



***MARGARET
M. ROBERTSON***

***ALLISON
BAIN; OR,
BY A WAY
SHE KNEW
NOT***

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Allison Bain; Or, By a Way She Knew Not

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"Allison Bain"

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Chapter One.

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"Was she wrong?

Is it wrong in the bird to escape from the snare of the fowler?

Is it wrong in the hunted deer to flee to the screening thicket?"

Mr Hadden was standing at the open door of the manse, waiting patiently, while his housekeeper adjusted his grey plaid on his shoulders in preparation for a long ride over the hills. His faithful Barbara was doing her part protesting, but she was doing it carefully and well.

"Such a day as it is!" said she. "Such a time of rain! Indeed, sir, I canna think it right for you to go so far. Mightna ye just bide still at home till they come to the kirkyard?"

But the minister shook his head. "I will need to go, Barbara. Think of poor Allison Bain on this sorrowful day."

"Ay, poor Allie! I'm wae for her this sorrowful day, as ye say. Greatly she'll need a good word spoken to her. But in a' the rain—and at your age—"

"Ay! I am a good ten years older than the man we are to lay in the grave. I might, as ye say, meet them at the kirkyard, but I must see that desolate bairn. And I think it may be fair."

It was June, but it looked more like November, so low lay the clouds, and so close hung the mist over all the valley. For a week the sun had hidden his face, and either in downpour or in drizzle, the rain had fallen unceasingly, till the burn which ran down between the hills had overflowed its banks and spread itself in shallow pools over the level fields below. The roads would be “soft and deep,” as Barbara said, and the way was long. But even as she spoke there was an opening in the clouds and the wind was “wearing round to the right airt,” for the promise of a fair day, and it was early yet.

“And rain or shine, I must go, Barbara, as ye see yourself. The powney is sure-footed. And my son Alexander is going with me, so there is nothing to fear.”

And so the two men set out together. “My son Alexander,” whose name the minister spoke with such loving pride, was the youngest and best beloved of the many sons and daughters who had been born and bred in the manse, of whom some were “scattered far and wide” and some were resting beside their mother in the kirkyard close at hand. In his youth, Alexander had given “some cause for anxiety to his father and mother,” as outside folk put it delicately, and he had gone away to America at last, to begin again—to make a man of himself, or to perish out of sight of their loving and longing eyes. That was more than fifteen years before this time, and he had not perished out of sight, as so many wanderers from loving homes have done. He had lived and struggled with varying fortunes for a time, but he had never failed once to write his half-yearly letter to his father and mother at home. The folk of the

olden time did not write nor expect so many letters as are written and sent nowadays, and the father and mother lived hopefully on one letter till another came. And for a while the lad wrote that he was making a living, and that was all, and then he wrote that he was doing well, and just when he was almost ready to tell them that he was coming home to show them his young wife, there came word to him that his mother was dead. Then he had no heart to go home. For what would the manse be without his mother to welcome them there?

So he sent home to his father a gift of money for the poor of the parish, and stayed where he was, and did well still, with fair prospects of some time being a rich man, and then—after more years—God touched him, not in anger, but in love, though He took from him his only son and best beloved child. For then he remembered his father who had loved him, and borne with him, and forgiven him through his troubled youth, and had sent him away with his blessing at last, and a great longing came upon him to see his father's face once more. And so he had made haste to come, fearing all the way lest he might find the manse empty and his father gone. It was a homecoming both sad and glad, and the week of rain had been well filled with a history of all things joyful and sorrowful which had come to them and theirs, in the years that were gone. And to-day father and son were taking their way over the hills, so familiar to both, yet so strange to one of them, on a sorrowful errand.

They kept the high-road for a while, and then turned into a broken path over the higher ground, the nearest way to the farm of Grassie, where the "goodman" who had

ploughed and sowed and gathered the harvests for fifty years and more lay dead of a broken heart.

