

***SAKI,
H. H. MUNRO***



***THE CHRONICLES
OF CLOVIS***

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The Chronicles of Clovis

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TO THE LYNX KITTEN,
WITH HIS RELUCTANTLY GIVEN CONSENT,
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

H. H. M.
August, 1911

Esmé

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“All hunting stories are the same,” said Clovis; “just as all Turf stories are the same, and all —”

“My hunting story isn’t a bit like any you’ve ever heard,” said the Baroness. “It happened quite a while ago, when I was about twenty-three. I wasn’t living apart from my husband then; you see, neither of us could afford to make the other a separate allowance. In spite of everything that proverbs may say, poverty keeps together more homes than it breaks up. But we always hunted with different packs. All this has nothing to do with the story.”

“We haven’t arrived at the meet yet. I suppose there was a meet,” said Clovis.

“Of course there was a meet,” said the Baroness; all the usual crowd were there, especially Constance Broddle. Constance is one of those strapping florid girls that go so well with autumn scenery or Christmas decorations in church. ‘I feel a presentiment that something dreadful is going to happen,’ she said to me; ‘am I looking pale?’

“She was looking about as pale as a beetroot that has suddenly heard bad news.

“‘You’re looking nicer than usual,’ I said, ‘but that’s so easy for you.’ Before she had got the right bearings of this remark we had settled down to business; hounds had found a fox lying out in some gorse-bushes.”

“I knew it,” said Clovis, “in every fox-hunting story that I’ve ever heard there’s been a fox and some gorse-bushes.”

“Constance and I were well mounted,” continued the Baroness serenely, “and we had no difficulty in keeping ourselves in the first flight, though it was a fairly stiff run. Towards the finish, however, we must have held rather too independent a line, for we lost the hounds, and found ourselves plodding aimlessly along miles away from anywhere. It was fairly exasperating, and my temper was beginning to let itself go by inches, when on pushing our way through an accommodating hedge we were gladdened by the sight of hounds in full cry in a hollow just beneath us.

“‘There they go,’ cried Constance, and then added in a gasp, ‘In Heaven’s name, what are they hunting?’

“It was certainly no mortal fox. It stood more than twice as high, had a short, ugly head, and an enormous thick neck.

“‘It’s a hyaena,’ I cried; ‘it must have escaped from Lord Pabham’s Park.’

“At that moment the hunted beast turned and faced its pursuers, and the hounds (there were only about six couple of them) stood round in a half-circle and looked foolish. Evidently they had broken away from the rest of the pack on the trail of this alien scent, and were not quite sure how to treat their quarry now they had got him.

“The hyaena hailed our approach with unmistakable relief and demonstrations of friendliness. It had probably been accustomed to uniform kindness from humans, while its first experience of a pack of hounds had left a bad impression. The hounds looked more than ever embarrassed

as their quarry paraded its sudden intimacy with us, and the faint toot of a horn in the distance was seized on as a welcome signal for unobtrusive departure. Constance and I and the hyaena were left alone in the gathering twilight.

“‘What are we to do?’ asked Constance.

“‘What a person you are for questions,’ I said.

“‘Well, we can’t stay here all night with a hyaena,’ she retorted.

“‘I don’t know what your ideas of comfort are,’ I said; ‘but I shouldn’t think of staying here all night even without a hyaena. My home may be an unhappy one, but at least it has hot and cold water laid on, and domestic service, and other conveniences which we shouldn’t find here. We had better make for that ridge of trees to the right; I imagine the Crowley road is just beyond.’

“We trotted off slowly along a faintly marked cart-track, with the beast following cheerfully at our heels.

“‘What on earth are we to do with the hyaena?’ came the inevitable question.

“‘What does one generally do with hyaenas?’ I asked crossly.

“‘I’ve never had anything to do with one before,’ said Constance.

“‘Well, neither have I. If we even knew its sex we might give it a name. Perhaps we might call it Esmé. That would do in either case.’

“There was still sufficient daylight for us to distinguish wayside objects, and our listless spirits gave an upward perk as we came upon a small half-naked gipsy brat picking blackberries from a low-growing bush. The sudden

apparition of two horsewomen and a hyaena set it off crying, and in any case we should scarcely have gleaned any useful geographical information from that source; but there was a probability that we might strike a gipsy encampment somewhere along our route. We rode on hopefully but uneventfully for another mile or so.

“‘I wonder what that child was doing there,’ said Constance presently.

