Saving Laughter

by Clara Thomas

When Margaret first came over from Elm Cottage to stay with us in the Fall of 1969, she inscribed her books for me. In *The Tomorrow-Tamer* she wrote: "For Clara Thomas — with thankfulness for all the saving laughter — Love, Margaret Laurence." Our friendship over the years contained shared tears and anguish, but it also contained much laughter, as do all her works. That is what I want to talk about to you this morning.

Do you remember *Jason's Quest*? The very first time I met Margaret was at Elm Cottage. I had gone over from Oxford to have lunch with her. Elmcot, as she called it, was an old, old, house in Penn, near High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire and she had first rented it through Alan MacLean, one of the senior editors of Macmillan, her English publishers. It was a house with many rooms, a tangled rose-garden and a large lawn at the back. The feature that I, and many others, noticed about it first, was a very beautiful oil painting of Alan MacLean's mother as a little girl, hanging in the hall and acting as the presiding "angel in the house." Margaret and her children loved that house, as did the many Canadians who visited and stayed with her there over the years. In June of 1969, when I paid my first visit, she had been living there for a number of years. Recently she had been able to buy the house from the proceeds of selling the film rights of *A Jest of God* to the Newmans (7000 pounds as I recall, a minimal price when you think of what is now being paid for movie rights). But she was overjoyed to own it at last, and had embarked on a great program of redecorating and weather-proofing it, for over the years it had become afflicted with what the English call "the rising damp." This is one house hazard with which we don't seem to be afflicted here in Canada. It means, simply, that the dampness of the climate slowly eats away and destroys the walls of the dwelling.

But that June, everything was in hand. She took me out into the garden and we sat down with pre-lunch drinks and she told me all about the genesis of *Jason's Quest*, soon to be published. The family had got up one morning to find the entire stretch of lawn we were sitting on all humped and bumped by mole-hills — ruined, in fact, and in dire need of the services of the local mole-catcher, an expert in controlling the little creatures who had suddenly caused all the damage. It took a season — but in the meantime, Margaret's imagination had got busy on the mole-civilization so obviously thriving beneath her — and she said, "the whole of *Jason's Quest* was given to me just like that — a great and joyous gift." She had just finished *The Fire-Dwellers* at that time; the relief and joy she found in suddenly being given this mole adventure to write of was, and remained, one of the crowning delights of her career.

It is the adventure of Jason, a young mole who goes searching for a cure for the invisible sickness that is destroying the ancient city of Molanium. He ventures through the Great North Tunnel to the world of Thither and there meets Oliver, the tawny owl who is also considering going on a quest for the wisdom which he, as an owl, is supposed to have, but which he is sure is sadly lacking in him. The two are joined by two cats, the dignified Calico who wishes to do a noble deed and flirty Topaz, who is along for fun and adventure. Both were the cats-in-residence then and long afterward at Elm Cottage. The group set out for the city Jason knows as Londinium, carrying with them the Cap of Deeper Thinking, given to Jason by the wise leader of the Molefolk, Venerable Mole. They have many adventures, bad and good, and in the end they find the answers they were seeking. Jason finds his own true love, Perdita, who provides the answer to the sickness of Molanium:

> *Doesn't anything ever* change *in Molanium, Jason? she asked. And didn't you ever find life there a little — well — dull? The way you describe it nothing ever seems to happen. All this devotion to the past. It's all very well, history and all that, but surely new things have to happen too, don't they? I don't think I'd like to live there. Why I'd die of boredom...*
>
> *That's it! he cried.. Molanium has been dying of boredom.*
>
> *Everything had to change and grow... The molefolk had simply stopped caring about life, because nothing new ever happened any more* (p. 167).