Slowly and carefully they moved over the uneven ground which gradually ascended and grew less wet as they went on, the son keeping by his father's side where the roughness of the way permitted, in silence, or only exchanging a word now and then. The clouds parted as they reached the hilltop, and they turned to look back on the wide stretch of low land behind them, which "looked in the sunshine," the minister said, "like a new-made world." They lingered for a while.

"We need not be in haste. It takes the folk long to gather at such a time, for they will come from far, and it is weary waiting. But I must have time for a word with Allison, poor lassie, before they carry her father away," added he with a sigh.

"But the sun may shine for Allison yet, though this is a dark day for her and a most sad occasion. Though her father's hearthstone be cold, let us hope that she may yet see good days in the home of her husband."

But the minister shook his head.

"She must see them there if she is ever to see good days again, but my fears are stronger than my hopes, Oh! man Alex! I'm wae for bonny Allie Bain."

"Is her husband such a wretch, then?"

"A wretch? By no means. I hope not. But he is a dour man of nearly twice her years. An honest man? Well, I have never heard him accused of dishonesty. A hard man he has been called, but he suits our thriftless laird all the better for that. He has kept his place as factor at Blackhills for fifteen years

and more, and has grown rich, they say—as riches are counted among folk who for the most part are poor. And he is respected—in a way.”

“Well, if I had been asked about it, I would have said that it was a rise in the world for Allie Bain to be made the mistress of the factor’s fine house over yonder. I suppose he might have looked for a wife in almost any of the better families of the countryside, without much chance of being refused.”

“Yes, but he is said to have set his heart on Allison Bain years ago when she was only a child—a strange-like thing for such a man to do. He went to work warily, and got her father and even her mother on his side—or so it is said. But Allie herself would have naught to say to him. She laughed at first, and then she scoffed at his advances, and Willie, her only brother, upheld her in her scorning—for a while. But Willie went wrong—and from bad to worse; but now he is in the tollbooth at Aberdeen, as you have heard. But I believe that even now the poor lassie would have a fairer chance of a peaceful life if they were to get away to begin again together, when his time is over, than ever she can hope for in the house of her husband. And the lad would be stronger, and have a better chance with his sister’s help. I fear—though I would say it to none but you—I fear that Allison’s consent was won at last by no fair means.”

“I mind Willie, a nice little lad, merry and frank and well-doing. I should never have thought of such a fate for him.”

“Yes, frank he was, and a fine lad in many ways; but he was not of a strong will, and was easily led away. Allison was far the stronger of the two, even when they were children. It

breaks my heart to think what a woman she might have become in favourable circumstances, and now, I fear, she has much suffering before her. Her mother's helplessness—she was bedridden for years before she died—laid too much on Allison, and she has grown changed, they say, and hard. She was ay more like her father than her mother, except for her sweet looks.”

“And how came the marriage about at last? And where was her brother?”

“He had fallen into trouble by that time. He had got in with ill folk that made use of him for their own purposes. There had been much meddling with the game on the Blackhills estate, and one night one of the gamekeepers got a sore hurt in a fight with some of those who had been long suspected. His life was despaired of for a time, and it was on Willie Bain that the blame was laid. At any rate he kept out of the way. It was said afterward that Brownrig had wrought on his fears through some of his companions, and in the meantime to save her brother, as she thought, Allison's consent was won.”

“It will be an ill day for Brownrig when Allison shall hear of that.”

“I doubt she has heard of it already. All I know is soon told. Brownrig came to me one night, saying that Allison Bain had promised to marry him, and that the marriage must be in haste for this reason and for that, and chiefly because the mother was near her end, and would die happier knowing that her dear daughter was in good keeping. This was for me, it seemed—for I was told

afterward that the mother was in no state for days before that to know what was going on about her.

