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

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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Westminster Gazette, 2 February 1912, p. 3

In the gathering twilight Richard Duncombe rode a tired horse through a seemingly endless succession of fields in what he guessed to be a more or less homeward direction. After the crowd and movement and liveliness of a good day with the hounds there was something still and ghostly about this long, slow ride through a misty world of plough-land, grass-land, and fallow, in which he and his horse seemed to be the only living things. Even when he struck into a road it seemed a deserted highway bordered by long stretches of hedge and coppice, with never a farm-gate or signpost to break its reticence or relieve its sameness. It was with a sense of pleasure that he came suddenly into the glow of lighted windows and drew rein hopefully outside the garden gate of a substantial-sized dwelling. A tall, red-haired girl stood in the doorway of the house, as though keeping watch along what could be seen of the dusky roadway. She returned Duncombe's greeting with a pleasant "Good evening."

"I see you have a stable there," he called out; "do you think you could let me put my horse up there for an hour's rest and give him a little flour and water? He's fairly done up, and I don't think there's an inn within five miles."

"Mother will be delighted," said the girl, and in a few minutes she had helped Duncombe to stable and water his tired animal.

"We are just sitting down to tea," she said shyly, "and mother hopes you will kindly come in and take a cup."

It was not the first time that Duncombe had partaken of pleasant wayside hospitality during homeward rides, and he gladly accepted the invitation. The house was evidently one belonging to fairly comfortable yeoman owners, and its mistress was a kindly faced woman, with quiet, friendly manners, who sat in her parlour at a table well laid out with the furnishing of a substantial middle-class tea. Seated also at the table when Duncombe entered was a red-haired boy of about seventeen, evidently the brother of the girl who had played the part of stable-help.

Duncombe lost no time in transforming himself from a stranger into an agreeable tea-table guest. He was hungry, and paid due attention to the fact, but he found time to talk, to praise, to take interest in the pictures and old china set round the room, and to wait on his hostess when the kettle needed moving from the hob to the table. He was possessed of a lively, sympathetic nature, that easily attuned itself to the company that he happened to be in, and he would have made himself equally at home at a chapel tea-fight¹ or a Montmartre café-chantant.² But on this occasion he became suddenly conscious of the disconcerting fact that he was striking a note of liveliness which met with no response. Behind the natural politeness with which his conversational efforts were received there hung an obvious air of constraint and depression. The mother and daughter made a show of eating and drinking which was little more than a pretence, while the boy sat staring at the wall with an untasted cup of tea before him. Duncombe noted that there was no trace of mourning in their clothes, yet there grew on him the presence of fear in the atmosphere, a sense of something instinctively dreaded, as though a corpse were lying somewhere in the house awaiting burial. He put this feeling down as due in some measure to the lonely situation of the house and the long, dark ride by which he had reached it. The road that ran past it might have been a churchyard path for all the sound it gave back.

As this thought crossed his mind its judgment was belied by the round of approaching hoofs and wheels. The occupants of the room seemed to listen with strained attention, as though the occurrence was too rare to pass without due notice. A gig or light cart of some sort drew up at the gate.

"Go to the door, Nan," said the mother quickly to the daughter. In a minute the girl returned with a short summons: "Ted."

¹ Humorous slang for "tea-party".

² A café with musical entertainment. Montmartre, in Paris, was known for its redlight district.

The boy rose slowly, drank off his tea at a gulp, and followed the girl out of the room. Duncombe was left alone with the mother, who began to re-question him, with nervous preoccupation, as to the details of the day's run. Nan reappeared for a moment and fetched a boy's overcoat and cap from a chair where they had been lying. Evidently Master Ted was being hustled off to some evening work for which he had no great enthusiasm. When the girl next appeared the receding sound of wheels betokened the cart's departure. There was a moment's silence, which seemed to Duncombe's fancy more tense in constraint than any of its forerunners, and then a sudden volubility descended on his hostess. The departure of the sulky boy to his work or evening class seemed to have loosened her tongue. She gave Duncombe an account of her family history and connexions that was almost defiant in its simple pride. She was a woman apparently on the young side of forty, or not much beyond it, and her children were mere boy and girl, yet her sympathies and interests seemed almost entirely with the past. Her father and her husband's father had belonged to the best yeoman class, and evidently had stood high in their neighbours' esteem. Good friends they seemed to have been, though their political creeds placed them locally in the forefront of the opposed party forces; she related with especial pride an incident which had happened when election passions ran high and an unpopular candidate had been threatened with violence by a hostile mob.

