

Day Clarence

# This Simian World



Clarence Day

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## This Simian World

### ONE

Last Sunday, Potter took me out driving along upper Broadway, where those long rows of tall new apartment houses were built a few years ago. It was a mild afternoon and great crowds of people were out. Sunday afternoon crowds. They were not going anywhere, – they were just strolling up and down, staring at each other, and talking. There were thousands and thousands of them.

"Awful, aren't they!" said Potter.

I didn't know what he meant. When he added, "Why, these crowds," I turned and asked, "Why, what about them?" I wasn't sure whether he had an idea or a headache.

"Other creatures don't do it," he replied, with a discouraged expression. "Are any other beings ever found in such masses, but vermin? Aimless, staring, vacant-minded, – look at them! I can get no sense whatever of individual worth, or of value in men as a race, when I see them like this. It makes one almost despair of civilization."

I thought this over for awhile, to get in touch with his attitude. I myself feel differently at different times about us human-beings: sometimes I get pretty indignant when we are attacked (for there is altogether too much abuse of us by spectator philosophers) and yet at other times I too feel like a spectator, an alien: but even then I had never felt so alien or despairing as Potter. I cast about for the probable cause of our difference. "Let's remember," I said, "it's a simian civilization."

Potter was staring disgustedly at some vaudeville sign-boards.

"Yes," I said, "those for example are distinctively simian. Why should you feel disappointment at something inevitable?" And I went on to argue that it wasn't as though we were descended from eagles for instance, instead of (broadly speaking) from ape-like or monkeyish beings. Being of simian stock, we had simian traits. Our development naturally bore the marks of our origin. If we had inherited our dispositions from eagles we should have loathed vaudeville. But as cousins of the Bandarlog, we loved it. What could you expect?

## TWO

If we had been made directly from clay, the way it says in the Bible, and had therefore inherited no intermediate characteristics, – if a god, or some principle of growth, had gone that way to work with us, he or it might have molded us into much more splendid forms.

But considering our simian descent, it has done very well. The only people who are disappointed in us are those who still believe that clay story. Or who-unconsciously-still let it color their thinking.

There certainly seems to be a power at work in the world, by virtue of which every living thing grows and develops. And it tends toward splendor. Seeds become trees, and weak little nations grow great. But the push or the force that is doing this, the yeast as it were, has to work in and on certain definite kinds of material. Because this yeast is in us, there may be great and undreamed of possibilities awaiting mankind; but because of our line of descent there are also queer limitations.

## THREE

In those distant invisible epochs before men existed, before even the proud missing link strutted around through the woods (little realizing how we his greatgrandsons would smile wryly at him, much as our own descendants may shudder at us, ages hence) the various animals were desperately competing for power. They couldn't or didn't live as equals. Certain groups sought the headship.

Many strange forgotten dynasties rose, met defiance, and fell. In the end it was our ancestors who won, and became simian kings, and bequeathed a whole planet to us-and have never been thanked for it. No monument has been raised to the memory of those first hairy conquerors; yet had they not fought well and wisely in those far-off times, some other race would have been masters, and kept us in cages, or shot us for sport in the forests while they ruled the world.

So Potter and I, developing this train of thought, began to imagine we had lived many ages ago, and somehow or other had alighted here from some older planet. Familiar with the ways of evolution elsewhere in the universe, we naturally should have wondered what course it would take on this earth. "Even in this out-of-the-way corner of the Cosmos," we might have reflected, "and on this tiny star, it may be of interest to consider the trend of events." We should have tried to appraise the different species as they wandered around, each with its own set of good and bad characteristics. Which group, we'd have wondered, would ever contrive to rule all the rest?

And how great a development could they attain to thereafter?

## FOUR

If we had landed here after the great saurians had been swept from the scene, we might first have considered the lemurs or apes. They had hands. Aesthetically viewed, the poor simians were simply grotesque; but travelers who knew other planets might have known what beauty may spring from an uncouth beginning in this magic universe.

Still-those frowzy, unlovely hordes of apes and monkeys were so completely lacking in signs of kingship; they were so flighty, too, in their ways, and had so little purpose, and so much love for absurd and idle chatter, that they would have struck us, we thought, as unlikely material. Such traits, we should have reminded ourselves, persist. They are not easily left behind, even after long stages; and they form a terrible obstacle to all high advancement.



