

CHOISE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

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

BOOK I.—CHAPTER IV.

"Gin ye be wyse, ye'll pit yer trust
In a' the fickle winds that blaw,
Afore ye lippen tae the wuid,
O' faithless Riddell o' Ravelaw."

In the window of her own sitting-room, which looked out upon a wide expanse of rich pasture land, sloping gradually down to the Ettrick, sat my lady of Ravelaw. Her white and slender hands, on which sparkled many gems, were crossed upon her silken lap, and her fair face wore an expression of deep seriousness. She was young still, and very fair to be a widow and the mother of a six-foot son. She had been a wife at seventeen, and a mother before she was twenty.

Slight and fragile of form, my lady was yet a very haughty and formidable person, being descended from the old and honourable house of Arngask. The wealth and goodly dwelling-place of rough Sandy Riddell had tempted the penniless daughter of the Napiers, grown tired of the genteel poverty of Arngask; and with the reluctant consent of her proud kinsfolk, she had come to reign at Ravelaw.

For ten years Sandy Riddell and his wife lived stormily together, till the unhappy wedlock was ended by death, when their heir and only child was eight years old. Since that time Mrs. Riddell had lived an easy luxurious life; but she was beginning to have her cares again, for Sandy had grown to manhood, and she was in daily fear of becoming the dowager Mrs. Riddell, and of beholding a young wife in her place at Ravelaw.

It was indeed this very subject which made her so serious this November morning, one week after the burying of the Laird of Aldersyde. She had heard it rumoured in her own circle even, that her son was paying unmistakable attention to Miss Nesbit. Knowing the nature of the girl, she trembled, and the instability of the Riddells was her only hope. Sandy Riddell did not confide all his goings out and comings in to his mother; therefore, although she was aware that he had not attended the funeral of the Laird, how was she to be sure that he had not seen Miss Nesbit a dozen times since? It entered into her head suddenly, that she could not do better than ask her son a plain question; therefore she rang the bell, and ordered the servant to request the Laird to step into her sitting-room.

He obeyed the summons with unusual promptitude, because at the moment he had no other thing engrossing his attention. He came lounging into his mother's presence, with his hands in his pockets, and enquired carelessly what she wanted of him. He was a great, powerful giant, with a ruddy well-featured face, big blue eyes, and a mass of lustrous hair. His physique was faultless, yet it was easy to see that nature had not endowed him with a large share of her higher gifts. He was not a man, one would think, likely to win the heart of a pure, high-souled maiden like Janet Nesbit; yet won it he had, away from a man who would have prized it above any earthly thing, and who was undoubtedly worthy of her in all ways. It is not a good thing to sit down and dwell upon such twists in the cord of life. To our narrow comprehension, they seem needless and inscrutable; but when we reach the fuller light beyond, we shall see how what we thought jarring discord was after all deep, sweet-toned harmony.

"Have you been at Aldersyde to see Miss Nesbit since her father died?" asked the lady of Ravelaw, fixing her piercing eyes on her son's face.

His full red lips parted in a curious smile.

"No, mother, I have not."

She looked for the moment as if she disbelieved him, yet she knew enough of him to be sure he would not tell an untruth to spare her mortification.

"I am very glad to hear it," she said heartily. "Then there is no truth in the rumour that I would need to welcome her as mistress of Ravelaw?"

Sandy Riddell laughed a laugh which might mean anything.

"Were you afraid of it mother?"

"Yes," she answered candidly. "Knowing you were often at Aldersyde, and that she is not one of these light-headed things a man might find amusement in playing with, I had made up my mind to it."

Mrs. Riddell did not guess that it was the very fact of her being so unlike other girls that had caused the pastime of making love to her to be so enjoyable to Sandy Riddell. No woman in the world ever thought less of lovers or marriage than Janet Nesbit, therefore her treatment of all young men was, though courteous, very cool and indifferent. This piqued the Laird of Ravelaw; it annoyed him to find one of the daughters of Ettrick Vale quite unimpressed by his charms. So he set himself in earnest to break down the barriers of her indifference. It had been a hard task. She had taken a very long time to discover that he was making love to her; and after the discovery was made, her own heart had awakened very slowly. He had succeeded well, and now she believed herself pledged to him, though there never had been any formal troth plight between them.

There are engagements which are not the outcome of a plain request to marry; also there are looks and actions, and a thousand indefinable things which constitute as perfect an understanding as any words that ever were uttered. To all these Sandy Riddell had confined himself, and to Janet Nesbit they seemed sacred and binding. It was the difference in their natures which caused them to estimate so differently.

"Janet Nesbit will never be mistress of Ravelaw," said Sandy Riddell.

My lady breathed freely to hear the decided words, yet she desired to be at the bottom of the whole matter.

"I doubt you have led her to expect it, Sandy, if all rumours be true?" said she.

"What has Mistress Rumour not said about me, mother?" he asked in his easy, careless way. "You may set your fears about Miss Nesbit at rest; she's not the wife for me. I'd rather have the other one, if I had to choose." Mrs. Riddell took fresh alarm.

