

THEY PUT THE BEHEMOTHS in the hold along with the rhinos, the hippos and the elephants. It was a sensible decision to use them as ballast; but you can imagine the stench. And there was no-one to muck out. The men were overburdened with the feeding rota, and their women, who beneath those leaping fire-tongues of scent no doubt reeked as badly as we did, were far too delicate. So if any mucking-out was to happen, we had to do it ourselves. Every few months they would winch back the thick hatch on the aft deck and let the cleaner-birds in. Well, first they had to let the smell out (and there weren't too many volunteers for winch-work); then six or eight of the less fastidious birds would flutter cautiously around the hatch for a minute or so before diving in. I can't remember what they were all called - indeed, one of those pairs no longer exists - but you know the sort I mean. You've seen hippos with their mouths open and bright little birds pecking away between their teeth like distraught dental hygienists? Picture that on a larger, messier scale. I am hardly squeamish, but even I used to shudder at the scene below decks: a row of squinting monsters being manicured in a sewer.

There was strict discipline on the Ark: that's the first point to make. It wasn't like those nursery versions in painted wood which you might have played with as a child - all happy couples peering merrily over the rail from the comfort of their well-scrubbed stalls. Don't imagine some Mediterranean cruise on which we played languorous roulette and everyone dressed for dinner; on the Ark only the penguins wore tailcoats. Remember: this was a long and dangerous voyage - dangerous even though some of the rules had been fixed in advance. Remember

too that we had the whole of the animal kingdom on board: would you have put the cheetahs within springing distance of the antelope? A certain level of security was inevitable, and we accepted double-peg locks, stall inspections, a nightly curfew. But regrettably there were also punishments and isolation cells. Someone at the very top became obsessed with information gathering; and certain of the travellers agreed to act as stool pigeons. I'm sorry to report that ratting to the authorities was at times widespread. It wasn't a nature reserve, that Ark of ours; at times it was more like a prison ship.

Now, I realize that accounts differ. Your species has its much repeated version, which still charms even sceptics; while the animals have a compendium of sentimental myths. But they're not going to rock the boat, are they? Not when they've been treated as heroes, not when it's become a matter of pride that each and every one of them can proudly trace its family tree straight back to the Ark. They were chosen, they endured, they survived: it's normal for them to gloss over the awkward episodes, to have convenient lapses of memory. But I am not constrained in that way. I was never chosen. In fact, like several other species, I was specifically not chosen. I was a stowaway; I too survived; I escaped (getting off was no easier than getting on); and I have flourished. I am a little set apart from the rest of animal society, which still has its nostalgic reunions: there is even a Sealegs Club for species which never once felt queasy. When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust.

You presumably grasped that the 'Ark' was more than just a single ship? It was the name we gave to the whole flotilla (you could hardly expect to cram the entire animal kingdom into something a mere three hundred cubits long). It rained for forty days and forty nights? Well, naturally it didn't — that would have been no more than a routine English summer. No, it rained for about a year and a half, by my reckoning. And the waters were upon the earth for a hundred and fifty days? Bump that up to about four years. And so on. Your species has always

been hopeless about dates. I put it down to your quaint obsession with multiples of seven.

In the beginning, the Ark consisted of eight vessels: Noah's galleon, which towed the stores ship, then four slightly smaller boats, each captained by one of Noah's sons, and behind them, at a safe distance (the family being superstitious about illness) the hospital ship. The eighth vessel provided a brief mystery: a dashing little sloop with filigree decorations in sandalwood all along the stern, it steered a course sycophantically close to that of Ham's ark. If you got to leeward you would sometimes be teased with strange perfumes; occasionally, at night, when the tempest slackened, you could hear jaunty music and shrill laughter — surprising noises to us, because we had assumed that all the wives of all the sons of Noah were safely ensconced on their own ships. However, this scented, laughing boat was not robust: it went down in a sudden squall, and Ham was pensive for several weeks thereafter.

The stores ship was the next to be lost, on a starless night when the wind had dropped and the lookouts were drowsy. In the morning all that trailed behind Noah's flagship was a length of fat hawser which had been gnawed through by something with sharp incisors and an ability to cling to wet ropes. There were serious recriminations about that, I can tell you; indeed, this may have been the first occasion on which a species disappeared overboard. Not long afterwards the hospital ship was lost. There were murmurings that the two events were connected, that Ham's wife — who was a little short on serenity — had decided to revenge herself upon the animals. Apparently her lifetime output of embroidered blankets had gone down with the stores ship. But nothing was ever proved.

Still, the worst disaster by far was the loss of Varadi. You're familiar with Ham and Shem and the other one, whose name began with a J; but you don't know about Varadi, do you? He was the youngest and strongest of Noah's sons; which didn't, of course, make him the most popular within the family. He also had a sense of humour — or at least he laughed a lot, which is usually proof enough for your species. Yes, Varadi was always

cheerful. He could be seen strutting the quarterdeck with a parrot on each shoulder; he would slap the quadrupeds affectionately on the rump, which they'd acknowledge with an appreciative bellow; and it was said that his ark was run on much less tyrannical lines than the others. But there you are: one morning we awoke to find that Varadi's ship had vanished from the horizon, taking with it one fifth of the animal kingdom. You would, I think, have enjoyed the simurgh, with its silver head and peacock's tail; but the bird that nested in the Tree of Knowledge was no more proof against the waves than the brindled vole. Varadi's elder brothers blamed poor navigation; they said Varadi had spent far too much time fraternizing with the beasts; they even hinted that God might have been punishing him for some obscure offence committed when he was a child of eighty-five. But whatever the truth behind Varadi's disappearance, it was a severe loss to your species. His genes would have helped you a great deal.

As far as we were concerned the whole business of the Voyage began when we were invited to report to a certain place by a certain time. That was the first we heard of the scheme. We didn't know anything of the political background. God's wrath with his own creation was news to us; we just got caught up in it with his own creation was news to us; we just got caught up in it willy-nilly. We weren't in any way to blame (you don't really believe that story about the serpent, do you? — it was just Adam's black propaganda), and yet the consequences for us were equally severe: every species wiped out except for a single breeding pair, and that couple consigned to the high seas under the charge of an old rogue with a drink problem who was already into his seventh century of life.

