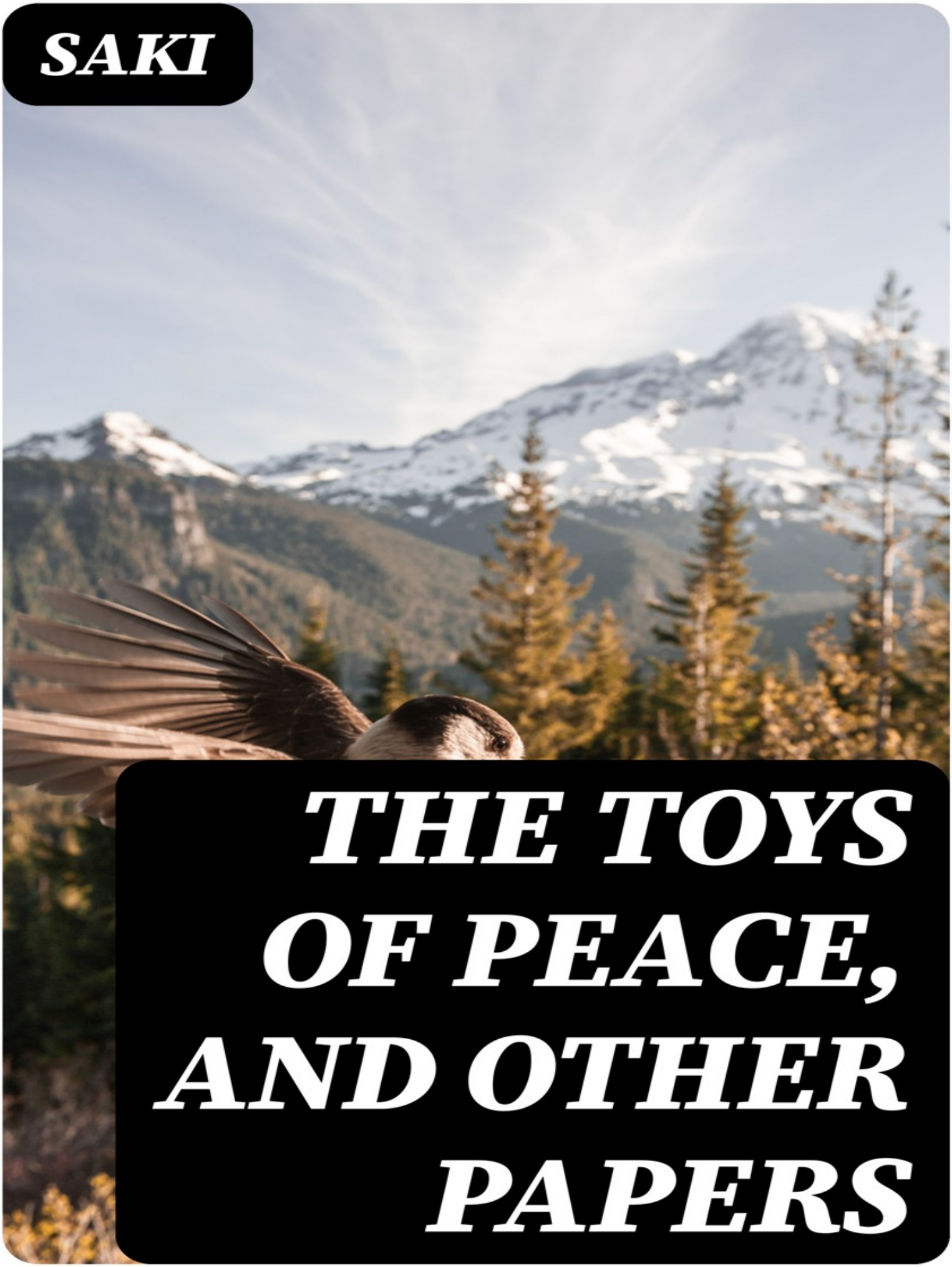
SAKI



THE TOYS OF PEACE, AND OTHER PAPERS

Saki

The Toys of Peace, and Other Papers

EAN 8596547383697

DigiCat, 2022
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HECTOR HUGH MUNRO

