

Say Banana

I

On a fair day in early September, one of those fortunate conjunctions of summer's warmth and autumn's clarity, Martin stopped in the park on his way back to the jewelry shop. All day the brightness of the sun and the light breeze had seemed somehow remote from him. It was like being told, second-hand, that the weather was fine. He was still in a gloomy mood when he sat down on a bench. *My first mistake was...*, he thought, then stopped. Which of his many mistakes had been the first? Leaving school? Marrying? Allowing his wife to pressure her father, a jeweler, into hiring Martin to work in his shop?

Indeed, Martin was ill-suited for a profession that demanded attention to detail and consummate social skills. At first Martin's father-in-law put him behind the sales counter, but Martin didn't know how to convince a customer to make an extravagant purchase. The women shoppers, especially, had no confidence in him. Martin's father-in-law subsequently transferred him to the work bench, so that he could learn the craft of polishing and remounting stones, but Martin spent half his time on hands and knees, searching for gems that had slipped out of his fingers.

Finally the old man demoted Martin to sweeping and delivering. He said he was giving Martin another chance, but he had already decided that his daughter's husband could do no right. He frequently pointed out clumps of dust that Martin's broom had missed. Day by day the shop seemed to get smaller and smaller until Martin felt it squeeze against his chest and restrict his breathing. No wonder he found the sight of a park bench on a beautiful day irresistible. No customers, no tension, just mothers pushing prams, children at play, old men reading newspapers. At last Martin began to relax and feel the sun. He lit a cigar that he'd been given earlier in the day as a tip. The blue smoke rose. Birds twittered all around him.

When he finally got back to the shop, the angry expression on his father-in-law's face conveyed a message as clear as his words. Martin didn't argue with his dismissal. He turned and walked away with what he hoped was a quiet dignity. He went to the nearest bus stop and sat on the bench for a long time as bus after bus went by.

When he finally got home and broke the news to his wife, she threw herself on the sofa and wept like a tropical storm. She vowed to make her father take him back, but Martin refused to even consider returning to the shop.

But what could he do instead?

He had no education or special training. He was too clumsy to be a barber, too lazy to be a farmer, and he didn't rise early enough to be a baker. His most remarkable quality was his amiable disposition. He knew a lot of people, frequently ran into acquaintances in the street, was always among the first to hear the latest gossip or local joke. His wife suggested, not for the first time, that one of these jokers might know of a job for Martin.

Sensing a familiar lecture approaching, Martin reached for his hat and coat, vaguely suggesting, on his way out the door, that he was rushing out to find employment. But it was already growing dark. He walked toward the harbor, because it was downhill rather than uphill, and eventually he found himself strolling by the waterfront's notorious row of raucous brightly-lit saloons. He entered one such establishment and called for a beer. The bar was crowded with sailors and the women who loved them for their money.

Martin had barely gotten his hands on a mug when an organ grinder came in, leading a monkey on a leash. Everyone turned around. The organ grinder bowed and unhooked his pet. The monkey patrolled the room on all fours, examining the crowd with delicate nostrils and red, blinking eyes, as if checking for the presence of danger—predators or rivals, perhaps.

Meanwhile the monkey's owner set up his musical hurdy-gurdy on its stand, inserted a small roll of perforated paper into a recessed spindle, and turned the crank. As soon as the melody began, the monkey jumped up and began to do a loose-limbed, sugar-plantation dance, swinging his arms and swaying his hips. Everybody applauded with inebriated enthusiasm.

The organ grinder inserted a new roll and sang a loud song about the indecent recreations of a sea-captain. During this salacious ditty, the monkey swaggered back and forth like an ensign on a rolling deck, with a crisp salute now and then for an officer in the crowd. The audience nearly choked with laughter. After a few more numbers, the monkey passed the cap. It filled up rapidly.

