

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

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

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Presently Tibbie, having made good use of her time, returned to the room dressed, ready for her journey, and the visitors rose.

Marget had carried out her young lady's bag to the coach, exchanged a civil good-day with the stately individual in bottle-green livery on the box, and stood ready to show the company out.

But Miss Nesbit herself came to the door, and bade them all a hearty farewell. When she returned to her deserted hearth, she wondered why her heart should be so heavy, when it ought to have been lightened by the loving kindness of these true friends.

Early on the morrow she went away down to Aldershope, to see about getting Mary Elliot up to Windyknowe. At the manse gate she met Mr. Bourhill, and told him her errand. In spite of what had been between them, there never was any constraint in their manner toward each other. Having buried the past they were indeed friends. I am aware that some scout the idea of such a friendship—Platonic, as it is called—in these days; but I, who have seen it in life, hold that it is the most beautiful and perfect of any friendship.

Mrs. Elliot's maid showed Miss Nesbit up to the drawing-room, and went for her mistress. But it was Mary who returned to greet the visitor, and upon her entrance Miss Nesbit was struck by her exceeding paleness.

"Mother is not well. You will come up and see her, Janet?" said Mary in her gentle way.

"Ay; hae ye been up a' the nicht tae, lassie? Ye dinna look very brisk."

"When the heart's sore it's not easy to look well, Janet. But come away up to mother: she will be impatient," said Mary, and without further talk they proceeded up-stairs.

Mrs. Elliot was sitting in her dressing-gown by her chamber fire, looking very worn and ill; yet she stretched out her thin hand to Miss Nesbit with the old smile of welcome.

"I'm vex't tae see ye lookin' sae ill, Mrs. Elliot," said Miss Nesbit. "Mair especially as I cam thinkin' tae get Mary back tae Windyknowe wi' me, Tibbie bein' awa tae Scottrigg for Christmas."

"My dear, you will certainly get Mary. I'm not that ill but what I can do without her, I'll need to learn to want her," said Mrs. Elliot with a heavy sigh. "Mary, my dear go and get your things together; I would speak a little with Janet."

"Yes, mother," said Mary, in a very willing voice, and whenever the door closed upon her, Mrs. Elliot stretched out her hand to Miss Nesbit as if seeking her help, and burst into tears.

"Oh, Miss Nesbit, my poor Mary!"

"What ill has happened, or is gaun tae happen, tae Mary, dear Mrs. Elliot?"

"The worst thing that can happen tae a woman," she answered mournfully; being forced to give her hand without her heart. In plain words, Mary is to marry your cousin, Hugh Nesbit of Aldersyde, whom I believe she dislikes above mortal man."

"Oh, wha's gaur tae force her intae such an unholy marriage, without affection or respect, Mrs. Elliot?" asked Miss Nesbit sharply.

"Her father."

No more would the loyal wife say. Whatever were her thoughts of him, they would not be uttered, even to Janet Nesbit.

"Hugh Nesbit an' your Mary are no weel matched Mrs. Elliot."

"It will be her death, poor, timid, sensitive thing as she is. But I can't make her father see it. He thinks only of the honour it will be to have his daughter lady of Aldersyde. It is a sad thing, Miss Nesbit, when a man values the pomp of the world above the happiness and well-being of his child."

"Is Mary submittin' tae this sacrifice o' herself without a murmur?" asked Miss Nesbit.

"You know her gentle nature, Janet, and she has been brought up to obey her father in all things. Besides, what would the protestations of two frail women avail against such a will as Dr. Elliot's?"

Miss Nesbit had nothing to say; such an argument was unanswerable.

"What may be Hugh Nesbit's aim in this, Mrs. Elliot?" she asked by and by. "I thocht he wad hae married for gear."

"He loves her, Janet, as such men love, with a fierce, wild passion that cannot last. Her gentle beauty has been her doom, as they say here. But Mary will not be a tocher-less bride. Her father will give her five thousand pounds on her wedding-day, and she inherits my fortune at my death."

"Was Hugh Nesbit aware o' this afore he socht Mary?" asked Miss Nesbit drily.

Mary's entrance at the moment interrupted the conversation. Miss Nesbit turned around to look at her, and to feel a great rush of pitying tenderness go out of her, such a feeling almost as a strong man might have for a child. Hers was the fairness of the lily, which lasts but till the wind comes and breaks it on the stalk; so was there not a mournful fitness in the name 'they had given her, the Lily of Aldershope? Janet Nesbit loved her well; and if Hugh Nesbit had been worthy of her, what a joy it would have been to see them living together in Aldersyde, with toddling bairnies growing up about their knees.

"I'm ready, Janet," she said. "Mother I'll leave the bag, and Peter or one of the girls can bring it up to Windyknowe in the evening."

"Very well, my dear. Good-bye: I know you will take care of her, Janet," said Mrs. Elliot. "God bless you both."

