

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

"Well," said he, after a pause, "I have only this to say to-night. We thank you for your kind thoughts for the child. We desire to say yes, we long to say it. But it is a great thing to decide, and we must ask counsel."

"Surely. I will wait patiently for your decision. But the sooner we can go, the better."

There was much more said than this, and counsel was asked before they parted. Mrs. Esselmont's last words were these:

"It was because of the child that I first thought of Allison Bain. Should you decide that you cannot let Marjorie go, then I will not take Allison. And remember, my dear," said she to Mrs. Hume, "you have another little daughter now to comfort you. And when you have made up your mind, whatever it may be, say nothing to Allison. I would like myself to ask her to go with us if you should decide to let the child go."

There was not long time needed in which to come to a decision. The father and mother had taken counsel together, and had asked counsel often. There was only one thing to be said at the last. Marjorie must go; and though it was said with sorrow, it was also with thankful gladness that they committed their darling to the care and keeping of the Great Healer of the bodies and souls of the creatures whom he came to save. And they agreed with Mrs. Esselmont that, the decision being made, there was no time to lose.

Kirstin had been coming to visit them before this change was spoken about. The only difference that this made was, that now she came home to stay, bringing all her gear with her. After her coming, Allison was not long kept in suspense as to what her own winter's work might be.

"Allison," said her mistress, "I would like you to go to Firhill this afternoon. No, Marjorie is better at home to-day. And, Allison, as you will be likely to see the lady herself, you should change your gown and put on your bonnet."

Which Allison did, wondering a little, for she had hitherto gone to Firhill with only her cap on her head, as she had gone elsewhere. Other folk wondered also. On the stone seat at the weaver's door sat the weaver's wife, busy with her stocking, and beside her sat her friend Mrs. Coats, "resting herself" after her work was over.

Allison did not pass by them now without a word, as used to be her way during the first days of their acquaintance; but she did not linger to say more than a word or two, "as would have been but civil," Mrs. Coats said. Allison had a message to deliver at the school, and she did not come back again, but went, as she liked best, round by the lanes.

"She has gien warning. She was aye above the place," said Mrs. Coats.

"Ye can hardly say the like of that, since she has filled the place weel," said her friend.

"But I do say it. He goes her ways like ane that hasna been used with doin' the bidding o' anither."

"She doesna need to be bidden. She kens her work, and she does it. What would ye have?" said the weaver, who had stopped his loom to hear through the open window what was to be said.

"That's true," said his wife; "but I ken what Mistress Coats means for a' that."

"Ye may say that. It's easy seen, though no' just so easy shown. Is she like the ither lassies o' the place? Who ever saw her bare feet? It's hose and shoon out and in, summer and winter, with her."

"And for that matter who ever saw her bare arms, unless it was in her ain kitchen, or in the milkhouse? Even gaen to the well her sleeves are put doon to her hands."

"I should like to ken the folk she belongs to."

"They're decent folk, if she's a specimen o' them. Ye needna be feared about that," said the weaver.

"It's no' that I'm feared, but ane would think that she was feared herself. Never a word has passed her lips of where she came from or who she belongs to."

"Never to the like o' you and me. But the minister's satisfied, and Mrs. Hume. And as to the folk she cam' o, we hae naething to do wi' them."

"That may be; but when there is naething to be said, there's maistly something to be hid."

"And when ye can put your hand on ane that hasna something to hide frae the een o' her neebors, ye can set her to search out the secrets o' the minister's lass. It winna be this day, nor the morn, that ye'll do that same," said the weaver, raising his voice as he set his loom in motion again.

"Eh, but your man is unco hard on the women," said Mrs. Coats, with a look which implied sympathy with the weaver's wife, as well as disapproval of the weaver. But her friend laughed.

"Oh! ay; he's a wee hard whiles on women in general, but he is easy enouch wi' me."

For some reason or other, Allison had to wait a while before she saw Mrs. Esselmont, and she waited in the garden. There were not many flowers left, but the grass was still green, and the skilful and untiring hands of old Delvie had been at work on the place, removing all that was unsightly, and putting in order all the rest; so that, as he said, "the last look which his mistress got of the garden might be one to mind on with pleasure."

"It's a bonny place," said Allison with a sigh.

The old man looked up quickly.

"Do ye no' ken that it's ill for a young lass to sigh and sech like that? Is it that this mind's ye o' anither bonny place that ye would fain see?"

Allison smiled, but shook her head.

"I never saw a garden like this. But I aye like to care for my own—"

"And ye have none now. Is that the reason that ye sigh?"

"Maybe I may I may have one again. If I do, I would like to have your advice about it," said Allison, wondering a little at herself as she said it.

"Oh! I'll gie you advice, and seeds, and slips, and plants as weel, gin ye are near at hand."

Allison shook her head.

"I doubt if I ever have a garden of my own again, it will be on the other side of the sea."

