

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XXV.

Show me what I have to do,
Every hour my strength renew.

All this Allison read to John's mother, and there was something more which, for a moment, she thought that she would like to read that might give pleasure to her kind old friend. For Willie, in his next letter, had betrayed that the "something" which was never to be permitted to come between the friends to separate them, was the good-will of pretty and wayward Elsie Strong, who, since she had come home from the school, where she had been for a year or more, "has been as changeable as the wind with me," wrote poor Willie, and greatly taken up, and more than friendly with Mr. Beaton whenever he came out to the farm. And then he went on to say that he thought of going to look about him farther West before he settled down on land of his own. And he had almost made up his mind to go at once, and not wait till the spring, as he had at first intended to do.

The letter went on to say that John Beaton had bought land, and was going to build a house upon it.

"It is the bonny knowe with the maples on it, looking down on the lake, where John brought me that first day to breathe the fresh air. John saved my life that time, and I will never forget it, nor all his goodness to me since then. Of course Mr. Strong would not have sold a rod of it to any one else. But Elsie is an only child, and it would be hard for him to part from her."

"The more I think of it, the more I wish to go farther West before I take up land of my own and you must come when I have got it—"

All this Allison glanced over in silence, but she could not bring herself to read it to Mrs. Beaton.

"He has told her himself doubtless, though she has no cause to tell it to me. I am glad—or I would be glad but for the sake of Willie, poor lad."

And then, as she rose to go, the door opened, and Sammers Crombie came stumbling in.

"Mistress Beaton," said the old man, "it is a liberty I am taking to trouble you at this late hour. But I have been at the manse to get speech o' Allison Bain, and if I dinna see her the night I kenna when I may see her, and it is of importance."

Allison came forward, and offered her hand with a smile. "I am sorry that you have had the trouble of seeking for me," said she.

"That's neither here nor there. I am glad to see you safe hame again. Ye hae been doin' your duty down yonder they tell me. May ye aye hae the grace to do it. I hae some words to say to ye. Will ye go with me, or will I say them here? I am just come hame from Aberdeen."

"And you are done out. Sit you down and rest yourself," said Mrs. Beaton, as she rose. Allison put out her hand to stay her as she was about to leave the room.

"Bide still with me. Mr. Crombie can have nothing to say to me that you may not hear."

The old man was leaning forward with his hands on his knees, looking tired and ready to fall asleep where he sat. He roused himself as Allison spoke.

"That is as ye shall think yoursel'. This is what I hae to say to you. I hae heard o' yon man again. I hae seen him. And I hae come to say to you, that it is your duty to go to him where he lies on his dying bed. Ay woman! ye'll need to go. It's no' atween you and him now, but atween you and your Maker."

"It's come at last," said Allison, growing pale.

Mrs. Beaton sat down beside her, and taking her hand, held it firmly in both hers.

"It was an accident," went on Crombie. "He had been drinking too freely, they say. He was in the town, and he set off late to go home, and was thrown from his horse. How it happened canna be said, but they fould him in the morning lying by the dike-side, dead—it was supposed at first. But they carried him to the infirmary, and he is living yet. He is coming to himself, and kens folk, and he may live to leave the place, but it's less than likely."

"And who bade you come to Allison Bain with all this?" asked Mrs. Beaton, gravely. "And are you quite sure it is true?"

"Oh! ay, it's true. I didna come to her with hearsays. I gaed myself to the infirmary and I saw him with my ain een. And who bade me come here to her, say ye? It was the Lord himself, I'm thinking. The man's name wasna named to me, nor by me. I kenna him because I had seen him before. And it was borne in upon me that I should tell Allison Bain o' his condition. Or wherefore should the knowledge of it have come to me who am the only one here beside yoursel' who kens how these twa stand to one another?"

But Mrs. Beaton's heart sickened at the thought of what might be before Allison.

"What could she do for him if she were to go there? He is in good hands doubtless, and is well cared for. Has he been asking for her?"

"That I canna say. But ye may ken without my telling you, that there is no saying 'wherefore' to a message from the Lord. And it is between the Lord and this woman that the matter is to be settled now."

But Mrs. Beaton shook her head.

"I canna see it so. If he really needed her if it were a matter of life and death—"

"A matter of life and death! Do ye no' see, woman, that it is for more than that? It is the matter of the saving of a soul! Do ye not understand, that a the evil deeds o' a his evil life will be coming back now on this man, and setting themselves in array against him, and no' among the least o' them the evil he brought on her and hers? And what kens he o' the Lord and His mercy? And what has he ever heard of salvation from death through faith in the Son of God?"

Mrs. Beaton had no words with which to answer him, and they all were silent for a while. Then Crombie began again, more gently:

"And if he were to come out of his fever, with all the dreads and doubts upon him that hae been filling his nights and days and if he were to see her face with a look of for-

givenness on it, and the peace of God, it might encourage him to hope in God's mercy, and to lippen himsel'—sinner as he kens himsel' to be—in the hands of Him who is gracious, and full of compassion and tender mercy. Think of the honour of being the means, in the Lord's hand, of saving a sinner like that?"

