

CHAPTER XII

WANTED : A HERO

MY father had now been for six years without any salmon-fishing of his own, and an occasional cast over strange waters did not satisfy him. He looked about, and pitched upon Kirkhill, near Girvan, in Ayrshire, as his next country home—though not sufficiently enamoured of it to sign a lease for more than two years.

Although there was good, mixed, low-country shooting, more easy of access than that of Kames or Ballimore, it was the river that was the real attraction. Despite its hideous name, good sport might be expected on the Stinchar, for the fish therein ran to a considerable size, as was presently attested, for my second brother, after playing one for four hours, landed him, and he turned the scale at thirty-one pounds.

When it is added that the noble fellow was only hooked through the back fin, and played on a single gut, it will be seen that this was something of a feat. He was stuffed, with the hook still firmly embedded in the fin, and is now in the museum which was lately transferred from 1 Royal Terrace to Rossdhu.

A salmon of twenty-eight pounds weight was afterwards caught by another brother in the same water, and the size of all the fish caught whilst we were at Kirkhill was far above the average. The Stinchar therefore did its part.

But the surroundings of our new abode seemed to us dull and tame after the fine scenery we had long been

accustomed to. Ayrshire may be a pretty county—Burns, we know, has sung its praises—but it does not do after the Sound of Mull and the Kyles of Bute. Even the coast-line, whose rugged beauty no one can deny, cannot atone to those dwelling inland for lack of purple moor and craggy height—and we were two miles from the nearest sea point.

Moreover, Kirkhill itself was a poor little house, on the edge of a poor little village. The only thing really to be admired about it was the ruined castle within its precincts, and the other ruined castles, gaunt and grim, which dotted the neighbourhood.

These were striking as foregrounds, but where was the background? No folding, fading mountain-range—no stretch of gleaming water; all was cheerful, pastoral cultivation: even Tigg woods, frequented by the roe-deer, although of interest to our sportsmen, added nothing to the landscape.

There were, however, pleasant neighbours at Pinmore, Knockdolian, and Daljarrock; also my mother enjoyed the many and varied drives about the countryside after her enforced abstinence from these at Ballimore. But we never really settled down at Kirkhill. There was always a feeling of being only there for a time, awaiting developments, and this sense of unrest was fostered by the shorter term of tenancy.

Who does not know what it is to have an hour taken off the end of the day—say by dining earlier than usual—and being conscious of it through all that day's varied stages? It may not really in the least affect other doings—it may be quite immaterial as regards *some* at least; but it begets a sensation of hurry and abbreviation. There is something to be remembered which is forever being remembered—and again forgotten. This has a disturbing effect. We experienced something of the kind when having a two instead of a three years' lease, and no desire to extend it.

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As I have so little to say about Kirkhill, therefore, I may perhaps be pardoned for narrating what was going on in my own little world, during the latter part of my parents' stay there.

Two years had passed since the magazine story, *The Merchant's Sermon*, found its way into the pages of the *Sunday Magazine*; and it had not been followed by any fresh literary attempts, though it and a few of the other contents of the brown albums had been incorporated in a small, a very small volume, brought out by an Edinburgh publisher, whose name need not be given.

This venture was a mistake. The little book was unnoticed — though all its contents were subsequently republished separately, and did well; but as a matter of remark, I would caution all young writers against making a first appearance in too modest a form. For better for worse, strike boldly, if you strike at all. A feeble, hesitating bid for public favour rarely meets with any response, as I found to my cost, when instead of my poor little volume bringing me in either money or reputation, there was a loss of nineteen pounds over it, which I had to make good, having foolishly published at my own expense.

Such an experience was mortifying enough; vexed and ashamed, I resolved never again to run a risk of the kind; and what other resolution might also have been formed, or nearly formed in the first moment of dismay, may be guessed. Fate, however, intervened.

I was now far away from the old Scottish home during the autumn months, which, with their sombre skies and misty landscapes, had always been those chiefly to arouse imagination and invention, and as my husband was obliged to be absent for the greater part of each day, I had much time to myself.

Soon the old desires began to be at work again.

