The Greatest Heroine

THE title of this novel* sounds ironical, but it is not ironical, it is felicitous. Miss Driver is the greatest woman created in recent fiction—not the best; no one knows who the best woman is anywhere —but the greatest. Here is a difference that is not merely a distinction, for one may be very good indeed without being great, and, like Miss Driver, one may be great without being altogether good. "Great" is an unharnessed adjective that has more native descriptive force when applied to power than to morals. And it is in this sense that the heroine of Mr. Hope's new novel is great. She is a woman of power rather than of righteousness. The story thru which she moves is splendid and written with that spirited charm which always enables Anthony Hope to take the top rail of the reader's imagination with so much ease. But the incidents of it would fail of their shining significance without the amazing heroine to star them. She makes the book, mars it, mends it, and sums it up at last in her own personality, which is both plebeian, brilliant and noble, destructive and creative, whimsical and steadfast.

She is the daughter of one Richard Driver, a rich, forceful man of the middle class in England. She is the issue of an unhappy marriage, her mother dies and her father has that kind of antipathy for her which makes it impossible for him to bear the sight of her. He therefore "farms" her out, so to speak, while she is growing up and getting the strength of her head and spirit. There is a scandalous episode in her early girlhood with

*THE GREAT MISS DRIVER. *By Anthony Hope.* New York: McClure Co. $1.50.

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an adventurer, and the reader is surprised at the assurance with which the author presents what appears to be the ordinary type of the commonplace, rich young vixen. There is something challenging in the way he refuses to conceal or condone her faults, as if she could afford the expense, morally speaking, and as if they were the prerogatives of a great nature in the process of development.

After the death of her father Miss Driver comes to Breyswater, accompanied by her governess, very much as a worldly woman sometimes preserves and cherishes an old battered doll thru affectionate sentimentality. Here she meets her father's lawyer and secretary. She accepts both in their respective capacities, and some of the best passages in the book are the comments of these two men upon her character. Austin, the secretary, has been telling the story all along, and from this point he tells it better, as if he had been both stung and stimulated. She takes possession of her great fortune, and at once begins to develop those qualities which entitle her to be called great, without showing the slightest feminine finickiness for virtue, taken as the wizened personal attribute for what we sometimes call little good women.

Now, when a woman wears the world as if it were a feather in her cap of the dust beneath her feet, when she makes her own will law and takes possession of all her powers, she is abler than a man, because by nature she is less scrupulous. Miss Driver had this invincible use of herself and her resources. She pressed every issue of life to the danger point and then stept over it, not because she was reckless, but because she was able, and must go to the limit before retrieving the situation with infinite wisdom and tact. She finally elopes with a big, gracious, eccentric, irascible man, to the great mortification of her friends and the confusion and disgust of her aristocratic lover. And she elopes, not because any one could or would oppose her marriage, but because she would not risk the yoke of marriage even with the man she loved.

And while she is away, out of the narrative, so to speak, bent upon this adventure, the author achieves a curious and daring triumph in his art. The light goes out of his pages, purposely. And the gloom of her absence is the first overpowering intimation the reader has of her fascination for him also, of her bigness and beacon brightness in the life about her. It is a new experiment in literary art and explains in a measure Mr. Hope's fitness as an interpreter of a character like that of Jenny Driver. He also has *insouciance* of courage, which carries the issue to the danger point in experiment.

After the tragic death of her lover in Paris she returns to Breyswater with the determination to reinstate herself in the favor of a respectable and scandalized community—not on account of any desire for forgiveness, exactly, but because the difficulty of the undertaking appeals to her indomitable spirit, and because she is determined to have the approval of people about as another might set his heart upon a certain investment in real estate. What she achieves may be read in the book. It is all good, brave, witty, and of a bigness in keeping with her own nature, and it is accomplished with some of the dignity of a queen, the insolence of a common woman, and the humor and toleration of a philosopher.

By this time the reader is asking himself, "Where have I read before of just such a woman?" Suddenly the great Miss Driver stands out luminous against the background of history, with eyes that mock and challenge memory. Mr. Hope himself reveals the secret in the last pages of the book. It is the character of the great Queen Elizabeth that he has dramatized in the life of his heroine.

The ease and politeness of manner with which the story is told may be compared with that of an intelligent, cultivated man who tells a story fascinatingly, yet with a certain deprecatory air, as if he said, "But do not let me tire you!" and the reader's response is, "Pray go on, sir; you could not tire me if your tale lasted till morning."

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