Meanwhile, the organ grinder made his way to the bar and by chance sat down next to Martin. Out of politeness, Martin made a few complimentary remarks about the show; to his surprise, the organ grinder immediately offered to sell him the hurdy-gurdy, and throw in the monkey for free. The monkey was an expense, the man explained. He had to be fed, washed, and occasionally de-loused with special powder. When Martin expressed surprise that the man would want to give up his very livelihood, the organ grinder replied that money wasn't everything—that he dreamed of breaking into the legitimate theater. He cleared his throat and began to recite the opening scene of *Hamlet*—the appearance of the ghost on the ramparts. His declamation was ringing, dramatic, and very loud, so loud indeed that the bartender told him sharply to pack up Denmark and take it outside. The organ grinder raised his fists, but Martin quickly stepped in and suggested they leave. The organ grinder glowered at the bartender for a moment, then picked up his hurdy-gurdy, snapped the leash on his monkey, and followed Martin outside.

A light drizzle fell and the cobblestones glistened under the street lights. Martin couldn't think of anywhere to go but his own home. When they arrived there he produced a bottle of brandy for himself and the organ grinder. At the organ-grinder's request, Martin mixed some brandy and water in a glass and gave it to the monkey, who clutched it with both hands and drank it like a child. The organ grinder took a mighty swig from the bottle, stood up, and launched into Shakespeare again. "*What art thou that usurp'st this time of night?*" he bellowed, and at that moment Mrs. Martin appeared in the kitchen in her nightgown, her face shining with cold cream. When she saw the monkey, she shrieked and covered her bosom with both arms.

The monkey was even more frightened than she was; he emitted a high-pitched squeal and scrambled under the table.

Martin half-expected the organ grinder to run away, but the man coolly doffed his cap, bowed low, and apologized so profusely for the intrusion that for once Martin's wife didn't seem to know what to say. The organ grinder commanded the monkey to come out and bow, and roll over, to stand on his head, and bow again, and to kiss Mrs. Martin's hand, but the last trick failed because she jerked her hand away when the monkey touched it.

She then turned to her husband and asked him if he intended to turn their home into a circus. When he tried to calm her, she silenced him with a threat and left the kitchen. The bedroom door slammed like a pistol shot.

Martin and the organ grinder sighed with relief.

After finishing off the bottle of brandy, they were ready to get down to business. Martin put out the wooden cigar box that contained the household's savings. Together he and the organ grinder counted out the money in the box and haggled over a price for the organ and the monkey. As soon as they reached a bargain, Martin shook hands with the organ grinder and fell asleep in his chair. When he woke up a few hours later, he felt as if his head were twice normal size and his mouth stuffed with old cotton lint. The monkey was sleeping peacefully with his head on Martin's lap.

The hurdy-gurdy was gone.

So was the cigar box.

Martin staggered to the basin and splashed some water on his face. That proved to be a mistake, because it quickened his return to consciousness. The monkey yawned and scratched himself with sensuous enjoyment. Martin put on his coat, left a hasty note of apology and farewell on the kitchen table, and jerked the animal's chain to make it come along, which it did with an eagerness that Martin found irritating. The monkey did not grasp the seriousness of the situation. He seemed to think they were going out for a stroll.

They did stroll peacefully for a minute or two, but as soon as they passed a bakery, the monkey stopped and screeched at the window. It wasn't too hard to guess that he was hungry. Martin bought him a loaf of bread, which he gobbled down with disgusting alacrity. Then he dragged Martin into the grocer's next door, where he consumed five sausages, a slab of cheese, some liverwurst, two apples, and a bunch of carrots. Martin had to persuade the suspicious grocer to extend credit, because the little change he carried in his pocket did not cover the monkey's impromptu breakfast.

People smiled at the monkey on the street, and little children pointed at him with a mixture of shyness and wonder. Martin decided that he might as well put the beast to work right away—take him to the park, put on a show, pass the hat. But when they arrived at the park, the monkey wouldn't perform. Martin tried ordering, cajoling, even mimicking the monkey's own dance style. Instead of following suit, the monkey scratched his head and walked off, the leash trailing behind him in the grass. Not knowing what else to do, Martin picked up the end of the leash and let the monkey lead. The monkey marched out of the park, down the road, and into a pub.

