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**JAMES M. BARRIE**

# The Little Minister



Introduction by W. G. Sebald

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED



# THE LITTLE MINISTER

JAMES M. BARRIE

(1860 — 1937)



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# THE LITTLE MINISTER

JAMES M. BARRIE

## Introduction

The first page of Barrie's romantic novel, *The Little Minister*, evokes a Scotland still mindful of its Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie, and scornful of "a king's soldier"—that is, an English soldier. Jealous of their separateness, Scotsmen cherished another form of distinction, their religious differences within their borders, as well as their proud sense of individuality from birth to death.

However, most Scotsmen were united then in their veneration for learning, as they are today. Even those villagers who did not belong to his denomination revered the Little Minister as an educated man. The story of the Little Minister of Thrums, a tale rich in melodrama, is told in retrospect by an old man, a retired village schoolmaster, or dominie, keenly versed in the idiosyncrasies of his fellow Scots, and bound by a long—and peculiar—tie to the Little Minister himself.

The dominie begins with a salute to romance in general and a warning that his story is only for those who "know the love-light when they see it." Through some rather enigmatic personal references, one gathers that he has profoundly loved the Little Minister's mother, Margaret. For reasons unstated, he feels now an obligation to conceal from her the very fact of his existence, to say nothing of his presence nearby, at Glen Quharity, some four miles from Thrums.

Fresh from his studies, Gavin Dishart, the Little Minis-



ter, arrives in Thrums with his mother, both of them enraptured by his new dignity. From a retired point of vantage, the dominie observes their arrival with his own eyes. Thus, the reader gains the vividness of first-hand observation. Soon Barrie inserts a quick apology for the future narration of events which the dominie could not have observed. He has gathered this part of his story, he tells us, "only afterward, from those who knew it best." Often the fiction of first-hand narration disappears altogether, but the reader is apt to be too absorbed in the plot to raise objections.

From the third chapter, with its drama of villagers on guard against an anticipated invasion of soldiers, the plot develops rapidly. The identity of the unexpected gypsy, or "Egyptian," who warns the villagers, is actually no secret; it is tossed to the reader casually at the end of a chapter. But just why her "leddyship" should masquerade as she does remains a real secret, well kept until the proper climax.

The drama of events is heightened by Barrie's telling his story in many voices, some speaking English, some, the Scottish' dialect. He characterizes his speakers, deftly, too, through their own words. This skillful use of dialogue reveals the talent which later made Barrie a phenomenally successful playwright. His humor, delicate, pointed and dry, seasons a story which might otherwise seem too sweet or too arch, at times. Barrie's humor is the high point of his style, as well as the saving grace of some of the impoverished lives he depicts. Throughout the novel, the tone of the romance is idyllic, but many speeches and scenes are—intentionally—very funny.

James Matthew Barrie was born May 9, 1860, in the Scottish village of Kirriemuir, which he christened in his writings "Thrums." Early in life, Barrie became a writer. While still a student at the University of Edinburgh, he worked on a three-volume novel, almost completing it. After the university, he went into newspaper-work. At the age of twenty-five, he moved to London, to engage in writing as a lifelong profession. Three years later, with extraordinary productivity, he brought out within a single



year three works: a volume of biographical sketches of famous men of Edinburgh, *An Edinburgh Eleven*; a book of sketches of his native village, *Auld Licht Idylls* (a title which illuminates his attitude towards his subject); and a novel, *When a Man's Single*. (Single is what Barrie remained.)

*The Little Minister*, published when he was thirty-one, may be classed as a work of Barrie's youth. Subsequently, he devoted himself to play-writing. (*The Little Minister*, re-written as a play, was produced in 1897.) At one time, Barrie had three plays on the London stage in a single season, a record equaled only, perhaps, by Somerset Maugham.

Barrie's most famous and most enduring work is *Peter Pan*, a play first presented in 1904. However, in his own time, Barrie was also famous for a particular kind of light comedy, a mixture of humor and pathos distilled in his plays more subtly than in his earlier works. Perhaps through his devotion to his mother, he manifests a marked sympathy for women's qualities, and for their general superiority to their men, a superiority they are shrewd enough to conceal. These themes appear in *What Every Woman Knows*, a comedy in which Helen Hayes once starred.

A fairy-tale element graces some of his plays, like *A Kiss for Cinderella*. In fact, Barrie has been likened to a blend of Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Dickens. In his last plays, Barrie ventured into even remoter realms of fantasy and, in *Mary Rose*, touched on communication from beyond the grave.

