

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

"I was but a lad," he said to himself. "I didna ken what he was till I lost him."

"You are growing like him, John," said his mother softly. "Am I, mother? I doubt it is only your loving een that can see it."

"Are ye troubled, John?" were the words that rose to the mother's lips, but they were not spoken. "Ye're needing your tea, John," said she instead.

John laughed. "I'm needing something, and I'll be glad of my tea in the meantime. No, you are not to rise. You are to sit still in your chair and tell me what to do."

Not that he needed telling. The skill, and the will, and the gentleness natural to a loving daughter had come to this mother's son through long and loving service. So the little table was brought forward, on which all things were already arranged. The tea was "masket," and the tea-pot covered with the "cosie," and during the three minutes necessary and sufficient for its proper infusion, John went to his room, and the mother's face grew grave while she waited.

"He's no' at peace with himself. But he'll tell me if he's needing my help. God bless him and keep him this day—and forever and aye."

Then John came in and they had their tea, and spoke about other things, about the visit she had had in the afternoon from little Marjorie, whom Allison Bain had carried in her arms to see her, as she often did, and of how the child was growing stronger every day. And then they agreed together that little Annie Thom, who had been coming in to help Mrs. Beaton all these years, should come now to stay always, because it would be better in many ways for both mistress and maid. They spoke of other things besides; but it must be acknowledged that John said little, and was not so ready with assent or response as he was wont to be when his mother had anything to say to him.

After a time they fell into silence for a little, and then John said:

"I have something to tell you, mother."

"Is it good news, John?" said his mother with a little flutter at her heart.

"Part of it is good, surely. As for the rest—that may be good or bad, as you shall take it."

"I'm waiting, John."

For John's head had drooped on his hand, and he sat thinking.

"And you're a wee anxious? But there is no occasion, mother dear. I have good news. I meant to tell you the night I came home. I could hardly wait till I got home to tell you. I dinna ken how I put it off," added John hurriedly. "Mother, did you ever hear my father speak of a good turn he once did to one David Cunningham, a long time ago it must have been?"

"No. He wasna one who was in the way of telling o' the good turns he did, as ye ken. But I mind the name of Cunningham."

"This must have been before your day. Maybe a good while before it." And John went on to tell the story of his father's timely help to a foolish lad, and of the debt which the man wished to pay, according to his friend's desire, to those who came after him. And when he had told all he knew about it, and how the money which his father had given had been increasing through all these years till it had become a sum so large that the interest alone would keep his mother in comfort for the rest of her life, his mother only said softly:

"Well, John?" as though something which he had had to say was still to be told.

"Well, mother. I think it is your turn now. Wasna that grand of my father?"

"It was like him. And is this David Cunningham able to spare all that money? It would be an ill thing to harm or harass him after so long a time."

"I cannot say whether he be rich or poor; but I am certain that nothing will hinder him from paying his debt. He told me that the sight of my face had given him more pleasure than anything he had seen in Scotland yet," said John, laughing. "I would have brought him out to see you, if the doctor would have let him come. He is but a frail man, and must go to the south again till summer is fairly here. He said little about himself, but I know he is a married man."

"And he would be sorry to hear of your father's losses at the last."

"Ay, that he was he, and angry at the ill done him. If he had but known, he said, he could have helped to tide him over the worst of his troubles, and it might have prolonged his life."

"It was God's will, and we must submit," said Mrs. Beaton softly.

"Yes, it was God's will." Then John rose and set the table back into its place, and stirred the fire and sat down again.

"Well, John?" said his mother in a little.

"Well, mother! You are a rich woman again, in a small way."

"I have aye been a rich woman. If I had been asked would I have more, I would have said I am content. I am glad of this for your sake, John, if you are glad. But I think the message from your father, as it seems, is more to me than the money."

"Yes, mother, and to me as well."

"You had something to tell me, John," said his mother, in a little.

"I thought I had when I came home. Now I am not sure. There is something that we may speak about together, and you will help me to make up my mind one way or the other."

Mrs. Beaton listened in silence as John went on to tell her what he had been doing and thinking for a while. He had not been idle since the building season ended. He had been in the employment of one of the builders of the town. He had been able to make himself useful to him—first by going over and putting to rights the books of the business, which had fallen into confusion, and afterward at more congenial work, where his knowledge of drawing, to which he had given much time when he was a boy, was brought into account with a success which had surprised himself. And now his employer had

offered him a permanent place, with an opportunity to acquire the kind of knowledge of his work which would come but slowly to him while he worked only with his hands.

He owned that he liked Mr. Swinton, and that they got on well together. Yes, the prospect of success seemed reasonable certain if he were to give himself wholly to the work. And then he came to a pause.

"Yes. It looks like that," said his mother. She missed the eager hopefulness with which her son was wont to bring forward any new plan or prospect of his, and she thought it wiser to let him go on of his own accord to say his say than to question him.

