

CHAPTER IX—MY HEROINE.

When it was known that I had begun another story my mother might ask what it was to be about this time.

‘Fine we can guess who it is about,’ my sister would say pointedly.

‘Maybe you can guess, but it is beyond me,’ says my mother, with the meekness of one who knows that she is a dull person.

My sister scorned her at such times. ‘What woman is in all his books?’ she would demand.

‘I’m sure I canna say,’ replies my mother determinedly. ‘I thought the women were different every time.’

‘Mother, I wonder you can be so audacious! Fine you know what woman I mean.’

‘How can I know? What woman is it? You should bear in mind that I hinna your cleverness’ (they were constantly giving each other little knocks).

‘I won’t give you the satisfaction of saying her name. But this I will say, it is high time he was keeping her out of his books.’

And then as usual my mother would give herself away unconsciously. ‘That is what I tell him,’ she says chuckling, ‘and he tries to keep me out, but he canna; it’s more than he can do!’

On an evening after my mother had gone to bed, the first chapter would be brought upstairs, and I read, sitting at the foot of the bed, while my sister watched to make my mother behave herself, and my father cried H’sh! when there were interruptions. All would go well at the start, the reflections were accepted with a little nod of the head, the descriptions of scenery as ruts on the road that must be got over at a walking pace (my mother did not care for scenery, and that is why there is so little of it in my books). But now I am reading too quickly, a little apprehensively, because I know that the next paragraph begins with—let us say with, ‘Along this path came a woman’: I had intended to rush on here in a loud bullying voice, but ‘Along this path came a woman’ I read, and stop. Did I hear a faint sound from the other end of the bed? Perhaps I did not; I

may only have been listening for it, but I falter and look up. My sister and I look sternly at my mother. She bites her under-lip and clutches the bed with both hands, really she is doing her best for me, but first comes a smothered gurgling sound, then her hold on herself relaxes and she shakes with mirth.

‘That’s a way to behave!’ cries my sister.

‘I cannot help it,’ my mother gasps.

‘And there’s nothing to laugh at.’

‘It’s that woman,’ my mother explains unnecessarily.

‘Maybe she’s not the woman you think her,’ I say, crushed.

‘Maybe not,’ says my mother doubtfully. ‘What was her name?’

‘Her name,’ I answer with triumph, ‘was not Margaret’; but this makes her ripple again. ‘I have so many names nowadays,’ she mutters.

‘H’sh!’ says my father, and the reading is resumed.

Perhaps the woman who came along the path was of tall and majestic figure, which should have shown my mother that I had contrived to start my train without her this time. But it did not.

‘What are you laughing at now?’ says my sister severely. ‘Do you not hear that she was a tall, majestic woman?’

‘It’s the first time I ever heard it said of her,’ replies my mother.

‘But she is.’

‘Ke fy, havers!’

‘The book says it.’

‘There will be a many queer things in the book. What was she wearing?’

I have not described her clothes. ‘That’s a mistake,’ says my mother. ‘When I come upon a woman in a book, the first thing I want to know about her is whether she was good-looking, and the second, how she was put on.’

The woman on the path was eighteen years of age, and of remarkable beauty.

'That settles you,' says my sister.

'I was no beauty at eighteen,' my mother admits, but here my father interferes unexpectedly. 'There wasna your like in this countryside at eighteen,' says he stoutly.

'Pooh!' says she, well pleased.

'Were you plain, then?' we ask.

'Sal,' she replies briskly, 'I was far from plain.'

'H'sh!'

Perhaps in the next chapter this lady (or another) appears in a carriage.

'I assure you we're mounting in the world,' I hear my mother murmur, but I hurry on without looking up. The lady lives in a house where there are footmen—but the footmen have come on the scene too hurriedly. 'This is more than I can stand,' gasps my mother, and just as she is getting the better of a fit of laughter, 'Footman, give me a drink of water,' she cries, and this sets her off again. Often the readings had to end abruptly because her mirth brought on violent fits of coughing.

Sometimes I read to my sister alone, and she assured me that she could not see my mother among the women this time. This she said to humour me. Presently she would slip upstairs to announce triumphantly, 'You are in again!'

Or in the small hours I might make a confidant of my father, and when I had finished reading he would say thoughtfully, 'That lassie is very natural. Some of the ways you say she had—your mother had them just the same. Did you ever notice what an extraordinary woman your mother is?'

