

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XXVII.—(Continued.)

But when the doctor came, Brownrig had forgotten his intention to speak, or he did not feel equal to the effort needed for the assertion of his own will in a matter which was of such importance to him. So it was Allison to whom he first spoke of his wish to go home. He said how weary he had grown of the dull room, and the din of the town, and even of the sight of the doctors' faces, and he said how sure he was that he would never gather strength lying there. It would give him new life, he declared, to get home to his own house, and to the free air of the hills.

Allison listened in silence, and when he would be answered, she murmured something about the coming of the summer days making such a move possible, and said that the doctors would have to decide what would be the wisest thing to do.

"They will be the wisest to decide how it is to be done, but it is decided already that the change is to be made. You speak of the summer days! Count ye the months till then, and ask if I could have the patience to wait for them? Yes, there is a risk, I ken that weel, but I may as weel die there as here. And to that I have made up my mind."

Allison did not answer him, and he said no more. He had grown wary about wasting his strength, or exciting himself to his own injury, and so he lay quiet.

"You might take the Book," said he in a little.

Yes, there was always "The Book." Allison took the Bible, and as it fell open in her hand, she read: "I will lead the blind by a way they know not, and her head was bowed, and the tears, which were sometimes very near her eyes, fell fast for a single moment. But they fell silently. No sound of voice or movement of hand betrayed her, and there was no bitterness in her tears.

"Yes, it is for me this word. For surely I am blind. I canna see my way through it all. But if I am to be led by the hand like a little child, and upheld by One who is strong, and who cares for me, who 'has loved me,' shall I be afraid?"

And if her voice trembled now and then as she read, so that at last Brownrig turned uneasily to get a glimpse of her face, he saw no shadow of doubt or fear upon it, nor even the quiet to which he had become accustomed, but a look of rest and peace which it was not given to him to understand. Allison took her work and sat as usual by the window.

"I may have my ups and downs as I have aye had them," she was saying to herself. "but I dinna think I can ever forget—I pray God that I may never forget—that I am 'led.'"

Brownrig lay quiet, but he was not at his ease, Allison could see. He spoke at last.

"Are you sure that you have forgiven me—quite sure—in the way that God forgives. Come and stand where I can see your face."

Allison in her surprise at his words neither answered nor moved.

"For ye see, if ye were to fail me, I doubt I could hardly keep hold of the Lord himself. If there is one thing that the minister has said oftener than another, it is this, that when God forgives He also receives. You believe this surely? Come and stand where I can see your face."

Allison laid down her work, and came and stood not very near him, but where the light fell full upon her.

"I canna but be sorry for—what happened, but I bear no anger against you for it now. Yes, I have forgiven. I wish you no ill. I wish you every good. I am far sorer for you than I am for myself. God sees my heart."

She did not need to prove her words. He knew that they were true. If she had not been sorry for him, if she had not forgiven him, and had pity upon him, why should she have come to him at all? But God's way went beyond that. He not only pitied and pardoned, He received, loved, saved. But he was afraid to say all this to her.

"In sickness and trouble she has been willing to stand by me, as she stands by all suffering creatures. That is all. And she is not one of these women who long for ease and prosperous days, or for anything that I could offer her to tempt her. I must just content myself with what she freely gives, nor ask for more."

Then he turned away his face, and Allison did not move till he spoke again.

"You could help me greatly with the doctor, if ye were to try."

Allison made a gesture of dissent.

"That is little likely," said he.

"He thinks much of you, and ye ken it well."

"Does he? It must be because he thinks I am kind to all the poor folk yonder—not because he thinks me wise," added she with a smile.

"As to wisdom, that's neither here nor there in this matter. I am going home to my ain house. That's decided, whatever may be said by any doctor o' them a'. As for life and death, they are no in the doctors' hands, though they whines seem to think it. I'm going home, whether it be to live or to die. But I want no vexation about it, I'm no able to wrangle with them. But if you were to speak to Doctor Fleming—if you were to tell him that you are willing to go with me—to do your best for me, he would make no words about it, but just let me go."

Allison's colour changed, but she stood still and said quietly:

"Do you think Doctor Fleming is a man like that? And don't you think he will be only too glad to send you home when you are able for the journey. Your wisest way will be to trust it all to him."

"At least you will say nothing against it?"

"I shall have nothing to say about it—nothing."

She spoke calmly and was quite unmoved as far as he could see. But she was afraid. She was saying in her heart that her time was coming. Beyond the day! Surely she must look beyond the day. But not now. Not this moment. Even in her dismay she thought of him, and "pitied" him, as he had said.

"You are wearing yourself out," said she gently. "The doctor will not think well of what you have to say, if you are tired and feverish. Lie quiet, and rest till he come."

He did not answer her except with his eager appealing eyes, which she would not meet. She sat by the window, sewing steadily on, till the doctor's step came to the door.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Look not at thine own peace, but look beyond,
And take the Cross for glory and for guide."

