

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

A BORDER STORY OF SEVENTY YEARS AGO BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

CHAPTER IV.

"This is the heir of Aldersyde."

Nature never intended Hugh Nesbit for the role of a country gentleman. It bored him to talk to his factor, or listen to the complaints from his tenants anent the damages done to crops by game. Even the sport furnished by the moors and lochs could not reconcile him to life at Aldersyde. He missed the gay companionship, pleasant excitement, and stirring activity of the old life at camp and barracks; and save that it exempted him from the drawbacks of empty pockets, he could have regretted the chance which made him Laird of Aldersyde. Disappointed in his marriage, tired of his wife, sick of the dreary routine of his life, he cast his eyes about for a means of release from the chain which bound him. The army was opened to him still, where he could enjoy life with double zest, because the revenues of Aldersyde would provide the wherewithal. What though the world commented on his desertion of his wife! She would feel nothing but relief, and they would be better apart than living unhappily together. So he reasoned and made his arrangements without consulting anybody.

The latter days of April made the world beautiful once more, and the first month of summer-time came in with balmy breath and sunshine which whitened all the hedge-rows, and surprised into bloom honeysuckle and sweetbriar in the den of Aldersyde. Before it was half gone, Hugh Nesbit announced to his wife his intention of returning to his regiment without delay, as it was being re-organized for early despatch to the Peninsula. She heard his decision with calmness, but did not appear so happily relieved as he had anticipated. She was simply indifferent whether he went or stayed.

"You will return home sometimes, I suppose?" she said listlessly.

"The chances are I shall never see Aldersyde again," he said.

"Why rejoin the army if such risks are imminent?" she asked faintly.

"Because I'm sick to death of this place," he answered rudely; "anything would be preferable to it."

There was nothing more said, and upon the morrow they parted as strangers might have parted, without a regret on either side. Ay, truly their marriage was the grand mistake of their lives.

Great was the astonishment in Aldershope and the neighbourhood when it transpired that Hugh Nesbit was off to the wars. His intention had been kept a close secret, and even Doctor Elliot only learned of his departure one evening upon coming to Aldersyde to see his daughter. His indignation knew no bounds.

"What right has he to leave you in this great house alone, to be pointed at as a deserted wife, of whom her husband tired before the honeymoon was well past?"

"The world is very bitter in its judgment, but generally correct, father," said Mary quietly; and you of all people have the least cause to marvel at any phase of my domestic affairs."

It was a direct reproach, and silenced him at once.

"You had better dismiss the servants, and come home to Aldershope, then," he said by and by.

"I prefer to remain here," she answered. "I expect Miss Nesbit to be with me a good deal; and the domestics are not mine to dismiss."

Doctor Elliot found himself set aside at every point, and did not relish it. During his nice home his thoughts dwelt upon his daughter's fragile appearance. Unless his professional eye strangely deceived him, she was already in a decline. Taking it all in all, the glory of being able to say, "My daughter, Mrs. Nesbit of Aldersyde," had its drawbacks. Ay, without doubt the wind was bending the lily, and the blast would break it on the stalk.

Miss Nesbit was much at Aldersyde—so much, indeed, that Marget began to wax indignant; for what was Windyknowe without her mistresses?

The summer waned, but no word came from the Laird. One day, having occasion to be in Melrose on some business for her cousin's wife, Miss Nesbit called at the office of Mr. Douglas the lawyer, to ask if he knew anything of his client. He looked surprised at the question.

"I had a letter yesterday, Miss Nesbit, concerning the lease of the Mains, which expires at Martinmas. He is on the eve of his departure with his regiment for Gibraltar."

"I thought he had been away before this, seeing we have gotten the word," said Miss Nesbit.

"Has he not written to Mrs. Nesbit since he left Aldersyde?" asked the lawyer bluntly.

"No. Ye wull hae guessed, I dinna doot, that their marriage has proved a mistake, Mr. Douglas."

"I have surmised as much," returned the lawyer. "It is a wise arrangement for Mrs. Nesbit to have control of her own income."

"There should be plenty for baith, aff Aldersyde," said Miss Nesbit.

"Do you remember Miss Oliphant of Yair's speech about the new Laird of Aldersyde making ducks and drakes of his inheritance before another year went by?"

"Ay, I mind," answered Miss Nesbit with a sinking heart.

"I regret to say that her prediction is likely to be fulfilled. To my certain knowledge Captain Nesbit has borrowed already to an extent which the Martinmas rents will not do much more than cover."

"That's all news, Mr. Douglas."

"To you it must be, remembering your mother's life-work," said the lawyer with true regret and sympathy. "By

the bye, the rent of the Mains is to be raised a hundred pounds, and if Lennox is unwilling to pay the place is to be advertised."

"I have heard enough for ae day, Mr. Douglas," said Miss Nesbit, rising. "As weel a'most might Aldersyde be without a Nesbit as Mains without a Lennox."

