CLASSICS TO GO

WHEN WILLIAM CAME

SAKI

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Saki

CHAPTER I

THE SINGING-BIRD AND THE BAROMETER

Cicely Yeovil sat in a low swing chair, alternately looking at herself in a mirror and at the other occupant of the room in the flesh. Both prospects gave her undisguised satisfaction. Without being vain she was duly appreciative of good looks, whether in herself or in another, and the reflection that she saw in the mirror, and the young man whom she saw seated at the piano, would have come with credit out of a more severely critical inspection. Probably she looked longer and with greater appreciation at the piano player than at her own image; her good looks were an inherited possession, that had been with her more or less all her life, while Ronnie Storre was a comparatively new acquisition, discovered and achieved, so to speak, by her own enterprise, selected by her own good taste. Fate had given her adorable eyelashes and an excellent profile. Ronnie was an indulgence she had bestowed on herself.

Cicely had long ago planned out for herself a complete philosophy of life, and had resolutely set to work to carry her philosophy into practice. “When love is over how little of love even the lover understands,” she quoted to herself from one of her favourite poets, and transposed the saying into “While life is with us how little of life even the materialist understands.” Most people that she knew took endless pains and precautions to preserve and prolong their lives and keep their powers of enjoyment unimpaired; few, very few, seemed to make any intelligent effort at understanding what they really wanted in the way of enjoying their lives, or to ascertain what were the best means for satisfying those wants. Fewer still bent their

whole energies to the one paramount aim of getting what they wanted in the fullest possible measure. Her scheme of life was not a wholly selfish one; no one could understand what she wanted as well as she did herself, therefore she felt that she was the best person to pursue her own ends and cater for her own wants. To have others thinking and acting for one merely meant that one had to be perpetually grateful for a lot of well-meant and usually unsatisfactory services. It was like the case of a rich man giving a community a free library, when probably the community only wanted free fishing or reduced tram-fares. Cicely studied her own whims and wishes, experimented in the best method of carrying them into effect, compared the accumulated results of her experiments, and gradually arrived at a very clear idea of what she wanted in life, and how best to achieve it. She was not by disposition a self-centred soul, therefore she did not make the mistake of supposing that one can live successfully and gracefully in a crowded world without taking due notice of the other human elements around one. She was instinctively far more thoughtful for others than many a person who is genuinely but unseeingly addicted to unselfishness.

Also she kept in her armoury the weapon which can be so mightily effective if used sparingly by a really sincere individual—the knowledge of when to be a humbug. Ambition entered to a certain extent into her life, and governed it perhaps rather more than she knew. She desired to escape from the doom of being a nonentity, but the escape would have to be effected in her own way and in her own time; to be governed by ambition was only a shade or two better than being governed by convention.

The drawing-room in which she and Ronnie were sitting was of such proportions that one hardly knew whether it was intended to be one room or several, and it had the merit of

being moderately cool at two o’clock on a particularly hot July afternoon. In the coolest of its many alcoves servants had noiselessly set out an improvised luncheon table: a tempting array of caviare, crab and mushroom salads, cold asparagus, slender hock bottles and high-stemmed wine goblets peeped out from amid a setting of Charlotte Klemm roses.

Cicely rose from her seat and went over to the piano.

“Come,” she said, touching the young man lightly with a finger-tip on the top of his very sleek, copper-hued head, “we’re going to have picnic-lunch to-day up here; it’s so much cooler than any of the downstairs rooms, and we shan’t be bothered with the servants trotting in and out all the time. Rather a good idea of mine, wasn’t it?”

Ronnie, after looking anxiously to see that the word “picnic” did not portend tongue sandwiches and biscuits, gave the idea his blessing.

“What is young Storre’s profession?” some one had once asked concerning him.

“He has a great many friends who have independent incomes,” had been the answer.

The meal was begun in an appreciative silence; a picnic in which three kinds of red pepper were available for the caviare demanded a certain amount of respectful attention.

