

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Oh, blessed vision, happy child."

"Are you sure you are glad to come home, Allie dear?" said Marjorie Hume, looking up rather doubtfully into her friend's face, for Allison had said not a word in answer to her exclamations for some time.

They were walking together through a wide street in Aberdeen, and Marjorie had been amusing herself looking at the people whom they met, and at the pretty things in the shop windows, and had been enjoying it all so much that, for a while, she had never doubted that Allison was enjoying it also. But Allison was looking away to the sea, and her face was very grave, and there was a look in her eyes that Marjorie had not seen in them for a long time now. The look changed as the child repeated the question.

"Allie, you are surely glad to be going home?"

"I am very glad to be bringing my darling home strong and well to her father and mother, and them all. They will be more than glad to see us again."

"And, Allie dear, it is your home too, till Mrs. Esselmont wants you again. And you will try to be happy there? And you will not be aye wishing to win away to your brother in America—at least for a while?"

"No, not for a while. But I must go when he sends word that he needs me. That may be sooner than we ken. When he gets his own land, and has his house built, then I will go. But I am in no hurry," said Allison, after a pause. "And now let us go and take a look at the sea. It is too early yet to see Dr. Fleming."

"But it is not the same sea that we have been looking at so long—the sea that has helped to make me strong and well."

"It is a grand sea, however, and it is our own. And to-day it is as bonny, and smooth, and blue, as ever the Southern Sea was, and the same sun is shining upon it. And we must make haste, for we have no time to lose."

They did not go at once, however. As they turned into the next street, a hand was laid on Allison's arm, and looking up she met the eyes of one whom she had not seen for many a day. She had last seen him looking sorrowfully down on the face of her dying father.

"Mr. Rainy!" cried she, faintly, thinking of that day.

"Eh! woman, but I am glad to see you after all this time. Where have you been since that sorrowful day? I was just thinking about you as I came down the street. I must believe in a special Providence after this. I was just saying to myself that I would give a five-pound note; and maybe twa, if I could put my hand on Allison Bain. And lo! here ye are. And, Allison, my woman, if your father could speak to you, he would say, 'Put yourself into my old friend's hand and be advised and guided by him, and ye'll never have cause to repent it.' And now I say it for him."

Allison shook her head.

"I cannot do that—blindly. I need neither the help nor the guidance that you would be likely to give me. I must go my way with the child."

"The child! Ah! yes, I see, and a bonny little creature she is," said Mr. Rainy, offering his hand to Marjorie. "And whose child may she be?"

"She is the child of my master and mistress. I have been in service all this time, and I need help from no one."

"In service! Yes, and among decent folk, I'll be bound! Well! well! And doubtless you will be able to account for every day and hour that has gone by since you—were lost sight of. That is well."

"It might be well if there were any one who had a right to call me to account," said Allison, coldly.

Mr. Rainy had turned with them, and they were walking down the street together.

"A right? The less said about the rights the better. But this I will say; you have a right to look upon me as a friend, as your father did before you. And I have a right to expect it from you. Your father trusted me, and it will be for your good to trust me likewise."

"Yes, he trusted you. And if I needed help that you could give, I might come to you for it. But I only have to ask that you forget that you have seen me. Not that it matters much now; I have got over my first fear. I must bid you good-day. We are on our way to see Doctor Fleming. But first we are going down to the sands."

And then Allison made him a curtsey which minded Marjorie of Mrs. Esselmont. Then they went down another street together, and left him standing there.

Mr. Rainy had been for many years the friend and legal adviser of the laird of Blackhills, and more than once, in his visits to the great house on the laird's business, he had given counsel to Allison's father with regard to his affairs. He had been with him when he was drawing near his end, and had done, what, at that late day, could be done, to set his affairs in order, and to secure that which he possessed, for the benefit of those he left behind. He had known all the circumstances of Allison's unfortunate marriage. He had not spared Brownrig when the matter was discussed between them, but in no measured terms had declared his conduct to have been cowardly, selfish, base.

But when Allison disappeared so suddenly, he had done his utmost to find her. That a woman might begin by hating a man, and yet come to love him when he was her husband, he believed to be possible. At the least, Allison might come to tolerate her husband if she did not love him. She might come, in time, to take the good of her fine house and of the fine things, of which there was like to be no stint in it, and live her life like the rest, when her first anger at his treacherous dealing was over. For her own sake, for the sake of her good name, and the respect he owed to the memory of her father, Mr. Rainy left no means untried, that might avail to discover her. He never imagined it possible that she she would remain within a short day's journey of the place where all her life had been spent.

Of late he had come to believe that she was dead. And he said to himself that if she could have been laid to her rest beside her father and her mother, no one need have grieved

for her death. For her marriage could hardly have been a happy one. All her life long she had forgotten herself, and lived only for her father and mother, because she loved them and because they needed her. For the same reason she would have laid herself down in the dust, to make a way for her young scamp of a brother to pass over to get his own will. But for the man who had married her she had professed no love, and even in his fine house it might have gone ill with them both.

