

J. M. Barrie

What Every Woman Knows

 Publio

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Minden jog fenntartva!

ACT I

(James Wylie is about to make a move on the dambrod, and in the little Scotch room there is an awful silence befitting the occasion. James with his hand poised—for if he touches a piece he has to play it, Alick will see to that—raises his red head suddenly to read Alick's face. His father, who is Alick, is pretending to be in a panic lest James should make this move. James grins heartlessly, and his fingers are about to close on the 'man' when some instinct of self-preservation makes him peep once more. This time Alick is caught: the unholy ecstasy on his face tells as plain as porridge that he has been luring James to destruction. James glares; and, too late, his opponent is a simple old father again. James mops his head, sprawls in the manner most conducive to thought in the Wylie family, and, protruding his underlip, settles down to a reconsideration of the board. Alick blows out his cheeks, and a drop of water settles on the point of his nose.

You will find them thus any Saturday night (after family worship, which sends the servant to bed); and sometimes the pauses are so long that in the end they forget whose move it is.

It is not the room you would be shown into if you were calling socially on Miss Wylie. The drawing-room for you, and Miss Wylie in a coloured merino to receive you; very likely she would exclaim, "This is a pleasant surprise!" though she has seen you coming up the avenue and has just had time to whip the dustcloths off the chairs, and to warn Alick, David and James, that they had better not dare come in to see you before they have put on a dickey. Nor is this the room in which you would dine in solemn grandeur if invited to drop in and take pot-luck, which is how the Wylies invite, it being a family weakness to pretend that they sit down in the dining-room daily. It is the real living-room of the house, where Alick, who will never get used to fashionable ways, can take off his collar and sit happily in his stocking soles, and James at times would do so also; but catch Maggie letting him.

There is one very fine chair, but, heavens, not for sitting on; just to give the room a social standing in an emergency. It sneers at the other chairs with an air of insolent superiority, like a haughty bride who has married into the house for money. Otherwise the furniture is homely; most of it has come from that smaller house where the Wylies began. There is the large and shiny chair which can be turned into a bed if you look the other way for a moment. James cannot sit on this chair without gradually sliding down it till he is lying luxuriously on the small of his back, his legs indicating, like the hands of a clock, that it is ten past twelve; a position in which Maggie shudders to see him receiving company.

The other chairs are horse-hair, than which nothing is more comfortable if there be a good slit down the seat. The seats are heavily dented, because all the Wylie family sit down with a dump. The draught-board is on the edge of a large centre table, which also displays four books placed at equal distances from each other, one of them a Bible, and another the family album. If these were the only books they would not justify Maggie in calling this chamber the library, her dogged name for it; while David and James call it the west-room and Alick calls it 'the room,' which is to him the natural name for any apartment without a bed in it. There is a bookcase of pitch pine, which contains six hundred books, with glass doors to prevent your getting at them.

No one does try to get at the books, for the Wylies are not a reading family. They like you to gasp when you see so much literature gathered together in one prison-house, but they gasp themselves at the thought that there are persons, chiefly clergymen, who, having finished one book, coolly begin another. Nevertheless it was not all vainglory that made David buy this library: it was rather a mighty respect for education, as something that he has missed. This same feeling makes him take in the Contemporary Review and stand up to it like a man. Alick, who also has a respect for education, tries to read the Contemporary, but becomes dispirited, and may be heard muttering over its pages, 'No, no use, no use, no,' and sometimes even 'Oh hell.' James has no respect for education; and Maggie is at present of an open mind.

They are Wylie and Sons of the local granite quarry, in which Alick was throughout his working days a mason. It is David who has raised them to this position; he climbed up himself step by step (and hewed the steps), and drew the others up after him. 'Wylie Brothers,' Alick would have had the firm called, but David said No, and James said No, and Maggie said No; first honour must be to their father; and Alick now likes it on the whole, though he often sighs at having to shave every day; and on some snell mornings he still creeps from his couch at four and even at two (thinking that his mallet and chisel are calling him), and begins to pull on his trousers, until the grandeur of them reminds him that he can go to bed again. Sometimes he cries a little, because there is no more work for him to do for ever and ever; and then Maggie gives him a spade (without telling David) or David gives him the logs to saw (without telling Maggie).

