

CHOISE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

A BORDER STORY OF SEVENTY YEARS AGO BY
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BOOK I - CHAPTER III.

"Wi' mony a sigh an' sair regret,
An' grief that wadna hide,
They carried tae his lanely rest
The Laird o' Aldersyde."

The next day many callers came to offer their condolences to the Miss Nesbits in their tribulation. Among the first were the doctor's wife, gentle, delicate, little Mrs. Elliot, and her daughter Mary, whose fair beauty had won for her the name of the Lily of Aldershope. Hugh Nesbit was in the house when they came, and made himself particularly agreeable to Miss Elliot, claiming a right, he said, to renew the acquaintance begun at Aldersyde when they were children. Mary Elliot did not look as if she thought it a desirable thing to renew such acquaintance, which was very fresh in her mind still as an unpleasant memory. They did not stay long, but their silently-expressed sympathy, after the peculiar comfort administered by Miss Grizzie, was very sweet to the Miss Nesbits.

Mr. Bourhill, the minister of Aldershope, was also an early caller; but, upon beholding him coming up the avenue, Hugh Nesbit took himself off to the stables. Mr. Bourhill had ever been a dear friend and a kindly-welcomed guest in Aldersyde, and he mourned its Laird with the sincerity which was part of his nature. Like the Elliots, his sympathy, being true and deep, did not find its expression in a multitude of words. A close hand clasp for each, and a "God comfort you," spoken in rich, full tones to Miss Nesbit, told all that was in his heart.

Miss Grizzie having taken offence at Tibbie at the breakfast table, had shut herself into the south room, and was not visible when Mr. Bourhill came.

Very willingly would Tibbie also have escaped out of the room, as she never felt at ease under the glance of Mr. Bourhill's keen grey eyes; but civility demanded that she should remain at least a few minutes. But when Miss Nesbit requested him to come up to see her father, Tibbie went down to Margot in the kitchen.

I am not ashamed to write that tears came into the eyes of Mr. Bourhill when he looked upon the face of his friend. All great natures are tender of heart and easily moved.

"Truly, He giveth His beloved sleep," he said, more to himself than to Miss Nesbit. "Looking upon such perfect peace, we cannot mourn."

"No for him, only for oorsels," Miss Nesbit made answer, and turned her eyes away.

Well that she did so, for there sprang into the face of Mr. Bourhill a something deeper than the mere expression of ministerial sympathy. He had loved Janet Nesbit long, but never in his life had he found it so hard a task to hide his love from her.

"Ye'll hae heard that the new Laird of Aldersyde cam' hame last night," she said, craving his sympathy in this trial also.

"No; who is he?" he asked in quick surprise.

"My cousin, Captain Hugh Nesbit, the only son o' my father's youngest brither."

The minister heard in silence. It swept across him what a mighty change in many ways their father's death would make for the Miss Nesbits, and what a severing of the heart-strings was before them in the leaving of Aldersyde.

"May I ask, without seeming curious, what is to become of you and Miss Isabel?" he said by and by.

"There's Windyknowe, ye ken," she answered, and stopped abruptly.

Quick was the minister's ear to note the tearless bitterness in her voice. Again the longing, almost uncontrollable, came upon him to take the sorrowing, desolate woman to his great heart, and comfort her in its love. His face grew pale with the intensity of his emotion, and involuntarily he took a step toward her. But the thought of where they were, in the very presence of death, checked him, and he turned away, just in time. When Miss Nesbit brought her eyes back from the chapel of St. Mary she saw only in his face the expression of sorrowing sympathy befitting a minister conversing with a bereaved member of his flock.

"The funeral is on Thursday, at twa o'clock. We'll expect ye awhile afore that, tae conduct the service i' the hoose," said Miss Nesbit as he turned to go.

"I shall be there," he answered gravely.

"It is ten years this very day sin' ye buried my mither," she said with a wintry smile. "Ye was newly placed in Aldershope then, Mr. Bourhill, an' I was but a lassie o' fifteen."

