

JESS & CO.

By J. J. BELL,

Author of "Wee Macgregor," "Mrs. McLerie," Etc.

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Mrs. Wallace went straight to the kitchen and found Jess about to dish a tempting little hot supper. She told her niece what she had heard, but told it without comment, for there was something about the young woman's face that disturbed her and made her wish to get home to consider matters. So when Jess pressed her to stay to supper she refused briefly and said she would find her way from the house alone. The supper being at a critical



"Mercy me! Is that you?"

stage in the dishing thereof, Jess could not leave it, and her aunt, after bidding her good night much less tenderly than she felt, left the kitchen and made her way to the front door.

But she halted at the door of the parlor and, opening it softly, peeped in. Katie was newly asleep, and David was still by the cradle. Mrs. Wallace beckoned him to her, and he came steadily.

"The lads are gettin' on fine," she whispered. "Nae doot ye'll hear mair about them the morn." She went on, adding to herself, "an' fur awhile to come. But they're na' muckle the wair."

"I'm glad o' that," he said, looking pleased. "D'ye ken what I did, they are?" he asked. "I didna ken their faces, an' there wasna a great deal o' time for us gettin' acquainted."

"Jess'll tell ye about them. I maun' gang hame. But, David-David, her voice softened wonderfully, "I'm rare proud o' ye, man! An'-an' tak' unco guid care-dinna say I said it, mind-but tak' unco guid care o' yer wife, Davie."

Before he could speak she closed the door quietly between them and a moment later left the cottage.

The grocer, at a discreet distance, walked behind her until she reached her home.

CHAPTER X.

MR. OGILVY HAS CUSTOMERS.

MISS PERK, having rectified a little list of groceries from the page of a small notebook, lingered at the counter and gazed about her as if trying to recollect something she had omitted.

"Naethin' else the day, ma'am?" inquired Mr. Ogilvy politely, and moistened the point of his pencil. "These finnan haddies is new in, an' so is the sausages. The sausages is vera fine-vera fine indeed. In fact, the meenister's laddy was in gettin' a bunch the day, an' she said the last yins she had was jist perfection, an' the laddy that's bidin' w' her the noo, a bonny young laddy an' that nice an' free, said they was simply de-vice."

"A word that should never be employed in referring to a mere article of food," remarked Miss Perk coldly.

"Weel, weel, the young laddy's language was maybe a wee thing extravagant, as it were," the grocer admitted mildly, "but it's no' for me to object to a complimentary observation on any o' ma' professions. As lang as language is no' profane in a swearin' sense I can let it pass. But I mind bein' rare horrified yinst when I was in the toon an' gaed into the station baur, or, to be exact, the railway restaurant, for a glass o' wh-leemonade, an' I wasna richt inside the door afore I heard a young man, a dacent, respectable lakin' young man, cryin' out to the waiter for deevil's kidneys, an'—"

"Mr. Ogilvy?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, for usin' the word afore ye, but I was tryin' to illustrate to ye the— Are ye no' for any eggs the day, ma'am?" he asked, realizing suddenly that his conversation was not being appreciated.

"Not today, thank you. I'm sorry to say the last eggs I had from you were not up to the mark, Mr. Ogilvy," said Miss Perk, continuing to gaze about her.

"No' up to the mark?" he exclaimed. "I'm shair I canna conceive sic a thing. Are ye certain, ma'am, that the eggs cam' frae here?"

"My cook told me so."

"What was the taste like, if ye please, ma'am?" he inquired in a tone respectful yet dignified.

"I cannot tell you that, as personally I never eat eggs," said Miss Perk.

"Weel," said Mr. Ogilvy after a short pause, "eggs is things that nae human bein' can guarantee, an' I'm no' gaun to perjure mysel' w' sayin' that I never had the misfortune to sell a dootfu' yin, but I wud jist like to ask ye if yer cook is new to Kinloch, ma'am."

"Yes. She has only been with me a fortnight," the lady replied, ceasing to gaze about her and fixing a look of inquiry on the grocer.

"An' she cam' frae the toon, I presume."

"Yes. But why?"

