

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

"Ah, yes! Aye waiting, my bonnie dooie (little dove)." When his wife entered the room he was sitting in silence with the pale cheek of his only daughter resting against his. A fair, fragile little creature she was, whose long, loose garments falling around her, showed that she could not run and play like other children, whatever might be the cause. It was a smile of perfect content which met her mother's look.

"Well, mother," said she softly.

"Well, my dear, you are happy now. But you are surely not going to keep your father in his damp clothes? And tea will soon be ready."

"Ah, no! I wunna keep him. And he is only going up the stair this time," said the child, raising herself up, and fondly stroking the grave face which was looking down upon her with love unutterable. He laid her upon the little couch by the fireside and went away without a word.

"Come soon, father," said the child.

It was not long before he came. The lamp was lighted by that time, and the fire was burning brightly. The boys had come in, and the mother went to and fro, busy about the tea-table. The father's eyes were bright with thankful love as he looked in upon them.

It was a large room, and might have seemed crowded and uncomfortable to unaccustomed eyes. For all the six sons were there—the youngest in the cradle, and the little daughter's couch took up the corner between the window and the fire. The tea-table was spread with both the leaves up, and there was not much room certainly between it and the other table, on which many books and papers were piled, or the corner where the minister's arm-chair stood.

The chair was brought forward in a twinkling, and he was seated in it with his little white dove again on his knee. This was the usual arrangement for this hour evidently. To-night the brothers stood before them in a half circle looking on.

"Well, and how has my Marjorie been all this long time?"

"Oh! I have been fine and well, father, and the time has not been so very long. Do you ken what Mrs. Esselment has sent me? A doll. A fine doll with joints in her knees, and she can sit down. And her clothes come off and on, just like anybody's. Jack has made a stool for her, and he said he would make me a table and a chair if you brought a knife to him when you came home. Did you bring Jack a knife, father?"

"Well—I'm not just sure yet. I will need to hear how Jack has been behaving before we say anything about a knife," said her father; but his smile was reassuring, though his words were grave.

"I think Jack has been good, father. And mother was here, ye ken, and she would settle it all, and not leave anything over till you come home, unless it were something serious," added the child gravely.

Jack hung his head.

"So I am to let bygones be bygones?" said his father.

"And, father," said the child again, her sweet, shrill voice breaking through the suppressed noise of her brothers—"Allie has come!" And even the introduction of the wonderful doll had brought no brighter look to the little pale face. "Allie has come, and I like Allie."

"Do you, love? That is well."

"Yes, father. Eh! but she's bonny and strong! When she carried me up the stair to my bed, I shut my een, and I thought it might be father himself. Robin is strong, too, and so is Jack, but I'm not aye just so sure of them," said Marjorie, looking deprecatingly at her brothers, "and I aye feel as if I must help mother when she carries me, because she's whiles weary. But it is almost as good as having you, father when Allie takes me in her arms."

Marjorie was "whiles weary" also, it seemed. She had talked more than all the rest of them put together, which was not her way in general; so she said no more till tea was brought in. It was the new maid who brought in the bright tea-kettle at last, and set it on the side of the grate. Marjorie raised her head, and put out a hand to detain her.

"Father, this is Allison Bain. And, Allie, ye must tell father about the lady. Father, Allie kennaed a lady once, who was like me when she was little, and hardly set her foot to the ground for many a year and day. I think she must have been even worse than me, for once they had her grave clothes made," said the child in an awed voice, "and when she didna die, they were hardly glad, for what was her life worth to her? they said. But she patient and good, and there came a wise woman to see her, and whether it was the wise woman that helped her or just the Lord Himself, folk couldna agree, but by and by she grew strong and well and went about on her own feet like other folk and grew up to be a woman, and was the mother of sons before she died."

Jack and his brothers laughed at the climax, but the child took no notice of their mirth.

"It might happen to me too, father, if a wise woman were to come, or if the Lord Himself were to take me in hand."

"Ay, my lamie," said her father, softly.

"The mother of sons before she died," repeated the child. "But she did die at last, father. It aye comes to that."

"Ay, dear, soon or late, it comes to that."

"But, father, I wouldna like it to be soon with me. And if only a wise woman would come here—But never mind,

father," added she, laying her soft little hand on his as his kind eyes grew grave; "I can wait. I'm only little yet, and there's plenty of time, and now Allie has come, and she is strong and kind. I like Allie," she added, caressing the hand which she had been holding fast all the time. "Allie says that maybe the best thing that could happen to me would be to die, but I would like to live and go about like other folk a while first."

