DUMB-ANIMAL

For Francis

RAILWAY carriages provide a perfect, neutral ground for conversation. There is enough grinding and rumbling to enforce the voice being a little uplifted, and this in itself gives confidence, sureness of aim. If, for example, a public speaker begins his exordium in too quiet and diffident a key, his speech will hold no ear, brings no conviction; is doomed to failure. A competitive noise, however, will remedy such a weakness. As a rule, too, the Englishman only talks of impersonal things that neither interest him nor the person to whom he is speaking: for we are a shy, silent, and especially a polite race, wherefore it is our convention that the talk must be adapted to the intelligence of the stupidest person present, and, if we are unaware of the mental calibre of anyone in the room, we must, out of good manners, presume that he is fatuous. But the anonymity of the railway carriage, once conversation is started, gives us release, makes confession, personal confession, quite easy. It is the under-the-rose intercourse of disembodied, nameless spirits floating swiftly through the air, inspired by the same ear-behind-the-grating anonymity that makes the

confessing of their sins possible to Catholics. And subjects which require both thought and feeling are there approached as continental nations approach them, without embarrassment.

From York onward the train was certainly a slow one, and the afternoon dark, for all the shimmering reflections into which the planes of the countryside had been transmuted. There had been a heavy fall of snow, and trees and telegraph-poles were hung with festoons and cobwebs in white and silver. But the windows were frosted with our breathing, and if you wiped them to look out, left a track of dribbling dirt on glove or newspaper: and all this, combined with such details as the heavy, tin foot-warmers, resembling milkcans that angry porters had hammered flat, the cigarette-smoke, the faint but nauseating smell of tunnels that never quite cleared away, the rattling of windows and doors, tended to focus the attention on the human elements rather than their surroundings. Up in the roof a star of yellow gaslight blossomed like a cherished plant beneath an inverted and sweating bell-glass. To this star our eyes now and again rolled upward in despair. In every station the red-nosed porters shouted to keep themselves warm, threw their loads heavily, and then, still cold, threshed their arms together.

After a time, however, a pleasant conversation sprang up. The cheerful young doctor at my elbow took off his pince-nez, rattled a paper by his side, lit a cigarette, and began to talk. Soon we were all of us exchanging intimate memories of childhood. The direction veered from time to time toward a semi-

scientific discussion of the dawn of memory or the difference between the animal-mind and the child-mind. The glum, yellow-faced man, with the trembling red fingers, opposite me, turned out to be a famous, now fever-stricken big-game hunter, though I have by this time forgotten his name. He told us of the pygmy-race he had discovered, and of its primitive beliefs. Perhaps the need to worship differentiated man from the other animals. Once, he told us, he had lived for several years in Central Africa, inhabiting a two-storeyed house of whitened mud, built round a large central courtyard. All the little iron-barred windows, high up in the walls, gave on to this enclosure, for it was not safe to have them facing outward. One evening a huge and ferocious man-ape was captured and brought in from the great forest many miles away. The span of its hideous, hairy arms was something that even he had not been prepared for, accustomed as he was to these forest-giants. It was, I do not remember why, impracticable to kill the creature that night, and accordingly it was let loose in the courtyard, for there it could do no harm. At first it grimaced horribly, and drummed in a martial way upon its chest; vain summons to its distant wives—though when darkness fell, it became quiet. But in the middle of the night, the hunter was woken up. He did not know what had wakened him, but he experienced a sensation that something was happening, something curious and a little disturbing. He had been dreaming of an enormous cathedral, where people were praying for salvation under vast arches,

sprinkled over with little lights, and had woken suddenly. He looked round his room. Green, tropical moonlight was splashing the floor, lay on it in pools, like water. He crept to the window, for an odd, low monotonous sound—did it remind him of chanting, he wondered?—was wafted therefrom.

He looked through the thick bars. The moon was round and high in the heavens, and just under him, in the brilliant, jade-green arena of the moonlit courtyard was the gigantic, shaggy, heavy-shouldered form of the ape, engaged in a sad, most moving ritual, bowing low to the moon, walking backward before it, prostrating himself on hands and feet, and making the deep but quiet, never-ending rhythmic mumble that had woken him. . . . And so this dull, shaking little man opposite, one realized, had witnessed an unique spectacle, the very dawn of religion.

