

A Report to an Academy

GENTLEMEN OF THE ACADEMY:

You have honored me with your invitation to submit a report to the Academy about my former life as an ape.

Taking this invitation in its literal sense, I am unfortunately unable to comply with it. Nearly five years stand between me and my apehood, a period that may be short in terms of the calendar but is an infinitely long one to gallop through as I have done, accompanied for certain stretches by excellent people, advice, applause and band music, but fundamentally on my own, because, to remain within the metaphor, all that accompaniment never got very close to the rail. This achievement would have been impossible if I had willfully clung to my origins, to the memories of my youth. In fact, avoidance of all willfulness was the supreme commandment I had imposed on myself; I, a free ape, accepted that yoke. Thereby, however, my memories were in turn increasingly lost to me. If at first a return to the past, should the humans have so wished, was as wide open to me as the universal archway the sky forms over the earth, at the same time my wildly accelerated development made this archway increasingly low and narrow; I felt more at ease and sheltered in the human world; the storm winds that blew out of my past grew calm; today there is only a breeze that cools my heels; and the hole in the distance through which it issues, and from which I once issued, has become so small that, if I ever had sufficient strength and desire to run all the way back there, I would have to scrape the hide off my body to squeeze through. Speaking frankly (although I enjoy using figures of speech for these matters), speaking frankly: your own apehood, gentlemen, to the extent that there is anything like that in your past, cannot be more remote from you than mine is from me. But every wanderer on earth feels a tickling in his heels: the little chimpanzee and great Achilles. In the most limited sense, however, I may be able to satisfy your

demands, and, in fact, I do so with great pleasure. The first thing I learned was shaking hands; shaking hands indicates candidness; today, when I am at the pinnacle of my career, why not add my candid words to that first handshake? My report will not teach the Academy anything basically new and will fall far short of what has been asked of me, which, with the best will in the world, I am unable to tell you — nevertheless, it is meant to show the guidelines by which a former ape has burst into the human world and established himself there. But I certainly would not have the right to make even the insignificant statement that follows, if I were not completely sure of myself and had not secured a truly unassailable position on all the great vaudeville stages of the civilized world.

I come from the Gold Coast. For the story of how I was captured I must rely on the reports of others. A hunting expedition of the Hagenbeck* firm — incidentally, since then I've drained many a fine bottle of red wine with its leader — was lying in wait in the brush by the shore when I ran down to the watering place one evening in the midst of a pack of apes. They fired; I was the only one hit; I was wounded in two places.

One wound was in the cheek; that was slight, but left behind a large, red, hairless scar, which won me the repulsive, totally unsuitable name of Red Peter, which must have been invented by an ape! — as if the red spot on my cheek were the only difference between me and the trained ape Peter, who had a local reputation here and there and who kicked the bucket recently. But that's by the by.

The second bullet hit me below the hip. It was a serious wound and the cause of my limping a little even today. Not long ago I read in an article by one of the ten thousand windbags† who gab about me in the papers, saying my ape nature is not yet suppressed; the proof being that, when visitors come, I'm fond of taking off my trousers to show where the bullet hit me. That guy should have every last finger of the hand he writes with individually blasted off! I, I have the right to drop my pants in front of anyone I feel like; all they'll see there is a well-tended coat of fur and the scar left over from — here let us choose a specific word for a specific purpose, but a word I wouldn't want misunderstood — the scar left over from an infamous shot. Everything is open and aboveboard; there's nothing to hide; when it comes to the truth, every high-minded person rejects namby-pamby etiquette. On the other hand, if that writer were to take his trousers off when company came, you can be sure it

* [Carl Hagenbeck of Hamburg was a pioneering zoo director, circus entrepreneur and supplier of live animals for exhibitions of all kinds. — TRANS.]

† [One of Kafka's animal jokes is irretrievably lost in translation here: the word he uses for "windbags" also means "greyhounds." — TRANS.]

would look quite different, and I'm ready to accept it as a token of his good sense that he refrains from doing so. But then he shouldn't bedevil me with his delicate sensibilities!

