

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XXXI.—Continued.

"And was he angry with me? I mean, was he angry that I was with your uncle at the end?"

"He did not speak of that. You must let me thank you for all you did for my uncle in his last days."

"Oh! no. You must not thank me. It was only my duty; I could not have done otherwise," said Allison. "And did Willie not speak of me at all?"

"Yes. He said that there was not in all Scotland another woman like his sister Allie, nor in America either."

Allison smiled at that.

"And did he send no letter to me?"

"Yes, he sent a letter. I have it with me. No, I gave it to a friend, who said he would put it into your own hand."

"It was to your brother's friend that he gave me the letter," said Mrs. Esselmont in a whisper.

So when Allison came home to see a light in the parlour window, and a tall shadow moving back and forth upon the blind, she knew who was waiting for her there.

An hour later, Robert Hume came to the house.

"Missess Allison must have gone to the inn with Mrs. Esselmont and her friends," said Mrs. Robb, "and here has the poor lad been waiting for her in the parlour an hour and more. What can be keepin' her, think you? And I dinna just like to open the door."

Robert laughed. "Poor fellow, indeed!" said he. "I suppose we may at least knock and ask leave to open it."

They had seen each other already, but the hands of the two young men met in a clasp which said some things which neither would have cared to put into words for the other's hearing. Then Robert turned to Allison, who was sitting there "just as usual," he thought at first. But there was a look on her face, which neither he nor any one else had seen there till now.

"No. I am not going to sit down," said Robert. "But I promised my mother that I would write to-night, to tell her how it all ended, and I need my time."

"Ended! It is only beginning," said John.

"Robert," said Allison gravely, "does John ken?"

Robert laughed.

"There are few things that John doesna ken, I'm thinking. What I mean is this. How did old Rainy and you agree at last?"

"Yes, Allison, I ken," said John, as she turned to him, "and I say as you said. The end is as right as right can be."

"Were you there, John?" said Allison wondering.

"Surely, I was there as Captain Douglas' friend. He had a right to ask me, you see."

"You know him, John, and Miss Mary?"

"We sailed together, and I had seen Captain Douglas before that time."

"Yes, when he went to see my brother. A friend helped him, he told me, a friend of Willie's, and I knew it must be you."

John told something of the interview between them, and when a pause came, Robert, who had been standing all this time, said:

"There is just one thing more which I must tell my mother. When are you coming home to the manse? and when is it to be?"

"You are a bold lad, Robin. I have not dared to ask that yet," said John.

But when Robert was gone he asked it, and Allison was kind and let him "name the day."

"A week hence? But is not that very soon, considering all you have to do?"

"Oh, no! All that I have to do can be done after," said John. "Will it be soon for you?"

Allison's modest "providing" had been growing under her own busy hands, during the brief leisure which her daily duties left her. It was all of the plainest and simplest, but it was sufficient in her esteem.

"Yes," said she after a moment's hesitation, "I can be ready, and—whatever more you think I need you will have to give me, John."

John laughed and kissed her hand. Then he said gravely:

"And, dear, I made a promise once, for you and for myself. I said, if this happy day should ever come, I would take my wife, first of all, to the manse of Kilgower to get an old man's blessing."

Kilgower! At the name, a shadow of the old trouble fell on Allison's face—for the last time.

"I will go anywhere with you, John," said she.

The next day Allison went home to the manse—another "happy home-coming," as Marjorie called it,—though she was to be there only a little while. There were few changes in the manse since the old days. There was a gleam of silver on the dark hair of the minister, and the face of the minister's wife showed a touch of care, now and then, when she fell into silence. But in the home there were cheerfulness and content, and a hopeful outlook as there had always been, and the peace which comes as the fulfilment of a promise which cannot be broken.

The boys had grown bigger and stronger, and they had three sisters now. Jack was not at home. Jack was in the South learning to make steam engines, and when he had learned, he was going to America to make his fortune, like John Beaton. And so was Davie. Only Davie was to have land—a farm of a thousand acres. To America, the thoughts and hopes of all the young people of the manse were turning, it seemed, and the thoughts of a good many in the town, as well.

John Beaton's success in the new country to which he had gone, was the theme of admiring discussion among the townsfolk, and when John came to Nethermuir, before the week was over, he found that all arrangements had been made for a lecture about America, which was to be delivered in the kirk. John saw at once that he could not refuse to speak. But it would be no lecture that he could give, he declared. If any one had any questions to ask, he would answer them as well as he could. And this he did, to the general satisfaction.

As to his own success—yes, he had been successful in so far, that he had made a beginning. That was all he had done as yet. It was a beginning indeed which gave him good reason for thankfulness and for hope.

"Oh! yes. America is a fine country. But after all, the chief thing is, that there is room for folk out there. When one comes to speak about success, courage, and patience, and strength, and hard work are as necessary to ensure it there as they are here in Scotland. But there is this to be said. When a man's land is his own, and he kens that every stroke of his axe, and every furrow of his plough, is to tell to his own advantage, it makes a wonderful difference." And so on, to the pleasure and profit of all who heard it.