"I am sure Allie will be good to you," said her father.

"Ay, that will I," said Allie, looking gravely down upon the child.

"Come, now, tea is ready," said the mother's cheerful voice. And rather quietly, considering their number, the boys took their places at the table.

There were five of them; the sixth was asleep in the cradle. Robert, the eldest, just fifteen, was a "good scholar," and dux in the parish school. He was ready for the university, and was going there when the way should be made clear for him. As a general thing, he had a book in his hand while he munched the oaten bannocks, which formed the chief part of the boys' evening meal. But to-night he listened and put in his word like the rest. And there were words in plenty, for their father had been away ten whole days, and he had much to hear.

The others were handsome, hardy boys, with dark eyes and sun-browned faces, and the fair hair of so many Scottish laddies, darkening a little already in the elder ones. They were seen at their best to-night, for their father had been expected, and clear hands and faces had been a matter of choice, and not, as was sometimes the case, of compulsion, and "the lint white locks," longer and more abundant than we usually see them on boyish heads nowadays, were in reasonable order.

If a hundredth part of the pride and delight which filled their father's heart, as he looked round on them, had been allowed to appear on his face, it would have astonished them all not a little. His eyes met those of their mother with a look in which was thankfulness as well as pride, but to the boys themselves he said quietly enough:

"I am glad to hear from your mother that you have been reasonably good boys while I have been away. If there is anything that any of you think I ought to hear of, you'll tell me yourselves."

A look was exchanged among the elder lads.

"The nicht, father?" said one of them.

"Well, to-morrow may do, unless it be something more than usual. Is it Jack?"

Of course it was Jack. He looked at his mother and hung his head, but said nothing.

"Hoot, man! get it over the nicht," whispered Robin.

And so he did. But poor Jack's mischief need not be told. It was not really very serious, though the father listened seriously, and kept his smiles till he was alone with the boy's mother. Mischief is a generic term in the Scottish tongue, including some things bad enough, but also some things in which fun is one of the chief elements, and Jack's mischief was mostly of this kind. Sometimes his father laughed in private, even when he found it necessary to show displeasure to the culprit.

But he was reasonable in his punishments, which was not invariably the case with even good men and good fathers in that land in those days. There were whispers among some of the frequenters of the little kirk to the effect that the minister's laddies needed sharper discipline of one kind or another when they should be out of their father's hands.

Jack got easily off, whatever his fault had been, and had his knife besides. They all grew a little noisy over their father's gifts. As it was Saturday night, his first thought had been that they should not be distributed till Monday. But their mother said they might, perhaps, think all the more about them if they had not seen them. So each got his gift, and their delight in them, seeing there was so little to rejoice over, was in the eyes of the father and mother both amusing and pathetic.

But little and great are comparative terms when applied to money's worth as to other things, and, considering the amount which must be made to stand for all that was needed in the home, the presents were not so trifling. Still, the minister was a rich man in the opinion of many about him, and it cannot be said that he was a poor man in his own opinion. At any rate, between them, his wife and he had made their comparative poverty answer a good many of the purposes of wealth, not to their children only, but to many a "puir bodie" besides, since they came to Nethermuir.

"And now, my lads, we'll to worship, and then you'll to your beds, for I have my morrow's sermon to look at yet, and I see your mother's work is not done."

So "the Books" were brought out and Allison Bain was called in from the kitchen. The minister asked God's blessing on the reading of the Word, and then he chose a Psalm instead of the chapter in Numbers which came in course. It was the thirty-fourth:

"I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth," and so on to the end.

"The Lord redeemeth the soul of his servants, and none of them that trust in Him shall be desolate."

"He believes it all," said Allison Bain to herself, lifting once again her sad eyes to his face. And then they sang:

"Oh! God of Bethel, by whose hand
Thy people still are fed,"

which was their family song of thanksgiving, as it was of many another family in those days, on all special occasions for rejoicing. It was the mother who led the singing with a voice which, in after years, when her sons were scattered in many lands, they remembered as "the sweetest ever heard." The father sang too, but among the many good gifts which God had given him, music was denied. He did not know one tune from another, except as it might be associated with some particular Psalm or hymn, and his voice, both powerful and flexible in speaking, had in singing only two unvarying tones. But he was never silent when the time came "to sing praises," and truly his

voice did not spoil the music to those who loved him. The boys had their mother's gift and they all sang with goodwill to-night. Allie's voice was mute, but her lips trembled a little, and her head dropped low as they sang,

"God of our fathers be the God
Of their succeeding race."