In solitary rambles a new world began to spring into

being on every side, and its denizens talked with each other, as it were, over my head. These ghostly companions were often very funny, and I had to laugh aloud, though outwardly alone.

And then a great deal in my new mode of life offered a remarkable contrast to that left behind. My eyes were being constantly opened afresh—as was natural, considering how very limited my range of vision had hitherto been. I now came into contact, easy, sociable contact, with all sorts and conditions of men and women ; and habits and ways of thought revealed themselves of which I had had no previous experience. I was forever being surprised, interested, amused.

It was, therefore, hardly to be wondered at that, instead of recurring to what was familiar—too familiar at the time to impress itself with any vividness on the brain,—I should wash in upon the canvas a picture in all respects different from those supplied by memory, when unable longer to resist the renewed promptings from within.

Write I must—but what ? Subjects teemed on every side ; but I needed a central figure, and a plot,—and scarcely had this conclusion been arrived at ere the former at least was forthcoming. The central figure was to be the hero of the humble Bute fishermen—later, our own dear and honoured friend, Mr Smith.

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It was a mild November afternoon, and I was wandering happily about the Cheshire lanes, pilfering ferns and ivy from the hedgerows as I went along—when all at once the first idea of *Mr Smith*—the book—arose.

That morning had come tidings of the real Mr Smith's death ; and, with the inclination we all feel to recall on such occasions whatever we have known of an endearing nature in the friend thus lost to earth, I had been dwelling on his

goodness, his kindness, his pleasantness—on the mingling of strength and sweetness, of nobility and simplicity, which made him at once revered and beloved ; on his beautiful, everyday life, so unconscious of any virtue in itself—in short, on all that made this man apart from other men.

Musing and pondering thus, I was turning homewards when a question flashed before my mind. Would it be possible to make a hero out of this “short, stout, grey man” who was externally nothing, internally everything? Could anything of a romance be constructed around such an unromantic figure? His personality might be all that I and others knew it to be ; but could I depict it—could I make anything of it?

I feared and doubted ; and, stumbling home in the dusk, continued the inward debate with ever-increasing fervour—inclination pointing one way ; prudence, the other—till, hastily pushing aside the tea-tray over which the battle had finally raged, I spread in its place a sheet of foolscap, wrote down the name, and almost without a pause covered both sides.

Before dinner-time a large portion of the opening chapter of *Mr Smith : A Part of His Life*, almost precisely as it now stands, was written.

My husband alone knew of this : I did not even confide in my home people till the book was complete—and this was not for about nine months.

The useful typewriter not being at that time in existence, the manuscript, written and re-written, corrected and revised, had to be transcribed for the press—if it were ever to reach the press—entirely by my own hand ; and, as I never hesitated to write a whole page afresh, if there were more than a very few erasures in it, it took me six weeks to do this alone, writing at the rate of four or five hours a day.

And here again I must digress for a moment. It has been my lot many a time and oft to be asked by a young

aspirant in the fields of literature to look at a first effort, submitted in terms humble enough ; but when, deluded by mock modesty—for such it proved to be—I have suggested amendments and pointed out defects, concluding by a recommendation, couched delicately, to recast or, at any rate, to rewrite the whole, I have been met by such thinly veiled vexation and amazement as betrayed the would-be author's real estimate of him or herself.

He or she really cannot “worry” more over the “horrid thing.” It has cost “drudgery” enough to make it what it is—etc., etc. Reproachful and indignant looks accompany the outburst. Finally, the “horrid thing” disappears, to be seen no more.

When such is the case, be very sure it is no loss to the world. To the youthful beginner, the task—if task it can be called—of correcting and revising should be one of pure joy. The pen should be loth to quit the page, should hang fondly over every paragraph, pause over every word which, however good, might be altered for the better.

Nor should the sheet be laid aside till it shows fair and clear to the reader's eye, and is no blurred and blotted mass, to be deciphered with doubt and difficulty. How can an editor or publisher judge the effect of a scene or dialogue which he can barely comprehend, because conveyed in an illegible scrawl, with half the words perchance scored out and reinstated ?