"Then the grocer drew himself up with a smile of satisfaction. "Thank ye, ma'am, for tellin' me. It's jist as I suspected. Yer cook, puir biddy, wasna used to ma' eggs. The freshness wud be strange to her. There's a great difference between an egg laid at a distance an' an egg laid locally, as it were. Wull I no' jist send ye hauf a dozen, ma'am?"

"Not today, thank you," Miss Perk returned. "By the way," she continued, coming to her point at last, "I was calling at Hazel Cottage on my way here."

"Was ye?"

"I understand you are a friend of the Houstons," she went on cautiously.

"I'm proud to say I am. He's a fine chap, is David Houston, an' as for his guid wife, it's a peety there's no mair like her on the shore—an' on earth, for that matter. Deed, ma'am, every time she comes into ma' shop I wish I was her fawther. She's that bonny an' blithe an' kind! An' she's clever furbye! It was jist the ither day I got fankled w' some o' ma' accounts—I was thinkin' o' takin' stoke, an' I hadna tried it for seven year—an' I was groanin', hauf demontit, over a dozen an' eleven tins o' lobster, finest quality, at sevenpence three farthings the tin, less 5 per cent."

"But—"

"An' jist then," proceeded the grocer, too interested in his own recital to notice the interruption—"jist then she cam' into the shop as brisk as a bee an' spierit what was a distressin' me. 'A dozen an' eleven tins o' lobster,' says I. An' she lauched an' lauched till I couldna help lauchin' mysel', though I didna perceive the pint o' the joke, as it were, till a wee while efter. Ye see, ma'am, she let on she thought I had et the dozen an' eleven tins o' lobster. That was the pint o' the joke. But at the time I didna perceive it, an' I jist said to her that takin' stoke was an invention of the d-evil yin, an'—"

"Every business man ought to take stock at least once a year," put in Miss Perk.

"That's true, ma'am, that's true. But it's a snair job when Providence has made ye a grocer. When Mistress Houston cam' into the shop I was gettin' dazed, an' I seemed to behold naethin' but lobsters an' vulgar fractions dancin' afore me. But in about twa moments she had workit out the calculation for me, an' I was maseel' again. An' she cam' back the next day an' workit out a lot mair sums that wud ha'e turned the schoolmaster peety heidit. Aye, did she! Aw, she's a clever lass, an' David Houston's the lucky lad to get her! Are ye no' for any smoked ham the day, ma'am? I've some supremely fine."

"Not today, thank you. I was going to ask ye if you knew whether David Houston's business was being affected by the young men who came to Kinloch recently," said Miss Perk, adding, "Of course you know I take a great interest in the young couple, and I put the same question to Mrs. Houston today, but I must say I found her rather reticent."

The grocer scratched his ear before he replied.

"Weel, ma'am," he said cautiously, "seein' that I've never pit the question maseel', I'm no' in the possession for to answer it. But for ma' part I didna think the twa young men'll pit David Houston's business up nor doon. They've jist got the yin job, ye ken—the new houses."

"But it must have been a blow to David Houston not getting that large piece of work."

"He's got plenty w'oot that."

"Indeed! I understand he had to dismiss his man Binnie some time ago."

"Aye, but Binnie'll be comin' back an' anither man w' him next week," checking an exultant chuckle with a violent cough. "Ye see, ma'am, David Houston has got the contract for the new store at the pier held, an' there's twa-three ither nice jobs that'll come his way afore the year's oot. Aw, I wudna disturb maseel' about the Houstons if I was you, ma'am."

"I'm very glad to learn the prospects are so good, Mr. Ogilvy. I had heard that the new store at the pier was to go to the newcomers when they had finished with Mr. Dobbie's houses. In fact, Mr. Dobbie told me so himself."

"Ye ken Maister Dobbie, ma'am?" quietly asked Mr. Ogilvy.

"I happened to meet him one day when I was having a glance at his new houses, very nice little flats they are, quite superior to the present tenements in Kinloch. I'm sure the peo-

ple in the village will want to remove as soon as possible. Of course I don't know Mr. Dobbie personally, but from what he said I should imagine he would make a good landlord."