“As for me, I had many doubts. But I had no opportunity to speak to her or her father till after their names had been cried in the kirk, and I thought it was too late to speak then. But oh, man! I wish I had. For when he brought her down to the manse with only two friends to witness the marriage, and I saw her face, my heart misgave me, and I had to say a word to her whatever might happen. So, when Brownrig’s back was turned for a minute, I took her by the hand, and we went into my study together; and I asked her, was she a willing bride? Then there came a look on her face like the shadow of death; but before she had power to utter a word, the door opened, and Brownrig came in. An angry man was he, and for a minute he looked as if he would strike me down, as I stood holding her hands in mine.

“‘Allison,’ I said, ‘you must speak to me. Remember this thing which you are to do will be forever. When once the words are spoken there can be no escape. May God help you.’

“She wrung her hands from mine, and cried out:—

“‘There is no escape now. And God has forgotten us.’ And then she looked round about her like a caged creature seeking for a way out of it all. When Brownrig would have put his hand on her, though he did it gently, she shrank from him as if she feared a blow. The man’s eyes were like coals of fire; but he was a strong man, and he put great constraint upon himself, and said calmly:—

“‘I am at a loss to understand what you would be at, sir. You heard the banns published. Was there any in the kirk

that day who had a word to say against it? I think you can hardly refuse to do your part.'

"I said, 'Allie, where is your brother? What does he say to all this? What says he to his sister's marriage to a man old enough to be her father?'

"Brownrig's face was an ill thing to see, but he said quietly enough, 'Yes, Allie, my woman, tell him where your brother is,—if ye ken, and where he is like to be soon if he gets his deserts. Speak, lassie. Tell the minister if you are going to draw back from your word now.'

"A great wave of colour came over her face, and it was not till this had passed, leaving it as white as death, that she said hoarsely that it had to be, and there was no use to struggle against it more.

"'He has promised one thing,' said she, 'and he shall promise it now in your presence. I am to go straight home to my father's house, and he is not to trouble me nor come near me till my mother is safe in her grave.'

"And then she turned to him: 'You hear? Now you are to repeat the promise in the minister's hearing, before we go out of this room.'

"He would fain have refused, and said one thing and another, and hummed and hawed, and would have taken her hand to lead her away; but she put her hands behind her and said he must speak before she would go.

"'And is not a promise to yourself enough? And will you draw back if I refuse?' But he did not persist in his refusal to speak, for she looked like one who was fast losing hold of herself, and he must have been afraid of what might happen next. For he said gently, always keeping a great restraint

upon himself, 'Yes, I have promised. You shall stay in your father's house while your mother needs you. I promise—though I think you might have trusted to what I said before.'

"Alex, my lad, I would give all I have in the world if I had but held out another hour. For the words that made them man and wife, were hardly spoken, when that happened which might have saved to them both a lifetime of misery. They had only passed through the gate on their way home, when down the hillside, like a madman, came Willie Bain. And far and hard he must have run, for he was spent and gasping for breath when he came and put his hand upon his sister. 'Allie!' he said, 'Allie!' and he could say no more. But oh! the face of his sister! May I never see the like look on face of man or woman again.

"'Willie,' she said, 'have you made what I have done vain? Why are you here?'

"'What have you done, Allie? And why shouldna I be here? Stone is well again, even if it had been me that struck the blow—which it was not—though I might have had some risk of no' being just able to prove it. Allie, what have you done?'

"But she only laid her white face on his breast without a word.

"'Allie,' gasped her brother, as he caught sight of Brownrig, 'you havena given yourself to yon man—yon deevil, I should better say? They told me over yonder that it was to be, but I said you scorned him, and would stand fast.'

"'Oh! Willie! Willie!' she cried, 'I scorned him, but for your sake I couldna stand fast.'

“Then Brownrig took up the word. ‘Young man, if you ken what is good for your ain safety, you’ll disappear again, and keep out o’ harm’s way. But that may be as pleases you. Only mind, you’ll have nothing to say to my wife.’