It was Allison's way, when the doctor came, to answer such questions as he had to ask, and then to call Dickson, and betake herself to the ward beyond. But to-day Brownrig's first words were:

"I have something to say to you, doctor, and I wish my wife to hear it. Bide ye still, Allison."

"My wife!" Neither the doctor nor Allison had ever heard him utter the word before. Allison took her usual seat by the window, and the doctor placed himself beside the bed. It was the same story over which Brownrig had to tell. He was going home to his own house. It might be to die, and it might not. But whether he were to live or die, home he must go. He had something to do which could only be done there. The doctors had owned that their skill could do nothing more for him. His cure, if he were to be cured, must be left to time. He would never improve in the dreary dullness of the place, and there were many reasons why he should be determined to go—reasons which would affect other folk as well as himself; go he must, and the sooner the better. He said it all quietly enough, speaking reasonably, but with decision. Doctor Fleming listened in silence, and did not answer immediately. To himself he was saying, that it might be well to let the man have his way. He did not think it would make much difference in the end. There was a chance for him—not for health, but for a few years of such a life as no man could envy, as few men could endure. Staying here, or going there, it would be all the same in the end.

Doctor Fleming had in his thoughts at the moment a life-long sufferer, who was happy in the midst of his suffering, and who made the chief happiness of more than one who loved him—one strong in weakness, patient to endure, a scholar, a gentleman, a simple, wise soul, to whom the least of God's works was a wonder and delight, a strong and faithful soul, who, in the darkness of God's mysterious dealings, was content to wait His time—willing to stay, yet longing to go—full of pain, yet full of peace.

"Yes," said the doctor, unconsciously uttering his thought aloud, "full of pain, yet full of peace."

And here was this man, so eager to live—this drunkard, and liar, and coward! What could life hold for him that he should so desire to prolong it? And what would life with such a man be to such a woman as Allison Bain?

"Yes, I know God can change the heart. He is wise to guide and mighty to save, and they are both in His good hands. May His mercy be vouchsafed to them both."

"Well," said the sick man, as the doctor suddenly rose to his feet.

"Well—it would be a risk, but it would not be impossible for you to be taken home, as you seem to desire it—if only the summer were here."

"Yes, I have been waiting to hear you say that like the rest," said Brownrig, with the first touch of impatience in his voice, "but the summer days are far away, and winna be here for a while. And ye ken yourself what chance I have of ever seeing the summer days, whether I bide or whether I go, and go I must."

Then he went on to say how the laird would be sure to send the Blackhills carriage for him—the easy one, which had been made in London for the auld leddy, his mother, and how the journey might be taken slowly and safely.

"And if I were only once there!" he said, looking up with anxious eyes. Then he lay still.

"If you were once there, you think you would be yourself again?"

A sudden spasm passed over the eager face.

"No not that. I ken, though you have never said it in my hearing, that it is your belief that, be my life long or short, I can never hope to bear my own weight again. My life's over an' done with—in a sense, but then—there is Allison Bain."

His voice sank to a whisper as he uttered her name.

"Yes," said the doctor to himself, "there is Allison Bain!" Then he rose and moved about the room. He, too, had something to say of Allison Bain—something which it would be a pain for the sick man to hear, but which must be said, and there might come no better time for saying it than this. And yet he shrunk from the task. He paused by the window and took out his watch.

"Mistress Allison," said he, speaking, as was his way when addressing her, with the utmost gentleness and respect, "I have half an hour at my disposal to-day. Go your ways down to the sands, and breathe the fresh air while I am here. The days are too short to put it off later, and you need the change."

"Yes, I will go," said Allison.

"And do not return to-night, neither here nor to the long ward. Mind, I say you must not."

As her hand was on the latch Brownrig called her name. When she came and stood beside the bed he looked at her, but did not speak.

"Were you needing anything?" she asked, gently.

"No. Oh! no, only just to see your face. You'll come early in the morning?"

"Yes, I will come early."

But as she moved away, there came into her eyes a look as of some frightened woodland creature, hemmed in and eager to escape. There was silence for a moment, and just as the doctor was about to speak, Brownrig said:

"Yes, it was well to send her away to get the air, and what I have to say may as well be said now, for it must not be said in her hearing. And it may be better to say it to you than to Rainy, who is but a—no matter what he is. But to you I must say this. Think of Allison Bain! Think of my wife, for she is my wife, for all that's come and gone. It is for her sake that I would fain win home to Blackhills. It is to help to make it all easy for her afterward. If I were to die here, do you not see that it would be a hard thing for her to go and lay me down yonder, in the sight of them who canna but mind the time when she seemed to think that the touch of my hand on his coffin would do dishonour to her father's memory among them? It would hurt her to go from my grave to take possession of her own house, with the thought of that in her mind, and with all their 'een upon her. But if

they were to see us there together, and to ken all that she has done and been to me for the last months, they would see that we had forgiven one another, and they would understand. Then she would take her right place easily and naturally, and none would dare to say that she came home for the sake of taking what was left."