So the word went out; but characteristically they didn't tell us the truth. Did you imagine that in the vicinity of Noah's palace (oh, he wasn't poor, that Noah) there dwelt a convenient example of every species on earth? Come, come. No, they were obliged to advertise, and then select the best pair that presented itself. Since they didn't want to cause a universal panic, they announced a competition for twosomes — a sort of beauty contest-cum brains trust cum Darby-and-Joan event — and told contest-

ants to present themselves at Noah's gate by a certain month. You can imagine the problems. For a start, not everyone has a competitive nature, so perhaps only the grabbiest turned up. Animals who weren't smart enough to read between the lines felt they simply didn't need to win a luxury cruise for two, all expenses paid, thank you very much. Nor had Noah and his staff allowed for the fact that some species hibernate at a given time of year; let alone the more obvious fact that certain animals travel more slowly than others. There was a particularly relaxed sloth, for instance — an exquisite creature, I can vouch for it personally — which had scarcely got down to the foot of its tree before it was wiped out in the great wash of God's vengeance. What do you call that — natural selection? I'd call it professional incompetence.

The arrangements, frankly, were a shambles. Noah got behind with the building of the arks (it didn't help when the craftsmen realized there weren't enough berths for them to be taken along as well); with the result that insufficient attention was given to choosing the animals. The first normally presentable pair that came along was given the nod — this appeared to be the system; there was certainly no more than the scantiest examination of pedigree. And of course, while they *said* they'd take two of each species, when it came down to it . . . Some creatures were simply Not Wanted On Voyage. That was the case with us; that's why we had to stow away. And any number of beasts, with a perfectly good legal argument for being a separate species, had their claims dismissed. No, we've got two of you already, they were told. Well, what difference do a few extra rings round the tail make, or those bushy tufts down your backbone? We've got you. Sorry.

There were splendid animals that arrived without a mate and had to be left behind; there were families which refused to be separated from their offspring and chose to die together; there were medical inspections, often of a brutally intrusive nature; and all night long the air outside Noah's stockade was heavy with the wailings of the rejected. Can you imagine the atmosphere when the news finally got out as to why we'd been asked to

submit to this charade of a competition? There was much jealousy and bad behaviour, as you can imagine. Some of the nobler species simply padded away into the forest, declining to survive on the insulting terms offered them by God and Noah, preferring extinction and the waves. Harsh and envious words were spoken about fish; the amphibians began to look distinctly smug; birds practised staying in the air as long as possible. Certain types of monkey were occasionally seen trying to construct crude rafts of their own. One week there was a mysterious outbreak of food poisoning in the Compound of the Chosen, and for some of the less robust species the selection process had to start all over again.

There were times when Noah and his sons got quite hysterical. That doesn't tally with your account of things? You've always been led to believe that Noah was sage, righteous and God-fearing, and I've already described him as a hysterical rogue with a drink problem? The two views aren't entirely incompatible. Put it this way: Noah was pretty bad, but *you should have seen the others*. It came as little surprise to us that God decided to wipe the slate clean; the only puzzle was that he chose to preserve anything at all of this species whose creation did not reflect particularly well on its creator.

At times Noah was nearly on the edge. The Ark was behind schedule, the craftsmen had to be whipped, hundreds of terrified animals were bivouacking near his palace, and nobody knew when the rains were coming. God wouldn't even give him a date for that. Every morning we looked at the clouds: would it be a westerly wind that brought the rain as usual, or would God send his special downpour from a rare direction? And as the weather slowly thickened, the possibilities of revolt grew. Some of the rejected wanted to commandeer the Ark and save themselves, others wanted to destroy it altogether. Animals of a speculative bent began to propound rival selection principles, based on beast size or utility rather than mere number; but Noah lofully refused to negotiate. He was a man who had his little theories, and he didn't want anyone else's.

As the flotilla neared completion it had to be guarded round

the clock. There were many attempts to stow away. A craftsman was discovered one day trying to hollow out a priest's hole among the lower timbers of the stores ship. And there were some pathetic sights: a young elk strung from the rail of Shem's ark; birds dive-bombing the protective netting; and so on. Stowaways, when detected, were immediately put to death; but these public spectacles were never enough to deter the desperate. Our species, I am proud to report, got on board without either bribery or violence; but then we are not as detestable as a young elk. How did we manage it? We had a parent with foresight. While Noah and his sons were roughly frisking the animals as they came up the gangway, running coarse hands through suspiciously shaggy fleeces and carrying out some of the earliest and most unhygienic prostrate examinations, we were already well past their gaze and safely in our bunks. One of the ship's carpenters carried us to safety, little knowing what he did.

For two days the wind blew from all directions simultaneously; and then it began to rain. Water sluiced down from a bilious sky to purge the wicked world. Big drops exploded on the deck like pigeons' eggs. The selected representatives of each species were moved from the Compound of the Chosen to their allotted ark: the scene resembled some obligatory mass wedding. Then they screwed down the hatches and we all started getting used to the dark, the confinement and the stench. Not that we cared much about this at first: we were too exhilarated by our survival. The rain fell and fell, occasionally shifting to hail and rattling on the timbers. Sometimes we could hear the crack of thunder from outside, and often the lamentations of abandoned beasts. After a while these cries grew less frequent: we knew that the waters had begun to rise.

Eventually came the day we had been longing for. At first we thought it might be some crazed assault by the last remaining pachyderms, trying to force their way into the Ark, or at least knock it over. But no: it was the boat shifting sideways as the water began to lift it from the cradle. That was the high point of the Voyage, if you ask me; that was when fraternity among the

beasts and gratitude towards man flowed like the wine at Noah's table. Afterwards . . . but perhaps the animals had been naive to trust Noah and his God in the first place.

