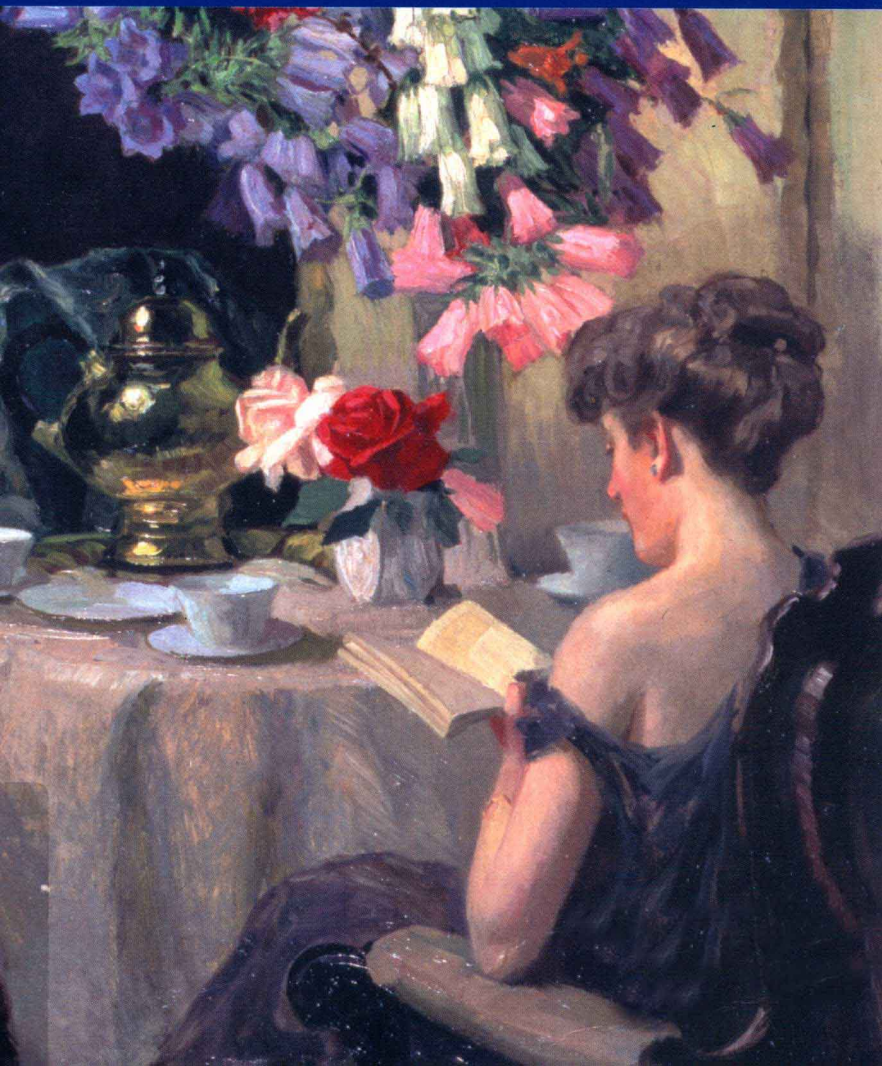


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

*The Collected  
Short Stories of Saki*  
HECTOR HUGH MUNRO



# COLLECTED SHORT STORIES OF SAKI



Hector Hugh Munro



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## INTRODUCTION

‘THERE IS NO GREATER COMPLIMENT to be paid to the right kind of friend than to hand him Saki without comment.’ This remark by Christopher Morley in 1930 is as true today as when it was made. So, to some extent, an introduction to Saki’s short stories is superfluous. The best introduction is to read them.

It matters little where one starts, but perhaps the quickest way to acquire a taste for Saki’s sardonic humour is to read of the activities of the outrageous Reginald, or of the refined cruelty of the epicene Clovis Sangrail. Alas, one will never know the answer to Reginald’s ambiguous question, ‘What did the Caspian Sea?’, but at the end of *The Unrest Cure* the reader is left with a *frisson* of pleasure at Clovis’s political incorrectitude. Saki’s short stories of urbane malice are like a fine dessert wine – they should be sipped, and savoured slowly; so intense are they that to read them at one sitting may induce a kind of literary dyspepsia. However, they are so beautifully crafted that one can return to them again and again with enhanced pleasure.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of Saki’s writing is his sympathy with the oppressed, in particular with children. He recognises the terrible hegemony that adults wield over the young, who, however intelligent or articulate, are essentially powerless. Without doubt this stems from the author’s own unhappy childhood. It is seen at its best in *Sredni Vashtar* which is one of the finest stories in the English language. Saki was himself something of an outsider, for his suppressed homosexuality lent him an intellectual fastidiousness that despised cant and hypocrisy. This is at its most cutting in *Tobermory*, the sly story of a cat that learns to speak. Other animals are used to expose the foibles and frailties of upper-class Edwardian society with devastating effect, *Gabriel-Ernest* and *Laura* being two of the most chilling.

