

THE MARLOW PLAYERS PRESENT : THE EASTER EGG: A SHORT STORY BY Saki adapted by Andrew Stafford.

On a May day in the early years of the twentieth century, in the drawing room of a retired house in Hampstead, Lady Barbara is in conversation with her companion, Miss Grey

Sound of a ticking grandfather clock, and then it chimes the half hour (Westminster chime)

Lady Barbara: Miss Grey?

Miss Grey: Yes, Lady Barbara?

Lady Barbara: What do you think of the weather outside? When I was taking the air this morning the sun felt warm enough then: I wonder whether it will turn out to be too scorching for another foray into the garden: You can hear so many birds with the window open.

Miss Grey: Well it certainly does seem to be rather too hot at the moment, Lady Barbara

Lady Barbara: Let us go into the garden and you can find a place in the shade:

*(sounds of them moving and as they enter the garden we hear birdsong, which remains in the background until **XXX**)*

Lady Barbara: I love to smell the lavender beds and hear the bees buzzing around the blooms: and there will be the sweet scent of new-mown hay: James has been mowing the outer paddock all morning.

Miss Grey: Really? I hadn't noticed . I can't see him.

Lady Barbara: No, but I heard him and the old horse he uses to draw the machine go past and since then the cutters have been busy.

Miss Grey: Here is a nice spot for us to sit: the garden bench under the apple tree. One might be in the Mediterranean, don't you think? One can sit and imagine the heat pouring through the green leaves of a palm shading a terrace in Nice

Lady Barbara: The Riviera and I have long been friends but now sadly are strangers. In fact that might be said of all those haunts of mine in Central Europe, where the onion domes of their churches cast pleasing shadows onto the little marble-paved squares, and where one could sip one's coffee and aquavit throughout the afternoon, whilst a little band of men in hats feathered like shaving brushes played those gaily pompous tunes which so harmonise with the Teutonic mind.

Miss Grey It sounds as if you knew it well.

Lady Barbara: Indeed so: I was often a visitor to Austria and those little princedoms near Styria: Easter always found me at Knobaltheim where I knew the prince's family well enough. My Papa, as a Major-General, was was the Ambassador, and so we were in receipt of the Prince's cordiality such that I continued to visit the area long after my father's appointment had ceased and he had been posted permanently to a very different court
My last foreign visit was there . I went with my son Lester Slaggsby.

XXX

Miss Grey: He must have been both a youthful and useful companion in that rather unsettled and unpredictable region.

Lady Barbara: Not at all: Lester was an undisguised coward. Charming enough, but lacking the courage which one might have expected him to have inherited from good fighting stock such as ours . His childish timidity moved through unreasoning fear to carefully planned “phobias”- as I believe Herr Freud would call them. He was frankly afraid of animals, nervous with firearms and never went on a Channel-crossing without calculating the proportion of life belts to passengers..I had to face But I loved him and still do .

Miss Grey: A pity he was not more like you – one of the bravest women of your generation! Travelling with him must have been quite a tedious affair.

Lady Barbara: Not at all: he usually made acquaintance with other travellers or indeed some of the local inhabitants: we spent nearly every Easter at Knobaltheim and knew the Burgomaster well. He was an old friend. On our last visit, that friendship was particularly evident, It began when the Prince, another old friend, decided to make a visit at Easter time. Imagine yourself sitting at a cafe in the main square, sipping an aperitif to the accompaniment of the town band and the chimes of a foreign campanile.....

Fade in the town band on “the accompaniment” and then fade to background as the dialogue resumes .

Lady Barbara: Another Aquavit, Burgomaster?

Burgomaster: (German/ Slovenian accent) Ach my dear Lady Barbara , how fine it is to sit here with you and your son, Lester, in this delightful Rosenheimplatz. And good it is to see you, Mister Slaggsby! I haf never really understood why you are not Lord Slaggsby if your mother is Lady Barbara..

