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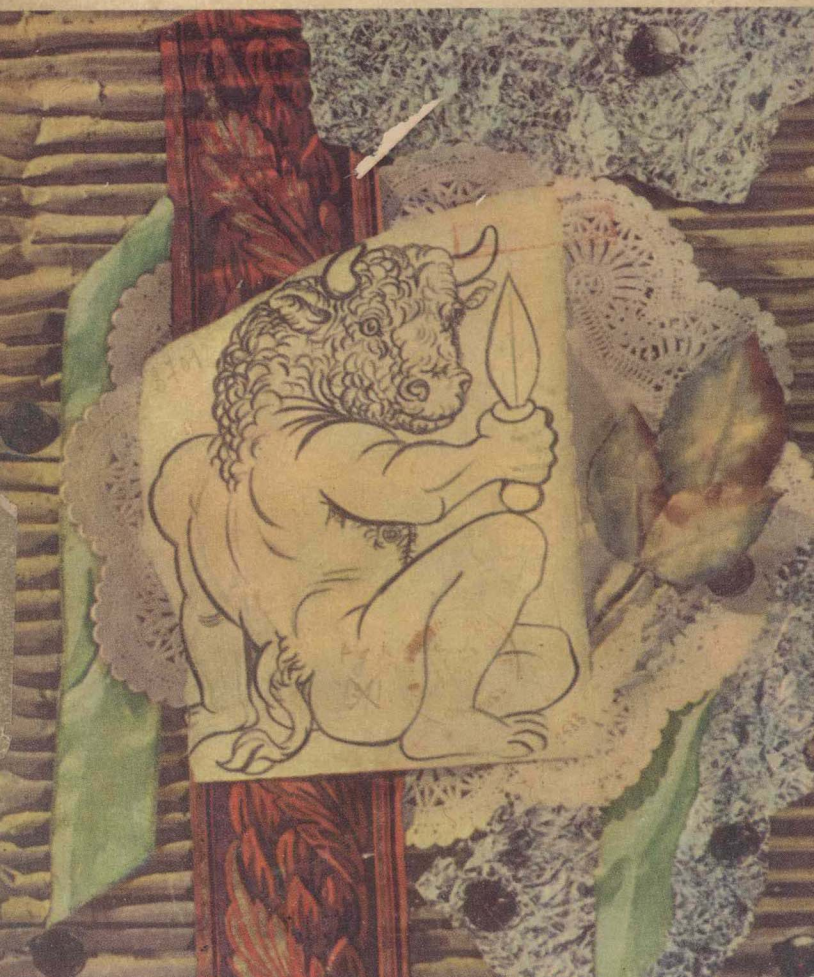
The Evolution Man

Roy Lewis



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THE EVOLUTION MAN

ROY LEWIS

Roy Lewis was born at Felixstowe in 1913 and was brought up in Birmingham before going to University College, Oxford, where he studied philosophy and broke his teeth on economics. He began writing at a very early age and became a full-time journalist on coming down from Oxford. He has served on the staff of the *Sydney Sun*, the *Statist*, *Scope*, and *Future*. He edited *New Commonwealth* from 1953 to 1954, then joined the *Economist* as an assistant editor and became their Washington Correspondent; since 1961 he has worked for *The Times*, mainly on Africa and the Caribbean. He has written, *inter alia*, *The English Middle Classes* and *Professional People*, with Angus Maude, and *The Boss*, with Rosemary Stewart. He is married, with two daughters, and lives in Hammersmith.

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ROY LEWIS

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TO MY DARLING DAUGHTERS,
DR THEODORE REIK,
AND SOME OTHERS

I

WHEN the winds blew strongly from the North, bringing an icy reminder that the great ice-cap was still advancing, we used to pile all our stores of brushwood and broken trees in front of the cave, make a really roaring fire, and tell ourselves that however far south it came this time, even in Africa, we could meet it and beat it.