With the exception of *The East Wing*, a story discovered in 1946, all Saki’s short stories are included in this volume. Saki also wrote two

## COLLECTED SHORT STORIES OF SAKI

novels, *The Unbearable Bassington* (1912) and *When William Came* (1913), as well as *The Westminster Alice* (see below) and three short plays, which are accomplished but lack the concentrated and vitriolic humour of the stories.

Saki was the pseudonym of Hector Hugh Munro. He was born in Burma in 1870, the youngest of three children. His mother died when he was an infant, so he, his brother and sister were raised in Devon by two aunts, most of whose deeply unpleasant characteristics appear in the stories. When he was twenty-three, he joined the military police in Burma (cf George Orwell a generation later), following the military traditions of his family. However, recurrent attacks of malaria enforced his resignation a year later, and, after recuperating in England, he joined the *Westminster Gazette* in 1896 as a political sketch writer. (These satires were later published as *The Westminster Alice* and *The Not So Stories*.)

A serious historical work, *The Rise of the Russian Empire*, was published in 1900. Munro became Balkan correspondent of the *Tory Morning Post* in 1902, and between then and 1908 he covered Russia, Poland and Paris as well. *Reginald*, originally published in the *Westminster Gazette*, appeared in book form in 1904, followed by *Reginald in Russia* (1910), *The Chronicles of Clovis* (1911) and *Beasts and Super-Beasts* (1914); the other stories were published posthumously. He enlisted in the ranks in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War, although he was well over the age-limit. By 1916 he was a Lance-Sergeant in the 22nd Royal Fusiliers. He was killed by a sniper on the dark morning of 14th November 1916; his last words before being shot were, 'Put that bloody cigarette out.'

Although Munro's pseudonym 'Saki' is described by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as being 'of unknown origin', Ethel Munro points out that her brother chose the name of the cup-bearer in the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám*, a favourite book.

## FURTHER READING

G. H. Gillam: *Saki: A Biography* 1971

A. J. Langguth: *A Life of H. H. Munro* 1982

E. M. Munro's biography of Saki in the *Bodley Head Complete Short Stories of Saki* 1930

G. J. Spears: *Saki: A Study* 1963

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## REGINALD

### *Reginald*

I DID IT – I should have known better. I persuaded Reginald to go to the McKillops' garden-party against his will.

We all make mistakes occasionally. 'They know you're here, and they'll think it so funny if you don't go. And I want particularly to be in with Mrs McKillop just now.'

'I know, you want one of her smoke Persian kittens as a prospective wife for Wumples – or a husband, is it?' (Reginald has a magnificent scorn for details, other than sartorial.) 'And I am expected to undergo social martyrdom to suit the connubial exigencies –'

'Reginald It's nothing of the kind, only I'm sure Mrs McKillop would be pleased if I brought you. Young men of your brilliant attractions are rather at a premium at her garden-parties.'

'Should be at a premium in heaven,' remarked Reginald complacently.

'There will be very few of you there, if that is what you mean. But seriously, there won't be any great strain upon your powers of endurance; I promise you that you shan't have to play croquet, or talk to the Archdeacon's wife, or do anything that is likely to bring on physical prostration. You can just wear your sweetest clothes and a moderately amiable expression, and eat chocolate-creams with the appetite of a *blasé* parrot. Nothing more is demanded of you.'

Reginald shut his eyes. 'There will be the exhaustingly up-to-date young women who will ask me if I have seen *San Toy*; a less progressive grade who will yearn to hear about the Diamond Jubilee – the historic event, not the horse. With a little encouragement, they will inquire if I saw the Allies march into Paris. Why are women so fond of raking up the past? They're as bad as tailors, who invariably remember what you owe them for a suit long after you've ceased to wear it.'

