

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER IX.

"The honest man howe'er so poor,
Is king o' men for a' that."

John Beaton's father had been John Beaton also, and so had his father before him. The first John had farmed a three-cornered nook of land, which had found a place among the gray stones scattered closely over a certain part of the high coast that looks down upon one of the narrow bays setting in from the North Sea.

He must have been a strong man, this John, for on this bit of land he lived and laboured for sixty years and more, and on it he brought up, and then sent out, to make a place for themselves, in their own, or in other lands, five strong sons and four fair daughters. And he had so brought them up that never, as long as he lived, did he, or any one else, hear aught of son or daughter to cause him to bow his good gray head before the face of man.

One son, neither the eldest, nor the youngest, stayed near home. First, he had broken stones on one of the great highways, which they were stretching through Scotland about that time. Then he learned to cut and dress the gray granite of his native hills, and then to build it into houses, under another man's eye, and at another man's bidding. After a time he took his turn, first as overseer, and then as master-builder, and succeeded, and men began to speak of him as a rising man, and one well-to-do in the world. All this was before he had got beyond middle life.

Then he married a woman "much above him," it was said, but that was a mistake. For though Marion Sinclair came of a good stock, and had all her life lived in a home well placed and well plenished, among folk who might have thought themselves, and whom others might have thought to be John Beaton's superiors, yet no man or woman of them all had a right to look down on John Beaton. He stood firm on his own feet, in a place which his own hand had won. No step had he ever taken which he had needed to go back upon, nor had he ever had cause to cast down his eyes before the face of man, because of any doubtful deed done, or false word spoken.

And Marion Sinclair, no longer in her first youth, might well go a proud and happy bride to the home of a man wise and strong, far-seeing, honest, and successful—one who loved her dearly, as a man of middle age may love, who in his youth has told himself that he had neither will nor time for such sweet folly.

With all his strong and sterling qualities, he was regarded by the world in general, as, perhaps, a little hard and self-opinioned. But he was never hard to her, or to the one son who was born to them. He exacted what was his due from the rest of the world, but he was always soft and yielding to them in all things. He was proud of his success and of his good name in the country-side, and he offended some of those who came in contact with him by letting his pride in all this be too plainly seen. But he was prouder far of his wife, and his happy home, and of his young son, with whom, to his thought, no price in all the land could compare.

And so it went well with him, till one day the end came suddenly. A broken bank, a dishonoured name, scathe and scorn to some—to him among the rest—who was, God knows, neither in deed nor in thought, guilty of the sin which had brought ruin upon thousands.

He made a gallant stand for his good name and his well-earned fortune, and for his fellow sufferers; but he was an old man by this time, and he died of it.

Mrs. Beaton had never all her life been a strong woman, and had never needed to think and act for herself in trying circumstances. She had not the skill to plan nor the strength to execute, and it was too late to begin now. But she could endure, and she did so, with long patience; and though her face grew thin and white, she gave no sign of anger, or discontent, or of breaking down under her troubles, as all her little world had believed she would surely do.

Amid the din and dulness of the great town in which they first took refuge for a while, she made a home for her son, and waited patiently to see what his young strength might do for them both, and never, by word or look, made his struggle for standing room in the crowd harder for him, or his daily disappointment worse to bear.

He fought his way to standing room at last—standing room at a high desk in a dark office, at work which he had still to learn, and which, though he loathed it, he might have learned to do in time if it had not "floored him" first.

"Mother," he cried one night in despair, "let us get away from this place—anywhere, where there is room to breathe. I will work with my hands as my father did before me. There are still surely stones to break somewhere up there in the north. We'll get fresh air at least."

So, without a word of doubt or of expostulation, she made haste to get ready, while they had yet the means of going, and they went north together, where they found, indeed, fresh air, and for a time they found nothing else. But fresh air was something to rejoice in, since it brought back the colour to the lad's cheek and lightened the heart of the mother, and they kept up one another's courage as well as might be.

A chance to earn their bread, that was all John wanted, and it came at last; but it was dry bread only for a while.

"What can you do? And what are you willing to do?" said a man who was the overseer of other men, and whom John had seen several times at the place when his work was done. John answered:

"I am willing to do anything. And I think I could break stones."

"I think I see you!" said the man with a shrug.

"I only wish I had a chance to show you. I think I might even chip away at cutting them, to as good purpose as some of those lads yonder."

"Here, Sandy," said the overseer. "Give this lad your hammer, and let him try his hand, for the fun o' the thing."

The man laughed, but John Beaton was in earnest. In a minute his coat was off, and he set to work with a will. He needed a hint or two, and he got them, with a little banter thrown in. The lad stuck to his work, and could, as his friend said, "do no' that ill." He had, perhaps, inherited the power to do the work, since he could do it, he thought, and he asked leave to come again in the morning.

"Ye hae earned your shilling," said the overseer, when it was time to go, and he held one out to John. He hardly expected the lad to take it, but he took it gladly, and looked at it, the man thought, in a curious way.

"Is it the first shilling ye ever earned?" said he.

