

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

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

CHAPTER VII.

"My cup runneth over!"

Before eleven o'clock next forenoon, Mrs. Riddell of Ravelaw came in her coach to Windyknowe. Marget showed her gingerly into the dining-room, and went to seek her mistress, who was up-stairs with the bairns.

When Miss Nesbit entered the room, she was much struck with the change in the appearance of the lady of Ravelaw. Her attire was costly, but slovenly and negligent-looking, and the freshness of her beauty was gone. Her face was thin and pallid, and wore a look of discontent and peevishness painful to witness. She rose and bowed slightly to Miss Nesbit, who, for the sake of the Laird of Ravelaw, strove to be kind and courteous to his wife.

"I regret tae see ye lookin' sae ill, Mrs. Riddell," she said gently.

"My health is wretched; my constitution has been utterly ruined by this vile Scotch climate," said Mrs. Riddell languidly.

"I presume you will guess my errand to-day, Miss Nesbit. I have come to see my niece, Mademoiselle Raynaud, and to arrange matters with you regarding her."

Miss Nesbit started. It had never occurred to her that Sandy Riddell's wife could have any claim upon Tibbie's bairn.

"Ye shall see her an' welcome, Mrs. Riddell," she said slowly; "but I hardly ken what ye mean by arrangements wi' me about her."

"Oh! that is like you Scotch; you never see what you don't want to see," said Mrs. Riddell with her unpleasantly sarcastic smile. "I have come, then, to see how often you will desire to have my brother's child brought to see you, for I do not suppose you will come to see her when she is at Ravelaw."

"I fail a' thegither tae understand ye yet, Mrs. Riddell," said Miss Nesbit quietly.

"Now you are absurd. The child ought to have been brought to Ravelaw at once, as I told Sandy. Of course you cannot afford the additional burden of another child on your limited means; besides, she could not have the rearing befitting a Reynaud, so I am quite willing to take her to Ravelaw. She will be a companion to Louis; my poor Marie, like her mother, has so poor health."

Miss Nesbit looked steadily into the face of Mrs. Riddell, and made answer low and clearly:

"Ye ask a thing utterly oot o' the question, Mrs. Riddell. The bairn is mine, left a sacred legacy by my sister. Please God, naething on earth shall part us as long as she needs my care."

Up rose the lady of Ravelaw in a towering passion. "You are a greater fool than I thought you. Woman, are you blind to the advantages she would have at Ravelaw? It—"

"A brawer hoose, finer meat an' claes, she micht hae," interrupted Miss Nesbit passionately, "but I doot she micht come tae as waeftu' an' end as her puir unhappy mither. Ye hae brocht enough trouble on my nearest an' dearest already, Mrs. Riddell, an' as sure as I stand here, I'll keep my sister's bairn awa frae ye if it can be done."

In an instant Mrs. Riddell's manner changed, and she resumed her seat.

"May I see the child?" she asked smoothly.

Miss Nesbit touched the bell, and desired Marget to bring the little one down-stairs, which she did, and placing her on the threshold of the door, retired very hastily to her own domain. In Mrs. Riddell's presence Marget was more than likely to forget discretion, so judged it best to keep out of the way.

Miss Nesbit held out her hand, and smiled at the slender little thing, who came running to her at once, but kept her eyes fixed on the face of the strange lady.

Mrs. Riddell put back her veil, ungloved her hands, and held them out to the child, saying coaxingly:

"Come, *petite*, come and kiss me!"

But Netta held back. Then Mrs. Riddell rose, and snatched her almost angrily in her arms.

"She has turned you against Aunt Honore already, *ma chère*," said she. "Come with me, *petite*, and you will have bon-bons and so many pretty things."

But the child struggled in her arms, and held out beseeching hands to Miss Nesbit, screaming as she had done the night before. Then very deliberately Mrs. Riddell administered a smart slap on the child's bare arm, and set her roughly to the floor.

"Gy! little thing, that evil temper never belonged to a Reynaud. Well, Miss Nesbit, you have your work before you. Ah! I would not have her now at any cost, she would be a perfect plague in a house. Permit me to wish you good-morning. Good-bye, little lady," she said showing her teeth in a little scornful laugh, then she flounced out of the room.

