J. M. Barrie

Auld Licht Idylls

Auld Licht Idylls

J. M. Barrie

Publio Kiadó

2013

CHAPTER I

THE SCHOOLHOUSE

Early this morning I opened a window in my schoolhouse in the glen of Quharity, awakened by the shivering of a starving sparrow against the frosted glass. As the snowy sash creaked in my hand, he made off to the water-spout that suspends its "tangles" of ice over a gaping tank, and, rebounding from that, with a quiver of his little black breast, bobbed through the network of wire and joined a few of his fellows in a forlorn hop round the henhouse in search of food. Two days ago my hilarious bantam-cock, saucy to the last, my cheeriest companion, was found frozen in his own water-trough, the corn-saucer in three pieces by his side. Since then I have taken the hens into the house. At meal-times they litter the hearth with each other's feathers; but for the most part they give little trouble, roosting on the rafters of the low-roofed kitchen among staves and fishing-rods.

Another white blanket has been spread upon the glen since I looked out last night; for over the same wilderness of snow that has met my gaze for a week, I see the steading of Waster Lunny sunk deeper into the waste. The schoolhouse, I suppose, serves similarly as a snowmark for the people at the farm. Unless that is Waster Lunny's grieve foddering the cattle in the snow, not a living thing is visible. The ghostlike hills that pen in the glen have ceased to echo to the sharp crack of the sportsman's gun (so clear in the frosty air as to be a warning to every rabbit and partridge in the valley); and only giant Catlaw shows here and there a black ridge, rearing its head at the entrance to the glen and struggling ineffectually to cast off his shroud. Most wintry sign of all, I think as I close the window hastily, is the open farm-stile, its poles lying embedded in the snow where they were last flung by Waster Lunny's herd. Through the still air comes from a distance a vibration as of a tuning-fork: a robin, perhaps, alighting on the

wire of a broken fence.

In the warm kitchen, where I dawdle over my breakfast, the widowed bantam-hen has perched on the back of my drowsy cat. It is needless to go through the form of opening the school to-day; for, with the exception of Waster Lunny's girl, I have had no scholars for nine days. Yesterday she announced that there would be no more schooling till it was fresh, "as she wasna comin';" and indeed, though the smoke from the farm chimneys is a pretty prospect for a snowed-up schoolmaster, the trudge between the two houses must be weary work for a bairn. As for the other children, who have to come from all parts of the hills and glen, I may not see them for weeks. Last year the school was practically deserted for a month. A pleasant outlook, with the March examinations staring me in the face, and an inspector fresh from Oxford. I wonder what he would say if he saw me to-day digging myself out of the schoolhouse with the spade I now keep for the purpose in my bedroom.

The kail grows brittle from the snow in my dank and cheerless garden. A crust of bread gathers timid pheasants round me. The robins, I see, have made the coalhouse their home. Waster Lunny's dog never barks without rousing my sluggish cat to a joyful response. It is Dutch courage with the birds and beasts of the glen, hard driven for food; but I look attentively for them in these long forenoons, and they have begun to regard me as one of themselves. My breath freezes, despite my pipe, as I peer from the door; and with a fortnight-old newspaper I retire to the ingle-nook. The friendliest thing I have seen to-day is the well-smoked ham suspended from my kitchen rafters. It was a gift from the farm of Tullin, with a load of peats, the day before the snow began to fall. I doubt if I have seen a cart since.

This afternoon I was the not altogether passive spectator of a curious scene in natural history. My feet encased in stout "tackety"

boots, I had waded down two of Waster Lunny's fields to the glen burn: in summer the never-failing larder from which, with wriggling worm or garish fly, I can any morning whip a savoury breakfast; in the winter-time the only thing in the valley that defies the ice-king's chloroform. I watched the water twisting black and solemn through the snow, the ragged ice on its edge proof of the toughness of the struggle with the frost, from which it has, after all, crept only half victorious. A bare wild rosebush on the further bank was violently agitated, and then there ran from its root a black-headed rat with wings. Such was the general effect. I was not less interested when my startled eyes divided this phenomenon into its component parts, and recognized in the disturbance on the opposite bank only another fierce struggle among the hungry animals for existence: they need no professor to teach them the doctrine of the survival of the fittest. A weasel had gripped a water-hen (whit-rit and beltie they are called in these parts) cowering at the root of the rose-bush, and was being dragged down the bank by the terrified bird, which made for the water as its only chance of escape. In less disadvantageous circumstances the weasel would have made short work of his victim; but as he only had the bird by the tail, the prospects of the combatants were equalized. It was the tug-of-war being played with a life as the stakes. "If I do not reach the water," was the argument that went on in the heaving little breast of the one, "I am a dead bird." "If this water-hen," reasoned the other, "reaches the burn, my supper vanishes with her." Down the sloping bank the hen had distinctly the best of it, but after that came a yard of level snow, and here she tugged and screamed in vain. I had so far been an unobserved spectator; but my sympathies were with the beltie, and, thinking it high time to interfere, I jumped into the water. The water-hen gave one mighty final tug and toppled into the burn; while the weasel viciously showed me his teeth, and then stole slowly up the bank to the rose-bush, whence, "girning," he watched me lift his exhausted victim from the water, and set off with her for the schoolhouse.

