

MARGARET OGILVY

(I remember !)

'Woe's me! That is what comes of his not letting me budge from this room. O, it is a watery Sabbath when men take to doing women's work !'

'It defies the face of clay, mother, to fathom what makes him so senseless.'

'Oh, it's that weary writing.'

'And the worst of it is he will talk tomorrow as if he had done wonders.'

'That's the way with the whole clan-jamfray of them.'

'Yes, but as usual you will humour him, mother.'

'Oh, well, it pleases him, you see,' says my mother, 'and we can have our laugh when his door's shut.'

'He is most terribly handless.'

'He is all that, but, poor soul, he does his best.'

CHAPTER VII

R. L. S.

THESE familiar initials are, I suppose, the best beloved in recent literature, certainly they are the sweetest to me, but there was a time when my mother could not abide them. She said 'That Stevenson man' with a sneer, and it was never easy to her to sneer. At thought of him her face would become almost hard, which seems incredible, and she would knit her lips and fold her arms, and reply with a stiff 'oh' if you mentioned his aggravating name. In the novels we have a way of writing of our heroine, 'she drew herself up haughtily,' and when mine draw themselves up haughtily I see my mother think-



MARGARET OGILVY

ing of Robert Louis Stevenson. He knew her opinion of him, and would write, 'My ears tingled yesterday; I sair doubt she has been miscalling me again.' But the more she miscalled him the more he delighted in her, and she was informed of this, and at once said 'The scoundrel!' If you would know what was his unpardonable crime, it was this, he wrote better books than mine.

I remember the day she found it out, which was not, however, the day she admitted it. That day, when I should have been at my work, she came upon me in the kitchen, 'The Master of Balantrae' beside me, but I was not reading: my head lay heavy on the table and to her anxious eyes, I doubt not, I was the picture of woe. 'Not writing!' I echoed, no, I was not writing, I saw no use in ever trying to write again. And down, I

R. L. S.

suppose, went my head once more. She misunderstood, and thought the blow had fallen; I had awakened to the discovery, always dreaded by her, that I had written myself dry; I was no better than an empty ink-bottle. She wrung her hands, but indignation came to her with my explanation, which was that while R. L. S. was at it we others were only 'prentices cutting our fingers on his tools. 'I could never thole his books,' said my mother immediately, and indeed vindictively.

'You have not read any of them,' I reminded her.

'And never will,' said she with spirit.

And I have no doubt that she called him a dark character that very day. For weeks too, if not for months, she adhered to her determination not to read him, though I, having come to my senses and seen that there is a place for the 'prentice,



MARGARET OGILVY

was taking a pleasure, almost malicious, in putting 'The Master of Ballantrae' in her way. I would place it on her table so that it said good-morning to her when she rose. She would frown, and carrying it downstairs, as if she had it in the tongs, replace it on its book-shelf. I would wrap it up in the cover she had made for the latest Carlyle: she would skin it contemptuously and again bring it down. I would hide her spectacles in it, and lay it on top of the clothes-basket and prop it up invitingly open against her tea-pot. And at last I got her, though I forget by which of many contrivances. What I recall vividly is a key-hole view, to which another member of the family invited me. Then I saw my mother wrapped up in 'The Master of Ballantrae' and muttering the music to herself, nodding her head in approval, and taking a stealthy glance at the foot of each

R. L. S.

page before she began at the top. Nevertheless she had an ear for the door, for when I bounced in she had been too clever for me; there was no book to be seen, only an apron on her lap and she was gazing out at the window. Some such conversation as this followed:

'You have been sitting very quietly, mother.'

'I always sit quietly, I never do anything, I'm just a finished stocking.'

'Have you been reading?'

'Do I ever read at this time of day?'

'What is that in your lap?'

'Just my apron.'

'Is that a book beneath the apron?'

'It might be a book.'

'Let me see.'

'Go away with you to your work.'

But I lifted the apron. 'Why, it's



MARGARET OGILVY

"The Master of Ballantrae!" I exclaimed, shocked.

'So it is!' said my mother, equally surprised. But I looked sternly at her, and perhaps she blushed.

'Well what do you think: not nearly equal to mine?' said I with humour.

'Nothing like them,' she said determinedly.

