

FOREWORD

Saki Munro was not a young man when the First World War ended his career as a writer and, at length, his life. His talent was mature. He left a large number of short stories, some horrific, the greater part humorous, and one novel, *The Unbearable Bassington*. It is for his short stories that he is most widely known and loved. He produced them year by year with apparently effortless invention and elegance. His one difficulty seems to have been length; perhaps he conformed too complacently to the requirements of the editors of his time; perhaps there was a defect in his exemplary literary tact. Whatever the reason, these stories too often have the air of being fancies and passing jests unduly expanded, or of dramatic themes unduly cramped. Occasionally, seven or eight times perhaps, the theme, by chance it seems, exactly fits the prescribed dimensions and the result is a masterpiece. To have written seven or eight masterpieces is a notable achievement.

As a work of art *The Unbearable Bassington* is inferior to the best of the short stories; faults in construction, which are the more disconcerting by contrast with the high skill of the writing, betray the first novel. For example, the opening seems to presage a series of episodes, an *enfant terrible* repeatedly, in various ways, upsetting the plans of his mother; it is not until the fourth chapter that the story truly starts. There is an inexplicable interlude in Chapter VIII which only serves to arouse unfulfilled expectations in Chapter XV. (Surely the mysterious Keriway will reappear in Vienna? But no.) The life of the book is lived within conventions more of the stage than of letters and already antiquated in 1912 – the complete exclusion of sex, for instance – which strain the apparatus of illusion. It is, however, with all its manifest defects a curiously interesting book.

Here, for the only time, Saki offers, instead of the cut

gardenia, the tree flowering in its pot, still the product of the hothouse, artificially nurtured, but a complete growth, leaf, stem, root, mould and all, and the rare object is found when in full view to be a sentimental tragedy; not, as a cursory reading might suggest, the tragedy of youth, but of the London drawing-room of a middle-aged lady.

The room, we are explicitly informed at the outset so that there shall be no mistaking it, is the lady's soul. It is also her life. It is one of countless similar drawing-rooms in the London of 1912, with its Bokhara rugs, buhl cabinets, and Dresden figures; it is more precisely dated by the Frémiet bronze on the mantelpiece. It is dominated by an urbane battle-piece supposedly by Van der Meulen. In this room, by a tenure which is one of the frequent insupportable improbabilities of the story, surrounded by treasures and trophies, lives Francesca Bassington, once a beauty, still 'svelte,' and at forty, one might suppose, still ripe for love. But her pleasures are limited to bridge, the theatre and a succession of small luncheon and dinner parties. This life in and of her drawing-room is Francesca's entire life. It has no obvious attraction, for she has surrounded herself with what must, surely, be the dreariest people in London. With the single exception of Lady Caroline Benaresq, who is a Meredithian abstraction, a mere vehicle for the tart comments normally left unspoken, Francesca knows no one but bores. She has no particular liking for them and is often fretful in their company, but they are her world. With their talk of 'the dear archdeacon' and of bandicoots, they are caricatures from Cheltenham and Torquay. What are they doing at fashionable first nights? Why are they asked anywhere? Saki endows them with titles and houses in Mayfair, but they remain obviously and hopelessly provincial. Among them Francesca has so atrophied that she is incapable of imagining any other life than they embody.

Of this life, threatened by penury, her son Comus may be

either the saviour or the destroyer. He, the eponymous hero, exists for the reader only as he exists for his mother. We really know nothing of him. We are told he has friends, but he is not seen with them; at his last 'first night' he is alone; when he goes to his club we part company with him on the steps. We know about his extravagant tailor's bills and his modest losses at cards (two pounds down on the week). He exists only as a problem: how to use him in the service of the drawing-room. In real life, with the qualities ascribed to him, his future would be plain enough. A contemporary of Francesca's would take him in hand and educate him, but within the peculiar conventions in which the book is conceived, Comus must at once marry an heiress or perish. He perishes, of course. Heiresses are not captured by good-looking, self-centred boys fresh from school, but by men, of any age and appearance, who have learned from women the art of pleasing. So without more ado he is despatched to West Africa, where he dies, and the drawing-room is left in sole possession of Francesca. Then comes the catastrophe. The Van der Meulen, genuine or spurious, is not enough. This book, which is prefaced with the callow statement that it 'has no moral,' discloses the ancient precept of the vanity of worldly goods, though Saki chooses to translate it into his own less accurate idiom: 'What shall it profit a man if he save his soul and slay his heart in torment?'

The defects of the book have been remarked; its virtues are abundant and delectable. Saki stands in succession between Wilde and Firbank in the extinct line of literary dandies. The wit is continuous and almost unailing; there are phrases on every page which are as fresh and brilliant after thirty-four years (most cruel of all periods) as on the day they were written. Saki has attempted and achieved a *tour de force* in limiting himself to the most commonplace material in its most commonplace aspect, in eschewing all the eccentrics which come so easily to English humorists, and the strong passions

which are foundations of satire, and producing a work that is wholly brilliant.

It is impossible in reading *The Unbearable Bassington* at this date to avoid a prophetic and allegorical interpretation which cannot have been consciously present to the author. It was 1912. Comus had only to wait two years to find full employment for all his talents. He was cannon-fodder in a time of peace. And it is impossible, now, not to see Francesca as a type of the English civilisation which sends its sons to death for a home whose chief ornament turns out, too late, to be spurious.

Evelyn Waugh
1946