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“When peace comes,” wrote an officer of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers, the regiment in which Munro was a private and in which he rose to the rank of lance-sergeant, “Saki will give us the most wonderful of all the books about the war.” But that book of the war will not be written; for Munro has died for King and country. In this volume are his last tales. And it is because these tales, brilliant and elusive as butterflies, hide, rather than reveal, the character of the man who wrote them, give but a suggestion of his tenderness and simplicity, of his iron will, of his splendour in the grip of war, that it is my duty to write these pages about him, now that he lies in the kind earth of France. It is but to do what his choice of a pen-name makes me sure he himself would have done for a friend.

“Yon rising Moon that looks for us again,
How oft hereafter will she wax and wane;
How oft hereafter, rising, look for us!
Through this same Garden—and for *one* in vain.
“And when like her, O Saki, you shall pass
Among the Guests, star-scattered on the grass,
And in your joyous errand reach the spot
Where I made one—turn down an empty glass.”

The first time that Munro used the name of Saki was, I believe, in 1890, when he published in the *Westminster Gazette* the second of the political satires, which were

afterwards collected in a volume, called *Alice in Westminster*. It was, I think, because the wistful philosophy of FitzGerald appealed to him, as it did to so many of his contemporaries, that he chose a pen-name from his verses. He loved the fleeting beauty of life. “There is one thing I care for and that is youth,” he once said. And he always remained youthful. It was perfectly natural for him, although he was then a man of forty, to celebrate the coming in of a new year by seizing the hands of strangers and flying round in a great here-we-go-round-the-mulberry-bush at Oxford Circus, and, later in the year, to dance in the moonlight round a bonfire in the country, invoking Apollo with entreaties for sunshine to waken the flowers. His last tale, *For the Duration of the War*, written when he was at the front, shows that his spirit remained youthful to the end. But if he gloried in the beauty of life, he was conscious of its sadness. Have we any book in which the joy and pain of life are so intimately blended as they are in *The Unbearable Bassington*? Munro himself laughed when he was looking through a collection of criticisms of that novel, some of which emphasised its gaiety and others its poignancy, and remarked that they would bewilder the people who read them.

It is not my present purpose to write a biography of my friend. That is a task which must be discharged later, and an account of his life will be given in the first volume of the collected edition of his works, which it is proposed to publish after the war. Nevertheless, before writing of the transformation wrought in him by the war, it may be well to give a brief outline of his career.

Munro was born in 1870 in Burmah, where his father, the late Colonel C. A. Munro, was stationed. At his christening he was named Hector Hugh. He belonged to a family with traditions of the two services. His paternal grandfather had been in the army, and his mother was a daughter of Rear-Admiral Mercer. Mrs. Munro died when her children were very young, and Hector, his elder brother and his sister were brought up by their father's sisters, two maiden ladies, who were devoted to the children, but had old-fashioned Scottish ideas of discipline. Their home was near Barnstaple, a lonely house in a garden shut in by high stone walls with meadows beyond. The three children had no companions, and were thrown on their own resources for amusement. One of their diversions was to produce a newspaper. All through his childhood Hector professed violent Tory opinions, and at a very early age he began to take an interest in politics and to read any books or papers dealing with them that came his way. He loved, above all, the woodlands and the wild things in them, especially the birds. His delicate health caused his aunts somewhat to temper their severity in his case, but I fancy they must have had some difficulty in curbing his high spirits; for he was a thoroughly human boy and up to every sort of prank. He was sent for a time to a private school at Exmouth, and when he left it did lessons at home with his sister's governess. Later he was sent to Bedford College.

