



SAKI (H.H. MUNRO)

ORIGINAL AND UNCOLLECTED STORIES

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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Bruce Gaston, *Saki (H. H. Munro): Original and Uncollected Stories*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0365>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-141-2

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-142-9

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-143-6

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-144-3

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-146-7

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-147-4

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0381

Cover illustration: Postcard LL3612, the Leonard A. Lauder collection of Raphael Tuck & Sons postcards, Curt Teich Postcard Archives Collection, The Newberry Library.

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Mrs. Pendercoet's Lost Identity

A Tragedy of the Chelsea Arts Club Ball¹

The Odd Volume 1911, pp. 20–21

Regularly once a year, somewhere about the first week in February,² Mrs. Pendercoet was wont to apply to her friends and acquaintances for a character. Not the sort of character which guarantees an applicant for a post of responsibility to be clean and honest and a lifelong abstainer, but a borrowed masquerade identity under which the wearer could momentarily lay aside the matronly state of Pendercoet, solemnly assumed many years ago at St. George's, Hanover Square,³ and become, if she so willed it, a nautch girl or the Second Mrs. Tanqueray.⁴

"Do suggest some costume for me to go to the Arts' Club Ball in," she would entreat every one; "not Marie Stuart or Diane de Poitiers.⁵ Something new and original."

No one had ever suggested that Mrs. Pendercoet should disguise herself as either of these renowned beauties, but she chose to regard the

1 Private members' club established in 1891. Chelsea was the centre of artistic bohemia in late nineteenth century London. The club's fancy dress balls (held first at Vestry Hall in the King's Road, then the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden in 1908 and 1909, and from 1910 the Royal Albert Hall) were lavish and correspondingly famous.

2 The balls were held either at New Year or Mardi Gras.

3 Anglican church in central London, a popular location for high society weddings.

4 Respectively, an Indian dancing girl and the title of a controversial but highly successful play by Sir Arthur Wing Pinero (1855–1934), first performed in 1893. Both characters would have been slightly shocking to contemporary conventional morality.

5 Marie (or Mary), Stuart, Queen of Scots (1542–87, ruled 1542–67); Diane de Poitiers (1500–1566), French noblewoman and mistress of King Henri II of France.

proposal as imminent on every one's lips.

"You might go as Liberty," said the Artist.

"Do you mean the shop⁶ or the thing in New York Harbour?" said the lady. "I don't think that would suit my style. Too massive. Now I had thought of the Queen of the Butterflies."⁷

"So good of you to think of others," interrupted Rollo.

Rollo was eighteen, and respect for Mrs. Pendercoet was not one of his most marked characteristics.

"I asked for advice, not flippancy," she protested.

"Well, why not go as Caesar's Wife, above reproach,⁸ you know. You could have a hobble edging⁹ of scandalous newspaper paragraphs in a sort of Plimsoll Line¹⁰ round the base of your skirt, and you'd be above it all, you see."

"Might I ask what you are going as?" said Mrs. Pendercoet severely.

"I'm going as 'Peace persuading the German war fleet to take Antipon.'"¹¹

The idea took some seconds to grasp.

"I don't see how you can possibly manage that," she objected.

"I can't. That's where the resemblance will come in."

There was an offended silence which the Artist hastened to break.

"Why not go as the Dawn?" he said; "'the Dawn, which always means good-bye.'"¹²

"But I don't want to mean good-bye," protested the lady; "it's hard enough to find one's partners in all that crush, without saying good-bye to them when you've got them."

"An inspiration!" cried Rollo; "there is one character in fiction one hears no end of, but no one has ever seen her represented in portrait or

6 Large luxury department store in Great Marlborough Street, in London's West End.

7 Otherwise known as the Queen Alexandra's birdwing, the largest of all butterfly species, discovered in 1906 and named after King Edward VII's wife.

8 Proverbial ("Caesar's wife must be beyond reproach") from Suetonius and Plutarch.

9 A hobble skirt was a short-lived Edwardian fashion trend of a skirt with a hem around the calves tight enough to make walking difficult.

10 Line painted on the side of a ship to indicate how deep it sits in the water when fully loaded.

11 Antipon was a patent medicine for obesity.

12 Quoting from the poem 'Yasmini' by Laurence Hope (pen-name of Adela Florence Nicolson, 1865–1904), published in *Garden of Kama* (1901).

in the flesh. Go as the Aunt of the Gardener. Every one would welcome her as an old friend the moment she came in with the pen of the Admiral and the good pears of the Ambassador.¹³ That woman must have been an inveterate kleptomaniac, you know, or else a very advanced Fabian;¹⁴ nothing seems to have been safe from her. The basket of the washerwoman and the small apricot of the child were no more sacred to her than the property of people better able to afford plundering. Do go as the Aunt of the Gardener, Mrs. Pendercoet. I have a great-uncle who is an admiral, and I'm sure he'd be delighted to lend you a pen."

The Artist abandoned further attempts at peace-mongering, and Mrs. Pendercoet momentarily diverted her attention from the pursuit of fictitious personality to a vigorous and unsparing analysis of Rollo's everyday character. To be recommended a comic costume when one wishes to make a legitimate sensation in some queenly guise is sufficiently annoying to produce plain speaking, and the irate lady could think afterwards of few uncomplimentary remarks that she regretted having left unsaid. Her tongue had the field to itself, so to speak, but Rollo wore the air of one who is keeping his reply in cold storage.

* * * * *

"I've settled on Pomona," Mrs. Pendercoet informed her artist friend a few days later.

The announcement sounded like a news item of the Crofter migration movement¹⁵ or an aeroplane descent in the Orkneys. As a matter of fact it indicated that Mrs. Pendercoet purposed going to the Arts' Club Ball in the character of the Roman Goddess of Orchards.

"A dress of some saffrony-green material, you know, and a basket of autumnal fruits. Simple, but dignified and effective."

It was the basket of fruit that gave Rollo his opportunity on the night of the ball. Mrs. Pendercoet spent a long unhappy evening trying to

13 Playing on the artificial sentences stereotypically found as translation exercises in beginner's guides to learning French.

14 The Fabian Society was a democratic socialist campaign group; Rollo is mischievously attributing to them the anarchist idea that "property is theft".

15 The Scottish Highlands and Islands were depopulated in the nineteenth century, with the crofters (small tenant farmers) moving to more industrialised areas or emigrating entirely, a process that continued in the twentieth century.

identify herself with the Orchard Goddess, but Rollo had been before her, and their large circle of mutual acquaintances greeted her with a universal chorus of delighted recognition:

“The Aunt of the Gardener! But how *clever*. And the good pears of the Ambassador. So original. Do tell us, was it your own idea?”

And so on throughout the evening. The special artist of the *Daily Pierglass*¹⁶ was supping with Rollo that night, and his picture of “the Aunt of the Gardener, carrying the good pears of the Ambassador and the small apricot of the child: a diverting costume in last night’s carnival,” is one of Mrs. Pendercoet’s bitterest memories.

16 Invented.