

KAFKA'S MONKEY

First published in 2009 by Oberon Books Ltd
521 Caledonian Road, London N7 9RH
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www.oberonbooks.com

Reprinted with revisions in 2011, 2012

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-84002-921-5

Design by Mercy

Cover photograph by Simon Annand

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

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1.

Esteemed members of the academy,
You've done me the great honour of inviting me
To give an account of my former life

As an ape.

I regret
That I cannot comply with your request,
At least to the extent you might desire,
Since it is now nearly five years that I was

An ape.

A brief span, according to the calendar,
But an eternity to run
As I have done, at full speed, cheered on
By teachers and trainers, with the sound
Of advice and applause and orchestral music
Ringing in my ears, yet always racing,

KAFKA / TEEVAN

Essentially,

Alone.

Those who cheered me on did so,
To continue the metaphor,
From the safety of the stands.

No,

I could not have achieved all that I've achieved
Had I stubbornly clung to my origins,
To the memories of my youth.
To stop being stubborn
Was the supreme commandment
I laid upon myself:

born a free ape,

I submitted myself to the yoke,

But the cost

has been the loss

of memory.

At first, had man allowed it,
I might have returned.
Through an archway as wide as the span
Of the heavens over the earth,
I might have returned to what I once was.
But as I raced, whipping myself on
The wide opening through which I'd entered this world,
Narrowed and shrank behind me.

I'd begun

To feel more secure in the world of men.

I'd have to flay the flesh from off my bones
To return to what I once was.

To speak in images, because
I like to speak in images:
The blast of wind that blew after me
Out of my past became
But a breath of air that played about my heels.



KAFKA / TEEVAN

To be blunt, much as I like images,
Your former lives as apes,
Esteemed members of the academy,

Are as far behind you as mine is behind me.

2.

But perhaps I can tell you something,
And I'll tell you with the greatest pleasure,
Something of my journey since entering
This world of men.

The first thing that I learned
was the handshake.

A handshake signifies openness.
And standing here today,
At the height of my career,
I hope to add openness in what I say
To the openness of that first handshake.
And, while what I have to tell the Academy
Will add nothing new, essentially,
To the sum of human knowledge, and
Will fall far short of what you've asked of me,
Which with the best will in the world
I simply cannot tell you,
Let it at least serve to indicate the course



KAFKA / TEEVAN

That I, a former ape, has had to plot
To enter and establish himself
In the world of men.

Of course I would certainly not risk
Relating to you even this
Insignificant information,
Were I not completely sure of both myself,
And my position at the pinnacle
Of the variety stages
Of the civilised world.



3.

I come from the Gold Coast.

For the story of my capture I am forced
To rely upon the evidence of others,
A hunting party from the firm of Hagenbeck –

By the way, I've since that time
Drunk many a bottle of good wine
With the leader of that expedition,

But that's for another time –

The hunters had hidden themselves
In the bushes by the shore, when I,
With some other apes, came down
In the evening to the pools to drink.

They shot at us.

I was the only one hit.

I was hit in two places.

KAFKA / TEEVAN

Once

in the face,

here,

on the cheek,

A superficial wound

But one which left a large, livid, red scar

Which earned me the name of Red Peter.

A loathsome name, utterly inappropriate,

Only an ape could have come up with it.

As if the only difference between me

And that performing monkey, Peter –

You might have heard of him,

He died not long ago in possession

Of a small and very local reputation –

As if the only difference between him and me

Was this scar upon my cheek! But

That is by the by.

The second shot hit me below the hip.

It was a serious wound.

I still limp to this day.
I read an article recently,
By one of those ten thousand hacks
Who feel compelled to take potshots at me in the press,
Saying my ape nature is not yet fully suppressed.
And, as proof of this he held up the fact
That I like to take my trousers down
To show visitors my bullet wound.
The fingers that typed that should be blown off
One by one. I'll take my trousers down
In front of whom I choose!
You'd see nothing there but well-groomed fur,
And this scar, made –
 And let me be particular in my choice of words,
 In order to avoid misunderstanding –
Made by a cowardly shot.
As I said, I wish to be open with you,
Ladies and gentlemen of the academy,
And when it is the truth one seeks,
One cannot stand on ceremony.
If that critic were to take his trousers down



KAFKA / TEEVAN

When a visitor called round,
That would be a different story.
I trust he has the good breeding not to do so
And so let him be so good
As not to trouble me with his opinions
Of either my breeding or my origins!

4.

After these two shots

I came to myself.

This is where my memory

gradually

begins,

Below decks

on the Hagenbeck Steamer

Inside a cage.

