

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER IX. (Continued.)

And then there was Marjorie, poor little soul, who was nearly nine, and who looked like six, a fair, weak little creature, who could only walk a step or two at a time, and who was yet as eager to know, and to do, and to be in the midst of things as the strongest of them all. "Another brother," she called their new friend, who had more sense and patience than Robin or Jack, and who could carry her so easily and strongly without being tired. It was a happy day for Marjorie when John came in to see her. It was better than a new book, she thought, to hear him talk.

"And a new book is so soon done with," said Marjorie, who did not see very many new books, and who had usually learned them by heart before she had had them many days. But John had always something to tell her. He told her about new places and new people, and he had seen the sea, and had sailed on it. He had been in London and had seen the king and the queen, "like the travelled cat," as Robin said. And there was no end to the stories he could tell her that she had never heard before. She was never tired of listening to him, and hailed his coming with delight, and long before he had come to feel quite at ease with the mother, John had learned to love dearly the eager, gentle, little creature, from whose eyes the joy at his coming chased the look of pain and weariness.

As for the friendship which grew more slowly, but quite as surely, between John and the elder boys of the manse, it cannot be said whether he or they benefited most by it. To Robin and Jack, John seemed a far wiser and stronger man than he knew himself to be,—a man of wider experience, higher aims, and firmer purpose. And their belief in him, their silent yet evident admiration of all his words and ways, their perfect trust in his discretion and sympathy, did as much for him as for them, and helped him to strive for the attainment of all the good gifts which they believed him to possess.

He helped them in many ways. He helped them at their work, and kept them back from taking part in many a "ploy," which, though only foolish, and not so very wrong, were still both foolish and wrong to them, because in engaging in them they would waste their time, and—being the minister's sons—set a bad example to the rest of the lads, and, worst of all, vex their father and their mother. And they could bear to be restrained by him, because, in the carrying out of all harmless fun, they profited by many a hint from John, and sometimes even by his help. But they all agreed that the less said about this matter among the neighbours the better for all concerned.

John had been in Nethermuir several months before he saw the inside of the little kirk. He knew little about the folk who worshipped there, except that they were said to be "a queer kin' o' folk, who set themselves up as better than their neebors, and wiser than a' their teachers." Differing, as they seemed to do, both in preaching and in practice, from the kirk of the nation, they were doubtless wrong, thought John. But whatever they were, they were folk in whom he took no interest, and with whom he had nothing at all to do. So when he had gone to the kirk at all, he had gone to the parish kirk to please his mother, who was not always able to go so far herself. Sometimes he had permitted himself to go even farther than the kirk, coming back when the service was half over to sit for a while on a fallen headstone, as Allison did afterward when her turn came.

On fine days his mother went with him, and then it was different. He sat with the rest and listened to what the minister had to say, with no inclination to find fault. Indeed there was no fault to be found from John's point of view or from the minister's. It cannot be averred that in what was said there was either "food or physic for the soul of man." But not knowing himself to be in special need of either the one or the other, John missed nothing to which he had been accustomed all his days to listen in the kirk.

"We had a good discourse," his mother would say, as they went slowly home together, and John always assented "Yes, mother, we had a good discourse."

So John went most days to please his mother. But there came a day of rain, and sleet, and bitter east wind, when, if her conscience would have permitted, Mrs. Beaton would have refrained from making her usual suggestion about the propriety of honouring the Sabbath day by going to the kirk. As for John, he was no more afraid of the rain, and the sleet, and the east wind than he was afraid of the summer sunshine; but when he proposed to go to hear Mr. Hume, the sound of the sleet and the rain on the windows silenced any objection she might have had to his going "once in a way, the day being wild and wintry," and she even added a hope that he might "hear something to do him good."

This was at the very beginning of his acquaintance with the minister and his family. If he had waited for a while, till the charm of their friendliness and genuine kindness had wrought, till the time came when he had seen with his own eyes, and heard with his own ears that which proved his new friend to be different in some ways from the most of those to whom he had all his life looked up as leaders and teachers, yet not unworthy also to teach and to lead, John might have been better prepared to get the good which his mother hoped for him. And yet he might not. At any rate, it was to that dark day in the little kirk that, in the years which came afterward, he looked back as the beginning of "good" to him.

"A dismal hole," he called it, as he went in among the first and sat down in a corner. It was scarcely barer or more dingy and dim than the rest of the kirks in country places were in those days; but it was very small, and it had windows only on one side. On that dark day it was dismal, and it could not have been beautiful at any time. The chill of the sleet and the wild east wind had got into it, and John wondered at the folk who should choose, of their own free will, to pass two hours, or even three, in the damp and gloom and dreariness. "There will be few here to-day," thought he.