"I have seen many painful changes in families, Miss Nesbit, but none which affected me as the mournful change in Aldersyde," said the lawyer as they shook hands. "Good-bye. Give my respects to Mrs. Nesbit."

Bitter were Janet Nesbit's thoughts during her drive to Aldersyde. It was hard to think that her nearest and dearest had denied themselves ceaselessly in life, in order to redeem Aldersyde, only to provide for a spendthrift kinsman who cared no more for Aldersyde than the merest stranger could have done. If the expected heir should live, what a poor inheritance his father would bequeath to him! She had it in her heart almost to pray that Mary's child might never open its eyes on Aldersyde.

The days wore on, till the month was August; and while grain was whitening to harvest in bonnie Eddrick vale, all England rejoiced over her heroes' triumphal entry into Madrid; for it gave birth to the hope that the long, wearing disastrous Peninsular War was nearing a close.

Little news of the doings in the great busy world penetrated to quiet Aldersyde. Sometimes Dr. Elliot would bring up a rare copy of a London newspaper containing brief intelligence of the war; but though it might at any time contain the news of her husband's wounding or death, it could not rouse the lady of Aldersyde from her dreary listlessness. She was fast drifting beyond all earthly interests, and the cool, golden days of September found her confined entirely to the west bedroom, where she would lie for hours looking out upon her mother's grave.

The world had many harsh things to say of Hugh Nesbit, and nothing but pity for the sweet young wife fading away alone in Aldersyde. They would have it that she was breaking her heart over his desertion, a report for which Miss Oliphant of Yair was mainly responsible. For after calling for the lady of Aldersyde one day, she went home denouncing Hugh Nesbit in righteous wrath, and praising the gentle wife without stint.

So amid peace and quietness, ministered unto by as abiding a friend as ever woman had, Mary's life drew to its close. Miss Nesbit would try to speak hopefully at times of brighter and stronger days to come, when she would have her bairn to comfort her; but Mary always shook her head, and would say sometimes, "Your charge will not end with me, Janet; you will need to care for him as you have cared for his mother all her days."

In the first week of November, Captain Nesbit was reported wounded. The newspaper list gave no particulars; but the army surgeon wrote, as requested by the disabled soldier, to say the wound was not dangerous, and that he hoped to be sufficiently recovered to take advantage of leave at New Year.

"I should like him to come before I died," said Mary absently. "If baby lives, I have a charge to leave with him."

But what the charge was, Janet Nesbit did not hear then, nor at any other time.

December swept in with a wild snowstorm, and upon a terrible afternoon, when the world seemed a whirling mass of drifting snow, a son and heir was born to the house of Aldersyde. The poor young mother, whose life was fast ebbing, asked by and by in a whisper that the child might be brought to her. Miss Nesbit motioned the nurse from the room, and herself laid the little one in the feeble arms which could scarcely bear even so light a burden. Then she laid her arms about them both, with the firm protecting tenderness characteristic of the whole woman.

"There is no word of Hugh, yet, I suppose;" said Mary.

"No yet; but he is on his way, an' may be here the night, Mary."

"He will be too late, I doubt. Well, Janet, this is the heir of Aldersyde," said Mary with a faint tremulous smile.

"Ay, Mary."

"He is to be christened Walter Elliot, Janet. Tell Hugh I desired that to be his name."

"Take him now, Janet; his poor mother is tired already, and would fain lie down."

Tenderly Miss Nesbit laid her back on her pillows, and took the bairn in her arms.

"That's where I leave him, Janet, in your arms. You will be a mother to him, and bring him up to be a good man, so that he may bless Aldersyde when he enters it."

Only a moment Janet Nesbit paused ere she took so great a charge upon her. Then she answered solemnly, great tears standing in her faithful eyes:

"My Mary, I will."

"Speak to him sometimes about his mother, Janet; keep my memory green in his heart—that is all. Now give him back to Susan, and come here: I shall need the grip in a little while."

Miss Nesbit carried the child into the next room, signed to Doctor Elliot, and they returned together.

He saw at a glance that the end was at hand, and moving over to the bed, would have raised his daughter in his arms; but she motioned him off, and looked toward the one who had befriended her through all.

Miss Nesbit leaned over her, gripping the cold hands in her strong, warm clasp.

"The Lord can uphald in the Jordan, my Mary," she whispered bravely.

Mary smiled and closed her eyes.

Doctor Elliot strode away over to the window, with the iron entering into his soul. His one child turned from him in her last extremity, and clung to a stranger. Ay! it was a bitter retribution.

Just then there came a great knocking at the hall door, and they heard the voice of Hugh Nesbit asking for his wife. Too late! for even as his foot was upon the threshold of the door, the wind rose, and bending the lily, broke it on the stalk.

Once more Miss Nesbit performed the last offices for the dead in the west bedroom at Aldersyde. When it was over, and Mary lay with her white hands folded on her quiet breast, her faithful friend bent over the bed, and bade her a last farewell. Then she went into the adjoining room, took the child from the nurse's lap, and, wrapping a shawl about him, carried him down to the dining-room.

