

CHOICE LITERATURE.

ALDERSYDE.

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

BOOK I—CHAPTER V.

"My hame! naeither spo. can be
Sae dear tae me on earth,
For hallowed memories entwine
About thy sacred hearth."

The Miss Nesbitt were sitting by the study fire talking soberly over their future. Mr. Douglas the lawyer had just left Aldersyde after a long interview, during which he had intimated to them that their yearly income could not amount to more than £60. To Miss Nesbitt his announcement was not a surprise; but Tibbie, who had never troubled her head about money matters, and was quite ignorant of her father's affairs, had dreamed dreams of a goodly establishment at Windyknowe, and a life of ease and pleasure. From these dreams Mr. Douglas had rudely awakened her, and her bonnie face wore a doleful and discontented look.

"Janet, what'll we do?" she asked for a third time.

"Live and be happy together, my dear," said Miss Nesbitt in a wonderfully cheerful voice. "Many a poor gentlewoman hasna that, wha has tae pay for a roof-tree besides."

I believe that this new turn of affairs, which compelled Miss Nesbitt to devote all her thoughts to the subject of "living," was the best thing which could have happened at the time. Tibbie glanced up at her sister's un-uffled face, then down upon her own slim, dainty hands, and said dismally:

"We'll need to turn house and kitchen maids ourselves, Janet; we can't keep Marget off £60."

Then, indeed, Miss Nesbitt sighed.

"Marget'll hae tae gang, Tibbie, an' that's the hardest hit o'd."

"We'll need to tell her, Janet."

"It's a task I dinna like, Tibbie; but as you say we'll need tae dae, an' the suner the better."

So saying, Miss Nesbitt touched the bell, to summon Marget, who came very slowly, as if she guessed there was something unpleasant in store for her.

"Come in an' sit doon, Marget," said Miss Nesbitt.

But Marget did not deem it a fitting thing for her to sit down in the presence of her young ladies, and therefore stood near the door, twirling her apron round her thumbs, and waiting to hear what was to be said to her.

"Ye've been a faithfu' freen tae us, Marget, an' ye hae a perfect richt tae ken a' oor affairs," said Miss Nesbitt. "Mr. Douglas has been tae tell us hoo we stand wi' regard tae money matters."

"Weel, mem?" queried Marget with intense interest.

"There's no muckle left," faltered Miss Nesbitt; for Marget's anxious, loving gaze broke her down.

"I'm vext for that, Miss Nesbitt; but there's Windyknowe an' the bit garden, an' gin we could keep Crummie, I'd mak a penny aff the butter," said Marget breathlessly.

"Oh but, Marget, wi' only £60 a year atween Tibbie an' me, hoo aie we tae keep Crummie, my wummin, or you ither?" said Miss Nesbitt mournfully.

Marget folded her arms, while a curious expression of mingled wrath and grief and wounded pride came on her honest face.

"Ye'll be gaun tae wash yer claes, an' clean yer hoose, an' mak yer meat, no tae speak o' howin' the garden, nae doot?" she said scornfully.

"We'll need tae try, Marget," said Miss Nesbitt with a smile and a tear.

"A bonnie like thing for the Nesbitts o' Aldersyde!" quoth Marget. "Weel, gif ye think ye'll get rid o' Marget Drysdale as easy's that, yer mista'en—that's a'. Wha said I wanted wages? Wha said I wanted anything but a mouthfu' o' kin milk, an' a bite o' pease bannock for my meat? Whaever said it, or said I wad leave them that's mair than flesh an' bluid tae me, telt a lee—that's a'," with which Marget whisked out of the room, and clattered down the kitchen stair with a great din.

After that, of course, there was no more said anent Marget leaving; but Miss Nesbitt had a plan of her own, whereby she would find the wherewithal to pay her labour.