The old man had risen, and with his eyes on Allison's face, spoke earnestly, almost with passion. But as he ended, he sank back into his chair again silent and exhausted. At a word now from Mrs. Beaton, Allison rose and went out into the kitchen.

"Mr. Crombie," said Mrs. Beaton, softly, "it is a great thing that you are asking of Allison Bain. I know not what to say. I can speak no word to bid her go. I pray that she may be guided aright."

The old man answered nothing. He seemed utterly spent and helpless.

"You have had a long journey. You are quite worn out," said Mrs. Beaton.

"Ay, have I. And it's no' just done yet, and there is a dark house and a silent at the end o' it. But I'll win through it."

In a few minutes Allison came in quietly.

"Mr. Crombie you are to come with me to the fire. I have made some tea for you, and you must eat and drink before you try to go home."

He looked at her without a word. She took his hand, and he rose and went with her to the kitchen, where a table was spread and a small fire burned on the hearth. She put food before him, and though at first he refused it, after a little he ate, and was refreshed. Then he leaned back and seemed ready to fall asleep again.

"Mr. Crombie," said Allison, stooping and speaking low, "I will think of what you have said. I wish to do right, and I pray that God may guide me. Wait here till I come back again."

She had seen one of Peter Gilchrist's men on his way to the mill with his cart, at a late hour, and she hoped to find him still lingering about the place. Crombie must be committed to his care, for in his present state he could not be allowed to take his way home alone. Before she could begin to think of what he had said, he must be safely sent on his way. Fortunately, she met the man coming down the street, and Crombie went with him. Then the two women sat down and looked at one another in silence. For the moment, Mrs. Beaton was more troubled and anxious than Allison herself.

"My dear," said she, "it looks as if all these years that you have been kept safe from his hands, had been spent in vain."

"No," said Allison, "much good has come to me in those years. They have not been in vain. Mrs. Beaton, I wish to do what is right. Tell me what I ought to do."

"My dear, I cannot tell you. It is you yourself who must decide. Allison, are you strong enough, or patient enough, to think of what may be before you? Think of living your life ten—twenty years with a man like that! Yes, it is said that he is dying, but that is what no one can really know. And if you go to him now, it must be till death comes to part you. May God guide you. It is not for me to say what it is right for you to do."

Allison sat silent.

"It is not as though all the blame had been his. I should have stood firm against him. And his life has been ruined as well as mine—far more than mine. God has been v' y ghod to me. If I were sure of His will in this thing, I wouldna be afraid."

"But, Allison! Think of your brother."

"Yes, it was of him I thought before, and I did a great wrong."

"Allison, it would be to sacrifice yourself a second time. My dear, at least take time to think and to seek counsel. You have been taken by surprise. In your great pity for this man, you must not let yourself do what can never be undone."

"No, I have not been taken by surprise. I have been expecting something to happen ever since I came back again." And then Allison told of her meeting with Mr. Rainy on the street in Aberdeen, and how he had spoken to her of Brownrig.

"He said nothing of his being hurt or in danger. But what he did say, has never been out of my thoughts since then. I seem to have been preparing myself for some great change all this time. It would be far easier for me to lose myself out of the sight and knowledge of all who know me, than it was when I left my home. I was hardly myself then. My only thought was, how I was to get away. I knew not where I was going. Yet I believe I was guided here."

Allison spoke with perfect quietness. Mrs. Beaton could only look and listen, astonished, as she went on.

"Yes, I was guided here, and much good has come to me since then. And I think—I believe, that I wish to follow God's will in this, whatever it may be. And I have only you to help me with your counsel."

"You have the minister—and Mrs. Hume."

"Yes, I might speak to them—I must speak to them," said Allison, with a sigh. "I must say something to them. They know nothing of me, except what they have seen with their own eyes. But I do not think they will blame me much, when they know all."

Mrs. Beaton said nothing. Little had ever been said to her, either by the minister or his wife, concerning Allison or her affairs. But in seeking to comfort the mother in her first loneliness, when her son went away, the minister had almost unconsciously shown her that he knew even more of John's disappointment and remorse than she herself knew. She had made no response, for she believed that for all concerned, silence was best.

As for Brownrig, whether he were dying or not, how could he be helped or comforted by the sight of the woman against whom he had so deeply and deliberately sinned? As to the saving of his soul, God was gracious, and full of compassion. He had many ways of dealing with men, whether in mercy or in judgment. Could it be God's will that Allison's life should be still one of sacrifice, and pain, and loss, because of him? Surely, surely not!

