

## Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

"I will help you if I can. I hope you may be mistaken in thinking that Crombie knows your story. I think, at the worst, it is only a guess he has made."

Allison shook her head.

"He saw the names of my father and mother on the headstone that their son has set up over their grave. Willie may be at home still, but I hope he has gone away to America. Oh! if I were only sure that he were I would go to him at once. I could hardly be brought back so far. And I might hide myself in that great country so that I could never be found."

"Allison," said John gently. "Think of me as a friend, who will help you whatever may happen."

"I thank you kindly, and I trust you. I will hide still where I am while I may, for oh! I dread the thought of these first dark days coming on me again."

"I do not think you need to be afraid of Crombie. He would not willingly injure you. He is a good man, though his sense of duty makes him sometimes say or do what looks hard."

"Yes. He might think it right to betray me not that it would be betrayal, since I have not trusted him or any one else."

She made a great effort to quiet herself and to speak calmly. But she was anxious and afraid, and she grew sick at heart at the thought that all the dreariness and misery of the first days of her stay in Nethermuir might come back upon her again, or that she might have to go away among strangers.

"But I will not go to yon man's house whatever befall," she said in her heart.

The cloud which had hidden the moon for a while passed and showed the trouble in her face, and John's heart smote him as he saw it. To whom might this poor soul turn in her distress? And why should she tell her story to any one? Since she had kept it so long to herself, it could not be an easy one to tell. Why should she tell it? Whether she had been right or wrong in her flight and her silence, it could not be helped now, and if she could be saved from her present fear and pain, it would be right to help her.

"Allison," he said in a little, "you say you can trust me. I also trust you. You do not need to tell your story to me. Some day, perhaps, you may tell it to my mother. No one can give you wiser counsel or warmer sympathy than she will. And I think you need not fear Saunners Crombie. At any rate, he would speak first to yourself, or to one whom he knows to be your friend. He would never betray you to your enemy."

"Well, I will wait. I will not go away—for a while at least. And you will be my friend?"

"I will try to help you," said John.

But all the thoughts which were passing through John Beaton's mind would not have made a pleasant hearing for his mother. A sudden, strong temptation assailed him, at which he hardly dared to look, and he strove to put it from him.

"As to Crombie," said he, "he is an old man and growing forgetful. It may all pass out of his mind again. That would be best."

"Yes," said Allison, "that would be best."

They walked down to the gate together.

"And you will forgive me, Allison, and—trust me?"

"I will aye trust you. And it is you who need to forgive me," said she, holding out her hand. "But it never came into my mind—"

John held her hand firmly for a moment.

"Allison!" said he, and then he turned and went away.

It was his mother who should befriend Allison Bain. But how to tell her story? If it had to be told, Allison must tell it herself. As to speaking with Saunners Crombie about Allison Bain and her troubles—

John uttered an angry word, and hurried down the lane and past the gardens and the green, and over the fields and over the hills, till he came to himself standing in the moonlight within sight of the "Stanin' Stanes." And being there he could only turn and go home again, carrying his troubled thoughts with him.

He had many of them, and the thought which pressed upon him most painfully for the moment was one which need not have troubled him at all. How was he to meet his mother and speak to her about Allison Bain with all this angry turmoil in his heart? He was angry with himself, with Crombie, even with Allison.

"How could I have thought—" she had said, looking at him with entreaty in her lovely eyes. While she had been in his thoughts by day and in his dreams by night, he "had never come into her mind!"

"But I could have made her think of me if I had not been a fool, with my fine plans about rising in the world! I could make her care for me yet," said John to himself, quite unconscious that from the window of her room his mother's kind, anxious eyes were watching him.

"Something has happened to vex him," said she to herself. "I will not seem to spy upon him. He will tell me, if he needs my help, in his own time."

But she waited and listened long before his footstep came to the door, and he went to his room without coming to say good-night as he passed.

"He is thinking I am asleep," she said with a sigh.

There was nothing to be said. That was the conclusion to which John came that night. What could he say to his mother about Allison Bain? If he were to speak a word, then nothing could be kept back. His mother had a way of knowing his thoughts even before he uttered them, and why should she be vexed at seeing the trouble which, if he spoke at all, could not be concealed from her?

If the story must be told to his mother, Allison herself must tell it. But why need it be told? If only that meddling old fool, Crombie, had had the sense to hold his tongue. What good could come of speaking? Why should not the poor soul be left to forget her troubles and to grow content? Even his mother could only warn her and help her to get away

if it ever came to that with her. But until then silence was best.

He would have a word with Saunners to find out what he knew and what he only suspected, and he would do what might be done to keep him silent.

John had his word with Crombie, but it did not come about in the way which he had desired and planned. While he was the next day lingering about the kirk in the hope of getting a word with him, Crombie was asking for John at his mother's door.

"Come away in, Mr. Crombie," said Mrs. Beaton when she heard his voice. "I have been wishing to see you this while."