"Oh, I've nae doot he'll get his flats filled in time, ma'am. I heard the ither day that Touse Tam was thinkin' o' takin' yin o' them." Touse Tam was a disheveled but cheerful, half-witted fellow, who occasionally made his bed in Kinloch out-houses.

Miss Perk was about to reprimand the grocer for unbecoming levity, but before she could speak he continued:

"In fact, I believe Tam met Maister Dobbie on the road an' spierit the rent."

Tam maun ha'e his joke, puir chap, but I understand Maister Dobbie got an awfu' rid face, for there was a lot o' folk listenin'."

"Of course," said Miss Perk, changing the subject, "the newcomers will have quite a friendly feeling toward David Houston after his gallant act on the evening of their arrival."

"Freely? Oh, ma'am, it's mair like brotherly! The twa Wilkies an' David Houston are as thick as onythin', an' so for opposition atween them, ye micht as weel luk for a fecht between a pair o' ma' sippers an' a finnan had d'ye. I think I mentioned the fact that the finnan haddies was mair nor usualy delicious the day an' that the meenister's laddy—Na; it was the sausages she referred to."

"So you think that the Wilkies will not interfere with David Houston's business?"

"I think they'll no'. Furbye, ma'am, the shop they're set up is jist temporary, so to speak."

"You mean that they will leave Kinloch when they have finished their work at Mr. Dobbie's houses?"

"No' bein' a soothsayer, as it were, ma'am, I wudna like to express maseel' in sic a definite fashion," said Mr. Ogilvy, fearing that possibly he was already expressing himself too freely.

"But whatever they do, it'll be fair. Marmalade's no' the only guid thing that comes oot o' Paisley. An' so ye needna fash yersel' about David Houston an' his guid wife, ma'am, if ye'll allow me the leeberty o' sayin' it."

Miss Perk smiled the least bit unpleasantly. "You seem to have an extensive knowledge of what passes in the district, Mr. Ogilvy," she remarked.

The grocer grinned modestly and shook his head. "It's little I ken," he replied innocently, "for I'm no' vera guid at askin' questions."

If there was any suggestion in his words Miss Perk did not observe it, for she immediately resumed her quest for information.

"I suppose David Houston has made some arrangement with the Wilkies," she said, eyeing Mr. Ogilvy searchingly. "Arrangement, ma'am?"

"Yes; some arrangement by which they are not to interfere with his business. They could hardly refuse to agree after—"

But she had touched the elderly man's loyalty—touched it to the quick. He reddened, but met her gaze steadily.

"Ma'am," he said, with a hint of contempt in his tone, "David Houston wudna tak' advantage o' anither man if the ither man owed him a dozen lives instead o' yin. David Houston's no' that kind. He's no' like the laddy that catched his wee sister stealin' the jam an' tellt her he wudna ha'e her poachin' on his preserves. Na! There's nae mair arrangement atween David Houston an' the Wilkies the day nor there was afore they left Paisley."

"How can you know?" demanded Miss Perk, irritated at the rebuff.

"I jist ken, ma'am," he answered stolidly. "Of course," he added, "I canna prove it in the meantime ony way, but ye'll see for yersel' later on that Samuel Ogilvy can weigh characters as well as groceries. Aye! Here the grocer pursed up his mouth and struck an attitude with his arms folded. Had Miss Perk known him better she would have understood that it was dangerous to attempt further inquiry.

"Perhaps you will kindly inform me," she began.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm oot o' information; naethin' left but professions o' the best quality," he returned, with a tight grin.

The grin exasperated the lady. "And impertinence," she supplemented in a low voice.

"Peppermints?" he inquired politely. "Wud ye like the ornar' kind or the dooble strong?"

"I said impertinence," cried she, losing her temper.

"An' I said ornar' kind or dooble strong," he retorted, boiling inwardly, but retaining the tight grin. "Ye're welcome to either, no' that I think ye're needin' ony."

"You forget yourself!" exclaimed Miss Perk, with awesome majesty, gathering up her skirts.

The grocer was not fear-stricken, but a sensation of shame at having lost control of his tongue came upon him.