The days wore on, till the fortnight of Hugh Nesbitt's absence elapsed, and it came to be the Miss Nesbitts' last night in Aldersyde, the last time they would sleep beneath their father's roof-tree. Ah me, but that "last" has a dreary sound in it! It is one of the saddest words in any tongue. The house was stripped of its furnishings, which under Marget's supervision had been conveyed by degrees to Windyknowe. All that remained on the last night was the study table and chairs, and the beds they three were to occupy.

But there was one room furnished ready for the use of the Laird of Aldersyde. Miss Nesbitt had selected some articles of later date, which were not so dear and sacred in her eyes, and had set them in the south room. Also, with her own hands, she had fastened up clean curtains about the bed, and at the window—a proceeding which considerably exercised Marget's spirit, and caused her to make some observations the reverse of flattering to the individual who was to occupy it.

There was no sleep for Miss Nesbitt that night. A north wind was roaring over Bourhope, with a warning of snow in its teeth. To a nervous or superstitious person, sleep in the house of Aldersyde on a windy night was a thing impossible. It might have been haunted by wraiths or warlocks so varied and uncanny were the sounds which could be heard in it. But it was not the eerie moaning and wailing in the empty rooms and desolate corridors which banished sleep from Miss Nesbitt's eyes, but heartache—bitter, regretful pain over the parting from the home of her forbears. Once in the night she rose from her slumbering sister's side, and crept across the bare floor to the uncurtained window. A wild sky, across which great inky masses of cloud were drifting southwards, frowned down upon the lone loch, and a heavy

shower was beating against the panes. Oblivious of cold, she stood looking out upon the dark picture, till, suddenly from a rift in the cloud overhanging Bourhope, the moon shon out with a fierce defiant gleam, which fell straight upon the ruined chapel of St. Mary, and made so plain its neglected burying-ground that she could almost see the mound of the new-made grave. Then sobbing she crept back to her bed, and tossed beside unconscious Tibbie till the dawning.

All three rose early and made a pretence of eating breakfast, before Mr. Lennox's cart came for the remainder of the things.

Marget was to go first with it to Windyknowe, in order to have a fire lighted before her young ladies arrived. A little while after the departure of the cart, the Miss Nesbitts, feeling that nothing was to be gained by remaining in the empty house, tied on their bonnets, and stood together in the hall of Aldersyde, two desolate women, holding each other's hands, and with nothing in the world but each other. Tears were raining down Tibbie's cheeks, but Miss Nesbitt was pale and fearless. It is the inward grief which eats out the heart.

"Come, Tibbie," she said with a kind of gasp, and they passed out of the house, locking the door behind them, and walked quickly till they came to the bend in the avenue, when they both turned about to look their last at Aldersyde.

It was a gray, rambling building, with a quaint old tower, entered by a low arched doorway. Its windows somewhat resembled the gratings of a gaol, but its clustering ivy and moss-grown walls made it lovely in its age, for it was clothed with all the beauty which time loves to lavish on the buildings of the past. Giant beeches and elms sheltered it on every side, while behind, solemn and grand, towered the peak of Bourhope, above which the grey and cloudy sky seemed mourning for the desolation of Aldersyde.

"Oh, Janet!" said Tibbie piteously, "we could have borne father's death if we could have stayed at Aldersyde."

Miss Nesbitt did not seem to hear. "God keep Aldersyde," Tibbie heard her whisper very low, then they went slowly and silently upon their way.

Miss Nesbitt tapped at the door of the lodge, and handed the key to an old man, but did not seem to hear his murmured words of blessing and farewell. As they passed through the gates, a gig came rattling up the road, and the driver drew rein close to them.

"I make bold to come an' offer tae drive ye tae Windyknowe," said the honest and sympathetic voice of William Lennox of the Mains.

"Many thanks," said Miss Nesbitt quietly and gratefully; "Tibbie and me harna muckle heart tae walk five miles this day."

So the dwellers in Aldersyde, who had been greatly exercised of late regarding the Miss Nesbitts and their changed fortunes, had the satisfaction of beholding Mr. Lennox drive them through the village on the way to their new abode.