“My heart ought to be like a singing-bird to-day, I suppose,” said Cicely presently.

“Because your good man is coming home?” asked Ronnie.

Cicely nodded.

“He’s expected some time this afternoon, though I’m rather vague as to which train he arrives by. Rather a stifling day for railway travelling.”

“And *is* your heart doing the singing-bird business?” asked Ronnie.

“That depends,” said Cicely, “if I may choose the bird. A missel-thrush would do, perhaps; it sings loudest in stormy weather, I believe.”

Ronnie disposed of two or three stems of asparagus before making any comment on this remark.

“Is there going to be stormy weather?” he asked.

“The domestic barometer is set rather that way,” said Cicely. “You see, Murrey has been away for ever so long, and, of course, there will be lots of things he won’t be used to, and I’m afraid matters may be rather strained and uncomfortable for a time.”

“Do you mean that he will object to me?” asked Ronnie.

“Not in the least,” said Cicely, “he’s quite broad-minded on most subjects, and he realises that this is an age in which sensible people know thoroughly well what they want, and are determined to get what they want. It pleases me to see a lot of you, and to spoil you and pay you extravagant compliments about your good looks and your music, and to imagine at times that I’m in danger of getting fond of you; I don’t see any harm in it, and I don’t suppose Murrey will either—in fact, I shouldn’t be surprised if he takes rather a liking to you. No, it’s the general situation that will trouble and exasperate him; he’s not had time to get accustomed to the *fait accompli* like we have. It will break on him with horrible suddenness.”

“He was somewhere in Russia when the war broke out, wasn’t he?” said Ronnie.

“Somewhere in the wilds of Eastern Siberia, shooting and bird collecting, miles away from a railway or telegraph line, and it was all over before he knew anything about it; it didn’t last very long, when you come to think of it. He was due home somewhere about that time, and when the weeks slipped by without my hearing from him, I quite thought he’d been captured in the Baltic or somewhere on the way back. It turned out that he was down with marsh fever in some out-of-the-way spot, and everything was over and finished with before he got back to civilisation and newspapers.”

“It must have been a bit of a shock,” said Ronnie, busy with a well-devised salad; “still, I don’t see why there should be domestic storms when he comes back. You are hardly responsible for the catastrophe that has happened.”

“No,” said Cicely, “but he’ll come back naturally feeling sore and savage with everything he sees around him, and he won’t realise just at once that we’ve been through all that ourselves, and have reached the stage of sullen acquiescence in what can’t be helped. He won’t understand, for instance, how we can be enthusiastic and excited over Gorla Mustelford’s début, and things of that sort; he’ll think we are a set of callous revellers, fiddling while Rome is burning.”

“In this case,” said Ronnie, “Rome isn’t burning, it’s burnt. All that remains to be done is to rebuild it—when possible.”

“Exactly, and he’ll say we’re not doing much towards helping at that.”

“But,” protested Ronnie, “the whole thing has only just happened; ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day,’ and we can’t rebuild

our Rome in a day."

"I know," said Cicely, "but so many of our friends, and especially Murrey's friends, have taken the thing in a tragical fashion, and cleared off to the Colonies, or shut themselves up in their country houses, as though there was a sort of moral leprosy infecting London."

"I don't see what good that does," said Ronnie.

"It doesn't do any good, but it's what a lot of them have done because they felt like doing it, and Murrey will feel like doing it too. That is where I foresee trouble and disagreement."

Ronnie shrugged his shoulders.

"I would take things tragically if I saw the good of it," he said; "as matters stand it's too late in the day and too early to be anything but philosophical about what one can't help. For the present we've just got to make the best of things. Besides, you can't very well turn down Gorla at the last moment."