Not a four-sided barred cage,

But a three sided cage

nailed to the ship's wall.

KAFKA / TEEVAN

The construction,

too low to stand up in,

Too narrow to sit down in,

I had to squat.

My knees bent

and trembling

all the time,

And since, probably,

for a time,

I wished to see no one,

to stay

In the dark forever,

I turned

Towards the wall

while the bars

Cut into
my flesh
behind.

This method of caging wild beasts,
In the first days of captivity,
Is, from a human point of view,
Supposed to have advantages.
And, in light of my experiences,
I can't deny, from a human point of view,
That this is true.

But I did not have that point of view then.

All I could see, for the first time in my life,
Was that there was:

No

Way

Out

KAFKA / TEEVAN

At least, no direct way.

Behind me the cage,

In front, the wall of the ship,

Plank fitted tight to heavy wooden plank.

True,

I did spy

a gap,

A narrow opening between the planks.

A hole!

A hole!

I greeted it with a howl –

O blissful howl of ignorance!

It was not big enough to squeeze a finger through,

Nor could all the strength of an ape enlarge it.

After this, I made unusually little noise, I'm told.

They concluded that I'd die,

Or, if I managed to survive

This critical first period,
That I'd be highly suitable for training.

I survived.

Hopelessly sobbing.

Painfully

Hunting for fleas.

Listlessly

Licking a coconut shell.

Beating

My skull against the wooden wall.

Sticking

My tongue out at whoever came near.

This is how I filled the first few days

KAFKA / TEEVAN

Of this, my new life.

But over and above it all, one feeling:

No

Way

Out.

Of course, what I felt then, as an ape,
I can only now represent in human terms,
And therefore I misrepresent it.
But although I can never truly reach back
To what I once was,
There is something of the truth in these words.

Up till then I'd had so many ways out of everything,
Now I had none.

I was cornered, penned in, had I
Been nailed to the ship's wall my right
To move
Could not have been more abused.

Why?

Scratch the flesh raw between your toes

But you won't find the answer.

Press yourself against the bars

Till it nearly cuts you in two,

But you won't find the answer.

No

Way

Out.

I had

No

Way

Out.

So I had to devise one

For without

you die.

KAFKA / TEEVAN

All that time,

facing the wall,

I should have died, yet

As far as Herr Hagenbeck was concerned,

The place for apes was in a cage, nailed

To the wall...

so,

I had to stop

being an ape.

A fine clear line of thought which

I must have cooked up in my belly,

Since apes can only think with their bellies.

I fear it might not be quite clear,

Ladies and gentlemen of the academy,

What I mean by:

'No
Way
Out'.

I do not use the word 'freedom'

With its' implication of space on every side.

No.

As an ape, perhaps, I had known such a thing

And have met men who yearn for it.

But I've not sought 'freedom' then or now.

By the way, since I've lived amongst men,

I've often noticed how they are betrayed

By this ideal of freedom.

For what is freedom but an illusion,

Which, when seen through,

Leads to the profoundest disillusion?

In variety theatres, I've often watched

While waiting for my turn, a pair of acrobats

On trapezes, high up in the rafters

Swing forward and back, round and round, flying

Through the air, and into the other's outstretched

KAFKA / TEEVAN

Arms.

I once saw one hang by the hair

From the other one's teeth.

'So that is human freedom?' I said to myself.

'A self-satisfied, rehearsed routine?'

What a mockery of mother nature!

Were an audience of chimpanzees

To see such a sight, the walls of the theatre

Would rupture at the roar of their laughter.

No,

Freedom was not what I was after,

Only a way out, right or left,

Any direction,

To get out somewhere,

To

Get

Out,

Only not to stay stuck still, arms raised,

Crushed against a wooden wall.

Today I see it all quite clearly:
Without the most profound inner calm,
I could not have found a way out.
And perhaps I owe all that I now am
To the calm that came over me
After my first few days on board that ship.

And for that calmness
I have the ship's crew to thank.

5.

They were good creatures, in spite of everything.
In spite of everything I still find it
Pleasant to remember the sound
Of their heavy footsteps echoing
Through my half-dreaming head.

And it was their habit to do everything
As slowly as they possibly could.
If one went to rub his eye he raised
His hand

as if

it was

a leaden weight.

Their jokes were coarse but hearty, their laughter
Rough, like the barks of dangerous dogs,
But they meant nothing. And they always had
Something in their mouths,

to spit.

And they did not care where they spat.
They always complained that they got fleas from me,
But they were not angry with me,
They knew my fur bred fleas and that fleas jump.
A simple fact of life, and they accepted it.

But still they complained.

