at his wife's door, with his fingers involuntarily clasping the handle. But he dared not go in. If he looked upon Felicity again, he could not leave her, even to escape from ruin and disgrace. An agony of love and of terror took possession of him. Never to see her again was horrible; but to see her shrink from him as a base and dishonest man, his name an infamy to her, would be worse than death. Did she love him enough to forgive a sin committed chiefly for her sake? In the depths of his own soul the answer was No.

He stole down stairs again, and passed out by a side door into the street. It was raining heavily, and the wind was moaning through the deserted thoroughfares, where no sound of footsteps could be heard. Behind him lay his pleasant home, never so precious as at this moment. He looked up at the windows, the two faintly lit up, and that other darkened window of the chamber he had not dared to enter. In a few hours these women, so unutterably dear to him, would be overwhelmed by the great sorrow he had prepared for them; those children would become the inheritors of his sins. He looked back longingly and despairingly, as if there only was life for him; and then hurrying on swiftly he lost sight of the old home, and felt as a drowning wretch at sea feels when the heaving billows hide from him the glimmering light of the beacon, which, however, can offer no harbour of refuge to him.

CHAPTER II.—PHEBE MARLOWE.

Though the night had been stormy, the sun rose brightly on the rain-washed streets, and the roofs and walls stood

out with a peculiar clearness, and with a more vivid colour than usual, against the deep blue of the sky. It was May-day, and most hearts were stirred with a pleasant feeling as of a holiday; not altogether a common day, though the shops were open, and business was going on as usual. The old bethought themselves of the days when they had gone a-Maying, and the young felt less disposed to work, and were inclined to wander out in search of May-flowers in the green meadows, or along the sunny banks of the river, which surrounded the town. Early, very early, considering the ten miles she had ridden on her bill-pony, came a young country girl across one of the ancient bridges, with a large market-basket on her arm, brimful of golden May-flowers, set off well by their own glossy leaves, and by the dark blue of her dress. She checked her pony and lingered for a few minutes, looking over the parapet at the swift rushing of the current through the narrow arches. A thin line of alders grew along the margin of the river, with their pale green leaves half unfolded; and in the midst of the swirling waters, parting them into two streams, lay a narrow islet on which tall willow wands were springing, with soft, white buds on every rod, and glistening in the sunshine. Not far away a lofty avenue of lime-trees stretched along the banks, casting wavering shadows on the brown river; while beyond it, on the summit of one of the hills on which the town was built, there rose the spires of two churches built close together, with the gilded crosses on their tapering points glittering more brightly than anything else in the joyous light. For a while the girl gazed dreamily at the landscape, her colour coming and going quickly, and then with a deep-drawn sigh of delight she roused herself and her pony, and passed on into the town.

The church clocks struck nine as she turned into Whitefriars Road, the street where the old bank of Riversborough stood. The houses on each side of the broad and quiet street were handsome, old-fashioned dwelling-places, not one of which had as yet been turned into a shop. The most eminent lawyers and doctors lived in it; and there was more than one frontage which displayed a hatched coat, left to grow faded and discoloured long after the year of mourning was ended. Here, too, was the judge's residence, set apart for his occupation during the assizes. But the old bank was the most handsome and the most ancient of all those urban mansions. It had originally stood alone on the brow of the hill overlooking the river and the Whitefriars Abbey. Toward the street, when Roland Selson's forefathers had realized a fortune by banking, now a hundred years ago, there had been a new frontage built to it, with the massive red brick workmanship and tall narrow windows of the eighteenth century. But on the river side it was still an old Elizabethan mansion, with gabled roofs standing boldly up against the sky, and low broad casements, latticed and filled with lozenge-shaped panes; and half-timber walls, with black beams fashioned into many forms; and with one story jutting out beyond that below, until the attic window under the gable seemed to hang in mid-air, without visible support, over the garden sloping down a steep bank to the river side.

Phebe Marlowe, in her coarse dark blue merino dress, and with her market-basket of golden blossoms on her arm, walked with a quick step along the quiet street, having left her pony at a stable near the entrance to the town. There were few persons about; but those whom she met she looked at with a pleasant, shy, slight smile on her face, as if she almost claimed acquaintance with them, and was ready, even wishful, to bid them good-morning on a day so fine and bright. Two or three responded to this inarticulate greeting, and then her lips parted gladly, and her voice, clear though low, answered them with a sweet good-humour that had something at once peculiar and pathetic in it. She passed under a broad archway at one side of the bank offices, leading to the house entrance, and to the sloping garden beyond. A private door into the bank was ajar, and a dark, sombre face was peering out of it into the semi-darkness. Phebe's feet paused for an instant.

"Good morning, Mr. Acton," she said, with a little rustic curtsy. But he drew back quickly, and she heard him draw the bolt inside the door, as if he had neither seen nor heard her. Yet the face, with its eager and scared expression, had been too quickly seen by her, and too vividly impressed upon her keen perception; and she went on, chilled a little, as if some cloud had come over the brightness of the morning.

Phebe was so much at home in the house, that when she found the housemaid on her knees cleaning the hall floor, she passed on unceremoniously to the dining-room, where she felt sure of finding some of the family. It was a spacious room, with a low ceiling where black beams crossed and crossed each other; with wainscoted walls and a carved chimney-piece of almost black oak. A sombre place in gloomy weather, yet so decorated with old china vases, and great brass salvers, and silver cups and tankards catching every ray of light, that the whole room glistened in this bright May-day. In the broad cushioned seat formed by the sill of the oriel window, which was almost as large as a room itself, there sat the elder Mrs. Selson, Roland Selson's foreign mother, with his two children standing before her. They had their hands clasped behind them, and their faces were turned toward her with the grave earnestness children's faces often wear. She was giving them their daily Bible lesson, and she held up her small brown hand as a signal to Phebe to keep silence, and to wait a moment until the lesson was ended.

"And so," she said, "those who know the will of God, and do not keep it, will be beaten with many stripes. Remember that, my little Felix."

"I shall always try to do it," answered the boy solemnly. "I'm nine years old to-day, and when I'm a man I'm going to be a pastor, like your father, grandmamma; my great-grandfather, you know, in the Jura. Tell us how he used to go about the snow mountains, seeing his poor people, and how he met with wolves sometimes, and was never frightened."

"Ah! my little children," she answered, "you have had a good father, and a good grandfather, and a good great-grandfather. How very good you ought to be."