"I'm not going to turn down Gorla, or anybody," said Cicely with decision. "I think it would be silly, and silliness doesn't appeal to me. That is why I foresee storms on the domestic horizon. After all, Gorla has her career to think of. Do you know," she added, with a change of tone, "I rather wish you would fall in love with Gorla; it would make me horribly jealous, and a little jealousy is such a good tonic for any woman who knows how to dress well. Also, Ronnie, it would prove that you are capable of falling in love with some one, of which I've grave doubts up to the present."

"Love is one of the few things in which the make-believe is superior to the genuine," said Ronnie, "it lasts longer, and

you get more fun out of it, and it’s easier to replace when you’ve done with it.”

“Still, it’s rather like playing with coloured paper instead of playing with fire,” objected Cicely.

A footman came round the corner with the trained silence that tactfully contrives to make itself felt.

“Mr. Luton to see you, Madam,” he announced, “shall I say you are in?”

“Mr. Luton? Oh, yes,” said Cicely, “he’ll probably have something to tell us about Gorla’s concert,” she added, turning to Ronnie.

Tony Luton was a young man who had sprung from the people, and had taken care that there should be no recoil. He was scarcely twenty years of age, but a tightly packed chronicle of vicissitudes lay behind his sprightly insouciant appearance. Since his fifteenth year he had lived, Heaven knew how, getting sometimes a minor engagement at some minor music-hall, sometimes a temporary job as secretary-valet-companion to a roving invalid, dining now and then on plovers’ eggs and asparagus at one of the smarter West End restaurants, at other times devouring a kipper or a sausage in some stuffy Edgware Road eating-house; always seemingly amused by life, and always amusing. It is possible that somewhere in such heart as he possessed there lurked a rankling bitterness against the hard things of life, or a scrap of gratitude towards the one or two friends who had helped him disinterestedly, but his most intimate associates could not have guessed at the existence of such feelings. Tony Luton was just a merry-eyed dancing faun, whom Fate had surrounded with streets instead of woods, and it would have been in the highest degree inartistic to have sounded him for a heart or a heartache.

The dancing of the faun took one day a livelier and more assured turn, the joyousness became more real, and the worst of the vicissitudes seemed suddenly over. A musical friend, gifted with mediocre but marketable abilities, supplied Tony with a song, for which he obtained a trial performance at an East End hall. Dressed as a jockey, for no particular reason except that the costume suited him, he sang, “They quaff the gay bubbly in Eccleston Square” to an appreciative audience, which included the manager of a famous West End theatre of varieties. Tony and his song won the managerial favour, and were immediately transplanted to the West End house, where they scored a success of which the drooping music-hall industry was at the moment badly in need.

It was just after the great catastrophe, and men of the London world were in no humour to think; they had witnessed the inconceivable befall them, they had nothing but political ruin to stare at, and they were anxious to look the other way. The words of Tony’s song were more or less meaningless, though he sang them remarkably well, but the tune, with its air of slyness and furtive joyousness, appealed in some unaccountable manner to people who were furtively unhappy, and who were trying to appear stoically cheerful.

“What must be, must be,” and “It’s a poor heart that never rejoices,” were the popular expressions of the London public at that moment, and the men who had to cater for that public were thankful when they were able to stumble across anything that fitted in with the prevailing mood. For the first time in his life Tony Luton discovered that agents and managers were a leisured class, and that office boys had manners.

He entered Cicely’s drawing-room with the air of one to whom assurance of manner has become a sheathed weapon, a court accessory rather than a trade implement.

He was more quietly dressed than the usual run of music-hall successes; he had looked critically at life from too many angles not to know that though clothes cannot make a man they can certainly damn him.

“Thank you, I have lunched already,” he said in answer to a question from Cicely. “Thank you,” he said again in a cheerful affirmative, as the question of hock in a tall ice-cold goblet was propounded to him.

“I’ve come to tell you the latest about the Gorla Mustelford evening,” he continued. “Old Laurent is putting his back into it, and it’s really going to be rather a big affair. She’s going to out-Russian the Russians. Of course, she hasn’t their technique nor a tenth of their training, but she’s having tons of advertisement. The name Gorla is almost an advertisement in itself, and then there’s the fact that she’s the daughter of a peer.”