'Not a bit,' said I, though whether with a smile or a groan is immaterial; they would have meant the same thing. Should I put the book back on its shelf? I asked, and she replied that I could put it wherever I liked for all she cared, so long as I took it out of her sight (the implication was that it had stolen on to her lap while she was looking out at the window). My behaviour may seem small, but I gave her a last chance, for I said that some people found it a book there was no put-

R. L. S.

ting down until they reached the last page.

'I'm no that kind,' replied my mother.

Nevertheless our old game with the haver of a thing, as she called it, was continued, with this difference, that it was now she who carried the book covertly upstairs, and I who replaced it on the shelf, and several times we caught each other in the act, but not a word said either of us; we were grown self-conscious. Much of the play no doubt I forget, but one incident I remember clearly. She had come down to sit beside me while I wrote, and sometimes, when I looked up, her eye was not on me, but on the shelf where 'The Master of Ballantrae' stood inviting her. Mr. Stevenson's books are not for the shelf, they are for the hand; even when you lay them down, let it be on the table for the next comer. Being the most sociable that



MARGARET OGILVY

man has penned in our time, they feel very lonely up there in a stately row. I think their eye is on you the moment you enter the room, and so you are drawn to look at them, and you take a volume down with the impulse that induces one to unchain the dog. And the result is not dissimilar, for in another moment you two are at play. Is there any other modern writer who gets round you in this way? Well, he had given my mother the look which in the ball-room means, 'Ask me for this waltz,' and she et-tled to do it, but felt that her more dutiful course was to sit out the dance with this other less entertaining partner. I wrote on doggedly, but could hear the whispering.

'Am I to be a wall-flower?' asked James Durie reproachfully. (It must have been leap-year.)

R. L. S.

'Speak lower,' replied my mother, with an uneasy look at me.

'Pooh!' said James contemptuously, 'that kail-runtle!'

'I winna have him miscalled,' said my mother, frowning.

'I am done with him,' said James (wiping his cane with his cambric handkerchief), and his sword clattered deliciously (I cannot think this was accidental), which made my mother sigh. Like the man he was, he followed up his advantage with a comparison that made me dip viciously.

'A prettier sound that,' said he, clanking his sword again, 'than the clack-clack of your young friend's shuttle.'

'Whist!' cried my mother, who had seen me dip.

'Then give me your arm,' said James, lowering his voice.



MARGARET OGILVY

'I dare not,' answered my mother.  
'He's so touchy about you.'

'Come, come,' he pressed her, 'you are certain to do it sooner or later, so why not now?'

'Wait till he has gone for his walk,' said my mother; 'and, forby that, I'm ower old to dance with you.'

'How old are you?' he inquired.

'You're gey an' pert!' cried my mother.

'Are you seventy?'

'Off and on,' she admitted.

'Pooh,' he said, 'a mere girl!'

She replied instantly, 'I'm no to be caught with chaff'; but she smiled and rose as if he had stretched out his hand and got her by the finger-tip.

After that they whispered so low (which they could do as they were now much nearer each other) that I could catch only

R. L. S.

one remark. It came from James, and seems to show the tenor of their whisperings, for his words were, 'Easily enough, if you slip me beneath your shawl.'

That is what she did, and furthermore she left the room guiltily, muttering something about redding up the drawers. I suppose I smiled wanly to myself, or conscience must have been nibbling at my mother, for in less than five minutes she was back, carrying her accomplice openly, and she thrust him with positive viciousness into the place where my Stevenson had lost a tooth (as the writer whom he most resembled would have said). And then like a good mother she took up one of her son's books and read it most determinedly. It had become a touching incident to me, and I remember how we there and then agreed upon a compromise:



MARGARET OGILVY

she was to read the enticing thing just to convince herself of its inferiority.

'The Master of Ballantrae' is not the best. Conceive the glory, which was my mother's, of knowing from a trustworthy source that there are at least three better awaiting you on the same shelf. She did not know Alan Breck yet, and he was as anxious to step down as Mr. Bally himself. John Silver was there, getting into his leg, so that she should not have to wait a moment, and roaring, 'I'll lay to that!' when she told me consolingly that she could not thole pirate stories. Not to know these gentlemen, what is it like? It is like never having been in love. But they are in the house! That is like knowing that you will fall in love to-morrow morning. With one word, by drawing one mournful face, I could have got my mother to abjure the jam-shelf— nay, I might have

R. L. S.

managed it by merely saying that she had enjoyed 'The Master of Ballantrae.' For you must remember that she only read it to persuade herself (and me) of its unworthiness, and that the reason she wanted to read the others was to get further proof. All this she made plain to me, eyeing me a little anxiously the while, and of course I accepted the explanation. Alan is the biggest child of them all, and I doubt not that she thought so, but curiously enough her views of him are among the things I have forgotten. But how enamoured she was of 'Treasure Island,' and how faithful she tried to be to me all the time she was reading it! I had to put my hands over her eyes to let her know that I had entered the room, and even then she might try to read between my fingers, coming to herself presently, however, to say 'It's a haver of a book.'