"There was no police anywhere near, and it seemed as if he must be roughly handled, when out he came into the crowd, with my father on one side of him and father-in-law on the other, and everyone made way and let them pass. There wasn't anyone would do anything against my father and father-in-law, they were so looked up to and respected. But those times are gone. I'm as comfortable here to-day as I've ever been, but it isn't the times that used to be, when one could hold up one's head and feel that one was somebody. They'll never come back."

Duncombe hastened with ready confidence to give cheerful denial to the good lady's repining.

"I'll wager you are just as much looked up to by your neighbours as you and yours have been," he said; "there may not be so many ways of showing it, but I'm sure the feeling is there all the same, and it's feeling that counts, you know. Then you've got your young people growing up to take their place in the world; they are going to keep up the family reputation. The good old times will never come back for anyone, but one mustn't turn one's back on the good time coming."

With the flow of cheering counsel on his lips Duncombe prepared to take his departure; he would ride on to the market town a few miles away, leave his horse stabled for the night at some hostelry, and get home by train in time for dinner. He would not dream of offending his hosts by offering anything in way of payment for their hospitality, but a graceful act of recognition suggested and commended itself to him.

"A friend of mine has just brought out a book, 'Old Days in Our Country,'" he said; "if you will allow me, I should like to send you a copy as a souvenir of our talk. Only, remember, you must still put your faith in the new days and the young folk. They are going to be worthy of the times that went before."

He rode off into the dusk, carrying with him the image of a woman's wistful face, a little hard and strained in its hunger for bygone things. As he rode he pieced together her history in his mind; the death first of father and father-in-law, then of husband, and the gradual waning of the family's importance in local affairs; the coming to the fore of newer names, the slipping away of old habits of consultation and consideration, the growing up of a proud feeling of neglected merit which in time would stand like a barrier against social intercourse. The young people had not yet arrived at an age of disposition to assert themselves, and the mother lived in the dead past. That was the thing that had given him, the feeling of something dead lying in the house—the unburied past that still lay above-ground.

Duncombe stabled his horse in the town and caught a train just on the point of starting. In one corner of the carriage two market-women were talking volubly about the heaven-knows-what that market-women do talk about; a stolid policeman gazed vacantly out of the window, and a mechanic read with absorbed attention a crumpled newspaper that had come out of his pocket. On the seat exactly opposite Duncombe sat, or, rather, sprawled, the red-haired boy whom he had last seen walking sulkily out of his mother's parlour. Evidently he was going up to some evening class in the neighbouring cathedral town, and from the expression on his face it did not appear that he regarded the expedition with any particular favour. The evening was not a cold one, but he had turned up the collar of his coat about his ears and drawn his cap forward over his eyes. He returned Duncombe's greeting with the embarrassed shyness of his age, and obviously did not desire to be much more conversational than he had been at the tea-table. But Duncombe, whose mind was still dwelling on the little wayside tragedy of fallen greatness that had been disclosed to him, was not going to let such an opportunity for improving the occasion slip through his hands.

"Your mother has been telling me a lot about old days, and how looked-up-to your father and grandfather were," he said in a quiet, friendly voice, "and I have been telling her that she must look to you to keep up the credit of the name, and show yourself worthy of the stock you come from."

He warmed with enthusiasm to the task of rousing the boy's family pride and putting him on his mettle. "You must stand as high in everyone's esteem as they did, and make your mother as proud of her name in the new days as she was in the old days."

Then he stopped in the middle of his friendly homily; the boy was looking at him with the glazed stare of a trapped and helpless animal that sees the hunter approaching. Once again Duncombe experienced the uncomfortable certainty of being face to face with a tragedy whose nature he could not guess at.

The train drew up at a brightly lit platform. The market-women, still in a full flow of chatter, hooked their arms into a wonderful assortment of baskets, and prepared to disentangle themselves and their burdens from the carriage; the mechanic folded his crumpled newspaper into a tight bunch and thrust it into his pocket. The stolid policeman became suddenly alert and stern-visaged.

"Come along," he said to the red-haired boy, and touched him on the arm.

The boy stumbled to his feet and drew his cap still lower over his eyes. Duncombe, with a sick feeling of distress in his heart, as of one who has struck or trampled on some wounded creature, watched the two thread their way through the cruelly observant station crowd, towards the grim prison that reared its long front beyond the station-walls.