At Windyknowe, secure with her friend, Mary Elliot abode in peace. The subject of the marriage was never mentioned between them, until one night when they had been about a week together. They were sitting by the fire in the gloaming, when a shadow fell athwart the window, and there came a knock at the door. Then, to the surprise of both, they heard the voice of Hugh Nesbit in the hall. Mary started to her feet and clung to Janet, lifting beseeching eyes to her face.

"Janet, Janet! don't let him come in," she whispered brokenly.

"Keep quiet, my dear; ye needna fear here wi' me. Hugh Nesbit canna come in tae my rooms if I want tae keep him out. Ride here an' I'll speak tae him," said Miss Nesbit; and setting Mary down, she left the room, locking the door after her.

In the hall Hugh Nesbit was taking of his overcoat, and Marget eyeing him suspiciously from the kitchen door. He turned round quite unconcernedly at sight of his cousin, and offered his hand.

"Ah, cousin Janet, how do you do?" he said smoothly. "I have been long in coming to pay my respects to you in your new home."

"Ay, ye hinna been in a hurry," she answered drily, and led the way into the study, at the same time desiring Marget to bring a candle. When it was brought, she desired Hugh Nesbit to be seated, and he looked round the room in a displeased way. His welcome was cold enough.

"Hae ye gotten settled in Aldersyde, Cousin Hugh?" asked Miss Nesbit politely.

"Yes, but it's dreary enough. I can't think how you supported existence in such a place. It will be changed when the mistress comes home. You will have heard, I suppose, that I am to be honoured with the hand of the young lady who is at present your guest."

"Ay, I hae heard ye are tae get Mary Elliot's hand," she said with direct emphasis on the last word.

He knew well enough what it implied, but deemed it wise to ignore it.

"Have you no congratulations to offer, Cousin Janet?"

"If the winnin' o' an unwillin' bride be matter for congratulation, ye hae mine," she said quietly.

"Who says she is unwilling?" asked Hugh Nesbit angrily.

"Had I no kenned afore, her look when she heard yer voice the noo wad hae telt me."

"Well, to be plain, Cousin Janet, I came to see her to-night. Since you are so plain with me, I need not mince my words to you," said Hugh Nesbit sullenly. "Be good enough either to take me to her presence, or ask her to come to mine."

"I can dae neither," answered Miss Nesbit without hesitation. "Mary Elliot is my guest, and I maun respect her wishes. She desired me to keep ye frae her; an' I if ye be a man ava' ye'll gang awa without insistin' on't."

"I do insist upon it. I claim a right to see my promised wife, no matter where she may be."

"Against her will, tae, I suppose," said Miss Nesbit with a dry smile.

"It is mere imagination on your part, and that of her silly mother, to think she is unwilling to become lady of Aldersyde. Any woman would jump at the offer."

"An' you tae the bargain, I dinna doot," said Miss Nesbit sarcastically. Then it entered her head to try and appeal to her cousin's better nature to release Mary from a bond so irksome to her.

"Ye ken brawly, Hugh, that Mary disna care for ye," she said with gentleness. "Be manly enough to refuse a wife wha has naething tae bring tae ye but her haund wi' its tocher."

"I don't care a rush for her tocher, as you call it," said Hugh Nesbit passionately. "It is her I want, and her I mean to have. Once for all, will you let me see her?"

"No, I winna," returned Miss Nesbit quietly. Whereupon Hugh Nesbit with an oath made haste from her presence, and lifting his coat and hat from the hall, took an indignant departure from Windyknowe.

"My certy, ye hae made quick work o' the Laird the nicht," said Marget in well-pleased tones.

Miss Nesbit smiled somewhat sadly, and went back to Mary.

"He's awa, my dear," she said, taking the poor fluttering thing in her brave arms, and soothing her as a mother might have done. "Ay, greet, my bairn; it'll ease yer heart, for I ken there's a sair load upon it. But mind through a' that amang many sorrows there's a God wha can help ye tae bear, as well as tae avenge them!"

CHAPTER IX.

"When once suspicion's seeds are sown,
Farewell to peace of mind!"

Three weeks did Mary Elliot abide at Windyknowe, for all that time was Tibbie absent at Scottrigg. Mary never knew what her mother suffered at home, between Doctor Elliot and Hugh Nesbit, to let her have unmolested this time of peace. But it ended at last. The coach from Scottrigg brought Tibbie home, and Mary went back to Aldershope to make her preparations for her bridal.

"An' what hae ye been dacin', Tibbie, a' this time at Scottrigg?" asked Janet when they sat alone again by their hearth.

"Oh, I've had a grand time, Janet! I never enjoyed anything half so much. So many people come and go at Scottrigg, one never has time to weary. Yon's the life I would like."

"Ye may get it yet, Tibbie," said Miss Nesbit, slyly, "if ye let young Walter Scott speak his mind."

Tibbie tossed her head.

"He's a very soft young man, Walter Scott, an' just sits like a calf in a lady's presence."

"Did ye see onything o' Miss Grizzie?" inquired Janet hastening to change the subject.

Tibbie coloured slightly.

"She came up to Scottrigg one day an' lectured me on the pomps and vanities, and bade me not think too much of what I saw at Scottrigg, as it would make me discontented at hame."

