

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER VI.

"Do thy duty, that is best,
Leave unto the Lord the rest."

That year there was through all the North an open winter, and the "green yule," which is said to make "a full kirkyard." The weather was mild and moist, with heavy fogs in the morning, which sometimes stayed all day, and all night as well. There was serious illness in many houses, and much discomfort in others, even where there was not danger.

Poor old folk who had sat by the door, or "daundered" about the streets and lanes in comfort during the summer-time, now sat coughing and wheezing in the chimney-corner, or went, bowed and stiff, about the work which must not be neglected, though pain made movement difficult. Some who had lingered beyond the usual term of life "dropped away," and their place knew them no more. And death, the Reaper, not content with the "bearded grain," gathered a flower or two as well.

Measles came first among the bairns, and whooping-cough followed, and Mrs. Hume would have liked to wrap up her little daughter and carry her away from the danger which threatened her. For, that the child should escape these troubles, or live through them, the mother, usually cheerful and hopeful in such times, could not believe. "And her father!" thought she, with a sinking heart, while the father was saying to himself, "Alas for her poor mother"; and out of all their anxious thoughts, nothing better could come than this: "We must submit to God's will, whatever it may be."

As for wrapping her up and carrying her away, that was out of the question. If it had been summer-time they might have sent her to a friend of theirs, who would have cared for the child tenderly and faithfully. But on the whole it seemed wiser to keep her at home.

"We must leave her in God's hand," they said to one another, and they did so entirely. Mrs. Hume was kept away from no sick or suffering household by the thought of possible danger to her little daughter. Many needed both help and comfort who could not come to the manse to find them, and to them the minister and his wife went gladly. But the strain of all she had to do told on Mrs. Hume. She also had her turn of illness, which kept her in the house for a while, and then a part of her duties to the sick poor in the neighbourhood fell to Allison.

"It is not always that the Lord lets us see at once the good which He has promised to bring out of what seems to be evil to us; but He has done so this time," said Mrs. Hume, after a little.

For what she had lost in being laid aside from helping others, Allison had gained in taking her place. It was at some cost to herself, because of her shyness, and because of other folk's curiosity, not always kept within bounds when a chance to gratify it came in the way. But on the whole she held her own among the neighbours, whom she had kept at arm's-length so long, and won the good opinion of many, and their good words also, which were, however, oftener spoken behind her back than before her face, because she would not stay to listen. Her way was to bring the medicine, or the broth, or the jug of tea, and set it down without a word, and then go at once, if there was no more needed from her. But occasionally she put her strong, expert hands to the doing of some good turn—the firm and gentle lifting of some weary, pain-worn creature, while the bed was put right, or to the settling in order of the confusion which soon befalls in a sick-room where nurses are unaccustomed, and have besides other cares to fill their time.

Whatever she did was done in silence. No one in telling of the help she gave, could tell a word she had uttered beyond the message which her mistress had sent. But though she had few words for any one, she had many thoughts about other people's troubles, which helped her to turn from the constant brooding over her own. So she got more than she gave, which is oftener the case with the doers of kindly deeds than is always known.

It was in this way that her acquaintance began with Mrs. Beaton, who lived in a house at the end of the street, close by the green. Allison had sometimes seen her in the kirk, and had noticed her at first for no better reason than that she wore a bonnet. Of course there were other bonnets in the kirk—many of them. The times were changing for the worse, it was thought, and even the servant-ladies were getting to wear bonnets. But of the elderly women who came there, not many had so far changed the fashion of their youth as to cover the white "mutch" with anything but a handkerchief in the summer-time, or with a shawl, or with the hood of the mantle of scarlet or gray duffel, when the weather was cold.

Mrs. Beaton wore a bonnet always at the kirk, and when she went to other places, also, as if she had been used with it all her life. And she had some other fashions as well, which made her seem different from her neighbours in Allison's eyes. She was small and fair, and over her gray hair she wore a widow's cap which was not at all like the thick mutches of the other women, and her shawls and gowns were of a texture and form which told of better days long past. She "kept herself to herself," the neighbours said, which meant that her door did not always stand open to all comers, though she was neighbourly enough in other ways when there was occasion. But though Allison had seen her, she had never spoken with her till the night when the minister, hearing from one of the neighbours that Mrs. Beaton was but poorly, sent her over to inquire about her.

"Just go down and see if you can do anything for her. I

cannot have your mistress disturbed to-night. You will know what to do. Mrs. Beaton is not just like the rest of them, as you will see yourself."

