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

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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Ministers of Grace¹

A Seasonable Political Fantaisie

The Bystander, 30 November 1910, pp. 432-34

Although he was scarcely yet out of his teens, the Duke of Scaw was already marked out as a personality widely differing from others of his caste and period. Not in externals; therein he conformed correctly to type. His hair was faintly reminiscent of Houbigant,² and at the other end of him his shoes exhaled the right soupcon of harness-room; his socks compelled one's attention without losing one's respect; and his attitude in repose had just that suggestion of Whistler's mother, so becoming in the really young.³ It was within that the trouble lay, if trouble it could be accounted, which marked him apart from his fellows. The Duke was religious. Not in any of the ordinary senses of the word; he took small heed of High Church⁴ or Evangelical standpoints, he stood outside of all the movements and missions and cults and crusades of the day, uncaring and uninterested. Yet in a mystical-practical way of his own, which had served him unscathed and unshaken through the fickle years of boyhood, he was intensely and intensively religious. His family were naturally, though unobtrusively, distressed about it. "I am so afraid

¹ Punning on Hamlet, I. 4. 39: "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!"

² French perfume. The House of Houbigant supplied many of the European royal families.

³ Painting of an elderly woman in profile, officially titled "Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1". The sitter was the mother of the painter, James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), hence the portrait's nickname.

⁴ The "High Church" in Anglicanism was the grouping closer in terms of ritual and doctrine to the Roman Catholic Church.

it may affect his bridge," said his mother.

The Duke sat in a pennyworth of chair in St. James's Park,⁵ listening to the pessimisms of Belturbet, who reviewed the existing political situation from the gloomiest of standpoints.

"Where I think you political spade-workers are so silly," said the Duke, "is in the misdirection of your efforts. You spend thousands of pounds of money, and Heaven knows how much dynamic force of brain power and personal energy, in trying to elect or displace this or that man, whereas you could gain your ends so much more simply by making use of the men as you find them. If they don't suit your purpose as they are, transform them into something more satisfactory."

"Do you refer to hypnotic suggestion?" asked Belturbet, with the air of one who is being trifled with.

"Nothing of the sort. Do you understand what I mean by the verb to koepenick?⁶ That is to say, to replace an authority by a spurious imitation that would carry just as much weight for the moment as the displaced original; the advantage, of course, being that the koepenick replica would do what you wanted, whereas the original does what seems best in its own eyes."

"I suppose every public man has a double, if not two or three," said Belturbet; "but it would be a pretty hard task to koepenick a whole bunch of them and keep the originals out of the way."

"There have been instances in European history of successful koepenickery," said the Duke.

"Oh, there have been False Dimitris and Perkin Warbecks who imposed on the world for a time, but they personated people who were safely dead.⁷ It would be far easier to pass oneself off as dead Hannibal⁸

⁵ Park in central London (Westminster), close to Buckingham Palace. You can still hire deckchairs there.

⁶ Referring to the story of the "Captain of Köpenick": in 1906 a German con man dressed up as a Prussian army officer and ordered a number of real soldiers to help him 'confiscate' 4000 marks from the town hall of Köpenick (east of Berlin).

⁷ There were three False Dimitris, all of whom claimed to be Ivan the Terrible's youngest son, tsarevich Dmitry Ivanovich, who was otherwise thought dead, possibly assassinated (1582–91). Perkin Warbeck (c. 1474–99) claimed to be Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York (the younger of the "Princes in the Tower" whose convenient disappearance allowed their uncle to ascend the throne as Richard III). Warbeck led several small military insurrections to wrest the crown from Henry VII.

⁸ Carthaginian general who fought the Roman Empire (247–181 B.C. at the latest).

than as living Haldane,9 for instance."

"I was thinking," said the Duke, "of the most famous case of all, the angel who koepenicked King Robert of Sicily.¹⁰ Imagine what an advantage it would be to have angels deputising, to use a horrible word, for Lloyd George and F. E. Smith, for instance.¹¹ Then one could dispense with the bother of these recurring General Elections."

"Angels don't exist nowadays; at least, not in that way," said Belturbet; "so what's the good of talking nonsense."¹²

"If you talk to me like that I shall just do it," said the Duke; "it's not everyone who would know how to bring it off, but—"

"Oh, stop that rubbish," said Belturbet, angrily. "Here's Winston coming," he added as a well-known figure approached hurriedly along the almost deserted path.¹³

"Hurry along, dear man," said the Duke to the Minister, who had given him a condescending nod; "your time is short," he continued in a provocative strain. "The whole inept crowd of you will shortly be swept away into the world's waste-paper basket."

"You silly little strawberry-leafed nonentity,"¹⁴ said the Minister, checking himself for a moment in his stride; "the voting masses are on our side; no power of earth or Heaven is going to move us from our place till we choose to quit it."