"Time hastens on," returned the minister in a constrained manner. Then they shook hands and he went his way.

Miss Grizzie having recovered her equanimity, now appeared in the drawing-room, and could not conceal her chagrin at missing the Elliots and Mr. Bourhill.

Miss Nesbit found the presence of her kinswoman anything but a comfort during the days intervening between her father's death and burial. Courtesy demanded that she should keep her company, since Tibbie absolutely refused to do so; and though never at any time did she relish Miss Grizzie's ill-natured, gossiping talk, in her present frame of mind it was almost intolerable to her. Miss Grizzie and the new Laird did not take to each other; and there never failed to be a war of words between them, at meal-times, or when they happened to be in each other's company.

Grey and cheerless over Bourhope crept the morning of the day on which the Laird of Aldersyde was to be carried to his rest.

Miss Grizzie spent the forenoon making an elaborate toilet, while Miss Nesbit was in the kitchen instructing

Margot concerning the dinner to be prepared for the mourners upon their return from the burying-ground. Tibbie having dressed herself in her black silk gown, and adorned her graceful neck with a profusion of white net quilling, put a shawl about her, and went out with her cousin. The two were the best of friends.

At one o'clock the two Miss Nesbits and Miss Grizzie seated themselves in the drawing-room, while the Laird waited to welcome the guests below. Before a quarter past the hour, a carriage swept up the avenue, and Miss Grizzie stretched her neck round the window curtains to see to whom it pertained.

"Ye needna redden, Janet Nesbit," she said maliciously. "It's no Sandy Riddel yet—only auld Watty Scott o' Scotttrigg an' his leddy-faced son, an' Charlie Douglas the lawyer frae Melrose!"

The personage whom Miss Janet mentioned with so little respect, was no less than Sir Walter Scott, eleventh baronet of Scotttrigg and Tushiemuir. In his youth he had paid some attention to Miss Grizzie, but in the end had deserted her for Bonnie Katie Graeme, of Mosslee.

To look at her now, one would not think Miss Grizzie likely to be susceptible to the tender passion; but in her young days Grizzie Oliphant had been as romantic as any school-girl, and even yet regretted the lover of her youth.

The slim, handsome young man had developed into a portly old gentleman, with white locks and a rubicund countenance, which showed to advantage against his spotless shirt front. He had a loud, hearty voice, which even the sorrowfulness of the occasion which brought him to Aldersyde could not subdue; but the warm cordiality of the grip which he gave the Miss Nesbits left no doubt in their minds of his true sympathy for them.

Miss Grizzie rose and made him a dignified courtesy, inquiring at the same time for his health and that of his lady.

"She's weel, but faillin', like oorsel's, Miss Grizzie," said Sir Walter. "It's mony a year sin' you an' me were lad an' lass."

Very wroth was Miss Grizzie, but the occasion forbade any exhibition of temper; so she turned to speak to the son, a pleasant-faced young man of modest, unassuming manner.

Mr. Douglas, the lawyer, having made his bow to the company, retired into the eastern window, to look over sundry documents he had brought with him.

"So ye've gotten the new Laird hame, Janet, bairn," said Sir Walter. "What like a child is he? I mind wild Hugh Nesbit the elder weel."

"Did ye no see him doon the stair, Sir Walter," asked Miss Nesbit. "He was waiting in the dinin'-room."

"Margot showed us directly up," returned the baronet; "so we didna see him."

"He's a black sheep, Watty Scott, if ever there was ane," cried Miss Grizzie shrilly. "He'll mak ducks an' drakes o' Aldersyde afore anither Martinmas. Charlie Douglas, it shows hoo muckle's i' your lawyers' heids, that ye canna mend that ill entail law. I wad brawly like tae ken what richt a gomeril like Hugh Nesbit has tae tak Aldersyde ower the heid o' a dooce young wummin like Janet Nesbit?"

Miss Grizzie had suffered from the entail law herself, having had to depart out of her father's house of Pitcairn, and leave it to the tender mercies of a ne'er-do-weel cousin. Hence her ire.