When school-days were over and Colonel Munro had returned to England for good, Hector and his sister were taken abroad by their father. They lived in Normandy and then in Dresden, where the first German words that Hector learnt were the names of birds, sometimes picked up from

strangers in the zoological gardens. Then came a strenuous series of visits to German and Austrian cities, which Colonel Munro arranged as much for the education as the pleasure of his son and daughter. Museums and picture-galleries were visited everywhere. Hector amused himself by counting up the number of St. Sebastians in each gallery and making bets with his sister as to which would have the most. Berlin won with eighteen. The impression made on Munro by this tour is to be seen in his books, and in the present volume there are two tales, *The Interlopers* and *The Wolves of Cernogratz*, which seem to have been inspired by the memory of some romantic castle in the heart of Europe. A short play, *Karl Ludwig's Window*, which will be published later, is based on an idea given by a visit to a castle near Prague.

After a long visit to Davos, Colonel Munro returned with his family to England and settled in North Devon, where he devoted himself during the next two years to directing the studies of his son and daughter. Then came another long visit to Davos, after which Hector left England and joined the Burmese Mounted Police. He once told me of the feeling of loneliness he experienced when he first arrived in Burmah, using almost the same words in which he described Bassington's sense of isolation in the colony to which he was sent. That account of the young Englishman looking enviously at a native boy and girl, racing wildly along in the joy of youth and companionship, is one of the rare instances of autobiography in Munro's works. He was unable to support the Burmese climate and, after having fever seven times in eleven months, was forced to return to England. He

remained at home for a year and hunted regularly with his sister during the winter. He then came to London with the intention of making a literary career for himself. His talent was recognised by Sir Francis Gould, to whom a friend had given him an introduction, and he soon began to write for the *Westminster Gazette*. Two years after he settled in London the publication of the political satires, based on *Alice in Wonderland*, brought him into prominence as a wit and a writer to be counted with. Mr. Balfour was his chief butt in these pieces. He was still, as he always remained, a Conservative, but he held at the time that Mr. Balfour's leadership was a weakness to the party.

In 1902 Munro went to the Balkans for the *Morning Post*, and later he became the correspondent of that paper in St. Petersburg, where he was during the revolution of 1905.

He left St. Petersburg to represent the *Morning Post* in Paris, and returned to London in 1908, where the agreeable life of a man of letters with a brilliant reputation awaited him. He had a lodging in Mortimer Street and lived exceedingly simply. It was his custom to pass the morning in a dressing-gown writing. His writing-pad was usually propped up with a book to make it slant and he wrote slowly in a very clear hand, rarely erasing a word or making a correction. His air and the movement of his hand gave one the impression that he was drawing and not writing. He almost always lunched at a Lyons bread-shop, partly because it was economical and partly because, as he said, he got exactly the sort of luncheon he liked. He cared nothing for money. He had to earn his living, but he was content as long as he had enough money to supply his

needs. When a friend once suggested a profitable field for his writings, he dismissed the idea by saying that he was not interested in the public for which it was proposed that he should write. He loved his art, and, by refusing to adopt a style that might have appealed to wider circles, he made himself a place in our literature which, in the opinion of many, will be lasting. Almost every day he played cards, either in the late afternoon or in the evening, at the Cocoa Tree Club. The sight of the wealth of others did not excite his envy. I remember his coming home from a ball and relating that he had sat at supper next a millionairess, whose doctor had prescribed a diet of milk-puddings. “I had a hearty supper,” he said gleefully, “and for all her millions she was unable to eat anything.”

Munro was exceedingly generous. He would share his last sovereign with a friend, and nothing pleased him better than to entertain his friends at dinner in a club or restaurant. Nothing angered him more than meanness in others. I remember the indignation with which he spoke of a rich woman who had refused to give adequate help to a poor person, who stood in need of it.

This even life in town, occasionally varied by a visit to a country house, was rudely disturbed by the shock of war. Munro was in the House of Commons when Sir Edward Grey made his statement on the position that this country was to take up. He told me that the strain of listening to that speech was so great that he found himself in a sweat. He described the slowness with which the Minister developed his argument and the way in which he stopped to put on his eye-glasses to read a memorandum and then took them off

