

The Great Kinship Of Humans and Fauna

Elisée Reclus

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Man loves to live in dreams. The effort which Thought must put forth in order to seize hold of realities seems to him too hard, and he tries to escape the task by taking refuge in opinions ready-made. If “doubt is the pillow of the wise,” we may say that blissful faith is the pillow of the weak in mind. There was a time when the power of a supreme God, who thought for us, who willed and acted over our heads, and directed human destiny in accordance with his own caprice, was amply sufficient for us, and caused us to accept our mortal lot with resignation or even with gratitude. Now this personal God, in whom the meek reposed their confidence, is perishing in his own temples, and men have to find a substitute for him. But there exists no longer any almighty power on which they can count; they only have a few words, to which they seek to give as it were a mystic force — as it were a magic virtue; for example, the word “progress”.

No doubt it is true that in many respects man has progressed; his sensations have (I indeed think) become more refined, his thoughts keener and more profound, and his humanity, embracing a vaster world, has prodigiously grown in breadth. But no progress can establish itself without a partial retrogression. The human creature grows, but in growing changes his place, and in the act of advancing he loses a part of the ground, which once he occupied. The ideal would be that civilised men should have preserved the force of the savage, that he should also have his skill, that he should still possess a perfect balance of limb, native health, tranquillity of the moral nature, simplicity of life, intimacy with the animals and the fields, and the harmony with the earth and all that inhabits it. But what was once the rule is now the exception. Many examples no doubt prove to us that the man of energetic

will, exceptionally favoured by his surroundings, can quite rival the savage in all his primitive attainments, while at the same time adding thereto a consciousness saturated by a higher soul. But how are there those who have gained without losing, who are at once the equals of primitive man in his forest or prairie, and the equals of the artist or modern savant in the turmoil of city life?

And if here or there a man, unique in force of will and dignity of action, succeeds in rivalling his ancestors in respect of their native qualities, while also outstripping them by reason of those acquired, one may say with regret that, as a whole, mankind has certainly lost some of its early winnings. Thus, the world of animals, from which we derive our genesis and which was our tutor in the art of existence, which taught us fishing and the chase, and the rudiments of healing and of house construction, the habits of work in common, and the storing of food — this world has become a stranger to us. We today, in regard to the animals, talk of education or domestication simply in the sense of enslavement, but primitive man was thinking of a fraternal association. He saw in these living beings companions, and not servants; and indeed in many cases, as of common calamity (especially in times of storm or flood), the beasts — dogs, birds, serpents — came and took refuge with him.

The Indian woman of the Brazils surrounds herself quite wittingly with a regular menagerie, and her cabin will have in the surrounding clearing tapirs, deer, opossums, and even tame jaguars. There one sees monkeys gambolling in the branches over the hut, peccaries rooting in the soil, toucans, hocco¹ and parrots perching here or there on the swinging branches, protected by dogs and great trumpeter birds². And this whole republic moves and has its being without any necessity for a cross-grained mistress to deal out insults and blows. The Quichuan shepherd, crossing the plateau of the Andes by the side of the llama and his burden, has never attempted to gain the assistance of the loved animal otherwise than by caresses and encouragement; a single act of violence, and the llama, his personal dignity offended, would lie down in wrath and refuse to rise. He walks at his own pace, never allows his burden to be too great, stands still a long time at sunrise to contemplate the ascending orb, expects to be crowned with flowers and ribbons, or to have a flag poised on his head, and desires the children and women, on his arrival at the huts, to flatter and caress him.

Does not the horse of the Bedouin — another primitive man — come into the tent? And do not the weaning children sleep between his legs? The natural sympathy existing between all these creatures harmonised them in a broad atmosphere

¹ A name given by Cuvier to birds of the genus Crax.

² Oiseaux adamis. The agami, or trumpeter bird, “is about the size of a large fowl, is kept in Guiana, of which it is a native, with poultry, which it is said to defend, and shows a strong attachment to the person by whom it is fed.” — Lloyd’s dictionary.

of peace and love. The bird would come and perch on the hand of man, as he does even today on the horns of the bull, and the squirrel would frolic within arm's reach of the field-worker or the shepherd.

