

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

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

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

Doctor Elliot cast a keen glance at his daughter when she entered the dining-room, and motioned her to come and sit by his side, which also happened to be the seat next Hugh Nesbit. It was a curious and painful thing to observe how Doctor Elliot's women-folk relapsed into subdued silence in his presence, and seemed to be in a state of nervous dread and fear of him all the time. In general he either remained silent, or monopolized the conversation; but that day he seemed anxious that Mary, at least, should take part in it. She answered Hugh Nesbit's remarks only in monosyllables, till her father said half-jokingly:

"Unless you find something more to say, Mary, Captain Nesbit will come to the conclusion that you are either an ignoramus or a painfully bashful country girl."

"Whether she speaks or remains silent, Miss Elliot must always be charming," said Hugh Nesbit gallantly.

Mary knew well that her father's seemingly playful speech was in reality a command, so with her customary submission to his will, she forced herself to carry on a conversation with the young man beside her. Sitting by Mrs. Elliot at the foot of the table, Miss Nesbit observed her dim eyes fill with tears, which she strove to hide by bending over her plate.

You will notice that the feminine relatives of coarse, unfeeling men, are generally women of refined and acute sensibilities, to whom their home life is almost always a species of martyrdom.

None present at Doctor Elliot's dinner-table that Sabbath day, save perhaps Hugh Nesbit, enjoyed the meal. When it was over the ladies retired, and the Miss Nesbits begging to be excused, as Marget would be anxious about them, went away home at once.

"What would you think if Mary Elliot became lady of Aldersyde, Janet?" asked Tibbie as they turned up the steep road to Windyknowe.

"I wadna wish tae see her the wife o' Hugh Nesbit, Tibbie."

"See it ye will, Janet," said Tibbie shrewdly. "Doctor Elliot has got the plan in his head. Did ye no see how he made Mary sit beside Hugh Nesbit, and scolded her for not speaking to him. It angers me to see how Mrs. Elliot and Mary fear Doctor Elliot: I never saw man that would fear me yet."

"He's maybe tae come yet, Tibbie," said Miss Nesbit with a slight smile.

"I canna bide Doctor Elliot," said Tibbie. "Can you?"

"There's some I like better," answered Miss Nesbit with characteristic caution.

"Like better!" echoed Tibbie. "He's, a mean, graspin', ill-natured man. They say he married Mrs. Elliot for her gear, an' he'll try tae make Mary do the same."

"Wheesht, Tibbie," said Miss Nesbit gently. "If ye canna say ony guid o' a body, dinna say ony ill."

"Look here, Janet," said Tibbie suddenly. "I dinna ken what Mrs. Riddell o' Ravelaw said tae ye that day she came tae Aldersyde, but d'ye mean tae say ye bear her nae ill-will for the way she has treated us since we kened her first."

"Wad it better us tae keep up a spite at her, Tibbie?"

"Maybe no," returned Tibbie impatiently. "An' I ken the Bible bids ye forgive yer enemies. But for a' that, an' I must say'd though it anger ye, Janet, if Sandy Riddell had treated me as he has treated you, I would hate him, an' live but tae be revenged on him."

The fiery, implacable spirit of the Nesbits was roused in Tibbie's breast. Looking at her, Janet almost trembled. For what tribulation might it not lead her into in years to come?

"Speak o' the deil, Janet," cried Tibbie. "Here's Sandy Riddell comin' ower the brae, on that black beast o' his—a bonnie like thing on a Sabbath afternoon."

Miss Nesbit cast one glance at the horse and rider, and then helplessly round, as if seeking a way of escape from the inevitable meeting.

"Janet, for ony sake dinna let the man see ye care sae much," said Tibbie sharply. "Wait till he comes up, an' I'll gie him a word he'll no forget in a hurry."

"Tibbie, if ye daur!" said Janet, and gripped her sister's arm with fingers that had no faltering in them, and which effectually silenced Tibbie.