Lester: That’s because mother was the daughter of an Earl, Earl St Helens, and so she has always been “Lady Barbara” (*Town band fades*) My grandfather, as you may know, was a Major General, and then Ambassador to this country, and the Government was rather grateful to him for getting them out of a few awkward moments and tight squeezes both in India and in these provinces:
I must confess that I would have never dared to go to India: all those horrible dogs and slithery things, and the noise and dust, quite terrible for anyone of my disposition, let alone the dreadful journey through the Suez Canal and across the Bay of Bengal. And then the noise of guns going off and the fearful restlessness of the native element. I might have to ride a horse: and the elephants and tigers would be bound to invade the compound and attack me.

Burgomaster: You are safe enough here, at all events.

Lester: I do not think so. I have heard that there are bears in the forests lying around, and there is always the danger of an avalanche or rockfall.

Burgomaster: But not, I think at this time of the year, and we are in the valley far below.

Lester: That is what I mean: this warm Spring weather might melt the snow on the mountain tops and send it crashing through the Square- and how would we all escape? Whilst that little river, which seems to glide so pleasantly towards the Lake, would, swollen by an Alpine rainstorm, become a torrent and sweep us all to our doom.
I have, of course, inspected the precautions taken by the hotel and found out all possible safety routes in the case of flood or fire, but I do not know how we are to manage in an earthquake.

(the town clock strikes four o clock very musically. Lester gives a small exclamation.)

Oh! I always wonder when I hear the clock whether it is a signal of some oncoming insurrection! There is such discontent in these volatile countries!

Burgomaster: My dear Mr Lester, please do not worry yourself: Knobaltheim has drowsed quietly in the sunshine for the last three hundred years, and does so today, under the benign rule of our dear Prince, who I believe has received you often as a family friend, Lady Barbara.?

Lady Barbara: That is so, Burgomaster. And indeed I have often joined the hunting parties in the woods: but Lester has on those occasions chosen to remain in the safety of the hotel Library.

Lester: Only comparatively safe, Mother. One never knows whether a fire might break out, or a loose dog enter the premises. And the Library is on the first floor, so one would not be able to leave through the window. One could so easily break an ankle in climbing down from the balcony to the street. I am so glad that there is now a new sanatorium just outside the town, where I might be able to take a rest cure.

Burgomaster: Well, we are happy that so far, nothing has ever happened of any interest here. But in celebration of our history, and to declare the Sanatorium open, the town is to have a special visitor: His Serenity the Prince has decided to pay us a visit in person in order to declare it officially open. I believe you will still be with us, Lady Barbara, and I was wondering whether you have any suggestions as to how we can devise some little entertainment to make the day more memorable for him: we have an excellent Town Band, as you know, and I shall make a speech and the school has arranged for the girls to dance in the Square and for the boys holding floral arches, to form an avenue through which the Royal party will walk to the church, where the priest will sprinkle the keys of the Sanatorium before they are placed on a cushion, embroidered with the town's coat of arms, ready to be used to unlock the doors of the Sanatorium.

Lady Barbara: (*concealing a yawn*) It sounds as though you have many quaint and charming plans already, Burgomaster,

Lester As long as they are safe

Burgomaster: Safe indeed-and perhaps rather tedious: they are exactly the same as the welcoming ceremonies of every other town, and His Serenity must be somewhat bored by endless repetitions of welcome, dancing, floral arches and blessings. It is to you, Lady Barbara, that I come as someone who might be able to suggest something new in the way of loyal greeting.

Lady Barbara: I shall certainly give the matter some thought. And now, I am afraid that this most pleasant interlude must end: I have arranged a donkey ride up the Alpenhorn and I must escort Lester back to the hotel for his afternoon rest. But I will talk it over with him and my acquaintances in our little hotel. Goodbye.

Burgomaster: Auf wiederschauen, Lady Barbara.

(*Town bells chime again, moving into brief musical interlude Emperor Waltz. Fade in sounds of people in a dining room*)

Lester: I do believe the hotel chef excelled himself at dinner this evening: the goulaschsuppe was pleasantly mild and the pieces of meat sufficiently small to prevent any choking: always a danger with foreign food, which often burns one's throat and cannot be good for the digestion.

