

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER XV.

"She courtied low, she spoke him fair,
She sent him on his way;
She said as she stood smiling there,
You're wealth and wiles, and wisdom rare,
But I have won the day."

Crombie did not leave the manse with an easy mind, and the more he thought of what he had said and what he had not said there, the more uneasy he became. He was in a quandry, he told himself, putting the accent on the last "a." To his surprise and consternation he found himself in doubt as to the course he ought to pursue.

He had gone to the manse with the full intention of asking the minister's lass whether she were the wife of the man whom he had seen "glowering at the new headstane" in the kirkyard of Kilgower, and of putting it to her conscience whether she was not breaking the laws of God and man by keeping herself hidden out of his way.

But he had not asked her. He could not do it. He had come away without a word, and now he was saying to himself that the man who, through soft-heartedness, or through the influence of carnal affection, suffered sin in another, thus being unfaithful to a sinful soul in danger, was himself a sinner. He ought to have spoken, he told himself. He could not be called upon to tell the story to another, but to Allison herself she should have spoken. If her conscience needed to be awakened, he sinned against her in keeping silence. It might have been to prepare him for this very work that he had been sent to lay his Eppie down in that far away kirkyard.

Saunners stood still on the hillside when he got thus far. Ought he to go back again? He could not be sure. The thought of the first glimpse he had got that night of Allison sitting quiet and busy with her work, with a look of growing content upon her face that had once been so gloomy and sad, came back to him, and he moved on again.

"I'll sleep on it," said he, "and I'll seek counsel."

It was a wise resolution to which to come. Saunners was a good man, though, perhaps, he did not always do full honour to his Master or to himself in the sight of those who were looking on. He was "dour, and sour, and ill to bide," it was said of him, even by some among his friends.

But there was this also to be said of Saunners. It was only when a life of struggle and disappointment and hard, wearying work was more than half over, that he had come to see the "True Light," and to find the help of the Burden-Bearer. A man may forsake the sins of his youth and learn to hate the things which he loved before, and to love the things which he hated, and in his heart long, and in his life strive, to follow the perfect Example in all things. But the temper which has been indulged for half a lifetime cannot be easily and always overcome, and habits which have grown through the years cannot be cast aside and put out of sight in a moment, like an ill-fitting garment which will never trouble more. Life was, in a way, a struggle to Saunners still.

But though he lost his temper sometimes and seemed to those who were too ready to judge him to fail in the putting on of that charity which "thinketh no evil," and which is "the bond of perfectness," he was still a good man, honest, conscientious, just, and he could never willingly have sought to harm or to alarm any helpless or suffering creature.

But then neither would his conscience let him consent to suffer sin in one whom he might, through faithful dealing, save from loss and ruin, and whom he might bring back to the right way again.

"She doesna look like a sinfu' woman," he thought, recalling the glimpse he had got through the open door, of Allison sitting at peace and safe from harm. "She is like a woman who has seen sorrow, and who is winning through wi't. And yon man had an evil look."

"And after a', what hae I to go upon? A name on a headstane in a far-awa' kirkyard! A' the rest came frae the wee wud wifie (the little mad woman), who might have made up the story, or only believed it true because o' the ill-will she bore to yon dark, angry lookin' man. And even if the story be true, what call have I to mak' or meddle in it?"

"No' an ill word that ever I hae heard has been spoken of the lass since she came to the manse. She's at peace, and she's doing the work that seems to be given her to do, and—I'll bide a wee and seek counsel. And after a', what hae I got to go upon?" repeated Saunners.

But there was plenty to go upon, as he knew well, if he had only been sure that it would be wise to do anything, or meddle at all in the matter. He had only spoken a word to Allison; but the wee wifie, while they sat together on a fallen gravestone, had told him, not the whole story—she was hardly capable of doing that—but all of it that she had seen with her own eyes.

Oh! yes. She knew well about bonny Allie Bain. She was in the kirk when she was married—"sair against her will. It was like a muckle black corbie carrying off a cushat doo. But the cushat got free for a' that," said the wee wifie, with nods and smiles and shrill laughter.

