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

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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The Romance of Business¹

Daily News and Leader, 19 March 1914, p. 5

"Ring for some more tea," said Margaret Sangrail to her nephew; "Sophie Chabhouse has just been here, and I always give her inferior tea in my most valuable tea service. The fact that she can neither drink the tea nor carry away the tea-cup fills her with acute anguish, which I find much more amusing than filling her with Lapsang Souchong."

"I'm afraid you're not very fond of Cousin Sophie," said Clovis.²

"I make it a rule to like my relations," said Margaret; "I remember only their good qualities and forget their birthdays. Still, when a woman is as indecently rich and as incredibly mean and as unpardonably boastful as Sophie is, a little malicious tail-twisting becomes not merely a pleasure but an absolute duty."

"The boasting is certainly rather unendurable," admitted Clovis; "I met her at lunch yesterday at the Cuverings, and she could talk of nothing else but a fur stole she'd just bought, Lake Baikal beaver, cost her seventy guineas after a fortnight's haggling, probably worth a hundred, and so on, all through lunch time."

See the introduction for the background to this story. When printed, it was prefaced by the following: "Mr. H. H. MUNRO ("Saki") in response to our request for an article on The Romance of Business, has, in his inimitable way, defined that text in the following:"

² Clovis Sangrail's name is made up of two allusions to early France. Clovis is an old form of Louis, and there were several Clovises who ruled the Franks in the fifth to seventh centuries. The name means "renowned in battle", which Munro's Clovis often is. Christopher Morley, one of Munro's early editors, suggested Clovis was so called "because he was so appallingly frank" (vii). Expanding on this, Sandie Byrne writes: "Munro, a student of medieval European genealogy, would have known the legends and history of the Frankish king Clovis, whose predilection for swift and nasty vengeance and what he considered poetic justice (he split the skull of a soldier who had split a looted vase with an axe) would have appealed to him" (106). Sangrail is the old French for Holy Grail, the mythical cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper and which was the object of quests in Arthurian legends.

78 Saki

"I heard about that stole from about seven different people," said Margaret placidly, "and when Sophie invited herself to tea I knew that she was coming to flaunt it at me. I just telephoned to Multevey & Princk³ to send me on approval the best thing in Lake Baikal beaver that they had in stock. When Sophie arrived the first thing she saw was the newly unpacked stole hanging over the back of a chair. 'Why!' she exclaimed, 'Lake Baikal beaver! Exactly like my new stole.' 'Exactly like,' I agreed, 'only a bit larger, and if you don't mind my saying so, rather better quality. In fact its⁴ rather better than I can afford. They're asking sixty-two guineas for it.' 'Sixty-two!' screamed Sophie, 'why I gave—' 'Sir Hartley Timming, the greatest living authority on furs, was lunching with me to-day,' I said, 'and he put its value at about sixty, and I daresay they'd let me have it for that, but he strongly advised me not to buy Lake Baikal beaver if I wanted to be in the fashion. "Only second-rate chorus girls and Viennese parvenus wear it," he said, "and all the really well-dressed women are going in for the fur of the soda-mink, that comes from the great soda plains of Northern Alaska." "Still," I said, "beaver is a pretty fur and I never bother much about fashion, and if I could get it for sixty I would think about it," and before I could say another word Sophie was weeping and raving and begging me to buy her stole off her.⁵ She said she had never really fancied it and had bought it against her better judgment, and had seen a soda mink stole that she really hankered after, and couldn't afford to have both. Finally I took pity on her and bought her seventy guinea beaver at my own figure. Altogether I rather enjoyed her visit."

"I thought I knew something about fur," said Clovis, "but I can't say that I ever heard of Alaska soda-mink before."

"There isn't such an animal," said Margaret, "and there isn't such a person as Sir Hartley Timming, and the real price that Multevey and Princk⁶ were asking for their stole was ninety guineas. I suppose you think I showed a certain tendency to untruthfulness in my dealings with Sophie?"

"Not at all," said Clovis; "but I think you've brought the Romance of Business to an advanced stage of perfection."

³ Invented.

⁴ Thus in the original.

⁵ The muddling of single and double quotation marks is reproduced from the original.

⁶ The inconsistency ("&" vs "and") is in the original.