Allison did not hear the lecture, nor Marjorie. They were at Mrs. Esselmont's. Marjorie enjoyed the visit and had much to say of it, when she came home. Allison did not enjoy it so well. She was a little doubtful as to how John would be pleased when he came to hear all. That was what troubled Allison,—that, and the fear that Mrs. Esselmont and Mrs. Douglas might see her trouble.

For it seemed that it was not to be left to John to supply all the rest that was needed in the way of Allison's "providing." For a glimpse was given her of a great many beautiful things, "naiprie," and bed linen, and gowns and shawls, and other things which a bride is supposed to require. And something was said of china and silver, that were waiting to be sent away to the ship when the time for sailing came. And Allison was not sure how John might like all this. But she need not to have been afraid.

Mrs. Esselmont had a word with John that night, when he came after his "lecture" to take Allison home. On their way thither, he said to her:

"What did Mrs. Esselmont mean when she said to me, that she had at one time hoped that you would come home to her, to be to her a daughter in her old age?"

"Did she say that? It was friend and companion that she said to me. It was at the worst time of all, when Willie had written to me that he was going away to the far West. I was longing to get away, but I couldna go, not knowing that Willie wanted me, and because—until—Oh! yes, I was sad and lonely, and not very strong, and Mrs. Esselmont asked me. But it was not daughter she said to me, but companion and friend."

"And what answer did you give her?"

"I thanked her, but I couldna promise, since I must go to my brother sooner or later."

"And was it only of your brother that you thought Allison?"

"I had no right to think of any one else then, and besides—"

"Well, besides?" said John after a pause.

"It was you that Elsie liked best, Willie thought—and that her father liked best, as well—"

"Did the foolish fellow tell you that?"

"He said that Elsie was aye friendly with you, and that she had hardly a word or a look for him, and he was afraid that it might break friendship between you if he stayed on, and he said he was going away."

"And he did go, the foolish lad. Friendly! Yes, Elsie and I were friendly, but it was Willie who had her heart. But his going away did no harm in the end."

Allison sighed.

"It was aye Willie's way to yield to impulse, and ill came of it whiles."

"It is his way still—whiles. But it is good that mostly comes of it now. And in Elsie's hands, a thread will guide him. You will love Elsie dearly, Allison."

"I love her dearly already."

They had reached the manse by this time, and as they lingered a moment in the close, John said:

"And were you pleased with all the bonny things that Mrs. Esselmont has been speaking to me about?"

Allison started, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Are you pleased, John? I was afraid—"

"Yes, I am pleased. She is very kind."

John kept her hand in his, and led her on till they came to the garden gate. "Now tell me of what you are afraid, Allie," said he.

"Oh! not afraid. But I was glad to come to you with little, because I knew you would be glad to give me all. And I thought that perhaps you—But Mrs. Esselmont is very kind."

"My dear, I would be ill to please indeed, if I were not both pleased and proud to hear the words which Mrs. Esselmont said of you to-night. Yes, she is more than kind, and she has a right to give you what she pleases, because she loves you dearly."

Allison gave a sigh of pleasure.

"Oh! it was not that I was afraid. But I was, for so long a time, troubled and anxious,—that—that—whiles—I think I am not just like other women—and that you might—"

John uttered a little note of triumph.

"Like other women? You are very little like the most of them, I should say."

"It is not of you—it is not of myself I am afraid. You think too well of me, John. I am not so good and wise as you believe, but I love you, John."

That ought to have been enough, and there were only a few words more, and this was one of them:

"Allie," said John gravely, "I doubt that I am neither so wise nor so good as you think me to be. You will need to have patience with me. There are some who say I am hard, and over-ful of myself, and whiles I have thought it of myself. But, Allie, if I am ever hard with you, or forgetful, or if I ever hurt you by word or deed, it will not be because I do not love you dearly. And you will aye have patience with me, dear, and trust me?"

"I am not afraid, John."

The happy day came, and the marriage in the manse parlour was a very quiet affair, as those who were most concerned desired it to be. But in the opinion of Nethermuir generally, a great mistake had been made. The marriage should have been in the kirk, it was said, so that all the town might have seen it.

Robert was best-man, and Marjorie was best-maid. Mrs. Esselmont and her daughter and son-in-law were there, and one other guest.

"Think of it!" folk said. "Only one asked to the marriage out of the whole town, and that one auld Saunners Crombie!"

There was a good reason for that in John's esteem, and in Allison's. Saunners appreciated the honour which was done

him. He also did honour to the occasion—pronouncing with unction over the bride and bridegroom the blessings so long ago spoken at the gate of Bethlehem.

It was not quite springtime yet, but the day was like a spring day, with a grey sky, and a west wind blowing softly, when John and Allison came in sight of the kirk of Kilgower. Only the voice of the brown burn broke the stillness, murmuring its way past the manse garden, and the kirkyard wall, and over the stepping-stones on which Allison had dared to rest her tired feet, on the morning when she saw it last, and she said in her heart:

"Oh! can it be that I am the same woman who would fain have died on that day?"