"But it is different now," he said to himself, as he went down the street. "Brownrig is a dying man, or I am much mistaken, and he has known little of any one belonging to him for many a year and day. And his heart is softening—yes, I think his heart must be softening. He might be brought to make amends for the ill turn he did her when he married her. As for her, she will hear reason. Yes, she must be brought to hear reason. She seemed to ken Dr. Fleming. I will see him. A word from a man like him might have weight with her. I will see him at once."

Mr. Rainy lost no time. He needed to say his say quickly, for the doctor had much before him in his day's work. The patience with which he listened, soon changed to eager interest.

"It's about Brownrig—the man whose horse fell with him in the street—that I want to ask. He was brought to the infirmary lately. You must have seen him."

Then in the fewest possible words that he could use, Mr. Rainy told the story of Allison Bain.

"I met her in the street, and the sight of me hurt her sorely, though she did not mean that I should see it. I came to you because she named your name, and I thought you might help in the matter."

Dr. Fleming listened in silence. He had never forgotten Allison Bain. He had never been told her story before, but through some words spoken by Mr. Hadden, and later by Mr. Hume, he knew that she had a story, and that it was a sad one. It was not necessary for him to say all this to Mr. Rainy, who ended by saying:

"What I want you to tell me is, whether the man is likely to live or to die." And then he added, with an oath, "If I thought he might live, I would not lift my finger to bring a woman like her into the power of a man like him. Certainly I would not do so against her will. But if he is to die—that is another thing."

Dr. Fleming was not the kind of man to be taken altogether into his confidence as to the motive he had in desiring to bring these two together, and he said no more.

"I will see the man to-day," said the doctor, gravely.

As one door opened to let Mr. Rainy out, another opened to admit Allison and Marjorie. It was Marjorie who spoke first.

"My father said I was to come and see you, doctor. I am little Marjorie Hume. You'll mind on me, I think."

Doctor Fleming laughed, and, lifting the little creature in his arms, kissed her "check and chin."

"My little darling! And are you quite well and so very strong?"

"Oh! yes. I'm quite well and strong now just like other bairns. I'm not very big yet," added she, as he set her down again. "But I am well. Allie will tell you."

Allison, who had remained near the door, came forward smiling.

"She is much better indeed," said she.

"You should say quite well, Allie, dear," urged Marjorie, in a whisper.

"Yes, I may say quite well. Her father wished us to come and see you before going home. Or rather, he wished you to see the child. But your time is precious."

"Where are you staying? At the old place with Mrs. Robb? Well, I will come round and see you this evening. I have a good many questions to ask. You were not thinking of leaving to-day?"

No, they were to remain a day to rest, and some one was to meet them when they left the mail coach to take them home. The doctor asked a question or two, and let them go but his eyes followed them with interest till they passed round the corner out of sight.

When he came to see them in the evening he found Marjorie sleeping on the sofa, while Allison sat by her side with work in her hand. It happened well, for the doctor had some questions to ask which could be answered all the more clearly and exactly, that the child need not be considered in the matter. They spoke softly, not to disturb her, and in answer to the doctor's questions, Allison told briefly and directly all that he wished to know. Indeed, he could not but be surprised at the fullness and the clearness of the account which she gave of all that the doctor had done. The minutest details of treatment were given; and sometimes the reason, and the result, almost as full as effectively as they were written down, in a letter which had been sent him by Dr. Thorne. To this letter he referred for a moment, and as he folded it up, he said:

"The child fell into good hands. Dr. Thorne is a skilful doctor and a wise man. That is well seen in his works and his words."

"Yes," said Allison. "You are right there."

She had spoken very quietly and gravely up to this time. Now the colour came into her cheeks, and her eyes shone as she went on.

"I could never tell you all his goodness. At first he seemed just to wish to please his friend, Mrs. Esselmont. I doubt whether he had much hope of helping the child at first. And then he took up the case in full earnest, for the sake of science, or just for the pleasure of seeing what wonderful things skill and patience could do for help and healing. But in a while it was not just a case with him. He soon came to love her dearly. And no wonder he loved the gentle little creature, aye patient and cheerful, and making the best of everything, even when they hurt her, or wearied her, with this thing or that, as whiles they had to do. Not a child in a thousand would have borne all she has come through, to have health and strength at last. And not a doctor in a thousand could have brought her through. I hope, sir, you will excuse my saying so much," said Allison, pausing suddenly, as she caught the look with which Doctor Fleming was regarding her.

"Oh! yes. I understand well." And then he opened his letter and read a line or two.

"It is a remarkable case altogether. The pleasure I have taken in it has paid me ten times over for my own trouble."

"I am sure of it," said Allison, speaking low and eagerly.