Lady Barbara: Sit down with me at this table, Lester and help me with suggestions for the Burgomaster. The task is not an easy one. The prince is known as an old fashioned reactionary combating modern progress with a wooden sword, as it were: but his people know him as a kindly old gentleman with a certain endearing stateliness, but not in the least standoffish.

Lester: I have spoken to a few of our fellow guests, but ideas are difficult to come by. There was one lady- rather Slavic in appearance- who expressed an interest when I mentioned the visit while I was worriedly waiting for you to return from your perilous donkey ride- ah! She and her husband are here now!

Slavic Lady: Guten Abend, Gnädige Frau. Might I suggest something for the Reception Feast? My husband and I are staying at the hotel and we could not help overhearing your esteemed son when he was talking about the Visit earlier this evening. My husband and I have discussed the matter over our meal-

Slavic Gent: May we perhaps join you?

Lester: Do, please: is that your little boy?

Slavic Lady: Ah yes, he is ours.

Lady Barbara: Please do not worry about him sitting with us. I am used to wild animals, and this little boy seems very silent. What have you been doing to amuse yourself today young man?

Slavic Gent: Ach leider, he has yet to learn any English: he has few words of our own language, but we will explain:

Slavic Lady: (*persistently*) Might I suggest something for the Reception Feast? Our little child here, our baby, we will dress him in little white coat, with small wings, as an Easter Angel, and he will carry a large white Easter egg, , and inside shall be a basket of plover eggs, of which the prince is so fond, and he shall give it to His Highness as an Easter offering.

Slavic Gent: It is so pretty an idea. We have seen it done once in Styria

Lester: I don't think we want to involve a small child in any plans: children are uncontrollable, and small boys positively dangerous.

Slavic Lady. But not this child. Look at how delightful he will appear, with his golden curls and the little angel wings. I am sure the Prince will be most enchanted , as will the burghers of Knobaltheim, with the prospect of the little scene.

Lester: But I don't see how the child can be trained to do everything as you describe it. He might run the wrong way, then the crowd will start to move around and goodness knows what problems that will cause: How re people to be prevented from stampeding and possibly asphyxiating anybody rash enough to be in the middle of the gathering? I shall certainly stay well on the outskirts.

Slavic Lady: Of course, Gnädige Frau will escort the child up to the Prince., but he will be quite good , and do as he is told.

Lady Barbara: Well, of course , you know your own child best. I will at least mention the idea to the Burgomaster, who will be able to advise on the feasibility of such an idea.

Slavic Lady: Oh I am sure that he will be enchanted with the idea, and I will set about making the Easter egg that is to contain the basket of plover eggs.

Slavic Gent: We haff some plover eggs that shall come fresh from Wien. Auf wiedersehen!

Slavic Lady: And I will make the wings and find a pretty white coat for the baby to wear. Come here, child. Hold on to my hand. Yes (*more a command than an invitation*).

Auf wiedersehn, Gnädige Frau! We have much to do!

Lester: Well, they're gone for the moment. And I hope the Burgomaster will *not* welcome the absurd idea.

Lady Barbara: Absurd or not, it is the only idea we have . The child with his bright curls will look angelic enough. By the way, do you think they are the parents of the boy? They seem to me with those high cheek bones, and sallow complexions to be quite alien.

Lester: Yes, I noticed it the day before in the hotel, and wondered how such a tow-headed child could belong to such a dark-visaged couple as this woman and her husband

Lady Barbara Probably an adopted baby, especially as the couple are not young. But now I must retire, Lester: the donkey ride up the Alphorn, though exhilarating at the time, and not at all unpleasant in recollection, has nevertheless quite tired me out. I am ready for bed.

Lester: And I. The strain of constantly watching for small accidents has quite worn me out. And of course I will need to check for insects in my room and in my bed. These beds, with their quilts are often the haunt of spiders, and those in this part of Europe are particularly large and poisonous. We are only a thousand or so miles from Italy, as the crow flies, and you know they have scorpions to endure. And please, mother, lock your door against assassins:

Lady Barbara Lester, you know Knobaltheim is as calm a place as one could wish. I have no doubts for my security. We shall go to see the Burgomaster tomorrow morning.