The Laird of Ravelaw looked well on horseback. He rode a great, powerful black animal, which chafed under bit and bridle, but carried his master superbly. His purpose in coming that unfrequented way, was solely to see Janet Nesbit. It did not suffice him that he had treated her shamefully, he desired to see for himself how she bore it. He actually drew rein in front of the Miss Nesbits, and lifting his cap, bade them good afternoon.

Tibbie kept her head down, lest she should be tempted to forget Janet's "daur!" But Miss Nesbit drew herself up in her proudest way, and putting back her veil, looked straight into his face. The curl in her long upper lip, the matchless contempt in her clear eyes, the haughty calm of her whole demeanour, left him in no doubt of what she thought of him. This was scarcely what he had looked for, and it made him shrink into himself, and curse himself for coming in the way of such humiliation. After that one look, which had not the shadow of recognition in it, Miss Nesbit drew down her veil and passed on. Then the Laird of Ravelaw dug his spurs into the black charger's sleek sides, causing him to rear, and afterwards to plunge forward in a mad gallop.

Faithless Riddell had got a lesson at the hands of a woman, which he would not forget for many a day. Not being a person of much discrimination, he concluded that

Janet Nesbit must have received his attentions as they were offered, to wile away an idle hour.

The first Sabbath evening in their new home passed but drearily for the Miss Nesbits. They had little in common, and did not talk much together, after the manner of other sisters.

They lingered long over their early tea; then Tibbie threw herself on the sofa, and folding her fair arms above her head, built her castles in the air. Miss Nesbit sat in the window, watching with yearning eyes the night creeping over Bourhope to envelop Aldersyde in its grim shadows. Her feelings being like to get the better of her, she rang the bell and bade Marget bring in the lamp, and took up a book. At nine o'clock it behoved her to call Marget again, to listen to the lesson she must read, as their father had done every Sabbath night since they were little toddling bairnies, who could not comprehend what it was all about. It was no wonder her voice faltered; for it is a sore thing for a woman to feel that she is the head of a house, and responsible for the well-being of its inmates. But I trow not many take up the charge with so earnest a spirit as Janet Nesbit.

Thus the Sabbath closed.

Upon the Monday afternoon, when Miss Nesbit was sitting alone in the dining-room, Tibbie having gone to Aldershope, Marget showed in Mr. Bourhill, the minister. Miss Nesbit rose from her seat, and held out her hand to him in frank welcome, but for the moment neither cared to speak. The memory of bygone days, and other greetings never more to be heard this side the grave, rose up before them, and made words difficult to come.

"I met Miss Isabel at the manse gate," said Mr. Bourhill after a little. "She is looking well, Miss Nesbit."

"Yes, she is weel. I was jist sittin' when ye cam' in, Mr. Bourhill, wonderin' what I wad dae wi' Tibbie. She's a restless, thochtless lassie; I'm jist fear'd Windyknowe will be ower quiet a hame for her."

Mr. Bourhill's heart beat quicker at this evidence of her perfect faith and confidence in him. He knew well there was no other to whom she would have spoken with such unreservedness.

"Could you not take her to Edinburgh for the winter months?" he suggested. "The change would do you both good."

Miss Nesbit lifted up her head and smiled slightly.

"Sixty pounds a year 'll no pay for mony changes, Mr. Bourhill."

The minister heard her in no little surprise.

"Miss Nesbit, is it possible *that* is all your income?"

She nodded.

"I'm no ashamed o'd; why should I be? As I said tae Tibbie, mony a puir gentlewoman hasna sa muckle. It's plenty for us if Tibbie—"

She paused, and a sigh escaped her.

"She has a constant cravin' after a gay life, an' a' the luxury that money can buy, Mr. Bourhill—a very natural thing in a young an' bonnie lassie."

"Is that work not trying for your eyes, Miss Nesbit?" asked the minister in a queer, abrupt way.