Then would I seek my mother for comfort. She was the more ready to give it because of her profound conviction that if I was found out—that is, if readers discovered how frequently and in how many guises she appeared in my books—the affair would become a public scandal.

'You see Jess is not really you,' I begin inquiringly.

‘Oh no, she is another kind of woman altogether,’ my mother says, and then spoils the compliment by adding naïvely, ‘She had but two rooms and I have six.’

I sigh. ‘Without counting the pantry, and it’s a great big pantry,’ she mutters.

This was not the sort of difference I could greatly plume myself upon, and honesty would force me to say, ‘As far as that goes, there was a time when you had but two rooms yourself—’

‘That’s long since,’ she breaks in. ‘I began with an up-the-stair, but I always had it in my mind—I never mentioned it, but there it was—to have the down-the-stair as well. Ay, and I’ve had it this many a year.’

‘Still, there is no denying that Jess had the same ambition.’

‘She had, but to her two-roomed house she had to stick all her born days. Was that like me?’

‘No, but she wanted—’

‘She wanted, and I wanted, but I got and she didna. That’s the difference betwixt her and me.’

‘If that is all the difference, it is little credit I can claim for having created her.’

My mother sees that I need soothing. ‘That is far from being all the difference,’ she would say eagerly. ‘There’s my silk, for instance. Though I say it myself, there’s not a better silk in the valley of Strathmore. Had Jess a silk of any kind—not to speak of a silk like that?’

‘Well, she had no silk, but you remember how she got that cloak with beads.’

‘An eleven and a bit! Hoots, what was that to boast of! I tell you, every single yard of my silk cost—’

‘Mother, that is the very way Jess spoke about her cloak!’

She lets this pass, perhaps without hearing it, for solicitude about her silk has hurried her to the wardrobe where it hangs.

‘Ah, mother, I am afraid that was very like Jess!’

‘How could it be like her when she didna even have a wardrobe? I tell you what, if there had been a real Jess and she had boasted to me about her cloak with beads, I would have said to her in a careless sort of voice, “Step across with me, Jess and I’ll let you see something that is hanging in my wardrobe.” That would have lowered her pride!’

‘I don’t believe that is what you would have done, mother.’

Then a sweeter expression would come into her face. ‘No,’ she would say reflectively, ‘it’s not.’

‘What would you have done? I think I know.’

‘You canna know. But I’m thinking I would have called to mind that she was a poor woman, and ailing, and terrible windy about her cloak, and I would just have said it was a beauty and that I wished I had one like it.’

‘Yes, I am certain that is what you would have done. But oh, mother, that is just how Jess would have acted if some poorer woman than she had shown her a new shawl.’

‘Maybe, but though I hadna boasted about my silk I would have wanted to do it.’

‘Just as Jess would have been fidgeting to show off her eleven and a bit!’

It seems advisable to jump to another book; not to my first, because—well, as it was my first there would naturally be something of my mother in it, and not to the second, as it was my first novel and not much esteemed even in our family. (But the little touches of my mother in it are not so bad.) Let us try the story about the minister.

My mother’s first remark is decidedly damping. ‘Many a time in my young days,’ she says, ‘I played about the Auld Licht manse, but I little thought I should live to be the mistress of it!’

‘But Margaret is not you.’

‘N-no, oh no. She had a very different life from mine. I never let on to a soul that she is me!’

‘She was not meant to be you when I began. Mother, what a way you have of coming creeping in!’

‘You should keep better watch on yourself.’

‘Perhaps if I had called Margaret by some other name—’

‘I should have seen through her just the same. As soon as I heard she was the mother I began to laugh. In some ways, though, she’s no’ so very like me. She was long in finding out about Babbie. I’se uphaud I should have been quicker.’

‘Babbie, you see, kept close to the garden-wall.’

‘It’s not the wall up at the manse that would have hidden her from me.’

‘She came out in the dark.’

‘I’m thinking she would have found me looking for her with a candle.’

‘And Gavin was secretive.’

‘That would have put me on my mettle.’

‘She never suspected anything.’

‘I wonder at her.’

But my new heroine is to be a child. What has madam to say to that?

A child! Yes, she has something to say even to that. ‘This beats all!’ are the words.

‘Come, come, mother, I see what you are thinking, but I assure you that this time—’

‘Of course not,’ she says soothingly, ‘oh no, she canna be me’; but anon her real thoughts are revealed by the artless remark, ‘I doubt, though, this is a tough job you have on hand—it is so long since I was a bairn.’

