The Quest: from a short story by ‘Saki’

Characters:

Clovis: young man, laconic, drawling, satirical, mocking: a weekend guest of the Momebys

Mrs Momeby; mother of Baby

Arnold Momeby; father of Baby

Miss Rose-Marie Gilpet: a Christian Scientist next door

Erik Momeby ( “Baby” ) about 2-3 years

Percy: resembling Erik in every way

A nursemaid from the Villa Charlottenberg up the road

The scene is the garden of the Villa Elsinore, in deepest Surrey. Afternoon of a summer’s day.

Shouts from Mrs M and Mr M: *Erik1 Erik! Where are you, Baby? etc.*

***Mrs Momeby****:* Oh, Clovis, oh Clovis, we have lost him! ( *wails )*

***Clovis****:* I hope you do not mean the Cook: I would not like to think that you are going to have to serve dinner late because you have yet to engage a replacement.

***Mrs Momeby****:* We’ve lost Baby! We’ve lost our Baby!

**Clovis**: ( lazily ) Do you mean that it’s dead, or stampeded, or that you staked it at cards and lost it that way?

***Mrs Momeby***: He was toddling about quite ha-happily on the l-lawn and Arnold had just come in from the garden and I was asking him what sort of sauce he would like with the asparagus-

***Clovis:*** *( with interest )* I hope he said Hollandaise, because if there’s anything I hate-

***Mrs Momeby:*** -and all of a sudden I missed Baby. We’ve hunted high and low, in house and garden and outside the gates, and he’s nowhere to be seen!

***Clovis:*** Is he anywhere to be heard? If not, he must be at least two miles away.

***Mrs M***: But where? And how? Erik has only just learned to toddle around, he couldn’t have wandered that far, and not in the time, Arnold had just come in from the garden and –

***Clovis:*** Perhaps an eagle or a wild beast has carried him off.

***Mrs Momeby:*** ( *horrified* ) There aren’t any eagles or wild beasts in Surrey!

***Clovis:***  They escape now and then from travelling shows. Perhaps they’ve had a circus in this part of the Home Counties. Sometimes I think they let them get loose for the sake of the advertisement. Think what a sensational headline it would make in the local papers: “Infant son of prominent nonconformist devoured by spotted hyena” Your husband isn’t a prominent Nonconformist, but his mother came of Wesleyan stock and you must allow the newspapers some latitude.

***Mrs Momeby:*** But we-we should have fou- found his remains: oh!

***Clovis*** If the hyena was really hungry and not merely toying with his food there wouldn’t be much in the way of remains. It would be like the small-boy-and-apple story- ‘there ain’t gonna be no core’

***Mrs Momeby:*** Oh! Oh!, what are you saying? where is Baby!

 ***Clovis:***  I am glad to hear-

***Mrs Momeby***: that Baby is safe?

 ***Clovis :***  -that you do not need to concern yourself over a lost Cook and that dinner arrangements are not disturbed. Now as I was saying, I am most anxious that a Hollandaise sauce is served with the asparagus-

***Mrs Momeby*** : Oh…. Arnold! Arnold! Where’s Baby? Baby!

***Miss Gilpet***: Hello my dear! Is there something wrong? I could hear you calling from the back garden. I know our grounds are only next door, but you sounded so agitated, I felt I simply must come around to see what the matter is.

***Mrs Momeby***: Oh Miss Gilpet..Rose-Marie I should say, we have lost Baby. He was happily toddling around the rosebeds while Arnold was pruning the peach trees against the gooseberry garden wall, and Arnold came in from the gooseberry garden complaining of rheumatism

***Clovis:*** There are so many things to complain of this household that it would never have occurred to me to complain of rheumatism-

***Mrs Momeby:***  ( chillingly and tearfully ) He was complaining of rheumatism

***Miss Gilpet:*** There is no such thing as rheumatism- as a Christian Scientist I am quite of the belief that maladies such as you describe, indeed all such phenomena, are merely weaknesses of Faith. Those of us who have Faith suffer no illnesses. They are merely the product of a weakened and unenlightened mind.

***Mrs Momeby:*** *( angrily )*  I suppose you’ll say next, Miss Gilpet, that Erik hasn’t really disappeared?

***Miss Gilpet:*** He has disappeared… but only because you haven’t sufficient faith to find him. It’s only lack of faith on your part that prevents him being restored to you safe and well.

***Clovis:*** But if he’s been eaten in the meantime by a hyena and partly digested, surely some ill-effects would be noticeable?

***Miss Gilpet***  : ( lamely ) I feel sure that a hyena has not eaten him….

***Clovis:*** the hyena might be equally certain that it has. You see, it may have just as much faith as you have and more special knowledge as to the present whereabouts of the baby.