"If it's to be one of them, let it be Janet, Sandy; I couldn't think to see that saucy, fair-faced Isabel Nesbit mistress of Ravelaw."

"She'd make you turn right about face, eh, mother?" asked Sandy with a mocking smile. "Well, if you have no more questions to ask, I'll be of to the meet at Drumkerr; I promised Patrick Kerr to be over by eleven."

"I am satisfied, my son, only remember that I want you to take a wife who will do honour to Ravelaw. I would have no objections to Patrick Kerr's sister Susan, for instance, or to Marjorie Scott of Scottrigg."

"Marjorie Scott won't look at me, mother, and Susan Kerr is a big, rough young woman," returned Sandy in his coarse way. "Well, good-day; and don't make any matches for me, mother. I'll marry when the Spirit moves me, and bring home whoever I take a fancy to, though she should be a peasant lass herding her ewes on the braes of Ettrick," with which polite and consoling assurance the Laird of Ravelaw departed out of the presence of his lady mother.

For awhile she sat cogitating on what had passed; then he called her serving-woman, Rebecca Ford, and bade her order the coach to drive to Aldersyde. Then Rebecca had to attire her mistress in a very stiff silk gown, made in the newest and most expensive fashion, a sable cloak of priceless value, and a bonnet with nodding plumes. Also, Mrs. Riddell did not forget to adorn herself with sundry articles of jewellery likely to inspire awe and envy in the minds of poor young women like the Miss Nesbits.

The family coach of the Riddells was a very cumbersome affair, of a genteel claret-colour, with the Ravelaw crest, an uplifted sword in a mailed hand, painted on the panels of the doors. The inside was comfortably cushioned in drab epp, with claret coloured buttons and braidings. It was drawn by a pair of very fine, high-stepping greys, which accomplished the distance to Aldersyde in less than an hour. It was noon when they swept through the lodge gates and up the avenue to the house. The Miss Nesbits being busily engaged with their one domestic in packing their goods prior to their removal to Windyknowe, did not observe its approach till a loud and pompous knock at the front door awoke sounding echoes in the quiet house.

Margaret very hastily made her hair straight, and putting on a clean apron, went with no very good grace to answer the summons. She was rather chagrined to behold alighting from the coach the magnificently-attired lady of Ravelaw, particularly when, at that moment, the Miss Nesbits, in the plainest, homeliest garb, were performing the work of menials up-stairs. But there was nothing for it but to show my lady up to the drawing-room, and announce her arrival to Miss Nesbit.

Janet's face flushed deep red, and she retired immediately to her own chamber to remove her white apron and wash her hands. She had to go down alone, Tibbie requiring first to attire herself in her best gown before she could appear before the lady of Ravelaw.

Mrs. Riddell rose up when Miss Nesbit entered the room, and approaching her with outstretched hands and sympathetic smile, kissed her on the brow. To Janet's mind such treatment, coming from the mother of the man she loved, could have but one meaning.

"My dear Miss Nesbit, you look wretchedly ill," said Mrs. Riddell sweetly. "This has been a sad and trying time for you."

"Yes, Mrs. Riddell," answered Miss Nesbit very low.

"How is your sister?" was the next question.

"Isabel is well; she'll be soon by an' by. We're very busy, Mrs. Riddell, makin' ready tae flit tae Windyknowe."

"Oh yes, I understand. Your cousin, of course, will take up his abode in Aldersyde. You will feel to leave the only home you have ever known."

"It's tae be expectit that we couldna leave without feelin', Mrs. Riddell," said Miss Nesbit somewhat sharply, the words seemed to her so needless.

A silence fell upon the two women then. A ray of sunshine stole in at the narrow window, and set a blaze the rubies clasping the cloak of my lady of Ravelaw. It also shone very tenderly on the pale face of Janet Nesbit. Looking at her, Mrs. Riddell could not but think what a sweet, lovable, thorough gentlewoman she looked, even in a gown her serving-woman would not have deigned to wear.

"You would wonder at Ravelaw's absence from the funeral?" said Mrs. Riddell abruptly.

"Mair than me wondered, Mrs. Riddell," Miss Nesbit made answer bravely, though the red dyed her cheek.

"He was very sorry, Miss Nesbit, that a previous engagement at Kelso prevented him, and he bade me convey to you his respects and apologies."

Mrs. Riddell had learned her lesson in polite falsehood-telling very well, for her lips uttered the words glibly and unconcernedly.

Miss Nesbit sat straight up in her chair, and looked her visitor in the face with calm, scornful eyes.

"He rode to the hunt at Pappertlaw on that day Mrs. Riddell," she said quietly.

For the moment the lady of Ravelaw was put out, but as behoved a woman of the world, she recovered her equanimity.

"You are well informed, it seems, even is this solitude," she said smoothly. "Well, Miss Nesbit, I believe the truth to be, that the Laird, remembering certain foolish words he may have uttered to you, as is the way of young men with maidens, would not care to intrude upon you in your sorrow, knowing he could not in anyway comfort you."

Surely Mrs. Riddell's native tact had failed her, when she could make such a blundering speech.

