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# The Great Transformation

By Ray Cummings

Wonder Stories

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Those who anticipate reading here a conventional tale of familiar type, cast in the mould accepted as fictional form had best pass by my few unimportant pages. I am not skilled in such craftsmanship. My chief told me once, when my report was made, that the affair should lie in oblivion. Certainly I was not the one to write it in the guise of fiction. Nor was it suitable as fact for our audible news-casters for it would have aroused too much of doubt, suspicion and horror....

*"He's very gentle," said the scientist. Yet from the heart of the ape there leaped out the tremendous power of outraged nature....*

Yet, I write it. For my own diversion, if you will; perhaps, with that morbid quality of the human mind which makes us like to dwell upon a horror ...

My name is Georg Blake. I was, that summer of 1948, a novice news-gatherer for the London *Vocal-Times*. I was in the editing room of the Tower—a sultry August afternoon when the chief called me.

"What do you calculate out of this? Georg?"

An old-fashioned, type-script letter. He tossed it at me and I read it. Signed in ink, quaintly handwritten, "Dr. John K. Roberts."

I had never heard of him. The letter set forth briefly that its writer was upon the eve of a medical experiment which would be of great interest to the public; which might indeed prove of stupendous importance. He was (he wrote) a physician and surgeon retired now many years; a scientist who knew other scientists for the charlatans they really are. Hence, he desired no recognized scientific witnesses; his discovery would be given to the world through the medium of the public news-casters. If the *Times* cared to avail itself of the opportunity he would be glad to have it send a representative. Someone trustworthy; discreet; intelligent; preferably with at least some knowledge, or interest, in science.

My chief grinned as I handed him back the letter. "That's you, Georg. You want to follow it up?"

A trickster, this fellow Roberts; this thing, some publicity trick. A charlatan, no doubt—himself, not all the other scientists in the world whom he so glibly, contemptuously accused ...

I had anticipated from his letter that he would be an old man; but I was not prepared for the ancient aspect which was his. A man of eighty—or if he had told me a hundred I would have believed it. Yet there was about him—despite his shriveled frame, his palsied hands, his cracked senile voice—a sense of driving power. A personality vaguely sinister. I recall that at once I no longer thought him a mere trickster. And I feared him—feared, at least, this necromancy I was about to witness ...

It was sundown when I arrived at the lonely little house set upon the edge of a moor ... They had looked strangely at me when in the village I inquired for the place ...

He had a daughter; I could have thought her his grand-daughter at the very least—a slim, pale girl of perhaps sixteen. He called her Edith. A somber girl queerly poised; a girl who would have been beautiful without that mantle of

apprehension which so obviously enwrapped her.

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They entertained me at supper. We were four in that household; we three humans, and the ape ...

We sat, after supper, in a small room which was the library. I had not yet seen the ape ...

"There is," said the old man, "no quality of the human mind which differs essentially from that of the beast."

I had found him pleased to have me argue with him. "There is the soul," I said. "If you could call that a mental thing—"

"A birthright, young Blake. The soul is a heritage. Nothing mental, nor physical. Hah! you could call it spiritual as they do, and still not know what it meant. A heritage and a promise of futurity, nothing more. Science is not concerned with that—"

Ah, I can say now how great a fallacy he voiced!

"Science is not concerned with that, young Blake. We deal in tangibilities. The human mind works in thus and such a fashion. We humans reason with logic—because we have had the training—the evolution through millions of generations. We have the qualities which now we call human because we have developed them. Respect for the property and life of others; desire for law; knowledge of justice—those things which raise some of us above the level of beasts."

"And we have the soul," I repeated.

"Yes. The consciousness of a Creator; the wonderment of the Hereafter; a philosophy which tries to envisage the universe and make it mean something. A mere ability to reason! We learned it in a million years of upward struggle; we give it to our children as a heritage, and we call it the soul. It is nothing but the quest for the unknown—"

He raised his skinny, palsied hand. He turned to the girl as she sat regarding him with her brooding dark eyes. Why, in those eyes of that girl I could see more than he said was the soul! Something—in your eyes as you read this, and in mine as I write—which no millions of generations could breed upward from the level of the beasts!