But she said nothing of the brother's part in that which followed, though she told with glee how Brownrig had gotten his deserts before all was done, and how the bride went one way, and the bridegroom went another, "carried hame wi' sair banes in his gig." She told how first Allison's mother, and then her father, were put in the grave, where they both lay with the new stone at their heads, and how "bonny Allie" had come to say farewell to them there. She grew eager and eloquent when she came to her own part in the story.

"I was here mysel', as I am maist days, for it's a bonny place and wholesome, though you mightna think it here among the dead folk. I like to hae a crack with them that's been awa' for mony a year and day. My mother lies ower in yon nook, and the man I should hae marriet. My father and my brother were lost at sea."

"Oh! ay—and about bonny Allie. Weel, she lay down wi' her face upon the sod, and lay lang there, and when she lifted it again it was white as the snaw, but there wasna a tear upon it. Then there came the bark o' a dog that I kenned

weel. He was sent after me once, though Brownrig denies it. So I made free to go in by; and says I, 'Miss Allie, dear, I hear the bark o' the black dog, Worry, and I doubt his maister's not far awa'.'

"She was speakin' ower the wa' to the minister's son by that time, and after a minute or two she came awa', put her face down on the grave again, and then she followed me. And when we came near to the foot o' the brae, I garred (made) her take off her hose and shoon, and wade doon the burn a bittie that the dog mightna follow the scent, and I laid doon peats that she might step on them a bit of the way between the burn and my ain door."

"When she came in she sat still like and dazed and spent, and never a word spake she. But I stirred up the fire and boiled the kettle, and said I:

"Did ye break your fast afore ye came awa'?"

"There wasna time," said she.

"And ye had nae heart for your supper yestreen, and ye forgot ye're dinner, and nae wonder. But if ye're thinkin' o' winning awa' to Aberdeen this day, or even the morn, ye'll need to tak' something to make ye strong for the long journey."

"So she ate her bread and drank her tea, and then she lay down on my bed and sleepit the hale day. I was unsettled mysel' that day, and I thocht I would gang up the brae to the Meikles and get some buttermilk that the mistress had promised me. So I darkened the window and locket my door. But I didna leave my key in the thecking (thatch) as I do whites, in any case any o' the neebors might send a bairn wi' a sup o' milk, or a bit from a new cut cheese. It's weel to gie them a chance to open the door."

"And what then?" said Crombie, fearful of another digression. "What happened then?"

"Oh! naething happened. I only thought I would be as well awa', in case Brownrig sent or came mysel' to see what there was to see. So I gaed awa' for a while, and when I cam' back I just set mysel' doon at the door to wait for what would come next. Allie sleepit on, and had nae appearance o' having moved when the sun was near set, which wasna early, for the days were near their langest. But I made the fire burn up, and b'iled the kettle to be ready, and made the tea. And then wha' should I see but Brownrig mysel', riding on his black horse and followed by his uncanny tyke. I had only time to draw thegither the doors o' my pressbed ere he was upon me."

"I was feared at the sight o' the dog, and the man saw it; but it wasna for mysel' that I was feared, and that he didna see."

"Ye needna gang white like that at the dog. He'll do ye no harm," said he.

"No, unless ye bid him," said I.

He gaed me a dark look, and said he: 'I'm not like to do that, though I hear you have accused me of it.'

"So I saw he was gaen to speak me fair, and I cum' to the door, and a' at once I saw the twa cups that I had set on the table for Allie and me."

"Ye're to hae a vesitor the nicht?" said he.

"Wha' kens?" said I. 'I'm aye ready, and it is to be you the nicht. Come ye away in and take a cup o' tea, and maybe I'll find a drappie o' something stronger, gin ye'll promise no' to tell the gauger. No' that I'm feared at him. He's a frien' o' mine, and that's mair than I would mak' bauld to say o' ye'resel', said I, 'yein' another feared look at the dog. 'Come in by, and sit soon.'

