

JOHN COLLIER
**HIS
MONKEY
WIFE**



'A tremendous and terrifying satire' Osbert Sitwell

JOHN COLLIE

His Monkey Wife
or, Married to a Chimp



INTRODUCED BY
PAUL THEROUX

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HIS MONKEY WIFE

JOHN COLLIER, born in London in 1901, began his career as a poet. In the 1920s he was poetry editor of *Time and Tide* and his first collection of poems, *Gemini*, was published in 1931. *His Monkey Wife* (1930) was his first novel. He published two others – *Tom's A-Cold* (1933) and *Defy the Foul Fiend* (1934) – as well as volumes of short stories. In all, he published thirteen books during the Thirties and made regular contributions to the *New Yorker*. From the 1940s, when he moved to California, he was occupied with the cinema and wrote many film scripts. Between 1955 and 1978 he lived in France, returning to California in 1978, where he lived until his death in 1980. *Fancies & Goodnights* (1951) contains fifty of his stories; *The John Collier Reader* was published in 1972, and in the following year *Paradise Lost*, *Cinema of the Mind* – a screenplay adaptation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

PAUL THEROUX was born in 1941 in Medford, Massachusetts. He has taught at universities in Italy, Malawi, Uganda and Singapore, and since 1971 has divided his time between London and Cape Cod. He has published eighteen books including *Saint Jack* (1973), *The Family Arsenal* (1976), *The Consul's File* (1977), *The Old Patagonian Express* (1979) and *The Mosquito Coast* (1981).

INTRODUCTION

BY PAUL THEROUX

"THIS is a strange book," the man wrote of *His Monkey Wife*, beginning the review on a small rectangle of notepaper. It was unlined paper but his sentences were set out in an orderly way, as if his copperplate was intended for someone at a linotype machine. He went on, "It clearly sets out to combine the qualities of the thriller with those of what might be called the decorative novel. Like most things which are extremely far apart, these two are also surprisingly near to one another." He continued in this elliptical way for four pages and then found the novelist wildly inexact. "From the classical standpoint his consciousness is too crammed for harmony, too neurasthenic for proportion, and his humour is too hysterical, too greedy and too crude."

On the other hand, this review of the novel was written by John Collier himself in 1930, when the book first appeared. It was titled "A Looking Glass", and one of its more bizarre aspects was that though it was carefully written it was very much a private joke: it was never printed anywhere, nor has anyone ever mentioned it before. Furthermore, it

that Emily shimmers out of the Ritz and offers him a new life. Redemption is the proper word but it is out of place in a discussion of this glancing novel. At important points in the narrative Emily takes the initiative—saving Alfred from Loblulya, learning to read, managing the marriage ceremony, and carrying Alfred away from the brink of oblivion. At last it is she who suggests that they return to Africa together. One of my favourite asides in the book is Collier's mention that Alfred is the only person ever to have returned to Boboma after having once left it.

From the first sentence of the novel the reader is aware that he is in the presence of a magician. This is Collier's strength as a writer. He casts a spell and he does so always with a smile. His style is effortless, always enjoying itself as it weaves its magic. The book is full of asides, parodies, half-quotes, and Collier's literary rope tricks, in which before our eyes he levitates a number of clauses and then he disappears leaving a long sentence dancing in the air. The second paragraph in Chapter XII begins with a sentence of 354 words.

If *His Monkey Wife* is a disturbing book it is because the chimp is so innocent, so winsome, so undemanding, relying on the power of romantic love in an atmosphere of human failure. She is civilized in the way man ought to be; she is Man before the Fall, before Satan and God hatched the idea of sin. She is also a terrific vaudeville act. The ending—one of the greatest last paragraphs of any novel—is a good shock; it is perfect, in fact. It gives

was rather dismissive—it contained faint praise but was generally belittling. It must have been the result of an impulse, but when you think about its backhanded generosity, its self-mockery and its extreme poise it is impossible not to be curious about its perpetrator.