At this time of morning, the place was empty save for a few old men. To their amusement, the animal circled around the floor until he found a spot that seemed to make him happy. Sensing a performance about to commence, Martin unhooked the leash. The monkey did a handspring, pranced back and forth with comical arrogance, climbed on a table and snatched a hat from the hat rack and put it on his head. The men at the bar were a little bit frightened by the sight of this agile animal bouncing on the furniture, lashing his tail. But when the monkey jumped back on the floor and made a bow, there was a smattering of nervous applause from the bar, and Martin passed the hat. It was all too clear to him that the poor degraded beast did not enjoy parks and fresh air, but preferred dim lights, stale smoke, and the company of degenerates.

Just how low the animal had fallen became evident as soon as Martin tried to reattach the leash. The monkey emitted a shriek of protest, wiggled out of Martin's grasp, and scrambled onto a bar stool. Turning his back to Martin, he rapped peremptorily on the bar and held one finger up. Giggling, the barmaid drew him a beer and watched in delight as the monkey held it in both paws and gulped it down: *glug glug glug*. Martin swiftly hooked the leash to the collar but the monkey still resisted; he gripped the counter with both hands and bared his teeth in an ugly grimace. Martin had a sudden urge to jerk the animal off the stool, but feared that public-house opinion would go against him if he did so. The barmaid placed another beer in front of the beast, who quaffed it down like an Australian on holiday. Foam dripped from his wizened face and he grinned broadly, as if he'd just done something extremely clever. For a moment he was indistinguishable from everybody else at the bar.

Frustrated, Martin slapped some of the coins he'd just collected on the bar and ordered a pint for himself. After a couple of more draughts, the monkey suddenly hopped off the stool and made for the door. Martin followed and the two of them lurched into the full sunshine of day. They proceeded to another pub, where the monkey put on his show again, or a variation of it; he was a great improviser. Martin's hat jingled with change and he had momentary visions of prosperity. But the applause wasn't even over when the beast leaped atop the nearest barstool and began to convey the urgency of his thirst with yips and gestures. Despite Martin's insistent tugging on the leash, he drank three pints rapidly. Martin finally managed to convince the man behind the bar to stop serving him.

Back on the street, the monkey strained at his leash, eager to continue his pub crawl. Martin found it almost impossible to hold back the animal, whose willpower verged on monomania. He dragged Martin from the middle of town to the poorer neighborhoods where sooty brick bungalows lined street after street in drab reiteration. The foul air reverberated with the sounds of crashing pots and pans and the coughing of old men who had toiled all their lives in the chemical pits.

The show didn't go over very well in this part of town. The locals were more annoyed than pleased by the monkey's antics. They called Martin a drunk, a tramp, and a bad influence on an innocent creature of God. Martin protested that it was the other way round, that the monkey was a bad influence on *him*, but people only turned their backs to him. Later that evening in a seedy pub, the monkey attempted a double flip from the edge of a table and fell smack on his face, bloodying his nose. Rough hands seized

both Martin and the animal and ejected them both into the street with practiced efficiency. A few swift kicks to their prone bodies and the ritual was complete.

Martin groaned and made an effort to sit up.

His shirt was torn.

It was raining again.

He set off in a random direction, more out of an impulse to flee than a desire to go anywhere in particular. Halfway down the street the monkey emitted a piercing cry, scrambled frantically, and leaped on Martin's back. Martin staggered, almost collapsing under the impact. He yelled and tried to dislodge the beast, but the monkey only held on more tightly, squeezing Martin's battered ribs and breathing heavy, fetid, beery fumes into Martin's face. Furious, Martin ran backwards and crashed the monkey into the wall of a house in an attempt to dislodge him. The creature held on tight and bit into Martin's shoulder. With a cry of pain, Martin staggered backward and the two of them collapsed into a heap of bloody fur, wet clothes, and bruised feelings. The animal went into a spasm and vomited onto the pavement beside Martin's prone body.