We were often hard put to it to keep up the supply of fuel for a big fire, even though a good edge on quartzite will cut through a four-inch bough of cedar in ten minutes; it was the elephants and mammoths who kept us warm with their thoughtful habit of tearing up trees to test the strength of their tusks and trunks. *Elephas antiquus* was even more given to this than is the modern type, for he was still hard at it evolving, and there is nothing that an evolving animal worries about more than how his teeth are getting along. The mammoths who reckoned that they were just about perfect in those days, only tore up trees when they were angry or showing off to the females. In the mating season we had only to follow the herds to collect firewood, but at other times a well-aimed stone behind the ear of a browsing mammoth would work wonders, and maybe set you up in kindling for a month. I have known that gambit work with the big mastodons, but an uprooted baobab takes a good deal of dragging home. They burn well, but keep you at a distance of a hundred feet. There is no sense in taking things to extremes. By and large, we kept a good fire going when it was chilly and the ice-caps on Kilimanjaro and the Ruwenzori descended under the 10,000-foot contour line.

The sparks flew up to the stars on cold clear wintry nights, the green wood hissed and the dry wood crackled, and our fire was quite a beacon all down the Rift Valley. When ground temperatures were low enough, or the dank rain closed in and made one's joints creak and ache, Uncle Vanya would come and visit us. During a lull in the noise of the jungle traffic

you would hear him coming, with a swish-swish-swish through the tree-tops, punctuated by an occasional ominous crack of an overburdened branch, and a muffled oath, which became a scream of uninhibited rage when he actually fell.

At last he would shamble into the circle of firelight, a massive figure, his long arms practically trailing the ground, his square head crouched down between his broad, hairy shoulders, his eyes bloodshot, his lips curled back in the effort which he customarily made to get his canines to stick outside them. This gave him, as it happened, the expression of one who has put on a completely false smile at a party which he greatly dislikes; and as a small boy I found it absolutely terrifying. But later on I discovered behind all his fads and eccentricities – from which he was the first to suffer, and indeed the only one – a kindly person always ready with a tip of juniper berries or figs for a boy whom he fondly supposed was properly taken in by the natural ferocity of his appearance.

But how he talked, how he argued! He barely saluted us, and nodded in Aunt Mildred's direction, barely held out his poor hands, blue with cold, to the blaze, before he got started, going for Father like a rhinoceros with its head down, his long accusing forefinger pointing for all the world like the tip of its horn. Father would let him charge and work off his pent-up feelings in a torrent of denunciation; then when he had calmed down a little, and perhaps eaten a couple of aepyornis's eggs and a few durians, Father would join the fray, parrying Uncle Vanya's thrusts with his mild, ironic interjections, and at times reducing him to stupefied speechlessness by gaily admitting his enormities and taking positive credit for them.

I believe that at bottom they were deeply fond of one another though they had spent their whole lives in violent disagreement; this could hardly be otherwise since they were both ape-men of unswerving principle, who lived in strict accordance with their beliefs, and their principles were totally opposed at every point. Each went his own way, firmly convinced that the other was tragically mistaken about the direction in which the anthropoid species was evolving; but their personal relationship was, if uninhibited, also quite un-

impaired. They argued, they even shouted at each other; but they never came to blows. And though Uncle Vanya usually left us in high dudgeon he always came back.

The first time that I can remember a set-to between the brothers, so utterly unlike in appearance and demeanour, was over the whole business of having a fire on cold nights at all. I was squatting well away from the red, writhing, wounded yet voracious thing, watching how Father fed it with a splendid if circumspect nonchalance. The women were huddled together, chattering as they deloused each other; my mother as always a little apart, staring at Father and the fire with her sombre brooding eyes as she masticated pap for the weaned babies. Then suddenly Uncle Vanya was among us, a menacing figure, speaking in a voice of doom.

'You've done it now, Edward,' he rumbled. 'I might have guessed this would happen sooner or later, but I suppose I thought there was a limit even to your folly. But of course I was wrong! I've only got to turn my back on you for an hour and I find you up to some fresh idiocy. *And now this!* Edward, if ever I warned you before, if ever I begged you, as your elder brother, to think again before you continued on your catastrophic course, to amend your life before it involved you and yours in irretrievable disaster, let me now say, with tenfold emphasis: Stop! Stop, Edward, before it is too late – if indeed you still have time, stop . . .'

Uncle Vanya drew breath before he completed this impressive but obviously difficult period to round off, and Father chipped in.

'Why, Vanya, we certainly haven't seen you for quite a while. Come and get warm, my dear chap. Where have you been?'

Uncle Vanya made an impatient gesture.