Even before the waters rose there had been grounds for unease. I know your species tends to look down on our world, considering it brutal, cannibalistic and deceitful (though you might acknowledge the argument that this makes us closer to you rather than more distant). But among us there had always been, from the beginning, a sense of equality. Oh, to be sure, we are one another, and so on; the weaker species knew all too well what to expect if they crossed the path of something that was both bigger and hungrier. But we merely recognized this as being the way of things. The fact that one animal was capable of killing another did not make the first animal superior to the second; merely more dangerous. Perhaps this is a concept difficult for you to grasp, but there was a mutual respect amongst us. Eating another animal was not grounds for despising it; and being eaten did not instill in the victim — or the victim's family — any exaggerated admiration for the dining species.

Noah — or Noah's God — changed all that. If you had a Fall, so did we. But we were pushed. It was when the selections were being made for the Compound of the Chosen that we first noticed it. All this stuff about two of everything was true (and you could see it made a certain basic sense); but it wasn't the end of the matter. In the Compound we began to notice that some species had been whittled down not to a couple but to seven (again, this obsession with sevens). At first we thought the extra five might be travelling reserves in case the original pair fell sick. But then it slowly began to emerge: Noah — or Noah's God — had decreed that there were two classes of beast: the clean and the unclean. Clean animals got into the Ark by sevens; the unclean by twos.

There was, as you can imagine, deep resentment at the divisiveness of God's animal policy. Indeed, at first even the clean animals themselves were embarrassed by the whole thing; they knew they'd done little to deserve such special patronage.

Though being 'clean', as they rapidly realized, was a mixed blessing. Being 'clean' meant that they could be eaten. Seven animals were welcome on board, but five were destined for the galley. It was a curious form of honour that was being done them. But at least it meant they got the most comfortable quarters available until the day of their ritual slaughter.

I could occasionally find the situation funny, and give vent to the outcast's laugh. However, among the species who took themselves seriously there arose all sorts of complicated jealousies. The pig did not mind, being of a socially unambitious nature; but some of the other animals regarded the notion of uncleanliness as a personal slight. And it must be said that the system — at least, the system as Noah understood it — made very little sense. What was so special about cloven-footed ruminants, one asked oneself? Why should the camel and the rabbit be given second-class status? Why should a division be introduced between fish that had scales and fish that did not? The swan, the pelican, the heron, the hoopoe: are these not some of the finest species? Yet they were not awarded the badge of cleanness. Why round on the mouse and the lizard — which had enough problems already, you might think — and undermine their self-confidence further? If only we could have seen some glimpse of logic behind it all; if only Noah had explained it better. But all he did was blindly obey. Noah, as you will have been told many times, was a very God-fearing man; and given the nature of God, that was probably the safest line to take. Yet if you could have heard the weeping of the shellfish, the grave and puzzled complaint of the lobster, if you could have seen the mournful shame of the stork, you would have understood that things would never again be the same amongst us.

And then there was another little difficulty. By some unhappy chance, our species had managed to smuggle seven members on board. Not only were we stowaways (which some resented), not only were we unclean (which some had already begun to despise), but we had also mocked those clean and legal species by mimicking their sacred number. We quickly decided to lie about how many of us there were — and we never appeared

together in the same place. We discovered which parts of the ship were welcoming to us, and which we should avoid.

So you can see that it was an unhappy convoy from the beginning. Some of us were grieving for those we had been forced to leave behind; others were resentful about their status; others again, though notionally favoured by the title of cleanliness, were rightly apprehensive about the oven. And on top of it all, there was Noah and his family.

I don't know how best to break this to you, but Noah was not a nice man. I realize this idea is embarrassing, since you are all descended from him; still, there it is. He was a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day grovelling to his God and the other half taking it out on us. He had a gopher-wood staff with which . . . well, some of the animals carry the stripes to this day. It's amazing what fear can do. I'm told that among your species a severe shock may cause the hair to turn white in a matter of hours; on the Ark the effects of fear were even more dramatic. There was a pair of lizards, for instance, who at the mere sound of Noah's gopher-wood sandals advancing down the companion-way would actually change colour. I saw it myself: their skin would abandon its natural hue and blend with the background. Noah would pause as he passed their stall, wondering briefly why it was empty, then stroll on; and as his footsteps faded the terrified lizards would slowly revert to their normal colour. Down the post-Ark years this has apparently proved a useful trick; but it all began as a chronic reaction to 'the Admiral'.

With the reindeer it was more complicated. They were always nervous, but it wasn't just fear of Noah, it was something deeper. You know how some of us animals have powers of foresight? Even *you* have managed to notice that, after millennia of exposure to our habits. 'Oh, look,' you say, 'the cows are sitting down in the field, that means it's going to rain.' Well, of course it's all much subtler than you can possibly imagine, and the point of it certainly isn't to act as a cheap weather-vane for human beings. Anyway . . . the reindeer were troubled with something deeper than Noah-angst, stranger than storm-

nerve; something . . . long-term. They sweated up in their stalls, they whinnied neurotically in spells of oppressive heat; they kicked out at the gopher-wood partitions when there was no obvious danger — no subsequently proven danger, either — and when Noah had been, for him, positively restrained in his behaviour. But the reindeer sensed something. And it was something beyond what we then knew. As if they were saying, 'You think this is the worst? Don't count on it. Still, whatever it was, even the reindeer couldn't be specific about it. Something distant, major . . . long-term.'

The rest of us, understandably enough, were far more concerned about the short term. Sick animals, for instance, were always ruthlessly dealt with. This was not a hospital ship, we were constantly informed by the authorities; there was to be no disease, and no malingering. Which hardly seemed just or realistic. But you knew better than to report yourself ill. A little bit of mange and you were over the side before you could stick your tongue out for inspection. And then what do you think happened to your better half? What good is fifty per cent of a breeding pair? Noah was hardly the sentimentalist who would urge the grieving partner to live out its natural span.