“She has temperament,” said Cicely, with the decision of one who makes a vague statement in a good cause.

“So Laurent says,” observed Tony. “He discovers temperament in every one that he intends to boom. He told me that I had temperament to the finger-tips, and I was too polite to contradict him. But I haven’t told you the really important thing about the Mustelford début. It is a profound secret, more or less, so you must promise not to breathe a word about it till half-past four, when it will appear in all the six o’clock newspapers.”

Tony paused for dramatic effect, while he drained his goblet, and then made his announcement.

“Majesty is going to be present. Informally and unofficially, but still present in the flesh. A sort of casual dropping in, carefully heralded by unconfirmed rumour a week ahead.”

“Heavens!” exclaimed Cicely, in genuine excitement, “what a bold stroke. Lady Shalem has worked that, I bet. I suppose it will go down all right.”

“Trust Laurent to see to that,” said Tony, “he knows how to fill his house with the right sort of people, and he’s not the one to risk a fiasco. He knows what he’s about. I tell you, it’s going to be a big evening.”

“I say!” exclaimed Ronnie suddenly, “give a supper party here for Gorla on the night, and ask the Shalem woman and all her crowd. It will be awful fun.”

Cicely caught at the suggestion with some enthusiasm. She did not particularly care for Lady Shalem, but she thought it would be just as well to care for her as far as outward appearances went.

Grace, Lady Shalem, was a woman who had blossomed into sudden importance by constituting herself a sort of foster-mother to the *fait accompli*. At a moment when London was denuded of most of its aforetime social leaders she had seen her opportunity, and made the most of it. She had not contented herself with bowing to the inevitable, she had stretched out her hand to it, and forced herself to smile graciously at it, and her polite attentions had been reciprocated. Lady Shalem, without being a beauty or a wit, or a grand lady in the traditional sense of the word, was in a fair way to becoming a power in the land; others, more capable and with stronger claims to social recognition, would doubtless overshadow her and displace her in due course, but for the moment she was a person whose good graces counted for something, and Cicely was quite alive to the advantage of being in those good graces.

“It would be rather fun,” she said, running over in her mind the possibilities of the suggested supper-party.

“It would be jolly useful,” put in Ronnie eagerly; “you could get all sorts of interesting people together, and it would be an excellent advertisement for Gorla.”

Ronnie approved of supper-parties on principle, but he was also thinking of the advantage which might accrue to the drawing-room concert which Cicely had projected (with himself as the chief performer), if he could be brought into contact with a wider circle of music patrons.

“I know it would be useful,” said Cicely, “it would be almost historical; there’s no knowing who might not come to it—and things are dreadfully slack in the entertaining line just now.”

The ambitious note in her character was making itself felt at that moment.

“Let’s go down to the library, and work out a list of people to invite,” said Ronnie.

A servant entered the room and made a brief announcement.

“Mr. Yeovil has arrived, madam.”

“Bother,” said Ronnie sulkily. “Now you’ll cool off about that supper party, and turn down Gorla and the rest of us.”

It was certainly true that the supper already seemed a more difficult proposition in Cicely’s eyes than it had a moment or two ago.

> “‘You’ll not forget my only daughter,
> E’en though Saphia has crossed the sea,’”

quoted Tony, with mocking laughter in his voice and eyes.

Cicely went down to greet her husband. She felt that she was probably very glad that he was home once more; she was angry with herself for not feeling greater certainty on the point. Even the well-beloved, however, can select the wrong moment for return. If Cicely Yeovil's heart was like a singing-bird, it was of a kind that has frequent lapses into silence.