He paused exhausted, but Dr. Fleming said nothing in reply, and he went on.

"It would be better and easier for her to be left in her ain house. And even though my days were shortened by the journey, what is a week or two more or less life to me? You'll just need to let me go."

In a little he spoke again, saying a few words at a time.

"No, my day is done—but she may have a long life before her. Yes, she has forgiven me—and so I can believe—that God will also forgive. And I am not so very sorry—that my end is near,—because, though I would have tried, I might have failed to make her happy. But no one can ever love her as I have done. Or maybe it was myself I loved—and my own will and pleasure."

There was a long pause, and then he went on speaking rather to himself than to him who sat silent beside him.

"Oh! if a man could but have a second chance! If my mother had but lived I might have been different. But it's too late now too late! I am done out. I'll try to sleep."

He closed his eyes and turned away his face. Greatly moved, Doctor Fleming sat thinking about it all. He had spoken no word of all he went to say, and he would never speak now. No word of his was needed. He sat rebuked in this man's presence—this man whom, within the hour, he had called boaster and braggart, liar and coward.

"Truly," he mused, "there is such a thing as getting 'a new heart.' Truly, there is a God who is 'mighty to save.' I will neither make nor meddle in this matter. No, I cannot encourage this woman to forsake him now at the last if the end is drawing near—as I cannot but believe. He may live for years, but even so, I dare not say she would be right to leave him. God guide and strengthen her for what may be before her. It will be a sore thing for her to go home and find only graves."

"Doctor," said Brownrig suddenly, "you'll no' set yourself against it longer—for the sake of Allison Bain!"

"My friend," said the doctor, bending forward and taking his hand, "I see what your thought is, and I honour you for it. Wait a day or two more before you make your plans to go, and then, if it is possible for you to have your wish, you shall have it, and all shall be made as easy and safe for you as it can possibly be made. You are right in thinking that you will never—be a strong man again. And after all, it can only be a little sooner or later with you now."

"Ay, I ken that well. It is vain to struggle with death."

"And you are not afraid?"

"Whiles—I am afraid, I deserve nothing at His hand, whom I have aye neglected and often set at naught. But, you see, I have His own word for it. Ready to forgive—waiting to be gracious—I am sorry for my sins—for my lost life—and all the ill I have done in it. Do you think I am over bold ust to take Him at His word? Well I just do that. What else can I do?"

What indeed! There was nothing else to be done and nothing else was needed.

"He will not fail you," said the doctor gently.

"And you'll speak to—my wife? for I am not sure that she will wish to go home." And then he closed his eyes and lay still.

In the meantime Allison had taken her way to the sands, and as she went she was saying to herself:

"I can but go as I am led. God guide me, for the way is dark."

It was a mild November day, still and grey on land and sea. The grey sea had a gleam on it here and there, and the tide was creeping softly in over the sands. Allison walked slowly and wearily, for her heart was heavy. She was saying to herself that at last, that which she feared was come upon her, and there was truly no escape.

"For how can I forsake him now? And yet how can I go with him to meet all that may wait me there? Have I been wrong all the way through, from the very first, and is this the way in which my punishment is to come? And is it my own will I have been seeking all this time, while I have been asking to be led?"

There was no wind to battle against to-day, but when she came to the place where she had been once before at a time like this, she sat down at the foot of the great rock, and went over it all again. To what purpose?

There was only one way in which the struggle could end, just as it had often ended before.

"I will make no plan. I will live just day by day. And if I am led by Him—as the blind are led—what does it matter where?"

So she rose and went slowly home, and was "just as usual," as far as Mrs. Robb, or even the clearer-eyed Robert, could see. Robert was back to his classes and his books again, and he took a great but silent interest in Allison's comings and goings, gathering from chance words of hers more than ever she dreamed of disclosing. And from her silence he gathered something too.

A few more days passed, and though little difference could be seen in Brownrig's state from day to day, when the week came to an end, even Allison could see that a change of some kind had come, or was drawing near. The sick man spoke, now and then, about getting home, and about the carriage which was to be sent for him, and when the doctor came, he asked, "Will it be to-morrow?" But he hardly heeded the answer when it was given, and seemed to have no knowledge of night or day, or of how the time was passing.

He slumbered and awakened, and looked up to utter a word or two, and then slumbered again. Once or twice he started, as if he were afraid, crying out for help, for he was "slipping away." And hour after hour—how long the hours seemed—Allison sat holding his hand, speaking a word now and then, to soothe or to encourage him, as his eager, anxious eyes sought hers. And as she sat there in the utter quiet of the time, she did get a glimpse of the "wherefore" which had brought her there.

For she did not help him. When there came back upon him, like the voice of an accusing enemy, the sudden remembrance of some cruel or questionable deed of his, which he could not put from him as he had done in the days of his strength, he could not shut his eyes and refuse to see his shame, nor his lips, and refuse to utter his fears. He moaned and muttered a name, now and then, which startled Allison as