“‘Your wife! You black-hearted liar and villain!’ and many a worse word besides did the angry lad give him, and when Brownrig lifted his whip and made as if he meant to strike him, Willie turned from his sister and flew at him like a madman, and—though I maybe shouldna say it—Brownrig got his deserts for once, and he will carry the marks the lad left on him that day, to his grave. He was sore hurt. They put him into the gig in which he had brought Allison down to the manse, and carried him home, and the brother and sister walked together to their father’s house.

“Their mother was nearer her end than had been supposed, for she died that night, and before she was laid in her grave there came an officer with a warrant to arrest poor Willie on a charge of having done bodily harm to one of Blackwell’s keepers months before. Two of his cousins stood surety for him till after his mother’s burial. No evidence could be got against him in the matter and he was allowed to go free. And then like a daft man, Brownrig had him taken up again on a charge of assault with intent to kill. It was a mad thing for him to do, if he ever hoped to win the goodwill of Allison, but it was said to me by one who knew him well, that he was afraid of the lad, and that he had good reason to fear, also, that as long as Allison was under the influence of her brother, she would never come home to him as his wife. But he might have waited to try other plans first.

“Poor John Bain, Allison’s father, you ken, had had much to bear what with one trouble and another, for many a day, and the last one fell heavier than them all. On the day when his son was condemned to an imprisonment for eighteen months, he had a stroke and he never looked up again, though he lingered a while, and Allison refused to leave him. Brownrig is a man who cares little what may be his neighbours’ opinion with regard to him, but he could hardly venture to insist on his wife’s coming home while her father needed her, for there was no one else to care for the poor old man.

“He came to the house while Mr Bain lived, but one told me who saw him there often, that since the day of their marriage Allison has neither given him good word nor bad, nor touched his hand, nor lifted her eyes to his face. Doubtless the man must have his misgivings about her and about what is to happen now. It is a sad story thus far, with no possible good ending as far as can be seen.”

“Ay! a most sad story. Poor Allie! There seems little hope for her, whatever may happen. As to her brother, I should like to see him, and I assuredly shall if it be possible. I should like to take him home with me when I go, and give him another chance.”

“Ah! that is a good word of yours, my son. It would be well done indeed to help the poor lad who is not bad at heart. I never will believe that. But I fear he will do no good here, even if he can keep the land, which is doubtful now, for things have gone ill with them this while, and Brownrig, even for Allie’s sake, would never forgive her brother.”

“And it is as likely that her brother would never forgive him. Allison may in time forgive her husband, and may end in loving him after all. Time and change work wonders.”

But the minister could not agree with his son.

“Another woman might forgive and love him, but never Allison Bain. She can never honour him, unless he should greatly change, and then I doubt it might be too late for love.”

They were drawing near the house by this time, where many neighbours had already gathered to do honour to the dead. They stood about in groups of two or three, speaking to one another gravely about their old friend, and the troubles which had fallen so heavily on him and on his of late. And doubtless, also, of other matters, that had to do with themselves and their own affairs, and the times in which they lived; but it was all said and done with a decent and even solemn gravity suitable to the occasion, and it ceased as the minister drew near.

Another gleam of sunshine broke out between the clouds as the pony stopped of his own accord. The minister took off his hat and said solemnly:

“As a cloud is consumed and slowly vanishes away, so he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more.

“He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more.”

At the first sound of his voice every “blue bonnet” was lifted and every head was bowed, and then, pausing for no greetings, the minister and his son passed into the house.

But the younger man saw there no “kenned face,” so he did not linger within, but came out again to stand with the

rest.

The house was a long, low-roofed cottage, with a wide door and narrow windows. The door opened on the side which faced the barns and outbuildings, and the first glimpse of the place was dreary and sad. For the rain had left little pools here and there on the ground, and had made black mud of the rest of it, not pleasant to look upon. After a glance to ascertain whether there were any of his old friends among the waiting people, Mr Hadden turned toward the garden, which lay on the other side of the house.