***Mrs Momeby:***  Oh! OH! Oh, Miss Gilpet- Rose-Marie – if you have faith, won’t you find our little Erik for us? I am sure you have powers that are denied to the rest of us..

***Miss Gilpet:*** We Christian Scientists have great belief in the power of Faith: it strengthens us in all adversity, in in this great opportunity case, I shall call forth every scrap of faith that I possess. I will start by venturing back on to the High Road outside.

 ***Mirs Momeby***: ( *calling after her )* It’s no use going there- we’ve searched there a dozen times..

( *garden gate heard to open and bang*…)

***Miss Gilpet:*** Aha! What can I see! Come here, don’t be frightened, Erik, I’ve come to take lost Baby back to his worried Mama – see what Faith can do!

( the baby is heard protesting as he is lifted up and then beginning to scream )

( the gate opens and shuts again )

***Mrs Momeby and Mr Momeby***; Erik, Erik! There you are!

***Miss Gilpet*** : See Mrs Momeby, I found him playing with the buttercups in the dusty road outside. I am glad to say that, there being no motor vehicle in the vicinity, I was able to effect his rescue. He has got his hat over his eyes, and I am ( whoops! ) finding it difficult to hold him the right way up, but he is through Faith, restored to you..

( Baby yells )

***Mr Momeby;*** Our own little Erik come back to us!

( Baby yells )

***Mrs Momeby:*** Oh Rose -Marie , how wonderful Our own little Erik! Is he glad to get back to Daddy and Mummy again? Dear Rose-Marie, thank you, thank you.

( Baby yells )

***Clovis:*** It appears, Miss Gilpet, by the ferocity of its protestations, rather to be showing a marked preference for the dust and buttercups from which it has been by faith so unceremoniously removed.

***Mr Momeby:*** I tell you what- give him a ride on the garden roller; he always enjoys that. ( to Baby ) baby want a ride on roly-poly? Daddy put him on roly-poly, just like this and now we go for a ride-

( *A second baby starts to scream in a more indignant tone that the first, who continues to scream*)

Why Good Lord! There’s another one inside the roller: he’s been hiding there all the time: no wonder we –

**Mrs Momeby:** But this is our baby! Our own little Erik ( sound of kissing ) did he hide in the roly-poly to give us all a big fright?

( *Baby 1 whimpers* )

***Clovis:*** ( to himself aside ) And there sits the interloper on the grass, while the Momebys glare at it, as if it had wormed its way into their affections by a series of heartless and unworthy pretences. -“When love is over, how little of love even the lover understands!”

***Miss Gilpet*** ( *weakly* ) if that is Erik you have in your arms, who is – that infant on the lawn?

***Mrs Momeby:*** ( *acidly* ) that , I think, Miss Gilpet, is for you to explain.

***Clovis***: Obviously, in the same white pinafore and blue-beribboned sun bonnet, which remains obscuring its face, it’s a duplicate Erik that your powers of Faith called into being. The question is, Miss Gilpet, what are you going to do with him?

***Miss Gilpet:*** *( desperately )* I found him sitting in the middle of the road

*( Baby 1 and Baby 2 cry, the Momebys are sniffing and tearfully exclaiming over Erik* ***)***

***Clovis:*** *( severely )*Miss Gilpet, you cannot take him back and leave him there. The highway is meant for traffic, not to be used as a lumber-room for disused miracles.

**Miss Gilpet** ( tearfully ) Oh..Oh.. must I keep him always? Oh..Oh…

***Clovis:***  (*cheerfully )* Not always –he can go into the navy when he’s thirteen. That should be a consoling thought in the meantime. Of course, there may be no end of a bother about his birth certificate. You’ll have to explain matters to the Admiralty, and they’re dreadfully hidebound .

( garden gate opens )

***Maid :* (** *breathlessly )* Master Percy! Master Percy! Thank goodness you’re found. Oh Mrs Momeby, madam, we’ve been in such a state at the Villa Charlottenberg over the way- our young Master Percy must’ve slipped out the front gate when Madam and Nurse were inspecting the Marshal Ney rosebeds . they turn round and he’s disappeared. We looked everywhere for him and I’d been out to the high road outside the Villa a hundred times, thinking he must’ve toddled out- he’s so fond of the buttercups- but he’d disappeared in a twinkling. ( *Baby stops wailing* )

***Mr Momeby:*** Guided by her Faith, Miss Gilpet made the mistake of assuming that Percy was our Erik, who had been hiding in the garden roller.

***Mrs Momeby:*** I am sure that Miss Gilpet will be accompany you and little Percy back to the Villa Charlottenberg, where she can clear matters up.

***Clovis:*** if you will excuse me, I feel I must go to the kitchen in order to ensure that Cook understands about the asparagus sauce.

THE END