

The Curse of Being Clever

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Stephen Leacock mentions in one of his essays the horseman who "leaped into the saddle and galloped off madly in all directions." It would take a clever horse and a clever rider to do that, but Leacock was not necessarily being clever when he wrote about it. He was merely experienced in such matters. Any one will admit that it would take a clever horse to be able to gallop off in all directions. And think of the dexterity of intellect of the man who rode him! Cleverness is intellectual trickery, usually harmless. A clever person is one peculiarly adroit, but not exact of mind, capable of grasping things quickly, but not entirely, who usually manages a complacent appearance, but is seldom satisfied with himself. He can answer nine questions quickly because he is clever, and miss a tenth for the same reason. He is apt to consider anything close a try; rather than a mistake. A clever person is handy at most jobs, seldom expert in any. Often his energies are so consumed in fluttering, he cannot muster the strength to fly.

If strength does not come with age, caution does. There are almost no clever old people. Cleverness is largely confined to the young, to the unformed character. Age supplants cleverness with wisdom sooner or later. Or the clever person, awakened from a dream he has forgot, stands disconsolate and dazed. The curse of being clever is another curse of being young, making a tender spot doubly vulnerable. Added to an acute discomfiture at his natural inferiority, the clever young person is further rankled by those more darkly accursed people who really think they are clever. It is a knife in his breast.

What has the clever person done to deserve his fate? If he is actually clever, what made him so? Perhaps his environment and heredity. If you

know a clever person, it is an even bet that he is one who has been much left to his own device. He has invented marvelous games, but played them all alone. He has asked himself many questions, and answered nine out of ten correctly.

There is a false premium placed upon cleverness amid the confusion of public education. Cleverness up to a certain point is mistaken for scholarship. The tenth question! Why cannot the clever person answer the tenth question? The clever man who is athletically inclined may soon become a hard-running back who can kick and pass. But if he eludes ten men, he is always stopped by the eleventh. He has merely advanced the ball down the field. Advancing the ball is the one important value of cleverness, and once advanced, the ball is due to be kicked back into hell's corner.

Socially, no one is so liable for hatred as the clever person taken at his face value. And no one is so completely lovable as the clever person exposed. It is an extra effort for the clever person to be popular. Usually he makes bad first impressions. His ideas are too generalized or too subtle. His wit is too scathing, or confined only to himself. If he is clever and knows it, he may allow for himself, but it is a tedious adjustment. And—can the truly clever person ever realize what ails him?

The answer is no, except in the final stages of his affliction. Then he sits secluded in a remote corner of his mind, frothing at the mouth, and mumbling, "I am clever! I am clever! I am clever" Suddenly he is no longer clever; he does not even think he is clever; he knows he is not clever. The transformation has just begun. He knows ten answers for eleven questions; he is set for the kick. The horse that galloped off in all directions is beginning to arrive at everyplace.