There was a hawthorn hedge on two sides of it, and a beech-tree, and many berry-bushes, and tall rose-trees covered with "drocket" roses, and the ground beneath was strewn with their scattered petals. The garden had a dreary look also, but he was not left to it long. For though he had recognised no one about the door, many a one had recognised him, and in a little time one man slowly followed another to the garden-gate, where he leaned, and hands "with a strong grip in them" were held out and grasped, and not one but said how glad they were to see him home again for his father's sake. And by and by as they waited, one after another had something to say and a question to ask.

There was time enough. The minister had to rest awhile and refresh himself, and the burial-bread had to be passed round, and that which usually accompanied it as well. Besides, there was no haste, for they had given the day to do honour to the occasion; and if they got safely home before it was very late, it was all that they expected or desired.

The questions were asked with lowered voices and in softened tones, but they were asked eagerly and anxiously, and with a purpose. For one had a Jock, and another had a Tam, and a third had a Jock and a Tam and a Sandy as well, who were all pushing up fast, and who had their own bread to win. And it was “whiles no’ just that easy to get work the laddies were fit for, or which was fit for them.”

“And you’ve done weel out there yourself, sir.”

“And was it land ye were on?”

“Oh, man! it’s the land I would like.”

“And is the cold as bad as folk have whiles said: and the heat in summer?”

“And would there be a chance for the laddies out there? Would they be made welcome if they were to pack their kists and go?”

Mr Hadden answered all questions kindly and fully, making no such rosy picture of life in America as some wandering lecturers on the subject had been doing of late through all the countryside. Yes, there was good land, and there was plenty of it, and in some places it was cheap. A man could get good land and time to pay it in, and when it was paid for it belonged to him and his forever. Yes, of course they would have taxes to pay and roads to keep up, and all that. And they would have to work, hard at first, and they would *always* have to work if they were to succeed. They would be welcome there, no fear of that. No well-doing lad from Auld Scotland but would find work and friends, and a home of his own after a while, in that free country. Would they like it? Scotch folk mostly liked it. One that would do well at home would be able to do far better for himself out

there. And some who had failed to do anything at home, had succeeded there. It was not a country where gold grew on the trees, as some would like; but no man need be afraid to go there if he had a will to work—and so on for a long time; and so close grew the crowd and so eager the questioning, there was some danger that the solemnity of the occasion might be forgotten in the growing interest, for more people were coming in by twos and threes, and not one of them all but was glad of a word with the minister's son.

In the meantime the minister was standing beside the dead master of the house, with his hand resting on the bowed head of poor Allison Bain. She had lifted her face once, when the first sound of his kind voice had reached her ear—a face weary and worn, and utterly woebegone. But kind as voice and words were, they had no power to reach her in the darkness and solitariness of that hour. Her face was laid down again upon the coffin-lid, and she took no heed of all that was going on around her.

Now and then a friend or neighbour came and stood a while looking at the closed coffin and the motionless figure of the desolate girl, but not a word was spoken in the room, till the minister rose and said:

“The time is come.”

Then there was a movement in the house, and those who were without came toward the door. Two or three kinsmen of the dead man drew near and stood ready “to lift the body.” At the head, where the son of the house should have been, Allison still sat mute and motionless, with her face hidden on her arms, which rested upon the coffin. There was a

minute's silence, so deep that the ticking of the clock seemed to smite with pain upon the ear. The minister prayed, and then he touched the bowed head and said gently:

“Allison Bain, the time has come.”

The girl rose and, still leaning on the coffin-lid, turned herself to the waiting people. There was a dazed look in her eyes, and her face was so white and drawn—so little like the face of “bonny Allie Bain”—that a sudden stir of wonder, and pain, and sympathy went through the throng. Her lips quivered a little as she met their sorrowful looks, and the minister hoped that the tears, which had been so long kept back, might come now to ease her heavy heart, and he laid his hand on hers to lead her away. Then a voice said:

“This is my place,” and Brownrig's hand was laid upon the coffin where Allison's head had lain.