Meanwhile Allison was repeating to herself Crombie's words:

"Life and death! It is the matter of a soul's salvation! It is not between you and that bad man any more. It is between you and the Lord himself, who is ever merciful, and ready to forgive. Forgive and it shall be forgiven unto you—"

Over and over again, the words repeated themselves to her as she sat in silence, till Mrs. Beaton said gently:

"Allison you have been greatly moved and startled by that which you have heard. You are in no state to decide anything now. Sleep upon it, my dear. Take time to look upon this matter in all lights, before you suffer yourself to be entangled in a net from which there may be no escape for many a year or day—from which you may never, all your life, escape. Allison, do you think the Lord has kept you safe these years to let you lose yourself now? No, I will say nothing to influence you against your conscience. Do nothing hastily, that is all I ask. Seek counsel, as I shall seek it for you."

But when the old woman had kissed her, and blessed her, and bidden her good-night, she held her fast and could not let her go, till Allison gently withdrew herself from her clasp.

"Pray to God to guide me in the right way," she whispered, and then she went away.

Mrs. Beaton slept little that night—less than Allison did, though she had much to do before she laid herself down beside little Marjorie. "Seek counsel," Mrs. Beaton had said. And this in the silence of the night, she herself tried to do. And gradually and clearly it came to her that better counsel was needed than that which she would fain have given to her friend.

Was it of Allison she had been thinking in all that she had said? Not of Allison alone. Her first thought had been of her son, and how it might still be God's will that he should have the desire of his heart. And oh! if Allison could but go to him as she was, without having looked again on that man's face, or touched his hand, or answered to his name. Surely, for this woman who had suffered much, and long and in silence, to whom had come the blessed "afterward" and "the peaceable fruits of righteousness," surely, for her it could not be God's will that the worst was yet to come. Who could say?

"And yet, ah me! our worst is whiles His best for us and ours! I doubt I have been seeking to take the guidance of their affairs into my ain hand. No, no, Lord! I would not have it for them nor for myself. She is in Thy hand. Keep her there safe. And a soul's salvation—that is a great thing—"

That was the way in which it ended with Mrs. Beaton. But the day was dawning before it came to that. And as the day dawned, Allison was once more standing on the hill-top to take a last look of her place of refuge, and then she turned her face toward Aberdeen.

When she left Mrs. Beaton and went round by the green, and the lanes, where she had gone so many times, and in so many moods, she was saying to herself:

"I will speak now, and I will take what they shall say to me for a sign."

It was later than she had thought. Worship was over and all the house was quiet, as she knocked at the parlour door with a trembling hand. The minister sat in his usual seat with an open letter before him, and Mrs. Hume's face was very grave as she bade her sit down. But Allison was in haste to say what must be said, and she remained standing with her hands firmly clasped.

"I have something to tell you, and it must be told to-night. You will try to think as little ill of me as you can. I did wrong maybe, but I could see no other way. But now I am not sure. I think I wish to do God's will, and you will tell me what it is."

She spoke low, with a pause at the close of every sentence, and she was very white and trembling as she ceased. Mrs. Hume rose, and leading her to a chair made her sit down, and sat beside her, still holding her hand.

"We shall be glad to help you if we can," said the minister.

Then Allison told her story briefly, so briefly that it is doubtful whether her hearers would have understood it if they had heard it then for the first time. They had not heard it all, only bits here and there of it, but enough to enable them to understand something of the morbid fear and the sense of utter desolation from which she had suffered, when she first came among them. Her voice grew firm as she went on, and she spoke clearly and strongly, so that many words were not needed. She hesitated a little when she came to the time when she had asked John Beaton to befriend her brother, but she went on gravely:

"He did not see my brother. He had gone. I had been months away with the child before I heard that Willie was in America safe and well. It was a friend who wrote to me—Mr. Hadden, our minister's son. Willie is doing well, and some time I am to go out to him—if I can."

She paused, withdrew her hand from Mrs. Hume's clasp, and rose, saying:

"Now, I must tell you. All this time I have been afraid that—the man who married me would find me and take me to his house in spite of me. But it is I who have found him. It was Mr. Crombie who told me about him. He said he had seen him—on his dying bed, and in God's name he bade me go to him, and tell him that I forgave him for the ill he did me. He said it was not between me and the man who had sinned against me, but it was between me and the Lord himself, and that I must forgive if I would be forgiven. And if you shall say the same—"

Allison sat down and bent her head upon her hands. Mrs. Hume laid her hand upon the bowed head, but she did not speak. Mr. Hume said:

"I do not see how Crombie has had to do with this matter."

"Allison looked up.

"I should have told you that it was in our parish that Mr. Crombie buried his wife. He saw the names of my father and mother on their headstone, and some one there—meaning me no ill—told him about me. And when he came home again, he thought it his duty to point out to me that I might be in the wrong. But I think it must have gone out of his mind, for he never spoke to me again till to-night."

"And to-night he spoke?"

"Yes. To-night he came to me in Mrs. Beaton's house, and warned me that it was my duty to go to a dying man. And if you tell me the same, I must go."

She let her face fall again upon her hands.

(To be continued.)

TITH: petition of Ayton U.P. congregation, for admission to the Free Church has been transmitted by Duns and Chirnside, Presbytery to the Assembly.