This may, indeed, be all very well when the author's name and the quality of his or her work is established ; if such an one likes to send in the scribbled foolscap full of erasures, or if, as is probably the case, it has become a necessity to do so through over-pressure, it is of small importance ; but to those whose step is on the first rung of the ladder, suffer me, after thirty-seven years of busy authorship, to offer one word of counsel : Grudge no time, no

strength, no trouble which you can by any means bestow upon the preparation of your work, before it passes from your hands into those of others. If the work be worth doing at all, every iota of pains thus taken will repay you a hundred, nay a thousandfold.

Long as it took to complete, the manuscript of *Mr Smith* was ready at last, and the secret of its existence confided to the two families most concerned. My father's first remark was uttered in some perplexity of spirit: "If only your poor Aunt Catherine" (Miss Catherine Sinclair) "were alive to tell us what to do with this!"

But she had been dead for some years, and, in default of any other experienced relation or friend to whom we could apply, we came to a bold decision. *The Moor and the Loch* had fared admirably in the hands of Mr John Blackwood, that "prince of editors and publishers"; and, albeit in some trepidation, we decided to submit to him the unknown bantling. We agreed, however, that in order not to put him in an awkward position should he regard it unfavourably, its authorship should be withheld.

And, indeed, I had already determined to appear before the world, if I appeared at all, under a pseudonym, and had written upon the title page of the novel, "By L. Wynn." This was even printed before Mr Blackwood prevailed on me later to alter it, urging that the only reason he could ever see for concealment in such a case was when the author wished to write what he or she was ashamed of—"and *that*," he added, "I am sure your father's daughter would never do."

To return, Mr Blackwood received the MS., courteously acknowledged it, and we awaited the result with what patience we might.

Mine, I own, was exhausted at the end of five months,

and having long before then returned to my southern home, I wrote to my father. He wrote to Mr Blackwood, and—and then followed a wonderful time.

I forget what explanation of the above negligence was given ; all I recall was that in the kindest manner possible the celebrated publisher not only at once accepted *Mr Smith*, but predicted for it a great success. When I went north to join my own people in August, I took with me the first batch of proofs.

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After leaving Kirkhill, my father went further south for his next halting-place, and this time all were well pleased that he should revert to the usual three years' tenancy when taking Knockbrex, on the coast of Galloway—a part we had never been in before.

The impression it made was delightful and instantaneous. We drove from Kirkhill along the banks of Loch Ryan, singing "The Rover of Loch Ryan" as we went, slept that night at Stranraer—then unthought of as a point of embarkation for the north of Ireland,—and on the afternoon of the second day arrived at our destination.

Knockbrex was the dower-house of the Selkirk family, and, though unpretending, was very much the kind of house we liked. Every window had a view : on the one hand, of a wild and storm-beaten district, wooded after a fashion on the hillsides, with the hills rising into mountains beyond ; while on the other was the famed Solway Firth, across which we could at times distinguish on the far horizon the faint outlines of the Isle of Man.

There were quicksands in the neighbourhood. There were also tales about them, sad enough to hear ; but the rocky bay beneath Knockbrex and all the thundering shores between it and Kirkcudbright, were safe enough, the pools

among them clear and teeming with life. We promised our mother to leave alone the "shifting sands," as they were locally called, and if another personage had done the same, it would have been the better for him.

This rash adventurer was a shark, whose end, however, was not due directly to the sands—among which he had been seen, doubtless tempted thither by curiosity—but to his entangling himself in the fishermen's nets at their entrance.

We had been only a few weeks resident at Knockbrenn when this event took place ; and, with the astuteness of the Scot, the captors—whose nets were ruined, torn to pieces by the rolling and plunging of the monster—made a handsome present of him to my father, whose hand in consequence had of course to be in his pocket, in a generous dole, which went some way towards making good their loss.

But what on earth was my poor father to do with such a gift ? It would never do to seem to despise it, however he might see through the simple wiles which saddled him with such an incubus ; he must think of some plan to please all parties. Accordingly he started to inspect the shark—we all did—as it lay on the shingle, the tattered nets shrouding it like a pall, and a happy idea struck him. He wrote an article for the *Times* ; this was copied into the local paper ; the fishermen were satisfied, and the shark was buried. We never heard of another's appearing in the same waters.