to continue, holding the House in suspense. That night we dined at a chop-house in the Strand with two friends. On our way Munro insisted on walking at a tremendous pace, and at dinner, when he ordered cheese and the waiter asked whether he wanted butter, he said peremptorily: “Cheese, no butter; there’s a war on.” A day or two later he was condemning himself for the slackness of the years in London and hiring a horse to take exercise, to which he was little addicted, in the Park. He was determined to fight. Nothing else was to have been expected of the man who wrote *When William Came*, a novel in which he used his supreme gift of irony to rouse his fellow-countrymen from their torpor and to stir them to take measures for the defence of the country. *Punch* declared that there had been no such conversational fireworks since Wilde, in reviewing this book, but Munro was more gratified by a word of encouragement sent him by Lord Roberts, after he had read the book, than by all the praise of the critics. He was over military age and he was not robust. In the first weeks of the war there seemed little chance of his being able to become a soldier. “And I have always looked forward to the romance of a European war,” he said.

There still hangs in his room in Mortimer Street an old Flemish picture, which he had picked up somewhere, of horsemen in doublets and plumed hats, fighting beneath the walls of a city. It was, I think, the only painting in his possession. Perhaps it was this picture that represented to him the romance of which he spoke; but he did not hide from himself the terrible side of war. Happily thoughts about war can be given in his own words. The following piece

appeared in the first edition of the *Morning Post* of April 23, 1915, under the title, *An Old Love*—

> "'I know nothing about war,' a boy of nineteen said to me two days ago, 'except, of course, that I've heard of its horrors; yet, somehow, in spite of the horrors, there seems to be something in it different to anything else in the world, something a little bit finer.'
>
> "He spoke wistfully, as one who feared that to him war would always be an unreal, distant, second-hand thing, to be read about in special editions, and peeped at through the medium of cinematograph shows. He felt that the thing that was a little bit finer than anything else in the world would never come into his life.
>
> "Nearly every red-blooded human boy has had war, in some shape or form, for his first love; if his blood has remained red and he has kept some of his boyishness in after life, that first love will never have been forgotten. No one could really forget those wonderful leaden cavalry soldiers; the horses were as sleek and prancing as though they had never left the parade-ground, and the uniforms were correspondingly spick and span, but the amount of campaigning and fighting they got through was prodigious. There are other unforgettable memories for those who had brothers to play with and fight with, of sieges and ambushes and pitched encounters, of the slaying of an entire garrison without quarter, or of chivalrous, punctilious courtesy to a defeated enemy. Then there was the slow unfolding of the long romance of actual war, particularly of European war, ghastly, devastating, heartrending in its effect, and

yet somehow captivating to the imagination. The Thirty Years' War was one of the most hideously cruel wars ever waged, but, in conjunction with the subsequent campaigns of the Great Louis, it throws a glamour over the scene of the present struggle. The thrill that those far-off things call forth in us may be ethically indefensible, but it comes in the first place from something too deep to be driven out; the magic region of the Low Countries is beckoning to us again, as it beckoned to our forefathers, who went campaigning there almost from force of habit.

"One must admit that we have in these Islands a variant from the red-blooded type. One or two young men have assured me that they are not in the least interested in the war—'I'm not at all patriotic, you know,' they announce, as one might announce that one was not a vegetable or did not use a safety-razor. There are others whom I have met within the recent harrowing days who had no place for the war crisis in their thoughts and conversations; they would talk by the hour about chamber-music, Greek folk-dances, Florentine art, and the difficulty of getting genuine old oak furniture, but the national honour and the national danger were topics that bored them. One felt that the war would affect them chiefly as involving a possible shortage in the supply of eau-de-Cologne or by debarring them from visiting some favourite art treasure at a Munich gallery. It is inconceivable that these persons were ever boys, they have certainly not grown up into men; one cannot call them womanish—the women of our race are made

of different stuff. They belong to no sex and it seems a pity that they should belong to any nation; other nations probably have similar encumbrances, but we seem to have more of them than we either desire or deserve.

“There are other men among us who are patriotic, one supposes, but with a patriotism that one cannot understand; it must be judged by a standard that we should never care to set up. It seems to place a huckstering interpretation on honour, to display sacred things in a shop window, marked in plain figures. ‘If we remained neutral,’ as a leading London morning paper once pleaded, ‘we should be, from the commercial point of view, in precisely the same position as the United States. We should be able to trade with all the belligerents (so far as war allows of trade with them); we should be able to capture the bulk of their trade in neutral markets; we should keep our expenditure down; we should keep out of debt; we should have healthy finances.’

