

CHOISE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER XX.—A DUMB MAN'S GRIEF.

The winter fogs which made London so gloomy did not leave the country sky clear and bright. All the land lay under a shroud of mist and vapour; and even on the uplands round old Marlowe's little farmstead the heavens were gray and cold, and the wide prospect shut out by a curtain of dim clouds.

The rude natural tracks leading over the moor to the farm became almost impassable. The thatched roof was sodden with damp, and the deep eaves shed off the water with the sound of a perpetual dropping. Behind the house the dark, storm-beaten, distorted firs, and the solitary yew-tree blown all to one side, grew black with the damp. The isolation of the little dwelling-place was as complete as if a flood had covered the face of the earth, leaving its two inmates the sole survivors of the human race.

Several months had passed since old Marlowe had executed his last piece of finished work. The blow that Roland Sefton's dishonesty had inflicted upon him had paralysed his heart—that most miserable of all kinds of paralysis. He could still go about, handle his tools, set his thin old fingers to work; but as soon as he had put a few marks upon his block of oak his heart died within him, and he threw down his useless tools with a sob as bitter as ever broke from an old man's lips.

There was no relief for him, as for other men, in speech easily, perhaps hastily uttered, in companionship with his fellows. Any solace of this kind was too difficult and too deliberate for him to seek it in writing his lamentations on a slate or spelling them off on his fingers, but his grief and anger struck inward more deeply.

Phebe saw his sorrow, and would have cheered him if she could; but she, too, was sorely stricken, and she was young. She tried to set him an example of diligent work, and placed her easel beside his carving, painting as long as the gray and fleeting daylight permitted. Now and then she attempted to sing some of her old merry songs, knowing that his watchful eyes would see the movement of her lips; but though her lips moved, her face was sad and her heart heavy. Sometimes, too, she forgot all about her, and fell into an absorbed reverie, brooding over the past, until a sob or half-articulate cry from her father aroused her. These outcries of his troubled her more than any other change in him. He had been altogether mute in the former tranquil and placid days, satisfied to talk with her in silent signs; but there was something in his mind to express now which quiet and dumb signs could not convey. At intervals, both by day and night, her affection for him was tortured by these hoarse and stifled cries of grief mingled with rage.

There was a certain sense of the duties of citizenship in old Marlowe's mind which very few women, certainly not a girl as young as Phebe, could have shared. Many years ago the elder Sefton had perceived that the companionless man was groping vaguely after many a dim thought, political and social, which few men of his class would have been troubled with. He had given to him several books, which old Marlowe had pondered over. Now he felt that, quite apart from his own personal ground of resentment, he had done wrong to the laws of his country by aiding an offender of them to escape and elude the just penalty. He felt almost a contempt for Roland Sefton that he had not remained to bear the consequences of his crime.

The news of Roland's death brought something like satisfaction to his mind; there was a chill, dejected sense of justice having been done. He had not prospered in his crime. Though he had eluded man's judgment, yet vengeance had not suffered him to live. There was no relenting toward him, as there was in Mr. Clifford's mind. Something like the old heathen conception of a Divine righteousness in this arbitrary punishment of the evil-doer gave him a transient content. He did not object therefore to Phebe's hasty visit to Mrs. Sefton at the sea-side, in order to break the news to her. The inward satisfaction he felt sustained him, and he even set about a piece of work long since begun—a hawk swooping down upon his prey.

The evening on which Phebe reached home again he was more like his former self. He asked her many questions about the sea, which he had never seen, and told her what he had been doing while she was away. An old, well-thumbed translation of Plato's Dialogues was lying on the carved dresser behind him, in which he had been reading every night, instead of the Bible, he said.

"It was him, Mr. Roland, that gave it to me," he continued; "and listen to what I read last night: 'Those who have committed crimes, great yet not unpardonable, they are plunged into Tartarus, where they go who betray their friends for money, the pains of which they undergo for a year. But at the end of the year they come forth again to a lake, over which the souls of the dead are taken to be judged. And then they lift up their voices, and call upon the souls of them they have wronged to have pity upon them, and to forgive them, and let them come out of their prison. And if they prevail they come forth, and cease from their troubles; but if not, they are carried back again into Tartarus, until they obtain mercy of them whom they have wronged.' But it seems as if they have to wait until they have wronged are dead themselves."

The brown, crooked fingers ceased spelling out the solemn words, and Phebe lifted up her eyes from them to her father's face. She noticed for the first time how sunken and hollow it was, and how dimly and wearily his eyes looked out from under their shaggy eyebrows. She buried her face in her hands, and broke down into a passion of tears. The vivid picture her father's quotation brought before her mind filled it with horror and grief that passed all words.