After those shots I woke up — and here my own recollections gradually begin — in a cage between decks on the Hagenbeck steamer. It wasn't a four-sided cage with bars all around; instead, there were only three barred sides attached to a crate, so that the crate formed the fourth wall. The whole thing was too low for standing erect in, and too narrow for sitting down in. And so I squatted with bent, constantly trembling knees, and, since at first I probably didn't want to see anyone and felt like being in the dark all the time, I faced the crate, while behind me the bars cut into my flesh. This way of keeping wild animals right after their capture is considered advantageous, and, with the experience I have today, I can't deny that, in a human sense, it is really the case.

But at that time I didn't think about it. For the first time in my life I had no way out, or at least not straight ahead of me; right in front of me was the crate, each board tightly joined to the next. True, between the boards there was a gap running right through, and when I first discovered it I greeted it with a joyful howl of ignorance, but this gap wasn't even nearly wide enough for me to push my tail through,* and all my ape's strength couldn't widen it.

They told me later on that I made unusually little noise, from which they concluded that I would either go under, or else, if I managed to live through the first, critical period, I would be extremely trainable. I lived through that period. Muffled sobbing, painful searching for fleas, weary licking of a coconut, banging the side of the crate with my cranium, sticking out my tongue whenever someone approached — those were my first occupations in my new life. But, throughout it all, only that one feeling: no way out. Today, naturally, I can only sketch from hindsight, and in human words, what I then felt as an ape, and therefore I am sketching it incorrectly, but even if I can no longer attain the old apish truth, my description isn't basically off course, and no doubt about it.

And yet, up to then, I had had so many ways out and now no longer one. I had boxed myself in. If I had been nailed down that couldn't have subtracted from my freedom of action. Why so? Scratch the skin between your toes till it bleeds, and you still won't find the reason. Press yourself backwards against the bars until they nearly cut you in two, you

* [There are several indications in the story, and in posthumously published deleted fragments, that Kafka meant Red Peter to be a chimpanzee; he either didn't know or didn't care that chimpanzees have no tail. (The German *Affe* that Kafka mainly uses means either ape or monkey indiscriminately.) — TRANS.]

won't find the reason. I had no way out, but had to create one for myself, because without it I couldn't live. Always up against the side of that crate — I would definitely have dropped dead. But, for Hagenbeck, apes belong at the side of the crate — so I stopped being an ape. A lucid, elegant train of thought, which I must have somehow hatched out with my belly, because apes think with their belly.

I'm afraid that it may not be clearly understood what I mean by "a way out." I am using the phrase in its most common and most comprehensive sense. I purposely do not say "freedom." I don't mean that expansive feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape I might have known it, and I've met human beings who long for it. As for me, however, I didn't desire freedom then, and I don't now. Incidentally: human beings fool themselves all too often on the subject of freedom. And just as freedom counts among the loftiest feelings, so does the corresponding delusion count among the loftiest. Often in vaudeville houses, before my act came on, I've seen some pair of artists do their trapeze routine way up near the ceiling. They swung to and fro, they rocked back and forth, they made leaps, they floated into each other's arms, one held the other by the hair with his teeth. "That, too, is human freedom," I would muse, "movement achieved in sovereign self-confidence." You mockery of holy Nature! No building would remain unshaken by the laughter of the ape world at that sight.

No, it wasn't freedom I wanted. Only a way out; to the right, to the left, in any direction at all; I made no other demands; even if the way out were a delusion; the demand was a small one, the delusion wouldn't be any bigger. To move forward, to move forward! Anything but standing still with raised arms, flattened against the side of a crate.

Today I see it clearly: without the utmost inner calm I would never have been able to save myself. And, in reality, I may owe everything that I've achieved to the calm that came over me after the first few days there on the ship. But, in turn, I probably owe that calm to the people on the ship.

