

The Bandits – Gerald Durrell

My first introduction to the extraordinary little animals known as kusimanes took place at the London Zoo. As I walked round the Rodent house peering into the cages, I saw that in one of them was nothing but a pile of straw. It was heaving gently and rhythmically, while a faint sound of snoring was wafting out towards me.

Every zoo has the rule not to disturb a sleeping animal by poking it or throwing peanuts. However, I ignored the rule on this occasion and rattled my thumbnail to and fro along the bars. As I did so a sort of explosion took place in the depths of the straw, and the next moment a long, rubbery, tip-tilted nose appeared, to be followed by a rather rat-like face with small neat ears and bright inquisitive eyes. This little face appraised me for a minute; then, noticing the lump of sugar which I held tactfully near the bars, the animal uttered a faint squeak and struggled madly to release itself from the cocoon of straw wound round it.

When only the head had been visible, I had the impression it was only a small creature, about the size of the average ferret, but when it eventually broke loose from its covering and waddled into view, I was astonished at its relatively large body: it was, in fact, so fat as to be almost circular. Not only this, but it had very short legs and fine, rather slender paws, and when it trotted about the cage these legs moved so fast that they were little more than a blur beneath the bulky body.

I was so captivated by this little animal that before I realized what I was doing I had fed it all the lump-sugar in my pocket. As soon as it knew that no more titbits were forthcoming, it uttered a long-suffering sigh and trotted away to dive into the straw. Within a couple of seconds it was sound asleep once more.

Three months later I was deep in the heart of the Cameroon rain-forests and here I found I had ample opportunity for getting to know the kusimane. One morning a native hunter walked into my camp carrying a small palm-leaf basket, and peering into it I saw three of the strangest little animals imaginable. They were about the size of new-born kittens, with tiny legs and somewhat motheaten tails. They were covered with bright gingery-red fur which stood up in spikes and tufts all over their bodies, making them look almost like some weird species of hedgehog. As I gazed down at them, trying to identify them, they lifted their little faces and peered up at me. The moment I saw the long, pink, rubbery noses, I knew they were kusimanes, and very young ones at that, for their eyes were only just open and they had no teeth. I was very pleased to obtain these babies, but after I had paid the hunter and set to work on the task of trying to teach them to feed, I began to wonder if I had not got more than I bargained for.

At first I kept them in a small basket by my bed. This was the most convenient spot, for I had to get up in the middle of the night to feed them. For the first week or so they really behaved very well, but it was not long before the baby kusimanes developed their front teeth and as their legs got stronger they became more and more eager to see the world that lay outside their basket. They had the first feed of the day when I drank my morning tea; and I would lift them out of their basket and put them on my bed so that they could have a walk round. I had, however, to call an abrupt halt to this habit, for one morning, while I was quietly sipping my tea, one of the baby kusimanes discovered my bare foot sticking out from under the bedclothes and decided that if he bit my toe hard enough it might produce milk. He laid hold with his needle-sharp teeth, and his brothers, thinking they were missing a feed, instantly

joined him.

This was merely the first indication of the trouble in store for me. Very soon they had become such a nuisance that I was forced to christen them the Bandits. They grew fast, and as soon as their teeth had come through they started to eat egg and a little raw meat every day, as well as their milk. Their appetites seemed insatiable, and their lives turned into one long quest for food. They appeared to think that everything was edible unless proved otherwise. One of the things of which they made a light snack was the lid of their basket. Having demolished this, they made their way to the one place where they could do the maximum damage in the minimum time: the place where the food and medical supplies were stored. Before I discovered them they had broken a dozen eggs and, to judge by the state of them, rolled in the contents. They had fought with a couple of bunches of bananas and apparently won, for the bananas looked distinctly the worse for wear. Having slaughtered the fruit, they had found two large packets of boracic powder. These they had burst open and scattered far and wide, while large quantities of the white powder had stuck to their egg-soaked fur. By the time I found them they were on the point of having a quick drink from a highly pungent and poisonous bucket of disinfectant, and I grabbed them only just in time. Each of them looked like some weird Christmas cake decoration, in a coat stiff with boracic and egg yolk. It took me three quarters of an hour to clean them up. Then I put them in a larger and stronger basket and hoped that this would settle them.

It took them two days to break out *of this* basket.

This time they had decided to pay a visit to all the other animals I had. Now at that time I had a large and very beautiful monkey, called Colly, in my collection. Colly was a colobus, perhaps one of the most handsome of African monkeys. Their fur is coal black and snow white, hanging in long silky strands round their bodies like a shawl. On this particular afternoon she had decided to enjoy a siesta in the bottom of her box, while waiting for me to bring her some fruit. Unfortunately, however, she had pushed her tail through the bars so that it lay on the ground outside like a feathery black-and-white scarf that someone had dropped. Just as Colly was drifting off into a deep sleep, the Bandits appeared on the scene.

The Bandits, as I pointed out, believed that everything in the world, no matter how curious it looked, might turn out to be edible. When he saw Colly's tail lying on the ground ahead, apparently not belonging to anyone, the eldest Bandit decided it must be a tasty morsel of something or other. So he rushed forward and sank his sharp little teeth into it. His two brothers, feeling that there was plenty of this meal for everyone, joined him immediately. Thus was Colly woken out of a deep sleep by three sets of extremely sharp little teeth fastening themselves in her tail. She gave a wild scream of fright and scrambled towards the top of her cage. But the Bandits were not going to be deprived of this tasty morsel without a struggle, and they hung on grimly. The higher Colly climbed in her cage, the higher she lifted the Bandits off the ground, and when eventually I got there in response to her yells, I found the Bandits, like some miniature trapeze-artists, hanging by their teeth three feet off the ground. It took me five minutes to make them let go, and then I managed it only by blowing cigarette-smoke in their faces and making them sneeze. By the time I had got them safely locked up again, poor Colly was a nervous wreck.

This was not the end of the Bandits' adventures and it was with a real feeling of relief that I got back to England and handed them over to a zoo.

The next day I went round to see how they were settling down. I found them in a huge cage,

pattering about and looking, I felt, rather lost and bewildered by all the new sights and sounds. Poor little things, I thought, they have had the wind taken out of their sails. They looked so subdued and forlorn. I began to feel quite sorry to have parted with them. I stuck my finger through the wire and waggled it, calling to them. I thought it might comfort them to talk to someone they knew. I should have known better: the Bandits shot across the cage and fastened on to my finger like bulldogs. With a yelp of pain I at last managed to get my finger away, and as I left them, mopping the blood from my hand, I decided that perhaps, after all, I was not so sorry to see the back of them. Life without the Bandits might be considerably less exciting - but it would not hurt nearly so much.