

Interview with a Lemming

By James Thurber

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The weary scientist, tramping through the mountains of northern Europe in the winter weather dropped his knapsack and prepared to sit on a rock.

"Careful, brother," said a voice.

"Sorry," murmured the scientist, noting with some surprise that a lemming which he had been about to sit on had addressed him. "It is a source of considerable astonishment to me," said the scientist, sitting down beside the lemming, "that you are capable of speech."

"You human beings are always astonished," said the lemming, "when any other animal can do anything you can. Yet there are many things animals can do that you cannot, such as stridulate, or chirr, to name just one. To stridulate, or chirr, one of the minor achievements of the cricket, your species is dependent on the intestines of sheep and the hair of the horse."

"We are a dependent animal," admitted the scientist.

"You are an amazing animal," said the lemming.

"We have always considered you rather amazing, too," said the scientist. "You are perhaps the most mysterious of creatures."

"If we are going to indulge in adjectives beginning with 'm,' said the lemming sharply, "let me apply a few to your species--murderous, maladjusted, maleficent and muffle-headed."

"You find our behavior as difficult to understand as we do yours?"

"You, as you would say, said it," said the lemming. "You kill, you mangle, you torture, you imprison, you starve each other. You cover the nurturing earth with cement, you cut down elm trees to put up institutions for people driven insane by the cutting down of elm trees, you--"

"You could go on all night like that," said the scientist, "listing our sins and shames."

"I could go on all night and up to four o'clock tomorrow afternoon," said the lemming. "It just happens that I have made a lifelong study of the self-styled higher animal. Except for one thing, I know all there is to know about you, and a singularly dreary, dolorous and distasteful store of information it is, too, to use only adjectives that begin with 'd.'"

"You say you have made a lifelong study of my species--" began the scientist.

"Indeed I have," broke in the lemming. "I know that you are cruel, cunning and carnivorous, sly, sensual and selfish, greedy, gullible and guileful--"

"Pray don't wear yourself out," said the scientist, quietly. "It may interest you to know that I have made a lifelong study of lemmings, just as you have made a lifelong study of people. Like you I have found but one thing about my subject which I don't understand."

"And what is that?" asked the lemming.

"I don't understand," said the scientist, "why you lemmings all rush down to the sea and drown yourselves."

"How curious," said the lemming. "The one thing I don't understand is why you human beings don't."