At the sound of his voice a change passed over the girl's face. It grew hard and stern; but she did not, by the slightest movement of eye or lip, acknowledge the men's presence or his intent.

“Now,” said she, with a glance at those who were waiting. And with her face bowed down, but with a firm step, she “carried her father's head” out of the house which was “to know him no more.” In breathless silence the friends and neighbours fell into their places, and she stood white and tearless gazing after them till the last of the long train had disappeared around the hill. Then she went slowly back toward the house. At the door she stopped and turned as if she were going away again. But she did not. When her aunt—her mother's sister—put her hand on her shoulder, saying

softly, "Allie, my woman," she paused and put her arms round the old woman's neck and burst into bitter weeping. But only for a little while. Her aunt would fain have spoken to her words which she knew must be said soon; but when she tried to do so, Allie held up her hand in entreaty.

"Wait, auntie. Wait a wee while—for oh! I am so spent and weary."

"Yes, my dearie; yes, I ken weel, and you shall rest—but not there!—surely not there!"

For Allie had opened the door of the room where her father died and where his coffin had stood, where her mother had also suffered and died. She would not turn back. "She was tired and must rest a while and there was nowhere else." And already, before she had ceased speaking, her head was on the pillow, and she had turned her face to the wall.



"Allison's sorrowful eyes looked down on him."

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In the early morning of the next day the minister's son, the returned wanderer, stood leaning over the wall which separated the manse garden from the kirkyard. He was looking at the spot where the grass waved green over the graves of his mother and his two brothers who slept beside her. As he stood, a hand touched his, and Allison Bain's sorrowful eyes looked down upon him. Looked *down*, because the many generations of the dead had filled up the place, and the wall which was high on the side of the garden was low on the side of the kirkyard.

“The minister is not up yet?” she asked without a pause. “Was he over-wearied? I had something to say to him, but I might say it to you, if you will hear me?”

“My father will be up soon, and he will see you almost immediately if you will come into the manse and wait a little while.”

“Yes, I could wait. But he is an old man and it might spare him trouble—afterwards—not to know that I passed this way. Are ye Mr Alex who once took our Willie out of the hole in the moss?”

“Yes; I mind poor Willie well. Poor laddie.”

“Poor laddie ye may well say,” said Allison, and the colour came to her pale face, and her eyes shone as she added eagerly: “You will be in Aberdeen—will you go to see Willie? I canna go to see him because—one might think o’ looking for me there. You are a good man, I have always heard, and he needs some one to speak a kind word to him, and I sore misdoubt that he’s in ill company yonder.”

“I am going to see him soon. My father was speaking about him yesterday. I shall certainly go.”

“And you’ll be kind to him, I’m sure,” said Allison, wistfully. “He is not bad, though that has been said. He is only foolish and not wicked, as they tried to make him out. And ye’ll surely go?”

“That I will. Even if you hadn’t asked me, I would have gone. And, afterwards, if he has a mind to cross the sea, he shall have a fair chance to begin a new life over there. I will be his friend. He shall be like a young brother to me.”

Allison uttered a glad cry and covered her face with her hands.

“I mauna greet. But oh! you have lightened my heavy heart.”

“I only wish you could come with him,” said Mr Hadden sadly. “It would be well for you both.”

“But I cannot—for a while—because I am going to lose myself, and if I were with Willie I would be found again. But you will tell him that I will ay have him in my heart—and sometime I will come to him, maybe. I’ll ay have that hope before me.”

“But, Allison—where are you going?—I hope—”

“I must tell no one where I am going. Somebody might ask you about me, and it is better that you should not ken even if I could tell you. Even Willie mustna ken—for a while.”

There was time for no more words. A little bowed old woman with a great mutch on her head, and a faded plaid upon her shoulders, came creeping through among the graves.

“Allie, my woman,” she whispered, “ye’ll need to lose no time. I hae seen the factor riding round the hill by the ither road. He lookit unco angry-like, and his big dog was wi’ him. Lie laich for a whilie till he’s weel by, and then tak aff ye’re hose and shoon and step into the burn and gae doon beyont the steppin’-stanes till ye get in to the hallow and ye’ll bide safe in my bit hoosie till the first sough be past.”