## FIVE

The bees or the ants might have seemed to us more promising. Their smallness of size was not necessarily too much of a handicap. They could have made poison their weapon for the subjugation of rivals. And in these orderly insects there was obviously a capacity for labor, and co-operative labor at that, which could carry them far. We all know that they have a marked genius: great gifts of their own. In a civilization of super-ants or bees, there would have been no problem of the hungry unemployed, no poverty, no unstable government, no riots, no strikes for short hours, no derision of eugenics, no thieves, perhaps no crime at all.

Ants are good citizens: they place group interests first.

But they carry it so far, they have few or no political rights. An ant doesn't have the vote, apparently: he just has his duties.

This quality may have something to do with their having group wars. The egotism of their individual spirits is allowed scant expression, so the egotism of the group is extremely ferocious and active. Is this one of the reasons why ants fight so much? They go in for State Socialism, yes, but they are not internationalists. And ants commit atrocities in and after their battles that are—I wish I could truly say—inhuman.

But conversely, ants are absolutely unselfish within the community. They are skilful. Ingenious. Their nests and buildings are relatively larger than man's. The scientists speak of their paved streets, vaulted halls, their hundreds of different domesticated animals, their pluck and intelligence, their individual initiative, their chaste and industrious lives. Darwin said the ant's brain was "one of the most marvelous atoms in the world, perhaps more so than the brain of man" – yes, of present-day man, who for thousands and thousands of years has had so much more chance to develop his brain... A thoughtful observer would have weighed all these excellent qualities.

When we think of these creatures as little men (which is all wrong of course) we see they have their faults. To our eyes they seem too orderly, for instance. Repressively so. Their ways are more fixed than those of the old Egyptians, and their industry is painful to think of, it's hyper-Chinese. But we must remember this is a simian comment. The instincts of the species that you and I belong to are of an opposite kind; and that makes it hard for us to judge ants fairly.

But we and the ants are alike in one matter: the strong love of property. And instead of merely struggling with Nature for it, they also fight other ants. The custom of plunder seems to be a part of most of their wars. This has gone on for ages among them, and continues today. Raids, ferocious combats, and loot are part of an ant's regular life. Ant reformers, if there were any, might lay this to their property sense, and talk of abolishing property as a cure for the evil. But that would not help for long unless they could abolish the love of it.

Ants seem to care even more for property than we do ourselves. We men are inclined to ease up a little when we have all we need. But it is not so with ants: they can't bear to stop: they keep right on working. This means that ants do not contemplate: they heed nothing outside of their own little rounds. It is almost as though their fondness for labor had closed fast their minds.

Conceivably they might have developed inquiring minds. But this would have run against their strongest instincts. The ant is knowing and wise; but he doesn't know enough to take a vacation. The worshipper of energy is too physically energetic to see that he cannot explore certain higher fields until he is still.

Even if such a race had somehow achieved self-consciousness and reason, would they have been able therewith to rule their instincts, or to stop work long enough to examine themselves, or the universe, or to dream of any noble development? Probably not. Reason is seldom or never the ruler: it is the servant of instinct. It would therefore have told the ants that incessant toil was useful and good.

"Toil has brought you up from the ruck of things," Reason would have plausibly said. "It's by virtue of feverish toil that you have become what you are. Being endlessly industrious is the best road-for you-to the heights." And, self-reassured, they would then have had orgies of work; and thus, by devoted exertion, have blocked their advancement. Work, and order and gain would have withered their souls.

## SIX

Let us take the great cats. They are free from this talent for slave-hood. Stately beasts like the lion have more independence of mind than the ants, – and a self-respect, we may note, unknown to primates. Or consider the leopards, with hearts that no tyrant could master. What fearless and resolute leopard-men they could have fathered! How magnificently such a civilization would have made its force tell!

A race of civilized beings descended from these great cats would have been rich in hermits and solitary thinkers. The recluse would not have been stigmatized as peculiar, as he is by us simians. They would not have been a credulous people, or easily religious. False prophets and swindlers would have found few dupes. And what generals they would have made! what consummate politicians!