Except for her draggled tail, she already looks wonderfully composed, and so long as the frost holds I shall have little difficulty in keeping her with me. On Sunday I found a frozen sparrow, whose heart had almost ceased to beat, in the disused pig-sty, and put him for warmth into my breast-pocket. The ungrateful little scrub bolted without a word of thanks about ten minutes afterwards to the alarm of my cat, which had not known his whereabouts.

I am alone in the schoolhouse. On just such an evening as this last year my desolation drove me to Waster Lunny, where I was storm-stayed for the night. The recollection decides me to court my own warm hearth, to challenge my right hand again to a game at the "dambrod" against my left. I do not lock the schoolhouse door at nights; for even a highwayman (there is no such luck) would be received with open arms, and I doubt if there be a barred door in all the glen. But it is cosier to put on the shutters. The road to Thrums has lost itself miles down the valley. I wonder what they are doing out in the world. Though I am the Free Church precentor in Thrums (ten pounds a year, and the little town is five miles away), they have not seen me for three weeks. A packman whom I thawed yesterday at my kitchen fire tells me, that last Sabbath only the Auld Lichts held service. Other people realized that they were snowed up. Far up the glen, after it twists out of view, a manse and half a dozen thatched cottages that are there may still show a candle light, and the crumbling gravestones keep cold vigil round the grey old kirk. Heavy shadows fade into the sky to the north. A flake trembles against the window; but it is too cold for much snow to-night. The shutter bars the outer world from the schoolhouse.

CHAPTER II

THRUMS

Thrums is the name I give here to the handful of houses jumbled together in a cup, which is the town nearest the schoolhouse. Until twenty years ago its every other room, earthen-floored and showing the rafters overhead, had a handloom, and hundreds of weavers lived and died Thoreaus "ben the hoose" without knowing it. In those days the cup overflowed and left several houses on the top of the hill, where their cold skeletons still stand. The road that climbs from the square, which is Thrums's heart, to the north is so steep and straight, that in a sharp frost children hunker at the top and are blown down with a roar and a rush on rails of ice. At such times, when viewed from the cemetery where the traveller from the schoolhouse gets his first glimpse of the little town, Thrums is but two church steeples and a dozen red stone patches standing out of a snow-heap. One of the steeples belongs to the new Free Kirk, and the other to the parish church, both of which the first Auld Licht minister I knew ran past when he had not time to avoid them by taking a back wynd. He was but a pocket edition of a man, who grew two inches after he was called; but he was so full of the cure of souls, that he usually scudded to it with his coattails quarrelling behind him. His successor, whom I knew better, was a greater scholar, and said, "Let us see what this is in the original Greek," as an ordinary man might invite a friend to dinner; but he never wrestled as Mr. Dishart, his successor, did with the pulpit cushions, nor flung himself at the pulpit door. Nor was he so "hard on the Book," as Lang Tammas, the precentor, expressed it, meaning that he did not bang the Bible with his fist as much as might have been wished.

Thrums had been known to me for years before I succeeded the captious dominie at the schoolhouse in the glen. The dear old soul who originally induced me to enter the Auld Licht kirk by

lamenting the "want of Christ" in the minister's discourses was my first landlady. For the last ten years of her life she was bedridden, and only her interest in the kirk kept her alive. Her case against the minister was that he did not call to denounce her sufficiently often for her sins, her pleasure being to hear him bewailing her on his knees as one who was probably past praying for. She was as sweet and pure a woman as I ever knew, and had her wishes been horses, she would have sold them and kept (and looked after) a minister herself.

There are few Auld Licht communities in Scotland nowadays—perhaps because people are now so well off, for the most devout Auld Lichts were always poor, and their last years were generally a grim struggle with the workhouse. Many a heavy-eyed, back-bent weaver has won his Waterloo in Thrums fighting on his stumps. There are a score or two of them left still, for, though there are now two factories in the town, the clatter of the handloom can yet be heard, and they have been starving themselves of late until they have saved up enough money to get another minister.