Oliver found the answer to his quest in the words of a truly wise old owl, Professor Kingsberry, whom they met in Trafalgar Square:

> *I'm afraid I can't tell you how to be wise, Oliver. That you must learn for yourself... Knowledge can be learned from books. But wisdom, now — wisdom must be learned from life itself... You must just go on by yourself, and if you have an opinion which turns out to be mistaken, Oliver, don't be afraid to change your mind, will you? Be patient. When you get home, you may be surprised at what you've learned* (p. 155).

And at least as important as these lessons learned is the fact that each one of the friends has learned that one can, and often does, act much more bravely than one feels and that, as Oliver says, "there's good and bad in all tribes. It's your friends that count."

Jason's Quest is part of the huge body of wish-fulfillment literature written for children of all ages, ending with a happy victory for the questing friends in their final confrontation with the Blades, a menacing group of gangster rats. Writing it Margaret Laurence was at play, but still it contains the themes that were central to all of her work: the unexpected finding of courage, one's rightful attitude to the ancestors, and the perilous effects of their overinfluence, the unexpected blessings vouchsafed to "strangers in a strange land," and the inescapable pressure on every individual to change and grow. To refuse to do so is to choose death. In Moleville, formerly Molanium, under Jason and Perdita's beneficent innovations, there is always another day and another chance:

At the onset of dusk in Moleville, the

Drums of the Night were heard, played by young moles trained by Perdita and Jason, and at the beginning of dawn, the Trumpets of The Day sounded their silvery notes, telling the molefolk that the night's work was over (p. 210).

One thing that Jason and Perdita did not change, however, was the ancient motto of the mole-folk, inscribed in gold and crimson on the wall of The Great Council Hall of their city: FESTINA LENTE. "The ancient motto of the molefolk," Jason said. "It means Hurry Slowly" (p. 13).

In the Fall of 1984 Margaret designed and had made as Christmas gifts for her children and their spouses, sterling silver pins, their own special plaid pin, engraved with a crest of her own devising and the motto, FESTINA LENTE.

If *Jason's Quest* was written for children of all ages, while Margaret Laurence was relaxing and at play, her story of Mr. Archipelago and Doree, "The Perfume Sea," published ten years earlier, reaches out to the child who resides, in some profound way, in all of us. Its sheer fairy-tale delight modulates into a deep humanity that reaches out and captures us, but at the beginning we are allowed to be enchanted observers:

"No question of it," Mr. Archipelago said, delicately snipping a wisp of hair. "I am flotsam." "Not jetsam?" Mrs. Webley-Pryce asked, blinking sharply watchful eyes as the scissored shreds fell down onto her face. "I always get the two confused."

Did you ever play the game "Who can remember the best first line in literature?" Moby Dick's "Call me Ishmael" usually wins, partly because it *is* inspired, partly because it's so short that we can always remember it. But for me the opening of "The Perfume Sea" always takes the prize. Archipelago — what a wonderful, funny and evocative name. It means "wreckage found floating" as he proudly announces later. Archipelago "delicately snips;" Mrs. Webley-Pryce, her imperial Britishness announced by her hyphenated name, "blinks sharply watchful eyes;" and we, the readers, become privileged observers of this most incongruous of establishments, a Western-style beauty shop set in a small and sleepy African town.

Outside, the small town was growing sluggish under the sedative sun of late morning... footsteps on the cracked and scorching pavement lagged. Even the brisk shoes of white men slackened and slowed, the market women walked tiredly, their headtrays heavy, their bare feet pressing the warm dust into ripples and dunes... Only the children, the fire and gleam of them greater even than the harsh glint of sun, continued to leap and shout as before (pp. 20-21).

In the midst of his jumbled shop, Archipelago, in a gold and crimson waistcoat, "a fat and frantic wizard, refreshing himself occasionally with Dutch ale," stirs his potions and darts over to the "mainstay of his alchemist's laboratory," his old-fashioned permanent-wave machine. "He waited, arms folded, until the whole dangerous mechanism achieved the dull mysterious fire which was to turn Mrs. Webley-Pryce's base metal, as it were, to gold." Archipelago looks wizardly exotic:

His shiny eyes were green as malachite. He stood on tiptoe, a plump pouter-pigeon of a man, puffing out his chest until the brocade waistcoat swelled. His hair, black as ripe olives, he only touched from time to time with pomade, but it gave the impression of having been crimped and perfumed (p. 22).