She was not forgotten in the prayer which followed. It was not as "the stranger within our gates" that she was remembered, but as one of the household, and it was reverently asked that the casting in of her lot with theirs might be for good to her and to them for all time and beyond it. But there was no brightening of her face when she rose and passed out from among them.

The minister's sermon was not the first thought when he returned to the parlour, after carrying his little daughter up-stairs. By and by his wife sat down with her stocking-basket by her side. They had many things to speak about, after a ten days' separation, which had not occurred more than twice before in all their married life, and soon they came round to their new servant.

"Well, what do you think of her?" said the minister.

"I cannot say. I cannot quite make her out," said Mrs. Hume gravely.

"You have not had much time yet."

"No; I mean that I do not think she intends that I should make her out."

"She says little?"

"She says nothing. She has passed through some sore trouble, I am quite sure. She looks, at times, as if she had lost all that she cared for, and had not the heart to begin again."

"I think you have made her out fairly well," said the minister smiling.

"Why was Dr. Fleming so anxious to send her here? Had he known her long? And how did he come to know her?"

"He had not known her very long. This is the way he came to know her: She was brought to the infirmary, ill of fever. She had gone into a cottage on the outskirts of the town 'to rest herself,' she said. But she was too ill to leave the place, and then she was sent to the infirmary. She had a struggle for life, which none but a strong woman could have won through, and when she began to grow better she made herself useful among the other patients, and was so helpful that when one of the nurses went away, they kept her on in her place. But evidently she had not been used with town life, or even indoor life, and she grew dowie first, and then despairing, and he was glad at the thought of getting her away, for fear of what might happen. It was change which she needed, and work such as she had been used with."

"But it was a great risk to send her here."

"Yes, in one way. And I hardly think he would have ventured to do so but that, quite by accident, he had heard about her from an old college friend. It seems that this gentleman came to see Dr. Fleming at the infirmary, and, getting a glimpse at the young woman's face, he betrayed by his manner that it was not for the first time. He was bound, he said, for her sake, not to seem to know her, nor would he say anything about her home or her station in life. But he said that he knew well about her, that she was an orphan who had suffered much, that she was a good woman, one to be trusted and honoured, and he begged his friend to ask her no questions, but to get her out of the town into some quiet country place where she might outlive the bitterness of the past. And his last words were, 'Fortunate will they be who can have her as a helper in the house.'"

"It is a pity for her sake that she should refuse to trust us."

"Yes. There is one thing you ought to know, though Dr. Fleming rather betrayed it than expressed it openly. I think, from what he said, and also from what he did not say, that there had been some fear that her mind might give way under the strain of her trouble, whatever it is. She seemed to have lost the power of turning her thoughts away from it, and yet she had never uttered a word with regard to it. She was sometimes, he said, like one walking in her sleep, deaf and blind to all that was going on about her. She had a dazed look, painful to see."

"I ken the look well."

"She had been used with country life, he thought, for in the town she was like a creature caged and wild to get out. Her best chance he said, was an entire change of scene and of work, and he thought it providential that we were to lose our Kirstin at this time. Our house, he thought, would be a good place for her. She will have plenty to do, and will have every allowance made for, and she will be kindly and firmly dealt with. And then, there are the bairns, and our bonny Maysie. I confess the glimpse I have gotten of her has greatly interested me."

"I acknowledge I have felt the same. But others will be interested in her also. Does she really think that she can keep a secret in a place like this? What she will not tell, others will guess. Or worse, they will imagine a story for her."

"We must do what we can to guard her from ill or idle tongues."

"Yes, and if she were just a commonplace servant-lass, like our Kirstin, it might be easy to do. But with a face and eyes like hers, to say nothing of her way of carrying herself, every eye will be upon her."

"She is a stately woman truly. But her dark, colourless face will hardly take the fancy of common folk. They will miss the lilies and roses. She has wonderful een," added the minister.

"Yes, like those of a dumb creature in pain. Whiles I feel, looking at her, that I must put my arms about her and let her greet (weep) her heart out on my breast. But she has hardly given me a chance to say a kind word to her yet. That may come in time, however."

"It will be sure to come," said the minister heartily.

"What sorrowful soul ever withstood you long? And you have reason to trust her? She has done well thus far?"

"I have had no cause to distrust her. Yes, she has