

Chapter 2 The Life of the Houyhnhnms

I wanted to learn the language of these horses — the Houyhnhnms. The grey horse, his family and his servants wanted to teach me. Why? Because they wanted the answer to this important question: Can an animal - me! - think?

My owner wanted to learn about me, so he gave a lot of time to me.

'You do not walk on your front feet. Why not?' he asked.

'We call them hands,' I told him, 'and we don't walk on them in my country.'

'Your nose is too big.'

'It is the right size for men of my age.'

'The Yahoos work for us on the farm, but they do not work well. Nobody can teach them. You are a good Yahoo. You learn and work well.'

'But I'm *not* a Yahoo!' I said angrily, when I heard this. 'I hate these ugly, dirty animals. You hate them - and I hate them too. Please don't call me a Yahoo!'

My owner wanted to know a lot of things and he asked me a lot of questions: 'Where do you come from? Who taught you to think? Nobody can teach the Yahoos to think!'

'I came over the sea from another country in a ship. You make ships from wood,' I told him. 'The other men on the ship brought me here and went away.'

'It is not possible,' he answered. 'No animal can make something from wood and go across the sea in it. Your words are a mistake.'

I could not understand these last words. Later I understood. There is no word in the Houyhnhmn's language for untrue. They use language because they want somebody to understand. When the speaker's words are not true, the words are stupid. They are 'a mistake', because the hearer cannot understand him. So why did the speaker speak?

We talked again and again.

'Who are the rulers in your country?' he asked me.

'You call them Yahoos,' I answered.

'Do you have Houyhnhnms there?'

'Yes,' I said. 'We call them horses. There are many horses in my country. Yahoo servants look after them. They give them food and make their beds. We like horses. They are strong and they run well. We sit on them when we travel. And they run and jump for us.'

'How can you use them in that way?' asked my owner angrily.

The Houyhnhnms use Yahoos. They work on the farms. They pull things and carry things. There are houses for them, but the houses are not too near the horses' houses. When they are not working, they stay outside.

The Yahoos love to be dirty, and the Houyhnhnms cannot understand that. Other animals like to be clean. I was clean. In this way I was different from the Yahoos. The Houyhnhnms saw this and liked me for it.



One day, I talked to my owner about the wars in my country.

'We had a long war with another country, France,' I told him. 'More than a million men died.'

'Why do you have wars?' he asked.

'Sometimes the rulers want more cities,' I answered. 'Then a strong country fights a weak country. The winner takes the weak country and then the other people are his servants.'

'But you Yahoos cannot hurt other people with your teeth,' he said. 'Our Yahoos hurt other Yahoos in this way. Your words are a mistake.'

I told him about the guns and gunpowder in my country. 'We can kill a lot of people with one big gun.'

He stopped me. 'I do not like our Yahoos,' he said, 'but they do not think. They are stupid. They fight for food, for the best places or because they want to fight. You Yahoos can think, so why do you fight? That is worse.'

'He's calling us Yahoos again!' I thought. 'I'll tell him about the good things in my country.'

So I talked for a long time about our Parliament, our rulers, our laws and our clever men and women.

There is no word for bad in the Houyhnhnms' language, but they use the word yahoo when a worker is stupid (*hnhm yahoo*), for a child's mistake (*whnaholm yahoo*), for strong winds and heavy rain. They use it when they cut their feet. They use it when they hate something.

The Houyhnhnms teach their young horses well. The young horses have to be clean, friendly and kind, and they have to work hard. They have to be strong and well. Every four years the young Houyhnhnms from everywhere in the country meet for games and running and jumping. When a horse wins, a friend sings a song about him or her.

Every four years, too, there is a Meeting. Then the heads of families talk about the country's important problems.