We have given James a longer time to make his move than our kind friends in front will give him, but in the meantime something has been happening. David has come in, wearing a black coat and his Sabbath boots, for he has been to a public meeting. David is nigh forty years of age, whiskered like his father and brother (Alick's whiskers being worn as a sort of cravat round the neck), and he has the too brisk manner of one who must arrive anywhere a little before any one else. The painter who did the three of them for fifteen pounds (you may observe the canvases on the walls) has caught this characteristic, perhaps accidentally, for David is almost stepping out of his frame, as if to hurry off somewhere; while Alick and James look as if they were pinned to the wall for life. All the six of them, men and pictures, however, have a family resemblance, like granite blocks from their own quarry. They are as Scotch as peat for instance, and they might exchange eyes without any neighbour noticing the difference, inquisitive little blue eyes that seem to be always totting up the price of things.

The dambrod players pay no attention to David, nor does he regard them. Dumping down on the sofa he removes his 'lastic sides, as his Sabbath boots are called, by pushing one foot against the other, gets into a pair of hand-sewn slippers, deposits the boots as according to rule in the ottoman, and crosses to the fire. There must be something on David's mind to-night, for he pays no attention to the game, neither gives advice (than which nothing is more maddening) nor exchanges a wink with Alick over the parlous condition of James's crown. You can hear the wag-at-the-wall clock in the lobby ticking. Then David lets himself go; it runs out of him like a hymn:)

DAVID. Oh, let the solid ground Not fail beneath my feet, Before my life has found What some have found so sweet.

[This is not a soliloquy, but is offered as a definite statement. The players emerge from their game with difficulty.]

ALICK [with JAMES's crown in his hand]. What's that you're saying, David?

DAVID [like a public speaker explaining the situation in a few well-chosen words]. The thing I'm speaking about is Love.

JAMES [keeping control of himself]. Do you stand there and say you're in love, David Wylie?

DAVID. Me; what would I do with the thing?

JAMES [who is by no means without pluck]. I see no necessity for calling it a thing.

[They are two bachelors who all their lives have been afraid of nothing but Woman. DAVID in his sportive days—which continue—has done roguish things with his arm when conducting a lady home under an umbrella from a soiree, and has both chuckled and been scared on thinking of it afterwards. JAMES, a commoner fellow altogether, has discussed the sex over a glass, but is too canny to be in the company of less than two young women at a time.]

DAVID [derisively]. Oho, has she got you, James?

JAMES [feeling the sting of it]. Nobody has got me.

DAVID. They'll catch you yet, lad.

JAMES. They'll never catch me. You've been nearer caught yourself.

ALICK. Yes, Kitty Menzies, David.

DAVID [feeling himself under the umbrella]. It was a kind of a shave that.

ALICK [who knows all that is to be known about women and can speak of them without a tremor]. It's a curious thing, but a man cannot help winking when he hears that one of his friends has been caught.

DAVID. That's so.

JAMES [clinging to his manhood]. And fear of that wink is what has kept the two of us single men. And yet what's the glory of being single?

DAVID. There's no particular glory in it, but it's safe.

JAMES [putting away his aspirations]. Yes, it's lonely, but it's safe. But who did you mean the poetry for, then?

DAVID. For Maggie, of course.

[You don't know DAVID and JAMES till you know how they love their sister MAGGIE.]

ALICK. I thought that.

DAVID [coming to the second point of his statement about Love]. I saw her reading poetry and saying those words over to herself.

JAMES. She has such a poetical mind.

DAVID. Love. There's no doubt as that's what Maggie has set her heart on. And not merely love, but one of those grand noble loves; for though Maggie is undersized she has a passion for romance.

JAMES [wandering miserably about the room]. It's terrible not to be able to give Maggie what her heart is set on.

[The others never pay much attention to JAMES, though he is quite a smart figure in less important houses.]

ALICK [violently]. Those idiots of men.

DAVID. Father, did you tell her who had got the minister of Galashiels?

ALICK [wagging his head sadly]. I had to tell her. And then I—I— bought her a sealskin muff, and I just slipped it into her hands and came away.

JAMES [illustrating the sense of justice in the Wylie family]. Of course, to be fair to the man, he never pretended he wanted her.

DAVID. None of them wants her; that's what depresses her. I was thinking, father, I would buy her that gold watch and chain in Snibby's window. She hankers after it.

JAMES [slapping his pocket]. You're too late, David; I've got them for her.

DAVID. It's ill done of the minister. Many a pound of steak has that man had in this house.

ALICK. You mind the slippers she worked for him?

JAMES. I mind them fine; she began them for William Cathro. She's getting on in years, too, though she looks so young.

ALICK. I never can make up my mind, David, whether her curls make her look younger or older.

