

# THIS SIMIAN WORLD

*THIS SIMIAN WORLD. By Clarence Day, Jr. With illustrations by the author. 12mo. 95 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. New York.*

**M**AN is forever trying to describe himself, trying to leave momentarily his prison of ridiculous clay, to stand aside and consider the small place he occupies in an immense and incalculable universe. Having invented all his own words, he is almost powerless to picture this universe otherwise than in terms of himself. Since their first appearance upon earth, poets have been robbing trees, clouds, the weather, of their natural dignity by comparing them to men. This is often explained and forgiven as part of man's ancient longing to transcend his animal nature. The much closer comparisons between animals and ourselves in our better moments, we seek to avoid. But we can give no names to the actions of these near relatives other than the names of our own actions. Few indeed have been the men who by a subtle regrouping of familiar words could draw an impersonal picture of our race. It is a talent rare among creatures whose firm belief in predestined world-empire and even in kinship with God, makes any attempt to view themselves from the impartial standpoint of an animal, a deity, or the inhabitant of another planet seem blasphemous or impossible. Just this rare quality of detachment, of complete independence from man's ancient myopia of self-esteem is the chief among the many high qualities of Mr. Clarence Day's *This Simian World*.

No less complete and varied than his estimate of man is Mr. Day's expression of it: a natural blend of wisdom with lightness, humour with profundity, hope with art, economy with abundance, kindness with malice. The quality that makes possible such alliances is the one most infrequently granted to mortals: Mr. Day sees things as they are beneath accumulated centuries of appearances; he cannot, he will not be fooled. Given such an equipment, he may have had, but he did not require, biology.

Swift required no knowledge of biology to see that man would be less unlike his best self if he were more like a horse. And with

no help from biology Anatole France saw the very close resemblance between men and penguins. The rest of us at some time or other feel dimly aware of "the beast with which we are crossed." It is an uncomfortable feeling, one we should like to forget, for what divides us most sharply from our fellow animals is an intense desire to become something else. Even if Darwin had never been born, we should have felt the chimpanzee stirring in our blood, and been angry, ashamed, and untruthful about it. So, Darwin or no Darwin, once Mr. Day had perceived that man is descended from or closely related to other animals, he would have seen for himself that if men's ancestors were the animals they most resembled in behaviour, these animals must have been monkeys.

Consider our civilization, says Mr. Day, were we descended from any other sort of creature. Ants, for instance. They lead "chaste and industrious lives." Too industrious, in fact: "The ant is knowing and wise, but he doesn't know enough to take a vacation." The vision of a super-ant civilization is highly distasteful to us simians: it would be "an orgy of work."

The great cats are more promising than ants: "They are free from this talent for slavehood." Imagine a noble race descended from tigers: "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." But they are nervous, high-strung; a race of super-cats "would have needed sanitariums; but fewer asylums. And their asylums would have been not for weak-minded souls, but for furies."

Cats honour combat above all things, while "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." This pleasure, held by us to be a base one, would have been hallowed by tigers. "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." But though cats would hold words to be of but slight importance, they would surpass us in singing: "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 animals would sing."

And Mr. Day goes on to reconstruct a feline Utopia. Brief quotation from his description will show only a glimpse of his art. And quotation cannot translate the amusing, wistful, imaginative little drawings that all too seldom decorate the book. You must turn to page eighteen to see Vera Pantherbilt for yourself.

But instead of this noble breed, our descent seems rather to be from monkeys. For even if we have a few qualities of our own, we share in a multitude of purely simian traits. The Bandarlog never, for instance, could keep still. Nor will their descendants:

"A discovery that helps them to talk, just to talk, more and more, will be hailed by these beings as one of the highest of triumphs. . . . [Simians] will set their young to spending a decade or more of their lives in studying duplicate systems—whole systems—of chatter. Those who thus learn several different ways to say the same things will command much respect, and those who learn many will be looked on with awe—by true simians."

Equally ridiculous is their curiosity, and yet it has helped them to conquer the world. They think they have conquered nature. Really, they have only adapted themselves to her. And are ungrateful as well. They will forget they're her sons.

Inquire a little into their strangely firm belief that they are fallen angels, or in some other way very close to God. Why do we have gods? Some explanation lies in a consideration of our cousins:

"Imagine you are watching the Bandarlog at play in the forest. As you behold them and comprehend their natures, now hugely brave and boastful, now full of dread, the most weakly emotional of any intelligent species, ever trying to attract the notice of some greater animal, not happy unless noticed,—is it not plain they are bound to invent things called gods?"

And of course there should be no god without a devil, to account for the

“strange perverse obstinacy . . . theologians call original sin. They regard it as the voice of some devil, and say good men should not listen to it. The scientists say it isn’t a devil, it is part of our nature, which should of course be civilized and guided, but should not be stamped out. (It might mutilate us dangerously to become under-simianized. Look at Mrs. Humphry Ward and George Washington. Worthy souls, but no flavour.)”

Haphazard quotation cannot do justice to *This Simian World*. It must be read as a whole. Only then can one see how idea follows idea, how artfully and with what purpose Mr. Day varies the cadences of his prose, how skilfully he contrives now to make us go on with him and forget what has been said, now to make us hear the undertones when he wants the echoes of what he has been saying to be prolonged. Only from the book as a whole can one learn in what just proportions can be combined the casual and the profound; the light touch and the brief glimpse into chasms of darkness or into unknown heavens. Mr. Day sees our simian selves with a sharp eye, all the sharper because it is kind. He sees innumerable possible grounds for despair, yet he does not despair: he is gay. He avoids completely the peevishness of the satirist mocking a bitter world. He can feel—suggest—hope, infinite magnificent hope, a slow ignoble march toward an unutterable destiny, but this cannot make him even faintly sentimental.

In this slim book, which looks so unimportant and will live so long, a weary mind, pausing a moment from its frantic simian activity, will find a merciless, yet temperate portrait of his race. It is not a picture that need tempt him to discouragement, to transform to inaction his busy futility. Rather will he see that there are new ways of looking at himself, new things to discover about himself, and that both art and profit can result from the attempt. He will find, too, something uncommonly not human about the book, a detachment incompatible with the self-importance, the self-esteem of most humans, a suggestion of the wisdom and impersonal amusement of some kindly deity here on visit.

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