They went into the kirkyard first. The tears which fell on the white headstone were not all tears of sorrow. They told of full submission, of glad acceptance of God's will in all the past, and of gratitude for all that the future promised.

"John," said she softly. But her voice failed her to say more.

"We will come again, dear," said he gently, and he led her away.

And so they went on to the manse, and Allison bowed her head while the good old man blessed her, and was glad, though the tears were very near her eyes. John had much to tell the minister about his son, and his happy family, and of their way of life, and the good which they did in the town; and after a little, Allison smiled as she met her husband's kind eyes, and was ready with her answers when Dr. Hadden turned to her.

They were to stay over the Sabbath. Surely they must stay over the Sabbath, the minister said, and the reason which he gave for their staying was the one which John would have given for wishing to go away.

"There will be so many at the kirk who will like to see Allison Bain's face again," said he.

But when he added reverently, "And doubtless it is in her heart to thank God in His own house, for all the way by which He has led her since that sorrowful day," what could they do but promise to remain?

In the gloaming, they went down by the burnside, and past the stepping-stones, and round the hill to the cottage of Janet Marr. It was a dark little place. The tiny peat fire on the hearth cast only a faint light, and it was some moments before they caught a glimpse of the wee bowed wife, who had befriended Allison in her time of need.

"Come ye awa ben," said she. "Is it Betty, or is it the minister's Barbara? Bide still till I licht my bit lampie."

But when the lamp was lighted, she "wasna just sae sure," even then, who it was that had come in.

"Dinna ye mind Allie Bain, and how good ye were to her, the day she gaed awa?"

"Ay do I. Weel that. Eh, woman! Are ye Allie Bain?"

The lamp did not cast a very bright light, but it fell full on Allison's face.

"Eh! but ye're grown a bonny woman! Sit ye doon and rest yersel'. And wha is this? Is it witless Willie, as I've heard folk ca' him?"

She did not wait for an answer, but wandered away to other matters. She seemed quite to have forgotten the events of the last year. But she told them about her mother and about the man she should have married, who were both lying in the kirkyard doon by, and about her father and her brothers who were lost at sea.

"I'm sair failed," said she. "It has been an unco hard winter, and I hae had to keep the hoose. But I'll be mysel' again, when the bonny spring days come, and I can win out to the kirkyard. It's a bonny place, and wholesome."

And so she wandered. They did not try to bring her thoughts back to later days. "It was as well not," Allison said sadly.

Yes, she was sore failed, but she brightened wonderfully at the touch of a golden piece which John put into her hand.

"I'll tak' it to the manse and get it changed for the bawbees and pennies that are gathered in the kirk. It'll tak' twa or three Sabbaths o' them. I daursay, to mak' it out. Eh! but ye're a braw lad, and weelfaured," added she, holding up the lamp and peering into his face. "And muckle gude be wi' ye a' ye're days," she added as they went away.

"You have never told me of all the help she gave you," said John, as they went down the burn side together.

"Sometime I will tell you; I would fain forget it all just now."

The next day they went to Grassie, to see the two or three with whom Allison could claim kindred in the countryside. She had seen them last on her father's burial-day. Then they went to many a spot where, in their happy childhood, Allison and her brother used to play together. John had heard of some of these before, he said. He knew the spot at the edge of the moor, where young Alexander Hadden had rescued Willie from the jaws of death, and he recognized the clump of dark old firs, where the hoodie-craws used to take counsel together, and the little nook where the two bairns were wont shelter from the wind or the rain. And he reminded Allison of things which she had herself forgotten. At some of them she wept, and at others she laughed, joyful to think that her brother should remember them so well. And she too had some things to tell, and some sweet words to say, in the gladness of her heart, which John might never have heard but for their walk over the hills that day.

They went to the kirk on the Sabbath, and sat, not in the minister's pew, but in the very seat where Allison used to sit with her father and her mother and Willie, before trouble came. And when the silence was broken by the minister's voice saying; "Oh Thou who art mighty to save!" did not her heart respond joyfully to the words? The tears rose as she bowed her head, but her heart was glad as she listened to the good words spoken. When they came out into the kirkyard, where, one by one, at first, and afterward by twos and threes, the folk who had known her all her life came up to greet her, there was neither tears nor smiles on her face, but a look, at once gentle and firm and grave—the look of a strong, patient, self-respecting woman, who had passed through the darkness of suffering and sorrow into the light at last.

John stood a little apart, watching and waiting for her, and in his heart he was saying, "May I grow worthy of her and of her love." When there had been "quite enough of it," as he thought, and he was about to put an end to it, there drew near, doubtful, yet eager, an old bowed man, to take her hand, and then John saw his wife's face, "as if it had been the face of an angel."

She had waited for all the rest to come to her, but