“‘Picking blackberries. Obviously.’

“‘I don’t like the way it cried,’ pursued Constance; ‘somehow its wail keeps ringing in my ears.’

“I did not chide Constance for her morbid fancies; as a matter of fact the same sensation, of being pursued by a persistent fretful wail, had been forcing itself on my rather over-tired nerves. For company’s sake I hulloed to Esmé, who had lagged somewhat behind. With a few springy bounds he drew up level, and then shot past us.

“The wailing accompaniment was explained. The gipsy child was firmly, and I expect painfully, held in his jaws.

“‘Merciful Heaven!’ screamed Constance, ‘what on earth shall we do? What are we to do?’

“I am perfectly certain that at the Last Judgment Constance will ask more questions than any of the examining Seraphs.

“‘Can’t we do something?’ she persisted tearfully, as Esmé cantered easily along in front of our tired horses.

“Personally I was doing everything that occurred to me at the moment. I stormed and scolded and coaxed in English and French and gamekeeper language; I made absurd, ineffectual cuts in the air with my thongless hunting-crop; I

hurled my sandwich case at the brute; in fact, I really don't know what more I could have done. And still we lumbered on through the deepening dusk, with that dark uncouth shape lumbering ahead of us, and a drone of lugubrious music floating in our ears. Suddenly Esmé bounded aside into some thick bushes, where we could not follow; the wail rose to a shriek and then stopped altogether. This part of the story I always hurry over, because it is really rather horrible. When the beast joined us again, after an absence of a few minutes, there was an air of patient understanding about him, as though he knew that he had done something of which we disapproved, but which he felt to be thoroughly justifiable.

“‘How can you let that ravening beast trot by your side?’ asked Constance. She was looking more than ever like an albino beetroot.

“‘In the first place, I can't prevent it,’ I said; ‘and in the second place, whatever else he may be, I doubt if he's ravening at the present moment.’

“Constance shuddered. ‘Do you think the poor little thing suffered much?’ came another of her futile questions.

“‘The indications were all that way,’ I said; ‘on the other hand, of course, it may have been crying from sheer temper. Children sometimes do.’

“It was nearly pitch-dark when we emerged suddenly into the highroad. A flash of lights and the whir of a motor went past us at the same moment at uncomfortably close quarters. A thud and a sharp screeching yell followed a second later. The car drew up, and when I had ridden back

to the spot I found a young man bending over a dark motionless mass lying by the roadside.

“‘You have killed my Esmé,’ I exclaimed bitterly.

“‘I’m so awfully sorry,’ said the young man; I keep dogs myself, so I know what you must feel about it. I’ll do anything I can in reparation.’

“‘Please bury him at once,’ I said; ‘that much I think I may ask of you.’

“‘Bring the spade, William,’ he called to the chauffeur. Evidently hasty roadside interments were contingencies that had been provided against.

“The digging of a sufficiently large grave took some little time. ‘I say, what a magnificent fellow,’ said the motorist as the corpse was rolled over into the trench. ‘I’m afraid he must have been rather a valuable animal.’

“‘He took second in the puppy class at Birmingham last year,’ I said resolutely.

“Constance snorted loudly.

“‘Don’t cry, dear,’ I said brokenly; ‘it was all over in a moment. He couldn’t have suffered much.’

“‘Look here,’ said the young fellow desperately, ‘you simply must let me do something by way of reparation.’

“I refused sweetly, but as he persisted I let him have my address.

“Of course, we kept our own counsel as to the earlier episodes of the evening. Lord Pabham never advertised the loss of his hyaena; when a strictly fruit-eating animal strayed from his park a year or two previously he was called upon to give compensation in eleven cases of sheep-worrying and practically to restock his neighbours’ poultry-

yards, and an escaped hyaena would have mounted up to something on the scale of a Government grant. The gipsies were equally unobtrusive over their missing offspring; I don't suppose in large encampments they really know to a child or two how many they've got."

The Baroness paused reflectively, and then continued:

"There was a sequel to the adventure, though. I got through the post a charming little diamond brooch, with the name Esmé set in a sprig of rosemary. Incidentally, too, I lost the friendship of Constance Broddle. You see, when I sold the brooch I quite properly refused to give her any share of the proceeds. I pointed out that the Esmé part of the affair was my own invention, and the hyaena part of it belonged to Lord Pabham, if it really was his hyaena, of which, of course, I've no proof."

