

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

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CHAPTER XI.

"Oh! the happy life of children still restoring joy to ours!
Back recalling all the sweetness."

Summer came slowly but happily to Marjorie this year, bringing with it, oh! so many pleasures to which she had hitherto been a stranger. She had had the early spring flowers brought into the parlour many a time, and ferns, and buds, and bonny leaves, for all the bairns of the place were more than glad to be allowed to share their treasures with her; and the one who came first and brought the most of these, thought herself the happiest, and great delight in past summers had all this given to the child. She had watched, too, the springing of the green things in the garden, the wakening of pale little snowdrops and auriculas, and the gradual unfolding of the leaves and blossoms on the berry-bushes, and on the apple tree, the pride of the place.

But she had never with her own hands plucked the yellow pussies from the saughs (low willows) by the burn, nor found the wee violets, blue and white, hiding themselves under last year's leaves. She had never watched the slow coming of first the buds, and then the leaves on the trees along the lanes, nor seen the hawthorn hedges all in bloom, nor the low hills growing greener every day, nor the wandering clouds making wandering shadows where the gow ns—the countless "crimson-tipped flowers"—were gleaming among the grass. All this and more she saw this year, as she lay in the strong, kind arms of Allison. And as the days went on it would not have been easy to say whether it was the little child, or the sad and silent woman, who got the greater good from it all.

For Allison could no longer move along the lanes and over the fields in a dream, her inward eyes seeing other far-away fields and hills, and a lost home, and faces hidden forevermore, when a small hand was now and then laid upon her cheek to call her back to the present. The little silvery voice was ever breaking in upon these dreary memories, and drearier forebodings, with cooing murmurs of utter content, or with shrill outbursts of eager delight, in the enjoyment of pleasures that were all of Allie's giving. And so what could Allie do but come out of her own sorrowful musings and smile, and rejoice in the child's joy, and find a new happiness in the child's love.

There was much to be done in the house, but there was no day so busy or so full of care but that Allison could manage to give the child a blink of sunshine if the day were fair. There was much to do out of the house also, what with the cows and the garden, and the glebe. Cripple Sandy, who was the minister's man-of-all-work, had all that he could do, and more, in the narrow fields. So Allison rose early and milked her cows, and led them out herself, to no wide pasture, but to one of those fields where she tethered them first and flitted them later in the morning, when they had cropped their little circle bare. And both at the tethering and the flitting Marjorie assisted when the day was fine, and it was a possible thing. She woke when Allison rose, and being first strengthened by a cup of warm milk and a bit of bread, and then wrapped warmly up in a plaid to keep her safe from the chill air of the morning, she was ready for a half-hour of perfect enjoyment. When that was over, she was eager for another cup of milk and another sleep, which lasted till breakfast was over and her brothers had all gone to school.

And when the time for the afternoon flitting of the cows came, Marjorie was in the field once more, sitting on a plaid, while the placid creatures were moved on, and she and Allie went home again as they came, through the lanes in which there were so many beautiful things.

Sometimes a neighbour met them, who had something to say to the child, and sometimes they met the bairns coming from the school. When they came home by the longest way, as Marjorie liked best to do, they would have a word with the schoolmistress, as she was taking the air at her door when the labours of the day were over, and sometimes a smile and a flower from Mrs. Beaton in her garden over the way. This was the very best summer in all her life, Marjorie told her father one day, as Allie laid her down on her couch in the parlour again.

All this was beginning to do the child good. Even the neighbours noticed the change after a little, and were glad also. Some of them meant that the coming and going passed the time and contented her. Others said that it was well that her mother's heart was set at rest about her, and that she got more time for all else that she had to do; and all thought well of the new lass for her care of little Marjorie.

The mother, who had consented to these new doings with misgiving, began, after a little, to see the change for the better that was being wrought in the child. Long before midsummer there was dawning a soft little gleam of colour on Marjorie's cheek, not at all like the feverish tints that used to come with weariness or fretfulness, or excitement of any kind. The movements of the limbs and of the slender little body were freer and stronger, and quite unconsciously, it seemed, she helped herself in ways on which she had never ventured before.

Her father saw the change too, though not so soon as her mother; but having seen it, he was the more hopeful of the two. And by and by they spoke to one another, saying if this thing could be done, or that their Marjorie might be helped and healed, and grow strong and tall like the other bairns, and have a hopeful life before her. But they paused when they had got thus far, knowing that the child was in God's hands, and that if it were His will to bring about the fulfilment of their desire, he would also show a way in which it was to be done. Whether this might be or not, their little gentle darling would aye be, as she had aye been, the dearest blessing in their happy home.

"And may God bless Allison Bain, however it is to be."

"Yes," said the mother. "I think a blessing is already coming to her through the child."

"Is she less sad, think you? She seems more at home among us, at least."