'Not all that far. It's been rather a poor season for the fruit and vegetables on which I rely rather heavily for my diet – '

'I know,' said Father in a sympathetic voice. 'Looks like we may be in for an interpluvial after all. I've noticed the way desiccation is spreading lately.'

'But not exclusively, by any means,' went on Uncle Vanya

irritably. 'There's plenty to eat in the forest if you know where to look. I happen to find that I have to be careful just what I eat at my time of life – so, like any sensible primate, I went a little further afield to find what I wanted – to the Congo, in fact, where there is plenty of everything for everybody, without having to pretend that you have the teeth of a leopard, the stomach of a goat or the taste and manners of a jackal, Edward!'

'That's putting it rather strongly, Vanya,' protested Father.

'I came back yesterday,' went on Uncle Vanya, 'intending to pay you a visit in any case. Of course at nightfall I knew something was wrong. Eleven volcanoes on this district I know of, Edward – but twelve! I knew there was trouble afoot, and I half knew you were at the bottom of it. Hoping against hope, but dread in my heart, I hurried here. How right I was. Private volcanoes indeed! you've done it now, Edward!'

Father grinned mischievously. 'Do you really think so, Vanya?' he asked. 'I mean, is this really the turning point? I thought it might be, but it's hard to be quite sure. Certainly *a* turning point in the ascent of man, but is it *the*?' Father wrinkled up his eyes in a look of humorous desperation that was characteristic of him at certain moments.

'I don't know whether it's a turning point or the turning point,' said Uncle Vanya. 'I don't profess to know what you think you are doing, Edward. Getting above yourself, yes. I'm telling you that this is the most perverse and unnatural – '

'It is unnatural, isn't it?' said Father, eagerly breaking in. 'But then, Vanya, there has been an element of the artificial in subhuman life since we took to stone tools. Perhaps, you know, that was the *decisive* step, and this is simply elaboration; but then *you* use flints and so – '

'We've had that out before,' said Uncle Vanya. 'Within reason tools and artifacts do not transgress nature. The spiders take their prey by net; the birds can build better nests than we can; and many's the time you have had a coconut thrown at your thick head by a monkey, as you well know; perhaps that is what has deranged your wits. Only a few weeks ago I saw a troop of gorillas beat up a couple of elephants – elephants, mark you! – with sticks. I am prepared to accept

simple trimmed pebbles as in the way of nature, provided one does not become too dependent on them, and no attempt is made to refine them unduly. I am not illiberal, Edward, and I will go as far as that. But *this*! This is quite another matter. This could end anywhere. It affects everybody. Even me. You might burn the forest down with it. Then where would I be?'

'Oh, I don't think it will come to that, Vanya,' said Father.

'Won't it, indeed! May I ask, Edward, are you in control of the thing at all?'

'Er – more or less. More or less, you know.'

'What do you mean, more or less? Either you are, or you are not. Don't prevaricate. Can you put it out, for example?'

'If you don't feed it, it goes out of itself,' said Father defensively.

'Edward,' said Uncle Vanya, 'I warn you. You have started something that you may not be able to stop. So you think it will go out if you don't feed it! Have you thought that it might decide to feed itself, sometime? Then where would you be?'

'It hasn't happened yet,' said Father crossly. 'It takes me all my time to keep it going, as a matter of fact, especially on wet nights.'

'Then my most earnest advice to you is not to keep it going any longer,' said Uncle Vanya, 'before you get a chain reaction started. How long have you been playing with fire?'

'Oh, I found out about it months ago,' said Father. 'And, you know, Vanya, it is the most fascinating stuff. The possibilities are stupendous. I mean, there is so much you can do with it. Far beyond mere central heating, you know, though that's a big step forward in itself. I have hardly begun to work out the applications yet. But just take the smoke alone: believe it or not, it smothers the flies and keeps down the mosquitoes. Of course, fire is tricky stuff. Hard to carry about, for instance. Then it's got a voracious appetite; eats like a horse. Apt to be spiteful, got a nasty sting, if you're not careful. And it really is new; opens up a positive vista of – '

But suddenly there was a loud shriek from Uncle Vanya and he began hopping about on one foot. I had observed with great interest that for some time he had been standing on a

red-hot ember. He had been too excited in his argument with Father to notice it, or the hissing noise and peculiar smell which followed. But now the ember had bitten right through the hide of his instep.