Curiously deformed and stunted were the little belts of trees around our new home. Flat as a table, the topmost boughs all bent one way, testifying to the power and persistency of the sea wind ; and sometimes the entire roof, so to speak, would overhang the ground on one side with no support from beneath, while on the other would be the stem, bare and bent, holding it at arm's length. In autumn, however, these strange woods, forming a compact

and ruddy mass, had a beauty of their own ; and I, for one, greatly loved them.

And the piece of marshland between us and the sea, dotted with Galloway cattle, and haunted by snipe and wild-duck, was full of attraction. The mushrooms—I must tell a tale of those mushrooms. They were especially prolific everywhere during our first year at Knockbrenn, and so covered the ground that at last we scarcely took the trouble of picking even fine ones, while others were of course beneath contempt. One morning our faithful Aiky, with a twinkle in her eye, met us in the hall as we emerged from the breakfast-room—Would we please look into the stable-yard ?

As we always did “please” to do whatever Aiky decreed, we followed her in a body straightway, and there was a sight indeed ! A small cart, filled to its highest height with mushrooms ! Mushrooms, not in baskets, not “in” anything, simply stacked like hay, and overflowing like a hay-wagon !

The household, headed by a youthful butler and still more youthful footman, had risen at crack of dawn, harnessed our good little Alpin (the sole survivor of the Shelties we rode as children) to the light cart he now drew wood in, and, for sheer fun of the thing, brought in that vast army of mushrooms. I may add that a brew of ketchup resulted, which was not exhausted for many a long day.

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There were beautiful country places in our new neighbourhood : Cally, Cardoness, Earlstone, and others further off ; and as there were no fewer than three recently made brides among the various families, we came in for lively doings.

One evening we were dining with the Murray-Stewarts

at Cally, and it was announced that next day there would be an impromptu otter-hunt, Captain Clark-Kennedy of Knockgray having suddenly arrived there with his pack of otter-hounds.

Of course everyone was eager to go, and the ladies as eager as the men. Accordingly we were bidden to return to Cally to breakfast with our hosts, and adjured not to be later than 6.30 in making our appearance. The hour was ghastly ; but we thought nothing of it—at least no one did but I, who alone of all the sisters happened to be at the old home at the moment. It was not only that it was nearly midnight before we returned home from the dinner-party, and all had gone to bed except the servant who let us in—but I had a shrewd suspicion that neither my mother nor Aiky would be best pleased with my turning out again so early and for such a purpose.

However, the four brothers (all of whom chanced to be at home together) combated the idea with such vigour that—oh, of course, it was all *their* doing, it was *they* who argued down misgivings and overcame scruples—it was not my own intense desire to go—oh, no. With the first glimmer of dawn one spectral figure summoned me to rise, another brought me his own cup of tea, for their wants could be attended to, though mine could not at such an hour—and, shivering 'twixt cold and excitement, I hurried on my war-paint.

Should we be overheard? Should we be stopped? But we were off ; we left the still hushed and darkened house behind, and as the mists rose sullenly from the shadowy earth, we turned into the beautiful grounds of Cally.

Here all was bustle and preparation. A concourse of wild-looking creatures was assembled in front of the house : keepers and boys holding together a cluster of yelping hounds, the gay little master flitting in and out

amongst them, new arrivals appearing every moment from every quarter—the whole presenting a weird scene but dimly discerned beneath the pale, trembling light of the heavens overhead. This is what an otter-hunt looks like—before it begins.

As the sun rose over the hilltops, we started. I was the only representative of my sex to go. On hearing that no carriages could follow, every other feminine heart failed, but again the four brothers supported their doubtful and vacillating sister, and she went.

For hour after hour we walked, we ran, we flew this way, we flew the other, we followed the pack now on this bank of the stream, now on that; we consulted and separated, we met again and consulted again—and it was all in vain. It was high noon at last, and the otter, where was he? He had vanished off the face of the earth.