“A question was buzzing in my head by the time I had finished reading those alluring arguments:

“Some men of noble stock were made;
Some glory in the murder-blade:
Some praise a science or an art,
But I like honourable trade.

“The poet has given a satiric meaning to the last word but one in those lines; perhaps that is why they flashed so readily to the mind.

“One remembers with some feeling of relief the spectacle last August of boys and youths marching and

shouting through the streets in semi-disciplined mobs, waving the flags of France and Britain. There is perhaps nothing very patriotic in shouting and flag-waving, but it is the only way these youngsters had of showing their feelings."

When at last Munro managed to enlist in the 2nd King Edward's Horse, he was supremely happy. He put on a trooper's uniform with the exaltation of a novice assuming the religious habit. But after a few months he found that he was not strong enough for life in a cavalry regiment and he arranged to exchange into the 22nd Royal Fusiliers. He chafed at the long months of training in England and longed to get to the front, but military discipline was to him something sacred and, whether in England or in France, he did his utmost to conform himself to it and to force others to do the same. One of his comrades told me that at the front they would sometimes put their packs on a passing lorry; it was against orders, and Munro refused to lighten the strain of a long march in this way, although the straps of the pack galled his shoulders.

Twice he was offered a commission, but he refused to take one. He distrusted his ability to be a good officer and also he desired to go on fighting side by side with his comrades, one of whom, now an officer and a prisoner in Germany, had been his friend before the war. I was told by a man of his company that one day a General was conducted along the trenches by the Colonel commanding the regiment and recognised Munro, whom he had met at dinner-parties in London. "What on earth are you doing here?" he asked, and said that he had a job to be done at

the rear which would be the very thing for him. Munro excused himself from accepting it. Another opportunity of less arduous work was offered him. Men who could speak German were ordered to report: interpreters were wanted to deal with prisoners. Munro reported, but urged that it had taken him two years to get out to the front and that he desired to remain there. He was allowed to do as he wished. And his gaiety never left him. Those who were with him speak of the tales with which he amused them. He even founded a club in one place at which they were stationed, and called it the Back Kitchen Club, because the members met in the kitchen of a peasant's cottage.

When he came home on leave, it was evident that the strain of military life was telling on him. He was thin and his face was haggard. But the spiritual change wrought in him by the war was greater than the physical. He told me that he could never come back to the old life in London. And he wrote asking me to find out from a person in Russia whether it would be possible to acquire land in Siberia to till and to hunt, and whether a couple of Yakutsk lads could be got as servants. It was the love of the woodlands and the wild things in them, that he had felt as a child, returning. The dross had been burnt up in the flame of war.

Munro fell in the Beaumont-Hamel action in November 1916. On the 12th he and his comrades were at Beldancourt. At one o'clock in the morning of the 14th they went to Mailly. As the men were crossing No-Man's-Land to occupy trenches evacuated by the enemy, Munro was shot through the head.

“Poor Saki! What an admiration we all had for him,” wrote the officer in command of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers. “I always quoted him as one of the heroes of the war. I saw daily the appalling discomforts he so cheerfully endured. He flatly refused to take a commission or in any way to allow me to try to make him more comfortable. General Vaughan told him that a brain like his was wasted as a private soldier. He just smiled. He was absolutely splendid. What courage! The men simply loved him.”

ROTHAY REYNOLDS,

September 1918.

THE TOYS OF PEACE

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“Harvey,” said Eleanor Bope, handing her brother a cutting from a London morning paper of the 19th of March, “just read this about children’s toys, please; it exactly carries out some of our ideas about influence and upbringing.”

