

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

A BORDER STORY OF SEVENTY YEARS AGO BY
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CHAPTER VI.

"Thy will be done."

The child was asleep. With trembling fingers Miss Nesbit put back the shawl from its head, and looked upon its face. It was perfectly featured, but dark in hue, and strongly resembling the face Miss Nesbit remembered well—that of Louis Reynaud. Long dark lashes swept the exquisitely rounded cheeks, and dark hair curled about the brow in a wild disorder of ringlets.

There was nothing about the little one which could recall the fair young mother to the mind of the sister who had loved her so well; yet she bent low over it and laid her quivering lips to its brow, Walter looking on wonderingly the while. Then she rose, motioned to him, and went away to the kitchen, where Marget was having her quiet greet to herself.

"Here, Marget; there's the bairns. Keep them by ye till I speak tae the Laird o' Ravelaw," said Miss Nesbit, and placing her sleeping burden in Marget's arms, went back to the dining-room.

"Sit down, Janet," said Sandy Riddell, offering her a chair.

"Tak it yersel'," she said wearily; "I maun stand while I hear what ye hae tae tell."

"Well, I can be brief," he said. "I reached Paris safely, and without much interruption considering the state of the country. I had Isabel's address, and found her at once."

He paused a moment there, as if not liking his task.

"I found her very ill—dying, in fact—but in the care of a good, kind-hearted woman, who looked after her and the children as if they had been her own."

"Children!" echoed Miss Nesbit.

"There were two. One had only been born a few hours when I arrived; but he did not survive the night. The doctor said I might see Madame Reynaud at once if I liked, for she could not live many hours. She was perfectly conscious, and knew me at once. Her first question was, had I brought you, Janet. I would have given a world to have been able to say yes. She asked me eagerly how you were, and if you had forgotten or forgiven her. Poor Isabel! she wept sure when I said you were making ready for her at Windyknowe."

"What did she look like?" asked Miss Nesbit.

"A trifle older and thinner, perhaps, but just as fair as she was when she was the Flower of Yarrow," returned the Laird, using a name which had been Tibbie's when they were boys and girls together. "I stayed with her as much as I was permitted; she seemed happier when I was by. I never was a great friend, Janet; only mine was the 'kent face in the strange land.' I promised her faithfully to bring the child home to you. She had got this nurse person to promise to journey to Scotland with the child when she died; but it was more satisfaction to her, of course, to leave her charge with me."

"She died two days later, ye say?"

"Yes—quietly and painlessly," said the Laird with a gentleness and sympathy marvellous to see in him. "She said you would find all her last messages, everything you wanted to know, in this packet, which she wrote before she became ill in case of a fatal issue. The nurse was to bring it also, to explain her presence and convince you of the identity of the child."

Miss Nesbit took the packet from his hands, and there was a moment's silence.

"Ye wad remunerate the kind Christian soul, of course?" she said then.

"I did."

"Tae what extent, might I spier? an' what ither expenses did ye incur on Isabel's account?" asked Miss Nesbit quietly.

"Janet, will you deny me that mournful satisfaction?" asked Sandy Riddell reproachfully.

She understood him at once, and coloured slightly, for her pride was strong within her.

"The little one yonder," said the Laird of Ravelaw, motioning in the direction of the kitchen, "will find ways and means to use your superfluous bawbees. What I did for Isabel was very little. Cannot you let it pass, Janet?"

Then Janet answered back simply and gracefully, "Let it be as ye will," and added, "Is that a'?"

"Yes; only I would like to say that from what I could gather from Isabel, I do not think Reynaud and she lived very unhappily together," said Ravelaw. "And she seemed to be in comfortable quarters. They had been living in a chateau near Versailles, till he was drafted into a regiment; then he brought her to Paris, thinking she would be safer. She seemed to feel his death; but I have no doubt the packet will explain everything. Well, Janet, I will go now. Another day, perhaps, you will admit me to Windyknowe to see the little one—she has learned to call me Uncle already. You'll not grudge me 'ha', surely?"

"Surely no," returned Miss Nesbit with a faint smile.

"I thank ye since mair, Sandy Riddell, an' though my words are few, I am none the less grateful. What ye hae done for me an' mine, I can never hope to repay."

"Hush, Janet! I wish I could have brought her back to you," said the Laird of Ravelaw passionately.

"It wadna the Lord's will, ye see," she returned in a low voice. Then their hands met in a fervent grip.

The Laird went away home to his peevish, ill-tempered wife and ill-guided home; and Miss Nesbit betook herself to the kitchen to see what her bairns were about. When she went in at the door, she could almost have smiled at the picture presented on the wide hearth. The little stranger was awake, and having permitted Marget to remove all

her wraps, now stood on the floor, finger in mouth, eyeing Walter, who was looking at her with mingled love and awe on his face.

"Weel, Marget?" said Miss Nesbit.

Very downcast indeed was the face of Marget Drysdale at that moment.

