

PRIMO LEVI

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CONTENTS

THE MNEMOGOGUES	11
ANGELIC BUTTERFLY	19
ORDER ON THE CHEAP	26
MAN'S FRIEND	34
SOME APPLICATIONS OF THE MIMER	38
VERSAMINA	45
THE SLEEPING BEAUTY IN THE FRIDGE: A WINTER'S TALE	55
THE MEASURE OF BEAUTY	71
FULL EMPLOYMENT	80
THE SIXTH DAY	90
RETIREMENT FUND	107
WESTWARD	126
SEEN FROM AFAR	136
THE HARD-SELLERS	145
SMALL RED LIGHTS	161
FOR A GOOD PURPOSE	164
PSYCHOPHANT	174
RECUENCO: THE NURSE	182
RECUENCO: THE RAFTER	188
HIS OWN BLACKSMITH: TO ITALO CALVINO	195
THE SERVANT	203
MUTINY: TO MARIO RIGONI STERN	211
EXCELLENT IS THE WATER	218

WESTWARD

FORGET ABOUT the movie camera: look, look with your own eyes, and try to count them!”

Anna put down the apparatus and looked down into the valley: it was a rocky, narrow valley that communicated with the interior only through a square notch and ended at the sea in a vast, muddy beach. At last, after weeks of lying in wait and pursuit, they were successful: the army of lemmings, wave after wave, came to the pass and descended precipitously along the slope, raising a brown cloud of dust; where the incline was less steep, the gray-blue waves again merged into a compact torrent which moved in an orderly fashion toward the sea.

Within a few minutes the beach was invaded: in the warm light of the sunset you could distinguish the individual rodents that advanced in the mud, sinking into it up to their bellies; they went forward with difficulty but without hesitation, entered the water and continued on by swimming. You saw the heads emerge about one hundred meters from the water's edge; some isolated heads could still be seen at two hundred meters' distance, where the waves of the fjord broke; farther out, nothing. In the sky, another army flashed restlessly: a flotilla of predators, many falcons, a few buzzards, and then sparrow hawks, kites and others that the two naturalists were unable to identify. They swirled and wheeled, screeching and fighting among themselves; now and then one of them dropped down like a stone, came to a halt with an abrupt milling of its wings, and landed attracted by an invisible target, and then around it the flood of lemmings split open as around a small island.

"There," Walter said, "now we've also seen it. Now it is different; we no longer have any alibis. It is something that exists, that exists in nature, that has existed always, and therefore must have a cause, and so that cause must be found."

"It's a challenge, isn't it?" Anna said in an almost maternal tone; but Walter already felt up to his neck in this and did not answer. "Let's go," he said; he picked up the mesh bag and flew down the slope all the way to where the more hurried lemmings passed between his legs without showing fear. He caught four of them, then it occurred to him that perhaps the ones that were already halfway down the slope did not represent an average sample: they might be the strongest, or the youngest, or the most resolute. He freed three of them, then advanced in the midst of the gray swarm and captured another five at various spots in the valley. He climbed back up to the tent with the six small animals, which twittered feebly but did not bite each other.

"Poor little things!" Anna said. "But after all they would have died in any case." Walter was already calling the forest ranger's helicopter over the radio. "They'll be here tomorrow," he said. "We can have dinner now." Anna looked up questioningly; Walter said, "No, actually not yet. In fact give them something to eat too; but not much, so as not to alter their condition."

They spoke about it at length three days later, with Professor Osiasson, but without settling anything. They returned to their hotel.

"What did you expect from him, after all? That he should criticize the theory he himself propounded?"

"No," Walter said, "but at least that he would pay attention to my objections. It is easy to repeat the same thing throughout an entire career and with a good conscience; you only have to reject new facts."

"Are you sure of those new facts?"

"I'm sure today, and I'll be even more so tomorrow. You saw it yourself: the six we captured at the end of the march were very well nourished: twenty-eight percent fat, more than the average of the lemmings captured on the plateaus. But if it's not enough, I'll go back there . . ."

"We will go back."

". . . we'll go back, and catch sixty of them, or six hundred, and then we'll see if there'll be an Osiasson who will dare to go on repeating that what moves them is hunger."

“Or overpopulation . . .”

“It’s nonsense. No animal will react to overcrowding with worse overcrowding. Those we have seen came from all the folds of the highlands; the fact is, they did not avoid each other, on the contrary they sought each other out, tribe with tribe, individual with individual. They have marched for two months, always westward, and every day they became denser.”