“In the view of the National Peace Council,” ran the extract, “there are grave objections to presenting our boys with regiments of fighting men, batteries of guns, and squadrons of ‘Dreadnoughts.’ Boys, the Council admits, naturally love fighting and all the panoply of war . . . but that is no reason for encouraging, and perhaps giving permanent form to, their primitive instincts. At the Children’s Welfare Exhibition, which opens at Olympia in three weeks’ time, the Peace Council will make an alternative suggestion to parents in the shape of an exhibition of ‘peace toys.’ In front of a specially-painted

representation of the Peace Palace at The Hague will be grouped, not miniature soldiers but miniature civilians, not guns but ploughs and the tools of industry . . . It is hoped that manufacturers may take a hint from the exhibit, which will bear fruit in the toy shops."

"The idea is certainly an interesting and very well-meaning one," said Harvey; "whether it would succeed well in practice—"

"We must try," interrupted his sister; "you are coming down to us at Easter, and you always bring the boys some toys, so that will be an excellent opportunity for you to inaugurate the new experiment. Go about in the shops and buy any little toys and models that have special bearing on civilian life in its more peaceful aspects. Of course you must explain the toys to the children and interest them in the new idea. I regret to say that the 'Siege of Adrianople' toy, that their Aunt Susan sent them, didn't need any explanation; they knew all the uniforms and flags, and even the names of the respective commanders, and when I heard them one day using what seemed to be the most objectionable language they said it was Bulgarian words of command; of course it *may* have been, but at any rate I took the toy away from them. Now I shall expect your Easter gifts to give quite a new impulse and direction to the children's minds; Eric is not eleven yet, and Bertie is only nine-and-a-half, so they are really at a most impressionable age."

"There is primitive instinct to be taken into consideration, you know," said Harvey doubtfully, "and hereditary tendencies as well. One of their great-uncles fought in the most intolerant fashion at Inkerman—he was specially

mentioned in dispatches, I believe—and their great-grandfather smashed all his Whig neighbours' hot houses when the great Reform Bill was passed. Still, as you say, they are at an impressionable age. I will do my best."

On Easter Saturday Harvey Bope unpacked a large, promising-looking red cardboard box under the expectant eyes of his nephews. "Your uncle has brought you the newest thing in toys," Eleanor had said impressively, and youthful anticipation had been anxiously divided between Albanian soldiery and a Somali camel-corps. Eric was hotly in favour of the latter contingency. "There would be Arabs on horseback," he whispered; "the Albanians have got jolly uniforms, and they fight all day long, and all night, too, when there's a moon, but the country's rocky, so they've got no cavalry."

A quantity of crinkly paper shavings was the first thing that met the view when the lid was removed; the most exiting toys always began like that. Harvey pushed back the top layer and drew forth a square, rather featureless building.

"It's a fort!" exclaimed Bertie.

"It isn't, it's the palace of the Mpret of Albania," said Eric, immensely proud of his knowledge of the exotic title; "it's got no windows, you see, so that passers-by can't fire in at the Royal Family."

"It's a municipal dust-bin," said Harvey hurriedly; "you see all the refuse and litter of a town is collected there, instead of lying about and injuring the health of the citizens."

In an awful silence he disinterred a little lead figure of a man in black clothes.

“That,” he said, “is a distinguished civilian, John Stuart Mill. He was an authority on political economy.”

“Why?” asked Bertie.

“Well, he wanted to be; he thought it was a useful thing to be.”

Bertie gave an expressive grunt, which conveyed his opinion that there was no accounting for tastes.

Another square building came out, this time with windows and chimneys.

“A model of the Manchester branch of the Young Women’s Christian Association,” said Harvey.

“Are there any lions?” asked Eric hopefully. He had been reading Roman history and thought that where you found Christians you might reasonably expect to find a few lions.

“There are no lions,” said Harvey. “Here is another civilian, Robert Raikes, the founder of Sunday schools, and here is a model of a municipal wash-house. These little round things are loaves baked in a sanitary bakehouse. That lead figure is a sanitary inspector, this one is a district councillor, and this one is an official of the Local Government Board.”

“What does he do?” asked Eric wearily.

“He sees to things connected with his Department,” said Harvey. “This box with a slit in it is a ballot-box. Votes are put into it at election times.”