In his lifetime, Barrie's talents and his personal charm were widely appreciated. He enjoyed the friendship of many celebrated writers of his day, such as Bernard Shaw, whose occasional pomposity he knew how to puncture with quiet wit. In 1913, Barrie was made a baronet, and in 1922 he received a possibly greater distinction, the Order of Merit, becoming thus "Sir James M. Barrie, O.M." For the little man from Kirriemuir, it had been quite a trip. Still a bachelor, he died on June 19, 1937.

A few years after the publication of *The Little Minister*,

Barrie wrote *Margaret Ogilvy*, an affectionate study of his early life with his mother. In the novel also it is impossible to overlook some touches of autobiography. Barrie, himself short of stature, dwells with humor upon the small size of his hero and upon Gavin's sensitivity on that subject. Far more important is the Little Minister's devotion to his mother, a topic which may seem desperately out of fashion to readers schooled by Freud and his followers. For reasons revealed only at the end of the novel, there was no important father-figure in Gavin Dishart's life. His loving concern for his mother's comfort is partly a response to her passionate maternal admiration and devotion. It is also partly a measure of his innocence and his ignorance of other women. When he falls in love with the Egyptian, Babbie, he does temporarily forget his mother's needs, and attracts therefore the reproach of the dominie. His fall—and it is a fall—attracts, too, the dire dismay and wrath of his congregation, the Auld Licht Kirk members who had chosen him so proudly and admired him so reverently.

The term *Auld Licht* (or Old Light) connotes a separation in Scottish church affairs which was maintained in the village with characteristic Scottish stubbornness. Though Presbyterians, like the Established Church of Scotland, the Old Lights were more staid and conservative both in their doctrine and in their forms of worship than certain church bodies more indulgent of evangelism. (In addition to the Established ones, there were also in the village some bold dissenters or atheists.) Though the Little Minister wins the heartfelt devotion of old Nanny Webster, she does not sever her ties to another church. ("Established I was born and Established I'll die.")

Early in the novel, some Thrums villagers, suffering acutely from a long drought, appear at the minister's back door to ask for some water from his well. His little servant, Jean, warns him that three of the villagers are "no Auld Lights."

"Let that make no difference," said Gavin, grandly, but Jean changed his message to: "A bowlful apiece to Auld Lights; all other denominations, one cupful."



The retiring minister, Mr. Carfrae, tells his young successor: "Our weavers are passionately religious." They are also extremely poor, and thus suffer from any reduction in the price of "the web," or cloth. It was such a reduction, Mr. Carfrae tells Gavin, that fired them to heed the agitations of the Chartists, a group of radicals working throughout Britain for legislative and social reform. In actuality, fears inspired by the Chartist-led riots culminated, in 1848, in a massing of troops under the Duke of Wellington. In the novel, the rumor that soldiers are coming to Thrums to seize the weavers involved—or suspected of involvement—in a previous riot has inspired a nightly watch on all the roads leading into Thrums. Barrie's heroine, Babbie, rushes into the village to give an early warning that the troops are at last on the way.

Between religious dissensions (which have recurred even among Presbyterians in the United States<sup>4</sup>), and the Chartist uprisings, the story has several points of reference in local and national history. The heart of the novel, however, lies in its human drama, in the factions among the villagers, the drought, the great storm, and, above all, in the two love-stories: the one, subliminal, between the dominie and the Little Minister's mother; the other, Gavin's trials in his love for the mysterious Egyptian. *The Little Minister* was made into a movie, in 1934, starring John Beale and Katharine Hepburn. It might well serve for a musical, if some genius could solve the problems of the dialect for non-Scottish audiences.

American readers may find it easier to understand unfamiliar words by *sounding* them, whether correctly or not. The ear offers clues sometimes more readily than the eye, as may be seen in the passage below.

While the villagers are pondering the peculiar behavior of their minister who has fallen—they are staggered to say it, even though they have seen it—"in love," a sage verdict on the human predicament comes from one Tammas Haggart:

"Yes, lathies," Haggart was saying, "daftness about women comes to all, gentle and simple, common and colleged, humorists and no humorists. You say Mr.



Dishart has preached ower muckle at women to stoop to marriage, but that makes no differ. Mony a humorous thing hae I said about women, and yet Christy has me. It's the same wi' ministers. A' at aince they see a lassie no unlike ither lassies, away goes their learning, and they skirl out, 'You dawtiel' That's what comes to all."