So, Allison went down the dark street, thinking a little about the sick woman, but quite indifferent as to the welcome she might receive. The house stood by itself, a little back from the road, and a wooden paling enclosed a piece of garden ground before it. The gate yielded to her hand, and so did the door. Allison felt her way to the inner door in the dim light, and then she spoke:

"I'm the minister's lass. Mistress Hume is no' weel, or she would have come herself. Will I light your lamp?"

"Ay, might ye, if there is fire enough left," said a voice from the darkness.

The lamp was lighted, and holding it high above her head Allison turned toward the bed. Mrs. Beaton raised herself up, and regarded her for a moment.

"And so you are wee Marjorie's bonny Allie! I am glad to see you."

"You're no' weel. The minister said I was to do what ye needed done."

"It was kind of him to send you, and it is kind in you to come. I'm not just very well. I was trying to settle myself for the night, since there seemed nothing better to be done. Maybe ye might make my bed a wee bit easier for me, if ye were to try."

"I'll do that," said Allison.

"Mrs. Coats would have come in, I suppose; but her bairns are not well, and she has enough to do. And Annie, the lassie that comes in to make my fire and do other things has gone to see her brother, who has just come home from a long voyage. I'm more than glad to see you. It's eerie being quite alone."

"I'm glad I came. Will I make you some gruel, or a cup of tea? When had you your dinner?"

"If you have the time to spare—"

There was time enough. In a minute or two the fire was burning brightly. Allison knew what to do, and where to find what was needed without a question; and Mrs. Beaton lay, following her movements with great interest.

"I was once young and strong like you," said she, with a sigh.

Allison said nothing, but went on with the making of the gruel.

"You have done that before," said Mrs. Beaton.

"Ay, many a time."

She left the gruel to simmer by the fire, and taking the coverlet from the bed, spread it over the arm-chair, then she lifted the sick woman as if she had been a child, and placed her in it. Then she put a pillow behind her, and wrapped her warmly round.

"And you have done this before."

Allison answered nothing.

"Was it your mother, my dear?" said Mrs. Beaton, laying her small, wrinkled hand on hers.

Allison turned toward her with startled eyes.

"Yes, it was my mother," said she.

"Ah! what a thing it must be to have a daughter!" went on Mrs. Beaton; and it was on her lips to ask if her mother were living still, but the look on Allison's face arrested the words. There was silence between them till Mrs. Beaton was laid in her bed again. Allison washed the dishes she had used, and put the room in order. Then she swept the hearth and covered the fire, and then she said good night. After she had shut the door, she opened it again and said:

"I might look in on you in the morning, but it would need to be early, and I might disturb you."

"You wouldna disturb me. But I doubt you would have us leaving."

"Oh! I can come, but I canna bide long."

She went the next day and for several days, and their friendship grew in a silent way. And then Mrs. Beaton was better, and the little lass who came in the mornings to make the fire and do what else was to be done returned, and Allison's visits ceased for a while.

Indeed she had little time for anything but the work of the house, and the care of the bairns as the winter wore on. The little boys and Marjorie had their turn of the cough, but happily much less severely than had been feared for them. Still there was enough to do for them, and as their mother was not very strong, Allison took Marjorie in charge by night as well as by day, and the child got bravely through it all. Allison made a couch of her high kitchen-dresser, when it could be done without interfering with the work of the moment, and Marjorie lay there for hours among her pillows, as content as if she had been with her mother in the parlour.

It was good for the child to have such constant and loving care, and it was good for Allison to give it. For many a word of childish wisdom did she get to think about, and sometimes foolish words to smile at, and in listening to Marjorie, and caring for her comfort at all times, she forgot for a while to think of her own cares.

In the long evenings, when the rain or the darkness prevented the usual run, after the next day's lessons had been prepared, the elder boys used to betake themselves to the kitchen fireside, and on most such nights some of their companions found their way there also. Then there was story-telling, or the singing of songs and ballads, or endless discussions about all things under the sun. Now and then there was a turn of rather rough play, but it never went very far, for the sound of their father's step, or a glimpse of their mother's face at the door made all quiet again, at least for a time.

They were rather rough lads some of those who came, but they were mostly "lad-ies weel brocht up," and rarely was there a word uttered among them which it would have harmed the youngest child to hear. There was Scotch of the broadest in their songs and in their talk, and the manse boys, who were expected to speak English in the presence of their father and mother, among their companions made the most of their opportunities for the use of their own more

expressive tongue. But there was no vulgarity or coarseness in their talk.