Put it another way: what the hell do you think Noah and his family are in the Ark? They are *us*, of course. I mean, if you look around the animal kingdom nowadays, you don't think this is all there ever was, do you? A lot of beasts looking more or less the same, and then a gap and another lot of beasts looking more or less the same? I know you've got some theory to make sense of it all — something about relationship to the environment and inherited skills or whatever — but there's a much simpler explanation for the puzzling leaps in the spectrum of creation. One fifth of the earth's species went down with Varadi; and as for the rest that are missing, Noah's crowd ate them. They did. There was a pair of Arctic plovers, for instance — very pretty birds. When they came on board they were a mottled bluey-brown in plumage. A few months later they started to moult. This was quite normal. As their summer feathers departed,

their winter coat of pure white began to show through. Of course we weren't in Arctic latitudes, so this was technically unnecessary; still, you can't stop Nature, can you? Nor could you stop Noah. As soon as he saw the plovers turning white, he decided that they were sickening, and in tender consideration for the rest of the ship's health he had them boiled with a little seaweed on the side. He was an ignorant man in many respects, and certainly no ornithologist. We got up a petition and explained certain things to him about moulting and what-have-you. Eventually he seemed to take it in. But that was the Arctic plover gone.

Of course, it didn't stop there. As far as Noah and his family were concerned, we were just a floating cafeteria. Clean and unclean came alike to them on the Ark; lunch first, then piety, that was the rule. And you can't imagine what richness of wildlife Noah deprived you of. Or rather, you can, because that's precisely what you do: you imagine it. All those mythical beasts your poets dreamed up in former centuries: you assume, don't you, that they were either knowingly invented, or else they were alarmist descriptions of animals half-glimpsed in the forest after too good a hunting lunch? I'm afraid the explanation's more simple: Noah and his tribe scoffed them. At the start of the Voyage, as I said, there was a pair of behemoths in our hold. I didn't get much of a look at them myself, but I'm told they were impressive beasts. Yet Ham, Shem or the one whose name began with J apparently proposed at the family council that if you had the elephant and the hippopotamus, you could get by without the behemoth; and besides — the argument combined practicality with principle — two such large carcasses would keep the Noah family going for months.

Of course, it didn't work out like that. After a few weeks there were complaints about getting behemoth for dinner every night, and so — merely for a change of diet — some other species was sacrificed. There were guilty nods from time to time in the direction of domestic economy, but I can tell you this: there was a lot of salted behemoth left over at the end of the journey.

The salamander went the same way. The real salamander, I

mean, not the unremarkable animal you still call by the same name; our salamander lived in fire. That was a one-off beast and no mistake; yet Ham or Shem or the other one kept pointing out that on a wooden ship the risk was simply too great, and so both the salamanders and the twin fires that housed them had to go. The carbuncle went as well, all because of some ridiculous story Ham's wife had heard about it having a precious jewel inside its skull. She was always a dressy one, that Ham's wife. So they took one of the carbuncles and chopped its head off; split the skull and found nothing at all. Maybe the jewel is only found in the female's head, Ham's wife suggested. So they opened up the other one as well, with the same negative result.

I put this next suggestion to you rather tentatively; I feel I have to voice it, though. At times we suspected a kind of system behind the killing that went on. Certainly there was more extermination than was strictly necessary for nutritional purposes — far more. And at the same time some of the species that were killed had very little eating on them. What's more, the gulls would occasionally report that they had seen carcasses tossed from the stern with perfectly good meat thick on the bone. We began to suspect that Noah and his tribe had it in for certain animals simply for being what they were. The basilisk, for instance, went overboard very early. Now, of course it wasn't very pleasant to look at, but I feel it my duty to record that there was very little eating underneath those scales, and that the bird certainly wasn't sick at the time.

In fact, when we came to look back on it after the event, we began to discern a pattern, and the pattern began with the basilisk. You've never seen one, of course. But if I describe a four-legged cock with a serpent's tail, say that it had a very nasty look in its eye and laid a misshapen egg which it then employed a road to hatch, you'll understand that this was not the most alluring beast on the Ark. Still, it had its rights like everyone else, didn't it? After the basilisk it was the griffon's turn; after the griffon, the sphinx; after the sphinx, the hippogriff. You thought they were all gaudy fantasies, perhaps? Not a bit of it. And do you see what they had in common? They were all cross-

breeds. We think it was Shem — though it could well have been Noah himself — who had this thing about the purity of the species. Cock-eyed, of course; and as we used to say to one another, you only had to look at Noah and his wife, or at their three sons and their three wives, to realize what a genetically messy lot the human race would turn out to be. So why should they start getting fastidious about cross-breeds?

Still, it was the unicorn that was the most distressing. That business depressed us for months. Of course, there were the usual sordid rumours — that Ham's wife had been putting its horn to ignoble use — and the usual posthumous smear campaign by the authorities about the beast's character; but this only sickened us the more. The unavoidable fact is that Noah was jealous. We all looked up to the unicorn, and he couldn't stand it. Noah — what point is there in not telling you the truth? — was bad-tempered, smelly, unreliable, envious and cowardly. He wasn't even a good sailor: when the seas were high he would retire to his cabin, throw himself down on his gopher-wood bed and leave it only to vomit out his stomach into his gopher-wood wash-basin; you could smell the effluvia a deck away. Whereas the unicorn was strong, honest, fearless, impeccably groomed, and a mariner who never knew a moment's queasiness. Once, in a gale, Ham's wife lost her footing near the rail and was about to go overboard. The unicorn — who had deck privileges as a result of popular lobbying — galloped across and struck his horn through her trailing cloak, pinning it to the deck. Fine thanks he got for his valour; the Noahs had him casseroted one Embarkation Sunday. I can vouch for that. I spoke personally to the carrier-hawk who delivered a warm por to Shem's ark.