The road to Windyknowe turned round by the kirk, and passing the manse, took a steep incline away up to the moorland. It was a by-way not under highway supervision, and was cut up by great deep ruts, which caused the gig to jolt in a very disagreeable manner. When they reached the top of the brae, they could see the grey walls of Windyknowe peeping out in the middle of one of the clumps of the scraggy fir which here and there dotted the moorland. A thin blue line of smoke curling upward to the sky told that Marget was already within. When they reached the broken gateway, Mr. Lennox stopped his horse and assisted the ladies to alight. Then Miss Nesbitt shook hands with him, and though she spoke never a word, the honest farmer understood her mute parting, and when he climbed into his gig his eyes were wet with unbidden tears. Slowly the Miss Nesbitts wended their way up the grass-grown avenue, till they came face to face with the house.

It was a great barn of a place, naked and desolate looking and crumbling to decay. A chill struck to the hearts of the two lonely women, the contrast between the new home and the old was so painful.

"Let's get in as fast's we can, Tibbie," said Miss Nesbitt, "an' no stand breakin' oor hearts here."

Hearing voices, Marget hurried to the door, and stood on the threshold trying to smile.

"Ye've gotten a fire on, I see, Marget," said Miss Nesbitt cheerfully.

"It's in the dinin' room. This way, mem," said Marget, and ushered them through the wide hall into a large dingy room, only made tolerable by the glow and crackle of the fire. In order to make it look as much as possible like the dining-room at Aldersyde, Marget had set the furniture in the same way, and hung the pictures in the same places. For a moment Miss Nesbitt's eyes brightened it looked so like home.

"Ye hae done weel, Marget," she said, and reaching out her hand, touched that of her faithful servant with a gentle appreciative touch which to Marget was sufficient reward.

"Gin ye've suttan a wee, and warmed yersels, ye'll maybe come ben tae the kitchen, an' syne up the stair, tae see if a thing's as ye wad like it," she said, and then withdrew.

Tibbie sat down at the fire to warm her chilled fingers, while Miss Nesbitt walked over to the window, and stood there, salt tears blinding her eyes.

They were far up on the dreary moorland. Far away down in the hollow, the roof-trees of Aldersyde clustered on the bank of the rushing Yarrow. Farther up the stream, the trees in the den of Aldersyde made a dark patch on the landscape, while beyond them towered the solemn peak of Bourhope.

By and by Miss Nesbitt turned about, and coming over to the fire, knelt down beside Tibbie, and put her arms round her waist, with the look on her face Tibbie had seen but once before.

"We hae built up oor hame, Tibbie," she said solemnly; "an' since there's only you an' me, my dear, lit's stick close together, and thank God that in His mercy there are twa insted o' ane, though we hae neither father, nor mother, nor Aldersyde."

CHAPTER VI.

"What though we cannot answer here,
The wherefore and the why?
The tangled skein of life will be
Unravell'd by and by."

Upon the Sabbath day, the Miss Nesbitts appeared in the parish kirk of Aldersyde. The high-backed pew with the crimson linings, where they had sat so many Sabbaths in time gone past, was not theirs to-day. Many eyes turned compassionately to an obscure pew near the door, where sat two figures in deep mourning, but whose faces could not be seen through their thick crape veils. Doctor Elliot occupied his pew opposite that of Aldersyde, having, on each side one his wife and daughter.

Punctually at noon, Mr. Bourhill, preceded by Caleb Lyall the headle, came out of the vestry and ascended the pulpit stair. When he stood up to pray, a late-comer entered the church, and a quick martial step echoed through the church as the new Laird of Aldersyde went down the stone passage to the crimson-lined pew. Many curious eyes were directed towards him, and it was whispered afterwards, that never once had his bold black eyes left the sweet face of Mary Elliot, the Lily of Aldersyde.

At the close of the service, the Miss Nesbitts made haste to get away before the rest of the congregation; but Mrs. Elliot and Mary hurrying out also, overtook them at the churchyard gate.

"You will come and have dinner with us, Miss Nesbitt," said the doctor's wife in her motherly way. "Nay, my dear, you must not turn from your oldest friend," she added, for Miss Nesbitt had already shaken her head.