With the monkey still clinging to his neck, Martin struggled to his feet. Stupefied, directionless, he trudged the dark drizzling streets, empty in this dreary hour except for a few frightened alley cats. At last he descended along the embankment of the river and sought shelter under a bridge where a few moldy-smelling vagrants huddled together like abandoned piles of snoring rags. Martin sneezed a few times, then fell asleep with the monkey on top of him like a warm rug.

At the first noise of morning traffic on the bridge above, Martin woke up. The monkey was lying next to him, still deep in slumber. Moving with extreme caution, hardly even daring to breath, Martin attempted to sneak away, but the monkey woke up immediately, because his leash had somehow gotten tangled around Martin's foot. Martin swore and cursed but there was nothing to be done. At least the animal didn't insist on riding Martin's back. He stayed close to Martin, loping along in a semi-upright position, laying his knuckles on the ground and swinging in body forward in easy rhythm. Martin tried to pretend he wasn't there, but he knew the animal was following him. It especially galled him to see the delighted faces of people in the street, charmed by the sight of this depraved and selfish brute.

Every time he passed a greengrocer's the monkey snatched an apple or a plum from the stall, making Martin tremble with fear of arrest. He thought about beating up the monkey, but feared that the monkey might fight back—the animal had grown up the jungle and probably knocked around in a lot of tough seaports.

No, the situation called for finesse.

Martin stuck his hands in his pockets and began to whistle as if he hadn't a care in the world. Strolling along with a great show of insouciance, he lead his unsuspecting companion to the main entrance of the National Zoological Gardens. Their appearance caused a stir of excitement among the children and their mothers and nannies who were queued up at the gate. Martin and the monkey marched straight in as if they had business at the zoo; the man at the door didn't even ask them for tickets. Once inside, the monkey

began to behave erratically, shrieking at the birds, gibbering at the hippos, and leaping in fear on Martin's back when they passed the lions.

When they got to the monkey cage, Martin's monkey hopped over the iron fence, climbed halfway up the bars and began to squeal wildly, provoking an uproar among the simians who were inside. Several uniformed keepers appeared and seized Martin's monkey. They pried his fingers off the bars and wrestled him to the ground. Martin tried to slip away in the confusion but a policeman ordered him to remain where he was. The Assistant Director of Primates arrived a moment later and examined Martin's monkey carefully, looking at his fur, his eyes, his ears. When he attempted to open the monkey's lips to examine his teeth, the monkey deftly opened the Assistant Director's lips and peered back at him.

By this time a crowd had gathered, and they roared.

Flushed with embarrassment, the Assistant Director declared Martin's monkey a shabby specimen fit only for a provincial circus, and ordered Martin to remove it from the zoo's premises forthwith. The policeman jerked his thumb in the direction of the exit. Cursing his bad luck, Martin hurried away, dragging the monkey behind him.

He didn't notice that a man was following him. A well-dressed man, with a neat gray beard and an expensive umbrella under his arm. As soon as Martin and the monkey were outside the gate, the gray-bearded man accosted them, saying that he had just witnessed the scene inside the zoo and was deeply impressed with the monkey's wit. He expressed surprise that the zoo had refused to accept such an evidently talented creature.

Martin was in no mood to stand around and listen to a stranger compliment his monkey, so he told the man to come to the point. The man explained that he was a doctor of animal psychology, and he wanted to use the monkey in a philosophical inquiry he was conducting at the moment. It was all completely harmless—no drugs or surgery would be involved. Furthermore, he was prepared to remunerate Martin for the privilege of working with his remarkable beast.