"I cannot say that she is less sad. But her sadness is no longer utter gloom and despair, as it seemed to me at first. And she says her prayers now, Marjorie tells me. I see myself that she listens to what you say in the kirk. I think it

may be that she is just coming out of the darkness of some great sorrow which had at first seemed to her to end all. She is young and strong, and it is natural that her burden of trouble, whatever it may be, should grow lighter as the time goes by. Oh! she is sad still, and she is sometimes afraid, but she is in a better state to bear her trouble, whatever it may be, than she was when she came first among us. I sometimes think if some good and pleasing thing were to come into her life, some great surprise, that might take her thoughts quite off the past, she might forget after a little and get back her natural cheerfulness again."

Mrs. Hume ceased suddenly. For a moment a strong temptation assailed her. If ever man and wife were perfectly one in heart, and thought, and desires, these two were. As for the wife, no thought or wish of hers, whether of great things or of small, seemed quite her own till she had also made it his. Seeing the look which had come to her face, her husband waited for her to say more. But she was silent. She had no right to utter the words which had almost risen to her lips. To tell another's secret—if indeed there were a secret—would be betrayal and cruel wrong. Even to her husband she might not tell her thoughts, and indeed, if she had but known it, there was, as far as Allison Bain was concerned no secret to tell.

But Robin, who was in the way of sharing with his mother most things which greatly interested himself, had told her about his morning run over the hills after John Beaton, and how he had found him "looking at nothing" on the very spot where, the day before, he had got his first look at Allison Bain, and how he had turned and run home again without been seen. Robin only told the story. He drew no inference from it, at least he did not for his mother's hearing.

His mother did that for herself. Remembering John's dazed condition at worship on the first night of his home-coming, it is not surprising she should have said to herself that "the lad's time had come."

And what of Allison? She had asked herself that question a good many times since John's departure; but she owned that never, either by word or look, had Allison betrayed herself, if indeed she had anything to betray, and of that she was less assured as the days went on. But whether or not, it was evident, Mrs. Hume assured herself, that Allison was "coming to herself" at last.

And so she was. Young and naturally hopeful, it is not to be supposed that Allison's sorrow, heavy and sore though it was, could make all the future dark to her, and bow her always to the earth. She had lost herself for a time in the maze of trouble, into which death, and her enforced marriage, and her brother's sin and its punishment had brought her. But she was coming to the end, and out of it now. She was no longer living and walking in a dream. She was able to look over the last year of her life at home with calmness, and she could see how, being overwrought in mind and body, spent with work and watching, and care, she had fallen under the mastery of blind terror for her brother's safety, and had yielded where she ought to have stood firm.

She had no one to blame for what had befallen her. Her mother had hardly been in a state to know what was going on around her, except that her "bonny Willie"—as she called him in her prayers, and in her murmured longings for him—was far away, and might not come home in time to see her die, or to help to lay her in her grave. Her father grieved for his son, but, angry at him also, had uttered no word either to help or to hinder the cause of the man who had made Allison's promise the price of her brother's safety. But he went about with bowed head, listening, and looking, and longing, aye longing, for the coming of the lad. So what could she do but yield for their sakes, and take what seemed the only way to bring him back again?

But one wrong was never righted by the doing of another, and her sacrifice had come to worse than naught. Though she had sinned blindly, she had suffered for her sin, and must suffer still. But gradually the despair which darkened all the year was passing. There was hope in her heart now, and a longing to throw off the dead weight which had so long held her down. And the lightening of her burden showed now and then in eye and voice, and step, so that all could see the change. But with all this the thought of John Beaton had nothing to do.

She had seen him just as she had seen other folk, and he had come into her thoughts once or twice when he was not in her sight. But that was because of the good understanding there was between him and little Marjorie. The child had much to say about him when he was at home; and when she was carried out in Allison's arms on those days, she was always wishing that they might meet him before they went home again.

One day they met, and Marjorie being gently and safely transferred to John's arms, Allison turned and went back into the house without a word of explanation and apology.

"It's ironing day," explained Marjorie, a little startled at the look on John's face.

"Oh! it's ironing day, is it? Well, never mind. I am going to take you to the very top of Windhill, to give you a taste of the fresh air, and then I shall carry you home to take tea with my mother and me."

"That will be delightful," said Marjorie with a sigh of pleasure.

No. In those days Allison was thinking nothing at all about John. When she went about the house, with no gloom, but only a shadow of softening sadness on her face, and a look of longing in her eyes, it was of her brother that she was thinking. She was saying in her heart:

"God help him in that dismal place—he who should be free upon the hills with the sheep, or following the plough on his ain land at home."

And when a sudden smile came, or a bright glance, or a murmur of song, she was telling herself that his time was nearly over; that he would soon be free again to go far away over the sea, where, with kind help from Mr. Hadden, he would begin a new life, and all would be well with him once more. Yes, and they might be together again.

But this could not be for a long time. She must not even try to see her brother. For Brownrig would be sure to have a watch set on him when he was free. And Brownrig—having the law on his side, as he had said in the hearing of many, on the night of the dark day on which her father was buried, raising his voice that she too might hear him, the door being locked and barred between them—Brownrig would come and she would be found, and then lost forever.

"For," said Allison to herself. "I should have to drown myself then, and make an end of it all."

She was standing on the edge of Burney's Pot, near the milldam, when she said this to herself, and she shuddered as she looked down into the gray water.