"Is she away?" asked the child in terrified tones. "I fiened, Auntie, hold me in your arms. Don't let her come in any more."

The memory of that morning never faded from the mind of Netta Raynaud, and even when she no longer feared her black-browed aunt at Ravelaw, she shrank from and disliked her most thoroughly.

Miss Nesbit drew a long breath of relief when the rolling of Mrs. Riddell's coach wheels drew away in the distance. The bairn herself had settled the matter beyond question, and again her heart was at rest.

Since Tibbie had quitted her roof-tree, Miss Nesbit had not required to work at her lace, but with the daily increasing wants of two children to provide for, she would need to return to her only means of adding to her slender

income. Whatever happened, the revenues of Aldersyde must remain untouched.

She went very quietly about it, not saying anything to Marget knowing what a grief it would be to her. She might have taken trouble by the forelock, and rendered herself unhappy with gloomy thoughts of the future, when there would be education to pay for and innumerable additional expenses; but she took the wiser way, and left the future of her bairns with the God who had never failed her yet.

Grizel Oliphant of Yair had truly washed her hands of the Nesbits, for Janet had never seen her face since the memorable day succeeding Tibbie's flight. She had heard occasionally through the Scotts that she was still the same sour, cankered old woman, and that her bodily strength was failing every day.

Dear Lady Scott, who had indeed proved an abiding friend to Janet Nesbit, came over one day to give her tender sympathy in her new tribulation, and to see the little one who had found a home at Windyknowe. From her Miss Nesbit learned that Grizel Oliphant was even then lying hopelessly ill at Yair, unattended save by her grim serving-woman.

"If ye'll gie me a seat in yer coach, Leddy Scott, I'll jist gang back tae Yair wi' ye an' see the puir auld body," said Miss Nesbit. "Marget'll mind the bairns brawly for ae night."

"My dear, I'll be more than delighted, and if you could stay with us till Friday, you will see Marjorie. We expect the Earl and her from their Sussex home for a few days before they proceed to the north for the shooting," returned Lady Scott.

"I'll see about it," Miss Nesbit answered, her heart yearning for a sight of Bonnie Marjorie, the blithe bairn she had aye loved.

Great was the consternation of the bairns when they beheld Auntie come down dressed to go away with the lady in her coach. Beyond a quiver of his red lip, Walter made no sign of his grief; but again, Netta stamped her small feet, and went into a passion of tears and crying.

Miss Nesbit took her up, and carrying her over to the window, took the little doubled-up fists out of the wet eyes, and looked gravely and sternly into her face.

"Netta, you must be quiet and good, or Auntie canna love ye ony mair. If ye mak sic a din, I'll be forced tae punish ye, an' shut ye up away frae Walter a' thegither."

The child looked into her face in mute amazement. Hitherto she had been accustomed to rule those about her, to have her own way in everything, and did not know the meaning of being punished. But there was no smile on her aunt's face: she had never seen her look so nearly angry before; and in a moment the little will was broken, and Miss Nesbit's firmness had gained the mastery. There was no more screaming or stamping, but a very woful-faced little maiden returned Auntie's kiss, and then climbed up in the window to watch her drive away.

"I'm beginnin' tae hae some inklin' o' a mither's battle, Leddy Scott," said Miss Nesbit with a smile. "I couldna hae believed it was sic an ill thing tae guide bairns."

"It takes a deal of patience, I know," returned Lady Scott. "And you are at a disadvantage, Janet; you have not the enduring mother-love to fall back on."

"I couldna lo'e them muckle mair, tho' they were my ain," returned Miss Nesbit.

Then they fell to talking in earnest about the best way to train children, a subject which was not exhausted when they reached the Brig of Yair. Miss Nesbit was set down at the door of Miss Oliphant's dwelling, and bade Lady Scott just go home. If she was not well received by her kinswoman, she would walk to Scottrigg after the moon had risen.