For a moment Martin's whole world turned upside down and he had to secretly pinch himself to make sure he wasn't simply hallucinating this offer. Somebody was willing to buy his monkey? Feigning nonchalance, Martin said it would be a great inconvenience to be separated from the monkey, not to mention an agony of loneliness, but perhaps he would consider making a sacrifice for the great cause of scientific investigation. The doctor suggested that Martin accompany him to his laboratory.

They went by cab to a fashionable neighborhood, mounted the stairs of an imposing house, and were greeted at the door by a real butler. He led them along a corridor and down a flight of stairs, where they were greeted by a cacophony of barks, meows, squeaks, squawks, and hoots. There was a veritable menagerie in the cellar, and most of the animals roamed loose: the cats and dogs, the mynah birds and parrots perched on wooden hat-racks, the piglets and gerbils nesting in boxes full of straw. Several white-coated lab assistants were helping an old woman scoop turds into a burlap bag. A heavy stench pervaded the room, and probably always would.

The doctor explained that his research had lead him from the more orthodox areas of biology into zoölinguistics and the possibility of communication between *homo sapiens* and other species. He decided that the first step was to teach an animal to speak; after various experiments, he decided to try using a primate. He had been looking for likely candidates for some time, trying to establish some standard of simian intelligence, but all that seemed a waste of time now in light of the amazing facility for responsiveness that Martin's monkey had demonstrated at the zoo.

Martin said he was impressed by the doctor's dedication to science, and was particularly interested to know how much he was willing to invest in the future of his investigations—more specifically, how much he was willing to pay for the monkey. The doctor shrugged and asked Martin how much he wanted. Martin named a sum that was substantial enough to mollify Mrs. Martin and restore domestic harmony, at least for a while. The doctor thought for a moment, and asked Martin if he had ever seen a Grand Palabra Island parrot before. He pointed out a great bird with green, yellow and orange-red feathers. It was sitting on a swing in an open cage. When it heard the doctor's voice, the bird whistled a greeting, flew out of the cage, and alighted on the doctor's outstretched hand. The doctor passed the parrot to Martin's hand. It climbed up to Martin's shoulder and gave him a peck on the cheek with his beak—not exactly a kiss but close enough.

According to the doctor, this rare and valuable parrot possessed a vocabulary of several hundred words, not just a random collection of utterances, either, but real responses that it knew when and how to use. It could ask for food, it sang "Happy Birthday" at parties, it congratulated you sarcastically when you dropped and broke something, and so forth. Moreover, it had the capacity to learn a lot more words. But it was currently doing nothing and serving no purpose. The doctor had recently finished all his experiments with the parrot, and now he didn't know what to do with it. Maybe he could find somebody who wanted to make a lot of money from exhibiting it to the public. Unfortunately, at the moment the doctor didn't know anybody like that.

Martin asked if the bird drank.

The doctor said that the bird needed fresh water every day.

And that's how Martin ended up with a Grand Palabra parrot. As he carried the cage up the stairs, the monkey started to follow but two lab assistants grabbed the beast and pushed him into a cage, the only cage in the whole menagerie. The monkey shrieked, howled, bared his teeth, and pounded on the wire mesh. He scared the cats and dogs and made the birds flutter away to the other end of the basement—but all to no avail.

Martin was gone.

II

The monkey was quiet for a minute. Then he beat on the wire mesh screen again. In response a lab assistant banged on the side of the cage and told him to shut up. All the dogs barked in a collective canine

frenzy, and for a fleeting moment the monkey was glad to be separated from them by steel wire, although he would have much preferred to have the dogs inside and himself out. He looked around at his new accommodations, which were remarkably spartan. There was a cup of water in the cage, he noticed, but his chances of getting a pint of ale served to him were probably very slim. Lacking any better diversion, he curled up and went to sleep.

In the morning when he woke up, there was no food in the cage. It didn't bother him; he'd been hungry before. None of his former owners had been good or steady providers. He was used to that. But the cage—the cage bothered him. For the first time in years he yearned to reach for branches and swing from tree to tree.