The square is packed away in the centre of Thrums, and irregularly built little houses squeeze close to it like chickens clustering round a hen. Once the Auld Lichts held property in the square, but other denominations have bought them out of it, and now few of them are even to be found in the main streets that make for the rim of the cup. They live in the kirk-wynd, or in retiring little houses the builder of which does not seem to have remembered that it is a good plan to have a road leading to houses until after they were finished. Narrow paths straggling round gardens, some of them with stunted gates, which it is commoner to step over than to open, have been formed to reach these dwellings, but in winter they are running streams, and then the best way to reach a house such as that of Tammy Mealmaker the wright, pronounced wir-icht, is over a broken dyke and a pig-sty. Tammy,

who died a bachelor, had been soured in his youth by a disappointment in love, of which he spoke but seldom. She lived far away in a town to which he had wandered in the days when his blood ran hot, and they became engaged. Unfortunately, however, Tammy forgot her name, and he never knew the address; so there the affair ended, to his silent grief. He admitted himself, over his snuff-mull of an evening, that he was a very ordinary character, but a certain halo of horror was cast over the whole family by their connection with little Joey Sutie, who was pointed at in Thrums as the laddie that whistled when he went past the minister. Joey became a pedlar, and was found dead one raw morning dangling over a high wall within a few miles of Thrums. When climbing the dyke his pack had slipped back, the strap round his neck, and choked him.

You could generally tell an Auld Licht in Thrums when you passed him, his dull vacant face wrinkled over a heavy wob. He wore tags of yarn round his trousers beneath the knee, that looked like ostentatious garters, and frequently his jacket of corduroy was put on beneath his waistcoat. If he was too old to carry his load on his back, he wheeled it on a creaking barrow, and when he met a friend they said, "Ay, Jeames," and "Ay, Davit," and then could think of nothing else. At long intervals they passed through the square, disappearing or coming into sight round the town-house which stands on the south side of it, and guards the entrance to a steep brae that leads down and then twists up on its lonely way to the county town. I like to linger over the square, for it was from an upper window in it that I got to know Thrums. On Saturday nights, when the Auld Licht young men came into the square dressed and washed to look at the young women errand-going, and to laugh sometime afterwards to each other, it presented a glare of light; and here even came the cheap jacks and the Fair Circassian, and the showman, who, besides playing "The Mountain Maid and the Shepherd's Bride," exhibited part of the tail of Balaam's ass, the

helm of Noah's ark, and the tartan plaid in which Flora McDonald wrapped Prince Charlie. More select entertainment, such as Shuffle Kitty's waxwork, whose motto was, "A rag to pay, and in you go," were given in a hall whose approach was by an outside stair. On the Muckle Friday, the fair for which children storing their pocket money would accumulate sevenpence-half-penny in less than six months, the square was crammed with gingerbread stalls, bag-pipers, fiddlers, and monstrosities who were gifted with second sight. There was a bearded man, who had neither legs nor arms, and was drawn through the streets in a small cart by four dogs. By looking at you he could see all the clockwork inside, as could a boy who was led about by his mother at the end of a string. Every Friday there was the market, when a dozen ramshackle carts containing vegetables and cheap crockery filled the centre of the square, resting in line on their shafts. A score of farmers' wives or daughters in old-world garments squatted against the town-house within walls of butter on cabbage-leaves, eggs and chickens. Towards evening the voice of the buckie-man shook the square, and rival fish-cadgers, terrible characters who ran races on horseback, screamed libels at each other over a fruiterer's barrow. Then it was time for douce Auld Lichts to go home, draw their stools near the fire, spread their red handkerchiefs over their legs to prevent their trousers getting singed, and read their "Pilgrim's Progress."

In my schoolhouse, however, I seem to see the square most readily in the Scotch mist which so often filled it, loosening the stones and choking the drains. There was then no rattle of rain against my window-sill, nor dancing of diamond drops on the roofs, but blobs of water grew on the panes of glass to reel heavily down them. Then the sodden square would have shed abundant tears if you could have taken it in your hands and wrung it like a dripping cloth. At such a time the square would be empty but for one vegetable cart left in the care of a lean collie, which, tied to the

