

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## COBWEBS AND CABLES.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

## CHAPTER XVIII.—Continued.

Felicita did not speak when she entered the room, but looked at him with a steadfastness in her dark sad eyes which again dimmed his with tears. Almost fondly he pressed her hands in his, and led her to a chair, and placed another near enough for him to speak to her in a low and quiet voice, although unlike the awful tones he used in the bank, which made the clerks quail before him. His hand trembled as he took the little photographs out of their envelope, so worn and stained, and laid them before her. She looked at them with tearless eyes, and let them fall upon her lap as things of little interest.

"Phebe has told you?" he said pitifully.

"Yes," she whispered.

"You did not know before?" he said.

She shook her head mutely. A long, intricate path of falsehood stretched before her, from which she could not turn aside, a maze in which she was already entangled and lost; but her lips were reluctant to utter the first words of untruth.

"These were found on him," he continued, pointing to the children's portraits. "I am afraid we cannot doubt the facts. The description is like him, and his papers and passport place the identity beyond a question. But I have dispatched a trusty messenger to Switzerland to make further inquiries, and ascertain every particular."

"Will he see him?" asked Felicita with a start of terror.

"No, my poor girl," said the old banker; "it happened ten days ago, and he was buried, so they say, almost immediately. But I wish to have a memorial stone put over his grave, that if any of us, I or you, or the children, should wish to visit it at some future time, it should not be past finding."

He spoke tenderly and sorrowfully, as if he imagined himself standing beside the grave of his old friend's son, recalling the past and grieving over it. His own boy was buried in some unknown common *fosse* in Paris. Felicita looked up at him with her strange, steady, searching gaze.

"You have forgiven him?" she said.

"Yes," he answered; "men always forgive the dead."

"Oh, Roland! Roland!" she cried, wringing her hands for an instant. Then, resuming her composure, she gazed quietly into his pitiful face again.

"It is kind of you to think of his grave," she said; "but I shall never go there, nor shall the children go, if I can help it."

"Hush!" he answered imperatively. "You, then, have not forgiven him? Yet I forgive him, who have lost most."

"You!" she exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of passion. "You have lost a few thousand pounds; but what have I lost? My faith and trust in goodness; my husband's love and care. I have lost him, the father of my children, my home—nay, even myself. I am no longer what I thought I was. That is what Roland robs me of; and you say it is more for you to forgive than for me!"

He had never seen her thus moved and vehement, and he shrank a little from it, as most men shrink from any unusual exhibition of emotion. Though she had not wept, he was afraid now of a scene, and hastened to speak of another subject.

"Well, well," he said soothingly, "that is all true, no doubt. Poor Roland! But I am your husband's executor and the children's guardian, conjointly with yourself. The will will be proved immediately, and I shall take charge of your affairs."

"I thought," she answered, in a hesitating manner, "that there was nothing left—that we were ruined and had nothing. Why did Roland take your bonds if he had money? Why did he defraud other people? There cannot be any money coming to me and the children, and why should the will be proved?"

"My dear girl," he said, "you know nothing about affairs. Your uncle, Lord Riversford, would never have allowed Roland to marry you without a settlement, and a good one too. His death was the best thing for you. It saves you from poverty and dependence, as well as from disgrace. I hardly know yet how matters stand, but you will have little less than a thousand a year. You need not trouble yourself about these matters; leave them to me and Lord Riversford. He called upon me yesterday, as soon as he heard the sad news, and we arranged everything."

Felicita did not hear his words distinctly, though her brain caught their meaning vaguely. She was picturing herself free from poverty, surrounded with most of her accustomed luxuries, and shielded from every hardship, while Roland was homeless and penniless, cast upon his own resources to earn his daily bread and a shelter for every night, with nothing but a poor handicraft to support him. She had not expected this contrast in their lot. Poverty had seemed to lie before her also. But now how often would his image start up before her as she had seen him last, gaunt and haggard, with rough hair and blistered skin serving him as a mask, clad in coarse clothing, already worn and ragged, not at rest in the grave, as every one but herself believed him, but dragging out a miserable and sordid existence year by year, with no hopes for the future, and no happy memories of the past!

"Mr. Clifford," she said, when the sound of his voice humming in her ears had ceased, "I shall not take one farthing of any money settled upon me by my husband. I have no right to it. Let it go to pay the sums he appropriated. I will maintain myself and my children."

"You cannot do it," he replied; "you do not know what you are talking about. The money is settled upon your children; all that belongs to you is the yearly income from it."

"That, at least, I will never touch," she said earnestly; "it shall be set aside to repay those just claims. When all those are paid I will take it, but not before. Yours is the

largest, and I will take means to find out the others. With my mother's two hundred a year and what I earn myself, we shall keep the children. Lord Riversford has no control over me. I am a woman, and I will act for myself."