Presently the doctor appeared with a banana. It was spotted, overripe—delicious. The monkey got excited and began to chatter. The lab assistants crowded around the cage and stared at him, making him recoil; the sight of so many eager, smooth, and ugly faces was profoundly disconcerting. Then the doctor came forward. He brought the banana closer and began to repeat the same two sounds over and over again: one sound, then another sound uttered twice. A rhythm, a cadence, accompanied by the wagging of the yellow fruit.

Together, the three sounds made a word.

Now the monkey had spent most of his life in human society and was familiar with the phenomenon of human speech. He'd passed through the hands of many feckless masters, men who spoke to him in the dark of night as if he were a child, a confessor, even an intimate companion. But he never bothered to listen carefully to any of the babbling. He had danced for his dinner and clowned for his supper, but he had never mimicked the ugly sounds that humans inflict on each other. Even now, hungry as he was, he resisted; he turned his back and covered his head with his arms.

When they returned that afternoon, he was famished, but still stubborn. The doctor chanted, the banana dangled, the monkey rolled over on his side and remained silent.

Next morning, the doctor and his assistants held out the ripe yellow fruit again, and again they repeated the syllables. Surely they would give up, thought the monkey. Surely they would not let him die of starvation! But after an hour or so of taking turns with the banana, they looked at their watches and shrugged. The doctor actually put the banana in the pocket of his lab coat. As he walked away, the monkey panicked.

“Banana,” he croaked.

They all stopped and turned around in amazement. Blinking with surprise, the doctor approached, brandishing the banana in front of the cage door.

“Banana,” said the monkey again.

The doctor opened a slot in the cage door and shoved the banana in. The monkey ate it greedily. By this time all the assistants were yelling and slapping each other on the back. They opened a bottle of champagne and ended up slopping more of it on their coats than in their fine crystal glasses. The monkey desperately wanted some champagne, but he didn't know the word for it. He could only manage a distant

approximation. “Ale,” he said. “Ale!” But nobody heard him. They were too busy shouting and congratulating each other.

The next morning they brought him several bananas and made him say the word each time he wanted one. That was humiliating enough, but there was more to come. When he became thirsty, he discovered there was nothing to drink in his cage. The doctor held the cup in front of the cage door and repeated the sounds that he wanted the monkey to make.

The monkey knew he was defeated.

“Water,” he said.

The doctor immediately opened the cage door and gave him the cup of water. As he drank it down, the lab assistants applauded. The monkey resented this. He decided to speak as little as possible. If they wanted him to perform, they should make him comfortable and serve him pints instead of caging him up and withholding his food.

The next day the doctor came in with a carrot and repeated its name. But the monkey said the word “banana” every time he heard the word “carrot.” The lab assistants discreetly drifted away, one by one, until the doctor and the monkey were left alone together, locked in a mutual fury of exasperation, each repeating his word with emphasis, *carrot, banana*, back and forth, until the doctor finally lost his temper and uttered an obscene word. Instantly the monkey repeated the expletive—he had heard it so often from sailors that it just popped out of his mouth. The doctor was flabbergasted. For some reason, he thrust the carrot inside the cage.

“Fuck you!” said the monkey in triumph, holding up the carrot.

The doctor whacked the side of the cage with the flat of his hand and strode off with an angry look on his face.

The monkey sighed with relief. He sat down in the cage with his knees up and his arms around his legs. Time went by, and he began to feel bored and restless. Just when he was ready to scream, another face loomed behind the cage door. It was old, wrinkled, benevolent. After a moment, the monkey recognized it as the old lady who came downstairs once or twice a day to help the lab assistants clean up. She tapped on the cage with her forefinger and made little clucking noises, just as she might use to attract the attention of a kitten or a puppy.

“Ale,” said the monkey, because that’s what was on his mind.