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## CHAPTER I

### The Love-Light

Long ago, in the days when our caged blackbirds never saw a king's soldier without whistling impudently, "Come ower the water to Charlie," a minister of Thrums was to be married, but something happened, and he remained a bachelor. Then, when he was old, he passed in our square the lady who was to have been his wife, and her hair was white, but she, too, was still unmarried. The meeting had only one witness, a weaver, and he said solemnly afterwards, "They didna speak, but they just gave one another a look, and I saw the love-light in their een." No more is remembered of these two, no being now living ever saw them, but the poetry that was in the soul of a battered weaver makes them human to us for ever.

It is of another minister I am to tell, but only to those who know that light when they see it. I am not bidding good-bye to many readers, for though it is true that some men, of whom Lord Rintoul was one, live to an old age without knowing love, few of us can have met them, and of women so incomplete I never heard.

Gavin Dishart was barely twenty-one when he and his mother came to Thrums, light-hearted like the traveller who knows not what awaits him at the bend of the road. It was the time of year when the ground is carpeted beneath the firs with brown needles, when split-nuts patter all day from the beech, and children lay yellow corn on the dominie's desk to remind him that now they are needed in the fields. The day was so silent that carts could be heard rumbling a mile away. All Thrums was out in its wynds and closes—a few of the weavers still in knee-breeches—to look at the new Auld Licht minister. I was there, too, the dominie of Glen Quharity, which is four miles from Thrums; and heavy was my heart as I stood afar off so that Gavin's mother might not have the



pain of seeing me. I was the only one in the crowd who looked at her more than at her son.

Eighteen years had passed since we parted. Already her hair had lost the brightness of its youth, and she seemed to me smaller and more fragile; and the face that I loved when I was a hobbledehoy, and loved when I looked once more upon it in Thrums, and always shall love till I die, was soft and worn. Margaret was an old woman, and she was only forty-three: and I am the man who made her old. As Gavin put his eager, boyish face out at the carriage window, many saw that he was holding her hand, but none could be glad at the sight as the dominie was glad, looking on at a happiness in which he dared not mingle. Margaret was crying because she was so proud of her boy. Women do that. Poor sons to be proud of, good mothers, but I would not have you dry those tears.

When the little minister looked out at the carriage window, many of the people drew back humbly, but a little boy in a red frock with black spots pressed forward and offered him a sticky parly, which Gavin accepted, though not without a tremor, for children were more terrible to him then than bearded men. The boy's mother, trying not to look elated, bore him away, but her face said that he was made for life. With this little incident Gavin's career in Thrums began. I remembered it suddenly the other day when wading across the wynd where it took place. Many scenes in the little minister's life come back to me in this way. The first time I ever thought of writing his love story as an old man's gift to a little maid since grown tall, was one night while I sat alone in the school-house; on my knees a fiddle that has been my only living companion since I sold my hens. My mind had drifted back to the first time I saw Gavin and the Egyptian together, and what set it wandering to that midnight meeting was my garden gate shaking in the wind. At a gate on the hill I had first encountered these two. It rattled in his hand, and I looked up and saw them, and neither knew why I had such cause to start at the sight. Then the gate swung to. It had just such a click as mine.

These two figures on the hill are more real to me than



things that happened yesterday, but I do not know that I can make them live to others. A ghost-show used to come yearly to Thrums on the merry Muickle Friday, in which the illusion was contrived by hanging a glass between the onlookers and the stage. I cannot deny that the comings and goings of the ghost were highly diverting, yet the farmer of T'nowhead only laughed because he had paid his money at the hole in the door like the rest of us. T'nowhead sat at the end of a form where he saw round the glass and so saw no ghost. I fear my public may be in the same predicament. I see the little minister as he was at one and twenty, and the little girl to whom this story is to belong sees him, though the things I have to tell happened before she came into the world. But there are reasons why she should see; and I do not know that I can provide the glass for others. If they see round it, they will neither laugh nor cry with Gavin and Babbie.

When Gavin came to Thrums he was as I am now, for the pages lay before him on which he was to write his life. Yet he was not quite as I am. The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another; and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it. But the biographer sees the last chapter while he is still at the first, and I have only to write over with ink what Gavin has written in pencil.