Splendid it was, the whole thing, as a romantic sight and a glorious chase; but evidently we were doomed to disappointment as regarded its primary object, and were resting dejectedly beneath a clump of trees overhanging the stream, debating the question of further pursuit or not, when all at once, within a few yards of us, a dark head rose to the surface of the water!

One wild halloo, one responsive yell, and in plunged the hounds; there was a fury of onslaught midstream, and *the death!*

No doubt this was a very ordinary otter-hunt, no doubt it was only because I had never taken part in one before that it impressed me so deeply; but, as it has always lived in my memory as one of the days of my life, I may be pardoned for recalling it. *N.B.*—Perhaps also for reproducing it in *Cousins*.

But when we had driven home, (carriages were waiting at a point a mile off,) and had lunched, and were about to

depart to our various homes, I underwent an unexpected ordeal. In a lull in the conversation, a voice suddenly demanded the name of my forthcoming book. Now, although proofs of this were coming in daily, they were still, so to speak, contraband, and it had been by sheer accident that knowledge of them had leaked out; accordingly the easy interrogation, a mere piece of civility, stabbed like a knife.

I faltered forth, however, "*Mr Smith,*" and next moment could have bitten my tongue out. If only I had laughed aside the inquiry and held my peace!

For there ensued a dead silence—a silence that spoke—and it was accompanied by blank looks and forced smiles; not all the patter of politeness that followed could deceive me as to the real feelings of my auditors. They had never heard of any title so stupid, so meaningless, so uninteresting; for a full hour afterwards I hated it myself.

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We had another expedition that summer which was not one to be easily forgotten. My eldest brother, who, as has been said, had a mind always on the alert for anything of interest, had arrived at Knockbrenn full of the wonders of a sea cave containing fossil remains said to be of great antiquity, of which he had heard as being in the neighbourhood.

Of course the residents, when inquiry was made of them, professed to know all about it, (though no one had ever mentioned it before), and an avalanche of information descended upon our heads. Among other items we learned that the owner of the cave had formed a collection of the fossils, and was always pleased to show it. He was an elderly man, a widower, lived a retired life, and this little museum was his hobby; we decided at once to gratify him and ourselves.

Accordingly we chose a fine afternoon when there was a garden-party in the same direction, and started early in gala attire (why I mention this will presently appear), so as to have time for our investigations before putting in an appearance at Earlstone.

After a long drive we turned off the highroad and pursued our way along a somewhat rough and lonely track, which, however, was well scored by wheelmarks. Evidently the recluse had had plenty of visitors of late ; we congratulated ourselves on following their example ; the cave and its relics must be well worth seeing.

Still more convinced of this were we, when on approaching the house—a common little house, but no matter—our eyes beheld not one, nor two, but half-a-dozen carriages—real carriages, not gigs and carts—standing in the stable-yard. There must be an overflow, and the coach-house must be full ; we were greatly impressed.

The front door flew open at our approach, and there was—or seemed to be—a hum of voices from within, while quite a small army of menservants stood about. It was all so cheerful, so festive, so different from what we had been led to expect, that we advanced gaily—my sister and I inwardly congratulating ourselves on having on smart new frocks for Lady Gordon's party, and our menfolk, I daresay, not sorry to be in their best kilts.

Conducted by a solemn and irreproachable butler, we filed across the hall into a room beyond that seemed to be cleared for company, only to find there a solitary occupant—one, moreover, who started from the depths of an arm-chair, and frankly looked frightened to death. Having hoped for a group of learned savants, or, better still, a detachment of lively Americans, lured thither by the same bait which had drawn ourselves, we conjectured that these might be actually now exploring the mysteries of the cave,

and essayed a polite remark to the startled little man before us. He was a minister by his garb, so ought to have some response at command ; but no—he merely breathed hard and shook his head.

At the same moment the door opened to admit another minister, then two more, and two more ; finally, the room was full, yet no one greeted us, nor seemed concerned to entertain us. Where was our host ? Why did he not appear ?