Don't imagine them as a collection of tigers walking around on their hind-legs. They would have only been like tigers in the sense that we men are like monkeys. Their development in appearance and character would have been quite transforming.

Instead of the small flat head of the tiger, they would have had clear smooth brows; and those who were not bald would have had neatly parted hair-perhaps striped.

Their mouths would have been smaller and more sensitive: their faces most dignified. Where now they express chiefly savageness, they would have expressed fire and grace.

They would have been courteous and suave. No vulgar crowding would have occurred on the streets of their cities. No mobs. No ignominious subway-jams.

Imagine a cultivated coterie of such men and women, at a ball, dancing. How few of us humans are graceful. They would have all been Pavlovas.

Like ants and bees, the cat race is nervous. Their temperaments are high-strung. They would never have become as poised or as placid as say-super-cows. Yet they would have had less insanity, probably, than we. Monkeys' (and elephants') minds seem precariously balanced, unstable. The great cats are saner. They are intense, they would have needed sanitariums: but fewer asylums. And their asylums would have been not for weak-minded souls, but for furies.

They would have been strong at slander. They would have been far more violent than we, in their hates, and they would have had fewer friendships. Yet they might not have been any poorer in real friendships than we. The real friendships among men are so rare that when they occur they are famous. Friends as loyal as Damon and Pythias were, are exceptions. Good fellowship is common, but unchanging affection is not. We like those who like us, as a rule, and dislike those who don't. Most of our ties have no better footing than that; and those who have many such ties are called warm-hearted.

The super-cat-men would have rated cleanliness higher. Some of us primates have learned to keep ourselves clean, but it's no large proportion; and even the cleanest of us see no grandeur in soap-manufacturing, and we don't look to manicures and plumbers for social prestige. A feline race would have honored such occupations. J. de Courcy Tiger would have felt that nothing *but* making soap, or being a plumber, was compatible with a high social position; and the rich Vera Pantherbilt would have deigned to dine only with manicures.

None but the lowest dregs of such a race would have been lawyers spending their span of life on this mysterious earth studying the long dusty records of dead and gone quarrels. We simians naturally admire a profession full of wrangle and chatter. But that is a monkeyish way of deciding disputes, not a feline.

We fight best in armies, gregariously, where the risk is reduced; but we disapprove usually of murderers, and of almost all private combat. With the great cats, it would have been just the other way round. (Lions and leopards fight each other singly, not in bands, as do monkeys.)

As a matter of fact, few of us delight in really serious fighting. We do love to bicker; and we box and knock each other around, to exhibit our strength; but few normal simians are keen about

bloodshed and killing; we do it in war only because of patriotism, revenge, duty, glory. A feline civilization would have cared nothing for duty or glory, but they would have taken a far higher pleasure in gore. If a planet of super-cat-men could look down upon ours, they would not know which to think was the most amazing: the way we tamely live, five million or so in a city, with only a few police to keep us quiet, while we commit only one or two murders a day, and hardly have a respectable number of brawls; or the way great armies of us are trained to fight, – not liking it much, and yet doing more killing in war-time and shedding more blood than even the fiercest lion on his cruelest days. Which would perplex a gentlemanly super-cat spectator the more, our habits of wholesale slaughter in the field, or our spiritless making a fetish of "order," at home?

It is fair to judge peoples by the rights they will sacrifice most for. Super-cat-men would have been outraged, had their right of personal combat been questioned. The simian submits with odd readiness to the loss of this privilege. What outrages him is to make him stop wagging his tongue. He becomes most excited and passionate about the right of free speech, even going so far in his emotion as to declare it is sacred.

He looks upon other creatures pityingly because they are dumb. If one of his own children is born dumb, he counts it a tragedy. Even that mere hesitation in speech, known as stammering, he deems a misfortune.

So precious to a simian is the privilege of making sounds with his tongue, that when he wishes to punish severely those men he calls criminals, he forbids them to chatter, and forces them by threats to be silent. It is felt that this punishment is entirely too cruel however, and that even the worst offenders should be allowed to talk part of each day.

Whatever a simian does, there must always be some talking about it. He can't even make peace without a kind of chatter called a peace conference. Super-cats would not have had to "make" peace: they would have just walked off and stopped fighting.