How often is it a phantom woman who draws the man from the way he meant to go? So was man created, to hunger for the ideal that is above himself, until one day there is magic in the air, and the eyes of a girl rest upon him. He does not know that it is he himself who crowned her, and if the girl is as pure as he, their love is the one form of idolatry that is not quite ignoble. It is the joining of two souls on their way to God. But if the woman be bad, the test of the man is when he awakens from his dream. The nobler his ideal, the further will he have been hurried down the wrong way, for those who only run after little things will not go far. His love may now sink into passion, perhaps only to stain its wings and rise again, perhaps to drown.



Babbie, what shall I say of you to make me write these things? I am not your judge. Shall we not laugh at the student who chafes when between him and his book comes the song of the thrushes, with whom, on the mad night you danced into Gavin's life, you had more in common than with Auld Licht ministers? The gladness of living was in your step, your voice was melody, and he was wondering what love might be.

You were the daughter of a summer night, born where all the birds are free, and the moon christened you with her soft light to dazzle the eyes of man. Not our little minister alone was stricken by you into his second childhood. To look upon you was to rejoice that so fair a thing could be; to think of you is still to be young. Even those who called you a little devil, of whom I have been one, admitted that in the end you had a soul, though not that you had been born with one. They said you stole it, and so made a woman of yourself. But again I say I am not your judge, and when I picture you as Gavin saw you first, a bare-legged witch dancing up Windyghoul, rowan berries in your black hair, and on your finger a jewel the little minister could not have bought with five years of toil, the shadows on my pages lift, and I cannot wonder that Gavin loved you.

Often I say to myself that this is to be Gavin's story, not mine. Yet must it be mine, too, in a manner, and of myself I shall sometimes have to speak; not willingly, for it is time my little tragedy had died of old age. I have kept it to myself so long that now I would stand at its grave alone. It is true that when I heard who was to be the new minister I hoped for a day that the life broken in Harvie might be mended in Thrums, but two minutes' talk with Gavin showed me that Margaret had kept from him the secret which was hers and mine, and so knocked the bottom out of my vain hopes. I did not blame her then, nor do I blame her now, nor shall any one who blames her ever be called friend by me; but it was bitter to look at the white manse among the trees and know that I must never enter it. For Margaret's sake I had to keep aloof, yet this new trial came upon me like our parting at Harvie. I thought that in those eighteen years



my passions had burned like a ship till they sank, but I suffered again as on that awful night when Adam Dishart came back, nearly killing Margaret and tearing up all my ambitions by the root in a single hour. I waited in Thrums until I had looked again on Margaret, who thought me dead, and Gavin, who had never heard of me, and then I trudged back to the schoolhouse. Something I heard of them from time to time during the winter,—for in the gossip of Thrums I was well posted,—but much of what is to be told here I only learned afterwards from those who knew it best. Gavin heard of me at times as the dominie in the glen who had ceased to attend the Auld Licht kirk, and Margaret did not even hear of me. It was all I could do for them.

## CHAPTER II

### *Runs Alongside the Making of a Minister*

On the east coast of Scotland, hidden, as if in a quarry, at the foot of cliffs that may one day fall forward, is a village called Harvie. So has it shrunk since the day when I skulked from it that I hear of a traveller's asking lately at one of its doors how far he was from a village; yet Harvie throve once and was celebrated even in distant Thrums for its fish. Most of our weavers would have thought it as unnatural not to buy harvies in the square on the Muckle Friday, as to let Saturday night pass without laying in a sufficient stock of halfpennies to go round the family twice.

Gavin was born in Harvie, but left it at such an early age that he could only recall thatched houses with nets drying on the roofs, and a sandy shore in which coarse grass grew. In the picture he could not pick out the house of his birth, though he might have been able to go to it had he ever returned to the village. Soon he learned that his mother did not care to speak of Harvie, and perhaps he thought that she had forgotten it, too, all save one scene to which his memory still guided him. When



his mind wandered to Harvie, Gavin saw the door of his home open and a fisherman enter, who scratched his head and then said, "Your man's drowned, missis." Gavin seemed to see many women crying, and his mother staring at them with a face suddenly painted white, and next to hear a voice that was his own saying, "Never mind, mother; I'll be a man to you now, and I'll need breeks for the burial." But Adam required no funeral, for his body lay deep in the sea.

Gavin thought that this was the tragedy of his mother's life, and the most memorable event of his own childhood. But it was neither. When Margaret, even after she came to Thrums, thought of Harvie, it was not at Adam's death she shuddered, but at the recollection of me.