And when they weren't on duty, some would sit
In a semicircle round my cage,
Not speaking to each other, but grunting,
Stretched out on the ship's lockers, smoking their pipes,
Smacking their knees with glee
If I made the smallest movement. And
From time to time, one might take a stick
And tickle me where I like being tickled.

Certainly, if invited on a cruise
On that same ship today, I would refuse,
But I'm also certain that the memories

KAFKA / TEEVAN

I can recall from below its decks are not

All entirely hateful.

And the calmness I acquired amongst these men

Kept me from trying to escape.

I don't know now if escape was possible,

But I believe it must have been. For an ape

Escape must always be possible.

With my teeth today I must be careful

Cracking even the most simple of nuts,

But at that time I could certainly

Have managed bit by little bit to bite through

The lock of my cage.

But I did not.

What use would it have been?

As soon as I stuck my head out of the hold

I'd have been caught and thrown in a worse cage.

Or, even if I'd slipped unnoticed

In amongst the other animals, what then?

Breathe out my last in the embrace
Of the pythons just across the way?
Or say I actually succeeded in sneaking out on deck
And made it to the handrail
And jumped overboard?
I'd have bobbed a short while on the deep,
Then drowned.

Desperate remedies.

Though I did not think it through,
In this human way, by staying calm,
And influenced by the men around me,
I behaved as though I had.

I could not think things through.
I observed.
Quietly I observed everything.
I watched these men go to and fro,
Always the same faces, the same movements.
It often seemed to me they were the same man,

KAFKA / TEEVAN

And this man, these men, walked about
Unimpeded.

A light

Began

To dawn

On me.

No one promised me that if I became like them
The bars of my cage would be taken away.
Nor was it that these men, in themselves,
Held the slightest attraction for me.
Had it been freedom I was seeking,
I'd have sooner jumped the handrail into the sea
Than seek out the 'freedom' suggested
In their dull, heavy faces.
But it was only after much observation
That I could think such things.

The light that had begun to dawn on me
Dawned not as a thought but through
The accumulated weight of observation.
It was this that led me in the right direction.

6.

And it was so easy
to imitate these men.

In the first few days I learned to spit.

We'd spit in each others' faces,
The only difference between us being
That afterwards, I'd lick my face clean.

And they would not.

I could soon smoke a pipe like an old sea dog,
And if I tapped my thumb down on the bowl,
A roar of laughter would fill the hold.
It took me a long time to learn the distinction
Between a full pipe and an empty one.

7.

But my worst problem was the rum.
The smell of the bottle tormented me.
It took weeks to overcome my disgust.
And this my inner struggle, strange to say,
The crew took more seriously, far more,
Than anything else regarding me.

In my memory
I cannot tell one man from the next,
But there was one who came,
Again and again, alone, or with his friends,
By day, by night, all kinds of hours, he'd come
And stand in front of me in order
To give instruction in the art of drinking rum.

He could not understand me, but it seemed
He wanted to solve the riddle of my being.

Slowly he'd uncork the bottle

KAFKA / TEEVAN

And look to see I did the action too.
I must admit I watched him eagerly,
So wildly eager to capture each particularity.
Such a student of humanity
No teacher ever found upon this Earth.
After he'd uncorked the bottle,
He raised it to his mouth,

while I

Watched it with my eyes rise

up

up

up

Up to his gaping jaws.
He nods, pleased with me,
And then he puts the bottle to his lips,

while I

Spellbound by burgeoning enlightenment,
Screech and scratch myself wherever
I need to be scratched.

He rejoices

In my apparent excitement

And tips the bottle up and takes a drink,
while I

So desperate to emulate him,
foul myself,

Which seems to cause him some satisfaction,
And therefore he moves the lesson on.

He holds the bottle at arms length,
And in one wide arc swings it to his mouth,
And drains it, bending back exaggeratedly,

so I

Can see quite clearly each step of the routine.

But I

Drained by the effort can follow him no further.

I hang exhausted to the bars,
while he

Concludes his demonstration of the theory
By rubbing his belly and grinning broadly.

But after the theory comes the practice.

Was I not already quite exhausted?

I was, utterly.

KAFKA / TEEVAN

But this was to be my fate.

So I

Take the proffered bottle, as best as I am able,

Uncork it,

Trembling,

But this action achieved

Spurs me on with new energy,

I raise

The bottle,

following my master's example,

I put it to my lips, then-

Then throw it down in disgust!

Complete disgust!

The bottle

Though drained by my master, retains the smell.

And so in disgust I throw it down.

My teacher frowns in sorrow.

I am sorry too.

And even though I don't forget

To rub my belly, and broadly grin,

It is of little comfort to either me or him.