DAVID [determinedly]. Younger. Whist! I hear her winding the clock. Mind, not a word about the minister to her, James. Don't even mention religion this day.

JAMES. Would it be like me to do such a thing?

DAVID. It would be very like you. And there's that other matter: say not a syllable about our having a reason for sitting up late to-night. When she says it's bed-time, just all pretend we're not sleepy.

ALICK. Exactly, and when—

[Here MAGGIE enters, and all three are suddenly engrossed in the dambrod. We could describe MAGGIE at great length. But what is the use? What you really want to know is whether she was good-looking. No, she was not. Enter MAGGIE, who is not good-looking. When this is said, all is said. Enter MAGGIE, as it were, with her throat cut from ear to ear. She has a soft Scotch voice and a more resolute manner than is perhaps fitting to her plainness; and she stops short at sight of JAMES sprawling unconsciously in the company chair.]

MAGGIE. James, I wouldn't sit on the fine chair.

JAMES. I forgot again.

[But he wishes she had spoken more sharply. Even profanation of the fine chair has not roused her. She takes up her knitting, and they all suspect that she knows what they have been talking about.]

MAGGIE. You're late, David, it's nearly bed-time.

DAVID [finding the subject a safe one]. I was kept late at the public meeting.

ALICK [glad to get so far away from Galashiels]. Was it a good meeting?

DAVID. Fairish. [with some heat] That young John Shand WOULD make a speech.

MAGGIE. John Shand? Is that the student Shand?

DAVID. The same. It's true he's a student at Glasgow University in the winter months, but in summer he's just the railway porter here; and I think it's very presumptuous of a young lad like that to make a speech when he hasn't a penny to bless himself with.

ALICK. The Shands were always an impudent family, and jealous. I suppose that's the reason they haven't been on speaking terms with us this six years. Was it a good speech?

DAVID [illustrating the family's generosity]. It was very fine; but he needn't have made fun of ME.

MAGGIE [losing a stitch]. He dared?

DAVID [depressed]. You see I can not get started on a speech without saying things like 'In rising FOR to make a few remarks.'

JAMES. What's wrong with it?

DAVID. He mimicked me, and said, 'Will our worthy chairman come for to go for to answer my questions?' and so on; and they roared.

JAMES [slapping his money pocket]. The sacket.

DAVID. I did feel bitterly, father, the want of education. [Without knowing it, he has a beautiful way of pronouncing this noble word.]

MAGGIE [holding out a kind hand to him]. David.

ALICK. I've missed it sore, David. Even now I feel the want of it in the very marrow of me. I'm ashamed to think I never gave you your chance. But when you were young I was so desperate poor, how could I do it, Maggie?

MAGGIE. It wasn't possible, father.

ALICK [gazing at the book-shelves]. To be able to understand these books! To up with them one at a time and scrape them as clean as though they were a bowl of brose. Lads, it's not to riches, it's to scholarship that I make my humble bow.

JAMES [who is good at bathos]. There's ten yards of them. And they were selected by the minister of Galashiels. He said—

DAVID [quickly]. James.

JAMES. I mean—I mean—

MAGGIE [calmly]. I suppose you mean what you say, James. I hear, David, that the minister of Galashiels is to be married on that Miss Turnbull.

DAVID [on guard]. So they were saying.

ALICK. All I can say is she has made a poor bargain.

MAGGIE [the damned]. I wonder at you, father. He's a very nice gentleman. I'm sure I hope he has chosen wisely.

JAMES. Not him.

MAGGIE [getting near her tragedy]. How can you say that when you don't know her? I expect she is full of charm.

ALICK. Charm? It's the very word he used.

DAVID. Havering idiot.

ALICK. What IS charm, exactly, Maggie?

MAGGIE. Oh, it's—it's a sort of bloom on a woman. If you have it, you don't need to have anything else; and if you don't have it, it doesn't much matter what else you have. Some women, the few, have charm for all; and most have charm for one. But some have

charm for none.

[Somehow she has stopped knitting. Her men-folk are very depressed.
JAMES brings his fist down on the table with a crash.]

JAMES [shouting]. I have a sister that has charm.

MAGGIE. No, James, you haven't.

JAMES [rushing at her with the watch and chain]. Ha'e, Maggie.

[She lets them lie in her lap.]

DAVID. Maggie, would you like a silk?

MAGGIE. What could I do with a silk? [With a gust of passion] You might as well dress up a little brown hen.

[They wriggle miserably.]