Then there were a few words spoken between them about the sorrow which had come upon him, and of his wife's last days, and of the long journey he had taken to lay her in the grave. Saunners told of the bonny, quiet place on the hillside, where he had laid her down, and before he had taken time to consider, the name of Allison Bain had been uttered.

"I saw the names of her father and her mother—" John Bain and Allison his wife—"on a fine, new headstone that has been put over them by their son. They have been dead a year and more. Decent folk they seem to have been. He farmed his ain land. I heard about it from a wee bowed wife who was there in the kirkyard. She had something to say o' Allison Bain as well."

And then Crombie came to a pause. Mrs. Beaton was startled by his words, but kept silence, for she saw that he had not meant to speak. But in a little while he went on.

"It was a queer story that she told altogether, and I have been in a swither as to what I was to do with it, or if I was to do anything with it. I cam' the day to speak to your son about it, but taking a' the possibilities into consideration, I'm no' sure but what I hae to say should be said to a prudent woman like yourself. I would be loth to harm the lass."

"I will never believe an ill word of Allison Bain till she shall say it to me with her own lips," said Mrs. Beaton, speaking low.

"Weel, I have no ill to say o' her. There was no ill spoken o' her to me. That is, the woman thought no ill, but quite the contrary—though mair micht be said. Ye're her friend, it seems, and should ken her better than I do. I've tell ye all I ken myself, though it was to ye're son I meant to tell it."

"And why to my son?" asked Mrs. Beaton, gravely.

It is possible that Crombie might have given a different answer if the door had not opened to admit John himself. The two men had met before in the course of the day, and all had been said which was necessary to be said about the death and burial of Crombie's wife, and in a minute Crombie turned to Mrs. Beaton again.

"As to the reason that I had for thinkin' to speak to your son, there was naeboddy else that I could weel speak to about it. No' the minister, nor his wife. It would be a pity to unsettle them, or to give them anxious thoughts, and that maybe without sufficient reason. And John's a sensible lad, and twa heads are better than ane."

John laughed and mended the fire, and asked "whether it was Robin or Jack this time, and what was ado now?"

"It's about neither the one nor the other," said Saunners, with a touch of offence in his voice. "It's about the lass at the manse—Allison Bain."

It had been a part of Crombie's plan "to take the lad by surprise" when he mentioned Allison's name, and he peered eagerly into his face "to see what he could see." But the peats, which John had put on with a liberal hand, had darkened the fire for the time, and he had taken his place beside his mother's chair and was leaning on it, as he had a way of doing when anything special was to be said between them, and Saunners saw nothing.

"Begin at the beginning," said Mrs. Beaton.

So Saunners began again, and getting into the spirit of the affair, told it well. They listened in silence till he came to a pause.

"It is a curious story," said John, by way of saying something.

"It was a curious story as I heard it," said Saunners.

"Is the wee wife 'a' there?" asked John quietly.

"I'm by no means sure o' it. She looked daft-like when she shook her neive (fist) at the man Brownrig behind his back and called him ill names. And her laugh when she told me that the man had never touched his wife's hand since the day he put the ring upon it, and when she swore that never had he touched her lips, was mad enow."

John's mother felt the start which her son gave when the words were spoken.

"And is it true, think ye?" said she.

"There seems to be truth in the story, but where it lies I canna say. And whether it be true or no, I am beginning to think that I have no call to make or meddle in it."

"There is just one thing that I must say again," said Mrs. Beaton—"I'll never believe an ill word of Allison Bain till with her own lips she gives me leave to do it! She is a good woman, whatever trouble may have been brought into her life by the ill-doing of others."

"What think ye, John?" said Saunners.

"I think ye did a wise thing when ye came to consult with my mother. She kens a good woman when she sees her."

"There may be truth in the story. It may be a' true. But the question for me to decide with your advice is whether a word o' mine will help or hinder the richt thing being done?"

"Yes, that is the question," said Mrs. Beaton. She hesitated to say more. For she knew that to set one side of a matter in a strong light was the surest way to let Crombie see more clearly all that might be said on the other side.

"She's a weel doin' lass," said Crombie.

"She is invaluable in the manse," said Mrs. Beaton.

"It would unsettle them sadly to lose her, or even to have a doubtful word spoken o' her," said Saunners.

"Especially just now, when Mrs. Hume is not quite well," said Mrs. Beaton.

"And what say ye, John?" asked Saunners.

"Do ye feel responsible to this man—whatever his name may be—that ye should wish to take up his cause? I mean, had ye any words with him about her?" added John, as his mother touched his hand in warning.

"No' me! The wife said he was aye waitin', and watchin', and speirin', and there was a chance that he would have a word wi' me. I didna bide to be questioned. I just took the road without loss o' time, whether it was wise to do it or no."