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Skating lightly over that quicksand for conversation, the wisdom and long-memoried gratitude of elephants, once more we reverted to children. At what age, we wondered, does the child begin to surround the central fact of being, of existing, with little clusters of things felt and seen, pleasant and unpleasant? At what age does the memory, once a temporary affair of days and weeks, apply itself to years, and remain unimpaired through decades? The nose, of course, rather than eye or ear, is guide to the past. Memories of each long summer and winter come back borne on a stream of smell, of flowers in a garden, warm scents of box and rosemary, stocks, carnations

or wallflowers, of bread being baked or jams being made, of bonfires blazing in the dull, late autumn air, of paint and varnish and a thousand other things. My first memory, I thought, was of my nurse and sister under a tree covered with golden apricots—but where it was has always baffled me. But at what age do emotions first remain within our consciousness, somebody inquired? I certainly remember, I said, the inability to express my thoughts in words, a very early memory that must be: yet there are those who maintain that no thought is possible without the appropriate words to clothe it, that no colour is seen by us for which we have not a name! There had been some paltry, infantile crime of which I had been accused falsely, and could not, for want of words, make clear my innocence. Only the blind faith of children in their elders made me feel secure. Of course they would understand: and their failure to do so overturned my whole childish world, shook my being to its foundation. God had tumbled out of the star-spangled heaven in which I had placed him.

The young doctor snapped his pince-nez into a case, and said he would tell us a very youthful experience of his own. He was getting on now, he was thankful to say, quite well, had a satisfactory practice (This kind of weather, he added, laughing, helps us a lot, you know), but in the past his dislike—no, his horror—of animals, especially dogs, had hindered him. There were a great many old ladies, bath-chair and arm-chair old ladies, in the seaside town from which he was travelling (indeed, they were the chief source

of local medical income there), and they all owned two or more dogs. Naturally, if they saw him wince at the advances of their pets, they classified him at once as an "odd sort of man." It did not matter so much with cats, but every man should love dogs. Well, latterly he had contrived to simulate a liking for them, and he hoped his lapses had been forgotten. But the horror, actually, still remained. It had been during his whole life a source of pain and injury to him, and was founded on a particular incident that had occurred in childhood.

It was impossible to be sure at what age it had taken place—three or four, though, he supposed: between the ages of three and four. He knew that he looked strong enough now, but we must imagine a delicate little boy, left in charge of a nurse in a small seaside village, a collection of a few square, red-brick houses with blue-slate roofs, on the East Coast. His parents had bought a cottage there, in which to spend the summer-months; had bought it, probably, for his sake, since he was weakly and an only child, and they were nervous about his health. Yet this, of course, he was too young at the time to understand. During the winter, then, he was left alone: quite alone there with his Nurse, who, though of rustic origin, was a very reliable, highly-trained young woman. She cooked all his food herself, so frightened was she of its possible contamination, and had a real hospital horror—quite rightly—of dirt and germs. In consequence she would never allow him to play with the other children of the village, who were rather squalid and unkempt. He supposed really that his Nurse

had been very fond of him, but she was a thoroughly sensible woman, and believed in her modern, educated way, that it was wrong to show sentiment, dangerous to show affection, to children. Moreover, his parents, in their kindness and concern for him, exercised a similar control. It is likely that it pained them very much to leave him, and not to be able to see him more often. But this again was beyond his comprehension. To beings as young as he was then, life appears in its most simplified form: if people wanted you to be with them, you were with them. And they never allowed themselves to show any sorrow at parting from him, for the Nurse said that one ought to be very careful not to upset children, and as a child he had been very easily upset.

His first impression, thus, was one of loneliness, and, much worse, of being unwanted; a feeling that undermines existence, and, with the feeble, in the very old or very young, can make for death. The background, against which these sensations were to be placed, was eroded, grey, high, gloomy cliffs, and a winter sea. The cliffs were not high enough to be imposing, but only to be forbidding, and their erosion was a matter of feeling. You knew instinctively that they were stricken and retiring bulwarks. The sea, on the other hand, imparted an overwhelming and savage sense of power, as the long grey, battering-rams rolled on towards you, breaking on the nearer rocks into explosions of white, dying wings.

We must picture, too, a stretch of tawny sand, along which two figures promenade: the pale, nervous little boy, the Nurse, straight, tall and unsentimental

as a young tree. And, to finish off the scene, we must conjure up the image of a few stray dogs, their barks and howlings lost in the muffled thunder of the sea, and the feel of an intensely cold wind that tears the flesh of face and neck with its numbing, iron beak. Sea air was good for him.