What sort of a man writes a masterpiece and then writes a snuffy review of it and slides it into a drawer to be found fifty years later by his widow? It is not an easy question, because John Collier is one of the great literary unclassifiabes—which is another way of saying genius. Collier had a generous man's modesty, and a great imagination, and no airs. Towards the end of his life he said, "I sometimes marvel that a third-rate writer like me has been able to palm himself off as a second-rate writer." He was a poet, editor, reviewer, novelist and screen writer. He was also unknown to the general public. "He eschews fame and has a horror of publicity", Anthony Burgess wrote in his Introduction to *The John Collier Reader* (1972). Like many other people who have no appetite for celebrity, John Collier was a happy man, who lived a rich and contented life. I am not speaking of books but of passions and pleasures. He was an attentive friend and a traveller; he was enthusiastic about boats and food. He liked to cook. He grew roses. He was asked by *Sight & Sound* magazine in 1976 why he had become a script writer. He admitted that he had been "abysmally ignorant of the cinema . . . I had seen scarcely a dozen films in my life." He had gone to Hollywood

because he had fallen in love with a fishing boat in Cassis, near Marseilles, in 1935, and so he wrote the script of *Sylvia Scarlett* in order to buy the boat.

There is another aspect to his anonymity that is interesting. He seems faceless and ungraspable and then, after a little probing, one discovers his involvement in all sorts of well-known contexts. Mystery men are often like that. Collier was poetry editor of *Time and Tide* in the 1920s, and in the 1930s published a number of short stories in the *New Yorker*. Collier it was who first suggested that Jack Warner buy *The African Queen* to film—and he wrote the first script for it. Some of his macabre stories were dramatized in *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, Sandy Wilson made a musical out of *His Monkey Wife*, and it was Collier who introduced “the magical-Druidical element” into Franklin Schaffner’s film, *The War Lord* (1965). He also wrote the script for the film *I Am A Camera*. So, though he may have been somewhat hidden, the fact remains that he spent the best part of his life working magic.

“John Henry Noyes Collier was born May 3, 1901”, his widow Harriet wrote to me, when I asked for the details. “His parents were John George Collier and Emily Noyes Collier. His great grandfather was physician to King William IV, a great uncle was a physician connected with the Hospital for Nervous Diseases, and there were other doctors,

artists, and an Uncle Vincent, who was an unknown novelist (he published *Light Fingers and Dark Eyes* in 1913), who tutored John and was a great influence on him and his career. His mother, a teacher, taught him to read at the age of 3, and he read an average of a book a day for the rest of his life. Except for kindergarten, this was the extent of his formal education. He read at the Bodleian and spent a great deal of time in the Reading Room of the British Museum."

His early writing was poetry and reviews. This was in the 1920s—in 1922 he received the poetry prize from *This Quarter*. In the 1930s he published thirteen books—poetry, novels, short story collections, an edition of John Aubrey, and a piece of collaboration entitled *Just the Other Day: An Informal History of Britain Since the War*. His early life divides almost by decades, for after his literary beginnings in the Twenties, and his assured and varied writing in the Thirties, he was occupied in the Forties with films—"a mixed bag", one critic wrote, for they included *Elephant Boy*, *Her Cardboard Lover*, *Deception* and *Roseanna McCoy*. "I suspect that what I wrote was far too wordy and far too literary", Collier once reflected, with his customary humility. The 1950s were the beginning of a happy period that lasted until his death in 1980. During this time he wrote more stories and more movie scripts, and bought a house, *Domaine du Blanchissage*, in Grasse, France.

His last project was his favourite, a movie script of

Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In an interview, Collier said, "I think the theme of *Paradise Lost* is singularly suited to attract a wide audience, and especially the young audience, of today. It is quasi-religious, quasi-scientific, and deeply humanistic, being the thrilling story, with which we can all identify, of how innocent, vegetarian, Proconsul or Pithecanthropus was caught up in the guerrilla war waged by Satan against the authoritarian universe, and how he emerged as moral and immoral, curious, inspired, murderous and suffering Man." The film was not made but the script was published as "A Screenplay for the Cinema of the Mind" in America in 1973. It is an astonishing thing—not quite what Milton intended—and Satan is the hero.

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Collier loved unlikely heroes. His stories are full of them, and so are his novels—not only Willoughby Ollebeare in *Defy The Foul Fiend*, but a whole marauding gang of savages in his novel of our tribalistic future, *Tom's A-Cold* (the American title was *Full Circle*)—set in the 1990s. And what is less likely than the main character of *His Monkey Wife*?

