



Clovis on
Parental Responsibilities

by Saki



MARION EGCELBY SAT TALKING TO CLOVIS on the only subject that she ever willingly talked about – her offspring and their varied perfections and accomplishments. Clovis was not in what could be called a receptive mood; the younger generation of Egcelby, depicted in the glowing improbable colours of parent impressionism, aroused in him no enthusiasm. Mrs Egcelby, on the other hand, was furnished with enthusiasm enough for two.

“You would like Eric,” she said, argumentatively rather than hopefully. Clovis had intimated very unmistakably that he was unlikely to care extravagantly for either Amy or Willie. “Yes, I feel sure you would like Eric. Every one takes to him at once. You know, he always reminds me of that famous picture of the youthful David – I forget who it’s by, but it’s very well known.”

“That would be sufficient to set me against him, if I saw much of him,” said Clovis. “Just imagine at auction bridge, for instance, when one was trying to concentrate one’s mind on what one’s partner’s original declaration had been, and to remember what suits one’s opponents had originally discarded, what it would be like to have some one persistently reminding one of a picture of the youthful David. It would be simply maddening. If Eric did that I should detest him.”

“Eric doesn’t play bridge,” said Mrs Egcelby with dignity.

“Doesn’t he?” asked Clovis; “why not?”

“None of my children have been brought up to play card games,” said Mrs Egcelby; “draughts and halma and those sorts of games I encourage. Eric is considered quite a wonderful draughts-player.”

“You are strewing dreadful risks in the path of your family,” said Clovis; “a friend of mine who is a prison chaplain told me that among the worst criminal cases that have come under his notice, men condemned to death or to long periods of penal servitude, there was not a single bridge-player. On the other hand, he knew at least two expert draughts-players among them.”

“I really don’t see what my boys have got to do with the criminal classes,” said Mrs Egcelby resentfully. “They have been most carefully brought up, I can assure you that.”

“That shows that you were nervous as to how they would turn out,” said Clovis. “Now, my mother never bothered about bringing me up. She just saw to it that I got whacked at decent intervals and was taught the difference between right and wrong; there is some difference, you know, but I’ve forgotten what it is.”

“Forgotten the difference between right and wrong!” exclaimed Mrs Egcelby.

“Well, you see, I took up natural history and a whole lot of other subjects at the same time, and one can’t remember everything, can one? I used to know the difference between the Sardinian dormouse and the ordinary kind, and whether the wry-neck arrives at our shores earlier than the cuckoo, or the other way round, and how long the walrus takes in growing to maturity; I daresay you knew all those sorts of things once, but I bet you’ve forgotten them.”

"Those things are not important," said Mrs Eggelby, "but –"

"The fact that we've both forgotten them proves that they are important," said Clovis; "you must have noticed that it's always the important things that one forgets, while the trivial, unnecessary facts of life stick in one's memory. There's my cousin, Editha Clubberley, for instance; I can never forget that her birthday is on the 12th of October. It's a matter of utter indifference to me on what date her birthday falls, or whether she was born at all; either fact seems to me absolutely trivial, or unnecessary – I've heaps of other cousins to go on with. On the other hand, when I'm staying with Hildegard Shrubley I can never remember the important circumstance whether her first husband got his unenviable reputation on the Turf or the Stock Exchange, and that uncertainty rules Sport and Finance out of the conversation at once. One can never mention travel, either, because her second husband had to live permanently abroad."

"Mrs Shrubley and I move in very different circles," said Mrs Eggelby stiffly.

"No one who knows Hildegard could possibly accuse her of moving in a circle," said Clovis; "her view of life seems to be a non-stop run with an inexhaustible supply of petrol. If she can get some one else to pay for the petrol so much the better. I don't mind confessing to you that she has taught me more than any other woman I can think of."

"What kind of knowledge?" demanded Mrs Eggelby, with the air a jury might collectively wear when finding a verdict without leaving the box.

"Well, among other things, she's introduced me to at least four different ways of cooking lobster," said Clovis gratefully. "That, of course, wouldn't appeal to you; people who abstain from the pleasures of the card-table never really appreciate the finer possibilities of the dining-table. I suppose their powers of enlightened enjoyment get atrophied from disuse."

"An aunt of mine was very ill after eating a lobster," said Mrs Eggelby.

"I daresay, if we knew more of her history, we should find out that she'd often been ill before eating the lobster. Aren't you concealing the fact that she'd had measles and influenza and nervous headache and hysteria, and other things that aunts do have, long before she ate the lobster? Aunts that have never known a day's illness are very rare; in fact, I don't personally know of any. Of course if she ate it as a child of two weeks old it might have been her first illness – and her last. But if that was the case I think you should have said so."

"I must be going," said Mrs Eggelby, in a tone which had been thoroughly sterilised of even perfunctory regret.

Clovis rose with an air of graceful reluctance.

"I have so enjoyed our little talk about Eric," he said; "I quite look forward to meeting him some day."

“Good-bye,” said Mrs Eggeby frostily; the supplementary remark which she made at the back of her throat was —

“I’ll take care that you never shall!”