

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

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

BOOK I.—CHAPTER II.

"Dear hands slip daily frae oor grasp,
An' hearts are sundert sair,
An' e'en grow dim wi' bitter tears,
For them they'll see nae mair."

With her own hands Miss Nesbit performed the last offices for the dead. Tibbie seemed to shrink from helping in the task, and would not even enter the room to look upon her father's face, which to Janet seemed only beautiful in its perfect peace and rest from pain. But she could be gentle with the weakness she could not understand, and bade Marget light a fire in the dining-room, so that Tibbie could be farther removed from the chamber she seemed to dread. After lighting the fire, Marget proceeded to set the table for the late tea. The regular ways of the house had been set aside during the long illness of the Laird.

Having finished her sad duties, Miss Nesbit retired to her own room to change her gown and make her hair smooth before she went to the tea table. It was characteristic of her that even in the first hours of her grief she should be thus particular in observing such trivial matters. Even in her sorrow for the dead, she did not forget her duty to the living. As the clock in the hall struck seven, she came down-stairs. Just as she was about to enter the dining-room, there came a loud knock at the outer door, which sent echoes thundering through the silent house.

"Guid guide us a'," she heard Marget say as she came breathlessly up the kitchen stair, "whatten a crater can this be at sic a time o' night?"

Miss Nesbit slipped within the dining-room door, and listened with bated breath while Marget undid the fastenings to admit the visitor.

"I am Captain Nesbit," she heard a man's voice say. "How's the Laird?"

"Gane," was Marget's laconic response. Then the door was slammed with unnecessary force.

"Cousin Hugh, Janet," said Tibbie, rising from the fire with brightening eyes.

Miss Nesbit nodded, her heart too full of bitterness to speak.

Yet why should it be? Was it not a right and fitting thing that the Laird of Aldersyde should come to see to his own? It passed in a moment; then she threw open the room door wide, and stepped out into the hall. Beneath the lamp, a man was taking off his overcoat. He was tall, but slender, not like the broad-shouldered sons of Aldersyde, yet he carried himself with a graceful and soldierly bearing.

"You are welcome to Aldersyde, Hugh Nesbit," said Janet, striving to speak heartily as well as sincerely.

He wheeled round immediately, and for a moment they looked at each other in silence. After that one steady look into his face, Miss Nesbit's eyes fell, and her heart sank. It was a dark passionate, evil face, with sinister black eyes and long, thin, cruel lips, partially hidden by a drooping moustache. He advanced, smiling, with extended hand to the graceful woman he had come to supplant.

"Cousin Janet! Am I right?" he said smoothly.

"I am Janet Nesbit," she answered with some stiffness.

"I am truly sorry I am too late to see my uncle. Your excellent but somewhat uncivil domestic has just given me the sad news."

"Come in, Cousin Hugh," said Miss Nesbit. "Isabel is here, and we are just about tae hae oor tea."

Hugh Nesbit bowed and followed her into the room. Tibbie was standing on the hearth, the red glow of the fire-light playing on her golden head and bright, expectant face. Her cousin's eyes gleamed with admiration, and he bent low over the hand she offered him.

"Cousin Isabel, it was worth a sixteen-mile ride on a wretched night to see you at the end of it."

The flimsy compliment pleased the giddy thing, and she smiled a satisfied smile.

"I'm glad you're come, Cousin Hugh," she said in her sweetest tones.

"Have you any luggage wi' ye?" asked Miss Nesbit.

"Only a bag," he answered. "I shall not stay many days at present."

It may have been her fancy, but to Janet Nesbit his last word seemed needlessly emphasized.

"I'll bid Marget tak it up tae the sooth room. I suppose u'll dae?" she said, moving towards the bell-rope.

"Any apartment you please, fair cousin; I am in your hands."

Marget did not answer the summons with her usual promptness. Several minutes elapsed before she entered, bringing the tea-tray with her.

"Marget, tak Captain Nesbit's bag up tae the sooth room, an' licht a fire, an' hing up the sheets tae air."