You don't have to believe me, of course; but what do your own archives say? Take the story of Noah's nakedness — you remember? It happened after the Landing. Noah, not surprisingly, was even more pleased with himself than before — he'd saved the human race, he'd ensured the success of his dynasty, he'd been given a formal covenant by God — and he decided to take things easy in the last three hundred and fifty years of his life. He founded a village (which you call Arghuri) on the lower

slopes of the mountain, and spent his days dreaming up new decorations and honours for himself: Holy Knight of the Tempest, Grand Commander of the Squalls, and so on. Your sacred text informs you that on his estate he planted a vineyard. Ha! Even the least subtle mind can decode that particular euphemism: he was drunk all the time. One night, after a particularly hard session, he'd just finished undressing when he collapsed on the bedroom floor — not an unusual occurrence. Ham and his brothers happened to be passing his 'tent' (they still used the old sentimental desert word to describe their palaces) and called in to check that their alcoholic father hadn't done himself any harm. Ham went into the bedroom and . . . well, a naked man of six hundred and fifty odd years lying in a drunken stupor is not a pretty sight. Ham did the decent, the filial thing: he got his brothers to cover their father up. As a sign of respect — though even at that time the custom was passing out of use — Shem and the one beginning with J entered their father's chamber backwards, and managed to get him into bed without letting their gaze fall on those organs of generation which mysteriously incite your species to shame. A pious and honourable deed all round, you might think. And how did Noah react when he awoke with one of those knifing new-wine hangovers? He cursed the son who had found him and decreed that all Ham's children should become servants to the family of the two brothers who had entered his room arse-first. Where is the sense in that? I can guess your explanation: his sense of judgment was affected by drink, and we should offer pity not censure. Well, maybe. But I would just mention this: *we* knew him on the Ark.

He was a large man, Noah — about the size of a gorilla, although there the resemblance ends. The florilla's captain — he promoted himself to Admiral halfway through the Voyage — was an ugly old thing, both graceless in movement and indifferent to personal hygiene. He didn't even have the skill to grow his own hair except around his face; for the rest of his covering he relied on the skins of other species. Put him side by side with the gorilla and you will easily discern the superior





creation: the one with graceful movement, rippling strength and an instinct for delousing. On the Ark we puzzled ceaselessly at the riddle of how God came to choose man as His protégé ahead of the more obvious candidates. He would have found most other species a lot more loyal. If He'd plumped for the gorilla, I doubt there'd have been half so much disobedience — probably no need to have had the Flood in the first place.

And the smell of the fellow . . . Wet fur growing on a species which takes pride in grooming is one thing; but a dank, salt-encrusted pelt hanging ungroomed from the neck of a negligent species to whom it doesn't belong is quite another matter. Even when the calmer times came, old Noah didn't seem to dry out (I am reporting what the birds said, and the birds could be trusted). He carried the damp and the storm around with him like some guilty memory or the promise of more bad weather.

There were other dangers on the Voyage apart from that of being turned into lunch. Take our species, for instance. Once we'd boarded and were tucked away, we felt pretty smug. This was, you understand, long before the days of the fine syringe filled with a solution of carbolic acid in alcohol, before creosote and metallic naphthenates and pentachlorophenol and benzene and para-dichlor-benzene and ortho-di-chloro-benzene. We happily did not run into the family Cleridae or the mite Pediculoides or parasitic wasps of the family Braconidae. But even so we had an enemy, and a patient one: time. What if time exacted from us our inevitable changes?

It came as a serious warning the day we realized that time and nature were happening to our cousin *xestobium rufo-villosum*. That set off quite a panic. It was late in the Voyage, during calmer times, when we were just sitting out the days and waiting for God's pleasure. In the middle of the night, with the Ark becalmed and silence everywhere — a silence so rare and thick that all the beasts stopped to listen, thereby deepening it still further — we heard to our astonishment the ticking of *xestobium rufo-villosum*. Four or five sharp clicks, then a pause, then a distant reply. We the humble, the discreet, the disre-

garded yet sensible *anobium domesticum* could not believe our ears. That egg becomes larva, larva chrysalis, and chrysalis imago is the inflexible law of our world: pupation brings with it no rebuke. But that our cousins, transformed into adulthood, should choose this moment, this moment of all, to advertise their amatory intentions, was almost beyond belief. Here we were, perilously at sea, final extinction a daily possibility, and all *xestobium rufo-villosum* could think about was sex. It must have been a neurotic response to fear of extinction or something. But even so . . .

One of Noah's sons came to check up on the noise as our stupid cousins, hopelessly in thrall to erotic publicity, struck their jaws against the wall of their burrows. Fortunately, the offspring of 'the Admiral' had only a crude understanding of the animal kingdom with which they had been entrusted, and he took the patterned clicks to be a creaking of the ship's timbers. Soon the wind rose again and *xestobium rufo-villosum* could make its trusts in safety. But the affair left the rest of us much more cautious. *Anobium domesticum*, by seven votes to none, resolved not to pupate until after Disembarkation.

It has to be said that Noah, rain or shine, wasn't much of a sailor. He was picked for his piety rather than his navigational skills. He wasn't any good in a storm, and he wasn't much better when the seas were calm. How would I be any judge? Again, I am reporting what the birds said — the birds that can stay in the air for weeks at a time, the birds that can find their way from one end of the planet to the other by navigational systems as elaborate as any invented by your species. And the birds said Noah didn't know what he was doing — he was all bluster and prayer. It wasn't difficult, what he had to do, was it? During the tempest he had to survive by running from the fiercest part of the storm; and during calm weather he had to ensure we didn't drift so far from our original map-reference that we came to rest in some uninhabitable Sahara. The best that can be said for Noah is that he survived the storm (though he hardly needed to worry about reefs and coastlines, which made things easier), and that when the waters finally subsided we

didn't find ourselves by mistake in the middle of some great ocean. If we'd done that, there's no knowing how long we'd have been at sea.

Of course, the birds offered to put their expertise at Noah's disposal; but he was too proud. He gave them a few simple reconnaissance tasks — looking out for whirlpools and tornadoes — while disdaining their proper skills. He also sent a number of species to their deaths by asking them to go aloft in terrible weather when they weren't properly equipped to do so. When Noah despatched the warbling goose into a Force Nine gale (the bird did, it's true, have an irritating cry, especially if you were trying to sleep), the stormy petrel actually volunteered to take its place. But the offer was spurned — and that was the end of the warbling goose.