Miss Nesbit laid her lace work down on her lap, a little humorous smile rippling about the corners of her mouth.

"I maun tell ye the meaning o' this, Mr. Bourhill. When Mr. Douglas tell'd us what was left, Tibbie an' me cam' tae the conclusion that we wad hae tae let Marget gang, an' I said sae till her. I wish ye had seen her, Mr. Bourhill; her honest wrath fairly took the breath frae Tibbie an' me. She just refused tae gang. So tae fill up my time, an' help tae pay Marget's wages, I mak this lace, which my mother learned me tae dae long ago, an' send it tae a shop in Edinburgh. It's aween you an' me, Mr. Bourhill; for if Marget suspect it, she wad tak my head aff. I've tae stow'd away in my apron pocket whenever I hear her comin'."

While she was speaking, the minister of Aldershope had risen and gone over to the window. He could not always force back from outward sight that which filled all his heart.

"We can see the den o' Aldersyde frae here, ye see," said Miss Nesbit cheerfully; "no tae speak o' Dryhope Tower, an' Bourhope. So we dinna feel a' thegither awa frae hame."

Then Mr. Bourhill turned about, and Miss Nesbit, happening to look at him at the moment, knew what was coming. She rose up trembling, and let her work fall down to the floor.

The deepest feelings do not find their expression in a multitude of words. Mr. Bourhill held out his hands to Janet Nesbit, and said in tones which his great emotion made hoarse and tremulous:

"Janet, I love you next to God. Let *me* make your happiness my greatest earthly care!" That was all.

A lesser nature might have misjudged him, and though his offer was the outcome of pity. But Janet Nesbit's great heart read that other like an open book, and knew, ah! none better, the priceless value of the love she could not take.

There was no coquetry about her, no shrinking from telling the truth; she answered the question as it had been put, in words grave, true, and earnest, coming from the heart.

"Mr. Bourhill, I would to God I could come, kenna' what it is ye offer, an' that there's no muckle love like yours in this weary world. But I hae nane tae gie, an' I could be wife tae nae man unless my love could match his ain." Then she broke down and covered her face with her hands.

To a true woman it is terrible to refuse the offer of a good man's love; because, if she has loved herself, she knows what her answer must mean to him.

It was no light thing for the minister of Aldershope; for, when love comes to a man for the first time, late in life, it is no child's play, but terrible earnest.

"In time to come," he said slowly; but Miss Nesbit held up her hand deprecatingly.

"Never, never! Mr. Bourhill. I'm a woman to whom love can come but aince. I hae gien mine already, an' though unworthily for a', she said. "Ye ken what I think o' ye when I bring mysel' tae tell ye this; and ye were my father's freend an' mine."

Then Mr. Bourhill went away over to the window, and stood there for what seemed a very long time to Miss Nesbit. Yet she dared not disturb him, nor go away out of

the room. These were sharp moments for the minister of Aldershope. When he turned about by and by, it seemed to Miss Nesbit that never before had Mr. Bourhill's face so reflected the light of his great heart and meek, unselfish soul. He went up to her, and taking both her hands in his firm yet gentle clasp, looked full into her eyes.

"It was too much happiness for me, and God has willed it otherwise. Forgive me if I have distressed you—nay, I know I have; but there are moments when a man is not altogether master of himself."

"I wasna worthy," faltered Janet, unable to say more. "You will forget this, Miss Nesbit, and let the old friendship grow deeper and stronger between us," he said with his true bright smile; "and only remember me as the one to whom your father ever accorded a warm welcome in happier days at Aldersyde?"

"I hinna that mony freens that I should care tae lose the best o' them," Miss Nesbit made answer with brimming eyes. "God bless ye, Mr. Bourhill."

The minister bent low over the clasped hands, and touched them with reverent lips: "God bless *you*, my friend!"

CHAPTER VII.

