

The Fall

My good sir, I wonder if I might venture to offer you some help? Otherwise, I'm afraid you may not be able to make yourself understood by the worthy gorilla who presides over the comings and goings of this establishment: he only speaks Dutch. Unless you allow me to plead your case, he won't guess that you want some gin. There: I dare to hope that he has got the message. That nod of the head should mean that my argument has won his ear. He's off, look: making haste slowly, the clever chap. You're lucky: he didn't complain. When he refuses to serve you, he just grunts. No one argues with that. It's the privilege of these big beasts to be moody when they like. I'm off, Monsieur, and glad to have been of service. Thank you; I'd accept if I were sure that I should not be imposing on you. You're too kind. I'll put my glass here, then, at your table.

You're right: his silence is deafening. It's the silence of the primeval forest, heavy with menace. It surprises me at times, the obstinacy with which our uncommunicative friend insists on giving the cold shoulder to every civilized language. His work involves serving sailors of all nationalities in this bar – which, for some reason or other, though we're in Amsterdam, he calls Mexico City. With a job like that, wouldn't you think his ignorance might be a burden to him? Imagine Cro-Magnon Man taking rooms in the Tower of Babel. He'd feel a little out of his element,

to say the least. But no, this fellow doesn't feel like an exile, he just carries on regardless. One of the few remarks that I have heard him utter was to declare that you could take it or leave it. Take or leave what? Our friend himself, quite likely. I must confess, I've got a soft spot for these people who are all of a piece. When you have thought deeply about mankind, whether because it's your job or your vocation to do so, you may sometimes feel a certain nostalgia for these primates. There's no side to them.

Actually, that's not quite true of our friend here, though any grudges that he harbours run pretty deep. Not understanding what is said in his presence has given him a suspicious nature. Hence that air of nervous gravity, as though he did at least suspect that not everything was quite right with people. This outlook makes it harder to talk to him about whatever is unconnected with his job. Take that empty rectangle on the back wall above his head which shows where a picture used to hang. There was a picture there once, a particularly interesting one, a real masterpiece. Well, I happened to be here when the master of the house took it in and when he let it go. In both cases, it was with the same mistrust, after weeks of rumination. One has to admit that on that score society has somewhat tarnished the pure simplicity of his character.

Mind you, I'm not passing judgement. I view his mistrust as well founded and would happily share it, were it not, as you can see, contrary to my own sociable nature to do so. Alas, I'm a chatterbox and I make friends easily. Although I do know how to keep a respectful distance, I seize any opportunity. When I was living in France, were I to meet an intelligent man, I could not but get to know him. Ah, I saw you flinch at that turn of phrase: I must admit to a weakness for the subjunctive mode and for fine language in general. I'm not proud of it, believe me. I