They're good sorts, despite everything. Even today I enjoy recalling the sound of their heavy steps, which at the time reechoed in my half-slumber. They had the habit of tackling everything as slowly as possible. If one of them wanted to rub his eyes, he would lift his hand as if it were a hanging weight. Their jokes were coarse but hearty. Their laughter was always mingled with a coughing sound that sounded dangerous but was insignificant. They always had something in their mouth they could spit out and they didn't care a bit where they spat it. They were always complaining that my fleas were jumping onto them; but they were never seriously mad at me for it; they were perfectly well aware that fleas thrive in my fur and that fleas jump; they reconciled themselves to it. When

they had no duties, sometimes a few of them would sit down in a semicircle around me; they rarely spoke but just mumbled to one another like pigeons cooing; they would stretch out on crates and smoke their pipes; they would slap their knees the minute I made the slightest movement; and from time to time one of them would take a stick and tickle me where I liked it. If I were to be invited today to take part in a voyage on that ship, I would certainly decline the invitation, but it is equally certain that the memories I could muse over from my days between the decks there are not all unpleasant.

The calm I acquired in the company of those people restrained me especially from any attempt to escape. From the vantage point of today, it seems to me I had at least a vague notion that I had to find a way out if I were to survive, but that the way out was not to be attained by escape. I no longer know for certain whether escape was possible, but I think so; an ape probably always has some means of escape. With my teeth as they are today, I have to be careful even when cracking an ordinary nut, but at the time I would probably certainly have managed to bite through the lock on the door in a matter of time. I didn't. What would I have gained if I had? They would have caught me again the minute I stuck my head out and locked me in a cage that was worse yet; or else I might have escaped unnoticed and run over to other animals, for instance the giant snakes opposite me, and breathed my last in their embraces; or I might even have successfully stolen away onto the top deck and jumped overboard; in that case, I would have rocked on the ocean for a while and then drowned. Deeds of desperation. My calculations weren't that human, but under the influence of my environment I behaved as if I had calculated it all.

I didn't calculate, but I did observe things very calmly. I watched those human beings walk back and forth, always the same faces, the same motions; it often seemed to me as if it was just a single person. Well, that person or those persons were walking around unmolested. A lofty goal hazily entered my mind. Nobody promised me that, if I became like them, the bars would be removed. Promises like that based on apparently impossible terms just aren't made. But if the terms are met, later on the promises turn up exactly where they were formerly sought in vain. Now, there was nothing about these humans in themselves that allured me all that much. If I were a devotee of that above-mentioned freedom, I would certainly have chosen the ocean over the kind of way out that offered itself to me in the dull eyes of those people. At any rate, I had already been observing them long before I thought about such things; in fact, it was the accumulation of observations that first pushed me in the chosen direction.

It was so easy to imitate people. I could already spit within the first few days. Then we would mutually spit in each other's faces; the only difference being that I licked my face clean afterwards, and they didn't. I was soon smoking a pipe like an old hand; if, when doing so, I still stuck my thumb into the bowl, everyone between the decks whooped with joy; it was only the difference between the empty and filled pipe that I didn't understand for a long time.

It was the liquor bottle that gave me most trouble. The smell was torture to me; I forced myself with all my strength; but weeks went by before I overcame the resistance. Oddly, it was these inward struggles that the people took more seriously than anything else about me. Although in my recollections I can't tell the people apart, there was one of them who came again and again, alone or with comrades, by day and night, at the most varied hours; he would place himself in front of me with the bottle and give me instruction. He couldn't comprehend me, he wanted to solve the riddle of my being. Slowly he uncorked the bottle and then looked at me to see if I had understood; I confess, I always watched him with frantic, exaggerated attention; no human teacher will ever find such a human pupil anywhere on earth; after the bottle was uncorked, he lifted it to his mouth; my eyes followed him all the way into his gullet; he nodded, contented with me, and put the bottle to his lips; I, delighted by dawning knowledge, then squeal and scratch myself all over wherever I feel the need; he is happy, presses the bottle against his mouth and takes a swallow; I, impatient and desperate to emulate him, soil myself in my cage, and this, too, gives him great satisfaction; and now, holding the bottle far away from himself and lifting it toward himself again briskly, he bends backwards with pedagogical exaggeration and empties it in one draught. I, worn out by the excess of my desire, am unable to follow any longer and hang weakly on the bars while he concludes the theoretical instruction by rubbing his stomach and grinning.