“What is put into it at other times?” asked Bertie.

“Nothing. And here are some tools of industry, a wheelbarrow and a hoe, and I think these are meant for hop-

poles. This is a model beehive, and that is a ventilator, for ventilating sewers. This seems to be another municipal dust-bin—no, it is a model of a school of art and public library. This little lead figure is Mrs. Hemans, a poetess, and this is Rowland Hill, who introduced the system of penny postage. This is Sir John Herschel, the eminent astrologer."

"Are we to play with these civilian figures?" asked Eric.

"Of course," said Harvey, "these are toys; they are meant to be played with."

"But how?"

It was rather a poser. "You might make two of them contest a seat in Parliament," said Harvey, "an have an election—"

"With rotten eggs, and free fights, and ever so many broken heads!" exclaimed Eric.

"And noses all bleeding and everybody drunk as can be," echoed Bertie, who had carefully studied one of Hogarth's pictures.

"Nothing of the kind," said Harvey, "nothing in the least like that. Votes will be put in the ballot-box, and the Mayor will count them—and he will say which has received the most votes, and then the two candidates will thank him for presiding, and each will say that the contest has been conducted throughout in the pleasantest and most straightforward fashion, and they part with expressions of mutual esteem. There's a jolly game for you boys to play. I never had such toys when I was young."

"I don't think we'll play with them just now," said Eric, with an entire absence of the enthusiasm that his uncle had shown; "I think perhaps we ought to do a little of our holiday

task. It’s history this time; we’ve got to learn up something about the Bourbon period in France.”

“The Bourbon period,” said Harvey, with some disapproval in his voice.

“We’ve got to know something about Louis the Fourteenth,” continued Eric; “I’ve learnt the names of all the principal battles already.”

This would never do. “There were, of course, some battles fought during his reign,” said Harvey, “but I fancy the accounts of them were much exaggerated; news was very unreliable in those days, and there were practically no war correspondents, so generals and commanders could magnify every little skirmish they engaged in till they reached the proportions of decisive battles. Louis was really famous, now, as a landscape gardener; the way he laid out Versailles was so much admired that it was copied all over Europe.”

“Do you know anything about Madame Du Barry?” asked Eric; “didn’t she have her head chopped off?”

“She was another great lover of gardening,” said Harvey, evasively; “in fact, I believe the well known rose Du Barry was named after her, and now I think you had better play for a little and leave your lessons till later.”

Harvey retreated to the library and spent some thirty or forty minutes in wondering whether it would be possible to compile a history, for use in elementary schools, in which there should be no prominent mention of battles, massacres, murderous intrigues, and violent deaths. The York and Lancaster period and the Napoleonic era would, he admitted to himself, present considerable difficulties, and

the Thirty Years' War would entail something of a gap if you left it out altogether. Still, it would be something gained if, at a highly impressionable age, children could be got to fix their attention on the invention of calico printing instead of the Spanish Armada or the Battle of Waterloo.

It was time, he thought, to go back to the boys' room, and see how they were getting on with their peace toys. As he stood outside the door he could hear Eric's voice raised in command; Bertie chimed in now and again with a helpful suggestion.

"That is Louis the Fourteenth," Eric was saying, "that one in knee-breeches, that Uncle said invented Sunday schools. It isn't a bit like him, but it'll have to do."

"We'll give him a purple coat from my paintbox by and by," said Bertie.

"Yes, an' red heels. That is Madame de Maintenon, that one he called Mrs. Hemans. She begs Louis not to go on this expedition, but he turns a deaf ear. He takes Marshal Saxe with him, and we must pretend that they have thousands of men with them. The watchword is *Qui vive*? and the answer is *L'état c'est moi*—that was one of his favourite remarks, you know. They land at Manchester in the dead of the night, and a Jacobite conspirator gives them the keys of the fortress."

Peeping in through the doorway Harvey observed that the municipal dust-bin had been pierced with holes to accommodate the muzzles of imaginary cannon, and now represented the principal fortified position in Manchester; John Stuart Mill had been dipped in red ink, and apparently stood for Marshal Saxe.