"But it was growing late, he said, and he must awa'. He had only a question to speir at me. Had I, by ony chance, seen his wife passing by that day? And in whose company?"

"Ye're wife?" said I, as gin I had forgotten. I whiles do forget."

"Ay, my wife, Mistress Brownrig—her that was Allison Bain!"

"Oh! said I then; "bonny Allie Bain? Ay, I did that! In the early, early mornin' I saw her ower yonder, lying wi' her face on the new-made grave."

"I spak' laich (low) when I said it."

"And did ye no' speak to her?" said he.

"I daured na'," said I.

"And which way went she?" said he.

"She stood up on her feet, and looked about her like one dazed, and then somebody spoke to her from ower the wall. And in a wee while I cam' round and said a word, but she never answered me."

"And wha was the man? Or was it a man?"

"Oh! ay. It was a man. It was the minister's son wha has come lately frae America. But I heard nae a word he said."

"Hadden?" he said. 'I'll hae a word wi' him.' And he gaed off in a hurry, and I was glad enow. Then I cried after him: 'Take ye're dog wi' ye, and the next time ye come leave him at hame.' But he never heeded, but he hurried awa'."

"And what happened then?" asked Saunners, trying to hide the interest he took in the story, lest she should suspect that he had a reason for it.

"Doubtless Mr. Hadden told him the truth. There was little to tell. But naething came o' it, or of a' the search which he has kept up since then near and far. It gae me lauch when I think about it. He was mad wi' the love o' her, and the last time he touched her hand was when he put the ring upon it in the kirk. Her lips he never touched—that I'll daur to swear. And a' this time he has been livin' in the house that he made sae grand and fine for her. And doesna he hate it waur than pain or sin by this time? Ay! that does he," said she with her shrill laughter. "He has had a hard year o' it. He gae here and there; and when a new-comer is to be seen among us, his een is upon him to mak' sure that he mayna hae something to say to the folk that bides in Grassie—that's the Bains' farm. And gin he thocht one had a word to say about Allie, he would gar his black dog rive him in bits, but he would get it out of him."

Then a change came over the old woman's face.

"And how did she get awa' at last?" asked Crombie, growing uneasy under her eye.

"Oh! she won awa' easy enuch in a while. She was far frae weel then, and I'm thinkin' that she's maybe dead and a' her troubles o'er by this time."

"And her name was Allie Bain, was it?"

"Ay, ay! her name was Allie Bain."

"Weel, I need to be goin' now. I thank ye for yer story. And if ever I happen to see her, I'll tell her that I saw a frien' o' hers wha spak' weel o' her. And what may ye're ain name be?"

"My name's neither this nor that, that ye should seek to ken it. And, man! gin ye're een should ever licht on aye that ca's hersel' Allie Bain, gae by her, as gin she wasna there. It's better that neither man nor woman should ken where she has made her refuge, lest aye should speak her name by chance, and the birds o' the air should carry the sound o' it to her enemy ower yonder. Na, na! The least said is soonest mended, though I doubt I have been sayin' mair than was wise mysel'. But ye seem a decent-like bodie, and ye were in sair trouble, and I thocht I might hearten ye with friendly words ere ye gaed awa'. But hae ye naething to say about Allison Bain neither to man nor woman, for ill would be sure to come o' it."

She was evidently vexed and troubled, for she rose up and sat down, and glanced sideways at him in silence for a while. Then she said:

"I dausay ye're thinkin' me a queer-like crater. I'm auld, and I'm crooket, and whiles my head's no richt, and there are folk that dinna like to anger me, for fear that I might wish an ill wish on them. I read my Bible and say my prayers like ither folk. But I'm no' sayin' that I haena seen uncanny things happen to folk that hae gaen against me. There's Brownrig mysel', for instance."

"I'm no' sayin' to ye to do the lass nae ill. Ye seem a decent man, and hae nae cause to mean her ill. But never ye name her name. That's good advice—though I haven't taken it mysel'. Gude-day to ye. And haste ye awa'. Dinna let Brownrig's evil een licht on ye, or he'll hae out o' you a ye ken and mair, ere ye can turn round. Gude-day to ye."