But they came one after another, and by twos and threes, and there was the stamping of wet shoes, and the shaking out of wet plaids, and many a sneeze and many a "hoast" (cough). And still more came, some of them with familiar

faces from the neighbouring streets, and some from beyond the hills, miles away. Peter Gilchrist was there, of course, and Saunners Crombie, and an old woman or two, who would better have kept the house, John thought, on such a day. And by and by the kirk was well filled. John would have liked to see the minister's seat. It was close to the door, and so was the one in which he sat; but a little porch, which protected the door, came between. He heard the clatter of the boys' feet as they came in, and once he heard their mother's "quietly, boys," gently, but firmly uttered, and by that time the minister was in the pulpit, and the service began.

It was just to be like other services in other kirks, John thought at first. There was a psalm read, and a remark was made on a verse here and there, and then they sang. He had a certain enjoyment in the singing, because he had never heard anything like it before. The sleet or something else had kept the usual precentor at home, and Saunners Crombie filled the office for the time. He had the singing mostly to himself for the first verse, because no one knew what tune he meant to sing, and some of those who joined, trying to do their best, "went out of it a'thegither," as Saunners said angrily afterward. The second verse went better. The minister's boys took it up, and their mother, and were joined by "the discordant crowd," as John called them while he listened; and though he might have done good service on the occasion, he never opened his lips.

Then came the "long prayer," in which John certainly did not join. But he listened, and after a little he wondered. It was "like all the prayers," he said to himself at first—confession, petition, thanksgiving. Yet it was a little different. The words came with a certain power. It was as if he who prayed saw the face of Him whom he addressed, a living Person whom he knew and had proved, and not an awful, unknown Being hidden in light unapproachable, or in dimness or darkness. He was speaking to One whose promise had been given, and many times made good unto those who trusted Him. And to him who was asking, evidently the promise was sure, the Word unchangeable.

"All good things! Why, a man who believed that need be afraid of nothing," said John to himself.

Then a chapter from the New Testament was read. It was the one in Corinthians about charity, from every verse of which a sermon might be preached, the minister said; but he only lingered a minute on the verse which speaks of the charity "which thinketh no evil," and by the little stir that went through the congregation, John thought that perhaps a word on that subject might be specially needed.

Then came the sermon, and John listened intently. But he did not like it. He told his mother when he went home that he had heard the folk saying about the kirk door that they had had a grand sermon. "And they should ken," said John, with a shrug.

"The text? Oh! it was a fine text: 'Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God unto salvation.' It was like no sermon I ever heard before," said John, "and I am not sure that I ever wish to hear another of the same kind."

John did not go to the manse that week, and he had no intention of going to the kirk on Sunday, but when Sunday came he changed his mind and was there with the rest. He sat in his corner, and listened and wondered, and grew angry by turns.

"Is not My Word like a fire? saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" That was the text and that was the way in which the Word came to John Beaton, and he would have none of it—for a time.

To his mother, who went to kirk with him after a while, it came in another way. It was not new to her. It was just what she had been hearing all her life, she said, only the minister made it clearer and plainer than ever it had been made to her before. Or it might be that her heart was more open to receive the Word than it used to be in former days, when both heart and hands were full of the good things of this life, which, she said, had contented her to the forgetting of the Giver's greater gifts.

She had never been a woman of many words, and even to her son she rarely spoke of these things. But as time went on she grew sweeter and gentler day by day, he thought. He left her with less anxiety when he went away, and he found her always when he came home peaceful and content. For the peace of God was with her.

CHAPTER X.

"O love will venture in where it daurna weel be seen;
O! love will venture in where wisdom ance has been."

Saunners Crombie had not been mistaken when he told his friend that "a measure of prosperity" had, of late, come to John Beaton. A debt long due to his father had been paid to him, and the story which the debtor had to tell was worth many times the money to John and his mother.

It was not the first good deed done in secret by the father which had since his death come to the knowledge of the son. Other stories had been told by friends and neighbours, and even by comparative strangers, of kind words spoken by him, and generous help given, which had healed sick hearts, and opened the way out of depths of despair to some who were sinners, and to some who were only sufferers. And now this man came to tell how he also had been helped—saved, he called it, and he told it with tears in his eyes, though more than a generation had passed since then.

David Cunningham was the son of the minister of the parish where the first of the three Johns had lived, and where the second John and his brothers and sisters had been born. He had fallen into foolish ways first, and then into evil ways, and through some act of inexcusable folly, or worse, had, it seemed, shut upon himself the last door of hope for a life of well-doing. An offer of a clerkship in an East Indian house had been given him by a friend of his family, and a sum sufficient for his outfit had been advanced, the sum he had lost, or rather it had been claimed for the payment of a debt which he could not have confessed to his father without breaking the old man's heart. It would have been utter ruin to the lad if John Beaton had not come to the rescue.

This was before John was a rich man, or even had a prospect of riches, but he gave the money willingly, even gladly, to save the son of his father's friend.

"When you come home a rich man you can pay me, if I be living; and if I be dead, you can pay it to them who may come after me," said he. And now David Cunningham had come home to pay his debt.

"Every month from the very first," he told John, "I put something away toward it, and a good many months passed before the full amount was saved. Then, when I wrote to your father that it was ready for him, he told me to invest it for him, and let it grow till I should come home again. That

was five-and-thirty years ago, and it has grown well since then. It is yours now, and much pleasure and profit may you get out of it."