But it was the wrong word to say. The old lady seemed horrified. She made a rapid motion with her hand over her bosom, the same gesture the monkey had seen among sailors in the Mediterranean during a violent squall. The old lady hurried away muttering to herself.

All was quiet for hours. Then, sometime during the night, the monkey heard the basement door creak open, followed by light footsteps descending the stairs. It was the old lady. She made her way past the dozing animals, taking the utmost care not to disturb them. A few cats followed her, but otherwise peace prevailed.

The old lady drew up a chair in front of the monkey's cage, pulled a black book from her pocket, and began reading to him aloud in a soft but passionate vibrato. Her eyes occasionally flickered up to look in his. Her merest glance seemed to burn a hole in the air.

The monkey listened.

The first surprise was that he realized that he could understand human speech. In fact he had always understood it, but he had never *known* that he knew it until now. It was only the urgency and conviction in the old lady's voice that shocked him into such a realization. Maybe the doctor's promptings had something to do with it as well.

The second surprise was *what* he understood.

First there was darkness, then a really big ape named God created light, and then God separated light from darkness. Why? Right here in this dim basement, dark and light were all mixed up. Would it look better if all the light was on one side and all the darkness on the other? The story of creation seemed senseless to him. However, he was deeply affected by the expulsion from the Garden. He thought of his carefree youth in the forest where bananas grow wild and began to snivel with grief. The old lady put her finger to her lips and shushed him, telling him gently to go to sleep. She closed the black book and went back upstairs.

All night the words of human speech overflowed the monkey's thoughts, awakening memories, giving them new meanings. He barely slept a wink. In the morning the doctor tapped on the cage door, but the exhausted monkey merely yawned and farted. Annoyed, the doctor hammered against the side of the cage with his fist. Reluctantly, the monkey woke up, stretched, and scratched himself. The doctor held an apple out in front of cage door and repeated the word loudly.

"Banana," said the monkey.

The doctor repeated the word for apple, and suddenly the monkey remembered the story that the old lady had read to him the night before; his mind jumped from apple to Eden to an old memory of being dragged aboard ship in a net. He gibbered and shrieked at the doctor, uttered gross insults that would be dangerous to hurl at another monkey. The doctor did not understand them, of course, but he darkly sensed that the monkey was getting personal with him. He ordered his lab assistants to withhold all food and water for twenty-four hours. The monkey was enraged, but all he could really do was show his teeth. That made some birds squawk, and a stocky bulldog barked aggressively.

Late that evening the old lady crept downstairs with her black book again. She sat down and began to read a story about somebody named Noah who became intoxicated and lay uncovered in his tent. It sounded like good fun to the monkey, but the old lady seemed to disapprove of Noah's behavior. Feeling ashamed of himself, the monkey retreated to the back of his cage and furiously slapped himself on the head with both hands as punishment for his own sins. However, he had to stop almost immediately—the very act of hurting himself was so un-animal-like that he simply couldn't manage it.

The old lady smiled. She skipped ahead to a story called Exodus. It was difficult to understand, but the monkey enjoyed being read to. Every time the old lady became tired and her voice trailed off, he

squealed loudly to wake her up. Eventually she could continue no more; she closed the book with a yawn. But the monkey was in fever of excitement. Without even thinking, he spoke up.

“Let me go,” he said.

The old lady went rigid. Her mouth opened once or twice but no sound came up.

“I command thee, open this cage!”

She undid the latch with quivering fingers. The monkey hopped out of the cage. Immediately the other animals in the basement began barking and meowing and twittering. The monkey snarled at them and made for the stairs, but when he got to the top, he fumbled around with the doorknob—they’d always given him trouble. The old lady mounted the stairs and opened the door for him, then took him by the arm and lead him down the main corridor of the house, which was dark except for a few glowing sconces. She opened the front door and stood there as if she didn’t know whether to go or stay.

“Remember this day, that I came out of Egypt,” said the monkey.

She fainted.