"Mr. Bourhill, an' Doctor Elliot," announced Margot at the door, and the entrance of these gentlemen turned the conversation into a more general groove.

As the solemn clock hands went slowly round to the hour of two, the company in the drawing room was increased by the arrival, one after the other, of Elphinstone of Elphinstone, Hamilton of Dryburn, Haig of Berzemesyde, Kerr of Drumkerr, and many more of the county gentry, all of whom, out of respect to the family of Nesbit, came to pay their last tribute to the memory of its Laird. William Lennox, whose forbears had been in the Mains since ever there was a Nesbit in Aldersyde, represented the tenantry at the house. The rest of them were to await the funeral company outside.

When all expected were gathered together, it behoved Mr. Bourhill to read the appropriate passage of Scripture and engage in prayer, which he did with many a falter in his manly voice. When it was over Hugh Nesbit, Sir Walter Scott, and Doctor Elliot went out to the landing, while William Lennox and three of his brother tenants went upstairs and bore the coffin down and out, at the door. Then one by one the guests filed out of the drawing-room, till the women were left alone.

From the front window Miss Nesbit watched the solemn procession till it disappeared through the trees into the path leading to the loch; then she turned about, hiding her face in her hands, and went up to the empty room.

Oh, but it was empty! I think that not till we see our dead borne out at the door do we realize that we have lost them.

The mists had lowered over Bourhope, and in its shadow the lonely loch lay grey and still, save on the narrow shore, where it broke with a restless sobbing. Up the winding path to the chapel burying-ground, Miss Nesbit could see the line of black figures wending its way, bearing its burden at its head. With eyes sharpened to painful keenness, she saw them gather about the newly-opened grave and take the cords, and chafed to observe one in the hands of Hugh Nesbit, though as the nephew of the deceased it was his right. She saw Mr. Bourhill take off his hat, followed by all the rest of the company; she almost fancied she heard that awful, drear sound of the earth being shovelled on a coffin lid. She could not bear it any longer. She moved over to the door in a swift, sudden way, turned the key in the lock, and then laid herself down on the floor, not to cry, as Tibbie was doing in the lower room, but to beat down the agony which had gained the mastery at last, and which she could not bear unless aided by the God of her fathers.

In the dining-room Margot was setting the table for dinner, weeping noiselessly the while, not so much for her dead master as for his orphan heirs and Aldersyde.

Only a few intimate friends of the family returned to hear the will read, and partake of Miss Nesbit's hospitality in Aldersyde for the last time. In grim state, with her mitted hands decorously folded on her lap, sat Miss Grizzie with

red-eyed Tibbie beside her. Miss Nesbit, not feeling the near presence of her kinswoman any comfort, but rather the reverse, sat by herself in the eastern window.

Without any preliminaries, Mr. Douglas stood up and read aloud the contents of the blue document in his hand. It was very brief, merely stating that Walter Nesbit, of Aldersyde and Windyknowe, being in his sound judgment, bequeathed to his daughters, Janet Hay Nesbit and Isabel Anne Nesbit, all moneys pertaining to him, together with the furnishings of the house of Aldersyde, and all plate and jewels, and napery therein, to be equally divided between them; as also to the aforesaid Janet Hay Nesbit, the house of Windyknowe, in the parish of Aldershope, to hold for a habitation as long as she choose, but which she was at liberty to dispose of at any time without let or hinder.

The substance of the will Janet Nesbit had been acquainted with before, except the clause which made Windyknowe exclusively her own. Mr. Douglas did not deem it needful to state that the last clause had only been changed to its present reading on the day before the Laird's death.

I cannot but think that some foreboding of what the future held for his elder daughter, had impelled Walter Nesbit to secure for her the shelter of a roof-tree as long as she lived.

The contents of the will were not pleasant to Hugh Nesbit. He was standing not very far from Miss Grizzie's chair, and she saw his frown, and heard him mutter:

"The old flint made sure there would be nothing for me but the bare walls of Aldersyde."

