

CHOICE LITERATURE.

COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

(Concluded.)

CHAPTER LV.—QUITE ALONE.

It was early in June, and the days were at the longest. Never before had Phebe found the daylight too long, but now it shone upon dismantled and disordered rooms, which reminded her too sharply of the separation and departure they indicated. The place was no longer a home: everything was gone which was made beautiful by association; and all that was left was simply the bare framework of a living habitation—articles that could be sold and scattered without regret. Her own studio was a scene of litter and confusion, amid which it would be impossible to work; and it was useless to set it in order, for at midsummer she would leave the house, now far too large and costly for her occupation.

What was she to do with herself? Quite close at hand was the day when she would be absolutely homeless; but in the absorbing interest with which she had thrown herself into the affairs of those who were gone, she had formed no plans for her own future. There was her profession, of course; that would give her employment, and bring in a larger income than she needed with her simple wants. But how was she to do without a home—she who most needed to fill a home with all the sweet charities of life?

She had never felt before what it was to be altogether without ties of kinship to any fellow-being. This incompleteness in her lot had been perfectly filled up by her relationship with the whole family of the Seltons. She had found in them all that was required for the development and exercise of her natural affections. But she had lost them. Death and the chance changes of life had taken them from her, and there was not one human creature in the world on whom she possessed the claim of being of the same blood.

Phebe could not dwell amid the crowds of London with such a thought oppressing her. This heart-sickness and loneliness made the busy streets utterly distasteful to her. To be here, with millions around her, all strangers to her, was intolerable. There was her own little homestead, surrounded by familiar scenes, where she would seek rest and quiet before laying any plans for herself. She put her affairs into the hands of a house-agent, and set out alone upon her yearly visit to her farm, which until now Felix and Hilda had always shared.

She stayed on her way to spend a night at Riversborough—her usual custom—that she might reach the unprepared home on the moors early in the day. But she would not prolong her stay; there was a fatigue and depression about her which she said could only be dispelled by the sweet fresh air of her native moorlands.

"Felix and Hilda have been more to me than any words could tell," she said to Mr. Clifford and Jean Merle. "And now I have lost them I feel as if more than half my life was gone. I must get away by myself into my old home, where I began my life, and readjust it as well as I can. I shall do it best there with no one to distract me. You need not fear my wishing to be too long alone."

"We ought to have let you go," answered Mr. Clifford. "Jean Merle said we ought to have let you go with them. But how could we part with you, Phebe?"

"I should not have been happy," she said, sighing, "as long as you need me most—you two. And I owe all I am to Jean Merle himself."

The little homely cottage with its thatched roof and small lattice windows was more welcome to her than any other dwelling could have been. Now her world had suffered such a change, it was pleasant to come here, where nothing had been altered since her childhood. Both within and without the old home was as unchanged as the beautiful outline of the hills surrounding it, and the vast hollow of the sky above. Here she might live over again the past—the whole past. She was a woman, with a woman's sad experience of life; but there was much of the girl, even of the child, left in Phebe Marlowe still; and no spot on earth could have brought back her youth to her as this inheritance of hers. There was an unspoiled simplicity about her which neither time nor change could destroy—the child-likeness of one who had entered into the kingdom of heaven.

It was a year since she had been here last, with Hilda in her first grief for her mother's death, and everywhere she found traces of Jean Merle's handiwork. The half-shaped blocks of wood, left unfinished for years in her father's workshop, were completed. The hawk hovering over its prey, which the dumb old wood-carver had begun as a symbol of the feeling of vengeance he could not give utterance to when brooding over Roland Selson's crime, had been brought to a marvellous perfection by Jean Merle's practised hand, and it had been placed by him under the crucifix which old Marlowe had fastened in the window-frame, where the last rays of daylight fell upon the bowed head hidden by the crown of thorns. The first night that Phebe sat alone, on the old hearth, her eyes rested upon these until the daylight faded away, and the darkness shut them out from her sight. Had Jean Merle known what he did when he laid this emblem of vengeance beneath this symbol of perfect love and sacrifice?

But after a few days, when she had visited every place of yearly pilgrimage, knitting up the slackened threads of memory, Phebe began to realize the terrible solitude of this isolated home of hers. To live again where no step passed by and no voice spoke to her, where not even the smoke of a household hearth floated up into the sky, was intolerable to her genial nature, which was only satisfied in helpful and pleasant human intercourse. The utter silence became irksome to her, as it had been in her girlhood; but even then she had possessed the companionship of her dumb