"You cannot do it," he repeated; "you have no notion of what you are undertaking to do. Mrs. Sefton, my dear young lady, I am come, with Lord Riversford's sanction, to ask you to return to your home again, to Madame's old home—your children's birthplace. I think, and Lord Riversford thinks, you should come back, and bring up Felix to take his grandfather's and father's place."

"His father's place!" interrupted Felicita. "No, my son shall never enter into business. I would rather see him a common soldier or sailor, or day labourer, earning his bread by an honest toil. He shall have no traffic in money, such as his father had; he shall have no such temptations. Whatever my son is, he shall never be a banker."

"Good gracious, Madame!" exclaimed Mr. Clifford. Felicita's stony quietude was gone, and in its place was such a passionate energy as he had never witnessed before in any woman.

"It was money that tempted Roland to defraud you and dishonour himself," she said; "it drove poor Acton to commit suicide, and it hardened your heart against your friend's son. Felix shall be free from it. He shall earn his bread and his place in the world in some other way, and till he can do that I will earn it for him. Every shilling I spend from henceforth shall be clean, the fruit of my own hands, not Roland's—not his, whether he be alive or dead."

Before Mr. Clifford could answer, the door was flung open, and Felix, breathless with rapid running, rushed into the room and flung himself into his mother's arms. No words could come at first; but he drew long and terrible sobs. The boy's upturned face was pale, and his eyes, tearless as her own had been, were fastened in an agony upon hers. She could not soothe or comfort him, for she knew his grief was wasted on a falsehood; but she looked down on her son's face with a feeling of terror.

"Oh, my father! my beloved father!" he sobbed at last. "Is he dead, mother? You never told me anything that wasn't true. He can't be dead, though Phebe says so. Is it true, mother?"

Felicita bent her head till it rested on the boy's uplifted face. His sobs shook her, and the close clasp of her arms was painful; but she neither spoke nor moved. She heard Phebe coming in, and knew that Roland's mother was there, and Hilda came to clasp her little arms about her as Felix was doing. But her heart had gone back to the moment when Roland had knelt beside her in the quiet little church, and she had said to him deliberately, "I choose your death." He was dead to her.

"Is it true, mother?" wailed Felix. "Oh, tell me it isn't true!"

"It is true," she answered. But the long, tense strain had been too much for her strength, and she sank fainting on the ground.

## CHAPTER XIX.—AUTHOR AND PUBLISHER.

It was all in vain that Mr. Clifford tried to turn Felicita from her resolution. Phebe cordially upheld her, and gave her courage to persist against all arguments. Both of them cared little for poverty—Phebe because she knew it, Felicita because she did not know it. Felicita had never known a time when money had to be considered; it had come to her pretty much in the same way as the air she breathed and the food she ate, without any care or provision of her own. Phebe, on the other hand, knew that she could earn her own living at any time by the work of her strong young arms, and her wants were so few that they could easily be supplied.

It was decided before Phebe went home again, and decided in the face of Mr. Clifford's opposition, that a small house should be taken in London, and partly furnished from the old house at Riversborough, where Felicita would be in closer and easier communication with the publishers. Mr. Clifford laughed to himself at the idea that she could gain a maintenance by literature, as all the literary people he had ever met or heard of bewailed their poverty. But there was Madame's little income of two hundred a year; that formed a basis, not altogether an insecure or despicable one. It would pay more than the rent, with the rates and taxes.

The yearly income from Felicita's marriage settlement, which no representations could persuade her to touch, was to go to the gradual repayment of Roland's debts, the poorest men being paid first, and Mr. Clifford, who reluctantly consented to the scheme, to receive his last. Though Madame had never believed in her son's guilt, her just and simple soul was satisfied and set at rest by this arrangement. She had not been able to blame him, but it had been a heavy burden to her to think of others suffering loss through him. It was then almost with cheerfulness that she set herself to keep house for her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren under such widely different circumstances.

Before Christmas a house was found for them in Cheyne Walk. The Chelsea Embankment was not then thought of, and the streets leading to it, like those now lying behind it, were mean and crowded. It was a narrow house, with rooms so small that when the massive furniture from their old house was set up in it there was no space for moving about freely. Madame had known only two houses—the old straggling, picturesque country manse in the Jura, with its walnut-trees shading the windows, and tossing up their branches now and then to give glimpses of snow-mountains on the horizon, and her husband's pleasant and luxurious house at Riversborough, with every comfort that could be devised gathered into it. There was the river certainly flowing past this new habitation, and bearing on its full and rapid tide a constantly shifting panorama of boats, of which the children never tired, and from Felicita's window there was a fair reach of the river in view, while from the dormer windows of the attic above, where Felix slept, there was a still wider prospect. But in the close back room, which Madame allotted to herself and Hilda, there was only a view of back streets and slums, with sights and sounds which filled her with dismay and disgust.