Even in their political communities primitive folk did not overlook the animal. In Fazokl, when the people depose a king, they are accustomed to address him as follows: "Since you have ceased to be pleasing to the men, the women, the children, and the donkeys, the best you can do is die, and to that end we will assist you."³ In old times men and animals had no secrets from one another. "The beast talked," so the story goes; but the main thing was that Man understood. Are there any stories more charming than the tales of South India — perhaps the oldest legends in the world — transmitted to the Dravidian invaders by the aborigines? In them elephants, jackals, tigers, lions, jerboas, serpents, crabs, monkeys, and men, hold converse in all freedom, thus constituting, so to speak, the great reciprocal school of the primitive world, and in this school it is more often the animal that is the real teacher.

Associations between man and the animals included, in those early times, a much greater number of species than we find today in our domestic sphere. Geoffroy St. Hilaire spoke of forty-seven, which thus formed, as it were, the retinue of Man; but how many species which he did not mention dwelt of old in intimacy with their youngest born brother! He did not include the many companions of the Indian woman of Guiana, nor the snakes which the Dinkaman on the Nile calls by name, and with which he shares the milk of his cows, nor the rhinoceros that pasture along with other cattle on the meadows of Assam, nor the crocodiles of the Indus, which the Hindu artists show decorated with sacred emblems. Archaeologists have proved beyond doubt that the Egyptians of the ancient empire had, among their herds of domestic animals, three, or even four, species of antelope, and one of wild goat, all of them creatures which, having once been associated with man, have become wild again. Even the hyena-like dogs and the guepards⁴ had once been transformed by hunters into faithful allies. The Rig Veda sings the praise of messenger pigeons "swifter than the clouds." It sees in them gods and goddesses, and exhorts that burnt sacrifices should be prepared and libations poured out for them. Without a doubt, the mythic story of the Flood recalls to us the skill of our earliest ancestors in the art of making use of the carrier pigeon's fleetness. It was the dove that Noah sent forth from the Ark to explore the waste of waters and the reappearing lands, which brought back in its beak the branch of olive.

And we may say that in many respects the domestication of animals, as we practice it today, exhibits a veritable moral backsliding, for, far from having improved

³ Lepsius, *Letters from Egypt*

⁴ Guepard, the hunting tiger of India, or cheetah.

them, we have deformed, degraded and corrupted them. We have, it is true, been able, by selection of specimens, to augment in the animal such and such quality of strength, of skill, of scent, of swiftness; but in our role of flesh-eaters our great preoccupation has been to augment certain four-footed masses of meat and fat – to provide ourselves with stores of walking flesh, moving with difficulty from dung-heap to the slaughterhouse. Can we truly say that the pig is superior to the wild boar, or the timid sheep to the intrepid mouflon? The noble art of breeders is to castrate their beasts, or to create hybrids, which are incapable of reproduction. They train horses “by means of bit, whip and spur,” and then complain that these exhibit no mental initiative. Even when domesticating the animals under the most favourable conditions, they diminish their powers of resistance to disease and their adaptability to new surroundings, making of them artificial creatures, incapable of self-support in the freedom of Nature.

The corruption of species is already a great evil, but civilised science tends also to their extermination. It is notorious how many birds have been destroyed by European sportsmen in New Zealand and Australia, in Madagascar, and in the polar archipelago; how many walrus and other cetacea have already disappeared. The whale has fled from our more temperate seas, and before long will not even be found among the ice floes of the Arctic Ocean. All the great land animals are threatened in the same way. One knows the fate of the aurochs and the bison; one can foretell that of the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus and the elephant. Statistics estimate the production of elephant ivory at 800 tons yearly, which is as good as to say that the hunters kill 40,000 elephants in the same time, without counting those who, after being wounded, go off and die afar in the jungle. How distant are we from the Singhalese folk of old times, for whom “the eighteenth science for man was to win the friendship of an elephant”! How distant from the Aryans of India, who appointed for the captive colossus two Brahmins as companions, in order that he might be taught to practice the virtues worthy of his race!