The wind was walling round the house with a ceaseless

moan of pain, in which she could almost distinguish the tones of a human voice lamenting its lost and wretched fate. The cry rose and fell, and passed on, and came back again, muttering and calling, but never dying away altogether. It sounded to her like the cry of a belated wanderer calling for help. She rose hastily and opened the cottage door, as if she could hear Roland Sefton's voice through the darkness and the distance. But he was dead, and had been in his grave for many days already. Was she to hear that lost, forlorn cry ringing in her ears forever? Oh, if she could but have known something of him between that night, when he walked beside her through the dark deserted roads, pouring out his whole sorrowful soul to her, and the hour when in the darkness again he had strayed from his path, and been swallowed up of death! Was it true that he had gone down into that great gulf of secrecy and silence, without a word of comfort spoken, or a ray of light shed upon its profound mystery?

The cold wind blew in through the open door, and she shut it again, going back to her low chair on the hearth. Through her blinding tears she saw her father's brown hands stretched out to her, and the withered fingers speaking eagerly.

"I shall be there before long," he said; "he will not have to wait very long for me. And if you bid me, I will forgive him at once. I cannot bear to see your tears. Tell me: must I forgive him? I will do anything, if you will look up at me again and smile."

It was a strange smile that gleamed through Phebe's tears, but she had never heard an appeal like this from her dumb father without responding to it.

"Must I forgive him?" he asked.

"If ye forgive men their trespasses," she answered, "your Heavenly Father will also forgive yours; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive yours." It was our Lord Jesus Christ who said that, not your old Socrates, father.

"It is a hard saying," he replied.

"I don't think so," she said; "it was what Jesus Christ was doing every day He lived."

From that time old Marlowe did not mention Roland Sefton again, or his sin against him.

As the dark stormy days passed on, he sometimes put a touch or two to the outstretched wings of his swooping hawk, but it did not get on fast. With a pathetic clinging to Phebe he seldom let her stay long out of his sight, but followed her about like a child, or sat on the hearth watching her as she went about her house-work. Only by those unconscious sobs and outcries, inaudible to himself, did he betray the grief that was gnawing at his heart. Very often did Phebe put aside her work, and standing before him ask such questions as the following on her swiftly moving fingers:

"Don't you believe in God, our Father in heaven, the Father Almighty, who made us?"

"Yes," he would reply by a nod.

"And in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord, who lived and died for us, and rose again?"

"Yes, yes," was the silent, emphatic answer.

"And yet you grieve and fret over the loss of money?" she would say, with a wistful smile on her young face.

"You are a child; you know nothing," he replied.

For without a sigh the old man was going forward conscientiously to meet death. Every morning when the dawn awoke him he felt weaker as he rose from his bed; every day his sight was dimmer and his hand less steady; every night the steep flight of stairs seemed steeper, and he ascended them feebly by his hands as well as feet. He could not bring himself to write upon his slate or to spell out upon his fingers the dread words, "I am dying;" and Phebe was not old or experienced enough to read the signs of an approaching death. That her father should be taken away from her never crossed her thoughts.

It was the vague, mournful prospect of soon leaving her alone in the wide world that made his loss loom more largely and persistently before the dumb old man's mind. Certainly he believed all that Phebe said to him. God loved her, cared for her, ordered her life; yet he, her father, could not reconcile himself to the idea of her being left penniless and friendless in the cold and cruel world. He could have left her more peacefully in God's hands if she had those six hundred pounds of his earnings to inherit.

The sad winter wore slowly away. Now and then the table-land around them put on its white familiar livery of snow, and old Marlowe's dim eyes gazed at it through his lattice window, recollecting the winters of long years ago, when neither snow nor storm came amiss to him. But the slight sprinkling soon melted away, and the dun-coloured fog and cloudy curtain shut them in again, cutting them off from the rest of the world as if their little dwelling was the ark stranded on the hill's summit amid a waste of water.

CHAPTER XXI.—PLATO AND PAUL.

Phebe's nearest neighbour, except the farm-labourer who did an occasional day's labour for her father, was Mrs. Nixey, the tenant of a farm-house which lay at the head of a valley running up into the range of hills. Mrs. Nixey had given as much supervision to Phebe's motherless childhood as her father had permitted, in his jealous determination to be everything to his little daughter. Of late years, ever since old Marlowe, in the triumph of making an investment, had communicated that important fact to her on his slate, she had indulged in a day-dream of her own, which had filled her head for hours while sitting beside her kitchen fire busily knitting long worsted stockings for her son Simon.

Simon was thirty years of age, and it was high time she found a wife for him. Who could be better than Phebe, who had grown up under her own eyes, a good, strong, industrious girl, with six hundred pounds and Upfold Farm for her fortune? As she brooded over this idea, a second thought grew out of it. How convenient it would be if she herself married the dumb old father, and retired to the little farmstead, changing places with Phebe, her daughter-in-law. She would still be near enough to come down to

her son's house at harvest-time and pig-killing, and when the milk was abundant and cheese and butter to make. And the little house on the hills was built with walls a yard thick, and well lined with good oak wainscoting; she could keep it warm for herself and the old man. The scheme had as much interest and charm for her as if she had been a peeress looking out for an eligible alliance for her son.