He appealed to the girl. "This young fellow would lead us into theosophy, Edith."

She said timidly, "I do not understand these things, father—these things you talk about so much—"

His sudden, cracked laughter made me shudder. Demented, this dotard! But he said very quietly, "Nor do I, Edith. You speak like a true agnostic. You do not understand, and you are too intelligent to blindly believe." He waved away the subject with a vehement gesture.

"I was saying, young Blake, the human mind is the mind of a beast who has been trained to think more clearly. The brain—do you know the difference between the mind and the brain?"

I stammered at his sudden question.

"The brain," he said, "is the physical mechanism by which the thinking is accomplished. A physical thing of cells and membranes and blood flowing through it, with sugar for the chemical energy to endow it with consciousness. Why, it is so physical a thing that if for one second you stop the supply of sugar, consciousness vanishes ... The beasts have brains—one species a brain quite comparable to that of man—"

"The apes—"

"Exactly. The anthropoid apes, and we call them that because they so closely resemble mankind. An ape is only a man undeveloped—a man backward a million years, but still a man—"

The Divine Elixir

It seemed to me that the girl was shuddering. I heard the sharp involuntary intake of her breath; she was half turned away so that I could not see her face.

"The brain of an ape, young Blake, is convoluted, like yours. The brain case, in some individuals is only slightly smaller —"

I sat, as the girl was sitting, and listened to his sacrilegious talk numbly. He had secured the brain of a man recently killed in an accident. A young man. Intelligent, of gentle birth and breeding. And he had a living ape to whom now—tonight—he was about to give the qualities—the essence—of that human brain. To make the backward man we call an ape, a man of human, developed reasoning, like ourselves ...

This thing, so horrible ... His words, so cold and precise, hewing to scientific logic when every instinct within me denied them with revulsion. This horrible thing ... But was it because I as the man, was revolted at taking the ape upon an equality with me? Was it mere vanity? Is that what makes us look with revulsion when they tell us we have ascended from the apes? Is it vanity causing us to endow ourselves with a soul—something intangible, not to be understood—to pander to our vanity so that we may say, "Ah, this at least I have, to make me superior to the beast—"

Is it my vanity—and yours—that makes us think we see in human eyes the light of the soul, something no beast could have?

I shuddered as he led me to the ape. I tried not to show it. I smiled. "You keep him—it—indoors?"

"Yes. He is very gentle. We have him in a room here—Edith feeds him. He likes Edith—"

Words, so horrible. He said, calmly, "I had my distillation ready this morning—"

My thoughts were flying far afield, but I strove to hold them on his words. At what we call death, he said, the conscious human brain ceases to function. The heart is stilled; the blood no longer flows. Yet the brain momentarily is unchanged. If the heart were again to beat—the lungs again to breathe, to cleanse the fouling blood—then the brain could function again.

There is no precise moment of death. It is gradual. With the ceasing of the functions, disintegration begins—a mere dissolution of the physical cells. He had obtained this human brain before the dissolution had progressed far enough to harm it. He had cleansed it; and by a process which he had over years perfected, had distilled from it an essence—an elixir—carrying, in a few drops of fluid, the living microscopic sperms which are man's heritage of Divinity ...

Heresy! Blasphemy!

We passed through his laboratory. The room was unlighted, save by the shafts of moonlight that slanted in through its windows. The sashes were raised this hot summer night; the breath of the moor came in to mingle with the smell of chemicals ... The old man paused his tottering step. The girl stood aside—slim white figure in the moonlight.

He fumbled at a shelf. "I have it here ... Edith, have you the apple—" The girl clutched an apple in her hand—"he likes apples—" That sudden chuckle of a madman! "—he likes apples—"

He pressed us on through the dim laboratory. I saw that he was carrying a small hypodermic syringe. He showed it to me, but I shrank away from it. This thing—infernal ...