"In America? They have grand flowers there, I hear. But before ye go there ye can ask me and I'll give ye seeds to take wi' ye, and maybe slips and roots as well. They'll mind ye o' hame in that far land. I once heard o' a strong man over yonder that sat down and grat (wept) at the sight o' a gowan."

"Thank you," said Allison. There were tears in her eyes though she smiled.

"Here's my lady," said Delvie, bending to his work again.

Mrs. Esselmont came slowly toward them, leaning on the arm of her maid, a woman several years older than herself.

"You may leave me here with Allison Bain," said she; "I will take a turn or two and then I will be in again."

She had the minister's note in her hand, but she made no allusion to it as they moved slowly up and down. They spoke about the flowers, and the fair day, and about Marjorie and the new baby for a while, and then Mrs. Esselmont said:

"You have a strong arm, Allison, and a kind heart. I am sure of it. I have something to say to you which I thought I could best say here. But I have little strength, and I am weary already. We will go into the house first."

So into the house they went, and when Milne had stirred the fire and made her mistress comfortable, she went away and left them together.

"Allison," said Mrs. Esselmont, after a moment's silence, "I have something to say to you."

And then she told her that she was going away for the winter because of her ill-health, and spoke of the plan which she had proposed to Marjorie's father and mother for the benefit of the child. This plan could be only carried out with Allison's help, because Mrs. Hume would never trust her child to the care of a stranger. The mother thought that she could be neither safe nor happy with any other. And then she added:

"I could only ask them to let me take her if I could have you also to care for her. I cannot say certainly that she will ever be strong and well, but I have good hope that she may be much stronger than she is now. Think about it. You need not decide at once, but the sooner the better. We have no time to lose."

Allison listened with changing colour and downcast eyes.

"I would go with you and the child. I would be glad to go—but—"

She rose and came a little nearer to the sofa on which Mrs. Esselmont was lying.

"But I cannot go without telling you something first, and you may not wish me to go when you have heard."

"Allison," said Mrs. Esselmont, "stand where I can see your face."

She regarded her a moment and then she said gravely:

"I cannot believe that you have anything to say to me that will change my thoughts of you. You have won the respect and confidence of your master and mistress, who ought to know you well by this time. I am willing to trust you as they have done, without knowing more of you than they have seen with their own eyes. I think you are a good woman, Allison Bain. You have not knowingly done what is wrong."

"I did not wait to consider whether I was right or wrong, but I should have done what I did even if I had known it to be wrong. And I would not undo it now, even if you were to tell me I ought to do so. I could not. I would rather die," said Allison, speaking low.

There was a long silence, and Allison stood still with her eyes fixed on the floor.

"Sit down, Allison, where I can see you. Put off your shawl and your bonnet. You are too warm in this room."

Allison let her shawl slip from her shoulders and untied the strings of her black bonnet.

"Take it off," said Mrs. Esselmont, as Allison hesitated.

Her hair had grown long by this time and was gathered in a knot at the back of her head, but little rings and wavy locks escaped here and there—brown, with a touch of gold in them—and without the disguise of the big, black bonnet, or of the full bordered mutch, a very different Allison was revealed to Mrs. Esselmont.

"A beautiful woman," she said to herself, "and with something in her face better than beauty. She can have done nothing of which she need be ashamed."

Aloud she said:

"Allison, since you have said so much, if you think you can trust me, you should, perhaps, tell me all."

"Oh! I can trust you! But afterward folk might say that you did wrong to take me with you, knowing my story. And if I tell you I would need to tell Mr. and Mrs. Hume as well, since they are to trust me with their child. And though you might be out of the reach of any trouble because of taking my part, they might not, and their good might be evil spoken of on my account, and that would be a bad requital for all their kindness."

"And have you spoken to no one, Allison? Is there no one who is aware of what has befallen you?"

Allison grew red and then pale. It was the last question that she answered.

"It was in our parish that Saunners Crombie buried his wife. One night he came into the manse kitchen, and he told me that he had seen my came on a new headstone, 'John Bain and Allison his wife'—the names of my father and mother. And he had some words with one who had known me all my life. But I never answered him a word. And whether he was trying me, or warning me, or whether he spoke by chance, I cannot say. I would like to win away from this place, for a great fear has been upon me since then. I might be sought for here. But I would never go back. I would rather die," repeated Allison, and the look that came over her face gave emphasis to her words.

"And has he never spoken again?"

"Never to me. I do not think he would willingly do me an ill turn, but he might harm me when he might think he was helping me into the right way. Oh! I would like to go away from this place, and it would be happiness as well as safety to go with you and my Marjorie."

Mrs. Esselmont sat thinking in silence, for what seemed to Allison a long time. Then she raised herself up and held out her hand.

"Allison, I understand well that there are some things that will not bear to be spoken about. Tell me nothing now, but come with me. I trust you. Come with me and the child."

The tears came into Allison's eyes, and she said quietly:

"I thank you, madam. I will serve you well"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"God be with thee,
Else alone thou goest forth,
Thy face unto the north."