"Humph!" said Marget, tossing her head; "I've just ta'en doon the poke frae the east bed-room lum; will it no dae?"

"Make ready the south room as I desire, Marget," repeated Miss Nesbit gently, whereupon Marget dropped a profound courtesy, cast a look of indignant scorn upon Hugh Nesbit, and retired.

"Really, cousin, your domestic amuses me," said Hugh Nesbit. "Is it the custom in this Border county of yours to permit such licence in inferiors?"

"Marget is mair a freen than a servant, an' is privileged to dae muckle as she likes," answered Miss Nesbit briefly, and seated herself before the urn.

Hugh Nesbit placed a chair for Isabel, and drawing in his own, took his seat beside her.

Miss Nesbit asked the grace herself, surmising her cousin would in all likelihood refuse. Then the meal began.

"It is, let me see, twelve, fourteen, fifteen years since I was here before," said Hugh Nesbit, meditatively stirring his tea. "We were not very good friends in those days, Cousin Janet."

"No," she answered; "maybe ye can mind why."

"I remember the thrashing you gave me for teasing Isabel. What a little fury you were; I can scarcely imagine you in such a passion now."

"If I had the same cause, I'll no answer for the consequences, Hugh," returned Miss Nesbit quickly.

"Is not London a splendid place, Cousin Hugh?" asked Isabel eagerly. "What a lot you must have seen!"

"Yes, I have knocked about plenty in my time; but I have been tied to Woolwich pretty tightly for months back. This Peninsula business keeps us on the alert. We were daily expecting orders to march. It was with the utmost difficulty I got leave of absence, when your letter reached me."

"You'll leave the army now, surely?" said Isabel.

"Yes; I have decided to sell out," he answered carelessly. "Where is Uncle Walter to be buried?" he broke off suddenly, and looked directly at Janet.

"Where my mother lies, in the chapel of St. Mary's, Hugh," she replied in a surprised way.

"I see. Who is to be asked? If you will furnish me with a list of names, I shall fill up invitations to-night."

He had counted on his uncle's certain death, then! Miss Nesbit bit her lip, and rose.

"That's my work, Cousin Hugh. I shall invite the folk tae my father's funeral."

"Oh, very well," said Hugh Nesbit, shrugging his shoulders. "It was only to save you trouble. I am glad to be relieved."

"Will ye come up the stair and see my father now?" she asked.

"Oh, well, there's no use; fact is, I'd rather not," he answered.

A slight smile curled Miss Nesbit's lips.

"Maybe yer feared, like Tibbie?" she said.

"Well, not exactly; but I'm not used to such things. I'll wait till daylight, anyway. With your permission, I'll take a smoke, and join you in the drawing-room in a few minutes."

"As ye please, Cousin Hugh. Come away, Tibbie."

Tibbie rose reluctantly, and they quitted the room. There were no words between them till they entered the drawing-room and shut the door.

"That's the Laird o' Aldersyde, Janet," said Tibbie, throwing herself into an easy chair.

"Ay, Tibbie."

Miss Nesbit folded her hands on the low mantel-shelf, and bent her eyes on the fire.

"D'ye like him, Janet?"

"Marget disna," said Miss Nesbit, not choosing to say ay or no to Tibbie's question.

"Marget!" echoed Tibbie wrathfully. "My face got red at the way she spoke to Cousin Hugh."

"If ye never get anything waur than Marget's honest tongue tae gar yer face grow red, Tibbie, my wummin, ye'll dae," said Miss Nesbit drily, and for the moment Tibbie was silenced.

Miss Nesbit stood up straight and looked about the room, which was endeared to her heart by so many hallowed memories. Her mother's work-table and foot-stool stood where she had left them in the front window, and close by was the spinet which in bygone days had responded to her touch, and filled the room with the heart stirring melodies of the old Border ballads. Never had the dear, homely place seemed so dear to Janet Nesbit as now, when reflecting how soon she would have to leave it to the occupation of strangers.