I stood silent while under a light he carefully filled the syringe. "I will inject this, young Blake, and in a few moments the living sperms will be absorbed into his blood—carried to his brain—to function in a moment ... Have you a note-book? You are my witness—"

I steadied my voice. "You will have the ape—what he becomes, will prove—"

"Yes, of course. And you will recall, and testify what the ape was, before we endowed him. He is a beautiful physical specimen, just matured ... Come, Edith—"

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The ape ... He was in a small room at the end of the wing. The old man was carrying a blue vacuum lamp; its glow mingled with the silver shafts of the moonlight; it threw swaying shadows of us on the walls. We passed the length of a hall, and came where it ended, to a barred door. Edith unlatched it. She was the first to enter ...

A small room on the ground level. Its rectangles of windows were crossed with metal bars. The moonlight cast monstrous patterns of the bars on the floor. There was a further door leading down a step to the ground. It stood open; I could see a small yard out there, enclosed with an iron cage.

Our front door from the corridor opened inward. We passed through—closed it after us; and put the lamp on a table. I noticed its glow reflected from a full length mirror on the wall behind me ...

The ape ... I saw it crouching in a corner on a litter of cloth. Frightened at us; shrinking back, but soothed by Edith's quiet words ... The old man sat in a chair by the small wooden table; he laid the apple at the base of the lamp. There was another small chair; he waved me to it.

"Sit down. I want you to study him a moment ... Edith, make him stand up so we can see him properly—he is really very gentle—"

I listened, with outward calm. I stared, trying not to shudder. This man—crouching here on his litter. Backward a million years, but nevertheless—a man ... The old doctor's words were calmly precise, pedantic as though he were upon a lecturer's platform ... These cold, calm details!...

This was, he said, a young male gorilla, family of *Simiidae*. I would notice the ample capacity of the brain case. I would observe that the supra-orbital skull ridges were not yet clearly defined. It would be evident to me also that in this youthful specimen the face bore a very close resemblance to man, since it had not yet attained its full brutality of expression. The canines had not developed fully; and the thickening of the skull, with its growth into crests and ridges, was not yet noticeable. The skeleton was the same as man's; the teeth, the same number; the shape of the jaw—not so curved as man, an angle on each side, with a canine tooth set at the apex of each angle ...

Oh, the cold passion of science for detail! But what I saw was a thick black hairy body crouching in the shadowed room corner. A face, black of skin, with features cast in a mould to mock mankind ...

The beast was chattering as Edith advanced upon it. "There, Timmy, don't be afraid—"

Its human name! Mockery!

The ape reared suddenly, and the girl retreated. Afraid? I could fancy so ... I turned to eye the closed door behind us. The old man said, "We've got something nice for you, Timmy. An apple—you like apples—Edith, keep him back—"

The Great Transformation

She stood confronting the ape. "Wait, Timmy, keep back—Edith give it to you—"

Her very words and tone as though this great brute were a small helpless child ... Grewsome ... I know too, that the girl was revolted; forcing herself to this task. "Wait, Timmy—Father, shall I—shall I feed it to him now?"

"No. Presently—"

The ape stood nearly as high as a man, thick bulging chest; great muscular arms dangling to the middle of its shank. It took a step backward, walking upon the clenched knuckles of its feet. The moon fell upon its face. It was eyeing me, the stranger ... And then I saw it stare into the mirror—staring at its own image; and then staring again at me.

I sat tense. Its gaze held me. Those dark pools of its eyes! What lay down in there? What thoughts? What gropings? Was this brute indeed a man?...

Its gaze turned to Edith. Did I see it soften? I thought so ... The ape relaxed. It sat down suddenly upon its litter, crouching in an attitude horribly human.

The old man held up the apple. "See Timmy? Look what's for you."

The black lips bared the pointed teeth. Travesty of a human smile!

The old man drew from his pocket a long clasp-knife. He opened its blade; he cut the apple into quarters.

"Here, Edith—give it to him."

He laid the knife, still opened, by the lamp-base. I recall that, clearly. But at the time I scarcely heeded it. My heart was pounding, seeming almost to smother me ... Edith's face was white as the moonlight as she came and took the pieces of apple.

"You're sure—father—"

I heard myself murmur, "Had we better not—wait outside?"

"Fools! He is very gentle—like a child. Soon he will be a man—like us! A kindly—man. Amazed, no doubt, to realize himself ... Sit still, young Blake—"

Ah, I was as irrational as both these other humans to have been there! A confusion was on me. I sat transfixed.