"Did the Laird o' Ravelaw bid ye come an' tell me that, Mrs. Riddell?" inquired Miss Nesbit in clear, cold tones. "Well, not exactly," said my lady with a smile. "But we were talking of you this morning, and I asked him if there was any truth in the rumours that you were likely to become mistress of Ravelaw."

"Weel, Mrs. Riddell?"

"The young man laughed, Miss Nesbit, and answered no. Had you not been of so proud and reticent a nature, I would have ventured to warn you against settling store by anything a Riddell may have said. You remember the old rhyme concerning them?"

Miss Nesbit felt her face grow ashen grey, as if all the blood had fled from it, to gather about her heart, and make it faint within her. But she kept her clear eyes on the smooth face of the woman before her, and said in tones which her pain made sharp and strained: "An' what brings ye here the day, Mrs. Riddell?"

"To tell you that I, his mother, am sorry for you, Miss Nesbit; for whatever Ravelaw may have said to you, he has no intention of making you his wife. I had it from his own lips not many hours ago."

Miss Nesbit's lips parted in a bitter smile.

"Ye'll be glad that a penniless dochter of the Nesbits will never get the chance tae reign at Ravelaw, Mrs. Riddell?" said she.

The lady of Ravelaw was nettled by the young woman's half-scornful and wholly calm demeanour.

"Well, since you take it for granted that such are my feelings," she said sharply, "I do think that Ravelaw might bring home a bride whose dower and name would do more honour to his own."

"Aldersyde ewes grew fat on Yarrow braes afore there was a Riddell in Ravelaw or a Napier in Arngask," said Miss Nesbit in a slow dry way. "An' for honour, it wadna be ill tae match the honour o' Ravelaw in mony a lowlier biggin' than Aldersyde. I'll bid ye guid-day, Mrs. Riddell wi' mony thanks for this kind and well-meant visit. If ye'll be pleased tae sit a meenit, I'll bid my servant show ye doon the stair."

Mrs. Riddell, however did not choose to wait for Margaret, but rose at once and got away down to her coach, where she had time to digest the insults she had received from the penniless daughter of the Nesbits. It was many a day since the proud dame had been so humbled, and had felt so wretchedly insignificant among all her splendour.

Coming out of the drawing-room, Miss Nesbit encountered Tibbie in the corridor, dressed in her best, and looking very fair.

"Is that Mrs. Riddell away, Janet?" she exclaimed in extreme surprise, "an' me just comin' to speak to her?"

Answer good or bad Miss Nesbit made none, but passed by her sister, and entered the room where *father* had died. She locked the door after her, and walking unsteadily over to the bed, sat down by it and buried her face in the pillow. So long did she remain there, that Tibbie and Margaret began to feel alarmed as well as astonished. By and by, when it was getting near the early tea-time, Tibbie crept to the door, and knocked softly.

"Let me in, Janet?" she pleaded. "Then Miss Nesbit opened the door and bade her enter."

"What is it, Janet?" cried she in affright, her sister looked so unlike herself.

"I ha'e been at the burial o' dead hopes, Tibbie," she said with a wintry smile. "Like other burials, it is sair tae thole. But its past. I dinna need tae tell ye mair, Tibbie."

"No, for Tibbie understood, and all the hot blood of the Nesbits rushed to her face, and she clenched her slender hands together, and was only restrained from indignant speech by the look on Janet's face. She made no moan, therefore Tibbie also must be silent. Miss Nesbit's one love affair ended here, and having faced the tribulation bravely, and mastered it at the first, she was ready to take up her life and live it as became a Christian woman and a daughter of the house of Aldersyde.

(To be Continued.)

VISIT TO A RUSSIAN CONVENT.

HOLY MOUNTAINS.

On the bank of the Donets River, in the Province of Khar-koff, there is a high, chalky mountain, white as snow, whose shape reminds the beholder of an enormous temple, crowned with a pinnacle. Upon a slope on the side of the mountain stands a convent whose shining gilt domes rise above the majestic old oak trees that surround it. This is the convent of the Holy Mountains. It was established by Russian monks in the twelfth century, when the place was in possession of the Tartars. The monks lived in catacombs connected by a subterranean passage with the river. In the Russian chronicles the convent was known as the one "beyond the frontier." Many Christian hermits were murdered there by the Tartars. At length the holy fathers determined to defend themselves. They obtained cannon and other arms, and repeatedly saved not only themselves, but also many Russian prisoners, from the Tartars. In the course of time, when the Muscovite Czar's conquered the Tartars, the convent became a sacred asylum for all who were persecuted by the Czar's authorities. Runaway peasants, Cossacks and even rebellious Boyards found a safe abode there. By order of the Czar the monks were dispersed, and the convent was abolished. During the present century the convent has been re-established, but the catacombs, left alone for four centuries, were quite forgotten until about twenty years ago, when they were accidentally discovered. They have since been cleared.

On entering the convent I noticed everywhere well-fed and well-dressed monks idling about. "How unlike these men are to those who centuries ago dug these catacombs and with swords in their hands fought against the Tartar hordes," I said to myself. I gave a hint of my thought to an intelligent monk whose acquaintance I made.

"Don't do us injustice," he answered. "Times are