CHAPTER II

THE HOMECOMING

Murrey Yeovil got out of the boat-train at Victoria Station, and stood waiting, in an attitude something between listlessness and impatience, while a porter dragged his light travelling kit out of the railway carriage and went in search of his heavier baggage with a hand-truck. Yeovil was a grey-faced young man, with restless eyes, and a rather wistful mouth, and an air of lassitude that was evidently only a temporary characteristic. The hot dusty station, with its blended crowds of dawdling and scurrying people, its little streams of suburban passengers pouring out every now and then from this or that platform, like ants swarming across a garden path, made a wearisome climax to what had been a rather wearisome journey. Yeovil glanced quickly, almost furtively, around him in all directions, with the air of a man who is constrained by morbid curiosity to look for things that he would rather not see. The announcements placed in German alternatively with English over the booking office, left-luggage office, refreshment buffets, and so forth, the crowned eagle and monogram displayed on the post boxes, caught his eye in quick succession.

He turned to help the porter to shepherd his belongings on to the truck, and followed him to the outer yard of the station, where a string of taxi-cabs was being slowly absorbed by an outpouring crowd of travellers.

Portmanteaux, wraps, and a trunk or two, much be-labelled and travel-worn, were stowed into a taxi, and Yeovil turned to give the direction to the driver.

“Twenty-eight, Berkshire Street.”

“Berkschirestrasse, acht-und-zwanzig,” echoed the man, a bulky spectacled individual of unmistakable Teuton type.

“Twenty-eight, Berkshire Street,” repeated Yeovil, and got into the cab, leaving the driver to re-translate the direction into his own language.

A succession of cabs leaving the station blocked the roadway for a moment or two, and Yeovil had leisure to observe the fact that Viktoria Strasse was lettered side by side with the familiar English name of the street. A notice directing the public to the neighbouring swimming baths was also written up in both languages. London had become a bi-lingual city, even as Warsaw.

The cab threaded its way swiftly along Buckingham Palace Road towards the Mall. As they passed the long front of the Palace the traveller turned his head resolutely away, that he might not see the alien uniforms at the gates and the eagle standard flapping in the sunlight. The taxi driver, who seemed to have combative instincts, slowed down as he was turning into the Mall, and pointed to the white pile of memorial statuary in front of the palace gates.

“Grossmutter Denkmal, yes,” he announced, and resumed his journey.

Arrived at his destination, Yeovil stood on the steps of his house and pressed the bell with an odd sense of forlornness, as though he were a stranger drifting from nowhere into a land that had no cognisance of him; a moment later he was standing in his own hall, the object of respectful solicitude and attention. Sprucely garbed and groomed lackeys busied themselves with his battered travel-soiled baggage; the door closed on the guttural-voiced taxi driver, and the glaring July sunshine. The wearisome journey was over.

“Poor dear, how dreadfully pulled-down you look,” said Cicely, when the first greetings had been exchanged.

“It’s been a slow business, getting well,” said Yeovil. “I’m only three-quarter way there yet.”

He looked at his reflection in a mirror and laughed ruefully.

“You should have seen what I looked like five or six weeks ago,” he added.

“You ought to have let me come out and nurse you,” said Cicely; “you know I wanted to.”

“Oh, they nursed me well enough,” said Yeovil, “and it would have been a shame dragging you out there; a small Finnish health resort, out of the season, is not a very amusing place, and it would have been worse for any one who didn’t talk Russian.”

“You must have been buried alive there,” said Cicely, with commiseration in her voice.

“I wanted to be buried alive,” said Yeovil. “The news from the outer world was not of a kind that helped a despondent invalid towards convalescence. They spoke to me as little as possible about what was happening, and I was grateful for your letters because they also told me very little. When one is abroad, among foreigners, one’s country’s misfortunes cause one an acuter, more personal distress, than they would at home even.”

“Well, you are at home now, anyway,” said Cicely, “and you can jog along the road to complete recovery at your own pace. A little quiet shooting this autumn and a little hunting, just enough to keep you fit and not to overtire you; you mustn’t overtax your strength.”