As he works on their hair, Archipelago tells his customers fabulous stories about his past, weaving another delightfully mysterious spell around them as he works on their physical transformations. "He allowed himself a degree of pride in the fact that no one could ever be sure where the truth ended and the tinted unreality began." But he practises white magic, not black, because he has sympathy for his lady customers: "He did not chide, even to himself, their hunger. If one went empty for a long time, one became hungry." His tales were "the manna with which it was his pleasure to nourish his lady customers" (p. 25).

Doree, his sorcerer's apprentice, is equally exotic, "an emaciated yellow and white bird, a tall gaunt crane, her hair clinging like wet feathers around her squeezed narrow shoulders" (p. 24). While Archipelago mixes his spells for Mrs. Webley-Pryce, Doree is lacquering her nails with lustrous green, the magic colours — "Sea Pearl," she said. "Kind of different anyhow." But it is with the introduction of Doree that Margaret Laurence begins to pull us towards her deeper intention in this story. Her hands are thin and white, "knuckle-swollen from years of cleansing other women's hair." She has "mild myopic eyes" and though her mouth is painted to "emulate hardness," it opens in "soft spontaneous astonishment" as Archipelago expounds on the Concise Oxford's definition of his name.

"Can you beat it?" she said. "He looks up words all the time, and laughs like the dickens. I used to read the telephone book sometimes, in the nights, and wonder about those names and if they all belonged to real people, living somewhere, you know, and doing something. But I never laughed" (p. 22).

Here we are first bidden to become more than observers, amused and enchanted ourselves by this strange and gaudy pair. Doree's speech signals a loneliness and need far more demanding than the observer's eye and ear. We are now participators as well.

The story runs its course, its two levels mixed in perfect balance. On the one hand, Archipelago and Doree and their lives provide us with constant, exotic visual delights and mysteries. They live in their isolated and mysterious magic castle, "a large green house by the shore." But within it, each is isolated from the other; they share only living and dining quarters. Mr. Archipelago's domain is the overgrown garden, surrounded by a high green wall.

He had no wish to tame the garden, which was a profusion of elephant grass, drooping casuarina trees, frowsy banana palms, slender paw-paw, and all manner of flowering shrubs... the favourite of his domain, however, was the sensitive plant, an earth vine which, if its leaves were touched even lightly, would softly and stubbornly close. Mr. Archipelago liked to watch the sensitive plant's closing. Nothing in this world could stop its self-containment; it was not to be bribed or cajoled; it had integrity (p. 31).

Doree's domain was the long verandah where all creatures were welcome and no was ever harmed. There she talked happily to her two favourite parrots, Brasso and Silvo, their names a compliment to the Italian-sounding Archipelago and the closest to Italian she could think of; there she admired and defended her bright green chameleon, whom Archipelago did not find as beautiful as she did: "What do you want me to do anyway? Conk him on the head because he's not a goddam butterfly?" (p. 33). And there they indulged in their hobbies, sometimes listening to Archipelago's fourteen records of Italian opera, sometimes playing their perfume game, sniffing the great variety of shapes and scents they had collected.

Mr. Archipelago did not love the perfumes for themselves alone, nor even for their ability to cover the coarse reek of life. Each one, sniffed like snuff, conjured up for him a throng of waltzing ladies, whirling and spinning eter-

nally on floors of light, their grey gowns swaying, ladies of gentle dust (p. 34).

All this is richly visual and wonderfully amusing on our observer's level; yet the undertones of loneliness constantly and increasingly draw us into the participant's level as well.

