## SAKI (H.H. MUNRO) ORIGINAL AND UNCOLLECTED STORIES

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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## Adrian

## A Chapter in Acclimatisation

Westminster Gazette, 9 July 1910, p. 3

His baptismal register spoke of him pessimistically as John Henry, but he had left that behind with the other maladies of infancy, and his friends knew him under the front-name of Adrian. His mother lived in Bethnal Green,<sup>1</sup> which was not altogether his fault; one can discourage too much history in one's family, but one cannot always prevent geography. And, after all, the Bethnal Green habit has this virtue—that it is seldom transmitted to the next generation. Adrian lived in a roomlet which came under the auspicious constellation of W.<sup>2</sup>

How he lived was to a great extent a mystery even to himself; his struggle for existence probably coincided in many material details with the rather dramatic accounts he gave of it to sympathetic acquaintances. All that is definitely known is that he now and then emerged from the struggle to dine at the Ritz or Carlton, correctly garbed and with a correctly critical appetite. On these occasions he was usually the guest of Lucas Croyden, an amiable worldling, who had three thousand a year and a taste for introducing impossible people to irreproachable cookery. Like most men who combine three thousand a year with an uncertain digestion, Lucas was a Socialist, and he argued that you cannot hope to elevate the masses until you have brought plovers' eggs into their lives and taught them to appreciate the difference between coupe

<sup>1</sup> Area in the East End of London notorious for its slums.

<sup>2</sup> The postcode letter stands for 'West': the more desirable part of London.

42 Saki

Jacques and Macédoine de fruits.<sup>3</sup> His friends pointed out that it was a doubtful kindness to initiate a boy from behind a drapery counter into the blessedness of the higher catering, to which Lucas invariably replied that all kindnesses were doubtful. Which was perhaps true.

It was after one of his Adrian evenings that Lucas met his aunt, Mrs. Mebberley, at a fashionable tea-shop, where the lamp of family life is still kept burning and you meet relatives who might otherwise have slipped your memory.

"Who was that good-looking boy who was dining with you last night?" she asked. "He looked much too nice to be thrown away upon you."

Susan Mebberley was a charming woman, but she was also an aunt.

"Who are his people?" she continued, when the protégé's name (revised version) had been given her.

"His mother lives at Beth—"

Lucas checked himself on the threshold of what was perhaps a social indiscretion.

"Beth? Where is it? It sounds like Asia Minor. Is she mixed up with Consular  $^{\!\!\!4}$  people?"

"Oh, no. Her work lies among the poor."

This was a side-slip into truth. The mother of Adrian was employed in a laundry.

"I see," said Mrs. Mebberley, "mission work of some sort. And meanwhile the boy has no one to look after him. It's obviously my duty to see that he doesn't come to harm. Bring him to call on me."

"My dear Aunt Susan," expostulated Lucas, "I really know very little about him. He may not be at all nice, you know, on further acquaintance."

"He has delightful hair and a weak mouth. I shall take him with me to Homburg<sup>5</sup> or Cairo."

"It's the maddest thing I ever heard of," said Lucas angrily.

"Well, there is a strong strain of madness in our family. If you haven't noticed it yourself all your friends must have."

"One is so dreadfully under everybody's eyes at Homburg. At least

<sup>3</sup> Respectively, a sort of fruit sundae with liqueur and a fruit salad.

<sup>4</sup> Capitalised in the original.

<sup>5</sup> Presumably Bad Homburg, a spa town in Germany favoured by European royalty.

Adrian 43

you might give him a preliminary trial at Etretat."6

"And be surrounded by Americans trying to talk French? No, thank you. I love Americans, but not when they try to talk French. What a blessing it is that they never try to talk English. Tomorrow at five you can bring your young friend to call on me."

And Lucas, realising that Susan Mebberley was a woman as well as an aunt, saw that she would have to be allowed to have her own way.