Some refreshments for the Laird had been hastily set on the table; but he sat with folded arms by the fire, and the repast remained untouched.

"This is your first-born son, Hugh," said Miss Nesbit, and laying aside the shawl, held him out.

Awkwardly enough Hugh Nesbit took the bairn in his arms, and looked down upon him for a moment in silence.

"I had no idea she had been ailing so long as the housekeeper tells me," he said in a low voice. "You might have written, Cousin Janet."

"Where tae?" she asked dryly.

"Well, she's rid of her wretched marriage tie now," he continued in a reckless way. "But what on earth am I to do with the child? It seems a pity, seeing what manner of father he has, that he should have lived."

"Wheesht, Hugh Nesbit," said his cousin sternly.

"Well, the servants are trustworthy, I suppose; so they must look after him," he said. "I rejoin the regiment immediately."

"Mary desired me to care for the bairn, Hugh. If ye like, I'll tak him hame tae Windyknowe, an' see tae his upbringing till ye come hame."

Hugh Nesbit looked at his cousin in perfect wonderment. He had been compelled to respect her awe, but this was an unselfishness of heart he could hardly understand.

"Do you mean to say you would undertake the entire care of a child like this, from now to an indefinite period?"

Miss Nesbit bowed her head.

"I lo'e'd his mither weel, an' I lo'e the name he bears," she said huskily.

"Well, there he is," said Hugh Nesbit, replacing the child in her arms. "You have relieved me of a considerable anxiety, cousin. I shall provide the wherewithal to feed and clothe him, of course; but do you what you like with him, train him in any creed you please, and he will grow up a better man than his father, I don't doubt. So you will have the future of Aldersyde in your own hands, cousin."

"I hardly think ye need fear for the bairn wi' me, Hugh Nesbit; but before God I pledge ye my word tae mak him my first earthly care," she said solemnly, and went away out of the room holding the child very close to her heart.

She had accepted a great responsibility, but she was not afraid. The heir of Aldersyde left in her sole care, to be trained, she prayed and hoped, in the path of uprightness, sobriety, and godliness! Oh! but it was a sweet and solemn thought.

In the evening Marget Drysdale came up to Aldersyde to enquire regarding the condition of Mrs. Nesbit. She heard the sad tidings from the lodge keeper, but went on to the house to see the heir and have a word with Miss Nesbit. The maid took her to the room where Miss Nesbit sat by the fire with the bairn on her knee. There was no light save that given by the fire; but it was sufficient to show the traces of tears on her face. Now that everything was done, she had time to dwell upon her grief.

"So Miss Mary's at peace at last," said Marget softly; "an' this is the wee heir o' Aldersyde?"

"Ay, Marget," said Miss Nesbit tremulously and put back with gentle hand the shawl from the tiny head.

"Fuir mitherless lamb!" whispered Marget tenderly.

"This is oor bairn, Marget—yours an' mine," said Miss Nesbit.

"Ay, mem; I'm thinking ye'll be mair than ever at Aldersyde noo?"

"Na, Marget; the Laird's gaun aff tae the wars again, an' I'll e gotten the bairn tae keep. As sune's the funeral's ower, I'll bring him hame tae Windyknowe."

"Od save us a', that'll be an unco handfu' for twa single weemin that never was marriet, an' ken neist tae naething about bairns," said Marget doubtfully.

"We'll hae tae learn, Marget," returned Miss Nesbit.

Marget stood quite still, looking reflectively on the fire. From the impression on her face, Miss Nesbit guessed she was not well pleased, but left her alone, knowing she would come round by and by.

"I was mindin' on the secht I've seen my guid sister an' ither folk hae. D'ye think ye could be fashed wi' a bairn givin' in yer lug mornin', none and nicht?" asked Marget grimly.

Again Miss Nesbit put back the shawl from the bairn's sleeping head, and touched Marget's gown to look at him.

"He's his mither's bairn, Marget, and was left tae me. Wull ye gar me leave him among frem folk?"

"Wha said I wantit ye tae leave him among frem folk, mem? I was only makin' bold tae think that the wullint beast aye gets the load tae draw," said Marget; then, wheeling round suddenly, she laid her rough hand on the bairn's head, her honest eyes brimming with tears. "Let him come; he'll be an ill bairn if we dinna get him warstled through some way. God bless him, an' mak him a blessin' an' a joy tae Aldersyde."

So did Marget Drysdale bind herself to the service of Miss Mary's bairn.

It was a great speaking in the country side when it transpired that Miss Nesbit had undertaken the charge of Hugh Nesbit's motherless son. Sundry wise and officious matrons bemoaned his fate, left to the mercies of a woman ignorant of the ways and needs of childhood; but the majority of the busybodies prophesied that he would find a comfortable home at Windyknowe.

Doctor Elliot was sternly displeased. He had signified to his son-in-law his willingness to take the child into his own house, and see that it was well cared for, but his offer