"Do you think well of it, mother? But there is one thing to be said which will please neither you nor me. I doubt in such a case we will need to say farewell to Nethermuir, and take up house in the town."

"Ay, we should both be sorry for that, but it could be done. You have more to say yet, John?"

"I thought I might have more to say, but since you are content with things as they are, it might be as well to say nothing."

"Tell me what is in your mind, John. You needna doubt but I'll take it reasonably whatever it may be."

John laughed.

"I have no fears for you, mother. It is for myself and my own discontents that I fear."

"Tell your mother, laddie."

Then he went on with his story. How he had taken to college work in earnest with Sandy Begg, how he had enjoyed it and been successful with it, and how the thought had come into his mind that after all he might go on again and redeem his character by doing now what he had failed to do when the way was made easy to him.

"I think my father would be pleased, mother, if he could ken. When I think of him I canna forget that I gave him a sore heart at the time when his troubles were coming thick upon him. I would like to do as he wished me to do, now that the way seems open."

"Is the way open?" asked his mother gravely. "If you take that way, all that you have been doing and learning for the last years will be an utter loss. I have aye liked to think of you as following in your father's steps to overtake success as he did."

"I am not the man my father was, as no one should ken better than my mother."

"But if you were to fall in with this man's offer, you could take the road your father took with fewer steps and less labour, and I might see you a prosperous man yet before I die. And all the good your father did, whether openly or in secret, would begin again in his son's life, and some of it, at least, your mother might see. I canna but long for the like of that, John."

"I would try to do my best, mother. But my best would fall far short of what my father did."

"Oh, fie! John, laddie! What ails ye at yourself the night, man? Do I no' ken my ain son by this time, think ye? Ay, do I. Better, maybe, than he kens himself."

"There can be no small doubt of that, mother. Only your kind eyes see fewer faults and failing than he kens of himself. And, mother, I am afraid the man who had my father for his good friend has done me an ill turn. He has, in a measure, taken away the motive for my work, and so I can have little pleasure in it."

"But, John, you will have your ain life to live and your ain work to do when your mother is dead and gone. I have been pleased and proud to have my son for breadwinner, and ken that he was pleased and proud for the same reason. But for all that, I am glad that you are set free to think of your ain life. You are wearing on, lad, and it would be a great gladness for me to see you in your ain house with wife and bairns about you before I die. Ye can let yourself think of it now, since I am off your hands."

"May ye live to see all you wish, mother. It winna be this while, though. There's time enough for the like of that."

"Well, that's true. There's no' to say much time lost at four-and-twenty. But I am growing an old woman and frail, and I mayna have so very many years before me. And ye needna put marriage off till middle life as your father did. Though he aye said had we met sooner it might have been different even with him. And it would be a wonderful thing for me to see my son's wife and bairns before I die," repeated she softly.

John rose and moved about the room. He had to do it with caution, for there was no space for more than two or three of his long, impatient strides between the four walls. His impulse was to rush out to the darkening lanes or even to the more distant hills, that he might have it out with himself there.

For his mother's words had moved him and a pair of wistful, brown eyes were looking at him from the dying embers and from the darkness without. He was saying to himself that the way lay straight before him if he chose to take it—the way to moderate success in life, a competence before his youth was past, and, as his mother had said, a wife and a happy home.

And would all this content him? Who could say? No thought of these things had troubled him, or even come into his mind till now. And no such thoughts would have come now, he told himself, if it had not been for his mother's words and a pair of bonny een. Should he let himself be influenced by a dream—a mere fancy?

It would pass away, this folly. It must pass away. Would it be wise to let circumstances guide him to take the course which seemed for a time to be the easiest, the most direct to insure a measure of success? Should he be wise in putting out of his thoughts the hopes and plans which had been occupying him lately? No, he was fit for higher work than cutting stones or building or planning houses. He could not go back to such work now. Even his mother's desire must be put aside when the work of his life was in question.

And yet!—and yet his mother's simple wisdom had never failed him since the day they had gone forth together from what had been the happiest of homes. She might be right, and he might be putting away the substance to please himself by chasing a shadow. So he said to himself, as she waited quietly with folded hands. He was anxious, uncertain, bewildered, as unlike himself, or as unlike his own idea of himself, as could well be. He was amazed and angry at his foolishness, and eager only to get away from his mother's eyes.

"I promised to go to the manse a while to-night, mother," said he with his hand upon the door.

"Yes, and quite right. The minister has clear vision

and good sense, and will give you none but good advice. But bide a wee. You have told your mother nothing yet. Sit down and let me hear what you are thinking to do. Since we have begun, it will be wise to go through to the end. So that you truly ken your ain mind, I shall be content."