'I'll order lunch for one o'clock; that will give you two and a half hours to dress in.'

Reginald puckered his brow into a tortured frown, and I knew that my point was gained. He was debating what tie would go with which waistcoat.

Even then I had my misgivings.

During the drive to the McKillops' Reginald was possessed with a great

peace, which was not wholly to be accounted for by the fact that he had inveigled his feet into shoes a size too small for them. I misgave more than ever, and having once launched Reginald on to the McKillops' lawn, I established him near a seductive dish of *marrons glacés* and as far from the Archdeacon's wife as possible; as I drifted away to a diplomatic distance I heard with painful distinctness the eldest Mawkby girl asking him if he had seen *San Toy*.

It must have been ten minutes later, not more, and I had been having *quite* an enjoyable chat with my hostess, and had promised to lend her *The Eternal City* and my recipe for rabbit mayonnaise, and was just about to offer a kind home for her third Persian kitten, when I perceived, out of the corner of my eye, that Reginald was not where I had left him, and that the *marrons glacés* were untasted. At the same moment I became aware that old Colonel Mendoza was essaying to tell his classic story of how he introduced golf into India, and that Reginald was in dangerous proximity. There are occasions when Reginald is caviare to the Colonel.

'When I was at Poona in '76 -'

'My dear Colonel,' purred Reginald, 'fancy admitting such a thing! Such a give-away for one's age! I wouldn't admit being on this planet in '76.' (Reginald in his wildest lapses into veracity never admits to being more than twenty-two.)

The Colonel went to the colour of a fig that has attained great ripeness, and Reginald, ignoring my efforts to intercept him, glided away to another part of the lawn. I found him a few minutes later happily engaged in teaching the youngest Rampage boy the approved theory of mixing absinthe, within full earshot of his mother. Mrs Rampage occupies a prominent place in local Temperance movements.

As soon as I had broken up this unpromising *tête-à-tête* and settled Reginald where he could watch the croquet players losing their tempers, I wandered off to find my hostess and renew the kitten negotiations at the point where they had been interrupted. I did not succeed in running her down at once, and eventually it was Mrs McKillop who sought me out, and her conversation was not of kittens.

'Your cousin is discussing *Zaza* with the Archdeacon's wife; at least, he is discussing, she is ordering her carriage.'

She spoke in the dry, staccato tone of one who repeats a French exercise, and I knew that as far as Millie McKillop was concerned, Wumples was devoted to a lifelong celibacy.

'If you don't mind,' I said hurriedly, 'I think we'd like our carriage ordered too,' and I made a forced march in the direction of the croquet ground.

I found every one talking nervously and feverishly of the weather and the war in South Africa, except Reginald, who was reclining in a comfortable chair with the dreamy, far-away look that a volcano might wear just after it had desolated entire villages. The Archdeacon's wife was buttoning up her gloves with a concentrated deliberation that was fearful to behold. I shall have to treble my subscription to her Cheerful Sunday Evenings Fund before I dare set foot in her house again.

At that particular moment the croquet players finished their game, which had been going on without a symptom of finality during the whole afternoon. Why, I ask, should it have stopped precisely when a counter-attraction was so necessary? Every one seemed to drift towards the area of disturbance, of which the chairs of the Archdeacon's wife and Reginald formed the storm-centre. Conversation flagged, and there settled upon the company that expectant hush that precedes the dawn – when your neighbours don't happen to keep poultry.

'What did the Caspian Sea?' asked Reginald, with appalling suddenness.

There were symptoms of a stampede. The Archdeacon's wife looked at me. Kipling or some one has described somewhere the look a foundered camel gives when the caravan moves on and leaves it to its fate. The peptonised reproach in the good lady's eyes brought the passage vividly to my mind.

I played my last card.

'Reginald, it's getting late, and a sea-mist is coming on.' I knew that the elaborate curl over his right eyebrow was not guaranteed to survive a sea-mist.

'Never, never again, will I take you to a garden-party. Never . . . You behaved abominably . . . What did the Caspian see?'

A shade of genuine regret for misused opportunities passed over Reginald's face.

'After all,' he said, 'I believe an apricot tie would have gone better with the lilac waistcoat.'

### *Reginald on Christmas Presents*

I WISH IT TO BE distinctly understood (said Reginald) that I don't want a 'George, Prince of Wales' Prayer-book as a Christmas present. The fact cannot be too widely known.