"Aw, weel, ma'am," he began in a tone of defense rather than of apology, "ye micht consider ma' feelin'—"

The lady, however, left the counter without another word, but at the door she turned and in a freezing voice said:

"I find I shall not require the articles I ordered today, and I shall be obliged if you will render your messenger to call for two empty biscuit tins and six empty orangeade bottles."

She stepped from the doorway as if she were shaking the dust of the shop from her feet and left Mr. Ogilvy gaping—there is no other word for it—over the counter.

For nearly a minute he stood motionless. Then suddenly his jaws set, and raising his clinched fist above his head, he smote the counter such a blow that the structure trembled, and a lofty tower of tins, which he had carefully erected that morning, tottered near its base and crashed in ruins on the outer floor. Three large tins that had formed the base remained, and with a grunt of rage, he caught them up and hurled them after the others just as Mrs. Wallace entered the shop.

"Whit kin' o' gemm is this ye're playin' at?" she demanded, halting a yard away from the counter. "Is't lawn tennis or manslaughter?"

Speechless and perspiring with shame, Mr. Ogilvy bowed his head and fumbled with his lipket.

"Whit's ado, man?" she went on severely. "If ye're jist practeeclin' fur the shows ye sud shut yer shop afore ye begin. I've nae ambition to get kilt w' a tin o' corned beef an' never even get a taste o' it. That's no' the way to keep yer customers. This, man! Luk whit ye're dacin' w' the ink! Whit a mess!"

"Oh, me!" groaned the grocer, laying down the pot and mopping up the food with wrapping paper. "Oh, me!"

"Maister Ogilvy," said Mrs. Wallace firmly, "wull ye be pleased to explain whit a' this carry on means? Are ye clean daft or are ye jist no' weel?"

"Oh, me!"

"Oh, me, yer granny's mutch! Whit d'ye mean heavin' about yer guid corned beef as if it wis dirt, furbye near crimpin' yer best customer, if no' killin' her fatally, fur life? Eh?"

Mr. Ogilvy at last pulled himself together. "It—it was a—a kin' o' substitute for sweerin', as it were," he said feebly.

"A ge' expensive substitute!" she remarked, with a snort.

"Aw, Mistress Wallace, ye—ye canna conceive what I've come through," he murmured, wiping his forehead with his apron.

"Ye luk as if ye had come through a patent mangle."

"That's the way I feel onyway," he returned seriously. "An' if I hadna had the presence o' mind, as it were, to ding doon these three tins o' corned beef, superior quality, I wud ha'e been compelled to express maseel' in shockin' language. It was better to sacrifice ma' corned beef nor ma' tongue."

"Tongue bein' dearer nor corned beef," put in Mrs. Wallace.

"I meant the tongue in ma' mouth," said the grocer, looking hurt. "It's a puir, stammerin' thing, but it'll never be devoted to sweerin' if I can help it."

"Ye maun gang through a lot o' tins if ye're ta'en that way frequent-like," she observed, picking one from the floor. "Whit's the price o' this yin?"

"Seven-pence ha'penny."

"But it's hashed. I'll g'ie ye sax-pence. Ye wudna ha'e the face to sell it to anybody like that."

"Na. An' I wudna like to sell it to naethin', Mistress Wallace, even at the mair drastic reduction," he replied.

"Oh, I'm no' heedin' about the bashes. I ken hoo they cam' there. Here's anither." She stooped and picked up a second tin. "I'll tak' this yin tae."

"Na, na. I've been affrontit enough the day w'oot acceptin' yer chairity, Mistress Wallace."

"Hand yer tongue. I'm fur the beef. But ye best come roon an' gether up yer tins. Some o' them's no' that bashed, an' ye'll maybe be able to pass them aff on some o' yer customers."

"Weel," said Mr. Ogilvy as he came round from behind the counter, "I'll g'ie ye the twa for ninepence, an' I'll no' tak' a farden mair."

"I doot ye're on the road to ruin," she observed and proceeded to help him to collect the tins and set them together in an orderly pile.

"A man never loses his temper w'oot losin' somethin' else," she remarked sagely.