"Let's go, Janet," pleaded Tibbie; "it's so dreary at Windyknowe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Elliot; then we'll come," said Janet, and taking Mary's arm, was about to turn up the village street, when Doctor Elliot came out of the churchyard in company with Hugh Nesbitt.

"Captain Nesbitt will dine with us to-day, Mrs. Elliot," said the doctor in his stern, pompous way, and what could the shrieking little body do but say she would be very glad to have his company.

Hugh Nesbitt shook hands with all the ladies, politely thanked the doctor's wife for her kindness, and then placed himself by the side of Mary Elliot, who kept a firm hold of Miss Nesbitt's arm. She had felt an unaccountable shrinking from Hugh Nesbitt that day at Aldersyde, and the feeling now returned to her more strongly than ever.

"I enjoyed the service to-day immensely, Miss Elliot," said he by way of beginning the conversation.

"Every one likes Mr. Bourhill," she answered in her gentle way. Even to those she most disliked, the Lily of Aldersyde could not be anything but gentle.

"I was not thinking of Mr. Bourhill, who, I daresay, is a very estimable person," said Hugh Nesbitt meaningly, and bent his eyes again on the sweet face beside him.

Miss Nesbitt felt her friend's fingers tremble on her arm, and hastened to change the theme.

"Are ye like tae be settled in Aldersyde, Cousin Hugh?" she asked courteously.

"By and by. I expect to have an upholsterer coming from Edinburgh to make the place habitable," he returned. "Ahem! I was much obliged to you, Cousin Janet, for leaving me a bed to sleep in. I did not expect it, and felt quite overwhelmed, I assure you."

"It was only common courtesy, Hugh Nesbitt," she said somewhat sharply, which speech brought them to the gate of Doctor Elliot's dwelling. It was a substantial, handsome house, standing back from the road in a garden which was the pride and admiration of Aldersyde.

"Your family is considerably increased to-day, Mrs. Elliot," said Hugh Nesbitt lightly. "I am afraid that if you once open your hospitable doors to me, I may become a weariness to you."

"You could scarcely be that, Captain Nesbitt," said the doctor, thus saving his wife the trouble of answering.

All the ladies went away up-stairs at once, Mrs. Elliot going to her own room, and Mary taking the Miss Nesbitts to hers. Tibbie removed her bonnet and cloak, and smoothing her hair, said lightly she would go down and let them to their secrets. When she was out of the room, Mary Elliot sat down by the bed, and covered her fair face with her hands.

"What is it, Mary?" asked Miss Nesbitt in anxious surprise.

"Do you believe in presentiments, Janet?" asked Mary very low.

"I canna say I dinna believe in them," said Miss Nesbitt. "I had a warnin' an' a fear o' comin' evil bairn afore my mother's death an' my father's. But what presentiment o' evil can you hae, Mary?"

"That man down-stairs, Janet," said Mary, shivering: "when he looks at me, I feel like to die. The old fear of him I had when I was a child and played with him at Aldersyde yon summer he lived with you, has come back to me far stronger and more real. What can it mean?"

"Ye arena weel, Mary; it's just a fancy," said Miss Nesbitt tenderly. "Come, my dear, let me help ye off wi' yer things. We maunna keep Mrs. Elliot waiting at the table."

Then with a sigh, Mary Elliot rose, and taking off her bonnet and cloak, smoothed her yellow hair, and fastened her lace collar about her throat.

(To be continued.)

THE SUBJECT OF "IN MEMORIAM."

Arthur Hallam was the same age as my own father, and born in 1811. When he died he was twenty-three; but he had lived long enough to show what his life might have been.

In the preface of a little volume of his collected poems and essays, published some time after his death, there is a pathetic introduction. "He seemed to tread the earth as a spirit from some better world," writes his father; and a correspondent, who, I have been told, is Arthur Hallam's and Tennyson's common friend, Mr. Gladstone, and whose letter