Even in her sick-bed, Grizel Oliphant's sharp ears had heard the coach stop at her gate, and despatched her serving-woman Lisbeth to see who it was, before Miss Nesbit had time to knock at the door.

"Hoo's Miss Grizie, Lisbeth?" asked Miss Nesbit. "D'ye think she'll let me see her?"

"Lord only kens, mem," returned Lisbeth, ushering her into the sitting-room. "She's that thrawn, there's nae leevin' wi' her. She'll no dae a thing the doctor bids her, an' whiles she'll no let me open the door till him efter he's come a' the way frae Aldershope tae see her."

"Lisbeth Harden, ye aff-pitten body," cried a shrill, wheezy voice, "how daur ye bide there clashin' tae onybody. Fesh them in whae'er they are, an' dinna staund there masca'in' me thegither."

Without more ado, Miss Nesbit, putting down her gloves and veil, went away into Miss Grizie's bedroom. There was no fire in the place—a whim of the sick woman's—though the doctor had expressly ordered it the autumn air being so keen and chilly.

Although unable to sit without the support of half-a-dozen pillows, Miss Grizie refused to lie down; and there she was, propped up against the head of the bed, with a shawl about her shoulders, and a high, stiffly-starched muslin cap on her head. Beneath its full painted border, the face was wofully thin and haggard and yellow, the long thin lips pinched and blue-looking, the bead-like eyes dim and glazed. But the old temper had not abated its sharpness a jot; for when she saw Janet Nesbit enter, she immediately went into a fit of passion.

"Hoo daur ye come here, Janet Nesbit, tae craw ower me wi' yer red cheeks and yer healthy step, when I'm oroch low on a sick-bed?" she screamed. "Get oot o' my sight! If it's my bits o' gear yer efter, or my twa three bawbees I may tell ye ance for a' ye'll no get nae o' d; an' I'm no gaun tae dee yet—I winna dee, I say, till I'm ready. I—"

She was obliged to stop through sheer exhaustion; then without ado, Janet Nesbit laid off her bonnet and shawl, and greasy to Lisbeth's amazement went over to the bed, and throwing all the pillows but one out on the floor, very deliberately took the shawl from Miss Grizie's shoulders, and laid her down in her bed. She was too weak to resist, and she believed she felt the rest grateful to her weary body, though she would not have admitted it.

Now, Miss Grizie, ye'll be still, sec. If ye're no gaun

tae dee, ye're 'akin' the surest way tae yer end, attill' up there shiverin' i' the cauld. Lisbeth, licht a spunk o' fire, my wummin; it's fair Greenland in here."

"Ye winna waste my peats, Janet Nesbit; I'm no cauld," Miss Grizie began; but Miss Nesbit took no notice of her. "I want tae ken what's brocht ye here, Janet Nesbit?" she said by and by, though in a quieter voice.

"I cam tae see ye, of coorse. Had I kent ye were ill I wad hae been afore noo. Dinna be feared," she added good humouredly, "I'm no gaun tae bide. I'll jist see the fire set, an' syne I'll be awa up tae Scottrigg."

"Scottrigg, again?" groaned Miss Grizie. "Lord deliver her frae the flesh-pats o' Egypt. Weel, I suppose ye've gotten another bairn home. Ye'd better set up a puir-house at ance."

"I'm quite wullint, if the Lord ca's me tae the wark, Miss Grizie," replied Janet cheerily. "Weel, I'll come and bide wi' ye till ye're better, if ye like. I'm a grand nurse, if ye'll but try me."

"Oo ay, ye can get roon some folk; but ye canna get roon me, Janet Nesbit," said Miss Grizie sourly. "I ken it's the bawbees; but ye'll no get them: ye needna build yer houns on that. The Kirk better deserves them than you."

"Let the Kirk get them an' welcome," smiled Miss Nesbit. "Brawly ye ken, Miss Grizie, that bawbees never entered my heid. But ye're jist the auld wife, I see, an' winna take a kindness as it's offered."

"Weel, awa ye gang up tae Scottrigg among yirls and coontesses, an' let auld Grizel Oliphant dee in peace. When she wants you, Janet Nesbit, she'll no forget tae send for ye," said the old woman grimly.