But it had always proved difficult to take first steps towards so delicate a negotiation. She was not a ready writer; and even if she had been, Mrs. Nixey felt that it would be almost impossible to write her day-dream in bold and plain words upon old Marlowe's slate. If Marlowe was deaf, Phebe was singularly blind and dull. Since Nixey had played with her when she was a child, but it had been always as a big, grown-up boy, doing man's work; and it was only of late that she had realized that he was almost an old man. For the last year or two he had lingered at the church door to walk home with her and her father, but she had thought little of it. He was their nearest neighbour, and made himself useful in giving her father hints about his little farm, besides sparing his labourer to do them an occasional day's work. It seemed perfectly natural that he should walk home with them across the moors from their distant parish church.

But as soon as the roads were passable, Mrs. Nixey made her way up to the solitary farmstead. The last time she had seen old Marlowe he had been ailing, yet she was quite unprepared for the rapid change that had passed over him. He was cowering in the chimney-corner, his face yellow and shrivelled, and his eyes, once blue as Phebe's own, sunken in their sockets, and glowering dimly at her, with the strange intensity of gaze in the deaf and dumb. There was a little oak table before him, with his copy of Plato's Dialogues and a black leather Bible that had belonged to his forefathers, lying upon it; but both of them were closed, and he looked drowsy and listless.

"Good sakes! Phebe," cried Mrs. Nixey, "whatever ails thy father? He looks more like dust and ashes than a livin' man. Hast thou sent for no physic for him?"

"I didn't know he was ill," answered Phebe. "Father always feels the winter long and trying. He'll be all right when the spring comes."

"I'll ask him what's the matter with him," said Mrs. Nixey, drawing his slate to her, and writing in the boldest letters she could form, as if his deafness made it needful to write large.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing, save old age," he answered in his small, neat handwriting. There was a gentle smile on his face as he pushed the slate under the eyes of Mrs. Nixey and Phebe. He had sometimes thought he must tell Phebe he would not be long with her, but his hands refused to convey such sad warnings to his young daughter. He had put it off from day to day, though he was not sorry now to give some slight hint of his fears.

"Old! he's no older nor me," said Mrs. Nixey. "A pretty thing 'ud be if folks gave up at sixty or so. There's another ten years' work in you," she wrote on the slate.

"Ten years' work." How earnestly he wished it were true! He might still earn a little fortune for Phebe; for he was known all through the country, and beyond, and could get a good price for his carving. He stretched out his hand and took down his unfinished work, looking longingly at it.

Phebe's fingers were moving fast—so fast that he could not follow them. Of late he had been unable to seize the meaning of those swift, glancing finger-tips. He had reached the stage of a man who can no longer catch the lower tones of a familiar voice, and has to guess at the words thus spoken. If he lived long enough to lose his sight he would be cut off from all communion with the outer world, even with his daughter.

"Come close to me, and speak more slowly," he said to her. "I am growing old and dark. Yet I am only sixty, and my father lived to be over seventy. I was over forty when you were born. It was a sunny day, and I kept away from the house, in the shed, till I saw Mrs. Nixey beckoning to me. And when I came into the house she laid you in my arms. God was very good to me that day."

"He is always good," answered Phebe.

"So the parson teaches us," he continued; "but it was very hard for me to lose that money. It struck me a dreadful blow, Phebe. If I'd been twenty years younger I could have borne it; but when a man's turned sixty there's no chance. And he robbed me of more than money; he robbed me of love. I loved him next to you."

She knew that so well that she did not answer him. Her love for Roland Sefton lived still; but it was altogether changed from the bright, girlish admiration and trust which confidence it had once been. His conduct had altered itself to her; it was colder and darker, with deeper and longer shadows in it. And now there was coming the darkest shadow of all.

"Read this," he said, opening the "Phædo," and pointing to some words with his crooked and trembling finger. She stooped her head till her soft cheek rested against his, with a caressing and soothing touch.

"I go to die, you to live; but which is best, God alone can know," she read. Her arms stole round his neck, her cheek was pressed more closely against his. Nixey's hard face softened a little as she looked at the old man, but she could not help thinking of the new turn affairs were taking. If old Marlowe died, it might be more convenient on the whole, than for her to marry him. How could she live up here, with a cow or two, and a little from the workhouse to be her companion and drudge?

Quite unconscious of Mrs. Nixey's plans, Phebe drew the old black leather Bible toward her, turning the stained and yellow leaves with one hand, for she would not withdraw her arm from her father's neck. She knew exactly where to find the words she wanted; last she came upon them. The gray shaggy locks of the old man and the rippling glossy waves of Phebe's hair mingled as they bent their heads again over the page.