"I could never tell you all his kindness. You see it was not just saving a life. It was a far greater thing than that. It would not have been so very sad a thing for a child like her to have died, to have been spared the trouble that comes into the life of even the happiest, though many would have missed her sorely. But she might have lived long, and suffered much, and grown weary of her life. It is from that that she has been saved, to happy days, and useful. It will be something to see her father's face when his eyes light upon her. And the doctor speaks in earnest when he says he took pleasure in helping the child."

Doctor Fleming looked up from his letter and smiled, and then read a few words more from it.

"You will understand and believe me when I say that her firm and gentle nurse has done more for the child than I have done. Without her constant, wise and loving care, all else could have availed little. She is a woman among a thousand—a born nurse."

Allison laughed very softly, though the tears came to her eyes.

"Did he say that? He is kind. And I am glad, because if a time should come when—"

And then she paused as she met Marjorie's wondering eyes. The doctor had something to say to the child, but he did not linger long. He had come with the intention also of saying something to Allison of Brownrig's condition. But he could not bring himself to do it.

"I will wait for a day or two, to see how it is like to be with him. He is not in a fit state to be moved, as the sight of her would be likely to move him. And even if knew he were able to bear it, I could not, by any words about him, spoil her happy home-coming."

"A happy home-coming!" It was that truly. When they came to the mill, where the houses on that side of the town begin, Marjorie would have liked to leave the gig, with which Robert had gone to meet them, at the point where they left the mail coach, that all the folk might see that she could walk, and even run, "like other bairns." And then everybody would see how wise her father and mother had been in sending her away to a good man's care. But Robert laughed at her, and said there would be time enough for all that in the days that were coming, and Allison bade her wait till her father and mother might see her very first steps at home.

The time of their home-coming was known, and there were plenty of people to see them as they passed down the street. Every window and door showed a face which smiled a welcome to the child. As for Marjorie she smiled on them all, and nodded and called out many a familiar name, and there were happy tears in her eyes, and running down her cheeks, before she made the turn which brought the manse into her sight.

And then, when they stopped at the door, her father took her in his arms, and carried her into the parlour, where her mother was waiting for her, and set her on her own little couch, which had never been removed all this time, and then the door was shut. But not for very long.

For there were all the brothers waiting to see her, and there was the little sister, who, when she went away, had been a tiny creature in a long white frock, whom Marjorie longed to see. She was a little lass of two years now, rosy and strong as any brother of them all. She was in Allison's arms when the door was opened to admit them, and the pleasant confusion that followed may be imagined, for it cannot be described.

That was but the beginning. During the next few days many a one came to the manse to see the little maiden who had suffered so patiently, though she longed so eagerly to be strong and well like the rest. And now she was "strong and well," she told them all, and the eager, smiling face was "bonnier and sweeter than ever," her admiring friends agreed.

And those who could not come to see her, she went to see auld Maggie and the rest. The school-mistress was come to the end of all her troubles before this time, and was lying at peace in the kirkyard. So were some others that Marjorie missed from the kirk and from the streets, but there was room only for brief sorrow in the heart of the child.

In the course of a few days Marjorie and Allison were invited to drink tea at Mrs. Beaton's, which was a pleasure to them both. Mrs. Beaton read to them bits out of her John's last letters, which told a good many interesting things about America, and about John himself, and about a friend of his, who was well and happy there. Marjorie listened eagerly and asked many questions. Allison listened in silence, gazing into her old friend's kindly face with wistful eyes.

That night, when the child was sleeping quietly, Allison came back again to hear more. There was not much to hear which Allison had not heard before, for her brother wrote to her regularly now. She had some things to tell John's mother which she had not heard from her son, though she might have guessed some of them. He had told her of his growing success in his business, and he had said enough about Willie Bain to make it clear that they were good friends, who cared for one another, and had helped one another through the time when they were making the first doubtful experiment of living as strangers in a strange land. But Willie had told his sister of his friend's success in other directions, and she gave the Americans credit for "kenning a good man when they saw him."

"For," said Willie, "it is not just an imagination, or a way of speaking, to say that in this land 'all men are free and equal.' Of course there are all kinds of men—rich and poor, good, bad and indifferent—here as in other lands. All are not equal in that sense, and all are not equally successful. But every man has a chance here, whether he works with his head or his hands. And no man can claim a right to be better than his neighbour, or to have a higher place than another because of his family, or his father's wealth. It is character, and intelligence, and success in what one has undertaken to do that bring honour to a man here. At least that is the way with my friend. If he cared for all that he might have pleasure enough, and friends enough. He is very quiet, and keeps close at his work."

"He has been a good friend to me—better than I could ever tell you, and nothing shall come between us to separate us, that I say and swear. Sometimes I think I would like to go back to Grassie again, that I might give myself a chance to redeem my character there. But still I do not think I will ever go. And so, Allie, the sooner you can come the better. There is surely no danger now after nearly three years."

(To be continued.)