

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XXVI. (Continued.)

"Ye'll need to spier at himsel' to find that out. He says naething to me."

"We will hope better things for you," said Allison.

She took the child in her arms again. A fair, fragile little creature she was, with soft rings of golden hair, and great, wistful blue eyes. She was not in the least shy or frightened, but nestled in Allison's arms in perfect content.

"Come and see Charlie," said she.

Charlie was a little lad whose right place was in another room; but being restless and troublesome, he had been brought here for a change.

"What ails you, my laddie?" asked Allison, meeting his sharp, bright eyes.

"Just a sair leg. It's better now. Oh! ay, it hurts whiles yet, but no' so bad. Have you ony books?"

"No, I brought no book with me except my Bible."

"Weel, a Bible would be better than nae book at a'."

"Eh! laddie! Is that the way ye speak of the good Book?" said a voice behind him. "And there's Bibles here—plenty of them."

"Are ye comin' the morn'?" asked the lad.

"Yes, I am," said Allison.

"And could ye no' get a book to bring with you—a book of ony kind—except the catechis'?"

"Heard ye ever the like o' that! Wha has had the up-bringin' o' ye?"

"Myself maistly. What ails ye at my up-bringin'? Will ye had a book for me the morn'?" said he to Allison.

"If I can, and if it's allowed."

"Oh! naeboddy will hinder ye. It's no' my head, but my leg that's sair. Readin' winna do that ony ill, I'm thinkin'."

And then Allison went on to another bed, and backwards and forwards among them, through the long day. There were not many of them, but oh! the pain, and the weariness!—the murmurs of some, and the dull patience of others, how sad it was to see! Would she ever get 'used with it,' as the woman had said, so that she could help them without thinking about them, as she had many a time kept her hands busy with her household work, while her thoughts were far away? It did not seem possible. No, surely it would never come to that with her.

Oh! no, because there was help for all these poor sufferers—help which she might bring them, by telling them how she herself had been helped, in her time of need. And would not that be a good work for her to do, let her life be ever so long and empty of all other happiness? It might be that all the troubles through which she had passed were meant to prepare her for such a work.

For the peace which had come to her was no vain imagination. It had filled her heart and given her rest, even before the long, quiet time which had come to her, when she was with the child beside the far-away sea. And through her means, might not this peace be sent to some of these suffering poor women who had to bear their troubles alone?

She stood still, looking straight before her, forgetful, for the moment, of all her own thoughts. Her hopes, she called them, for she could not but hope that some such work as this might be given her to do.

"Allison Bain," said a faint voice from a bed near which she stood. Allison came out of her dream with a start, to meet the gaze of a pair of great, blue eyes, which she knew she had somewhere seen before, but not in a face so wan and weary as the one which lay there upon the pillow. She stooped down to catch the words which came more faintly still from the lips of the speaker.

"I saw you—and I couldna keep myself from speaking. But ye needna fear. I will never tell that it is you—or that I have seen you. Oh! I thought I would never see a kened face again."

The girl burst into sudden weeping, holding fast the hand which Allison had given her.

"Is it Mary Brand?" whispered Allison, after a little.

"No, it is Annie. Mary is dead and—safe," and she turned her face away and lay quiet for a while.

Allison made a movement to withdraw her hand.

"Wait a minute. I must speak to some one—before I die—and I may die this night," she murmured, holding her with appealing eyes. "I'm Annie," she said. "You'll mind how my mother died, and how my father married again—over-soon maybe—and we were all angry, and there was no peace in the house. So the elder ones scattered,—one went here and another there. We were over-young to take right heed,—and not very strong. Mary took a cold, and she grew worse, and—went home to die at last. As for me—I fell into trouble,—and I daredna go home. Sometime I may tell you—but I'm done out now. I'm near the end—and oh! Allie—I'm feared to die. Even if I were sorry enough, and the Lord were to forgive me how could I ever look into my mother's face in heaven? There are some sins that cannot be blotted out, I'm sair feared, Allie."

Allison had fallen on her knees by the low bed, and there were tears on her cheeks.

"Annie," said she, "never, never think that. See, I am sorry for you. I can kiss you and comfort you, and the Lord Himself will forgive you. You have His own word for that. And do you think your own mother could hold back? Take hope, Annie. Ask the Lord Himself. Do ye no' mind how Doctor Hadden used to say in every prayer he prayed, 'Oh! Thou who art mighty to save'—Mighty to save! Think of it, dear. 'Neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.' Jesus said that Himself. Ah! ye are weary and spent—but ye have strength to say, 'Save me, I perish.'—And that is enough."

"Weary and spent!" Yes, almost to death. The parched lips said faintly, "Come again," and the blue, beseeching eyes said more. Allison promised surely that she would come, and she kissed her again, before she went away.

She came often—every day, and many times a day, and she always had a good word to say to the poor sorrowful soul, who needed it so much. Annie lingered longer than had seemed possible at first, and there came a day when every

moment that Allison could spare was given to her, and then a long night of watching, till at the dawning she passed away—sinful, but forgiven; trembling, yet not afraid. Allison kissed the dead mouth, and clipped from the forehead one ring of bright hair, saying to herself: "To mind me, if ever I should grow faithless and forget."