The ape was grinning. Pleased with anticipation of this coming delicacy. It stretched out a thick hairy arm and took the segment of apple. It was absorbed in eating; and the old man, mustering courage, held its forearm; punctured its thick insensitive skin; injected the fluid into its veins.

The room was very silent. Black and white with the shadows and patches of moonlight; and a glow by the table from the lamp, where now the old doctor and I sat watching.

Edith stood back against the wall; her slim white figure was blurred in a shadow. Moonlight lay upon the ape. It sat gobbling its morsel like a pleased child. It finished; and stretched out its arm again ...

"Give it another, Edith—"

She handed it the rest of the apple. We were waiting for the injected fluid to take effect.

Heresy ... Blasphemers, all of us ...

But of course nothing would happen. We would wait, and this old madman would be chagrined; this poor terrified girl would be relieved; and I would go back and my chief would laugh ...

A minute passed. Or an hour? I could not say. The ape had long ago finished the apple. Edith was standing back again, away from it ...

The ape sat crouching. We sat like carved statues, waiting ... Nothing—would—happen—that injected fluid would not take effect ... Nothing would happen ...

But there *was* something. What was this? Nothing—

But the ape suddenly was trembling. Crouching; and then it passed a shaking hand across its black forehead, as though dazed.

A terror swept me, but I could not move. What horrible thing was this? With that one simple gesture of the ape's, it seemed to me that everything was changed. This black hairy beast—or was that a man, imprisoned there in that thick, powerful body? A man, dazed, confused, frightened ...

The ape hitched, shuffled on its litter, and slowly reared up on its hind legs. Stood with long, dangling arms; stood swaying as though dizzy ... Its fists were tight ...

A panic must have swept us. I heard Edith give a sharp, horrified cry. The old doctor shoved back his chair. I stood up sharply; my chair overturned with a crash.

An instant. The ape's gaze was roving; the narrow black forehead was wrinkled in a frown. It stared at its mirrored reflection. It was puzzled. It held out an arm as though regarding it; and lowered its head to gaze at its hairy flanks. Puzzled ... And then it turned to stare at Edith ...

A moment ... All its muscles tensed. It leaped. But not at the girl; leaped for this table beside which, frozen with horror I was standing. The hairy body struck me, and struck the table. I was flung back, scrambling. The table and lamp crashed. The lamp was extinguished. But in the moonlight, suddenly vivid, I saw the ape's hand holding the knife which it had leaped to seize. The old doctor screamed—a long, shuddering last scream. He was fumbling at the door; and the scream

died in a gurgle as he fell with the knife buried in his back.

I do not know what I may have shouted, or what I did. The wizened body of the old man blocked the door. The ape stood again with the knife—dripping crimson now—upraised ...

I found myself in the center of the room with Edith clutching at me; my arms around her—the ape advancing upon us ...

A second. Oh, there can be an eternity crowded into a single second of terror! Whirling thoughts. Things horrible, to be seen in a second ...

I stared for that single second across a patch of moonlight, into the eyes of the ape. And there were many things I saw ... My frightened fancy, if you will. Yes! Call it that ...

The ape's black lips were mouthing with words it could not form. And I saw, back in those eyes of the beast, things that should not have been there. A soul? Something human. A human realization. A man—the consciousness of a man, tortured with realization. A man, imprisoned in the body of the beast—suddenly realizing ... And gazing at me, and at Edith—the woman. Realizing with horror, and despair ... And acting with desperate frenzy. But not the acts of a beast! The acts of a man—despairing, irrational with his sudden horror ... He had murdered the old doctor who had brought this upon him ... And perhaps, too, an all-wise Creator was stamping out this necromancy.

The ape raised the dripping knife. It seemed, in that second, as though with the eyeballs of a beast but the look of a man, his gaze turned again to Edith—the woman. And softened—wistful ...

The knife-blade plunged down into the bulging black chest. Not the act of a beast! A suicide ...

The monstrous body of the ape fell at our feet; writhed and lay still; lay in a patch of moonlight on the floor, with a black pattern of the window-bars crossed upon it.

## **THE END.**

[The end of *The Great Transformation* by Ray Cummings]