We came very close to each other in those talks. ‘It is a queer thing,’ she would say softly, ‘that near everything you write is about this bit place. You little expected that when you began. I mind well the time when it never entered your head, any more than mine, that you could write a page about our squares and wynds. I wonder how it has come about?’

There was a time when I could not have answered that question, but that time had long passed. ‘I suppose, mother, it was because you were most at home in your own town, and there was never much pleasure to me in writing of people who could not have known you, nor of squares and

wynds you never passed through, nor of a country-side where you never carried your father's dinner in a flagon. There is scarce a house in all my books where I have not seemed to see you a thousand times, bending over the fireplace or winding up the clock.'

'And yet you used to be in such a quandary because you knew nobody you could make your women-folk out of! Do you mind that, and how we both laughed at the notion of your having to make them out of me?'

'I remember.'

'And now you've gone back to my father's time. It's more than sixty years since I carried his dinner in a flagon through the long parks of Kinnordy.'

'I often go into the long parks, mother, and sit on the stile at the edge of the wood till I fancy I see a little girl coming toward me with a flagon in her hand.'

'Jumping the burn (I was once so proud of my jumps!) and swinging the flagon round so quick that what was inside hadna time to fall out. I used to wear a magenta frock and a white pinafore. Did I ever tell you that?'

'Mother, the little girl in my story wears a magenta frock and a white pinafore.'

'You minded that! But I'm thinking it wasna a lassie in a pinafore you saw in the long parks of Kinnordy, it was just a gey done auld woman.'

'It was a lassie in a pinafore, mother, when she was far away, but when she came near it was a gey done auld woman.'

'And a fell ugly one!'

'The most beautiful one I shall ever see.'

'I wonder to hear you say it. Look at my wrinkled auld face.'

'It is the sweetest face in all the world.'

'See how the rings drop off my poor wasted finger.'

'There will always be someone nigh, mother, to put them on again.'

‘Ay, will there! Well I know it. Do you mind how when you were but a bairn you used to say, “Wait till I’m a man, and you’ll never have a reason for greeting again?”’

I remembered.

‘You used to come running into the house to say, “There’s a proud dame going down the Marywellbrae in a cloak that is black on one side and white on the other; wait till I’m a man, and you’ll have one the very same.” And when I lay on gey hard beds you said, “When I’m a man you’ll lie on feathers.” You saw nothing bonny, you never heard of my setting my heart on anything, but what you flung up your head and cried, “Wait till I’m a man.” You fair shamed me before the neighbours, and yet I was windy, too. And now it has all come true like a dream. I can call to mind not one little thing I ettled for in my lusty days that hasna been put into my hands in my auld age; I sit here useless, surrounded by the gratification of all my wishes and all my ambitions, and at times I’m near terrified, for it’s as if God had mista’en me for some other woman.’

‘Your hopes and ambitions were so simple,’ I would say, but she did not like that. ‘They werena that simple,’ she would answer, flushing.

I am reluctant to leave those happy days, but the end must be faced, and as I write I seem to see my mother growing smaller and her face more wistful, and still she lingers with us, as if God had said, ‘Child of mine, your time has come, be not afraid.’ And she was not afraid, but still she lingered, and He waited, smiling. I never read any of that last book to her; when it was finished she was too heavy with years to follow a story. To me this was as if my book must go out cold into the world (like all that may come after it from me), and my sister, who took more thought for others and less for herself than any other human being I have known, saw this, and by some means unfathomable to a man coaxed my mother into being once again the woman she had been. On a day but three weeks before she died my father and I were called softly upstairs. My mother was sitting bolt upright, as she loved to sit, in her old chair by the window, with a manuscript in her hands. But she was looking about her without much understanding. ‘Just to please him,’ my sister whispered, and then in a low, trembling voice my mother began to read. I looked at my sister. Tears of woe were stealing down her face. Soon the reading became very slow and stopped. After a pause, ‘There was

something you were to say to him,' my sister reminded her. 'Luck,' muttered a voice as from the dead, 'luck.' And then the old smile came running to her face like a lamp-lighter, and she said to me, 'I am ower far gone to read, but I'm thinking I am in it again!' My father put her Testament in her hands, and it fell open—as it always does—at the Fourteenth of John. She made an effort to read but could not. Suddenly she stooped and kissed the broad page. 'Will that do instead?' she asked.