wheel, whined and shivered underneath. Pools of water gather in the coarse sacks, that have been spread over the potatoes and bundles of greens, which turn to manure in their lidless barrels. The eyes of the whimpering dog never leave a black close over which hangs the sign of the Bull, probably the refuge of the hawker. At long intervals a farmer's gig rumbles over the bumpy, ill-paved square, or a native, with his head buried in his coat, peeps out of doors, skurries across the way, and vanishes. Most of the leading shops are here, and the decorous draper ventures a few yards from the pavement to scan the sky, or note the effect of his new arrangement in scarves. Planted against his door is the butcher, Henders Todd, white-aproned, and with a knife in his hand, gazing interestedly at the draper, for a mere man may look at an elder. The tinsmith brings out his steps, and, mounting them, stealthily removes the saucepans and pepper-pots that dangle on a wire above his sign-board. Pulling to his door he shuts out the foggy light that showed in his solder-strewn workshop. The square is deserted again. A bundle of sloppy parsley slips from the hawker's cart and topples over the wheel in driblets. The puddles in the sacks overflow and run together. The dog has twisted his chain round a barrel and yelps sharply. As if in response comes a rush of other dogs. A terrified fox-terrier tears across the square with half a score of mongrels, the butcher's mastiff and some collies at his heels; he is doubtless a stranger who has insulted them by his glossy coat. For two seconds the square shakes to an invasion of dogs, and then, again, there is only one dog in sight.

No one will admit the Scotch mist. It "looks saft." The tinsmith "wudna wonder but what it was makkin for rain." Tammas Haggart and Pete Lunan dander into sight bareheaded, and have to stretch out their hands to discover what the weather is like. By and by they come to a standstill to discuss the immortality of the soul, and then they are looking silently at the Bull. Neither speaks, but they begin to move toward the inn at the same time, and its door closes

on them before they know what they are doing. A few minutes afterwards Jinny Dundas, who is Pete's wife, runs straight for the Bull in her short gown, which is tucked up very high, and emerges with her husband soon afterwards. Jinny is voluble, but Pete says nothing. Tammas follows later, putting his head out at the door first, and looking cautiously about him to see if any one is in sight. Pete is a U. P., and may be left to his fate, but the Auld Licht minister thinks that though it be hard work, Tammas is worth saving.

To the Auld Licht of the past there were three degrees of damnation—auld kirk, play-acting, chapel. Chapel was the name always given to the English Church, of which I am too much an Auld Licht myself to care to write even now. To belong to the chapel was, in Thrums, to be a Roman Catholic, and the boy who flung a clod of earth at the English minister—who called the Sabbath Sunday—or dropped a "divet" down his chimney was held to be in the right way. The only pleasant story Thrums could tell of the chapel was that its steeple once fell. It is surprising that an English church was ever suffered to be built in such a place; though probably the county gentry had something to do with it. They travelled about too much to be good men. Small though Thrums used to be, it had four kirks in all before the Disruption, and then another, which split into two immediately afterwards. The spire of the parish church, known as the auld kirk, commands a view of the square, from which the entrance to the kirkyard would be visible, if it were not hidden by the town-house. The kirkyard has long been crammed, and is not now in use, but the church is sufficiently large to hold nearly all the congregations in Thrums. Just at the gate lived Pete Todd, the father of Sam'l, a man of whom the Auld Lichts had reason to be proud. Pete was an every-day man at ordinary times, and was even said, when his wife, who had been long ill, died, to have clapped his hands and exclaimed, "Hip, hip, hurrah!" adding only as an afterthought, "The

Lord's will be done." But midsummer was his great opportunity. Then took place the rouping of the seats in the parish church. The scene was the kirk itself, and the seats being put up to auction were knocked down to the highest bidder. This sometimes led to the breaking of the peace. Every person was present who was at all particular as to where he sat, and an auctioneer was engaged for the day. He rouped the kirk-seats like potato-drills, beginning by asking for a bid. Every seat was put up to auction separately; for some were much more run after than others, and the men were instructed by their wives what to bid for. Often the women joined in, and as they bid excitedly against each other the church rang with opprobrious epithets. A man would come to the roup late, and learn that the seat he wanted had been knocked down. He maintained that he had been unfairly treated, or denounced the local laird to whom the seat-rents went. If he did not get the seat he would leave the kirk. Then the woman who had forestalled him wanted to know what he meant by glaring at her so, and the auction was interrupted. Another member would "thrip down the throat" of the auctioneer that he had a right to his former seat if he continued to pay the same price for it. The auctioneer was screamed at for favouring his friends, and at times the roup became so noisy that men and women had to be forcibly ejected. Then was Pete's chance. Hovering at the gate, he caught the angry people on their way home and took them into his workshop by an outside stair. There he assisted them in denouncing the parish kirk, with the view of getting them to forswear it. Pete made a good many Auld Lichts in his time out of unpromising material.