So Miss Nesbit put on her things again, and bidding her farewell, left the house, wondering, with a great pity in her heart, if she should ever look on the unhappy old woman in life again. No sooner was she out of the door than Lisbeth was ordered to carry the blazing peat back to the kitchen fire, which she did, being in great awe of her sharp-tongued mistress.

At Scottrigg, to her surprise and pleasure, Miss Nesbit found the Earl of Dribburgh and his fair young wife, they having arrived earlier than they were expected. Warmly she took the blithe bairn to her heart, looking lovingly into the happy eyes, and stroking down the sunny hair which even the dignity of wifehood and great rank could not induce to be smooth and straight on the broad white brow.

Then the Earl came forward to be introduced to the lady of whom he had heard so much; and after one look into his noble, manly face and true eye, Miss Nesbit spoke to him as a friend, because she said that Marjorie's husband was worthy of her.

A happy evening was spent in that dear home circle, and Miss Nesbit lay down in her bed, thanking God for this sunny spot in her life, and for the blessing of such true friends. Having seen Marjorie, she did not require to stay another day at Scottrigg, much as they desired it; and her heart was at home with her bairns.

"I'm the heid o' a family noo, Marjorie," she said as she tied on her bonnet, "an' hae mony claims on me. When my bairns are awa tae har es o' their ain, I'll come and bide an' help ye to bring up yours."

"All right, Janet; I'll hold you to it," laughed Marjorie, and in after years she claimed and received part fulfilment of Janet's promise. Then Miss Nesbit took her to her heart again, and prayed God to bless an' keep her aye, for she was a glint o' His ane sunshine in a weary world.

Such a welcome awaited Auntie at Windyknowe! It was worth being away to see the look of perfect content on Walter's face, and to hear, too, the more bounteous expressive joy from Netta.

"She's been a wunnerfu' guid bairn," Marget said. "Never a cheep sin' ye gaud awa."

So with gentle but firm management, Tibbie's passionate little girl might not be so ill to guide after all.

For some days Miss Nesbit heard no more of Miss Grizie's state, Doctor Eliot having ceased to attend her. Drawing very near her end, Grizel Oliphant's heart went out yearningly to Janet Nesbit, whose sweet face and tender womanly ways would have made smooth her last hours; but since she had turned her from the door, she could not humble herself to send for her again. Curious as it may seem, Grizel Oliphant's heart was not dead yet, and it clung with what tenderness it possessed to Janet Nesbit. Even in her frequent fits of anger which Janet's honest tongue had kindled, she had felt drawn towards her, though nobody, least of all Janet herself, could have guessed it. But the old woman died as she had lived, trampling down all softer impulses, and showing to the end the grim exterior which had made her so unpopular all her days.

Her last act was to scold Lisbeth for lighting the fire when she found all other means inadequate to warm the chilled frame of her mistress.

One day, about a week after her return from Scottrigg, Miss Nesbit was surprised by a visit from Mr. Douglas, who brought the news of Miss Oliphant's death the previous morning. He carried with him a document which he silently handed to Miss Nesbit for perusal.

It was the last will and testament of Grizel Oliphant of Birkenhaws, Yair; and after making mention of a legacy to Lisbeth Harden, bequeathed to her well-beloved kinswoman, Janet Hay Nesbit of Windyknowe, the house of Birkenhaws, with all gear and plenishing within its walls; also all moneys pertaining to said Grizel Oliphant, to be paid without reserve three days after her decease.

"Amounting in all to fully three thousand pounds, Miss Nesbit," supplemented the lawyer when she folded up the document with a strange expression on her face.

"I had nae expectation o' this, Mr. Douglas," she said, "I believe you; but Miss Grizie, in spite of her scant courtesy, entertained for you a very profound affection and respect. She told me the day before she died there was not one in Eunck Vale fit to hold a candle to you."

"Fair Miss Grizie," said Miss Nesbit from the depths of her heart. By and by when the lawyer had gone, she sat down in the window to realize how great a change this bequest would make in her life. Henceforth she need have