'Yah!' roared Uncle Vanya. 'You damned fool, Edward! It's bitten me! That's what your infernal bag of tricks has done! Yah! What did I tell you? It'll end by eating the whole lot of you! Sitting on a live volcano, that's what you're doing! I've finished with you, Edward! You'll be extinct, the whole pack of you, in no time. You've had it. Yah! I'm going back to the trees! You've overstepped the mark this time, Edward! That's what the brontosaurus did, too!'

He soon hobbled out of sight, but his howls could be heard for another fifteen minutes at least.

'All the same, I guess it was Vanya who overstepped the mark,' said Father to Mother, as with a leafy branch he carefully swept the hearth.

2

UNCLE VANYA returned, notwithstanding, to repeat his warnings many times, especially on cold or rainy nights. His misgivings were not at all appeased by our gradual progress in fire-control. He snorted contemptuously when we showed him how to damp it down, how it could be cut up, like an eel, into several fires, and how it could be carried on the tip of dry branches. Even though all these experiments were carefully supervised by Father, Uncle Vanya condemned them; botany and zoology he considered to be the whole content of a scientific education, and he was entirely opposed to adding physics to the curriculum.

Yet we all took to it very quickly. The women were at first slow to get out of the way and burned themselves; and for a time it looked as if the youngest generation would not survive at all. But Father thought that everyone should make his own mistakes. 'A burned child respects the fire,' he would say

confidently as yet another baby began screeching after it had grabbed a fiery beetle. He was right.

These were, after all, small accidents to set against the gain. Our standard of living rose almost out of recognition. Before we had fire, we were in a very small way. We had come down from the trees, we had the stone axe; but we had not much more, and every tooth and claw and horn in nature seemed to be against us. Though we considered ourselves as ground animals, we had to nip up a tree pretty smartly again if we got into any sort of a jam. We still had to live on berries, roots and nuts to a great extent; we were still glad of fat caterpillars and grubs to strengthen the intake of protein. Of energy-giving foods we were chronically short, though we needed them desperately to sustain our growing physique. One important reason for leaving the forest was to get more meat into our diet. There was plenty of meat on the plains; the trouble was, it was all on four legs. The great grasslands were crowded with game: great herds of bison, buffalo, impala, oryx, wildebeeste, hartebeeste, antelope, gazelle, zebra and horse, to mention only a few of those we would have liked to dine on. But chasing meat on four legs when you are trying to go about on two is a mug's game; and we were forced to try and stand up in order to see over the top of the savannah grass. Even if you caught a big ungulate, what could you do with it? It kicked you. Sometimes you could run a lame animal down; then it presented its horns to you. A horde of ape-men was needed to stone it to death. With a horde, you can surround and run down game; but to keep a horde together needs a large and regular food supply. This is the oldest of vicious circles in economics: to make any sort of bag you need a team of hunters; but to feed a team you must be sure of a regular bag. Otherwise meal-times are so irregular that you can feed a little group of three or four at best.

We had therefore to start right at the bottom and work our way up. We had to begin with rabbits, hyrax and minor rodents which you can knock over with a stone; we had to go after turtles and tortoises, lizards and snakes, which can be caught if you study their habits with assiduity. Once killed,

small ground game can be cut up with flint knives fairly handily, and though the best part of the meat is not easy to tear and eat without the big canines of the carnivores, it can be cut up and smashed a bit with stones prior to mastication by molars which were primarily designed for a frugivorous diet. The soft parts are often not very nice, but people who are hungry with the effort of walking upright all day on their hind legs, and who want to nourish their brains, cannot afford to be fastidious. We competed for the soft parts and set high store on mushy animals, because they relieved the strain on our teeth and digestions.