Whereupon she exploded:

"Ye mean, graspin', black-hearted scoundrel," she said shrilly, to the no little amazement of those assembled; "ye hae gotten an inheritance without a happy o' debt on't, an' ye're no content. Ye wad tak the verra claes aff the orphans' backs. It's an ill wish, but I pray that ye mayna flourish in Aldersyde, nor hae a meenit's pleasure o' yer inheritance."

"Wheesh! Miss Grizzie!" fell from the pale lips of Janet Nesbit.

Hugh Nesbit showed his teeth in a smile which Miss Grizzie afterwards described as resembling the "grim o' a rat," and made the old lady a sweeping bow.

"Much obliged, ma'am, and I am only sorry that, this being certainly the last time that you will sit in my house, you will not have the extreme satisfaction of observing whether your courteous desire is likely to be fulfilled."

Then turning his eyes on the face of his cousin, he said suavely:

"Business being concluded, cousin, with your permission, we will retire to the dining-room, as these gentlemen, I am sure, stand in need of some refreshment after the protracted exercises in which they have engaged."

Miss Nesbit bowed, and led the way to the dining-room.

The meal passed in uncomfortable constraint, none of those present feeling inclined for sociable conversation. Sir Walter Scott was indeed so heartily disgusted with the new Laird of Aldersyde, and so overflowing with fatherly sympathy for the orphans, that his joviality was quite extinguished. Miss Grizzie sat upright in her chair, only occasionally relieving the monotony of her silence, by girmacing in the direction of Hugh Nesbit. In spite of apparent unconcernedness, that young man was far from being at his ease. Miss Nesbit did the honours of the table with her usual quiet grace; but, while studiously attending to the wants of others, she did not break her own fast.

Whenever the meal was past the company withdrew. At the door, Sir Walter came back to give Miss Nesbit another grip of the hand, and to whisper with a suspicious moisture in his eyes:

"Come ower tae Scotttrigg, Tibbie an' you, an' my Liddy Kate. I'll mak ye as welcome as her ain."

A wan smile flitted across the face of Miss Nesbit, and her eyes answered what her lips refused to do. Then she went away slowly up to the drawing-room, where sat Miss Grizzie and Tibbie. Before she had been many minutes in the room Hugh Nesbit followed her, and asked pointedly for a few minutes' private conversation with her.

"Say yer say before me, like an honest man," quoth Miss Grizzie, to which Hugh Nesbit made answer with more energy than courtesy, "Peace, you old hag!" and quitted the room before Miss Grizzie recovered from the shock.

Opposite the dining room there was a little room where the old Laird had kept his guns and fishing-tackle, and where also he had transacted business with his factor, and received his tenants on rent days. Into this apartment Miss Nesbit followed her cousin, and stood near the door waiting for what he had to say.

"I'm going off to Edinburgh to-night, cousin Janet," he said, "from whence I shall proceed early to-morrow morning to London. I wish to settle and wind up all my affairs at Woolwich, and will be back, I expect, at Aldersyde within the fortnight."

Miss Nesbit bowed her head.

"Tibbie an' me will by that time be settled in Windyknowe," she answered quietly. "Ye wull find yer roof-tree yer ain when ye come back."

There was nothing offensive in her words nor in her manner, yet they angered Hugh Nesbit, and caused his sallow face to redden:

"Look here, Cousin Janet; I want to know why you and all these county gentry look a-kance at me as if I had committed some atrocious crime, instead of simply coming to claim my own?"

Miss Nesbit lifted up her head and looked him all over.

"I feel, an' my father's friends may feel also, Hugh Nesbit, that ye might hae shown mair cousinly kind as tae Tibbie an' me than ye hae done the day. No that we need it or want it," she said with a sudden pride in her voice. "It's o' the new Laird they dinna draw tae; it's the man." Then Miss Nesbit went away out of the room, and left him to digest her plain-spoken words.

By six o'clock Aldersyde was left in the possession of the women folk. Round the drawing-room hearth in the fire-light sat Miss Grizzie and the two Miss Nesbits. Fain, fain would they have been alone this one night; but since Miss