All right, all right, Noah had his virtues. He was a survivor — and not just in terms of the Voyage. He also cracked the secret of long life, which has subsequently been lost to your species. But he was not a nice man. Did you know about the time he had the ass keel-hauled? Is that in your archives? It was in Year Two, when the rules had been just a little relaxed, and selected travellers were allowed to mingle. Well, Noah caught the ass trying to climb up the mare. He really hit the roof, ranted away about no good coming of such a union — which rather confirmed our theory about his horror of cross-breeding — and said he would make an example of the beast. So they tied his hooves together, slung him over the side, dragged him underneath the hull and up the other side in a stampeding sea. Most of us put it down to sexual jealousy, simple as that. What was amazing, though, was how the ass took it. They know all about endurance, those guys. When they pulled him over the rail, he was in a terrible state. His poor old ears looked like fronds of slimy seaweed and his tail like a yard of sodden rope and a few of the other beasts who by this time weren't too crazy about Noah gathered round him, and the goat I think it was butted him gently in the side to see if he was still alive, and the ass opened one eye, rolled it around the circle of concerned muzzles, and said, 'Now I know what it's like to be a seal.' Not bad in the

circumstances? But I have to tell you, that was nearly one more species you lost.

I suppose it wasn't altogether Noah's fault. I mean, that God of his was a really oppressive role-model. Noah couldn't do anything without first wondering what *He* would think. Now that's no way to go on. Always looking over your shoulder for approval — it's not adult, is it? And Noah didn't have the excuse of being a young man, either. He was six hundred-odd, by the way your species reckons these things. Six hundred years should have produced some flexibility of mind, some ability to see both sides of the question. Not a bit of it. Take the construction of the Ark. What does he do? He builds it in gopher-wood. *Gopher-wood*? Even Shem objected, but no, that was what he wanted and that was what he had to have. The fact that not much gopher-wood grew nearby was brushed aside. No doubt he was merely following instructions from his role-model; but even so. Anyone who knows anything about wood — and I speak with some authority in the matter — could have told him that a couple of dozen other tree-types would have done as well, if not better; and what's more, the idea of building all parts of a boat from a single wood is ridiculous. You should choose your material according to the purpose for which it is intended; everyone knows that. Still, this was old Noah for you — no flexibility of mind at all. Only saw one side of the question. Gopher-wood bathroom fittings — have you ever heard of anything more absurd?

He got it, as I say, from his role-model. What would God think? That was the question always on his lips. There was something a bit sinister about Noah's devotion to God; creepy, if you know what I mean. Still, he certainly knew which side his bread was buttered; and I suppose being selected like that as the favoured survivor, knowing that your dynasty is going to be the only one on earth — it must turn your head, mustn't it? As for his sons — Ham, Shem, and the one beginning with J — it certainly didn't do much good for their egos. Swanking about on deck like the Royal Family.

You see, there's one thing I want to make quite clear. This

Ark business. You're probably still thinking that Noah, for all his faults, was basically some kind of early conservationist, that he collected the animals together because he didn't want them to die out, that he couldn't endure not seeing a giraffe ever again, that he was doing it for us. This wasn't the case at all. He got us together because his role-model told him to, but also out of self-interest, even cynicism. *He wanted to have something to eat after the Flood had subsided.* Five and a half years under water and most of the kitchen gardens were washed away, I can tell you; only rice prospered. And so most of us knew that in Noah's eyes we were just future dinners on two, four or however many legs. If not now, then later; if not us, then our offspring. That's not a nice feeling, as you can imagine. An atmosphere of paranoia and terror held sway on that Ark of Noah's. Which of us would he come for next? Fail to charm Ham's wife today and you might be a fricassée by tomorrow night. That sort of uncertainty can provoke the oddest behaviour. I remember when a couple of lemmings were caught making for the side of the ship — they said they wanted to end it once and for all, they couldn't bear the suspense. But Shem caught them just in time and locked them up in a packing-case. Every so often, when he was feeling bored, he would slide open the top of their box and wave a big knife around inside. It was his idea of a joke. But if it didn't traumatize the entire species I'd be very surprised.

And of course once the Voyage was over, God made Noah's dining rights official. The pay-off for all that obedience was the permission to eat whichever of us Noah chose for the rest of his life. It was all part of some pact or covenant botched together between the pair of them. A pretty hollow contract, if you ask me. After all, having eliminated everyone else from the earth, God had to make do with the one family of worshippers he'd got left, didn't he? Couldn't very well say, No you aren't up to scratch either. Noah probably realized he had God over a barrel (what an admission of failure to pull the Flood and then be obliged to ditch your First Family), and we reckoned he'd have eaten us anyway, treaty or no treaty. This so-called covenant had absolutely nothing in it for us — except our death-warrant. Oh

yes, we were thrown one tiny sop — Noah and his crowd weren't permitted to eat any females that were in calf. A loophole which led to some frenzied activity around the beached Ark, and also to some strange psychological side-effects. Have you ever thought about the origins of the hysterical pregnancy?

Which reminds me of that business with Ham's wife. It was all rumour, they said, and you can see how such rumours might have started. Ham's wife was not the most popular person in the Ark; and the loss of the hospital ship, as I've said, was widely attributed to her. She was still very attractive — only about a hundred and fifty at the time of the Deluge — but she was also wilful and short-tempered. She certainly dominated poor Ham. Now the facts are as follows. Ham and his wife had two children — two male children, that is, which was the way they counted — called Cush and Mizraim. They had a third son, Phut, who was born on the Ark, and a fourth, Canaan, who arrived after the Landing. Noah and his wife had dark hair and brown eyes; so did Ham and his wife; so, for that matter, did Shem and Varadi and the one beginning with J. And all the children of Shem and Varadi and the one whose name began with J had dark hair and brown eyes. And so did Cush, and Mizraim, and Canaan. But Phut, the one born on the Ark, had red hair. Red hair and green eyes. Those are the facts.

At this point we leave the harbour of facts for the high seas of rumour (that's how Noah used to talk, by the way). I was not myself on Ham's ark, so I am merely reporting, in a dispassionate way, the news the birds brought. There were two main stories, and I leave you to choose between them. You remember the case of the craftsman who chipped out a priest's hole for himself on the stores ship? Well, it was said — though not officially confirmed — that when they searched the quarters of Ham's wife they discovered a compartment nobody had realized was there. It certainly wasn't marked on the plans. Ham's wife denied all knowledge of it, yet it seems one of her yakskin underests was found hanging on a peg there, and a jealous examination of the floor revealed several red hairs caught between the planking.