Before he went away on the morning after they had heard the story which Crombie had to tell, John Beaton had said to his mother:

"If Allison Bain seems anxious or restless, you must find some way of letting her know that she has nothing to fear from the old man. He will say nothing to harm her."

But he did not tell her that he had already heard the story of Allison's marriage from her own lips. And not knowing this, after considering the matter, his mother decided to say nothing, believing that it would not be well for Allison's peace of mind to know that the sad story of her life had been told to them.

And even if she had wished to do so, it would not have been easy to find a chance to speak. For Allison was shy of Mrs. Beaton at this time, and went no more to see her in the gloaming, as she had sometimes done of late, and was not at ease with her when they met.

For she said to herself, that Mrs. Beaton might know, or might suspect that her son had of late been giving too many of his thoughts to one of whom they knew nothing; and though she was not to blame, Mrs. Beaton might still blame her for her son's folly.

Allison was indeed troubled. Since the night on which Crombie had so startled her, she had never been quite at rest. She had striven to be reasonable and to put away her fears; but there never came a step to the door, that she did not pause from her work to listen for the words that might be spoken. She looked on every unfamiliar face that came into the kirk, or that she passed on the street, or in the lanes, with a momentary terror, lest she should meet the eyes of one whom her enemy had sent in search of her.

She had said to herself many times, "I will wait quietly. I will stay where I am, and I will not yield to my fears."

But when Mrs. Esselmont spoke to her, and a way of escape appeared, she knew that she had been sore afraid, and that she could not long have borne the strain which had been upon her.

"Six days!" she said to herself, as she came down from Firhill that night, in the darkness. "Only six days and nights, and I shall be away, and safe for a year at least; and then!—but I will not look beyond the year. I will care for the child, and be at peace."

As for John, he had written to his mother that he was to be sent north on business that might keep him there some days. He did not tell where he was going, and she did not hear again for a good while after that. When he did write, he said nothing about his journey or its results, as he was usually in the way of doing, and he said nothing about coming home. His mother's heart was sore for her son. No word concerning Allison Bain had passed between them, but she knew that his heart had gone from him and that he must suffer for a time.

"But he'll win through," she said, hopefully, to herself, "as other men have won through the same trouble in all the generations of men, since ever the world began; and may he be the wiser and the better for the pain! He will be sorry not to see her again," added she, with a sigh.

So she wrote a letter telling him, among other things, that wee Marjorie was to be sent away with Mrs. Esselmont for the good of her health; that she was likely to be away a year at least. She said some hopeful words as to the benefit the child might receive, and then she said: "It is Allison Bain who is to have the care of her." Of Allison herself, she only said that she was one to be trusted, and that the child would be happy in her care. But to this there came no word in reply.

On the last day at home, Marjorie was carried down the street by Jack, that she might say good-bye to Mrs. Beaton and the schoolmistress, and the neighbours generally. Jack had been warned by his mother, that if there should be any signs of weariness or excitement, there must be no lingering. The child must be brought home at once. But Marjorie took it all very quietly.

"Yes I'm going away. Yes, I'm sorry, and I'm glad, but I'm not afraid, because our Allison is going with me. Oh! yes, I'm glad. I'm going to see new things and places—me that was never ten miles away from home in all my life! And I'm going to come home strong and well, like the other bairns, to help my mother and them all. And my mother has my sister now to take my place. It's my father that I'm sorriest for. But I'll come home strong and well, and then he'll be glad that he let me go."

She said the same to the bairns who lingered on their way home from the school to speak to her as they passed. She was coming home again well and strong, and she would be happy, having Allison all to herself, and though she was sorry to leave them, she was not afraid.

Allison had no formal leave takings. She had been very busy all day, and came down stairs after seeing Marjorie quietly asleep, doubtful whether she should go to say good-bye to Mrs. Beaton and the school-mistress or not. The question was decided for her.

"Allison," said Mrs. Hume, as she passed the parlour door, "I think it would be but kind to ask Mrs. Beaton if she has any message to send to her son. You could leave it with Robin if you should not chance to see him yourself in the town. Are you very tired?"

"I am not so very tired. Yes, I will go now," said Allison.

So she turned down the lane and went round by the green, as she had gone so many times before, not without some troubled thoughts of her own. She found Mrs. Beaton sitting alone in the firelight.

"Come away in, Allison. I have been expecting you," said she.

Allison sat down at her bidding, and gave Mrs. Hume's message.

"I hope you may see him. But I have nothing to say or to send. He will be here soon. And you are glad to be going, Allison, for the sake of the child?"

"Yes, I am glad to be going."

"But you are not sorry that you came here? You have been content?"

"No. I had to go away from home. I am not sorry I came here. Everybody at the manse has been kind."

"And you have been good to them and to me. I am glad to have kenned you, Allison Bain," but Mrs. Beaton sighed as she said it.

What could Allison answer? Indeed, what was to be said between these two? Nothing, unless all might be said. A