"Gude-day to you," said Saunners, rising. He watched her till she passed round the hill, and then he went away.

But the repentant wee wifie did not lose sight of him till he had gone many miles on his homeward way. She followed him in the distance, and only turned back when she caught sight of Brownrig on his black horse, with his face turned toward his home.

Though Saunners would not have owned that the woman's words had hastened his departure, he lost no time in setting out. It was not impossible that, should Brownrig fall in with him later, he might seek to find out whether he had ever seen or heard of Allison Bain, since that seemed to be his way with strangers. That he should wile out of him any information that he chose to keep to himself, Saunners thought little likely. But he might ask a direct question; and the old man told himself he could hold up his face and lie to no man, even to save Allison Bain.

So he hasted away, and the weariness of his homeward road was doubtless beguiled by the thoughts which he had about the story he had heard, and about his duty concerning it. His wisdom would be to forget it altogether, he told himself. But he could not do so. He came to the manse that night with the intention of telling Allison all he had heard, and of getting the truth from her. But when he saw her sitting there so safe, and out of harm's way, he could not do it.

And yet he could not put it altogether out of his thoughts. He would not harm a hair of the lassie's head. A good woman she must be, for she had been doing her duty in the manse for nearly a year now, and never a word to be spoken against her. And who knew to what straits she might be driven if she were obliged to go away and seek another shelter? There were few chances that she would find another such home as the manse. No, he would utter not another word to startle her, or to try to win her secret.

"But there is John Beaton to be considered. I would fain hae a word wi' John. He's a lad that maybe thinks ower-weel o' mysel', and carries his head ower-high. But the root o' the matter's in him. Yes, I hae little doubt o' that. And if I'm nae sair mista'en there's a rough bittie o' road before him. But he is in gude hands, and he'll win through. I'll speak to him, and I'll tak' him at unawares. I'll ken by the first look o' his face whether his heart is set on her or no."

CHAPTER XVI.

"Love will venture in where it daurna weel be seen."

But John had been taken by surprise before Crombie's turn came to speak. Some one else had spoken.

It was Saturday night. The work of the week was over; Marjorie was safe asleep, and restless with the thoughts which always came with leisure, Allison threw a shawl over her head and went out into the lane. It was dark there, where the hedge was high, and the branches hung low from the trees in the manse garden; but beyond the lane, the fields and the far-away hills lay clear in the moonlight. With lingering steps she turned toward the green, along the path which skirted the cottage gardens. When she came to the lae, of them she heard her name called softly.

It was John Beaton's voice. She could not see him where he stood, but he saw her clearly. He saw on her face, as she drew near, the shadow which told of the old sadness and gloom; and he saw it pass, like the mist before the sunshine, as she stood still to listen. In a moment he had leaped the dyke, and stood by her side.

"Allison!" said he, eagerly, as he took her hand.

John was young, and he had had but small experience with woman and her ways, or he never would have mistaken the look on Allison's face for the look of love which he longed to see. He never would have clasped and kissed her without a word.

In the extremity of her surprise and dismay, Allison lay for a moment in his embrace. Then she struggled to get free.

"Allison, forgive me—because I love you. Allison, say that you will be my wife."

A low cry of anguish came from her white lips.

"Oh! may God pity me. I have been sorely wrong, or this would not have come to be my punishment."

She drew herself away from him, but she made no movement to leave him. John hung his head before her.

"Allison, forgive my presumption, and give me a chance to win your love. Allison, I love you dearly."

"Hush!" she whispered. "Come with me. I must speak to you. I have done wrong, but how could I ever have dreamed that you would give a thought to me?"

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"I am in sore trouble. Come with me somewhere—to your mother—for I must speak to you."

"Not to my mother, if you have anything to say which will grieve her," said John, huskily.

"It might grieve her, but she would understand. She might be angry for a moment; but she is kind and good, and she would not think evil of me."