“And so?”

“So . . . you see, I don’t know yet, I cannot yet formulate my thought exactly, but I . . . I believe that they really want to die.”

“Why would a living being want to die?”

“And why should it want to live? Why should it *always* want to live?”

“Because . . . well, I don’t know, but we all want to live. We are alive because we want to live. It is a characteristic property of living substance; I want to live, I have no doubt. Life is better than death: that seems an axiom to me.”

“You never had any doubts? Be honest!”

“No, never.”

Anna meditated, then she added: “Almost never.”

“You said *almost*.”

“Yes, you know very well. After Mary was born. It lasted only a short time, a few months, but it was pretty awful: I had the impression that I would never get out of it, that I would remain like that forever.”

“And what did you think about during those months? How did you see the world?”

“I no longer remember. I’ve done everything to forget.”

“Forget what?”

“That hole. That void. That feeling . . . useless, with all around me useless, drowned in a sea of uselessness. Alone also in the midst of a crowd: buried alive amidst everybody else buried alive. But let’s stop this, please let me be. Keep to more general topics.”

“Let’s see . . . listen, let’s try this. This is the rule, that each of us human beings but also the animals, and . . . yes, also the plants, everything that is alive struggles to live and does not know why. The why is inscribed in every cell, but in a language that we cannot read with our minds; but we do read it with all of our being, and we obey the message with all our behavior. But the message can be more or less imperative: the species in which the messages are incised deeply and

clearly survive, the others become extinct, are extinct. But also those in whom the message is clear can have gaps. Individuals without love for life can be born; others may lose it for a short or long time, perhaps for all the life they have left; and finally . . . here, perhaps I've got it: also groups of individuals may lose it, epochs, nations, families. Such things have happened; human history is full of them."

"Fine. There's a semblance of order now; you're getting close. But now you must explain to me, indeed, explain to yourself, how that love can disappear in a group."

"I'll think about it later. Now I also wanted to tell you that between a person who possesses the love of life and a person who has lost it there exists no common language. The same event is described by both in two ways that have nothing in common: one person draws joy from it, the other torment, each draws from it the confirmation of his own vision of the world."

"They can't both be right."

"No. In general, you know, and one must have the courage to say so, it's the others who are right."

"The lemmings?"

"Why not: let's call them lemmings."

"And what about us?"

"We are wrong, and we know it, but we find it more agreeable to keep our eyes shut. Life does *not* have a purpose; pain always prevails over joy; we are all sentenced to death, and the day of one's execution has not been revealed; we are condemned to watch the end of those dearest to us; there are compensations, but they are few. We know all this and yet something protects us and supports us and keeps us away from the shipwreck. And what is this protection? Perhaps only habit: the habit of living that we contract at birth by being born."

"In my opinion, the protection is not the same for all. Some find a defense in religion, some in altruism, some in obtuseness, some in vice; some are able to distract themselves uninterruptedly."

"All true," Walter said. "I might add that the most common and also the least ignoble defense is the one that exploits our essential ignorance of tomorrow. And, you see, here too there is symmetry. This uncertainty is the same uncertainty that makes life bearable for the . . . the lemmings. For everyone else, the will to live is something profound and confused, something within us and at the same time beside us, separate from consciousness, almost an organ that as a

rule functions in silence, quite obediently, and so is ignored; but it can become diseased or atrophied, be wounded or amputated. In that case one goes on living, but with effort, with pain, like someone who has lost his stomach or a lung.”

“Yes,” said Anna, “this is the principal defense, the natural defense that is given to us together with life so that life can be endured. But there are others, I believe: the ones I mentioned before.”

“Indeed, all defenses must have something in common. If we can answer the question we’ve left hanging, that is, what acts within a group, we will also know what the various defenses share. Two suppositions can be made: the first is that one ‘lemming’ contaminates all its neighbors; the other is that this is a matter of an intoxication or a deficiency.”

Nothing is more vivifying than a hypothesis. The Forest Rangers’ Laboratory was mobilized within a few days, and the results were soon evident, but for a long time they were negative. The blood of migrating lemmings was identical to that of stationary lemmings: the same for the urine, the amount of fat, everything. Walter thought and spoke of nothing else. One evening he talked about it with Bruno, their glasses full before them, and they hit on the idea together.

“This, for instance, is useful,” Bruno said. “It’s old knowledge, common knowledge.”