Here was the dawning of his memory, the first certain thing he could draw out of the universal darkness that had preceded him. He could not be absolutely certain of his age . . . but he could see the dogs now. They seemed an Ishmael race, ownerless and outcast. And among them, especially, he remembered his first friend. He had loved it; but, regarded from an unprejudiced angle, doubtless it would have appeared a horrible, cringing, dirty little cur of a dog, very dirty and uncared-for. He could see it now though, spinning round after its tail like a whiting, curled up. Searching its tail, he imagined now, for fleas. A toffee-coloured dog, with long, sharp ears and deep yellow-brown eyes. Its stomach was fawn-coloured, and it rather resembled an ill-bred fox-hound. In spite of its ugliness, however, it had the alluring grace of all young animals.

Actually, he had not taken to this dog in the first place. But it had been so patient in its show of affection for him, had so obviously adopted him, that he had grown to love it. It waited for him every morning on the sands, jumped up and kissed his face, played with him, and, in fact, was a companion. Indeed this daily meeting with the mongrel became, secretly, the event of his day, and if by any chance it was too wet for him to be taken out, he was

most unhappy, as he thought of the dog, soaked through, waiting by the sea-shore. But this he kept to himself, for grown-up people, he had already discovered, were intent on killing every pleasure.

This state of affairs lasted some time, and the Nurse paid little attention. But one day, quite suddenly, she realized how dirty, how filthily dirty, the dog was. Perhaps she had not noticed it attentively before, for she would often stand gazing at the sea, while her ward ran and played near at hand behind her on the beach. Of what use, she must have demanded of herself, were all her care and cleanliness, her sterilizings and boilings and washings, if the child behaved in this way behind her back? A strange, mangy cur of course harboured innumerable germs, was no fit companion for a delicate child. Having driven the dog off with the threat of a stick, she seized the boy by the hand, shook him, and dragged him home.

"Master Humphrey," she cried, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself in your nice clean suit, playing with that little wretch, so dirty and unhealthy-like. If you lets him jump up at you like that to-morrow, I'll kill the little beast, I will."

He wondered how his Nurse, whom he knew to be fond of animals, could be so suddenly cruel. And yet he knew that she was direct, a woman of her word. He believed her. What was he to do? . . . If the dog came near him, she would kill it, then.

A deep sense of gloom and tragedy enveloped the small boy. If only it would rain to-morrow, so that he might put off his decision. . . . For at any cost,

he must save his friend from this fate, steel himself to be brutal if necessary. All night long in his dreams, the dreadful situation presented itself: and his courage failed him.

The next morning dawned, a clear winter's morning, with a thin, false blue canopy spread over all this bareness. In this clean, very ordinary light, he was confident that so terrible a thing could not be true; this vast cloud of sorrow which had blown up over him. He dreaded the beach, cried a little as he approached it. The Nurse wondered to herself whether he was not well—he had seemed restless all night—and promised aloud to give him a dose that evening.

There, sure enough, was the dog, waiting for him, very alert and joyful, for it was sufficiently inured to rebuffs not to have taken the Nurse's threat with her stick very seriously the previous morning. Now, the boy realized, before his Nurse saw him, was his chance to save his loved comrade: and taking up pebble after pebble, he threw it with all his strength at the dog.

At first the mongrel thought this was only in play, and skipped and leapt gaily to one side: at the third or fourth stone, it stopped cringed away, making itself small. Then it gave a howl of pain, and was sure: slunk away into pariahdom, its tail between its legs, ever and again looking round, the orange-brown eyes full of a mute but immeasurable reproach, at this friend who had encouraged and then denied it. The pebbles still followed the cur, as it crept and cringed away, pleading: for the boy stood there,

intent on saving this only friend, throwing stone after stone, while tears streamed down his face.

The Nurse, who had been watching the fierce play of the waves, had completely forgotten about the dog of yesterday. All at once, she looked round and saw what was happening. "Oh, you horrid little boy, you," she exclaimed, smacking his hand very hard. "Oh, you horrid little cruel monkey, torturing dumb animals," and took him home.

He had been afraid of animals ever since. He was sure that was what it was.

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The train roared through a tunnel, gave a bump. We collected our coats and papers, called for porters, and were lost, disembodied again under the vast arches of foggy darkness, lit up, as it seemed, by the tinsel splinters of huge circus lamps.