"She was a leddy o' high degree,
An' she was proud as proud could be,
An' she had siller, an' gear, an' a,
An' mony a servant in her ha',
But aye her life was dreary, dreary,
An' aye her heart was sad an' weary!"

After meeting the Miss Nesbits on the Sabbath afternoon, Sandy Riddell rode home to Ravelaw in a great rage. At the dinner-table he was so rude and sulky, like some school-boy who had been whipped for transgression, that his mother found it necessary to remonstrate with him, and ask him what had happened to ruffle his temper. Whereupon her gentlemanly and respectful son swore at her, and Mrs. Riddell retired to her chamber in hysterics.

In the lifetime of Sandy Riddell the elder, such scenes had been of so frequent occurrence that the domestics thought nothing of them. Since the young Laird had grown to manhood he had given large evidence of having inherited his father's coarse, rough nature, rather than the courtesy which had ever been characteristic of his mother's family. This was the price my lady had had to pay for the wealth and stately home she had won. She did not appear down stairs again that evening, which mattered little to her son, he being in the stables smoking and talking familiarly with the groom.

On Monday morning Mrs. Riddell did not feel herself equal to the exertion of rising at the usual hour, but rang for her waiting-woman to bring her a cup of strong tea, and thereafter remain in the next room till she was again required. At eleven, Mrs. Riddell pulled her bell-rope again, and Rebecca, who had been down-stairs gossiping with the maids, came running up in breathless haste.

"You've been down-stairs, Rebecca," said her mistress peevishly. "I might have fainted or died while you were gone."

"I had the toothache, ma'am," said Rebecca, telling her lie as glibly as her mistress could have done, "and just ran down for a mouthful of whisky to deaden it."

Mrs. Riddell did not believe her serving-woman's statement. There are no greater suspects of the veracity of others than those who have little regard for the truth themselves.

"Dress me, then, Rebecca," she said languidly "and then go down for some vinegar and water to bathe my head; it aches intolerably, the result of the wretched night I have had."

Rebecca had passed the night on a couch in her mistress's bedroom, and knew she had slept soundly till the dawning. But being only a poor waiting-woman, it did not behove her to have any opinions of her own. There was a bit of news burning her tongue; but she dared not breathe it, lest she should betray that even in the agonies of toothache she had been able to gossip down-stairs. Having got her mistress into her clothes, she went away for the vinegar and water, with which she bathed her lady's head, she lying back in her easy chair the while.

"When did the Laird breakfast, Rebecca?" asked my lady.

"At six o'clock, ma'am," answered Rebecca; "and away driving to Galashiels to catch the coach for London."

Mrs. Riddell gave a faint scream.

"You are talking sheer nonsense, Rebecca," said she sharply.

"I beg pardon, ma'am; I had it from Gibson's own lips when I was down just now," said Rebecca smoothly.

"Go and send Gibson to me directly; I cannot comprehend what you tell me, Rebecca," exclaimed her mistress with considerable energy.

Rebecca departed at once, and returned shortly with the housekeeper, a stately personage in stiff black silk, with a bunch of keys jingling at her side.

"What is this Rebecca tells me about the Laird, Gibson?" asked Mrs. Riddell.

"I don't know what Rebecca may have told you, ma'am," said Gibson sullenly, who still resented being ordered up-stairs by my lady's maid.

"Don't exasperate me, Gibson. Has the Laird gone to London, or has he not?"

"I gave him his breakfast myself at six o'clock, ma'am, and packed his bag while he ate it; and I saw him drive away at half-past six. Duncan has just returned from Galashiels."

Mrs. Riddell bit her lip.

"He must have taken a sudden whim in his head," said she. "Did he make any allusion to his return?"

"As he was going out of the door, ma'am, he turned about and said to me, 'Gibson, tell my mother I'm off for a holiday, and she may expect me when I come.'"

Again Mrs. Riddell bit her lip. To leave such a message for her with a servant; it was intolerable!