As silent here as elsewhere, the presence of "the new lass," as the visitors, long accustomed to old Kirstin, called her, did not interfere in the least with the order of things. She might have been blind or deaf for all the difference it made to them, and, except on the rare occasions when little Marjorie was permitted to be there, for all the difference their coming made to her. When Marjorie was there, Allison's wheel, or the stocking she was knitting, was put aside, and the child rested at ease and content in her arms. No one of them all took more pleasure at such times than Marjorie. She liked the stories and the songs and the quaint old ballads, of which Robin and some of the others had a store, and she was a sympathetic little creature, and could not be happy unless Allie enjoyed them also, so her attention was never allowed to wander when the child's hand could touch her cheek.

But better than either song or story, Marjorie liked to hear about all that was going on in the town. Nothing came amiss to her that any one had to tell. She liked to hear about their neighbours, and the bairns, their goings and comings, their sickness and recovery. Even their new gowns and their visits to one another interested the friendly little child, who could not visit herself, nor wear new gowns, and the lad who had the most to say about them all was the one who pleased her best. All they used to tell her made her a little sad sometimes, for she could not come and go, or run and play, as those happy children could, and her chief desire was to be strong and well, and "to go about on her own feet like other folk."

January was nearly over before there came any frost to speak of, and the first bright, sharp weather, it was said, did much good to the sick folk in the town. Then they had snow—not just a shower to excite first expectation and then disappointment among lads and lassies who rejoiced in its coming, as they mostly delighted in any change that came—but a heavy fall, and then a high wind which drifted it here and there between the hills and made some of the roads impassable for the time. Many of the lanes were filled with it, and some of the folk had to be dug out, because the snow had covered their doors.

There was no end to the great balls which were rolled along the streets. A strong fort was built on the square beside the pump, which was fiercely attacked and bravely defended, and battles were fought through all the streets before the snow was trodden into black slush beneath the feet of the combatants. Even the dreaded "kink-hoist" (whooping-cough) failed to keep some of the bolder spirits out of the fray, and those of them who took the fun in moderation were none the worse, but rather better for the rally.

But Marjorie saw none of this, and she longed to see it all; and though she had been less ill with the cough than some others had been, she lost ground now, refused her food, and grew fretful and listless as Allison had never seen her before.

It was hard for the eager little creature to listen quietly to all her brothers had to tell of what was going on among the young folk of the town. They boasted of Robin's strength and skill, and of Jack's unequalled prowess when "snauba'ing" was the order of the day, and she wanted to see it all. And she longed to see the rush of the full burn and the whiteness of all the hills. Allison looked at her with a great longing to comfort her, but what could she say? Even the mother thought it wisest to be in silence to the child's murmurs.

"But it's no' just the snauba'ing and the white hills I am thinking about, mother. This is the way it will aye be, all my life long. I must just sit still and hear the sound of things, and never be in the midst of them like other folk. All my life, mother! Think of it!"

"My dear," said the mother gravely, "all your life may not be a very long time."

"But mother, I would like it to be long. There is Robin going to be a great scholar and astonish the whole world; and Jack is going in search of adventures; and Davie is going to America to have a farm of a thousand acres, all his own. And why should I have to stay here, and not even see the snauba'ing, nor the full burn, nor the castle that the boys made?"

As a general thing Mrs. Hume left her little daughter's "why" unanswered, only trying to beguile her from such thoughts to the enjoyment of what was left to her in her quiet life. To-day her heart was sore for the child, knowing well that her lot would not seem more easy to bear as the years went on.

"My darling," said she, "it is God's will."

"Yes, mother; but why should it be God's will just with me? Surely when He can do anything, He might give me a chance with the rest. Or else He should just make me content as I am."

"And so He will, dear, in time. You must ask Him, and leave all in His hand."

"Oh! yes. I must just leave it. There is nothing else to do. As to asking—I aye ask to be made strong, and to walk about on my ain feet. And then—wouldna I just serve Him!"

The last words were spoken to Allison, whose kind sad eyes had been resting on her all the time. And Allison answered:

"But surely it may be His will that you should see the full burn and the snawy braes, if it be your mother's will. A' the bairns are better since the frost came, and I might carry wee Marjorie as far as the fit o' the Wind Hill for a change."

"Oh! mother! mother! Let me go. Allie carries me so strong and easy. And I might have Mrs. Esselmont's warm shawl round me, and the soft little hat, and I would never feel the cold. Oh! mother! mother!"

"I might at least take her to the end o' the lane; and if she should be cauld, or weary, or if the cough came on, I could be hame with her in a minute."

Though only half convinced of the wisdom of such a plan her mother consented; and by and by the happy child,