'Those pirate stories are so uninteresting,' I would reply without fear, for she was too engrossed to see through me. 'Do you think you will finish this one?'

'I may as well go on with it since I have begun it,' my mother says, so slyly that my sister and I shake our heads at each other to imply, 'Was there ever such a woman!'

'There are none of those one-legged scoundrels in my books,' I say.

'Better without them,' she replies promptly.

'I wonder, mother, what it is about the man that so infatuates the public?'

'He takes no hold of me,' she insists. 'I would a hantle rather read your books.'

I offer obligingly to bring one of them to her, and now she looks at me suspiciously. 'You surely believe I like yours best,' she says with instant anxiety, and I

soothe her by assurances, and retire advising her to read on, just to see if she can find out how he misleads the public. 'Oh, I may take a look at it again by and by,' she says indifferently, but nevertheless the probability is that as the door shuts the book opens, as if by some mechanical contrivance. I remember how she read 'Treasure Island,' holding it close to the ribs of the fire (because she could not spare a moment to rise and light the gas), and how, when bed-time came, and we coaxed, remonstrated, scolded, she said quite fiercely, clinging to the book, 'I dinna lay my head on a pillow this night till I see how that laddie got out of the barrel.'

After this, I think, he was as bewitching as the laddie in the barrel to her — Was he not always a laddie in the barrel himself, climbing in for apples while we all



MARGARET OGILVY

stood around, like gamins, waiting for a bite? He was the spirit of boyhood tugging at the skirts of this old world of ours and compelling it to come back and play. And I suppose my mother felt this, as so many have felt it: like others she was a little scared at first to find herself skipping again, with this masterful child at the rope, but soon she gave him her hand and set off with him for the meadow, not an apology between the two of them for the author left behind. But never to the end did she admit (in words) that he had a way with him which was beyond her son. 'Silk and sacking, that is what we are,' she was informed, to which she would reply obstinately, 'Well, then, I prefer sacking.'

'But if he had been your son?'

'But he is not.'

'You wish he were?'

R. L. S.

'I dinna deny but what I could have found room for him.'

And still at times she would smear him with the name of black (to his delight when he learned the reason). That was when some podgy red-sealed blue-crossed letter arrived from Vailima, inviting me to journey thither. (His directions were, 'You take the boat at San Francisco, and then my place is the second to the left.') Even London seemed to her to carry me so far away that I often took a week to the journey (the first six days in getting her used to the idea), and these letters terrified her. It was not the finger of Jim Hawkins she now saw beckoning me across the seas, it was John Silver, waving a crutch. Seldom, I believe, did I read straight through one of these Vailima letters; when in the middle I suddenly remem-



MARGARET OGILVY

bered who was upstairs and what she was probably doing, and I ran to her, three steps at a jump, to find her, lips pursed, hands folded, a picture of gloom.

‘I have a letter from ——’

‘So I have heard.’

‘Would you like to hear it?’

‘No.’

‘Can you not abide him?’

‘I canna thole him.’

‘Is he a black?’

‘He is all that.’

Well, Vailima was the one spot on earth I had any great craving to visit, but I think she always knew I would never leave her. Sometime, she said, she should like me to go, but not until she was laid away. ‘And how small I have grown this last winter. Look at my wrists. It canna be long now.’ No, I never thought of going, was never absent for a day from

R. L. S.

her without reluctance, and never walked so quickly as when I was going back. In the meantime that happened which put an end for ever to my scheme of travel. I shall never go up the Road of Loving Hearts now, on ‘a wonderful clear night of stars,’ to meet the man coming toward me on a horse. It is still a wonderful clear night of stars, but the road is empty. So I never saw the dear king of us all. But before he had written books he was in my part of the country with a fishing wand in his hand, and I like to think that I was the boy who met him that day by Queen Margaret’s burn, where the rowans are, and busked a fly for him, and stood watching, while his lithe figure rose and fell as he cast and hinted back from the crystal waters of Noran-side.