In a world of super-cat-men, I suppose there would have been fewer sailors; and people would have cared less for seaside resorts, or for swimming. Cats hate getting wet, so men descended from them might have hated it. They would have felt that even going in wading was a sign of great hardihood, and only the most daring young fellows, showing off, would have done it.

Among them there would have been no anti-vivisection societies:

No Young Cats Christian Associations or Red Cross work:

No vegetarians:

No early closing laws:

Much more hunting and trapping:

No riding to hounds; that's pure simian. Just think how it would have entranced the old-time monkeys to foresee such a game! A game where they'd all prance off on captured horses, tearing pell-mell through the woods in gay red coats, attended by yelping packs of servant-dogs. It is excellent sport-but how cats would scorn to hunt in that way!

They would not have knighted explorers-they would have all been explorers.

Imagine that you are strolling through a super-cat city at night. Over yonder is the business quarter, its evening shops blazing with jewels. The great stock-yards lie to the east where you hear those sad sounds: that low mooing as of innumerable herds, waiting slaughter. Beyond lie the silent aquariums and the crates of fresh mice. (They raise mice instead of hens in the country, in Super-cat Land.) To the west is a beautiful but weirdly bacchanalian park, with long groves of catnip, where young super-cats have their fling, and where a few crazed catnip addicts live on till they die, unable to break off their strangely undignified orgies. And here where you stand is the sumptuous residence district. Houses with spacious grounds everywhere: no densely-packed buildings. The streets have been swept up-or lapped up-until they are spotless. Not a scrap of paper is lying around anywhere: no rubbish, no dust. Few of the pavements are left bare, as ours are, and those few are polished: the rest have deep soft velvet carpets. No footfalls are heard.

There are no lights in these streets, though these people are abroad much at night. All you see are stars overhead and the glowing eyes of cat ladies, of lithe silken ladies who pass you, or of stiff-whiskered men. Beware of those men and the gleam of their split-pupiled stare. They are haughty, punctilious, inflammable: self-absorbed too, however. They will probably not even notice you; but if they do, you are lost. They take offense in a flash, abhor strangers, despise hospitality, and would think nothing of killing you or me on their way home to dinner.

Follow one of them. Enter this house. Ah what splendor! No servants, though a few abject monkeys wait at the back-doors, and submissively run little errands. But of course they are never let inside: they would seem out of place. Gorgeous couches, rich colors, silken walls, an oriental magnificence. In here is the ballroom. But wait: what is this in the corner? A large triumphal statue-of a cat overcoming a dog. And look at this dining-room, its exquisite appointments, its daintiness: faucets for hot and cold milk in the pantry, and a gold bowl of cream.

Some one is entering. Hush! If I could but describe her! Languorous, slender and passionate. Sleepy eyes that see everything. An indolent purposeful step. An unimaginable grace. If you were *her* lover, my boy, you would learn how fierce love can be, how capricious and sudden, how hostile, how ecstatic, how violent!

Think what the state of the arts would have been in such cities.

They would have had few comedies on their stage; no farces. Cats care little for fun. In the circus, superlative acrobats. No clowns.

In drama and singing they would have surpassed us probably. Even in the stage of arrested development as mere animals, in which we see cats, they wail with a passionate intensity at night in our yards. Imagine how a Caruso descended from such beings would sing.

In literature they would not have begged for happy endings.

They would have been personally more self-assured than we, far freer of cheap imitativeness of each other in manners and art, and hence more original in art; more clearly aware of what they really desired, not cringingly watchful of what was expected of them; less widely observant perhaps, more deeply thoughtful.

Their artists would have produced less however, even though they felt more. A super-cat artist would have valued the pictures he drew for their effects on himself; he wouldn't have cared a rap whether anyone else saw them or not. He would not have bothered, usually, to give any form to his conceptions. Simply to have had the sensation would have for him been enough. But since simians love to be noticed, it does not content them to have a conception; they must wrestle with it until it takes a form in which others can see it. They doom the artistic impulse to toil with its nose to the grindstone, until their idea is expressed in a book or a statue. Are they right? I have doubts. The artistic impulse seems not to wish to produce finished work. It certainly deserts us half-way, after the idea is born; and if we go on, art is labor. With the cats, art is joy.

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