"I'm just wunnerin', mem, whaur the Lord's gane, that ye should hae sae mony heartbreaks?" she said sharply. He should ken weel ye had nae need o' anither aue."

"Wheesh, Marget; I can say His will be done," said Miss Nesbit gently. "He kenneed what a grateful heart I wad hae uplifted to Him, had He seen fit tae let me look on her face again. But His way's the best, an' we hae the bairn, an' mauna grumble."

While Miss Nesbit was speaking, the little stranger had been eyeing her intently, and now as if drawn by some magnet, came to her, clinging to the folds of her gown, and lifting pleading eyes to her sweet face.

Miss Nesbit gave a great start, for the eye's were Tibbie's—the very blue depths which had been as changeful in their loveliness as the summer sea. With a great sob she lifted the child to her heart, feeling almost as she used to feel long ago, when Tibbie had been a timid, toddling thing, aye looking for protecting care from her motherly elder sister.

Then Walter, with shadowing eyes, crept over to her, and touching her gown, said in a frightened, pleading voice, as if he dreaded he was no longer "Auntie's pet."

"Auntie?"

Then with her other arm Miss Nesbit drew him to her side, feeling in the deepest depths of her heart what a thing it was to have these two young lives dependent on her, turning to her, and looking up to her for guidance in all things. A mother, and yet no mother! Surely never had woman been so strangely placed before. In that moment, the shadows seemed to roll away from what had been to her an inscrutable past, and the "wherefore" of many things was made plain to her. Well might she say in her heart, God help me! She would need all His help.

"Weel, Marget," she said cheerfully, "we micht as weel hae been mairre, you an' me, when oor family's growin' sae fast. My certy, we'll be keepit lively noo."

"I wunner wha's bairn'll come next?" said Marget, who had not yet got the better of her disappointment.

"We dinna ken that, Marget, but we'll open the door tae them, kenna' the Lord'll send ony mair without providin' for them. Come, get on the kettle, my wummin, an' get Tibbie's bairn something tae eat. Are ye no hungry, my pet?" Miss Nesbit added, longing to hear the little one speak.

"No, no, I want Uncle," lisped the bairn, to Miss Nesbit's great joy speaking good English, though the foreign accent was marked.

"He'll come another day, my pet. Come, Walter, an' speak tae her. I dinna ken what her name is yet," said Miss Nesbit, and set the little one down, whereupon she stamped her feet, and screamed in a perfect passion.

"Lord hae mercy on us! She's surely French," said Marget. "A Scotch bairn never yelled like that."

"I doot she'll no be as easy tae bring up as Walter was," said Miss Nesbit, trying to quiet her. "But she'll be tired, likely. We'll better ken what mainer o' a bairn she'll be the morn'."

By and by, the supper past, and both the little ones in bed—Walter in his crib, and the stranger in Miss Nesbit's bed—she sat down by them in the dim lamplight and opened out the packet she was longing and yet afraid to read. It was written carefully and clearly, though blotted here and there, as if Isabel's tears had been falling while she wrote. Thus it ran:—

"RUE ALBOIS, PARIS, June, 1815.

"MY SISTER,—For the first time since I scrawled the few words I left behind at Windyknowe, I lut my pen to write to you. Before I begin, let me pray you to forgive my long neglect. It was not willing on my part, for my heart has daily broken for you since I left you. I can hardly hope—and yet I do hope, knowing what you are—that you still love the wayward, erring being who so ill repaid all your love, and deceived you as I did up to the very hour of my flight; but for that and other sins I have borne my punishment. To begin at the beginning, Janet. All my days I had a longing after a life very different from ours at Aldersyde. I aye loved fine dresses, and jewels, and all the things money can buy, and used to be so sick of our poverty that I could hardly live. When we went to Windyknowe, it was worse; and I used to be afraid, I felt so desperate and wicked sometimes. So when Mrs. Riddell and her brother made my acquaintance, I was quite ready to be made much of by them, for I never had your high-souled pride, Janet: as you said once, I was aye a poor Nesbit. From the first, Louis Reynaud had a power over me, he was so different from any man I had ever seen. He was so handsome, and his talk was so fascinating, that when he began to make love to me my head seemed to be dazzled. But I knew well enough that the feeling I had for him was not a right one—not the love which makes the happiness of married life.

"Both of them did their best to feed my wicked discontent, but it was Mrs. Riddell first who whispered to me, when I was at Ravelaw, that I had a way of escape from your tyranny and the dreariness of Windyknowe. I had only to say the word, and Louis would take me away and make me an adored wife, the mistress of a splendid establishment, and give me my heart's desire—plenty of luxury and quiet and pleasure.

"Ay, Janet, they called your dear, faithful love tyranny; and I believed them, and turned traitor to you. I can't think what they wanted me for, for I had no tocher; but since, I have been convinced that it was revenge on Mrs. Riddell's part for your treatment of her, and the coolness of her reception by other folk in the country side. She knew it would be a blow to many besides you when I ran away.