"We'll can mak Windyknowe like hame, Tibbie," she said with an effort; "after we get a' the auld things set in."

"What d'ye say about Windyknowe?" asked Tibbie, awakened from her reverie.

"Ye ken, Tibbie, we canna bide in Aldersyde noo," answered Miss Nesbit with a break in her voice. "Let us be thankful we hae Windyknowe tae gang tae."

"It didna enter my head to think we would need to go away from Aldersyde," said Tibbie.

Miss Nesbit smiled slightly. If left in the world alone, what would become of this young sister of hers, who never in her life had taken a thought beyond the moment with her?

Presently a footfall was heard on the stair, and Hugh Nesbit sauntered into the room with his hands in his pockets. Miss Nesbit sat down by Tibbie, and her cousin lounged up against the mantel, and took a deliberate and critical survey of the room and its occupants.

"This place is exactly as it used to be," he said. "You used to sing and play on that thing with legs in the corner. Do you ever do it now, Cousin Janet?"

"No! this morny day," answered Miss Nesbit.

"It is an awful place this to be buried alive in. Listen to that howling wind! Ah! it's enough to give a fellow the blues," said the Laird of Aldersyde, shrugging his shoulders.

"The wind?" queried Miss Nesbit in surprise. To her the tempest roaring over Bouthope spoke with the voice of a friend.

"I agree with you, Cousin Hugh," said Tibbie shivering. "I hate storms and wind. If it was always summer time, Aldersyde would be a pleasant place."

"I think I'll have the trees thinned round the house," said Hugh Nesbit, keeping his eyes fixed on Janet's pale face. "Useless timber might with advantage be turned into cash."

Miss Nesbit winced, but preserved a proud silence.

"The place needs many alterations which I shall have executed directly," he went on mercilessly, knowing the pain he was inflicting. "I shall have all that ivy stripped of the front. It is a harbour for damp and insects, besides being opposed to all modern taste."

"Tibbie, you an' me had better gang doon the stair," said

Miss Nesbit in a strange, sharp way, "Sic talk has nae interest for us."

At that moment a loud and imperative knock at the hall door caused them all to start. Miss Nesbit rose at once, and motioning to Tibbie, they quitted the room. Just as they reached the landing, a gust of wind swept up from the open door, and they heard the tones of a shrill, wheezy voice both recognised at once.

"Janet Nesbit, whaur are ye?"

"Grizzie Oliphant as I live, Janet Nesbit!" exclaimed Tibbie. "What on earth brings her frae Yair to-night?"

Miss Nesbit did not look particularly delighted; nevertheless, it behoved her to go down immediately and bid her father's kinswoman welcome. Tibbie remained on the landing and peered over the balustrade to behold Miss Grizzie. In the middle of the hall stood a tall, angular, bony woman, past middle life, attired in a stiff black satin gown, a filled in plaid, and a towering head gear of the same material. She had several band-boxes with her, and a black velvet reticule on her right arm.

"Well, Janet Nesbit?" she said grimly, and her restless black eyes wandered scrutinizingly over the face and figure of her comely young kinswoman.

"How are ye, Miss Grizzie?" asked Miss Nesbit. "This is a surprise."

"It needna be, then," snapped Miss Grizzie. "I met Doctor Elliot yestreen in Yair, an' he tellt me yer faither hadna mony hoors tae leeve; an' that we were bootly expectin' Hugh Nesbit's son at Aldersyde. So as it wasna a fittin' thing for two lassies an' a maid bidden in the hoose their lane wi' a young man, I gar'd Tammas Erskine yoke the coach an' bring me ower. He'll bide here, of course, till I gang hame; but I'm gaun tae bide a bit wi' ye in yer tribulation. Has Hugh Nesbit come? an' whaur's Tibbie?"

"Yes; he cam' about two hoors sin' syne; an' Tibbie's up the stair, Miss Grizzie," answered Miss Nesbit slowly.