"The chimp is civilized"—the flat statement appears in the first chapter. Very soon we begin to realize its implications, for Emily is no ordinary chimp. The laugh is on the scientists "who have chosen to measure the intelligence of the chimpanzee solely by its reactions to a banana". Collier implies that it might be far better to test a chimp's

reaction to the poetry of Tennyson or Frances Crofts Cornford. Emily is tremendously well-read—no one in the novel, not even the aesthetes or writers, is so knowledgeable as she or possesses her range of reference. She knows she has no dowry but “she brought with her the treasure of a well-stocked mind . . . which, all the books said, was infinitely to be preferred”. She has a good nose for literary style, finding in the prose of the divorce laws a stark simplicity of greater merit than the exoticism of the marriage service. On the ship to England from Africa the other passengers want to feed her nuts and they urge her to smoke and do tricks. She tries to engage them in a discussion of Conrad’s understanding of the sea. She can’t win.

That she is a monkey is of small significance to the other characters. (She is not, we know, a monkey, but rather an anthropoid ape. Collier uses the words interchangeably, and I have followed his example.) There are many references to the fact that Amy, too, looks like a chimp. I once heard that in the seventeenth century a monkey was found in the north of England and was hanged by the locals, who suspected the poor beast of being a French spy. Emily is taken to be Arab or Chinese or Irish; most onlookers conclude that she is probably Spanish—dusky and hot-blooded. On several occasions men try to pick her up. It is the humans in the book who behave like monkeys, gibbering and indulging their frivolous passion for fancy dress. This has the effect of making Emily a deeply sympathetic character and

of giving force to the love story in the satire. If Alfred Fatigay were not so clownishly obtuse and such a jackass in all his dealings with Emily, it might even have been a touching love story.

Throughout the novel all the real feeling is Emily's and all the insincerity belongs to the humans. After reading a letter Amy has written to Alfred, Emily understands the bogus nature of Amy's sentiment—but Alfred remains blind to it. Soon we cease to expect any subtlety or surprise from the humans in the book; they are stick-figures, being held up to ridicule, and they come out very badly in comparison with the chimp.

It is not only the subtlety of Emily's understanding that is impressive, but also her ability to express it. It is Emily's bookishness that fills this novel with literary allusions. (One of the great games *His Monkey Wife* inspires is guessing the sources of the numerous quotations.) I have mentioned F. C. Cornford and Tennyson—'Locksley Hall' is a special favourite of the chimp, presumably for its own Alfred and its own Amy and its own view of love. But there are also poems by Vaughan, Donne, Dowson, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Blake. Emily is romantically inclined and eager to give Alfred the benefit of the doubt. Love has made her literary, and so has contempt, for when Amy treats her like a slave Emily feels "like something out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*". Collier made her presence especially effective by giving her thoughts but no voice. What might have sounded pompous or improbable in

direct speech is persuasive and vigorous when rendered as ruminant thought. One of the funniest scenes in the novel also depends on a literary classic for its effect. This occurs when Emily brandishes a knife and a copy of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* in Amy's face, just before the wedding ceremony. It is unexpectedly fierce of Emily to threaten anyone (love is her excuse), but even so it is the Poe that makes the point.

His Monkey Wife has been described by Osbert Sitwell (in his Foreword to Collier's *Green Thoughts*, 1932) as an allegory about "the growth of the soul, from beast to man", and other critics have suggested that it is a satire against the New Woman. Anthony Burgess described the book as a "wayward masterpiece" and a "sport" and said that thematically "anything will do". It is a highly adaptable fable, but will anything do? The book is so funny and bright it does not need critical explanation. Sitwell's thesis about its illustrating a kind of moral evolution is not very interesting, and mentions of Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Pankhurst and gibes at George Moore hardly create enough wind to fill the sails of a feminist argument.

But not anything will do. The book is a laugh, yet it is also a great satire about human weakness. The chimp is weakest at her most human, and strongest and most resourceful at her monkeyest. There is not a human being in the book who is not deficient and deeply silly in a crucial way. Collier's writing is in the tradition of English satire in being cheerfully

misanthropic, and not long after writing the novel he declared, "I cannot see much good in the world or much likelihood of good. There seems to me a definite bias in human nature towards ill, towards the immediate convenience, the ugly, the cheap . . . I rub my hands and say 'Hurry up, you foulers of a good world, and destroy yourselves faster.'"