But many things had happened before this came to pass. For at the end of the first week of Allison's stay among the sick and sorrowful folk, there came to her the message for which she had through all the days been waiting. It was Doctor Fleming who brought it, saying only, "Come."

"Is he dying?" she found voice to say, as they passed into the room together.

"No. Oh! no. But he has come to himself, in a measure, and needs to be roused. Your coming may startle him. That is what I wish. It cannot really harm him."

And so with little outward token of the inward trembling which seized her when she saw his face, Allison stood beside her husband. Yes, her husband! For the first time, scarcely knowing what she did, she said to herself, "My husband."

The doctors had something to do for him, and something to say to one another, and she stood looking on in silence, pale, but calm and firm, at least as far as they could see. They spoke to him and he answered sensibly enough, and muttered, and complained, and begged to be let alone, as sick folk will, and told them at last that little good had all their physis done him yet.

They let in the light, and his eye followed Allison and rested on her face for a moment; then he sighed and turned away. No one moved, and in a little he turned his head again, and his colour changed. Then they let down the curtain, and the room was in shadow.

"A dream—the old dream, aye coming—coming—only a dream," they heard him say with a sigh.

Doctor Fleming beckoned to Allison, and she followed him from the room.

"He will sleep now for a while, and when he awakens he will be more himself. You are not afraid to be left with him? He may know you when he awakens again."

"I am not afraid," said Allison, speaking faintly, and then she added with a firmer voice, "No, I am not afraid."

"You have but to open the door and call, and his man Dickson will be with you in a minute. Do not speak to him unless he speaks to you. Even if he should speak, it may be better to call Dickson, and come away."

Doctor Fleming spoke gravely and briefly, letting no look or tone of sympathy escape from him. "I'll see you again before I leave the place," said he.

So she sat down a little withdrawn from the bed and waited, wondering how this strange and doubtful experiment was to end. He neither spoke nor moved, but seemed to slumber quietly enough till Doctor Fleming returned. He did not come in, but beckoned Allison to the door.

"That is long enough for to-day. Are you going to your poor folk again? If it should suit you better to go home, you can do so. Old Flora has returned, and I will speak to her."

"I will go out for a little, but I will come back. They will expect me. Yes, I would like better to come back again."

And so she went out a while, and when she returned she brought an odd volume of the History of Scotland to restless Charlie, and a late rose or two tied up with a bit of sweet-briar and thyme, to poor Annie Brand.

The next day passed like the first. Allison went when she was called, and sat beside the sick man's bed for an hour or two. He followed her with his eyes, and seemed to know her, but he did not utter a word. He was restless and uneasy, and muttered and sighed, but he had no power to move himself upon the bed, and he did not fall asleep, as Allison hoped he might after a while. For the look in his troubled eyes hurt her sorely. There was recognition in them, she thought, and doubt, and a gleam of anger.

"If I could do something for him," thought she.

"But to sit here useless! And I must not even speak to him until he speaks to me."

She rose, and walked about the room, knowing that the dull eyes were following her as she moved. When she sat down again she took a small New Testament from her pocket, and as she opened it he turned his face away, and did not move again till a step was heard at the door. Then, as some one entered, he cried out with a stronger voice than had been heard from him yet:

"Is that you, Dickson? Send yon woman away—if she be a woman and not a wraith (spirit)," he added, as he turned his face from the light.

It was not Dickson. It was the doctor who met Allison's startled look as he came in at the door.

"You have had enough for this time. Has he spoken to you?" said he.

"He has spoken, but not to me. I think he knew me, and not with good-will."

"You could hardly expect that, considering all things. He had made a step in advance, for all that. And now go away, and do not show your face in this place again to-day. Wrap yourself up well, and go for a long walk. Go out of the town or down to the sands. Yes, you must do as I bid you. Never heed the auld wives and the bairns to-day. I ken they keep your thoughts on their troubles and away from your own. But you may have a good while of this work yet—weeks, it may be, or months," and in his heart he said, "God grant it may not be for years."

"Yes, I will go," said Allison, faintly.

"And you must take good care of yourself. Mistress Allison, you have set out on a road in which there is no turning back now, if you would help to save this man's soul."

"I have no thought of turning back," said Allison.

"That is well. And to go on will need faith and patience, and ye'll also need to have a' your wits about you. You'll need perfect health and your natural strength, and ye'll just do my bidding in all things, that you may be fit to meet all that is before you—since it seems to be God's will that this work should fall to you."

Allison went at the doctor's bidding. She wrapped herself up and went down to the sands, to catch the breeze from the sea. It was more than a breeze which met her. It was almost a gale. The waves were coming grandly in, dashing themselves over the level sands. Allison stood and watched them for a while musing.

"And each one of them falls by the will of the Lord. A word from Him could quiet them now, as His 'Peace, be still,' quieted the waves on the Sea of Galilee so long ago. 'Oh! ye of little faith!' said He, 'Wherefore do ye doubt?'"