Adrian was duly carried abroad under the Mebberley wing; but as a reluctant concession to sanity Homburg and other inconveniently fashionable resorts were given a wide berth, and the Mebberley establishment planted itself down in the best hotel at Dohledorf,<sup>7</sup> an Alpine townlet somewhere at the back of the Engadine.8 It was the usual kind of resort, with the usual type of visitors, that one finds over the greater part of Switzerland during the summer season, but to Adrian it was all unusual. The mountain air, the certainty of regular and abundant meals, and in particular the social atmosphere, affected him much as the indiscriminating fervour of a forcing-house might affect a weed that had strayed within its limits. He had been brought up in a world where breakages were regarded as crimes and expiated as such; it was something new and altogether exhilarating to find that you were considered rather amusing if you smashed things in the right manner and at the recognised hours. Susan Mebberley had expressed the intention of showing Adrian a bit of the world; the particular bit of the world represented by Dohledorf began to be shown a good deal of Adrian.

Lucas got occasional glimpses of the Alpine sojourn, not from his aunt or Adrian, but from the industrious pen of Ida Fisher, a lady who had been at school with Susan Mebberley, and who seemed to have chaperoned her ever since.

"The entertainment which Susan got up last night ended in disaster. I thought it would. The Grobmayer child, a particularly loathsome five-year-old, had appeared as 'Bubbles' during the early part of the evening,

<sup>6</sup> Sea resort on the northern French coast.

<sup>7</sup> The name is made up, but "-dorf" means "village" in German. "Dohlen" are European jackdaws.

<sup>8</sup> Alpine valley in south-eastern Switzerland.

<sup>9</sup> The child from the famous Pears soap advertisement, based on a painting originally

44 Saki

and been put to bed during the interval. Adrian watched his opportunity and kidnapped it when the nurse was downstairs, and introduced it during the second half of the entertainment, thinly disguised as a performing pig. It certainly *looked* very like a pig, and grunted and slobbered just like the real article; no one knew exactly what it was, but everyone said it was awfully clever, especially the Grobmayers. At the third curtain Adrian pinched it too hard, and it yelled 'Marmar'! I am supposed to be good at descriptions, but don't ask me to describe the sayings and doings of the Grobmayers at that moment; it was like one of the angrier Psalms set to Strauss's music.<sup>10</sup> We have moved to an hotel higher up the valley."

Miss Fisher's next letter arrived five days later, and was written from the Hotel Steinbock.

"We left the Hotel Victoria this morning. It was fairly comfortable and quiet—at least there was an air of repose about it when we arrived. Before we had been in residence twenty-four hours most of the repose had vanished 'like a dutiful bream,'11 as Adrian expressed it. However, nothing unduly outrageous happened till last night, when Adrian had a fit of insomnia and amused himself by unscrewing and transposing all the bedroom numbers on his floor. He transferred the bathroom label to the adjoining bedroom door, which happened to be that of Frau Hofrath Schilling, 12 and this morning from seven o'clock onwards the old lady had a stream of involuntary visitors; she was too horrified and scandalised it seems to get up and lock her door. The would-be bathers flew back in confusion to their rooms, and, of course, the change of numbers led them astray again, and the corridor gradually filled with panic-stricken, scantily robed humans, dashing wildly about like rabbits in a ferret-infested warren. It took nearly an hour before the guests were all sorted into their respective rooms, and the Frau Hofrath's condition was still causing some anxiety when we left. Susan is beginning to look

titled 'A Child's World' by Sir John Everett Millais (1829-96).

<sup>10</sup> Strauss here could be Johann Strauss I (1804–1849) or one of his sons, Johann II (1825–99), Josef (1827–70) and Eduard (1835–1916). The Austrian family dominated the light music scene and were especially famous for their waltzes.

<sup>11</sup> Alluding to the line "Thou art gone from my gaze like a beautiful dream" in the song of that name (also known as 'Spirit of Love') by George Linley (1797–1865).

<sup>12</sup> Her title ("Frau Hofrath") indicates high social status; her husband was most likely a high-ranking civil servant in either the German or Austrian civil service.

Adrian 45

a little worried. She can't very well turn the boy adrift, as he hasn't got any money, and she can't send him to his people as she doesn't know where they are. Adrian says his mother moves about a good deal and he's lost her address. Probably, if the truth were known, he's had a row at home. So many boys nowadays seem to think that quarrelling with one's family is a recognised occupation."

Lucas's next communication from the travellers took the form of a telegram from Mrs. Mebberley herself. It was sent "reply prepaid," and consisted of a single sentence: "In Heaven's name, where is Beth?"