"The very first! May I come back to-morrow?"

"O, ay! gin ye like; but I should think that this is hardly the kind o' work ye're best fitted for."

"One must take what one can get," said John.

That was the beginning. He went again, and as hands happened to be scarce at the time, he was kept on, and his wages were raised as his skill and his strength increased. By and by he was offered permanent work on a mill that was to be built in a country place at some distance. It would take months to build, and he would be sure of work for that time; so he took his mother with him, and what household stuff they had left, and lived in a tiny room in a cottage for a while.

Not very far from the new mill was Nethermuir, a quiet place, out of the way, where they might live, they said to one another, unknown and forgotten. And here, after many thoughts about it, they resolved to make themselves a home.

At the end of the street on which stood the missioner kirk and manse, was a small house which had once been of the better sort, but which had been vacant for some time, and had fallen into disrepair. The thatch was rotten and the roof had partly fallen in, but the foundation was firm, and the walls were thick and strong. This house John leased for seven years, at a very small rent, and by his own strength, and skill, and will, with some help from his fellow workmen, he made of it such a house as was not unworthy of being a home for his mother; and in it, while her son went here and there as his work called him, she lived content.

Terrible as the blow was which took from them husband, and father, and home, it might have been worse in the end had John Beaton died a rich man. So said some of the lookers-on, who, long before that time, had declared that his son, having all his life long got more of his own will than was good for him, was in a fair way to become a "spoiled laddie" at last.

Some said it who envied the lad, and others said it who loved him well, and it is possible that they were not far wrong in the belief. John the younger was a "bonny lad," tall and strong, sweet-tempered and light-hearted, a favourite with all. But he was open to temptation like the rest of his kind, even more so than many, and not all of those who gathered round him in his prosperous days were of the sort likely to influence him for good. He went through the first years at the university without getting much good from it, it was said. He had disappointed his father greatly, as well as his teachers; but though he had been foolish and idle, he had not disgraced himself by anything beyond idleness and folly. Whether he would have gone through the course without doing worse, might be questioned.

The chance was not given him. His father died, and instead of inheriting what would have been called wealth among those who were his friends, he found himself penniless, having his own bread, and possibly his mother's also to win. And seeing there was good stuff in the lad, his mother's helplessness and desolation might be the saving of him, said one of his mother's humble friends.

They had friends—yes, many of them—but some of them had suffered, and had no power to help except with kind words. Others who had the power to help had not the will, or only the will to help in their own way. Others added to their offers advice that could not be followed, or they hurt the sore hearts of the lad and his mother with words which implied censure on the dead, because he had not foreseen and provided against the coming of evil days. And so, seeing no help among "kenned folk," the two went out, "not knowing whither they went."

They had gone away bravely enough, and even through the dark days which came first, it cannot be said that they quite lost heart or hope. As long as his mother was content, John told himself, he did not care what fell to him to do or to endure; and as long as John was well, and within reach of hand or voice, it was well with the mother. It was not till the first months were over that John's heart seemed to fail. When the mill was finished, instead of going with the men to other work in another direction, he remained in Nethermuir, hoping to find something to do in the neighbourhood, so that he might be near his mother. He found enough to do for a time in making the little house a comfortable and even beautiful home for her. Then he prepared the neglected bit of ground around it for a garden, and took pleasure in doing it. It was work which he liked, and which he knew how to do, but it put nothing into the family purse, which was getting low, and something must be done to replenish it.

He worked for a few weeks in harvest in the narrow fields of Peter Gilchrist, and to good purpose, though the work was new to him; and he made friends with Peter himself, which was something. But the harvest wore over and winter was coming on, and then he wrote to Jamie Dunn, his first friend, saying he was now ready and willing to go wherever he should be sent.

But in his heart he knew that for the only work which was left for him to do, he was neither ready nor willing, nor for the kind of life which he saw stretching a long, weary way before him.

He could do as his father had done before him, he told his mother cheerfully, and who had done better than he? But to himself he owned that this was to be doubted. He could never do as his father had done; he was not the man his father had been, or he could never have played the fool, wasting his time and losing his opportunities, as he had done. He had been spoiled with softness, with idle days, and the pleasant things of life, which he could not forget, and which, like a weakling, he was in his secret heart longing for still. And even his father had not won what men called success, and a firm footing among his fellows, till the best part of his life was over.

But his father had been content through all his days as they came, and with his day's work and his day's wages. And his father had known his own strength and could bide his time. As for his son, John told himself that he was neither strong nor wise. He knew, or he feared at this time, that only the thought of his mother and her need of him kept him from despair.

He called it despair, poor lad, not knowing what he said. The depths of despair came to him with the thought of enlisting as a common soldier, to go away and live his life with as little exercise of his own will as the musket he carried, and to death and a nameless grave. Or it meant to sail away before the mast, a slave to some tyrant who held the power of life and death, because he held the power of the lash. And it might

have come to one or other of these possibilities with him, if he had not been for his mother and her need of him.

