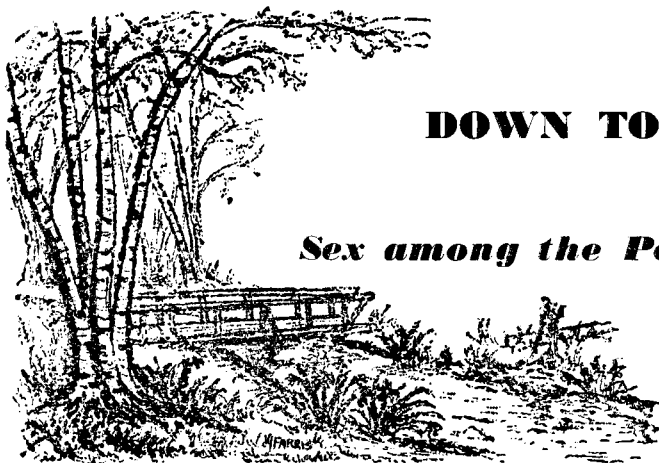


ALAN DEVOE

## DOWN TO EARTH

### *Sex among the Porcupines*



OUR BASIC HUMAN situation today remains exactly what it has always been, ever since that day when the light which never thitherto had been on land or sea first began gleaming in our human skull and enabled a creature, for the first time, to look around it and understand something of its creaturely circumstances. We remain, as in the first place, one of a very large body of different beings — several millions of them — which variously go creeping, flying, slithering, wriggling, or jog-trotting through a life-experience on this bright star. In company with all these other creatures, in our shared journey from birth to death, we are under certain inescapable terms. For example: we eat. We do this by killing other living things and stuffing them into

our mouths. There is no other way we can eat. For another example: we excrete. We do this by bladders and bowels. There is no other way we can do it. For a third example: we breed. We do this by a union of penis with vagina.

Now all this, of course, is elementary. It is obvious that we cannot elude — any more than we can elude the law of gravity — the law whereby, when we die, we rot and stink. It is entirely vain to wish we were not a hairy animal. We are. We issue out of a womb, attended by considerable slippery mess, very much as a baby fox does; and when we have been dead for three days we give off a stench indistinguishable from that of the squashed toad by the roadside. The terms have been perfectly plain from

the beginning.

However, we haven't liked it. It was apparently only a very little while after our acquisition of self-awareness and the gleam of understanding that we began a dismayed deploring and a frantic campaign of concealment that has been going on ever since.

What! We die the way weasels do? We can't have that at all. And so all the embossed coffins and curlicued marble mausoleums, far nicer for living-in than the homes where many of the living must live . . . so all the whisking-away of corpses, and the rouging of their cheeks, and the natty bedecking of them in evening dress, and their interment in "decay-proof" containers. So the whole elaborate rigmarole of *The Loved One*, and never letting ourselves remark that the loved one is now a pile of maggoty detritus.

Bowels? Bladders? The same sort of sweaty lather that a galloping horse works up we too work up? Dear me no. Surely not *us*. And so all the relegating of such matters to a category of what we call "brutish", and then — having successfully shooed them that far — the decision that they are nasty, and next that they are unmentionable, and finally that they don't exist. Animals, perhaps, may

have blood. We may even have some in our own veins. But that puddle of hot gore on our roast-beef platter, that's "rose gravy". See our new mink coat? Where did it come from? Why, out of the everywhere, I guess. Who is to be so shocking, so bizarre-minded, so really nasty, as to reflect or say that this coat is the skins of little brother-animals that we caught by the paws in the toothed jaws of steel traps, and that screamed and screamed their lungs out, and in struggling terror voided their urine and feces?

Not every one of our concealments, disguises, and aversions from foundational fact, of course, is a merely preposterous evasion. Dung is not pleasant to have around the house. A great honor belongs, rightly enough, to Sir John Harrington, the dedicated nobleman who invented the water-closet. If we sweat like horses, it is sensible enough that we do what we can to obscure the unpleasantness. But most of our obfuscative pretendings have about them that quality of a terrified tension, lest truth burst free, which marks neurosis. A great English playwright discovered that the way to shock a theatreful of people into spasms of tittering laughter was to tell them, quite simply and gravely, an evident

truth. Whitman tossed off a line or two, involving the patent fact that there are sweat-glands in an arm-pit; and it was as though he had exploded a revolution. Right now, tonight, uncountable generations after Adam, a whole dinner-party of adult human beings can be reduced to nervous giggles by the flushing of a toilet.