The Match-Maker

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The grill-room clock struck eleven with the respectful unobtrusiveness of one whose mission in life is to be ignored. When the flight of time should really have rendered abstinence and migration imperative the lighting apparatus would signal the fact in the usual way.

Six minutes later Clovis approached the supper-table, in the blessed expectancy of one who has dined sketchily and long ago.

"I'm starving," he announced, making an effort to sit down gracefully and read the menu at the same time.

"So I gathered;" said his host, "from the fact that you were nearly punctual. I ought to have told you that I'm a Food Reformer. I've ordered two bowls of bread-and-milk and some health biscuits. I hope you don't mind."

Clovis pretended afterwards that he didn't go white above the collar-line for the fraction of a second.

"All the same," he said, "you ought not to joke about such things. There really are such people. I've known people who've met them. To think of all the adorable things there are to eat in the world, and then to go through life munching sawdust and being proud of it."

"They're like the Flagellants of the Middle Ages, who went about mortifying themselves."

"They had some excuse," said Clovis. "They did it to save their immortal souls, didn't they? You needn't tell me that a

man who doesn't love oysters and asparagus and good wines has got a soul, or a stomach either. He's simply got the instinct for being unhappy highly developed."

Clovis relapsed for a few golden moments into tender intimacies with a succession of rapidly disappearing oysters.

"I think oysters are more beautiful than any religion," he resumed presently. "They not only forgive our unkindness to them; they justify it, they incite us to go on being perfectly horrid to them. Once they arrive at the supper-table they seem to enter thoroughly into the spirit of the thing. There's nothing in Christianity or Buddhism that quite matches the sympathetic unselfishness of an oyster. Do you like my new waistcoat? I'm wearing it for the first time to-night."

"It looks like a great many others you've had lately, only worse. New dinner waistcoats are becoming a habit with you."

"They say one always pays for the excesses of one's youth; mercifully that isn't true about one's clothes. My mother is thinking of getting married."

"Again!"

"It's the first time."

"Of course, you ought to know. I was under the impression that she'd been married once or twice at least."

"Three times, to be mathematically exact. I meant that it was the first time she'd thought about getting married; the other times she did it without thinking. As a matter of fact, it's really I who am doing the thinking for her in this case. You see, it's quite two years since her last husband died."

"You evidently think that brevity is the soul of widowhood."

“Well, it struck me that she was getting moped, and beginning to settle down, which wouldn’t suit her a bit. The first symptom that I noticed was when she began to complain that we were living beyond our income. All decent people live beyond their incomes nowadays, and those who aren’t respectable live beyond other peoples. A few gifted individuals manage to do both.”

“It’s hardly so much a gift as an industry.”

“The crisis came,” returned Clovis, “when she suddenly started the theory that late hours were bad for one, and wanted me to be in by one o’clock every night. Imagine that sort of thing for me, who was eighteen on my last birthday.”

“On your last two birthdays, to be mathematically exact.”

“Oh, well, that’s not my fault. I’m not going to arrive at nineteen as long as my mother remains at thirty-seven. One must have some regard for appearances.”

“Perhaps your mother would age a little in the process of settling down.”

“That’s the last thing she’d think of. Feminine reformations always start in on the failings of other people. That’s why I was so keen on the husband idea.”

“Did you go as far as to select the gentleman, or did you merely throw out a general idea, and trust to the force of suggestion?”

“If one wants a thing done in a hurry one must see to it oneself. I found a military Johnny hanging round on a loose end at the club, and took him home to lunch once or twice. He’d spent most of his life on the Indian frontier, building roads, and relieving famines and minimizing earthquakes, and all that sort of thing that one does do on frontiers. He

could talk sense to a peevish cobra in fifteen native languages, and probably knew what to do if you found a rogue elephant on your croquet-lawn; but he was shy and diffident with women. I told my mother privately that he was an absolute woman-hater; so, of course, she laid herself out to flirt all she knew, which isn't a little."

"And was the gentleman responsive?"

"I hear he told some one at the club that he was looking out for a Colonial job, with plenty of hard work, for a young friend of his, so I gather that he has some idea of marrying into the family."

"You seem destined to be the victim of the reformation, after all."

Clovis wiped the trace of Turkish coffee and the beginnings of a smile from his lips, and slowly lowered his dexter eyelid. Which, being interpreted, probably meant, "I DON'T think!"

