



# SAKI (H.H. MUNRO)

ORIGINAL AND UNCOLLECTED STORIES

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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# Wratislav

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*Westminster Gazette*, 12 March 1910, p. 13

The Gräfin's<sup>1</sup> two elder sons had made deplorable marriages. It was a family habit. The youngest boy, Wratislav,<sup>2</sup> who was the black sheep of a rather greyish family, had as yet made no marriage at all.

"There is certainly this much to be said for viciousness," said the Gräfin, "it keeps boys out of mischief."

"Does it?" asked the Baroness Sophie, not by way of questioning the statement, but with a painstaking effort to talk intelligently. It was the one matter in which she attempted to override the decrees of Providence, which had obviously never intended that she should talk otherwise than inanely.

"I don't know why I shouldn't talk cleverly," she would complain; "my mother was considered a brilliant conversationalist."

"These things have a way of skipping one generation," said the Gräfin.

"That seems so unjust," said Sophie; "one doesn't object to one's mother having outshone one as a clever talker, but I must admit that I should be rather annoyed if my daughters talked brilliantly."

"Well, none of them do," said the Gräfin consolingly.

"I don't know about that," said the Baroness, promptly veering round in defence of her offspring. "Elsa said something quite clever on

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1 Duchess (German).

2 The name may have been chosen purely because it sounded Middle European, but it may be a hidden reference to the English minor poet Theodore William Graf Wratislaw (1871–1933). He was close to the Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s and his oeuvre included a few homoerotic poems. Such a reading would explain the choice of the word "viciousness" (deriving from "vice") to describe Wratislav's behaviour, and allow a more telling reading of the story for those in the know.

Thursday about the Triple Alliance.<sup>3</sup> Something about it being like a paper umbrella, that was all right as long as you didn't take it out in the rain. It's not everyone who could say that."

"Everyone has said it; at least everyone that I know. But then I know very few people."

"I don't think you're particularly agreeable today."

"I never am. Haven't you noticed that women with a really perfect profile like mine are seldom even moderately agreeable?"

"I don't think your profile is so perfect as all that," said the Baroness.

"It would be surprising if it wasn't. My mother was one of the most noted classical beauties of her day."

"These things sometimes skip a generation, you know," put in the Baroness, with the breathless haste of one to whom repartee comes as rarely as the finding of a gold-handled umbrella.

"My dear Sophie," said the Gräfin sweetly, "that isn't in the least bit clever; but you do try so hard that I suppose I oughtn't to discourage you. Tell me something: has it ever occurred to you that Elsa would do very well for Wratislav? It's time he married somebody, and why not Elsa?"

"Elsa marry that dreadful boy!" gasped the Baroness.

"Beggars can't be choosers," observed the Gräfin.

"Elsa isn't a beggar!"

"Not financially, or I shouldn't have suggested the match. But she's getting on, you know, and has no pretensions to brains or looks or anything of that sort."

"You seem to forget that she's my daughter."

"That shows my generosity. But, seriously, I don't see what there is against Wratislav. He has no debts—at least, nothing worth speaking about."

"But think of his reputation! If half the things they say about him are true—"

"Probably three-quarters of them are. But what of it? You don't want an archangel for a son-in-law."

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3 Signed in 1882 between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy and promising mutual support in case of war with one of the other Great Powers. Italy's commitment to the agreement was doubted by many (and in the event it reneged on it when the First World War broke out).

"I don't want Wratislav. My poor Elsa would be miserable with him."

"A little misery wouldn't matter very much with her; it would go so well with the way she does her hair, and if she couldn't get on with Wratislav she could always go and do good among the poor."

The Baroness picked up a framed photograph from the table.

"He certainly is very handsome," she said doubtfully; adding even more doubtfully, "I dare say dear Elsa might reform him."

The Gräfin had the presence of mind to laugh in the right key.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three weeks later the Gräfin bore down upon the Baroness Sophie in a foreign bookseller's shop in the Graben,<sup>4</sup> where she was, possibly, buying books of devotion, though it was the wrong counter for them.

"I've just left the dear children at the Rodenstahls'," was the Gräfin's greeting.

"Were they looking very happy?" asked the Baroness.

"Wratislav was wearing some new English clothes, so, of course, he was quite happy. I overheard him telling Toni a rather amusing story about a nun and a mousetrap, which won't bear repetition. Elsa was telling everyone else a witticism about the Triple Alliance being like a paper umbrella—which seems to bear repetition with Christian fortitude."

"Did they seem much wrapped up in each other?"

"To be candid, Elsa looked as if she were wrapped up in a horse-rug. And why let her wear saffron colour?"

"I always think it goes with her complexion."

"Unfortunately it doesn't. It stays with it. Ugh. Don't forget, you're lunching with me on Thursday."

The Baroness was late for her luncheon engagement the following Thursday.

"Imagine what has happened!" she screamed as she burst into the room.

"Something remarkable, to make you late for a meal," said the Gräfin.

"Elsa has run away with the Rodenstahls' chauffeur!"

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4 One of the main shopping streets in the centre of Vienna.

"Kolossal!"<sup>5</sup>

"Such a thing as that no one in our family has ever done," gasped the Baroness.

"Perhaps he didn't appeal to them in the same way," suggested the Gräfin judicially.

The Baroness began to feel that she was not getting the astonishment and sympathy to which her catastrophe entitled her.

"At any rate," she snapped, "now she can't marry Wratislav."

"She couldn't in any case," said the Gräfin; "he left suddenly for abroad last night."

"For abroad! Where?"

"For Mexico, I believe."

"Mexico! But what for? Why Mexico?"

"The English have a proverb, 'Conscience makes cowboys of us all.'"

"I didn't know Wratislav had a conscience."

"My dear Sophie, he hasn't. It's other people's consciences that send one abroad in a hurry. Let's go and eat."

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5 Extraordinary, amazing (German).