Lester: Do not take the lift, mother!

Lady Barbara: Good night.

Music as before is heard, which fades into: 1. Chimes of the clock (as before) and 2 general cafe sounds which continue as the dialogue proceeds, then fade)

Lady Barbara And so Burgomaster, that is the only idea I have been able to offer you. I must say that I am not particularly enamoured of it , and when I looked at the child, he seemed similarly unenthusiastic, although it was rather difficult to tell what he might think, since his rather blank expression and complete absence of conversation hardly permitted me to imagine he understood the importance of the ceremony or the desirability of his participation in it.

Burgomaster: But no. Lady Barbara! It is an enchanting idea. . A little angel, offering to His Highness the Easter egg in which there is a basket of plover eggs, and those fresh from Wien! It will be a most pretty ceremony. It will be afford quite as much pleasure to His Serenity as the more formal and elaborate ceremonial which larger towns offer on these occasions.

Lady Barbara: In that case, I shall tell the couple that you have welcomed the idea. I imagine that they have already begun to make preparation: the wings, the coat and the egg, in anticipation of your favourable decision. Clearly the combination of sentiment and plovers' eggs appeals strongly to your Teutonic mind. I shall provide myself with an emergency supply of chocolate sweetmeats for use on the day: children may be time-servers, but they do not encourage long accounts.

Lester: I will privately have words with the little blighter and try to convey the horrible smackings that will attend any failings in its share of the proceedings

Burgomaster: Everything will be quite delightful. His Serenity will take his place on the princely dais, the boys will form an avenue of the floral arches, and you, Lady Barbara, will move forward, the child walking at your side.

Lester: The best we can hope for is that he will march stolidly with a certain grim determination and under the promise of cakes and sweeties galore, will give the egg well and truly to the kind old gentleman who will be waiting to receive it.

Burgomaster: And receive it he shall. When you get closer to the dais, you, Lady Barbara must step aside, so that the child may toddle forward for the last few steps on his own, before offering the egg to His Serenity. Please give your friends the good news, so that they can complete their preparations, whilst you train the little angel to carry the egg and offer it when he reaches the Prince. To the gala!

Chimes of the clock, fade in under and then over the Music of the town band, the crowd cheering in distance and then a louder cheering nearer : the crowd noise and band music continue quietly underneath all the ensuing dialogue until A

Lady Barbara: Well, I must say, you have certainly made an effort with the child: the angel is most prettily and quaintly dressed. Do you not think so Lester?

Lester: The wings look really as if you had spent hours in one of these overpainted and overelaborate churches which seem to abound in this part of Europe, where the fat little cherubs never seem to leave off eating, when they are not plucking at harps or, as in this case offering a basket of something or other to whichever of the heavenly host will receive it. Where is the Easter egg, anyway?

Slavic Gent: I haff it here.

Lady Barbara: Ah! If you give it to me, I will have it ready to give him just before we walk up to the Prince.

Slavic Lady: No! I will place it in his arms personally: I have schooled him most carefully in how the precious burden must be held. I will take him over here, out of the way, for a final tidy up, and then you shall escort him, Lady Barbara.

Lady Barbara: Do you not wish to escort him yourself? The proud parents who have devised this pretty ceremony? Surely you wish to be at the front of the crowd?

Slavic Lady: No thank you. We prefer to be unobtrusive. We will watch from the back of the Square, behind the crowd. We shall nevertheless be able to see, I feel sure. Goodbye.

A: *The Town Band finishes, there is a single trumpet fanfare, then the crowd noise is sshh*

Lady Barbara: So now I must have the chocolate bribes at the ready, and marshal this child through the crowd . Come, child, the Prince has mounted the dais, the path is cleared for us and we move forward to give the egg to His Serenity. Walk nicely.

Sound of oohs and aahs from the crowd.