And Belturbet saw, with bulging eyes, a sudden void, where a moment earlier had been Winston Churchill; a void emphasised rather than relieved by the presence of a puffed-out, bewildered-looking sparrow, which presently fell to a violent cheeping and scolding.

⁹ Presumably Richard Haldane, 1st Viscount Haldane, (1856–1928) Liberal and later Labour politician, Secretary of State for War 1905–12, Lord Chancellor 1912–15.

¹⁰ *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863) by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) includes the tale of King Robert of Sicily, in which the arrogant king falls asleep in church and awakes to find an angel doppelgänger has taken his place on the throne. Eventually, he is restored, chastened and humbled, to his original status.

¹¹ David Lloyd George (1863–1945), Welsh radical Liberal M.P., at the time Chancellor of the Exchequer (later to become Prime Minister); Frederick Edwin Smith (1872– 1930), prominent Conservative M.P.

¹² It is a full stop, not a question mark, in the original.

¹³ Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874–1965), later a Conservative prime minister, but at the time one of the Liberal government's young radicals. He was Home Secretary when this story was written.

¹⁴ Strawberry leaves symbolise a duke.

"If we could understand sparrow-language," said the Duke serenely, "I fancy we should hear something infinitely worse than 'strawberryleafed nonentity.""

"Good Heavens, Eugène," said Belturbet hoarsely, "what has become of—Why, there he is!"

And he pointed wildly towards a semblance of the vanished Minister, which approached once more along the unfrequented path.

"That, I think you will find, is his angel under-study," said the Duke composedly.

"How beastly happy you two look sitting there," said the Angel-Churchill wistfully.

"I don't suppose you'd care to change places with poor little us," replied the Duke, chaffingly.

"How about poor little me?" said the Angel, modestly. "I've got to run about behind the wheels of popularity, like a spotted dog behind a carriage, getting all the dust and trying to look as if I was an important part of the machine. I must seem a perfect fool to you onlookers sometimes."

"I think you are a perfect angel," said the Duke.

The Angel-that-had-been-Winston smiled, and passed on his way, pursued across the breadth of the Horse Guards' Parade¹⁵ by a tiresome little sparrow that cheeped incessantly and furiously at him.

"That's only the beginning," said the Duke complacently; "I've made it operative with all of them, irrespective of parties."

Belturbet was engaged in feeling his pulse. The Duke fixed his attention on a black swan that was swimming with haughty, stiffnecked aloofness amid the crowd of lesser water-fowl that dotted the ornamental water. For all its pride of mien, something was evidently ruffling and enraging it; in its way it seemed as angry and amazed as the sparrow had been.

At the same moment a human figure came along the pathway.

"Curzon," said Belturbet briefly.

"An Angel-Curzon, if I am not mistaken," said the Duke. "See, he is talking affably to a human being.¹⁶ That settles it."

¹⁵ A large courtyard, east of St. James' Park, used for the annual 'Trooping the Colour' military parade.

¹⁶ See p.40, note 4.

A shabby lounger had accosted the ex-Viceroy. "Could you tell me, sir, if them white birds is storks or halbatrosses? I had an argyment—"

"Those are pelicans. Are you interested in birds? If you would join me in a bun and a glass of milk at the stall yonder I could tell you some interesting things about Indian birds. The hill-mynah, for instance."

The two men disappeared in the direction of the bun-stall, shadowed from the other side of the railed enclosure by a black swan, whose temper seemed to have reached the limit of inarticulate rage.

"I think a prairie oyster¹⁷ on the top of a stiffish brandy-and-soda might save my reason," said Belturbet weakly, as he limped towards his club.

It was late that afternoon before Belturbet could steady his nerves sufficiently to read the evening papers. The Parliamentary report was not reassuring. "Mr. Lloyd George, whose manner was entirely different from either the aggressive or the suave types to which he has accustomed the House, rose to express regret at having, in the course of his speech at Houndsditch¹⁸ the previous night, alluded to certain protesting taxpayers as 'fuddled skulkers.'¹⁹ He realised on reflection that they were probably perfectly honest in their inability to understand certain legal technicalities." (Sensation and some cheers.) Belturbet hurriedly skimmed over a further item of news, "Wild cat found in an exhausted condition in Palace Yard," and ordered another prairie-oyster.

The events of the next few days were piquantly bewildering to the world at large; to Belturbet, who knew dimly what was happening, the situation was fraught with recurring alarms. The young Duke of Scaw, on the other hand, retained all his usual composure. Belturbet, after fruitlessly ringing him up at intervals during the week, ran him to earth one afternoon at his club, smooth and spruce and unruffled as ever. He was reading with evident pleasure a poem in the *English Review*²⁰ by the Angel-Lady Cardigan,²¹ entitled "Pure Women and Clean Men: A

¹⁷ Drink made of raw egg, Worcestershire sauce, vinegar, salt, and ground black pepper, believed to cure hangovers.