"To my mind it was both wise and kind," said Mrs. Beaton. "As ye say, there may be truth in the story; but the telling of it here will be the same thing to Allison Bain, whether it be true or false. She is alone and friendless, it seems, and that a young lass should be spoken about at all is a harm to her, and a word might be the means of sending her out into the world without a friend. Surely the Lord was keeping His eye on her for good when he sent her to the manse, and into the hands of such a woman as Mrs. Hume."

"Ay, that's the truth. And what say ye, John?"

"I say that my mother seldom makes a mistake when she lets herself speak strongly about any matter. I agree with her that ye took the right course when ye made up your mind to say nothing about the matter."

Crombie fidgeted in his chair, and was silent for a minute or two.

"I said nothing to the man himself, but I did drop a word to Allison Bain. She said nothing, but I saw by her face that she understood. I only hope I may no hae done ill in speakin'."

The others hoped the same with stronger emphasis, and not without some angry thoughts on John's part. But to speak the old man fair was the wisest way. There was no time for many words, for Annie brought in the tea, and Saunners was prevailed upon to stay and share their meal. When it was over it was beginning to grow dark, and he rose to go, and John rose also, saying he would go with him a bit of his way.

The talk between them as they went on was not of Allison, but of quite other persons and matters, and it was kept steadily up and not suffered to turn in that direction. When Saunners spoke of the strange things that might be happening under "our very een," John listened in silence, or brought him back to the kirk, and the new members, and the good that was being done, till they came to the little house by the side of the moss, out of whose narrow window no welcoming light was gleaming.

"I'm na' used wi' ye," said Saunners with a groan, as he fumbled awkwardly trying to put the clumsy key into the lock. "It's the hardest part o' my day's work, this coming hame to a dark house. But folk maun bide what's sent, and be thankful its nae waur. Gude-night to ye. Ye hae shortened my road, and mony thanks, I winna ask ye to come in."

"No. I must be early up and awa' in the morning, and it may be long ere I be home again. Ye might look in on my mother whiles, when ye're down our way. She's much alone."

If John had planned his best to win Saunners to friendliness, and to silence concerning the affairs of Allison Bain, he could have said nothing more to the purpose than that. Saunners accepted the invitation, and came now and then to inquire for the health of Mrs. Beaton, and "heard only good words from her," as he said.

He had something to say to most of his friends about the place where he had laid down his wife to her rest beside her own folk, and even spoke of the "daft wife" that he had seen there; but he never uttered a word as to the story she had told him, and in course of time, as he thought less about it, it passed quite out of his remembrance—which was best for all concerned.

## CHAPTER XVII.

"Fear hath a hundred eyes that all agree  
To plague her beating heart."

As for Allison, the thought of going away from Nethermuir to escape the threatened danger did not stay long with her. It would be wrong to go away now, she told herself. For another little daughter came to the manse about this time, and Allison's strength and skill were tried to meet all demands upon them for awhile. Yes, it would be wrong to leave these good friends who had been kind to her, and above all, wrong to steal away, as in her first alarm it had come into her mind to do.

And besides, even if that which she feared were to come upon her, and if by means of Crombie, or by any other means she were discovered, the times had gone by when force could be used and a woman carried away secretly against her will. There would be a good many words to be said before she could be forced to go with Brownrig, even though he might, as he had said, have "the law on his side."

"I must wait patiently; I must not let myself fall into blackness and darkness again. Whether I have done wrong, or whether I have done right, there's no turning back now."

As far as Saunners was concerned it soon was seen that she had nothing to fear. He had only kindly words for her now, and though his words of greeting were few, they were kindly also. The words of caution and counsel which it was "his bounden duty" to let drop for the benefit of all young and thoughtless persons when opportunity offered, had reference chiefly to the right doing of daily duty, and the right using of daily privileges and opportunities, as far as Allison was concerned.

And so the days passed till November was drawing near. Then something happened. Auld Kirstin came home to the manse. "Home," it must be, thought the neighbours, who saw the big "kist" and the little one lifted from the carrier's cart. And Allison, to whom Mrs. Hume had only spoken in general terms as to the coming home of their old servant, could not help thinking the same, and with a little dismay. But her year's experience had given her confidence in the kindness and consideration of her mistress, and she could wait patiently for whatever might be the decision with regard to her.

The minister's wife and the minister himself had had many thoughts about the matter of Kirstin's coming home long before she came. For as the summer days drew to a lingering end, Mrs. Esselmont had fallen sick and had appealed to them for help.

She was not very ill, but her illness was of a nature which made her residence at Firhill during the winter not altogether impossible, but undesirable and unwise, as she told them, since she had the power to go elsewhere. She could spend the winter with her eldest daughter, she said, but as her home lay in one of the cold, English counties, washed by the same sea from which the bleak winds came moaning through the firs on her own hill, she would hardly better herself by the change. What she wished was to go further south to a place by the sea, where she had already spent more than one winter, and some of the winter days there, she told them, might well pass for the days of a Scottish summer. What she could not endure was the thought of going away alone.