If this were a Presbytery meeting, as we now surmised, the business was obviously over, and we had not voluntarily intruded ; but whenever we endeavoured to explain this, we were met by a mumble in the throat and a shake of the head, while the blackcoats from time to time gazed helplessly at each other. What was to be done ? The cave—the cave—if only they would let us go off to the cave. But a motion to that effect was promptly negatived. In fact I am not sure that some of our strange companions did not bar the door—and we were still at a deadlock when, at last, came the end.

A slight lad, solemn, bashful, and not without a touch of dignity in his bearing, stood before us. He also was apparently a minister ; but we had no time to wonder afresh at this (combined with his extreme youth), for with one accord the whole body of others started forward, pointed at him, and exclaimed in melodramatic tones that would have done honour to the stage, “ *This is the owner of the cave!* ”

Grotesque as the scene was, we were mercifully withheld from laughter by an inkling of the truth—and what was the truth ? The poor boy had just buried his father—it was the funeral cortège we saw in the stable-yard—the spruce servants were undertakers’ men—the “ ministers ” were mourners !

Now that the murder was out, and there was no longer any need of their help, the tongue-tied gentry were ready

enough to be garrulous ; but we could not forget their previous absurd behaviour, nor that of the idiot who let us in when we were so obviously a jarring note in the mournful procedure of the day. We fled indignantly and precipitately ; nor did we once give way to mirth till far away and out of sight.

But we never saw the cave, then or thereafter. No one ever had the hardihood to risk a second attempt, when the first had met with such a fate.

In a bookshop at Kirkcudbright I found one day a curious volume, yclept *The Scottish Gallowidean Encyclopedia*. It was written in the year 1824, by a queer, clever, conceited "buddy"—a "buddy" of the worst type ; but probably a superior personage would not have constructed half so good a book. It is a wonderful book. It is absolutely exhaustive. There is not a phrase, not an idiom, a custom, a superstition, a sentiment of the old "Gallowa" country left out ; one breathes the salt of the sea-foam, hears the booming of the caves, sees the shorn woods, the red moss, and the black cattle.

Ballads also are freely introduced ; but, alas ! they are nearly all by the would-be poet himself, and I fear are not to be commended. There is, however, an occasional shrewd touch, as in one on the parish of Borgue (ours for the time being) :

"Borgue lads are fain to wed wi' lasses bonny,
But scorn to look fra hame in search o' ony."

Very nice of the Borgue lads, I'm sure ; but the result is perhaps not all that could be wished : the Borgue lasses being about as uncomely as can be seen anywhere.

The poet goes on with fearless lack of connection :

"Wi' shore and caves whaur gurlly wunds do blow,
As by Nockbrax and ancient Carlines Co."

What the final "Co" stands for it is not easy to conjecture ; but "Nockbrax" is certainly Knockbren, and the then Lord Selkirk, who was our landlord, said he could remember its being spelt so.

Lord Selkirk was a character. A fine type of the old Scottish gentleman, well-bred and well-read, it nevertheless pleased him often to affect a homeliness of demeanour and shabbiness of dress—especially when tramping about on his own lands—which deceived strangers. Thus he had many adventures, which he loved, and as time passed he lived more and more his own quiet life at the beautiful St Mary's Isle, and settled more and more down into his homespuns.

One afternoon he passed our windows, making for the front door. "There's old Posty," cried I ; for the Knockbren postman was the counterpart of the Ballimore one, and unmistakable—or so I thought,—round of back, bent of head, and with a scuffle in his walk.

My father rose as I spoke. "Old Posty ? No ; that's Lord Selkirk. And now I'll have to go in to him," he added ruefully, "for he's seen me. I caught his eye as he went by." Otherwise he would have fled, as was his wont ; he never could abide callers.

Nevertheless, he liked the old lord and rather enjoyed his company—as did I, his daughter ; for subsequently he re-appeared in my novel, *The Matchmaker*, under the name of "Lord Carnoustie." Kind, friendly old gentleman, he has long been dead and left no descendants, so it can do no harm to confess this now.

"Lord Carnoustie" has been said to be taken from my uncle, Sir James Colquhoun—or, again, from my father ; but this is not true. I never attempted to portray my uncle, and my father was, as I avow later on, the prototype of "Sir John Manners" in *Cousins*.