"There is no fear of that," said John.

"And I have a better wish than that for you," said Mr. Cunningham gravely. "May you have the chance and the heart to help to save some poor fellow as your father saved me."

"Thank you for your good wish. I will try to follow in my father's steps," said John. "But the money is my mother's, and the pleasure of doing good with it will be hers."

"And if all I have heard of her be true, her pleasure will be to give pleasure to her son," said his friend.

"Yes, that is true, too," said John.

But as the money was well invested, it was to be allowed to remain where it was for the present. The income from it would secure to his mother a home more like that to which she was born than the one in which she had lived since her husband's death, "though, God bless her, she has never murmured," said her son.

And John was triumphing in his heart. He saw, or he thought he saw, his way clear to the carrying out of several plans which he had been dreaming about, but which he had hardly suffered himself to regard as possible till now. He had been in Aberdeen all the winter, working both with his head and his hands. He had fallen in with an old school-fellow, who was in the second year of his university course, a cripple lad, who was altogether unfit for the kind of life enjoyed most by lads of his age when set free from their lectures and their hours of study. He was living a lonely life till John found him, and his visits to the lad's rooms were good for them both.

John had been reading steadily during the winter leisure of the years he had been in Nethermuir, and now he enjoyed greatly going over the ground with his friend, and gradually the knowledge came to him that he had grown in mind as well as in stature since the days when he had trifled with, or utterly neglected, the opportunities which had been given him. He could do now with ease and pleasure that which in those idle days had been a task and a burden. Gradually that which had been a vague longing, a half-acknowledged desire, became a settled purpose.

It was to consult with his mother as to the carrying out of this purpose that he had come to Nethermuir at this time, and he had not meant to sleep until all his plans were laid before her. But when three days had passed—on the fourth he was to return to Aberdeen—not a word with regard to them had been uttered. John had not got out of the maze into which he had fallen when he first caught sight of Allison Bain, standing with loosened hair and smiling eyes, watching the mad play of the bairns, with little Marjorie in her arms.

He had not forgotten his plans or his purposes. There were moments when he would have been willing to forget them, when he even tried to forget them and to smile at his thought of them, as he had sometimes smiled at a foolish dream in the light of the morning. He was not quite sure that he needed to speak to his mother at all. He might at least wait a while. Why should he trouble her by speaking about changes which might never come?

And yet, had he not told his mother all his plans and even his thoughts all his life? Her word would make clear what course he should take. Her "single eye" would see the fine scheme he had been dreaming about in its true light. He could trust his mother's wise simplicity more than his own ambitious desires, which could hardly be worthy, he thought, since they were the outcome of discontent.

And why should he not be content as he was? He had fallen from no high estate. His father and his father's father had wrought with their hands, and had been honoured of all who knew them. Why should he not be content to live as they lived, or to work his way upward to an easier life, as his father had done?

"At any rate, I will have it out with my mother to-night," said he.

He was standing, when he came to this resolve, on the very spot where he first saw Allison Bain. It was the second time he had stood there since that day, for no reason that he could have told to any one. He had come to the spot in the early morning, after that first sleepless night. He needed a walk to stretch his legs, which were rather stiff after the long tramp of yesterday, he told his mother, when he came home to the breakfast he had kept waiting, and he told himself that he only chanced to take that road rather than another.

He said nothing about it to Robert Hume. They had the night before agreed to take an early walk together. Robin was late; but happily, as he thought, he caught sight of John as he was disappearing over the first hill-top, and followed, with no thought of finding himself in the way.

But when he came to the head of the last hillock, and saw John standing where he had stood the day before, "looking at nothing," as Robin told his mother afterward, he was seized with sudden shamefacedness, and, turning, shot like an arrow down the brae.

John had been less at the manse than he usually was while visiting his mother. He was to go there in the evening, and he must speak to his mother before he said anything about his half-formed plans to the minister or Mrs. Hume, as he came home fully intending to do. So he turned homeward on the last afternoon; and as he walked he was saying to himself, with indignant contempt of his indecision, that, after all, he must be a poor creature, a fool, though he had never been in the way of thinking so till now.

"Well, John, lad," said his mother, looking up as he came in.

Her little maid had gone home for the day, and Mrs. Beaton was sitting in her arm-chair "just waiting," as she said.

It was a nice little room. A bright fire burned in the grate, and a shining tea-kettle was steaming on the hob. The carpet on the floor was faded and worn, and the furniture was of the plainest; but there were a few pretty things in the room to brighten it, and over the mantel-piece was a portrait of John's father, "taken at his best." For some strange reason, which he himself did not understand, John paused at the door, and looked up at the strong, good face.

The picture was not much as a work of art perhaps, but it was a striking likeness. There was the firm mouth, and the kind gray eyes, and the broad shoulders, rounded and stooping a little, after long years of labour, and the abundant dark hair, which had showed no silver threads until the last blow came to end all. A sudden pang smote John's heart as he looked:

(To be continued.)