"But it will never come to that! Oh! no, mother, it will never come to that. But to save myself from that man, even to end all would surely be no sin."

But these thoughts did not haunt and terrify her now, as her doubts and dreads had done during the winter. She had no time for brooding over the past. Every hour of the day was more than full with all she had to do, and there were no long, dark evenings, when she had only her wheel and her own thoughts for company.

And there was Marjorie. Marjorie had something to do with her thoughts through all the hours of the day. She was always there to lift or to lay down, to carry here or to carry there, to speak to or to smile upon. And she grew sweeter and dearer every day. Above all, the time was hastening, and Willie would soon be free. That thought made all the days bright to Allison.

And so she grew, not light-hearted, but reasonable and patient in her thoughts of all that had befallen them, and, at most times, hopeful as to all that might lie before them.

The neighbours, who, at her first coming among them, had been inclined to resent her gloom and her silence, were ready now, for the sake of her friendly looks, to forgive the silence which she kept still. Even in the kirk she was like another woman, they said, and didna seem to be miles awa', or dreaming, or in fear.

Of this change, Allison herself was conscious, when she thought about it. The minister's words did not seem "just to go by" her as they used to do. She listened and took her portion with the rest of the folk, and was moved, or glad, or doubtful, or afraid, as they were, and thought about all she had heard afterwards, as doubtless some of the rest did also.

She was not desirous now, as she had been at first, for more than her own turn of staying at home from the kirk. This was partly because little Marjorie was sometimes able to go there; and when she went she was carried in Allison's arms, where she rested, sometimes listening to her father's voice, and sometimes slumbering through the time. But it was partly, also, because there came now and then a message to Allison there.

For some of the good words spoken must be for her, she thought, since the minister said they were for all. Allison was not good at remembering sermons, or even "heads and particulars," as Robin was. For a long time she had heard nothing but the minister's voice, and carried away no word of his, either for correction or instruction. His sermons were "beyond her," as she said. They meant nothing to her. But now and then a good word reached her out of the Book; and sometimes a word of the minister, spoken, as was the way in those days, as a comment on the psalm that was to be sung, or on the chapter that was read, touched her, strangely enough, more even than the words of the Book itself, with which she had been familiar all her life.

One day early in summer she carried her wee Marjorie to the kirk with a sad heart. For the Sabbath days were the worst to bear, since she had least to do, and more time for thinking. All the morning her thought had been with "her Willie," shut in between stone walls, away from the sunshine and the sweet air, and she was saying to herself: Would the shame and the misery of it all have changed him, and would he come out, angry and reckless, a lost laddie? Oh! if she could only go to meet him at the very door, and if they could get away together over the sea, to that country so great and wide that they might easily lose themselves in it, and so pass out of the sight and out of the thoughts of all who had known them in their happy youth, before trouble had come! Might it not be? And how could it be? Might she not set Brownrig and his wicked wiles at naught, and go with her brother to save him?

And then the minister's voice was heard: "Fret not thyself because of evil-doers." And so on: "Commit thy way unto the Lord. Trust also in Him and He shall bring it to pass."

"Bring it to pass!" In the midst of her trouble and longing Allison had almost uttered the words aloud, as though they had been spoken to her alone of all the listening people, and then Marjorie stirred in her slumber and brought her to herself again.

"Rest in the Lord. Wait patiently for Him. Fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in the way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass."

Surely these words were for her! And she heard no more till he came to the good man whose "steps are ordered of God."

"Though he fall, he shall be not utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand."

"I have been young, and now am old: yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread."

And then Robin touched his mother's hand. For Allison had drawn her big black bonnet over her face to hide from the folk in the kirk the tears which were falling fast on the bright hair of the little sleeper. Mrs. Hume made no sign that she saw they, but she prayed silently for the sorrowful woman who, all the long winter, had kept her sorrow to herself.

"Say nothing, Robin," said she, when they rose to go out together. "She will be the better for her tears, or rather for that which made them flow."

To herself Robin's mother said:

"She will surely speak now, and open her heart to comfort."

She had a while to wait for that, but a change came over Allison as the summer days went on. She was restless sometimes, and anxious and afraid. She had an air of expectation as though she were waiting for something, and sometimes she had the look of one eager to be up and away.

One night when Mrs. Hume went up to see her little daughter in her bed, she found Allison writing. She said nothing to her and did not seem to see, and waited in expectation of hearing more. But she never did.

For Allison's courage failed her and the letter was never sent. It was written to Dr. Fleming, who had been kind to her in the infirmary, and it told him of her brother who was in prison, and asked him to visit him and to be kind to him, as he had been to her. But after it was written, she was afraid to send it.

No. She must wait and have patience. Willie must go away alone over the sea, as they had agreed together in the only letters that had passed between them since he was a prisoner. Mr. Hadden would befriend him as he had promised, and she would follow him when the right time came.

"But it is ill waiting," said Allison to herself, "It is ill waiting."

In those days many a word came to her as she sat in the kirk, or in the parlour at worship time, which set her thinking. Some of them strengthened her courage and gave her