father: now there was not only silence, but utter loneliness. The necessity of forming some definite plan for her future life became every day a more pressing obligation, whilst every day the needful exertion grew more painful to her. Until now she had met with no difficulty in deciding what she ought to do: her path of duty had been clearly traced for her. But there was neither call of duty now nor any strong inclination to lead her to choose one thing more than another. All whom she loved had gone from London, and this small solitary home had grown all too narrow in its occupations to satisfy her nature. Mr. Clifford himself did not need her constant companionship as he would have done if Jean Merle had not been living with him. She was perfectly free to do what she pleased and go where she pleased, but to no human being could such freedom be more oppressive than to Phebe Marlowe. She had sauntered out one evening, ankle deep among the heather, aimless in her wanderings, and a little dejected in spirits; for the long summer day had been hot even up here on the hills, and a dull film had hidden the landscape from her eyes, shutting her in upon herself and her disquieting thoughts. "We are always happy when we can see far enough," says Emerson; but Phebe's horizon was all dim and overcast. She could see no distant and clear sky-line. The sight of Jean Merle's figure coming towards her through the dull haziness brought a quick throb to her pulse, and she ran down the rough wagon track to meet him.

"A letter from Felix," he called out before she reached him. "I came out with it because you could not have it before post-time to-morrow, and I am longing to have news of him and of Hilda."

They walked slowly back to the cottage, side by side, reading the letter together, for Felix could have nothing to say to Phebe which his father might not see. There was nothing of importance in it; only a brief journal dispatched by a homeward-bound vessel which had crossed the path of their steamer, but every word was read with deep and silent interest, neither of them speaking till they had read the last line.

"And now you will have tea with me," said Phebe joyfully.

He entered the little kitchen, so dark and cool to him after his sultry walk up the steep, long lanes, and sat watching her absently, yet with a pleasant consciousness of her presence, as she kindled her fire of dry furze and wood, and hung a little kettle to it by a chain hooked to a staple in the chimney, and arranged her curious old china, picked up long years ago by her father at village sales, upon the quaintly carved table set in the coolest spot of the dusky room. There was an air of simple busy gladness in her face, and in every quick yet graceful movement, that was inexpressibly charming to him. Maybe both of them glanced back at the dark past when Roland Selson had been watching her with despairing eyes, yet neither of them spoke of it. That life was dead and buried. The present was altogether different.

Yet the meal was a silent one, and as soon as it was finished they went out again on to the hazy moorland.

"Are you quite rested yet, Phebe?" asked Jean Merle.

"Quite," she answered, with unconscious emphasis.

"And you have settled upon some plan for the future?" he said.

"No," she replied; "I am altogether at a loss. There is no one in all the world who has a claim upon me, or whom I have a claim upon, no one to say to me 'Go' or 'Come.' When the world is all before you, and it is an empty world, it is difficult to choose which way you will take in it."

She had paused as she spoke; but now they walked on again in silence, Jean Merle looking down on her sweet yet somewhat sad face with attentive eyes. How little changed she was from the simple, faithful-hearted girl he had known long ago! There was the same candid and thoughtful expression on her face, and the same serene light in her blue eyes, as when she stood beside him, a little girl, patiently yet earnestly mastering the first difficulties of reading. There was no one in the wide world whom he knew as perfectly as he knew her; no one in the wide world who knew him as perfectly as she did.

"Tell me, Phebe," he said gravely, "is it possible that you have lived so long, and that no man has found out what a priceless treasure you might be to him?"

"No one," she answered, with a little tremor in her voice; "only Simon Nixey," she added, laughing, as she thought of his perseverance from year to year. Jean Merle stopped and laid his hand on Phebe's arm.

"Will you be my wife?" he asked.

The brief question escaped him before he was aware of it. It was as utterly new to him as it was to her; yet the moment it was uttered he felt how much the happiness of his life depended upon it. Without her, all the future would be dreary and lonely for him. With her—Jean Merle did not dare to think of the gladness that might yet be his.

"No, no," cried Phebe, looking up into his face, furrowed with deep lines; "it is impossible! You ought not to ask me."

"Why?" he said.

She did not move or take away her eyes from his face. A rush of sad memories and associations was sweeping across her troubled heart. She saw him as he had been long ago, so far above her that it had seemed an honour to her to do him the meanest service. She thought of Felicia in her happy, reachable loveliness and stateliness, and of their home, so full to her of exquisite refinement and luxury. In the true humility of her nature she had looked up to them as far above her, dwelling on a height to which she made no claim. And this dethroned king of her early days was a king yet, though he stood before her as Jean Merle, still fast bound in the chains his sins had riveted about him.

"I am utterly unworthy of you," he said; "but let me justify myself if I can. I had no thought of asking you such a question when I came up here. But you spoke mournfully of your loneliness; and I, too, am lonely, with no human being on whom I have any claim. It is so by my own sin. But you, at least, have friends; and in a year or two, when my last friend, Mr. Clifford, dies, you will go out to them,

to my children, whom I have forfeited and lost forever. There is no tie to bind me closely to my kind. I am older than you—poorer; a dishonour to my father's house! Yet for an instant I fancied you might learn to love me, and no one but you can ever know me for what I am; only your faithful heart possesses my secret. Forgive me, Phebe, and forget it if you can."