But Madame made the best of the woeful change. The deep, quiet love she had given to her son she transferred to Felicita, who, she well knew, had been his idol. She believed that the sorrows of these last few months had not sprung out of the ground, but had for some reason come down from God, the God of her fathers, in whom she put her trust. Her son had been called away by Him; but three were left, her daughter and her grandchildren, and she could do nothing better in life than devote herself to them.

But to Felicita her new life was like walking barefoot on a path of thorns. Until now she has been so sheltered and guarded, kept from the wind blowing too roughly upon her, that every hour brought a sharp pin-prick to her. To have no carriage at her command, no maid to wait upon her, not even a skilful servant to discharge ordinary household duties well and quickly—to live in a little room where she felt as if she could hardly breathe, to hear every sound through the walls, to have the smell of cooking pervade the house—these and numberless similar discomforts made her initiation into her new sphere a series of surprises and disappointments.

But she must bestir herself if even this small amount of comfort and well-being were to be kept up. Madame's income would not maintain their household even on its present humble footing. Felicita's first book had done well; it had been fairly reviewed by some papers, and flatteringly reviewed by other critics who had known the late Lord Riversford. On the whole it had been a good success, and her name was no longer quite unknown. Her publishers were willing to take another book as soon as it could be ready; they did more, they condescended to ask for it. But the £50 they had paid for the first, though it seemed a sufficient sum to her when regarded from the standpoint of a woman surrounded by every luxury, and able to spend the whole of it on some trinket, looked small enough—too small—as the result of many weeks of labour, by which she and her children were to be fed. If her work was worth no more than that, she must write at least six such books in the year! Felicita's heart sank at the thought!

There seemed to be only one resource, since one of her publishers had offered an advance of £10 only, saying they were doing very well for her, and running a risk themselves. She must take her manuscript and offer it as so much merchandise from house to house, selling it to the best bidder. This was against all her instincts as an author, and if she had remained a wealthy woman she would not have borne it. She was too true and original an artist not to feel how sacred a thing earnest and truthful work like hers was. She loved it, and did it conscientiously. She would not let it go out of her hands disgraced with blunders. Her thoughts were like children to her, not to be sent out into the world ragged and uncouth, exposed to just ridicule and to shame.

Felicita and Madame set out on their search after a liberal publisher on a gloomy day in January. For the first time in her life Felicita found herself in an omnibus, with her feet buried in damp straw, and strange fellow-passengers crushing against her. In no part of London do the omnibuses bear comparison with the well-appointed carriages rich people are accustomed to; and this one, besides other discomforts, was crowded till there was barely room to move hand or foot.

"It is very cheap," said Madame cheerfully after she had paid the fare when they were set down in Trafalgar Square, "and not so very inconvenient."

A fog filled the air and shrouded all the surrounding buildings in dull obscurity; while the fountains, rising and falling with an odd and ghostly movement as of gigantic living creatures, were seen dimly white in the midst of the gray gloom. The ceaseless stream of hurrying passers-by lost itself in darkness only a few paces from them. The chimes of unseen belfries and the roll of carriages visible only for a few seconds fell upon their ears. Felicita, in the secret excitement of her mood, felt herself in some impossible world, some phantasmagoria of a dream, which must presently disperse, and she would find herself at home again, in her quiet, dainty study at Riversborough, where most of the manuscript, which she held so closely in her hand, had been written. But the dream was dispelled when she found herself entering the publishing-house she had fixed upon as her first scene of venture. It was a quiet place, with two or three clerks busily engaged in some private conversation, too interesting to be abruptly terminated by the entrance of two ladies dressed in mourning, one of whom carried a roll of manuscript. If Felicita had been wise, the manuscript would not have been there to betray her. It made it exceedingly difficult for her to obtain admission to the publisher, in his private room beyond; and it was only when she turned away to go, with a sudden outflashing of aristocratic haughtiness, that the clerk reluctantly offered to take her card and a message to his employer.

In a few moments Felicita was entering the dark den where the fate of her book was in the balance. Unfortunately for her, she presented too close a resemblance to the well-known type of a distressed author. Her deep mourning, the thick veil almost concealing her face; a straw clinging to the hem of her dress and telling too plainly of omnibus-riding; her somewhat sad and agitated voice; Madame's widow's cap, and unpretending demeanour—all were against her chances of attention. The publisher, who had risen from his desk, did not invite them to be seated. He glanced at Felicita's card, which bore the simple inscription "Mrs. Sefton."

"You know my name?" she asked, faltering a little before his keen-eyed, shrewd, business-like observation. He shook his head slightly.

"I am the writer of a book called 'Haughmond Towers,'" she added, "published by Messrs. Price and Gould. It came out last May."

"I never heard of it," he answered solemnly. Felicita felt as if he had struck her. This was an unaccountable thing; he was a publisher, and she an author; yet he had never heard of her book. It was impossible that she had understood him, and she spoke again eagerly.

"It was noticed in all the reviews," she said "and my