The second story — which again I pass on without comment — touches on more delicate matters, but since it directly concerns a significant percentage of your species I am constrained to go on. There was on board Ham's ark a pair of simians of the most extraordinary beauty and sleekness. They were, by all accounts, highly intelligent, perfectly groomed, and had mobile faces which you could swear were about to utter speech. They also had flowing red fur and green eyes. No, such a species no longer exists: it did not survive the Voyage, and the circumstances surrounding its death on board have never been fully cleared up. Something to do with a falling spar . . . But what a coincidence, we always thought, for a falling spar to kill both members of a particularly nimble species at one and the same time.

The public explanation was quite different, of course. There were no secret compartments. There was no miscegenation. The spar which killed the simians was enormous, and also carried away a purple muskrat, two pygmy ostriches and a pair of flat-tailed aardvarks. The strange colouring of Phur was a sign from God — though what it denoted lay beyond human decipherability at the time. Later its significance became clear: it was a sign that the Voyage had passed its half-way mark. Therefore Phur was a blessed child, and no subject for alarm and punishment. Noah himself announced as much. God had come to him in a dream and told him to stay his hand against the infant, and Noah, being a righteous man as he pointed out, did so.

I don't need to tell you that the animals were pretty divided about what to believe. The mammals, for instance, refused to countenance the idea that the male of the red-haired, green-eyed simians could have been carnally familiar with Ham's wife. To be sure, we never know what is in the secret heart of even our closest friends, but the mammals were prepared to swear on their mammalhood that it would never have happened. They knew the male simian too well, they said, and could vouch for his high standards of personal cleanliness. He was even, they hinted, a bit of a snob. And supposing — just supposing — he had

wanted a bit of rough trade, there were far more alluring specimens on offer than Ham's wife. Why not one of those cute little yellow-tailed monkeys who were anybody's for a pawful of mashed nutmeg?

That is nearly the end of my revelations. They are intended — you must understand me — in a spirit of friendship. If you think I am being contentious, it is probably because your species — I hope you don't mind my saying this — is so hopelessly dogmatic. You believe what you want to believe, and you go on believing it. But then, of course, you all have Noah's genes. No doubt this also accounts for the fact that you are often strangely incurious. You never ask, for instance, this question about your early history: what happened to the raven?

When the Ark landed on the mountaintop (it was more complicated than that, of course, but we'll let details pass), Noah sent out a raven and a dove to see if the waters had retreated from the face of the earth. Now, in the version that has come down to you, the raven has a very small part; it merely flutters hither and thither, to little avail, you are led to conclude. The dove's three journeys, on the other hand, are made a matter of heroism. We weep when she finds no rest for the sole of her foot; we rejoice when she returns to the Ark with an olive leaf. You have elevated this bird, I understand, into something of symbolic value. So let me just point this out: the raven always maintained that *he* found the olive tree; that *he* brought a leaf from it back to the Ark; but that Noah decided it was 'more appropriate' to say that the dove had discovered it. Personally, I always believed the raven, who apart from anything else was much stronger in the air than the dove; and it would have been just like Noah (modelling himself on that God of his again) to stir up a dispute among the animals. Noah had it put about that the raven, instead of returning as soon as possible with evidence of dry land, had been malingering, and had been spotted (by whose eye? not even the upwardly mobile dove would have deemed herself with such a slander) gourmandising on carrion. The raven, I need hardly add, felt hurt and betrayed at this instant rewriting of history, and it is said — by those with a

better ear than mine — that you can hear the sad croak of dissatisfaction in his voice to this day. The dove, by contrast, began sounding unbearably smug from the moment we disembarked. She could already envisage herself on postage stamps and letterheads.

Before the ramps were lowered, 'the Admiral' addressed the beasts on his Ark, and his words were relayed to those of us on other ships. He thanked us for our co-operation, he apologized for the occasional sparseness of rations, and he promised that since we had all kept our side of the bargain, he was going to get the best *quid pro quo* out of God in the forthcoming negotiations. Some of us laughed a little doubtfully at that: we remembered the keel-hauling of the ass, the loss of the hospital ship, the exterminatory policy with cross-breeds, the death of the unicorn . . . It was evident to us that if Noah was coming on all Mister Nice Guy, it was because he sensed what any clear-thinking animal would do the moment it placed its foot on dry land: make for the forests and the hills. He was obviously trying to soft-soap us into staying close to New Noah's Palace, whose construction he chose to announce at the same time. Amenities here would include free water for the animals and extra feed during harsh winters. He was obviously scared that the meat diet he'd got used to on the Ark would be taken away from him as fast as its two, four or however many legs could carry it, and that the Noah family would be back on berries and nuts once again. Amazingly, some of the beasts thought Noah's offer a fair one: after all, they argued, he can't eat all of us, he'll probably just cull the old and the sick. So some of them — not the cleverest ones, it has to be said — stayed around waiting for the Palace to be built and the water to flow like wine. The pigs, the cattle, the sheep, some of the stupider goats, the chickens . . . We warned them, or at least we tried. We used to mutter derisively, 'Braised or boiled?' but to no avail. As I say, they weren't very bright, and were probably scared of going back into the wild; they'd grown dependent on their gaol, and their gaoler. What happened over the next few generations was quite predictable: they became shadows of their former selves. The

pigs and sheep you see walking around today are zombies compared to their effervescent ancestors on the Ark. They've had the stuffing knocked out of them. And some of them, like the turkey, have to endure the further indignity of having the stuffing put back into them — before they are braised or boiled.

And of course, what did Noah actually deliver in his famous Disembarkation Treaty with God? What did he get in return for the sacrifices and loyalty of his tribe (let alone the more considerable sacrifices of the animal kingdom)? God said — and this is Noah putting the best possible interpretation on the matter — that He promised not to send another Flood, and that as a sign of His intention He was creating for us the rainbow. The rainbow! Ha! It's a very pretty thing, to be sure, and the first one he produced for us, an iridescent semi-circle with a paler sibling beside it, the pair of them glittering in an indigo sky, certainly made a lot of us look up from our grazing. You could see the idea behind it: as the rain gave reluctant way to the sun, this flamboyant symbol would remind us each time that the rain wasn't going to carry on and turn into a Flood. But even so. It wasn't much of a deal. And was it legally enforceable? Try getting a rainbow to stand up in court.