WHAT BRINGS all this up, in the flowering and merry month of May, is two letters from readers about S-e-x. It is in the province of sex, of course, that we have reached our most loony triumphs of the devoted lie, the simper, and the Studied Silence. Not long ago, in the *MERCURY*, William Bradford Huie had occasion to employ the word "orgasm". For weeks the mailmen tottering into the *MERCURY*'s quarters were all but crushed by the burden of outraged letters they bore. Mice, it may be allowed, have orgasms. The thing probably occurs, unavoidably, in the "brute" creation. But we — we are ladies and gentlemen, are we not?

And that, no doubt, is why two such letters have come to me. The same two letters come every year — (I mean, of course, that letters asking the same two questions come) — when it gets

to be spring, and a concern with sex becomes in our secret selves even livelier than usual. Only a history of generation after generation devoted to shush-shush, and the answering of children's questions with any sort of eerie flapdoodle rather than the simple truth, could bring it about that today people are still slipping away to the letterbox and posting these giggly inquiries to naturalists.

Well, here they are. Let us answer them briefly, and, if possible, with a straight face.

First: The Problem of the Porcupines. Is it true, my correspondent asks, what "they say" about porcupines? This is putting it with an agonized delicacy. What my correspondent refers to is the story that porcupines, because of their quilly prickliness, are able to engage in copulation only by resorting to a technique of wonderful intricacy. The female porcupine, the story goes, climbs out on a branch, gets a good grip on it, and then slings herself underneath it upside-down and hangs there with her quill-less belly-side uppermost. Her swain, teetering out along the branch to his appointment, creeps gingerly down on top of her and the animals lie swinging front to front in a precarious aerial union. That's what "they say." Is it

true? No. This imperishable piece of nonsense is just one of those moonstruck fantasies that resolute ignorance fosters. A female porcupine can switch her tail aside and flatten her quills to make possible a copulation by that standard technique of "mounting" which is general among mammalian quadrupeds.

Second question: The Magical Pouch of the 'Possum. If what "they say" about porcupines is only a fantasy, the everlasting story about opossums is near demented. It goes right on, though, age after age. When Aristotle was a small boy, another small boy probably took him behind a pillar and told it to him. Opossums, "they say," don't breed like other mammals. The female opossum receives the male's fertilizing material — a kind of dust or pollen, one would take it — in her nostrils. Then presently she bends down her head, pokes it into the pouch on her abdomen, and with a massive sneezy snort blows the germ of life into that depository.

A naturalist may think, the first time this lunatic yarn comes his way, that it must have started, 'way back in the dim mists of ancient time, just as an out-and-out joke. It must just have been thought up, out of nothing, in somebody's wild

moment of creative fantasticality. But then, after he's heard the story half a dozen times, and been furtively questioned about it by inquirer after inquirer, he gets to thinking the thing over and presently he realizes that the truth is something much sadder. This notion about opossums didn't come into being out of nothing. It came into being because of a curious fact of natural history, and because of people's having to belabor their wits over the curious fact without ever daring to ask a straightforward question about it. It grew out of a bafflement over a matter of mammalian anatomy, and it grew in the atmosphere which makes any questioning about such a thing an impropriety.

I trust we shall not get ourselves banned if I say what the fact is. (After all, the triumph of things-as-they-aren't has been so considerable that a magazine got itself condemned a few years ago for showing some pictures of — what one would hardly have supposed was a dirty novelty — the birth of a baby.) Well, we must take our chances. The tale of the 'possum, in all its pathetic absurdity, arises out of God's endowment of His 'possums with a surprising genital arrangement. A male 'possum's penis is forked.



## ***The Critical Vocabulary***

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

IN THE VOCABULARY of American drama criticism the word "clever" has become a term of deprecation. Just what is wrong with cleverness, which the critics seem to confuse with rank triviality and cheap smartal-eckry, eludes anyone with a regard for semantics and bright entertainment. Cleverness, or "mere cleverness" as they like to put it, does not necessarily betoken the light-headedness and superficiality they appear to think it does, else they would have to list Congreve, Sheridan, and other such theatrical notabilities as morons, and such as Giraudoux, Guitry, and Molnar as intolerable bores.

What the critics probably have in mind when they derogate cleverness is not real cleverness but attempted cleverness which does not come off. That

is, the counterfeit cleverness practised, for instance, by some contemporary, popular English playwrights and which resembles true cleverness only as the wise-crack resembles true wit; in other words, crisply delivered vaudeville badinage in white tie and tails.

Chesterton, an authentically clever if strainful old cock — who, incidentally, in *Magic* wrote a play of genuine cleverness — took pleasure in depreciating cleverness by way of trying to persuade his critics that he was not only much more than clever but actually a very profound and important intellect. "The doctrine of human equality responds in this," he would say: "that there is no man really clever who has not found that he is stupid." But he fooled no one. He was an