"She might not be very faur wrang, Tibbie, said Miss Nesbit with a sigh.

"Sandy Riddle an' his wife were three times at Scottrigg when I was there, Janet."

Miss Nesbit looked much surprised.

"Bonnie wild Lady Scott was I can tell ye, Janet. What a handsome woman Mrs. Riddle is, and how grandly dressed?"

"I hardly thocht Sandy Riddle wad hae taen his wife tae Scottrigg," said Miss Nesbit musingly.

"She made him come, I think. She'll rule him if ever woman rules man. Lady Scott was very distant and scornful, but Mrs. Riddle didna care. She'll make a place for herself, yon woman, Janet."

"Are a' the strangers awa frae Ravelaw?" asked Miss Nesbit.

"A' but her brother, Mr. Louis Reynaud, Janet," answered Tibbie, and turned her face away, though at the time Miss Nesbit did not take any notice of it.

"So Mary Elliot is to be Lady of Aldersyde, after all," said Tibbie. "Are ye no gled, Janet? We can go often to Aldersyde when she's there."

"It's no o' Mary's seekin', Tibbie. Hers'll be a dreary bridal."

"It needna be, then. She's gettin' a fine man, an' a bonnie hame. I think ye are too hard on Cousin Hugh, Janet. He came once to Scottrigg when I was there, and I liked him very well. He's a very gentlemanly young man."

"Ay, he's a' that; but he'll no make oor Mary happy," said Miss Nesbit sadly.

"Majorie Scott's comin' for ye on Monday afternoon, Janet; and they'll give you a warm welcome to Scottrigg, and make a great fuss over you. I found it very pleasant."

Tibbie got up and wandered restlessly up and down the room, looking discontentedly on its plain, old-fashioned furnishings. Evidently she was sighing after the flesh-pots of Egypt.

Again the old fear of something, she could not tell what, stole into Janet's heart as she looked on her fair young sister.

Next afternoon, when the Miss Nesbits were getting themselves dressed to go to Aldershope, they were disturbed by a great clattering of hoofs on the avenue, and two horses were reined up at the door. Tibbie flew to the window and then turned round a wave of crimson sweeping over her face.

"It's Mrs. Riddell of Ravelaw and her brother," she said confusedly. "She said at Scottrigg she would maybe call on me at Windyknowe."

Miss Nesbit shut her lips together, and a red spot began to burn on either cheek. This was not the behavior she had been taught to think fitting in a newly-married gentlewoman. But as it behoved them to get away down-stairs at once, she made no remark.

No sooner had they got into the dining-room than Marget announced "Mrs. Riddell an' a strange gentleman."

The lady came first, attired in an exquisitely fitting riding-habit, and a coquettish hat with nodding plumes. She approached Tibbie with a great show of affection, and, to the horror of Miss Nesbit kissed her on both cheeks. Then she turned to Miss Nesbit, and said prettily:

"You are Miss Nesbit. Forgive the liberty I take, but your charming sister won my heart at Scottrigg; so I make bold to come and see her, though they tell me it is not the fashion in Scotland for a stranger to call first. Ah! one might wait for ever; so I have broken through the custom."

Miss Nesbit bowed coldly, not offering to touch the outstretched hand.

"Permit me to introduce to you my brother, Louis Reynaud, Miss Nesbit," said the lady of Ravelaw, looking towards the gentleman who had followed her into the room.

He immediately stepped forward, and placing his hand on his heart, almost bowed himself to the earth.

Miss Nesbit looked him over from head to foot, and acknowledged him by a distant bow. His resemblance to his sister was very marked, and he was undeniably a handsome man. But his was not the face of a good man, nor one likely to inspire trust in man or woman. To the no little dismay of Miss Nesbit, he greeted Tibbie after the manner of an old friend, and then retired with her to the farthest window. Never had Tibbie looked so beautiful, so full of vivacity and life. Then the new lady of Ravelaw, without being invited, sat down by Miss Nesbit, and commenced to talk to her.

"You are so cool, so unlovable, in this bleak Scotland," she said in her most winning tone. "If you see one kiss a friend, as I did your sister just now, you look all so horrified as if you thought it some great sin. I do not know what you are made of. In my dear country, if we love, we show it; here it seems the right thing to hide it out of sight."

"It is the way of Scotch folk, Mrs. Riddell," answered Miss Nesbit stiffly, her eyes watching the pair in the window.

The Frenchman was sitting much closer to Tibbie than Janet's idea of propriety approved, and his handsome head was bent down on a level with hers.

"I came to your home to-day to see if you and your sister would honour us on Friday at Ravelaw. We have a little dance—only a few in honour of my brother, who leaves us next week; then indeed I shall be quite alone to make my home in Scotland."

"I am obliged to you, Mrs. Riddell; but the mourning Tibbie and I wear forbid us takin' part in ony gaiety," said Miss Nesbit coldly.

"Pardon me, I had thought it was three months since your parent died. In our country a quiet party is permitted at the end of that time."

Miss Nesbit made no answer.