It would ill become me to take a late revenge on Adam Dishart now by saying what is not true of him. Though he died a fisherman, he was a sailor for a great part of his life, and doubtless his recklessness was washed into him on the high seas, where in his time men made a crony of death, and drank merrily over dodging it for another night. To me his roars of laughter without cause were as repellent as a boy's drum; yet many faces that were long in my company brightened at his coming, and women, with whom, despite my yearning, I was in no wise a favourite, ran to their doors to listen to him as readily as to the bell-man. Children scurried from him if his mood was savage, but to him at all other times, while me they merely disregarded. There was always a smell of the sea about him. He had a rolling gait, unless he was drunk, when he walked very straight, and before both sexes he boasted that any woman would take him for his beard alone. Of this beard he took prodigious care, though otherwise thinking little of his appearance, and I now see that he understood women better than I did, who had nevertheless reflected much about them. It cannot be said that he was vain, for though he thought he attracted women strangely, that, I maintain, is a weakness common to all men, and so no more to be marvelled at than a stake in a fence. Foreign oaths were the nails with which he held his talk together, yet I doubt not

they were a curiosity gathered at sea, like his chains of shells, more for his own pleasure than for others' pain. His friends gave them no weight, and when he wanted to talk emphatically he kept them back, though they were then as troublesome to him as eggs to the bird-nesting boy who has to speak with his spoil in his mouth.

Adam was drowned on Gavin's fourth birthday, a year after I had to leave Harvie. He was blown off his smack in a storm, and could not reach the rope his partner flung him. "It's no go, lad," he shouted; "so long, Jim," and sank.

A month afterwards Margaret sold her share in the smack, which was all Adam left her, and the furniture of the house was roused. She took Gavin to Glasgow, where her only brother needed a housekeeper, and there mother and son remained until Gavin got his call to Thrums. During those seventeen years I lost knowledge of them as completely as Margaret had lost knowledge of me. On hearing of Adam's death I went back to Harvie to try to trace her, but she had feared this, and so told no one where she was going.

According to Margaret, Gavin's genius showed itself while he was still a child. He was born with a brow whose nobility impressed her from the first. It was a minister's brow, and though Margaret herself was no scholar, being as slow to read as she was quick at turning bannocks on the girdle, she decided, when his age was still counted by months, that the ministry had need of him. In those days the first question asked of a child was not, "Tell me your name," but "What are you to be?" and one child in every family replied, "A minister." He was set apart from the Church as doggedly as the shilling a week for the rent, and the rule held good though the family consisted of only one boy. From his earliest days Gavin thought he had been fashioned for the ministry as certainly as a spade for digging, and Margaret rejoiced and marvelled thereat, though she had made her own puzzle. An enthusiastic mother may bend her son's mind as she chooses if she begins at once; nay, she may do stranger things. I know a mother in Thrums who loves "features," and had a child born with no chin to speak of, and a high-



bours expected this to bring her to the dust, but it only showed what a mother can do. In a few months that child had a chin with the best of them.

Margaret's brother died, but she remained in his single room, and, ever with a picture of her son in a pulpit to repay her, contrived to keep Gavin at school. Everything a woman's fingers can do Margaret's did better than most, and among the wealthy people who employed her—would that I could have the teaching of the sons of such as were good to her in those hard days!—her gentle manner was spoken of. For though Margaret had no schooling, she was a lady at heart, moving and almost speaking as one even in Harvie, where they did not perhaps like her the better for it.

At six Gavin hit another boy hard for belonging to the Established Church, and at seven he could not lose himself in the Shorter Catechism. His mother expounded the Scriptures to him till he was eight, when he began to expound them to her. By this time he was studying the practical work of the pulpit as enthusiastically as ever medical student cut off a leg. From a front pew in the gallery Gavin watched the minister's every movement, noting that the first thing to do on ascending the pulpit is to cover your face with your hands, as if the exalted position affected you like a strong light, and the second to move the big Bible slightly, to show that the kirk officer, not having had a university education, could not be expected to know the very spot on which it ought to lie. Gavin saw that the minister joined in the singing more like one countenancing a seemly thing than because he needed it himself, and that he only sang a mouthful now and again after the congregation was in full pursuit of the precentor. It was noteworthy that the first prayer lasted longer than all the others, and that to read the intimations about the Bible-class and the collection elsewhere than immediately before the last Psalm would have been as sacrilegious as to insert the dedication to King James at the end of Revelation. Sitting under a minister justly honoured in his day, the boy was often some words in advance of him, not vainglorious of his memory, but fervent, eager, and regarding the preacher