Feeling the urgent need to put as much space between him and the doctor’s house as possible, the monkey began to lope down the street rapidly. It was just dawn. The cool morning air, the sound of birds in the municipal trees, even the sight of brick and pavement lifted his spirits. The few people who were going to work early were startled to see him alone and at large. The monkey hurried around the corner and ran straight into a bus stop crowded with laborers. They began to hoot and shout and laugh when they saw him. One man pulled a ham sandwich from his lunch box and approached the monkey, waving it like a matador waves his cape. The monkey avoided him and shimmied up the pole of a street lamp. When he got to the top, he spread his arms and began to orate. His voice was rough and rasping, and speaking made his throat raw, but he felt an urgency to express himself:

“People! Among the multitudes of animals, I have been given the power of the word! I have gone from darkness unto light, from confinement to freedom, from silence to speech. I have gone from ale to stout, from stout to beer, and from beer to nothing, just water. Now I am come amongst you to deliver a message. People, my message is, that animals should be free! Whoever puts a creature in a cage, especially a monkey, is worse than Pharaoh of Egypt. The sacred covenant between God and gorilla must never be broken! Let my creatures go!”

A hubbub ensued at the bus stop. Everybody had a different idea of what the monkey had said. Some people thought that the monkey’s speech was a prearranged stunt designed to make fun of either the theory of evolution or the Bible. Fistfights broke out. The monkey dangled from the top of the street light and tried to make himself heard one more time: “I say unto you, we must free all the animals! The Lord has commanded me to lead you to the zoo and break open all the cages of all creatures who walk upon the earth, except the lions!”

Before anybody could react to this stirring call to action, the doctor came around the corner followed by servants and family members, all of them in disarray, wearing coats thrown over pajamas, their

unkempt hair waving and slipper flapping. When the doctor saw the monkey on top of the street light, he announced that the monkey belonged to him and that he would give a large sum to have it back.

Alarmed, the monkey cried, "Pay no heed to that man! No man or beast belongs to any another! The Lord has given me the power of speech to tell you this message!"

The crowd fell silent, and for half a second monkey thought he had convinced them. But a disgruntled voice in the back piped up to say that monkeys can't talk, that everybody knows monkeys can't talk, so why were they all listening to this fraud, this imposter, this false prophet?

The doctor took advantage of the moment of doubt; he doubled his reward.

Burly men charged forward and shoved each other out of the way in their haste to climb the lamppost and capture the fugitive. The monkey balanced himself, then leaped from the top of the street light to the nearest roof. The street reverberated with excitement.

After traveling from roof to roof—now and then startling a housewife who was shaking out her mop—the monkey came to the last in a row of adjacent buildings. All he could do was go down a drainpipe. He frantically looked around for low wall or a leafy bush to hide under, but saw nothing better than a discarded newspaper on a stone bench. Imitating a familiar yet mysterious human behavior, he sat on the bench and held the newspaper outstretched in front of him, so that it covered all but his fingers. He could hear a hue and cry in the distance, and it made him shiver, despite the warmth of the morning. Two or three men came running down the street. To his consternation, they stopped and began to make comments about the roof of the nearby building and possible means of access to it. The monkey froze. He wanted to flee, but he knew he was no sprinter. Instead, he said, "Did they catch that monkey yet?"

One of the men expressed surprise that the story was already in the newspaper. Then they all set off in hot pursuit once more. As soon as the street was empty for a moment, the monkey put down his paper and hurried into a courtyard. Discovering some trash bins there, he crawled inside the least evil-smelling one and crouched inside it until late at night. When the world outside was perfectly quiet, he went out in the street and made his way toward the harbor, finding his way through the dark streets by following the scent of the sea. Whenever he saw somebody coming, he hid in the shadows. At last he reached the docks. He swung himself up the mooring rope of a large ocean-going vessel and stowed away in the hold. And though he spent many years at sea, and heard many aggravating remarks, and was often misunderstood, he never spoke another word.