The cannier animals saw Noah's offer of half-board for what it was; they took to the hills and the woods, relying on their own skills for water and winter feed. The reindeer, we couldn't help noticing, were among the first to take off, speeding away from 'the Admiral' and all his future descendants, bearing with them their mysterious forebodings. You are right, by the way, to see the animals that fled — ungrateful traitors, according to Noah — as the nobler species. Can a pig be noble? A sheep? A chicken? If only you had seen the unicorn . . . That was another contentious aspect of Noah's post-Disembarkation address to those still loitering at the edge of his stockade. He said that God, by giving us the rainbow, was in effect promising to keep the world's supply of miracles topped up. A clear reference, if ever I heard one, to the scores of original miracles which in the course of the Voyage had been slung over the side of Noah's ships or

had disappeared into the guts of his family. The rainbow in place of the unicorn? Why didn't God just restore the unicorn? We animals would have been happier with that, instead of a big hint in the sky about God's magnanimity every time it stopped raining.

Getting off the Ark, I think I told you, wasn't much easier than getting on. There had, alas, been a certain amount of raving by some of the chosen species, so there was no question of Noah simply flinging down the ramps and crying 'Happy land'. Every animal had to put up with a strict body-search before being released; some were even doused in tubs of water which smelt of tar. Several female beasts complained of having to undergo internal examination by Shem. Quite a few stow-aways were discovered: some of the more conspicuous beetles, a few rats who had unwisely gorged themselves during the Voyage and got too fat, even a snake or two. We got off—I don't suppose it need be a secret any longer—in the hollowed tip of a ram's horn. It was a big, surly, subversive animal, whose friendship we had deliberately cultivated for the last three years at sea. It had no respect for Noah, and was only too happy to help outsmart him after the Landing.

When the seven of us climbed out of that ram's horn, we were euphoric. We had survived. We had stowed away, survived and escaped—all without entering into any fishy covenants with either God or Noah. We had done it by ourselves. We felt ennobled as a species. That might strike you as comic, but we did: we felt ennobled. That Voyage taught us a lot of things, you see, and the main thing was this: that man is a very unevolved species compared to the animals. We don't deny, of course, your cleverness, your considerable potential. But you are, as yet, at an early stage of your development. We, for instance, are always ourselves: that is what it means to be evolved. We are what we are, and we know what that is. You don't expect a cat suddenly to start barking, do you, or a pig to start howling? But this is what, in a manner of speaking, those of us who made the Voyage on the Ark learned to expect from your species. One moment you bark, one moment you mew; one

moment you wish to be wild, one moment you wish to be tame. We knew where we were with Noah only in this one respect: that we never knew where we were with him.

You aren't too good with the truth, either, your species. You keep forgetting things, or you pretend to. The loss of Varadi and his ark—does anyone speak of that? I can see there might be a positive side to this wilful averting of the eye: ignoring the bad things makes it easier for you to carry on. But ignoring the bad things makes you end up believing that bad things never happen. You are always surprised by them. It surprises you that guns kill, that money corrupts, that snow falls in winter. Such naivety can be charming; alas, it can also be perilous.

For instance, you won't even admit the true nature of Noah, your first father—the pious patriarch, the committed conservationist. I gather that one of your early Hebrew legends asserts that Noah discovered the principle of intoxication by watching a goat get drunk on fermented grapes. What a brazen attempt to shift responsibility on to the animals; and all, sadly, part of a pattern. The Fall was the serpent's fault, the honest raven was a slacker and a glutton, the goat turned Noah into an alkie. Listen: you can take it from me that Noah didn't need any cloven-footed knowledge to help crack the secret of the vine.

Blame someone else, that's always your first instinct. And if you can't blame someone else, then start claiming the problem isn't a problem anyway. Rewrite the rules, shift the goalposts. Some of those scholars who devote their lives to your sacred texts have even tried to prove that the Noah of the Ark wasn't the same man as the Noah arraigned for drunkenness and indecent exposure. How could a drunkard possibly be chosen by God? Ah, well, he wasn't, you see. Not *that* Noah. Simple case of mistaken identity. Problem disappears.

How could a drunkard possibly be chosen by God? I've told you—because all the other candidates were a damn sight worse. Noah was the pick of a very bad bunch. As for his drinking: to tell you the truth, it was the Voyage that tipped him over the edge. Old Noah had always enjoyed a few horns of fermented liquor in the days before Embarkation: who didn't? But it was

the Voyage that turned him into a soak. He just couldn't handle the responsibility. He made some bad navigational decisions, he lost four of his eight ships and about a third of the species entrusted to him – he'd have been court-martialled if there'd been anyone around to sit on the bench. And for all his bluster, he felt guilty about losing half the Ark. Guilt, immaturity, the constant struggle to hold down a job beyond your capabilities – it makes a powerful combination, one which would have had the same ruinous effect on most members of your species. You could even argue, I suppose, that God drove Noah to drink. Perhaps this is why your scholars are so jumpy, so keen to separate the first Noah from the second: the consequences are awkward. But the story of the 'second' Noah – the drunkenness, the indecency, the capricious punishment of a dutiful son – well, it didn't come as a surprise to those of us who knew the 'first' Noah on the Ark. A depressing yet predictable case of alcoholic degeneration, I'm afraid.

As I was saying, we were euphoric when we got off the Ark. Apart from anything else, we'd eaten enough gopher-wood to last a lifetime. That's another reason for wishing Noah had been less bigoted in his design of the fleet: it would have given some of us a change of diet. Hardly a consideration for Noah, of course, because we weren't meant to be there. And with the hindsight of a few millennia, this exclusion seems even harsher than it did at the time. There were seven of us stowaways, but had we been admitted as a seaworthy species only two boarding-passes would have been issued; and we would have accepted that decision. Now, it's true Noah couldn't have predicted how long his Voyage was going to last, but considering how little we seven are in five and a half years, it surely would have been worth the risk letting just a pair of us on board. And after all, it's not our fault for being woodworm.