Tobermory

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It was a chill, rain-washed afternoon of a late August day, that indefinite season when partridges are still in security or cold storage, and there is nothing to hunt — unless one is bounded on the north by the Bristol Channel, in which case one may lawfully gallop after fat red stags. Lady Blemley's house-party was not bounded on the north by the Bristol Channel, hence there was a full gathering of her guests round the tea-table on this particular afternoon. And, in spite of the blankness of the season and the triteness of the occasion, there was no trace in the company of that fatigued restlessness which means a dread of the pianola and a subdued hankering for auction bridge. The undisguised openmouthed attention of the entire party was fixed on the homely negative personality of Mr. Cornelius Appin. Of all her guests, he was the one who had come to Lady Blemley with the vaguest reputation. Some one had said he was "clever," and he had got his invitation in the moderate expectation, on the part of his hostess, that some portion at least of his cleverness would be contributed to the general entertainment. Until tea-time that day she had been unable to discover in what direction, if any, his cleverness lay. He was neither a wit nor a croquet champion, a hypnotic force nor a begetter of amateur theatricals. Neither did his exterior suggest the sort of man in whom women are willing to pardon a generous measure of mental

deficiency. He had subsided into mere Mr. Appin, and the Cornelius seemed a piece of transparent baptismal bluff. And now he was claiming to have launched on the world a discovery beside which the invention of gunpowder, of the printing-press, and of steam locomotion were inconsiderable trifles. Science had made bewildering strides in many directions during recent decades, but this thing seemed to belong to the domain of miracle rather than to scientific achievement.

“And do you really ask us to believe,” Sir Wilfrid was saying, “that you have discovered a means for instructing animals in the art of human speech, and that dear old Tobermory has proved your first successful pupil?”

“It is a problem at which I have worked for the last seventeen years,” said Mr. Appin, “but only during the last eight or nine months have I been rewarded with glimmerings of success. Of course I have experimented with thousands of animals, but latterly only with cats, those wonderful creatures which have assimilated themselves so marvellously with our civilization while retaining all their highly developed feral instincts. Here and there among cats one comes across an outstanding superior intellect, just as one does among the ruck of human beings, and when I made the acquaintance of Tobermory a week ago I saw at once that I was in contact with a ‘Beyond-cat’ of extraordinary intelligence. I had gone far along the road to success in recent experiments; with Tobermory, as you call him, I have reached the goal.”

Mr. Appin concluded his remarkable statement in a voice which he strove to divest of a triumphant inflection. No one

said "Rats," though Clovis's lips moved in a monosyllabic contortion which probably invoked those rodents of disbelief.

"And do you mean to say," asked Miss Resker, after a slight pause, "that you have taught Tobermory to say and understand easy sentences of one syllable?"

"My dear Miss Resker," said the wonderworker patiently, "one teaches little children and savages and backward adults in that piecemeal fashion; when one has once solved the problem of making a beginning with an animal of highly developed intelligence one has no need for those halting methods. Tobermory can speak our language with perfect correctness."

This time Clovis very distinctly said, "Beyond-rats!" Sir Wilfrid was more polite, but equally sceptical.

"Hadn't we better have the cat in and judge for ourselves?" suggested Lady Blemley.

Sir Wilfrid went in search of the animal, and the company settled themselves down to the languid expectation of witnessing some more or less adroit drawing-room ventriloquism.

In a minute Sir Wilfrid was back in the room, his face white beneath its tan and his eyes dilated with excitement.

"By Gad, it's true!"

His agitation was unmistakably genuine, and his hearers started forward in a thrill of awakened interest.

Collapsing into an armchair he continued breathlessly: "I found him dozing in the smoking-room, and called out to him to come for his tea. He blinked at me in his usual way, and I said, 'Come on, Toby; don't keep us waiting;' and, by

Gad! he drawled out in a most horribly natural voice that he'd come when he dashed well pleased! I nearly jumped out of my skin!"

Appin had preached to absolutely incredulous hearers; Sir Wilfrid's statement carried instant conviction. A Babel-like chorus of startled exclamation arose, amid which the scientist sat mutely enjoying the first fruit of his stupendous discovery.

In the midst of the clamour Tobermory entered the room and made his way with velvet tread and studied unconcern across to the group seated round the tea-table.

A sudden hush of awkwardness and constraint fell on the company. Somehow there seemed an element of embarrassment in addressing on equal terms a domestic cat of acknowledged dental ability.

"Will you have some milk, Tobermory?" asked Lady Blemley in a rather strained voice.