For the dead level of the life which he saw stretching out before him seemed even worse to him than that—the life of ceaseless, ill-remunerated labour, the companionship of men grown dull through a changeless routine of toilsome days or debased through ignorance or self-indulgence, a life and a companionship with which he might at last grow content, being no stronger or wiser than other men.

These were dark days for the young man. At last he took his mother's gently spoken words of counsel to heart, and opened the box in which she had secretly packed his college books, and where they had laid hidden all this time. But the sight of them, and the associations they called up, made him heartsick and ashamed, and it was only by the exercise of strong self-restraint that he made himself pretend to take some interest in them for his mother's sake. After this he fell into the way of taking long walks in all directions, and did a turn of work here and there as he could get it, and generally came home hungry, and tired, and ready for his bed, so that no reading could be expected of him.

But the days were growing short, and the dark hours many and long, and the mother heart "grew wae" for her son many a time. By and by something happened.

It was a good thing for the minister's Davie that John Beaton was within sound of the voices of the lad's terrified companions the day that he fell into "Burney's Pot," and it was a good thing also for John. The little lad was nearly gone when he was pulled out of the water, and having no knowledge of his home or name, since his young companions had taken to their heels as soon as they saw Davie safe, John took him home to his mother, and together they did what could be done for his help.

This was the beginning. Davie was allowed to fall asleep in Mrs. Beaton's bed, and in the gloaming, John carried him home wrapped in a blanket, and then he saw the minister and his wife, and Marjorie. It was the beginning for John of more than can well be told.

His manner of life from that time was changed. Not that he went often to the manse at first, though the door was always open to him, and a welcome awaiting him. But the life he saw there, the words he heard, and the spirit that showed in all that was done, or said, or planned, in great things and in small, came like a new revelation to him; and the more he saw and thought of it all, the less he thought about his own loss, and his changed life, and his unhelpful prospects.

He had more days of leisure that winter than well pleased him, but not one of them was spent in wandering aimlessly about the dreary hills. He had company, most days, wherever he went. If he had not Robin or Jack, there was always Davie, who seemed to think he had a special claim upon him. Davie had not yet been promoted to a seat in the parish school, but was beginning to think himself, at eight, too big a boy for Mistress Jamieson's rule, since he could say the Catechism from end to end, proofs, and petitions, and all. With Davie trotting along at his side, John had little chance for brooding. Besides, he had taken to his books again, and meant to employ his leisure and make up for lost time if such a thing might be. It was not likely that he would have much use for Latin or Logic in the life that lay before him, he told himself; but he might as well make the most of the idle days, and keep his mind from stagnation.

And he had less of leisure after a while. It was about this time that he had begun to try his hand at the making of "headstones" for the kirkyard. Chance put such work in his way, and being ready of hand and quick of eye, and having long patience and much need of a job, he set to work with a will. He did not succeed in pleasing himself, but he pleased his employer, which answered the purpose; and he did more at the work, at odd times, when he could get nothing else to do.

The life which he saw lived in the manse did something for him, and the Word as it was held forth in the little kirk did more: but that came long afterward. The minister was the busiest of men, either among his books or among his people, or in his garden, or his land; but he was never too busy for a cheery word to John, or for help or counsel to any one who needed them. And the same might be said of the minister's wife. She was active and had enough to do at home, but she was glad to help those who needed help anywhere. She had good sense and good judgment, and was ready with sweet words or sharp words as the case presented seemed to demand. She was firm where firmness seemed to be required, but had long patience and unfailing gentleness in her dealings with the weak and even with the wilful; and as the days passed, John took heed of her words and ways with ever-growing interest.

She had not an easy life, but she had usually firm health, and she had a cheerful nature, and the peace of God was in her heart. So she "stood in her lot" strong and unafraid, whatever might befall.

She was a loving mother to her sons, but her rule was firm as well as gentle. There was no need in that house to appeal to the father's stronger will, where obedience was not promptly given. It was a serious matter indeed that needed an appeal to their father. To the lads their mother's word was law. Not that the law was not forgotten sometimes, or even wilfully broken in times of strong temptation. But confession of sins, though not always prompt, was, in course of time, quite certain. She had their confidence entirely. It was an unhappy boy, indeed, who carried about, for even a few days, a sinful or sorrowful secret hidden from his mother.

In among these lads, John came as another brother, and Mrs. Hume was kind and gracious in her intercourse with him. She was faithful also, and told him of faults and failings which his own mother never acknowledged, and helped him to correct them, as, even had she seen them, his own mother might have hesitated to do. It was, indeed, a good day for John when the door of the manse was opened to him.

(To be continued.)

THE Rev. John McNeill, of Edinburgh, "ad overflowing congregations, when he preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, for Mr. Spurgeon. There was an unusually large proportion of London Scots present, and the Regent Square people attended in large numbers.

IN Dumbarton Presbytery, the refusal to hear Assembly delegates on Foreign Missions, at a former meeting, was brought up, on motion by Mr. King, that the delegates be invited to address them. Mr. Warr objected, and spoke on principle, not out of disrespect to these deputies. On a vote, sixteen were for inviting, and six for refusing the deputies.