Too often lessons ended in this way,

To the great sorrow of my teacher,

And to the greater sorrow of myself.

But to his credit, he did not get angry.

True, he'd sometimes hold his burning pipe against my fur,

Some place I could not easily reach,

Until it began to smoulder, but then

He himself would put it out again,

With his own kind, enormous hand.

No,

He was not angry with me,

He knew we were on the same side,

Fighting against our ape-like natures,

And he knew I had the more difficult task than he.

In despair, but in the manner
Of an artistic performer.

I forgot to rub my belly,
Or grin,
But instead,
Because all my senses were reeling,
Because I could not help myself,
I called out a brief but unmistakable:

‘Hallo!’

And,
with this word,
I broke into the world
Of human speech,
and heard
its echo:
‘Listen,
he’s talking.’

Like a caress



KAFKA / TEEVAN

Over the whole

of my sweat-soaked

body.



9.

Let me repeat,

The imitation of human beings

Held not the slightest attraction for me.

I only ever imitated men

Because I needed:

A

Way

Out.

No other reason. And even

This triumph did not achieve much,

I lost my newfound voice at once.

It did not return again for months,

While my revulsion at the rum bottle

Came back doubly so.

But the course I had to follow

Had been set, once and for all.

10.

In Hamburg, when handed to my first trainer,

I soon realised two possible choices

Were laid out before me:

The zoo

or

Variety.

I did not hesitate, I chose the stage.

For what is the zoo but another cage?

Once there:

You

Are

Lost.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I learned.

You learn when you have to.

You learn when you need:

A
Way
Out.

You learn at all costs.
You stand over yourself with a whip.
You flay yourself at the slightest sign
Of stubbornness, the smallest opposition.
My ape-nature fled out of me
Head over heels away, so fast
My first teacher nearly turned ape himself.
He had to give up teaching and was taken
To a mental institution.

Fortunately
They soon let him out again.
But by then, I'd exhausted many teachers.

And, as I became more confident,
In myself and my abilities,
And the public began to take
An interest in me and in my progress,

KAFKA / TEEVAN

My future began to look brighter.
And I engaged teachers for myself,
Setting them at desks in five connecting rooms
While I leaped from one room to the next
Taking lessons from all five at once.

The progress that I made!
Rays of knowledge
Penetrating my awakening brain
From every side!

I do not deny it,
I found it intoxicating, but I confess
I also did not overestimate it.

No.

Not then,

Much less now.

Nevertheless, in those few short years,
With an effort never seen, before nor since,
In the entire history of humanity,

I reached the cultural level
Of an average European.

In itself this is nothing to speak of,
But in as much as it rescued me
From my cage, and opened a way out for me,
The way of humanity,
It is something indeed.

There is an excellent saying:
Forsaken by the wind, you must use your oars.
That is what I've done. Since freedom
Was never a possibility,
There was nothing else for me to do,
But row myself to the other shore.
I have rowed myself to the other shore.

11.

As I look back now,
At my progress,
And assess what I have achieved so far,
I do not complain,
Nor am I complacent.
With my hands in my trouser pockets,
A bottle of wine in front of me,
I half lie/half sit in my rocking chair,
Gazing out of the window.

If a visitor comes to call,
I receive him politely.
My manager sits outside in the hall,
When I ring he comes in straight away.
He always listens to what I have to say.

Most evenings I give a performance.
I could not enjoy greater success.
But when, late at night, I return home,

From a banquet or a social gathering,
Or scientific conference,
I always return home
Alone.

You see,
I'm still overcome with such an aversion
To human beings, I can barely stop myself
From retching.

It's nothing
To do with the person in question,
Least of all your good selves,
Ladies and Gentlemen of the academy,
It's all humanity.

If you were to live with apes continuously,
You'd probably suffer similar attacks,
However great your self-control.
In fact, it's not the smell of human beings
That repels me so much, it's the smell
Of humanity that clings to me and

KAFKA / TEEVAN

Mingles with the smell of my native land.

Smell me.

Smell me!

As I said,

When I return home late at night,

I return home

Alone,

And there sits,

Waiting for me,

A half-trained female chimpanzee.

And I take comfort from her as apes do.

But, by day, I cannot bear to see her.

She has the insane bewildered look

Of the half-broken beast in her eyes.

No one else can see it,

but I do

And I cannot bear it.

But,

on the whole,

I believe

I've achieved what I set out to achieve.

And don't tell me it was not worth the trouble.

I look for no man's approval,

I seek only to impart knowledge, to report.

To you, esteemed members of the academy,

I have simply made a report.









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