"That's an agonizin' fac'," he returned humbly. "I—I'm sair vexed ye seen the deplorable exhibition o' ma' angry passions, Mistress Wallace," he added, bending over the floor. "I'm sayin' I'm sair vexed."

"Oh, dinna fash yersel'. Yer angry passions made nae odds to me. I wis jist thankfu' ye didna strike me."

"If I had struck you, Mistress Wallace—if I had struck you," he continued excitedly, "I wud deserve to be drawn an' quartered an' hanged on a gibbet, an'—"

"On a whit? A gibbet?"

"Aw, I meant gibbet."

"Weel, Maister Ogilvy, ye've evidently no' got back the command o' yer tongue yet, so if ye'll tak' yer place on the ither side o' the counter I'll dace the speakin'."

The grocer retired to the position indicated. "I hope ye're no' offendit, Mistress Wallace," he said sadly.

"If I wudna be waitin' here fur ye to tak' doon an' important order, weel, ye best begin w' pittin' doon the twa tins o' corned beef."

Having seen all her requirements recorded, Mrs. Wallace abruptly put the question:

"Whit wis she sayin' to ye to get up yer dander?"

"Wha'?"

"Ye ken fine."

"Ye mean Miss Perk?" he stammered.

"Jist that. Whit wis she sayin' to gar ye behave like a ragin' lunatic?"

"But hoo d'ye ken it was her?"

"Man, she kep' me frae comin' into the shop fur near hauf an' hoor, an'—"

"Aw, I wish ye had come in, Mistress Wallace," the grocer fervently sighed.

"Ye've gotten plenty damage w'oot her an' me addin' mair," said the other, with a grim chuckle. "Na, na; I wisna comin' in when she wis there, so I had a crack w' postie till she cam' oot. She cam' oot w' her head up, like a hen takin' a drink, but no' as happy-like. Wis she giein' ye a lectur', Maister Ogilvy?"

Mr. Ogilvy shook his head.

"Wis she makin' complaints?"

"She was. But I micht ha'e thole'd that. It was her inquiries that bate me. Oh, me, the curiosity o' thon wumman is somethin' stupendous! She seemed to be seekin' information as if she was hungerin' for't—strivin' for to c'raw it oot o' me. An' as for me, I can only say that I was tried as by a cork-screw!"

"Whit wis she wantin' to ken? The wholesale prices o' yer groceries, or yer age, or yer—"

"She was spierin' about David Houston's affairs," he replied, and briefly related his experience.

"I micht ha'e kent that," said Mrs. Wallace, with a wag of her head. "She's been at Jess twice this week, and Jess thinks she wis offendit the last time at no' gettin' a' the answers she wantit."

"But what business has she w' David's affairs?"

"Spier somethin' easier, Maister Ogilvy. But it's naethin' new. She's been that way since Jess got mairrit. She's been curious about a lot o' folk since I cam' to Kinloch. She wis curious about maseel' yinst—jist yinst, though—but she's never been curious about onybody like Jess."

"It's mair mysterious," said the grocer, drawing a long breath. "Yin o' these things that may be said to baffle the keenest intellectual investigation. Aye!"

"Baffle yer Auntie Kate! Ye've been readin' mair o' these detective stories!"

"It has been said by them as is competent to g'ie an opinion that detective stories is vera guid for trainin' the mind to consider problems," said Mr. Ogilvy, nettled into dignity.

"Mercy me! Then ye canna ha'e read sufficient, Maister Ogilvy," she retorted crushingly. "But," she continued seriously and with less asperity, "I've been thinkin' about Miss Perk, an' I've got a—"

"A clew?"

"I've got a—"

"A theory, Mistress?"

"Can ye no' keep quiet? I've got a notion."

"A notion, Mistress Wallace?"

"Aye. D'ye no' ken whit a notion is? Weel, if ye'll hand yer tongue I'll tell ye whit I think. In the first place, ye ken I wudna say a guid word fur onybody if I can help it, an' in the second place I didna like thon Miss Perk ony better nor she likes me. But I think she is rare fond o' Jess, though she has a ge' spierit way o' showin' her fondness, an' furbye that I think she's got it intil her heid, an' canna get it oot, either that David's affairs is in a bad way. Na, Maister Ogilvy, whit think ye o' that notion?"