Only now does the practical exercise begin. Am I not too exhausted already by the theoretical part? Far too exhausted, most likely. That's how my destiny goes. All the same, I do the best I can as I reach for the bottle he holds out to me; trembling, I uncork it; as I succeed, I gradually acquire new strength; I lift the bottle, by this time imitating my model so closely that there's hardly any difference; I put it to my mouth and — and with loathing, with loathing, even though it's empty and only the smell is left, with loathing I throw it on the ground. To my teacher's sorrow, to my own greater sorrow; I fail to make things right with either him or myself when, even after throwing away the bottle, I don't forget to do an excellent job of rubbing my stomach and grinning at the same time.

Things went that way all too often during my course of instruction. And to my teacher's credit: he wasn't angry with me; true, he sometimes held his lit pipe against my fur until it started to get singed in some spot that was very hard to reach, but then he would put it out again himself with his gigantic, kindly hand; he wasn't angry with me, he realized that we were both fighting as allies against ape nature, and the difficulty was more on my side.

What a victory it was, then, for him and for me, when one evening, before a large group of spectators — maybe it was a party, a gramophone was playing, an officer was walking about among the men — when on that evening, while no one was observing me, I grasped a liquor bottle that had been accidentally left in front of my cage, uncorked it according to all the rules as the people paid increasingly greater attention, put it to my mouth and, without hesitating, without twisting my lips, like a drinker from way back, with rolling eyes and gurgling throat, really and truly emptied the bottle; threw it away, no longer like someone in despair, but like an artiste; did actually forget to rub my stomach; but, instead, because I simply had to, because I had the urge to, because my senses were in an uproar — in a word, I called out "Hello," breaking into human speech, leaping into the human community by means of that outcry, and feeling its echo, "Listen, he's talking," like a kiss all over my sweat-soaked body.

I repeat: I didn't imitate human beings because they appealed to me; I imitated because I was looking for a way out, for no other reason. And that victory still didn't amount to much. My speaking voice failed me again immediately, and it took months for it to come back; my aversion to the liquor bottle returned and was even stronger than before. But, all the same, my course was set once and for all.

When I was handed over to the first trainer in Hamburg, I immediately recognized the two possibilities that were open to me: zoo or vaudeville. I didn't hesitate. I told myself: make every effort to get into vaudeville; that's the way out; the zoo is just another cage; once you land there, you're lost.

And I learned, gentlemen. Oh, you learn when you have to; you learn when you want a way out; you learn regardless of all else. You observe yourself, whip in hand; you lacerate yourself at the least sign of resistance. My ape nature, turning somersaults, raged out of me and away, so that my first teacher nearly became apelike himself, and soon had to give up the instruction and go to a sanatorium. Fortunately he came out again before long.

But I used up many teachers, sometimes a few teachers simultaneously. When I had become more sure of my abilities, when the

public was following my progress and my future began to look bright, I took on teachers on my own, sat them down in five successive rooms and took lessons from all of them at once, uninterruptedly leaping from one room to another.

That progress! That penetration of rays of knowledge from all sides into my awakening brain! I won't deny it: it made me happy. But I also admit: I didn't overestimate it, not even then, let alone today. Through an effort that hasn't found its match on earth to the present day, I have attained the educational level of an average European. Perhaps that wouldn't be anything by itself, but it is really something when you consider that it helped me out of my cage and gave me this particular way out, this human way out. There's an excellent German expression: *sich in die Büsche schlagen*,* to steal away secretly. That's what I did, I stole away secretly. I had no other way, always presupposing that I couldn't choose freedom.

When I survey my development and the goal it has had up to now, I am neither unhappy nor contented. My hands in my trousers pockets, the wine bottle on the table, I half recline, half sit, in my rocking chair and look out the window. When a visitor comes, I receive him in a proper manner. My impresario sits in the anteroom; when I ring, he comes and listens to what I have to say. There's a performance almost every evening, and my success probably can't get much greater. When I come home late at night from banquets, learned societies or friendly gatherings, a little half-trained female chimpanzee is waiting for me and I have a good time with her, ape fashion; in the daytime I don't want to see her, because her eyes have that deranged look which bewildered trained animals have; I'm the only one who recognizes it, and I can't stand it.

All in all, however, I have achieved what I wanted to achieve. Let nobody say that it wasn't worth the trouble. Anyway, I don't want any human being's opinion, I merely wish to disseminate information; I am merely making a report; even to you, gentlemen of the Academy, I have merely made a report.