I doubt if many people remember today what agonies of indigestion we endured in those early times; or indeed how many succumbed to it. Tempers were permanently soured by gastric disturbances; and the lowering sullen grimace of the subhuman pioneers of primordial days had far less to do with their moroseness or savagery than the condition of their stomach linings. The sunniest disposition is apt to be undermined by chronic colitis. It is a complete fallacy to suppose that, because we were just down from the trees and to that extent 'nearer to nature', we could eat just anything, however unpalatable or stringy it might be. On the contrary, to widen one's feeding habits from the purely vegetarian (and almost wholly frugivorous at that) towards omnivorousness is a painful and difficult process, demanding immense patience and persistence in discovering how to keep down things which not only disgust one, but disagree with one as well. Only unrelenting ambition, the desire to improve one's place in nature, and ruthless self-discipline will carry one through that transition. I am not denying that there are unexpected titbits to be found, but life cannot be all snails and sweetbreads. Once you set out to be omnivorous you must learn to eat *everything*, and in times when you never know where the next meal is coming from you must also eat everything *up*. As children we were brought up most strictly on these rules; and a child who dared to say, 'But, Mummy, I don't like toad!' was a child asking to have its ears boxed. 'Eat it up; it's good for you,' was the refrain of my childhood; and of

course it is true – nature, marvellously adaptable, did somehow harden our little insides to digest the indigestible.

It must be remembered that in becoming meat-eaters we had to chew, and therefore to taste, all this rich, unsuitable food. The carnivores – the great cats, the wolves and dogs, the crocodiles – merely tore their meat into pieces and swallowed it, careless of whether it was shoulder, rump steak, liver or tripes. We could not bolt our food. 'Chew one hundred times before you swallow', another maxim of childhood, was based on the certainty that severe belly-ache would follow if it were ignored. However nasty the gobbet, in primeval times it had to be well explored by mouth and palate. Hunger was our only sauce; but that we had in plenty.

So we envied the huge banquets of meat which the lions and sabre-tooths struck down so casually and ate of so wastefully, leaving perhaps three-quarters of a carcase for the jackals and vultures. Our first concern was therefore whenever possible to be in at the lion's kill, and, when he had taken his share, to take the remainder. We were at least the equal of the jackal and the vulture, with our axes and our well-aimed stones and our pointed sticks, though we often had to fight hard. Our best meals often came by watching the vultures and racing them to the spot; though of course to be a scavenger carries the disadvantage that you have to keep in the vicinity of the killer, and most of all when he is hungry. This involves the risk that you will provide his dinner yourself.

It was a big risk. The jackal and hyaena can run; the vulture can fly; but your poor ape just down from the trees must walk warily in the plains. There were plenty who did not care for that dangerous life and confined themselves to small game, nasty as it often was, and to the small, unstimulating parochial society which was all it could support. The best-fed, biggest and most enterprising people were undoubtedly those who followed the big cats – lion, sabre-tooth, leopard, cheetah, lynx, and the rest of the tribe – and dined when they left the table. It was dangerous work, but those who preferred its rewards always maintained that the cats would eat primate flesh anyway, if only for a change from their usual meat; by

keeping close to them you did not greatly increase the risk of being hunted yourself, but on the other hand you learned a great deal that was useful about their habits which enabled you to take avoiding action at need. Then, when you *did* have to run for it, you were well-nourished and in good training. The great thing was to know when a lion was hungry and when he was not; casualties could be halved by careful observance of this one point alone. I have heard it objected that hunting with the lion is what gave the lion his taste for us; but those early hunters hotly denied it, as they also resented the slighting suggestion that they were mere parasites on the higher carnivores. It must be accepted, I think that they did after all learn a very great deal about beasts of prey which will be of permanent use to humanity.

We might make something out of the carnivores, but we were no match for them. We did not dare to cross them. They were the lords of creation, and their will was law. They kept our numbers firmly down, and there was very little we could do about it, except go back to the trees and give the whole thing up as a bad job. As Father was absolutely convinced that we were on the right track, there was no question of that, except for people like Uncle Vanya. Father was serenely certain that something would turn up to restore our fortunes; we had put our trust in intelligence, in a big brain and a big skull to keep it in, and we must trust to it to see us through somehow. Meantime, we must just have as good a pair of legs as possible. 'There is no earthly reason,' I heard Father say more than once, 'why an ape-man should not be able to run a hundred metres in ten seconds, jump over a seven-foot thornbush or, using a spear, vault a fifteen-and-a-half-foot one; given a decent start and biceps to swing oneself up from branch to branch, that should get you out of trouble ninety times in a hundred.' I have seen him prove this himself.

This was all very well, but it did not solve the major problem or settle the host of minor inconveniences which are inevitable when the cat tribe is the ruling class. One of these is undoubtedly housing. Every ape-woman wants a decent place in which to bring up her family, a real home, snug, warm and,