

THE SYMBOL AND THE ANT

THE EDITOR

ELSEWHERE in this issue the reader will find several references to the need for the symbol in human and Christian life. The emphasis is nothing new to this review, which has for some years past pointed to the central place of the signs evoked naturally by man so as to bind him at once to the universe of which he is a part and to God of whom he is a dependant. The signs have been made into vehicles of grace by the Incarnation—the unique and central sign—with the result that the Bible, the Liturgy and all the sacraments are unifying, integrating and health-giving (i.e. salutary) in a physical, psychological and spiritual manner all at once. In this way the sciences of archaeology, anthropology, comparative religions and many others can serve to broaden and deepen the life of the spirit so long as the student clings firmly in faith to the fact of the Word made flesh.

Wherever we turn these sciences can be found revealing these spiritual realities. Recently it has been shown that this use of the symbol is natural and instinctive at the animal level. In his book on *Animal Courtship* (Hutchinson; 16s.) Dr Maurice Burton describes the symbolic acts used by many animals and birds in their type of love and union. Every child has watched with fascination the gyrations of the drake's head as he appears to drop a sip of water on his own back in an often-repeated ritual, and the waltzing of the pigeons in the park give joy to the children playing there. Not so many have been privileged to watch the March hare in his rites that have drawn down the ignominy of madness on his head. But perhaps strangest of all is the *fermentum* of the worker ants who pass on a drop of food from one to the other when they meet for no apparent utilitarian purpose. Mr Morley, in his recent 'Pelican Book' on *The Ant World*, writes of this fact as an 'important emotional bond' between the ants; and he adds: 'It is, as any student of ants will tell you, the symbolic action of the ant colony. It goes on

constantly wherever ants meet, even if both have well-filled crops, and in the case of a stranger ant, placed within the gates by some experimenter, it is the symbol of final acceptance and unity within the colony.' These tiny insects provide many other illustrations of mutual interchanges which hold them together, and of symbolic actions such as the well-known virginal flight of the queen, as also with the bee; so that modern study reveals still more depths in the words of Proverbs: 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise' (6, 6). The early Fathers were ready enough to learn from the ant as from all the beasts of God's creation; and now after many a century we are being encouraged to return to the study of the spiritual life in the book of nature.

It is not that these animals and insects can 'mean' anything deliberately by these signs—for the giving or using of the *meaning* of things is proper to the special type of animal that is man. Subsequent study, too, may reveal that all these symbolic rites in irrational creation have some strictly utilitarian or biological explanation. Yet the fact still remains that they do not live together and mate and feed like mere machines in the way that man, cut off from nature and her world of symbols, is tending to treat mankind today. Such natural actions and demonstrations raised to a human and indeed to a supernatural level will discover man within the created universe, sanctifying it together with himself and leading it back to God.

Once again, then, the Christian may return to his *Bestiaries* and draw the morals from the behaviour of the orders of creation that have no reason. And he can do so with an even greater appreciation of that other world as the sciences continue to show him that he belongs there as well as in heaven. We can very well, with the counsel of the Book of Proverbs, make our spiritual reading from the books on the ants and on animal courtship. And we shall thus find that we cannot merely ignore or reject these natural bonds of the symbol that express the instinctive movements and rhythms of creation which throb within our veins as much as and more than in those of the mad March hare.