

THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES OF SAKI Illustrated

INTRODUCTION TO SAKI'S STORIES

Saki is now chiefly remembered for his inimitable short stories. Many of his stories from 1902-1908 feature the dapper, but mischievous characters Reginald and Clovis, young men-about-town that take great delight in the discomfort or downfall of their conventional and pretentious elders. Munro's first collection of *Reginald* stories appeared in 1904 in book form, which in itself was very short, with fewer than forty pages. Most of the pieces are not really stories, but short anecdotes, providing context for a witty remark from the cynical Reginald. These include what is probably Saki's most famous phrase: "She was a good cook, as cooks go, and as cooks go, she went." The main purpose of these vignettes was to satirise society through the character of Reginald in what he says and does. He is a product of high society, and yet something of an outsider in that he does not take the world around him seriously. The urbane wit and characters of Oscar Wilde are clearly noticeable influences in the tales of *Reginald* and *Clovis*.



Munro's other tales are famous for contrasting the conventions and hypocrisies of Edwardian England with the ruthless, but straightforward life-and-death struggles of nature. Throughout his range of tales, nature generally prevails in the end. For example, *The Interlopers* concerns Georg Znaeym and Ulrich von Gradwitz, whose families have fought over a forest in the eastern Carpathian Mountains for generations. Ulrich's family legally owns the land, but Georg, believing that it rightfully belongs to him, hunts there anyway. One winter night Ulrich catches Georg hunting

in his forest. Neither man can shoot the other without warning, as they would soil their family's honour, so they hesitate to acknowledge one another. As an "act of God" a tree branch suddenly falls on each of them, trapping them both under a log. Gradually they realise the futility of their quarrel, become friends and end the feud. Nature has prevailed over man's folly.

The famous story *Gabriel-Ernest* opens with a stark warning: "There is a wild beast in your woods ...". As the story proceeds we learn from the narrator that Gabriel, a naked boy sunbathing by the river, is wild, indeed feral, and turns out to be a werewolf. The climax comes when Gabriel is revealed to have taken a small child home from Sunday school. A pursuit ensues, but Gabriel and the child disappear near a river. The only items found are Gabriel's clothes, and the two are never seen again...

REGINALD

REGINALD

I did it — I who 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 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.

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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 everyone 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? Everyone 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 someone 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.

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“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 anyone 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 Khayyam. I gave the last four that I received to the lift-boy, and I like to think of him