“It’s a very rudimentary medicine. Alcohol is not innocuous, it is difficult to dose and its effect is very brief.”

“But one could work on it.”

The following day they were in front of the lemming enclosure on the Institute’s grounds. It had been necessary to reinforce the mesh of the wire fence on the side facing in the direction of the sea, and sink it two hefty meters below ground level, because the small beasts found no peace: there were about a hundred of them by now, and all day long, and through half of the night they crowded against the wire fence, trampling over each other, trying to climb up and push each other back; some dug tunnels that inevitably came to a halt against the buried fence, they came out crawling backward, began again; the other three sides of the enclosure were deserted. Walter went inside, caught four of them, tied a marker to their paw and with a probe administered to them one gram of alcohol. The four, put back in the enclosure, paused for a few moments, with bristling hair and dilated

nostrils, then they moved away and quietly began to munch on the heather; nevertheless, an hour later, they had one by one resumed their places in the melee of lemmings determined to migrate westward. Walter and Bruno agreed in concluding that it wasn't much, but it was a clue.

A month later, the pharmacology department was going full blast. The proposed theme was simple and terrifying: to identify or synthesize the hormone that inhibits the existential void. Anna was perplexed and said so openly.

"Say we find it, will it be good or bad?"

"Good for the individual, certainly. Whether it will be good for the human species is doubtful, but it is a boundless doubt—which applies to any drug, not only to this. Any medicine, indeed any medical intervention makes the unfit fit: would you object to all medication and all doctors? The human species has chosen this path for centuries, the path of artificial survival, and it does not seem to me that it's been weakened by it. Humanity has turned its back on nature for quite some time: it is made up of individuals and stakes everything on individual survival, on the prolongation of life and on the victory over death and pain."

"But there are other ways to vanquish pain, this pain: other struggles that each of us has a duty to wage with his own means, without outside help. Those who win prove they are strong, and in so doing become strong, are enriched and better themselves."

"And those who do not win? Those who give in, collapsing with a crash or little by little? What will you say, what will I say, if we shall also find ourselves . . . walking westward? Will we be able to rejoice in the name of the species, and of those others who within themselves find the strength to reverse their course?"

Six more months went by and for Anna and Walter they were unusual months. They went up the Amazon river on a passenger service boat, then on a smaller boat up the Cinto river, and finally in a native canoe up a nameless tributary: the guide who accompanied them had promised them a journey of four days, but it was only on the seventh day that they negotiated the Sacayo rapids and came in sight of the village. From a distance they could distinguish the crumbling buttresses of the Spanish fortress, and they said nothing because there was no need and it was nothing new for them, another element in the

landscape: in the sky a dense interweaving of predatory flights which seemed to center directly above the fortress.

The village of Arunde sheltered the last remnants of the Arunde tribe; they had learned of its existence by chance, from an article that appeared in an anthropological review. The Arunde, once spread over a territory as large as Belgium, had withdrawn within ever narrower borders since their number was in continuous decline. This was not the consequence of illnesses, or of wars with bordering tribes, nor even of insufficient food, but only because of the enormous number of suicides: it was exactly because of this that Walter had decided to request financing of the expedition.

They were received by the village's elder, who was only thirty-nine years old and spoke Spanish quite correctly. Walter, who hated preambles, came straight to the point; he expected from the elder reserve, shyness, perhaps suspicion or coldness before a stranger's pitiless curiosity, and instead found before him a serene man, conscious and mature as though he had prepared for that interview for years, perhaps for his entire life.

The elder confirmed that the Arunde had since time immemorial lacked metaphysical convictions: alone among all their neighbors they had neither churches nor priests nor witch doctors, and did not expect succor from the heavens nor the earth nor from the lower depths. They believed neither in rewards nor punishments. Their soil was not poor, they enjoyed just laws, a humane and expeditious administration; they knew neither hunger nor discord, they possessed a rich and original popular culture, and they often made merry in festivities and banquets. Interrogated by Walter about the constant numerical decline of the population, the elder answered that he was aware of the fundamental difference between their belief and those of other people, near or distant, of which he had heard.