Lester: *(to himself)*: Where are the proud parents. I can't see their beaming faces: they were so eager for their "pretty idea" and should be in the front row. Hulloo! There they are. But why in a side street? And why getting into a cab with such furtive haste? And why making off, leaving the boy, who is approaching the dais clutching his burden with slow, relentless steps!

Sound of horses' hooves beginning to take the cab off in the distance.

Mein Gott! It's a bomb! This "quaint Styrian ceremony" has been concocted to blow up the Prince and mother as well! For once in my life I must stop this! Out of the way! Out of the way!

Burgomaster: Mr Slaggsby! What are you doing? You have seized the egg as if it is a rugby ball!

Lady Barbara: Lester! Let the boy alone! He is holding on to it with great determination , and this is most undignified!

Lester: The Easter egg is a bomb! It's an assassination plot! The supposed "parents" are in a cab driving fast towards the station! The child is merely the tool of destruction!

Burgomaster: Quickly, Your Serenity, out of the Square immediately:

(sound of crowd reaction: screams and running)

Lady Barbara: What are you doing Lester! Get away! Get rid of the bomb! Don't just lie there clutching it!

Lester: *(Screaming)* I can't get it from him! he's clutching it too tightly! : I'm too afraid to do anything! My legs won't bear me! What am I to do!

(Lester screams several times and the bomb is heard to explode: then there are screams which fade. Fade in the chimes from the grandfather clock striking the three-quarters (Westminster) and the birdsong heard at the start which continues throughout the remaining dialogue)

Lady Barbara: And so, Miss Grey, I saw my son lying prone in abject terror! Timid and fearful all his life, terror had now mastered him, and his spasm of daring had been shattered by the child's resistance.

Miss Grey: It had not let go of the egg?

Lady Barbara: No. It had been promised cakes and sweetmeats if it handed it over to the prince, Lester could not have dislodged it any more than a limpet. So he lay there, screaming and clutching the white silken gewgaw as if for safety, unable to crawl from that deadly neighbourhood, able only to scream and scream and scream.

Miss Grey: But are you not proud of your son's heroic act? The prince was saved and Central Europe has been as calm and peaceful ever since.

Lady Barbara: I stood there, striving to balance in my mind the abject shame at the terror which then held him in thrall against the compelling act of courage which flung him grandly

and madly on to the point of danger. I saw for the space of a second the two entangled figures, the infant with its woodenly obstinate face and body tense with dogged resistance, and my boy, limp and already nearly dead with a terror that nearly stifled his screams: and over them the long gala streams flapping gaily in the sunshine. I have never forgotten the scene: it was the last I saw.
The scars I bear on my face and my sightless eyes are the surface: There are wounds much deeper which I must bear for the rest of my darkened life.

Miss Grey: Would you like me to take you in now, Lady Barbara? Shall we go in now? You can perhaps sense that the sun has been clouded over, and we have just heard the clock telling us that it is nearly tea- time.

Lady Barbara: Take me in, please. The garden grows cold. Let us be thankful that Knobaltheim has had no further disturbances to its peace,

(*the clock begins to strike the hour of four*)

and we are in England, with the twentieth century only a decade old, and a new King, George the Fifth and Queen Mary, to be crowned next week.

Miss Grey: I shall hope to watch the procession from a place in Whitehall.

Lady Barbara: (*shuddering*) No such ceremonies for me!

(*the sound of birdsong fades as the grandfather completes the chime*)

Narrator: You have been listening to "the Easter Egg " a play adapted by Andrew Stafford from a short story by H H Munro, known as "Saki", performed by The Marlow Players .

(*Fade in under the Narrator the town band playing*)

The cast was as follows:

Lady Barbara Slaggsby was played by...

Lester Slaggsby, her son, by.....

Miss Grey, her companion, by..

The Burgomaster by.....

The Slavic Lady by.....

The Slavic Gentleman by...

Post production sound was provided by Andy Scott

The technical producer for this recording was Brian Couling

and the play was directed by Andrew Stafford.

(*the Town Band music fades up to its conclusion*)

Note: Casting: If necessary, it is possible to double Miss Grey and the Slavic Lady, providing the accents are sufficiently different.