"I think ye're an exceedin' fair mindit wumman," replied the grocer, "an' yer theory, or notion, is—no' unco nice. I jist wish I had thocht o' it a wee while syne."

"Na, na! Ye wis fair better to dace as ye did. Miss Perk's no' gaun to help Jess by gaun roon Kinloch an' spierin' about David's affairs," said Mrs. Wallace.

"I'm shair I tried for to show her that David's affairs was flourishin', but she wudna believe me. She—"

"Aye, I tellt ye she has gotten it intil her heid an' canna get it oot. She's a stupt buddy, fur she micht ha'e kent at the vera beginnin' that a young lass new mairrit an' w' ony speerit wudna pit up w' ony leddy aye pokin' her nose intil her man's affairs, no' even if she kent the leddy mottel weel."

"D'ye no' think she's maybe gotten a spite at Jess no'?"

"No' a real tite, I think if Jess wis ever needin' her help she wud g'ie it quick an' kindly. But she's wild at Jess the noo fur bein' independent. However, we'll maybe see if I'm richt some day. Whit did ye say she wis sayin' about thon penny maister Dobbie?"

Mr. Ogilvy supplied the details in full, finishing up with the hope that he had not said too much to Miss Perk.

"Ye micht ha'e been mair discreet w'oot bein' ta'en fur a complete dummy," Mrs. Wallace replied. "But I didna think ye'd did muckle damage. That wis a guid joke about Touse Tam," she laughed. "I'll ha'e to g'ie him feely on his piece the next time he comes to ma' door. Weel, ha'e ye had a crack w' the Wilkies since I seen ye?"

"Aye, Mistress Wallace, but of course I was carefu' what I said. But them an' me's gettin' rare pack. They're dacent lads, an' they're bath that ta'en up w' David an' Jess. What dae ye think o' them yersel' noo that ye've got better acquaint w' them?"

"I think thon jumpin' Jake Dobbie cudna ha'e pickit out waur men fur his dirty wark."

"I'm glad to hear ye say that!"

"I wis speakin' to the lads the day, an' they're comin' to their teas at ma' house on Friday. I'll be pleased to see yersel', Maister Ogilvy," she added graciously. "If ye can thole shuttin' yer shop sae early."

"I wud shut ma' shop at ony 'oor for sic a pleasure," he returned, beaming with delight. "It's rare kind o' ye to invite me, Mistress Wallace, an' I'll be richt proud to attend. Ma satisfaction is vera acute, an' I may say I—"

"Is't settled that David's to get the job o' the new store at the pier?" she interrupted.

"It's settled, but it was a close shave. I was jist in time."

"Hoo did ye manage it? Did Maister Murdoch no' think ye had an' unco cheek ringin' his bell last night?"

"Maybe he did, but I wasna heedin'. I jist catched him in time to keep him frae tellin' his manager to g'ie the job to the Wilkies. He wasna gaun to see me at first, but I sent him word that I was on an errand o' justice, as it were, an' at last I seen him. He wasna pleased at me for interferin', though."

"Whit did he say?"

"I said it wud be a roonin' shame no' to g'ie the job to David Houston."

"An' whit did he say?"

"He spierit if I hadn't plenty to dace in ma' shop, an' he rang the bell dootless to get me pit oot."

"Weel?"

"Then, in the strictest confidence, ye ken, I g'ied him a hint about Dobbie's gemm. It maun ha'e been some freeen o' Dobbie's that askt Maister Murdoch to g'ie the job to the Wilkies. It wasna Dobbie alseel'?"

"An' whit happened then?"

"Oh, then I kent it was a' richt for David. Efter a few questions to see if I wasna leein' he offers me a ceaguar an' says, rare pleasant like: 'I'm glad ye tellt me in time, Ogilvy. The Job's Houstons, an' if I had the use o' ma' legs—he's lame, puir man—I wud like a kick at that deevil Dobbie!'"

"Did he say deevil?"

"Aye, did he, an' waur nor that. But her heert's in the richt place, an' his jobs