Allison took a bundle of papers from beneath her shawl.

“They are for the minister. It is about the keepin’ o’ the place till Willie comes home,” said she.

But the little old woman interposed:

“You maun gie them to me. The minister maun hae nae questions to answer about them, but just to say that auld

Janet Mair gie'd them to him, and he can send the factor to me."

She took the papers and put them in her pocket and went her way. Allison looked after her for a moment, then drew nearer to the wall.

"Sir," said she in a whisper, "I have something to give your father. He will ken best what to do with it. I had something to say to him, but maybe it is as well to say nothing. And what could I say? Tell him not to think ill of me for what I must do."

"Allison," said Mr Hadden gravely, "my father loves you dearly. It would break his heart to think of harm coming to you. I am afraid for you, Allison."

"Can anything worse come to me than has come already? Tell him I will ay try to be good. And he will tell my mother, if he goes first where she has gone—" Her voice failed her.

"Have you friends anywhere to whom you can go?"

"I'll go to Willie some time, if you take him home with you. Only it must be a long, long time first, for *he* will keep his eye on Willie, and he would find me. And Willie himself mustna ken where I am, for if he came to me he might be followed. I must just lose myself for a while, for if *he—that man—*were to find me—"

Her colour had come back, and her eyes shone with feverish brightness. What could he say to her? He tore a leaf from his note-book, and wrote his name and his American address upon it.

"Come to me and you shall have a safe home with my wife and children. Come now, or when you feel that you can

come safely, though it be ten years hence. You shall have a welcome and a home."

She gave him her hand, and thanked him, and prayed God to bless him, and then she turned to do as Janet Mair had bidden her. But first she knelt down beside the new-made grave, and, at the sight, Alexander Hadden bared and bowed his head. When he raised it again she was gone.

When the minister opened the parcel which Allison Bain had sent him, he found folded within it her marriage lines and a plain gold ring.

Chapter Two.

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"Martinmas dowie did wind up the year."

The little town of Nethermuir stands in the shire of "bonnie Aberdeen," though not in the part of it which has been celebrated in song and story for beauty or for grandeur. But in summertime the "gowany braes" which lie nearest to it, and the "heather braes" into which they gradually change as they rise higher in the distance, have a certain beauty of their own. So have the clear brown burns which water its narrow fields, and the belts of wood which are planted here and there on the hillsides.

In summertime, even the little town itself, as it was fifty years ago and more, might be called a pretty place, at least the lanes about it were pretty. There were many lanes about it, some of them shaded by tall firs or spreading beeches, others shut in by grassy dikes which inclosed the long,

narrow “kail-yards” running back from the clusters of dwellings which fronted the narrow streets. There were tall laburnums here and there, and larch and rowan trees, and hedges of hawthorn or elder, everywhere, some of them shutting in gardens full of such fruits and flowers as flourish in the north.

Yes, in summer the place might have been called a pretty place; but under low, leaden skies, when the reaches of sodden grass-land and rain-bleached stubble had to relieve their grey dreariness only a newly ploughed brown ridge, or the long turnip fields, green still under the rain and sleet of the last November days, even the hills were not beautiful, and the place itself had a look of unspeakable dreariness.

On such a day the Reverend Robert Hume was leading his horse down the slope which looks on the town from the south, and though his eyes had the faculty of seeing something cheerful even in dismal things, he acknowledged that, to eyes looking on it for the first time, the place might seem a little dreary.

It did not look dreary to him, as he came into one of the two long streets which, crossing each other at right angles, made the town. Though he bowed his high head to meet the bitter wind, and plashed through the muddy pools which the rain had left in the hollows here and there, he was glad at heart to see the place, and to be at home; and he smiled to himself as he came in sight of the corner, beyond which lay the house which held his treasures.