Catastrophe occurs — the Webley-Pryces and all the other British withdraw. Their places are filled by Africans, "and in Mr. Archipelago's shop the whirr of the hair-dryer was heard less and less." At the very nadir of their misfortunes Archipelago reveals that like every good sorcerer he even has a secret store of gold, hidden in the belly of a little wooden elephant. It is an ancient Ashanti necklace and he tries to give it to Doree to support her for a while since it seems inevitable that they must separate, each to find some other way to make a bare living. "She turned to him, almost angrily. 'Don't you think I'd miss you?' she cried. 'Don't you know how it would be — for me?'" This is their climactic moment of truth, "of unreasonable and terrifying hope." But they are both of the genus "sensitive plant," and they retreat from the confrontation, each still solitary and intuitively protective of the mutual need and devotion that they have been on the brink of revealing.

Then we are allowed to become observers again. The marvellous comic turn in the story occurs. Their landlord, Mr. Tachie, grumbling about the new and frivolous dreams of his daughter, Mercy, unwittingly hands them their salvation. A new sign announces it: "Archipelago and Dorree, Barbershop, All-Beauty Salon, African Ladies a Specialty." Mercy Tachie, who wants to look like a westernized city girl, is their first customer and her transformation — softly-curled hair, brown make-up that matches her own skin, crimson lipstick — is glorified by a parade — a great celebration for Mercy and her friends, a victory parade for Archipelago and Doree.

Spilling down the street was an impromptu procession. Every girl in town appeared to be there, hips and shoulders swaying, washed feet stepping lightly, hands clapping, cloths of blue and magenta and yellow fluttering around them like the flags of nations while they danced... Beside Mercy, as her guard and her champions, there pranced and jittered half a dozen young men, in khaki trousers and brilliantly flower-printed shirts... They sang at full strength...

Everybody like Mercy Tachie
Everybody, everybody
Everybody, everybody
Everybody say she fine pas' all —
(pp. 46-7).

And finally, in the story's last lines, observer and participant become one — and one with Doree and Archipelago as well as they walk contentedly by the seashore.

Mr. Archipelago sniffed the brine-laden wind.

"Smell the sea, Doree? A perfume for our collection."

She smiled, "What shall we call it?"

"Oh, nothing too ornate," he said lightly. Perhaps eau d' exile would do."

The sea spray was bitter and salt, but to them it was warm, too. They watched on the sand their exaggerated shadows, one squat and bulbous, the other bone-slight and clumsily elongated, pigeon and crane. The shadows walked with hands entwined like children who walk through the dark (pp. 48-9).

Sorcerer and apprentice, lonely exiles, sensitive plants, Everyman and Everywoman — and throughout, **saving laughter.**

We all know that, to Margaret, the climactic moment for Hagar was her recognition, when Mr. Troy sang the Old Hundredth for her of her need to rejoice:

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.
Him serve with mirth, His praise forthtell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

... I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always, have wanted that — simply to rejoice (The Stone Angel, p. 292).

We know too, that all the Manawaka women bring themselves to us — and bring us to ourselves — through laughter. Margaret's humour is what Thomas Carlyle called long ago, the highest kind — the humour of fellow-feeling.

It must be five years ago now that she called me one day in great excitement and delight: "I have found the title for my book," she said. "It's from that hymn we love, *Lord of the Dance*."

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth,
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he;
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.

Dance on the Earth, her memoir, will add to her already great legacy to us — and you may be sure that in it there is much **saving laughter.**

CHINUA ACHEBE

Two Poems from *Beware Soul Brother*

The Explorer

Clear-sighted with a clarity
rarely encountered in dreams
my Explorer-Self stood a little
distant but somewhat fulfilled;
behind
him a long misty quest; unanswered
questions put to sleep needing
no longer to be raised.

Beware, Soul Brother

remember also your children
for they in their time will want
a place for their feet when
they come of age and the dance
of the future is born
for them.