¹⁸ Street within the City of London; also part of the East End.

¹⁹ Lloyd George did not shy away from attacking opponents of his radical financial plans in vivid terms.

²⁰ Founded in 1908 by Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford Madox Ford) to publish modern writing.

²¹ See p. 28, note 9.

Tribute to the Victorian Era." It had attracted much notice, alike for the excellence of its metre and the generosity of its judgments.

"Tell me, what on earth *have* you turned Hensley Henson²² into?" asked Belturbet anxiously. "I don't fancy he *believes* in angels, and if he finds an angel preaching orthodox sermons from his pulpit while he's been turned into a fox-terrier, he'll develop rabies in less than no time."

"I rather think it was a fox-terrier," said the Duke lazily.

Belturbet groaned heavily. "Look here, Eugène," he cried, "you've got to stop it. Consols²³ are jumping up and down like bronchos."

"Well, you see, the Angel-Balfour's threat to bring eighty thousand Tory stalwarts up to wreck the House²⁴ unless the Navy Estimates²⁵ were revised on a Two-Power basis²⁶ before Parliament was dissolved has created a bit of a sensation. That was really rather a fine passage when he said, 'I glory in the name of Apache.'²⁷ I wonder, by the way, why the angel up at Dalmeny²⁸ isn't giving tongue in his support. If there ever was a moment for an epoch-making speech, it's now."

"I saw on the tape this morning that Rosebery refused to address a meeting on the subject. He said something more than mere speech-making was wanted."²⁹

²² Herbert Hensley Henson (1863–1947), vicar at St. Margaret's Westminster and canon of Westminster Abbey. He published many books and expressed a controversial liberal theology.

²³ Government bonds.

²⁴ As Arthur Balfour (British Conservative politician, Prime Minister 1902–05, at the time Leader of the Opposition) actually mobilised Tory peers to come to the House of Lords to thwart the Liberal government's plans to introduce basic social security payments.

²⁵ Proposed budget for financing the Royal Navy.

²⁶ The two-power standard was a defence doctrine that Britain's navy should always be at least as strong as its next two largest rivals combined. It was enacted into law in 1889 as the Naval Defence Act, but by the Edwardian era it had begun to be criticised as overly expensive and inappropriate. (Britain now had only one serious rival: Germany.) In 1909, to the government's consternation, the Admiralty had demanded an increase in the Naval Estimates to finance the building of six new ships of the state-of-the-art 'Dreadnought' type.

²⁷ Name given to delinquent youths in Paris at that time. Munro is parodying George III's utterance "Born and educated in this country, I glory in the name of Briton".

²⁸ In Scotland, the ancestral home of the Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929), Liberal politician and Prime Minister 1894–95.

²⁹ Rosebery was a noted orator; in addition, he could not refrain from criticising the party he had once led.

The young Duke said nothing, but his eyes shone with quiet exultation. Suddenly there was a magnetic stampede of members towards the lobby, where the tape-machines were ticking out some news of more than ordinary import.

"Coup d'état in the North. Rosebery seizes Edinburgh Castle."

In the Babel which ensued Belturbet lost sight of his young friend. For the best part of the afternoon he searched one likely haunt after another, spurred on by the sensational posters which the evening papers were displaying broadcast over the West End. "Premier's constituency of East Fife harried by Moss-troopers,"³⁰ was one of the gravest items of news, followed, however, after a brief interval by the reassuring statement: "Government gives way. Important expansion of naval programme."

Belturbet gave up his quest, and turned homeward through St. James's Park. In spite of the political ferment which reigned in the streets quite a large crowd had gathered to watch the unfolding of a tragedy that had taken place on the shore of the ornamental water. A large black swan had savagely attacked a young gentleman who was walking by the water's edge, dragged him down under the surface, and drowned him. At the moment when Belturbet arrived on the spot several park-keepers were engaged in lifting the corpse into a punt. Belturbet stooped to pick up a hat that lay near the scene of the struggle. It was a smart soft felt hat, faintly reminiscent of Houbigant.

Nearly a month elapsed before Belturbet had recovered from his nervous attack sufficiently to take an interest once more in what was going on around him. The General Election was in full swing. He called for a batch of morning papers, and skimmed through some speeches of the Lord-Advocate, Mr. F. E. Smith, and other public men, and then sank back in his chair with a sigh of relief. Evidently the spell had cease³¹ to act after the catastrophe which had overtaken its invoker. There was no trace of angel anywhere.

³⁰ Brigands (historically, those operating around the border between England and Scotland in the seventeenth century).

³¹ Misprint in the original for "ceased".