All the town seemed like home to him. As he went slowly on, he had a thought to give to many dwellers on the street. Was “auld Maggie’s” thatch holding out the wet? And surely

there was danger that the water of that pool might find its way in beneath "Cripple Sandy's" door. There were friendly faces regarding him from some of the narrow windows, and "welcome hame," came to him from more than one open door. The town pump was by no means a beautiful object in itself, but his eye rested with great satisfaction upon it. It stood on the square where the houses fell back a little, at the place where the two streets crossed, and it could be seen from the furthest end of either of them. It had not long stood there, and as it caught his eye, the pleasant thought came freshly to him, how the comfort and cleanliness of the homes might be helped, and how much the labour of busy housewives must be lightened by it.

But it was no Nethermuir woman who so deftly plied the heavy handle, and lifted her full buckets as if they had been empty, and who walked before him down the street with a step which made him think of the heather hills and the days of his youth. There was no woman of that height in Nethermuir, nor one who carried herself so freely and so lightly. It was no one he had ever seen before. But some one crossed the way to speak to him, and he lost sight of her, and a few steps brought him to his own door. His house was close upon the street. It was of grey stone, and only looked high because of the low thatched cottages near it, on both sides of the way. On the left, a little back from the street, stood the kirk, hardly higher than the house. It had no special features, and was not unlike in appearance to the low outbuildings of the manse, which extended behind it.

Its insignificance alone saved it from positive ugliness, but the minister gave it as he passed, a fond admiring

glance. He knew every grey stone in its walls, and every pane of glass in its narrow windows. He had not built it with his own hands but his heart had been in the laying of every stone and the driving of every nail in it. And that was true of the house as well. He had only time for a glance. For through the close there came a shout, and his boys were upon him.

“Steady, lads. Is all well? Where is your mother, and how is your sister? Robert, you’ll take good care of Bendie and rub her well down. She’s quite done out, poor beast; and John, you’ll help your brother. She must go to the smithy on Monday. There is something wrong with one of her shoes. I’ve been leading her for the last miles.”

And so on. Not a spoken word of tenderness, but Davie leaned against his father in utter content, and little Norman clasped his arms round his knee. Jack eagerly helped to unsaddle the tired mare, not caring to speak, though as a general thing he had plenty to say. And Robert had enough to do with the lump that rose in his throat when he met his father’s eye. The father ended as he began:

“Where is your mother?”

The mother was standing at the kitchen-door with a child in her arms.

“Well, dearie?” said the one to the other—their eyes said the rest. It was the child that the minister stooped to kiss, but the touch of his hand on his wife’s shoulder was better to her than a caress. Fond words were rare between these two, who were indeed one—and fond words were not needed between them.

Mrs Hume set down the child and helped her husband off with his wet coat, and if he would have permitted it, she would have helped him off with his boots also, since the wet and the chill had made him helpless. But it was not needed this time. For a woman with a step like a princess crossed the floor and bent down to the work.

“Thank you, my lassie. You have both strength and skill, and you have a good will to use them, though I may have no right to demand it at your hands. It is perhaps your way of doing the Lord’s bidding. ‘If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet!’ Do you not mind?”

The smile which rose to Mrs Hume’s face had a little surprise in it. For it was not the minister’s way to meet strangers with a text like that.

“It is Allison Bain,” said she.

“Oh! it is Allison Bain, is it? So you are come already. I have seen your friend Dr Fleming, since you left.”

“Dr Fleming was kind to me when I sore needed kindness.”

Her eyes searched wistfully the minister’s face, and it came into his mind that she was wondering how much of her story had been told to him.

“Dr Fleming said many kind things about you, and I trust it may prove for the good of us all, that we have been brought together,” said he.

In his esteem it was no small thing that this poor soul who had suffered and perhaps sinned—though looking in her face he could not think it—should have been given into their care. But nothing more could be said. A soft, shrill voice came from a room on the other side of the house.