The Arunde, he said, attributed little value to individual survival, and none to that of the nation. Each of them was taught from infancy to evaluate life exclusively in terms of pleasure and pain, factoring in, of course, also the pleasures and pains the behavior of each individual caused his fellow men. When, in the judgment of each individual, the balance sheet tended to become permanently negative, when, that is, the citizen felt he suffered and produced more sorrows than joys, he was invited to an open discussion before the council of elders, and if his judgment was confirmed, the conclusion was encouraged and

facilitated. After his dismissal, he was led to the area of the ktan fields: ktan is a cereal very widespread in this country, and its seed, sifted and ground, is used to make a kind of flat bread. If it is not sifted, the very minute seeds produce an infesting weed, which has a drugging and toxic effect.

The man is handed over to the ktan cultivators: he lives on bread made from unsifted seed, and in a few days, or a few weeks, as he may choose, he reaches a state of agreeable stupor, which is followed by definitive rest. A very few change their minds and return from the ktan fields to the fortified town: there they are welcomed with joyful affection. Unsifted seeds are smuggled past the walls, but the volume is not preoccupying and the practice is tolerated.

Upon their return, Anna and Walter were met by an important piece of news. The "missing substance" had been found—more precisely, it had first been created from nothing by synthesis, through an exhausting labor of evaluation of innumerable compounds suspected of having a specific effect on the nervous system; shortly after, it had been identified in normal blood. Strangely, Bruno's intuition had hit the mark: in fact the most efficacious compound was an alcohol, even though its structure was rather complex. The dosage was quite small, so small as to justify the failure of the analyst, who had not identified it as a normal component of the blood of all healthy mammals, including man, and who therefore had not been able to notice its absence in the blood of the migrating lemmings. Walter had his quarter hour of success and notoriety: the blood samples he had collected from the Arunde did not contain even a trace of the active principle.

This, which had been called factor L, was soon produced on a pilot scale. It was active if or when taken orally and proved miraculous in restoring the will for life in subjects that lacked it, or had lost it as the result of illnesses, calamities or traumas; in other people, taken in normal doses it did not produce noteworthy effects or signs of sensitization or accumulation.

The opportunity for a confirmation was immediately evident to everyone: in fact, for a twofold confirmation, concerning the migratory lemmings and their human analogues. Walter sent the elder of the Arunde a small package which contained a dose of factor L sufficient for one hundred persons and for one year; under separate

cover he wrote him a long letter in which he explained in great detail how the medication must be administered, and begged him to extend the experiment also to the people sent to the ktan fields; but he did not have the time to wait for an answer, because the Forest Rangers had informed him that a column of lemmings was rapidly approaching the mouth of Molde river, at the end of Penndal fjord.

It was not an easy job: Walter had to avail himself of the help of four young assistants besides Anna's enthusiastic collaboration. Fortunately, the L factor was water soluble and water was abundantly available on the spot; Walter planned to scatter the solution beyond the gorge, where the heather grew thickly, and one could expect that the lemmings would stop to munch on it. But it became clear that his plan could not be realized: the area was too broad, and the columns of lemmings were already approaching, heralded by high dust swirls visible at a distance of twenty kilometers.

At that Walter decided to spray the solution directly above the columns, along the sole path that ran immediately below the gorge. He would not be able to act upon the entire population, but he believed that the effect would nevertheless be demonstrative.

The first lemmings showed up at the gorge around nine o'clock; by ten the valley was already crowded and the flow promised to increase. Walter descended into the valley with the sprayer attached to his back; he leaned against a boulder and opened the tap of the propellant. There was no wind: from high up on the ridge Anna distinctly saw the whitish cloud spurt out, streaming out in the direction of the valley. She saw the gray tide stop in a swirl, like the water of a river against the pylon of a bridge: the lemmings that had inhaled the solution seemed uncertain whether to continue, to stop or go back up. But then she saw a massive wave of restless bodies wash over the first, and a third over the second, so that the rolling mass reached up to Walter's waist; she saw Walter make rapid gestures with his free hand, confused, convulsed gestures that seemed to her a call for help, then she saw Walter totter, torn away from the boulder's shelter, fall and get carried along, buried and again carried farther, visible for short stretches like a swelling beneath the flood of the innumerable small desperate creatures that were running toward death, their death and his death, toward the swamp and the nearby sea.

That same day the package that Walter had sent across the ocean came back, returned to the sender. Anna gained possession of it only three days later, when Walter's body had already been recovered: it contained a laconic message addressed to Walter "y a todos los sábios del mundo civil." It said: "The Arunde people, soon to be no longer a people, greets you and thanks you. We do not wish to offend, but we return your medicament, so that those among you who wish to may profit from it: we prefer freedom to drugs and death to illusion."