Fatigay is perfectly named—he is limp and clapped out, always the solemn fool, and not a patch on "his sensitive pet". It is one of the ironies of the novel that none of the characters has any idea of how wonderful Emily really is, or what a good mind she has. This is particularly true of Alfred. He never discovers how perceptive and high-minded she is. The chimp is civilized, an omnivorous reader and a woman of the world, but it is for her pet-like qualities that Alfred admires her. He comes to love her at last for her being a good pet, for her constancy and devotion. Human love is shown to be no more than selfish condescension. Emily is the worthiest character in the book. If this were not so, the satire would be quite different. The last irony is that a novel that delights in being unphysical ends on a note of triumphant carnality.

Among other things, the novel is a chronicle of Emily's success. In the course of four years, Emily rises to such a highly paid position as a star dancer in London that she is able to transform Alfred, who has been brought to a pitiful condition—gnawing cauliflower stems for sustenance and chattering in Piccadilly. It is when he becomes most monkey-like

order to the disturbance, and it reminds me of Collier's remark about his script for *The African Queen*, in which he chose to deal with Allnut and Rose in his own way. "A happy end?" he said. "Bet your life it was."

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As a footnote, here in its entirety is the review John Collier wrote of his novel:

A LOOKING GLASS

This is a strange book. It clearly sets out to combine the qualities of the thriller with those of what might be called the decorative novel. Like most things which are extremely far apart, these two are also surprisingly near to one another. In order to reach the one spot on the globe which is twenty five thousand miles from me, I have only to turn around. Similarly, it is not necessary, nor I think desirable, to circumnavigate the novel-world, passing through the warren continents of character and zeit-geist, in order to link the most highly coloured aestheticism with the penny dreadful. They stand back to back on their small island of complete arbitrariness.

In penny dreadfuls, the Wembleys, or the earthquakes of the mind, an astonishing amount of unworked beauty is to be found. And this beauty, while it can be no more absolute than beauty of any kind, may perhaps give us the illusion of being so, for it has this accidental advantage, that being cut off from mental habit by a frame of improbability, it is

perceived in its purest and most electric state, as in a modern picture.

Violence and extravagance do not prohibit beauty and subtlety, as Webster's plays and the penny blood lives of the Borgias demonstrate, but beauty and subtlety will prohibit violence and extravagance if they get there first. The aesthete, then, must go more than half way to meet the thriller, lest he should vitiate his material into mere charm and fantasy. The sea serpent is a shy serpent, and if we do not go far enough in search of him, we may find ourselves with only a pretty toy snake in our hands, of which we could have bought a dozen at Mudies.

The problem is an amusing one, and, if successfully worked with, it should yield a very downright sort of story, which would be at least a holiday from the mass of serious and yet facile psychology which lends a sameness to most of the better sort of fiction of today. How far has Mr. Collier been successful?

The plot he has hit on is certainly bizarre enough, and if he does not keep entirely clear of that mental slackness which we are tasteless enough to call "charm", he very consistently avoids fantasy; that is, he insists that we meet his extraordinary characters on their own terms and do not send out merely the childish survival in us to deal with them.

Viewed as a story, this novel is an emotional melodrama, complete with a Medusa villainess, an honest simpleton of a hero, and an angelic if only anthropoid heroine, all functioning in the two-

dimensional world of the old Lyceum poster or the primitive fresco, where Chinamen walk haloed in infernal green, where an angel may outsize a church, and where a man may marry a monkey on a foggy day.

The simplest novel, of course, must exist on other planes than that of its action. In the mere choice of words something of the writer's attitude to life must leak through. Mr. Collier's positively squirts through, too insistently at times. This makes for variety of interest, but not for harmony. This point inevitably marks the widest divergence of this type of novel from the true penny dreadful, whose author generally has a very simple and unobtrusive attitude to life. He expresses a dislike of villains, and a liking for chums and sweet girls. But the aesthete finds his existence on a complex system of likes and dislikes, and Mr. Collier, if he is all sensationalist in his plot, is all aesthete in his counterpoint of personal expression.

He seems to dislike almost everything and everybody in life, and to love everything and everybody as soon as they have been transmuted into a comedy which is sardonic and unjust. The sentences that carry in the melodrama are loaded, sometimes overloaded, with phrases which insist on this transmutation: they kick out like mules with their hinder clauses, their blows falling alike on the cultured and the uncultured, the chaste and the unchaste, the ambitious mind and the loving heart. This, though it adds richness to the texture, prevents