"I never can forget it," she answered, with a low sob.

"Then I have done you a wrong," he went on; "for we were friends, were we not? And you will never again be at home with me as you have hitherto been. I was no more worthy of your friendship than of your love, and I have lost both."

"No, no," she cried, in a broken voice. "I never thought—it seems impossible. But, oh! I love you. I have never loved any one like you. Only it seems impossible that you should wish me to be your wife."

"Cannot you see what you will be to me," he said passionately. "It will be like reaching home after a weary exile; like finding a fountain of living waters after crossing a burning wilderness. I ought not to ask it of you, Phebe. But what man could doom himself to endless thirst and exile? If you love me so much that you do not see how unworthy I am of you, I cannot give you up again. You are all the world to me."

"But I am only Phebe Marlowe," she said, still doubtfully.

"And I am only Jean Merle," he replied.

Phebe walked down the old familiar lanes with Jean Merle, and returned to the moorlands alone whilst the sun was still above the horizon. But a soft west wind had risen, and the hazy heat was gone. She could see the sun sinking low behind Riversborough, and its tall spires glistened in the level rays, while the fine cloud of smoke hanging over it this summer evening was tinged with gold. Her future home lay there, under the shadow of those spires, and beneath the soft, floating veil ascending from a thousand hearths. The home Roland Selson had forfeited and Felicia had forsaken had become hers. There was deep sadness mingled with the strange, unanticipated happiness of the present hour, and Phebe did not seek to put it away from her heart.

CHAPTER LVI.—LAST WORDS.

Nothing could have delighted Mr. Clifford so much as a marriage between Jean Merle and Phebe Marlowe. The thought of it had more than once crossed his mind, but he had not dared to cherish it as a hope. When Jean Merle told him that night how Phebe had consented to become his wife, the old man's gladness knew no bounds.

"She is as dear to me as my own daughter," he said, in tremulous accents; "and now at last I shall have her under the same roof with me. I shall never be awake in the night again, fearing lest I should miss her on my death-bed. I should like Phebe to hold my hand in hers as long as I am conscious of anything in this world. All the remaining years of my life I shall have you and her with me as my children. God is very good to me."

But to Felix and Hilda it was a vexation and a surprise to hear that their Phebe Marlowe, so exclusively their own, was no longer to belong only to them. They could not tell, as none of us can tell with regard to our friends' marriages, what she could see in that man to make her willing to give herself to him. They never cordially forgave Jean Merle, though in the course of the following years he lavished upon them magnificent gifts; for once more he became a wealthy man, and stood high in the estimation of his fellow-townsmen. Upon his marriage with Phebe, at Mr. Clifford's request, he exchanged his foreign surname for the old English name of Marlowe, and was made the manager of the Old Bank. Some years later, when Mr. Clifford died, all his property, including his interest in the banking business, was left to John Marlowe.

No parents could have been more watchful over the interests of absent children than he and Phebe were in the welfare of Felix and Hilda. But they could never quite reconcile themselves to this marriage. They had quitted England with no intention of dwelling here again, but they felt that Phebe's shortcoming in her attachment to them made their old country less attractive to them. She had severed the last link that bound them to it. Possibly, in the course of years, they might visit their old home; but it would never seem the same to them. Canon Pascal alone rejoiced cordially in the marriage, though feeling that there was some secret and mystery in it, which was to be kept from him as from all the world.

Jean Merle, after his long and bitter exile, was at home again, after crossing a thirsty and burning wilderness, he had found a spring of living water. Yet whilst he thanked God and felt his love for Phebe growing and strengthening daily, there were times when, in brief intervals of utter loneliness of spirit, the long-burned past arose again and cried to him with sorrowful voice amid the tranquil happiness of the present. The children who called Phebe mother looked up into his face with eyes like those of the little son and daughter whom he had once forsaken, and their voices at play in the garden sounded like the echo of those beloved voices that had first stirred his heart to its depths. The quiet room where Felicia had been wont to shut herself in with her books and her writings remained empty and desolate amid the joyous occupancy of the old house, where little feet pattered everywhere except across that sacred threshold. It was never crossed but by Phebe and himself. Sometimes they entered it together, but often he went there alone, when his heart was heavy and his trust in God darkened. For there were times when Jean Merle had to pass through deep waters when the sense of forgiveness forsook him and the light of God's countenance was withdrawn. He had sinned greatly and suffered greatly. He loved as he might never otherwise have loved the Lord, whose disciple he professed to be; yet still there were seasons of bitter remembrance for him, and of vain regrets over the irrevocable past.

It was no part of Phebe's nature to inquire jealously if her husband loved her as much as she loved him. She knew that in this as in all other things "it is more blessed to give than to receive." She felt for him a perfectly unselfish and