John was far from knowing his own mind. That was what ailed him. And he had been so sure of himself before he came home. And so sure also that he could persuade his mother to see as he did about that which he desired to bring to pass! He did not feel that he could do justice to himself for his plans and prospects at this moment.

He sat down, however, and went over the matter from the beginning. He said something also about his hopes and plans for the future. He by no means meant to give up his work at present. He meant to work in the summer as he had hitherto done, and go on with his reading in the winter. If he and Mr. Swinton were to come to an agreement, it would be all the easier for him. He had no fear but that he could get on with both work and reading till he had got through with the college at least.

"But, O John! it will be a lang look to the end! I can hardly hope to see it, though that would matter little if it were the best thing for you. But what is to come after?" asked his mother with a sigh.

John could not tell her that. But there was nothing more certain than that when he should be "thoroughly furnished," the right work would be found—the very highest work—and a kind of life which would suit him, though he might not grow rich in it.

"John," said his mother gravely, "I hardly think all that would help you to live a better life than your father lived. It is not the *kind* of work that matters: it is the way it is done. Your father did his duty in the sight of God and man, and went far beyond what folk whiles call duty, never letting his left hand ken what his right hand was doing. And I have aye hoped that ye might follow in his steps. It is like a slight on your father, John, when ye speak of higher work."

"Mother! you cannot really think that of me! And, mother, you must mind that my father meant me to do as I wished to do. It is only to begin a little later than he hoped. And there is no fear but I shall see my work when I am ready for it."

"And yet there is many a man in Scotland with a store o' book learning who has done little work, or only ill work, for God and man. And even with a good-will the opportunity doesna aye come."

"Well, never mind, mother. There is no pressing need to decide now, at least till summer is over. We will wait to see what may happen." He did not speak cheerfully, however.

"John," said his mother earnestly, "are ye sure that your heart is set on this? What has come to you? Has anything happened to unsettle you, lad? Tell your mother, John."

John laughed as he rose and then stooped down and kissed her.

"Nothing has happened. It is quite possible that you are right and that I am wrong. We will just wait and see and decide the matter later. Even if we hope to leave Nethermuir, it need not be till summer is over. I am sorry that I have troubled you with this now. You will vex yourself thinking about it all."

"Deed I'll do nothing of the kind. I'll just leave it all in better hands than either yours or mine. And as to your troubling me—Who has a lad a right to trouble if it be not his ain mother? And when a' is said, our way is laid out before us by Him who kens a' and cares for a'. Why should I trouble myself taking thought to-day for the things o' tomorrow? Go your way to the manse, John, and I'll bide still and think about it all."

But the visit to the manse was not so satisfactory as usual. There were other people there, and though John had a few minutes alone with Mr. Hume in the study, there was no time to enter fully into the matter which he had at heart, and on which, he sincerely believed, he wished for the minister's opinion and counsel, and so he said nothing about it.

Robin went down stairs with him, and while he was making ready the lantern to light the way to an outhouse, where Davie had a puppy which his friend must see, John stood waiting by the kitchen door. In her accustomed corner sat Allison, spinning in the light of the lamp which hung high above her head. She raised her eyes and smiled when John came in, but she gave no answer to his greeting, and went on with her spinning, apparently quite unconscious of his presence. As for him, he found nothing to say to her, though the lighting of the lantern seemed to take a good while. To himself he was saying:

"I am glad I came. Of course I knew it was but a fancy and utterly foolish, and that it would pass away. But it is well to know it. Yes, I'm glad I came in."

Could this be the stately maiden he had seen smiling in the sunshine on the hill, with wee Marjorie in her arms? There she sat in the shadow, with the accustomed gloom on her face, wearing the disguise of the big mutch with the set up borders, tied with tape under the chin. An apron, checked in blue and white, held with its strings the striped, short gown close over the scanty petticoat of blue. John wondered whether her thoughts ever wandered away from the thread she was drawing from the head of flax so silently.

"A decent, dull servant lass, strong and wholesome, invaluable doubtless in her place, but just like any other lass of her kind." That is what he said, and then he added:

"She has bonny een." Ay, wonderful soft een, with a world of sorrow and sweetness in them; and he waited with impatience till she should lift them to meet his again. But she did not. And though he let the lads pass out before him, and turned at the door to look back, there she sat, busy with her thread and her own thoughts, with never a thought of him.

"A good lass," he repeated as he followed the lads; but he could not ignore the sense of discomfiture that was on him, as he went down the lane with Robin at his side. He had enough to say to Robin. He had something to tell him about his winter's work, and without meaning to do so, he gave him "an inkling," as Robin called it to his mother, of the plans he had been making, and of the new course which was opening before him.

But John said no more to his mother. It was late when he came home that night, and there was no time for many words in the morning, for he had a long journey before him.

(To be continued.)