"Weel, bi't that ill-mannett maid o' yours, cairry my things up tae the sooth room, an' cairry up a shovelful o' coal frae the kitchen fire tae air the sheets, or I'll lae rheumatism in my left leg."

"I hae putten Cousin Hugh in the sooth room," Miss Nesbit ventured to say.

"An' what altho' ony room's guid enough for Hugh Nesbit's son, I'm thinkin'. He'll no hae lain on feathers a' his days, nae mair than his ne'er-dae-weel faither afore him," quoth Miss Grizzie. "Sae let Marget cairry his things oot, an' pit mine it."

There was no help for it, Miss Nesbit knew. It was the habit o' Miss Grizzie to turn upside down every house she visited.

"Come up the stair, then, Miss Grizzie," she said, and laid her hand on one of the band-boxes.

"Na, na; I'll tak that," said Miss Grizzie. "My best bannet's in ane, and my new kep in the ither. Tak that bag. It has my hoose, goon an' my shoon in it."

Miss Nesbit obeyed, and led the way up-stairs. Tibbie fled into her bedroom at their approach. When they reached the south room, Miss Grizzie very quietly lifted Hugh Nesbit's portmanteau and one or two things off the dressing-table, and conveyed them outside to the landing. Then she proceeded to take off her travelling garments and get in to her house gown.

"So yer faither's deid at last, Janet Nesbit. Weel, I houp ye see it's for the best," said she.

"I'm tryin' tae think it," answered Miss Nesbit, folding her quiet hands upon her lap, her habit when her heart was stirred.

"Ye maun think it. If ye rebel again' Providence, it's just tempin' Him tae send anither dispensation."

Miss Nesbit remained silent.

"Hugh Nesbit gets Aldersyde, of coorse. What's left to you lassies?"

"My father's money, an' Windyknowe," replied Miss Nesbit, knowing she had no alternative but answer every question.

"Hump! it'll dae till ye get men. When are ye gaun to reign at Ravelaw noo, Janet Nesbit?"

Miss Nesbit's face flushed a deep red.

"W'at put that thoct i' yer heid, Miss Grizzie?"

"Dinna be a fule, Janet Nesbit," retorted Miss Grizzie. "Sandy Riddell will hae been here the day, readily?"

"No, Miss Grizzie."

To Janet's unutterable relief, Tibbie's entrance changed the subject. Miss Grizzie turned about, hair-brush in hand, and surveyed the bonnie Isabel from head to foot.

"Hump! ye're a well-faured hizzie," she said, offering her hand. "I hope ye mind that beauty is vain, an' a virtuous wummin far abune rubies, as Solomon says?"

"I didna ken he said that, Miss Grizzie," said Tibbie in her cool, careless way.

Horror was depicted on the face of Miss Grizzie.

"I doot ye've hain a pair upbringin'," lassies. I thoct yer mither, a minister's dochter, wad hae garr'd ye read yer Bibles; but, tae be sur, she was ower saft for the upbringin' o' Nesbit's bairns. They aye needit the rod."

"What'll ye tak tae eat, Miss Grizzie?" inquired Miss Nesbit, knowing from experience to ignore such speeches.

"Naething. Whaur's Hugh Nesbit?"

"He's in the drawin'-room," said Tibbie.

"Ye seem tae ken brawly whaur tae find the young man, my wummin," quoth Miss Grizzie, fixing her keen eyes on Tibbie's face. "I dinna think Janet has the upper hand o' ye. Weel, I'm awa in tae see Hugh Nesbit. Ye needna come, lassies. I want a word wi' the young man myself."

So saying, Miss Grizzie stalked away to the drawing-room.

Hugh Nesbit had thrown himself on the sofa, but sprang up at the opening of the door, and absolutely stared at the vision on the threshold. She was now attired in a merino gown of scanty dimensions, a black cap adorned in a fearful manner with crape flowers and jingling beads, a black lace cape on her shoulders, and black silk mittens on her hands.

"Ye'll be Hugh Nesbit?" she said, stalking familiarly