What a contrast there exists between the two kinds of civilisation I had occasion to see one day in a plantation in Brazil. Two bulls, bought at great expense in the Old World, were the pride of the proprietor. One of them, which came from Jersey, was pulling at a chain which passed through his nostrils, bellowing, fuming, tearing the ground with his hoof, thrusting with his horns, and watching his keeper with a wicked eye; the other, a zebu, imported from India, followed us like a dog, with gentle eyes, begging for a caress. We poor ignorant “civilisees”, living in our closed houses, afar from Nature, which alarms us because the sun is too hot or the wind too cold – we have entirely forgotten even the meaning of the festivals which we celebrate, and which, all of them – Christmas, Easter, Rogations, and All-Hallows – were originally festivals of Nature, though Christianity itself does not know it. Do we understand the meaning of the traditions which place the first

man in a garden of beauty, where he walks in freedom with all the animals, and which tell us that the “Son of Man” was born on a bed of straw, between the ass and the ox, the two companions of the field-worker?

Nevertheless, though the gulf which separates man from his brethren the animals has widened, and though our direct influence on those species that remain free in Nature’s wilds has diminished, it seems clear that at least a certain progress has been effected, thanks to the more intimate association which has arisen with those domestic animals which are not used for food. No doubt even dogs have been partially corrupted. The majority of them, accustomed like soldiers to blows, have become degraded beings that tremble before the stick, and cringe and crawl under the threats of the master; others, who are taught savagery, become the bulldogs that seize poor folk by the calf of the leg, or leap at the throats of the slaves; and then again “greyhounds in petticoats”⁵ adopt all the vices of their mistresses – greediness, vanity, luxury, and insolence; while the dogs in China, bred for the table, are stupid beyond compare. But the dog that is truly loved, and brought up in generosity, gentleness and nobility of feeling – does he not quite often realise a human or superhuman ideal of devotion and moral greatness?

And cats – who have understood better than dogs how to safeguard their personal independence and originality of character, who are “companions rather than captives” – have they not, too, since the day of primitive wildness in the woods, made advances intellectual and moral which partake of the miraculous? There is not a human sentiment, which on occasion they do not understand or share, not an idea, which they do not divine, not a desire but what they forestall it. The poet sees in them magicians; it is that in fact they do seem at times more intelligent than their human friends, in their presentiment of the future. And such and such “happy family,” exhibited by showmen in the fairs, does it prove to us that rats, mice, guinea pigs and so many other little creatures, only desire to enter, with man, into the great kinship of gladness and kindness? Every prison cell is soon transformed – provided the warders do not impose “good order” – into a school of lower animals, rats and mice, flies and fleas. The story of Pelisson’s spider is well known. The prisoner had begun again to take interest in life, thanks to the little friend whose training he had undertaken; but a guardian of order appears on the scene, and avenging official morality with his boot, crushes the creature which had come to console the unfortunate man!

These facts prove to us the resources which man holds in command for the revival of his influence over all this animated world which now he leaves in the lap of chance, and neglects to associate with his own life. When our civilisation, ferociously individualist as it is, and dividing the world into as many little hostile

⁵ *Les levrettes en panetot.*

States as there are separate properties and different family households — when its last bankruptcy shall have been declared, and recourse to mutual help shall have become necessary for the common salvation, when the search for friendship shall have taken the place of the search for wealth — that wealth which, sooner or later, will be sufficiently assured for all; and when the enthusiasm of naturalists shall have revealed to us all that there is of charming, of lovable, of human, and often of more than human, in the nature of the animals, then we shall remember all these species that have been left behind on the forward route, and shall endeavour to make of them, not servants or machines, but veritable companions. The study of primitive man has contributed in a singular degree to our understanding of the “law and order” man of our own day; the customs of animals will help us to penetrate deeper into the science of life, will enlarge both our knowledge of the world and our love. Let us long for the day when the doe of the forest shall come to meet us, to win our caresses by the look of her dark eyes, and the bird shall perch triumphantly on the shoulder of the loved woman, knowing himself beautiful, and demanding, he also, his part in the kiss of friendship!

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