"I don't mind if I do," was the response, couched in a tone of even indifference. A shiver of suppressed excitement went through the listeners, and Lady Blemley might be excused for pouring out the saucerful of milk rather unsteadily.

"I'm afraid I've spilt a good deal of it," she said apologetically.

"After all, it's not my Axminster," was Tobermory's rejoinder.

Another silence fell on the group, and then Miss Resker, in her best district-visitor manner, asked if the human language had been difficult to learn. Tobermory looked squarely at her for a moment and then fixed his gaze

serenely on the middle distance. It was obvious that boring questions lay outside his scheme of life.

"What do you think of human intelligence?" asked Mavis Pellington lamely.

"Of whose intelligence in particular?" asked Tobermory coldly.

"Oh, well, mine for instance," said Mavis, with a feeble laugh.

"You put me in an embarrassing position," said Tobermory, whose tone and attitude certainly did not suggest a shred of embarrassment. "When your inclusion in this house-party was suggested Sir Wilfrid protested that you were the most brainless woman of his acquaintance, and that there was a wide distinction between hospitality and the care of the feeble-minded. Lady Blemley replied that your lack of brain-power was the precise quality which had earned you your invitation, as you were the only person she could think of who might be idiotic enough to buy their old car. You know, the one they call 'The Envy of Sisyphus,' because it goes quite nicely up-hill if you push it."

Lady Blemley's protestations would have had greater effect if she had not casually suggested to Mavis only that morning that the car in question would be just the thing for her down at her Devonshire home.

Major Barfield plunged in heavily to effect a diversion.

"How about your carryings-on with the tortoiseshell puss up at the stables, eh?"

The moment he had said it every one realized the blunder.

“One does not usually discuss these matters in public,” said Tobermory frigidly. “From a slight observation of your ways since you’ve been in this house I should imagine you’d find it inconvenient if I were to shift the conversation on to your own little affairs.”

The panic which ensued was not confined to the Major.

“Would you like to go and see if cook has got your dinner ready?” suggested Lady Blemley hurriedly, affecting to ignore the fact that it wanted at least two hours to Tobermory’s dinner-time.

“Thanks,” said Tobermory, “not quite so soon after my tea. I don’t want to die of indigestion.”

“Cats have nine lives, you know,” said Sir Wilfrid heartily.

“Possibly,” answered Tobermory; “but only one liver.”

“Adelaide!” said Mrs. Cornett, “do you mean to encourage that cat to go out and gossip about us in the servants’ hall?”

The panic had indeed become general. A narrow ornamental balustrade ran in front of most of the bedroom windows at the Towers, and it was recalled with dismay that this had formed a favourite promenade for Tobermory at all hours, whence he could watch the pigeons — and heaven knew what else besides. If he intended to become reminiscent in his present outspoken strain the effect would be something more than disconcerting. Mrs. Cornett, who spent much time at her toilet table, and whose complexion was reputed to be of a nomadic though punctual disposition, looked as ill at ease as the Major. Miss Scrawen, who wrote fiercely sensuous poetry and led a blameless life, merely displayed irritation; if you are methodical and virtuous in

private you don't necessarily want every one to know it. Bertie van Tahn, who was so depraved at seventeen that he had long ago given up trying to be any worse, turned a dull shade of gardenia white, but he did not commit the error of dashing out of the room like Odo Finsberry, a young gentleman who was understood to be reading for the Church and who was possibly disturbed at the thought of scandals he might hear concerning other people. Clovis had the presence of mind to maintain a composed exterior; privately he was calculating how long it would take to procure a box of fancy mice through the agency of the EXCHANGE AND MART as a species of hush-money.

Even in a delicate situation like the present, Agnes Resker could not endure to remain too long in the background.

"Why did I ever come down here?" she asked dramatically.

Tobermory immediately accepted the opening.

"Judging by what you said to Mrs. Cornett on the croquet-lawn yesterday, you were out for food. You described the Blemleys as the dullest people to stay with that you knew, but said they were clever enough to employ a first-rate cook; otherwise they'd find it difficult to get anyone to come down a second time."

"There's not a word of truth in it! I appeal to Mrs. Cornett —" exclaimed the discomfited Agnes.

"Mrs. Cornett repeated your remark afterwards to Bertie van Tahn," continued Tobermory, "and said, 'That woman is a regular Hunger Marcher; she'd go anywhere for four square meals a day,' and Bertie van Tahn said —"