There ought (he continued) to be technical education classes on the science of present-giving. No one seems to have the faintest notion of

what any one else wants, and the prevalent ideas on the subject are not creditable to a civilised community.

There is, for instance, the female relative in the country who 'knows a tie is always useful,' and sends you some spotted horror that you could only wear in secret or in Tottenham Court Road. It might have been useful had she kept it to tie up currant bushes with, when it would have served the double purpose of supporting the branches and frightening away the birds – for it is an admitted fact that the ordinary tomtit of commerce has a sounder æsthetic taste than the average female relative in the country.

Then there are aunts. They are always a difficult class to deal with in the matter of presents. The trouble is that one never catches them really young enough. By the time one has educated them to an appreciation of the fact that one does not wear red woollen mittens in the West End, they die, or quarrel with the family, or do something equally inconsiderate. That is why the supply of trained aunts is always so precarious.

There is my Aunt Agatha, *par exemple* who sent me a pair of gloves last Christmas, and even got so far as to choose a kind that was being worn and had the correct number of buttons. But – *they were nines!* I sent them to a boy whom I hated intimately: he didn't wear them, of course, but he could have – that was where the bitterness of death came in. It was nearly as consoling as sending white flowers to his funeral. Of course I wrote and told my aunt that they were the one thing that had been wanting to make existence blossom like a rose; I am afraid she thought me frivolous – she comes from the North, where they live in the fear of Heaven and the Earl of Durham. (Reginald affects an exhaustive knowledge of things political, which furnishes an excellent excuse for not discussing them.) Aunts with a dash of foreign extraction in them are the most satisfactory in the way of understanding these things; but if you can't choose your aunt, it is wisest in the long run to choose the present and send her the bill.

Even friends of one's own set, who might be expected to know better, have curious delusions on the subject. I am not collecting copies of the cheaper editions of Omar Khayyám. I gave the last four that I received to the lift-boy, and I like to think of him reading them, with FitzGerald's notes, to his aged mother. Lift-boys always have aged mothers; shows such nice feeling on their part, I think.

Personally, I can't see where the difficulty in choosing suitable presents lies. No boy who had brought himself up properly could fail to appreciate one of those decorative bottles of liqueurs that are so reverently staged in Morel's window – and it wouldn't in the least



matter if one did get duplicates. And there would always be the supreme moment of dreadful uncertainty whether it was *crème de menthe* or Chartreuse – like the expectant thrill on seeing your partner's hand turned up at bridge. People may say what they like about the decay of Christianity; the religious system that produced green Chartreuse can never really die.

And then, of course, there are liqueur glasses, and crystallised fruits, and tapestry curtains, and heaps of other necessities of life that make really sensible presents – not to speak of luxuries, such as having one's bills paid, or getting something quite sweet in the way of jewellery. Unlike the alleged Good Woman of the Bible, I'm not above rubies. When found, by the way, she must have been rather a problem at Christmas-time; nothing short of a blank cheque would have fitted the situation. Perhaps it's as well that she's died out.

The great charm about me (concluded Reginald) is that I am so easily pleased. But I draw the line at a 'Prince of Wales' Prayer-book.

### *Reginald on the Academy*

'ONE GOES TO THE ACADEMY in self-defence,' said Reginald. 'It is the one topic one has in common with the Country Cousins.'

'It is almost a religious observance with them,' said the Other. 'A kind of artistic Mecca, and when the good ones die they go –'

'To the Chantrey Bequest. The mystery is *what* they find to talk about in the country.'

'There are two subjects of conversation in the country: Servants, and Can fowls be made to pay? The first, I believe, is compulsory, the second optional.'

'As a function,' resumed Reginald, 'the Academy is a failure.'

'You think it would be tolerable without the pictures?'

'The pictures are all right, in their way; after all, one can always *look* at them if one is bored with one's surroundings, or wants to avoid an imminent acquaintance.'

'Even that doesn't always save one. There is the inevitable female whom you met once in Devonshire, or the Matoppo Hills, or somewhere, who charges up to you with the remark that it's funny how one always meets people one knows at the Academy. Personally, I *don't* think it funny.'

'I suffered in that way just now,' said Reginald plaintively, 'from a woman whose word I had to take that she had met me last summer in Brittany.'