As He might well say to me this day, for oh! I am faint-hearted. Was I wrong from the beginning? And is my sin finding me out? Have I undertaken what I can never go through with? God help me, is all that I can say, and though I must doubt myself, let me never, never, never doubt Him."

And then she set herself to meet the strong wind, and held her way against it till she came to a sheltered spot, and there she sat down to rest. When she turned homeward again there was no strong wind to struggle against. It helped her on as she went before it, and it seemed to her as if she had come but a little way when she reached the place where she had watched the coming in of the waves. The weight was lifted a little from her heart.

"It is only a day at a time, however long it may be," she told herself. "It is daily strength that is promised, and God sees the end, though I do not."

Yes, daily strength is promised, and the next day, and for many days, as she went into the dim room where the sick man lay, Allison felt the needs of its renewal. It was not the silence which was so hard to bear. It was the constant expectation, which was almost dread, that the silent lips might open to speak the recognition which she sometimes saw in the eyes, following her as she moved. There were times when she said to herself that she could not long bear it.

"In one way he is better," said the doctor. "He is coming to himself and his memory—his power of recalling the past—is improving. He is stronger too, though not much, as yet. With his loss of memory his accident has had less to do than the life he had been living before it. He has had a hard tussle, but he is a strong man naturally, and he may escape this time. From the worst effects of his accident he can never recover. As far as I can judge from present symptoms, he will never walk a step again—never. But he may live for years. He may even recover so as to be able to attend to business again—in a way."

Allison had not a word with which to answer him. The doctor went on.

"I might have kept this from you for a while, but I have this reason for speaking now. I do not ask if you have 'counted the cost.' I know you have not. You cannot do it. You have nothing to go upon which might enable you to do so. Nothing which you have ever seen or experienced in life, could make you know, or help you to imagine, what your life would be—and might be for years—spent with this man, as his nurse, or his servant—for it would come to that. Not a woman in a thousand could bear it—unless she loved him. And even so, it would be a slow martyrdom."

Allison sat silent, with her face turned away.

"What I have to say to you is this," went on the doctor. "Since it is impossible—if it is impossible, that such a sacrifice should be required at your hands, it will not be wise for you to bide here longer, or to let him get used to you, and depend upon you, so that he would greatly miss you. If you are to go, then the sooner the better."

Allison said nothing, but by her changing colour, and by the look in her eyes, the doctor knew that she was considering her answer, and he waited patiently.

"No," said Allison, "I do not love him, but I have great pity for him—and—I am not afraid of him any more. I think I wish to do God's will. If you do not say otherwise, I would wish to bide a while yet—till—it is made plain to me that I ought to do. For I was to blame as well as he. I should have stood fast against him. I hope—I believe, that I wish to do right now, and the right way is seldom the easy way."

"That is true. But many a sacrifice which good women make for men who are not worthy of it, is made in vain. I do not like to think of what you may have to suffer, or that such a man should have, as it were, your life at his disposal. As for you, you might leave all this care and trouble behind you, and begin a new life in a new land."

"That was what I meant to do. But if the Lord had meant that for me, why should He have let me be brought here, knowing not what might be before me."

"I doubt I am not quite free from responsibility in the matter, but I thought the man was going to die."

"No, you are not to blame. When Mr. Rainy touched my arm that day in the street, I seemed to know what was coming, and I would not wait to hear him. And when Saunders Crombie spoke his first word to me that night, I kened well what I must do. But, like you, I thought he was going to die. And so I came, though I was sore afraid. But I am not afraid now, and you might let me bide a little longer, till I see my way clearer whether I should go or stay."

"Let you stay! How could I hinder you if I were to try? And I am not sure that I wish to hinder you. I suppose there may be a woman in a thousand who could do as you desire to do, and come through unscathed, and you may be that woman. My only fear is—no, I will not say it. I do believe that you are seeking to do God's will in this matter. Let us hope that during the next few days His will may be made clear to you, and to me also."

But Mr. Rainy had also a word to say with regard to this.

"If I had thought it possible that the man was going to live, I would never have spoken to you, or let my eyes rest upon you that day. Yes, I was sure that he was going to die. And I thought that you might do him some good maybe—pray for him, and all that, and that his conscience might be ceased. Then I thought he might make some amends at last. But well ken I, that all the gear he has to leave will ill pay you for the loss of the best years of your youth, living the life you would have to live with him. I canna take upon myself to advise you, since you havena asked my advice; but really, if ye were just to slip away quietly to your brother in America, I, for one, would hold my tongue about it. And if ever the time should come when you needed to be defended from him, I would help you against him, and all the world, with right good will."

Allison thanked him gently and gravely, but he saw that she was not to be moved. A few more days, at least, the doctor was to give her, and then she must decide. Before those days were over something had happened.

One day, for some reason or other, she was detained longer than usual among her "auld wives," and it was late when she came into Brownrig's room.

"What has keptit you?" said he impatiently.

It was the very first time he had ever directly addressed her.

"I have been detained," said Allison quietly. "Can I do anything for you now that I am here?"