"Well, they arranged all the plans, and I agreed, even with sore misgivings in my heart. I suppose you would hear that I was married at Gretna, for I know you would sift it to the bottom. I have often pictured to myself your

look when you came home from Mary's bridal that night and found me away. Oh, Janet, though I have tried to shut it out, your face will rise up before me—never in anger, but white, and drawn, and troubled as I have seen you look before. Let me hurry on, for I am like to break down.

"We stayed in London awhile; and I saw Mary there, as she would tell you. Then Louis was called home, and we went away to France. Instead of the magnificent castle they had promised me, I found my home a ruined old chateau at Versailles; instead of the retinue of servants, one deaf old Frenchwoman who did not know a word of English. My husband had no money, except what was made at gaming-tables; and there were days, Janet, when I knew what it was to be hungry, and not have a bite to eat.

"I had to work, too—oh, if Marget could but see my hands now! I was proud of them once, but never mind. Louis had expected some money with me, and was constantly desiring me to write and tell you to send my half of the income. But if he had killed me, I would not have done that, and he began to learn that I could be obstinate too.

"Perhaps that will let you know what treatment I had at his hands. I need not enlarge upon it: he was my husband, and he is dead. Let the matter rest. But oh, that I could speak to the inmost soul of every Scottish maiden, and bid her make her home in her own country, and marry one of her own nation! There cannot be happiness when ways and tastes and habits are so far apart as the French are from the Scotch.

"In time my baby was born. But for her, well, I should not be alive to-day. She was my very life, my all—my solace in home-sickness, in heart-yearnings for you, in sorrows of which I cannot write. Her name is Janet, but I called her Netta—that is the name she knows. She has received no baptism. When she comes home to Windyknowe, get Mr. Bourhill to christen her by the name which is engraven on my heart. I pray God, as I write, that she may grow up something like the one whose name she bears.

"Well, I am nearly done. I am very frail in health, and will not survive the birth of my second child, I know. I hope it will die with me also. I have with me here in Paris a faithful soul, Marie Loufrois, a comparative stranger to me, but who has shown me as much kindness as I could have experienced among my own country-women. She has promised, and will perform what I ask her, to take Netta home to Scotland when I am gone. You will see that she does not go unrewarded.

"And now, my sister, best of friends, dear, dear Janet, just one little word about my bairn and I will finish. Take her to your heart, if not for my sake, for the sake of those who lie in the chapel-yard of St. Mary. As I write these words, what memories throng about my heart! But I must not give way. I darestay you will know how I feel. When she grows to be a woman, tell her as much of her mother's life-story as you think fit; it may be a warning to her.

"I cannot say anything to you, Janet, for my heart fails me. Not on earth do such as you have their reward; but if there be a God, surely He prepares a recompense for those who serve Him as you do. Pray for me, Janet. Perhaps in some far-off time we may meet in a happier world, where the agonies of earth are forgotten.

"I feel very dark; it is so long since I have heard of holy things, or read a Bible. This is a terrible heathen land, where God is forgotten altogether, and each one lives for himself and this world. But I remember father used to read from the Book at Aldersyde, that Christ died to save sinners, and that though our sins were red like crimson, they should be made white as snow. I am trying humbly to trust in these words; perhaps at eventide there may be light for me.

"Good-bye, Janet, my sister. Oh, the love with which I write down these words, you will never know! Keep a little corner in your heart for Tibbie, and when you look at Netta, remember her mother only as she was when she was like her—that is all I ask.

The paper fluttered from Miss Nesbit's hands to the floor, and her head fell upon her breast. At that moment there was in her heart a very different feeling from that which had prompted her gentle "God's will be done" little more than an hour ago.

All her life Janet Nesbit remembered with horror those minutes in that quiet, dimly-lighted room, beside the unconscious sleeping children. She tottered to her feet by and by, lowered the lamp, and went over to the window. The sky was dark and lowering, the moon hidden by slow-hanging clouds; only right above the chapel of St. Mary shone, clear and bright, a solitary star.

It was a curious thing how that trivial incident went straight to the heart of the stricken woman who looked out into the night. It seemed to her a direct message from above. She fell down upon her knees, a wild rush of tears blinding her eyes, and stretching out her hands, these words fell from her lips in a low, sobbing cry.

"Lord, forgive; it is past Thy will be done!"

Then there came a great peace.

(To be continued.)

HOME BOOKS.

As we live now, it becomes a distinct object to wean young people from children's books, and teach them to feed themselves from the stores of general literature. They are to leave of the corks and other life-preservers, and swim in the ocean. At the same time, however, we choose a beach where there is no undertow, and where the current does not set off shore.

Reading aloud in the family circle is almost sure to interest even the youngest people about what is read, if you have made your selections wisely. But, without relying upon that, a well-ordered household ought to be always tempting children to read men and women's books; and in the purchase of books and other family arrangements such temptations should be one of the first considerations.

To speak of a mere detail, which, however, illustrates a principle, there should never be glass or other doors to a bookcase. No binding should be too good for us, and