

Youth

Isaac Asimov

There was a spatter of pebbles against the window and the youngster stirred in his sleep. Another, and he was awake.

He sat up stiffly in bed. Seconds passed while he interpreted his strange surroundings. He wasn't in his own home, of course. This was out in the country. It was colder than it should be and there was green at the window.

"Slim!"

The call was a hoarse, urgent whisper, and the youngster bounded to the open window.

Slim wasn't his real name, but the new friend he had met the day before had needed only one look at his slight figure to say, "You're Slim." He added, "I'm Red."

Red wasn't his real name, either, but its appropriateness was obvious. They were friends instantly with the quick unquestioning friendship of young ones not yet quite in adolescence, before even the first stains of adulthood began to make their appearance.

Slim cried, "Hi, Red!" and waved cheerfully, still blinking the sleep out of himself.

Red kept to his croaking whisper, "Quiet! You want to wake somebody?"

Slim noticed all at once that the sun scarcely topped the low hills in the east, that the shadows were long and soft, and that the grass was wet.

Slim said, more softly, "What's the matter?"

Red only waved for him to come out.

Slim dressed quickly, gladly confining his morning wash to the momentary sprinkle of a little lukewarm water. He let the air dry the exposed portions of his body as he ran out, while bare skin grew wet against the dewy grass.

Red said, "You've got to be quiet. If Mom wakes up or Dad or your Dad or even any of the hands then it'll be 'Come on in or you'll catch your death of cold.' "

He mimicked voice and tone faithfully, so that Slim laughed and thought that there had never

been so funny a fellow as Red.

Slim said, eagerly, "Do you come out here every day like this, Red? Real early? It's like the whole world is just yours, isn't it, Red? No one else around and all like that." He felt proud at being allowed entrance into this private world.

Red stared at him sidelong. He said carelessly, "I've been up for hours. Didn't you hear it last night?"

"Hear what?"

"Thunder."

"Was there a thunderstorm?" Slim never slept through a thunderstorm.

"I guess not. But there was thunder. I heard it, and then I went to the window and it wasn't raining. It was all stars and the sky was just getting sort of almost gray. You know what I mean?"

Slim had never seen it so, but he nodded.

"So I just thought I'd go out," said Red.

They walked along the grassy side of the concrete road that split the panorama right down the middle all the way down to where it vanished among the hills. It was so old that Red's father couldn't tell Red when it had been built. It didn't have a crack or a rough spot in it.

Red said, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure, Red. What kind of a secret?"

"Just a secret. Maybe I'll tell you and maybe I won't. I don't know yet." Red broke a long, supple stem from a fern they passed, methodically stripped it of its leaflets and swung what was left whip-fashion. For a moment, he was on a wild charger, which reared and champed under his iron control. Then he got tired, tossed the whip aside and stowed the charger away in a corner of his imagination for future use.

He said, "There'll be a circus around."

Slim said, "That's no secret. I knew that. My Dad told me even before we came here—"

"That's not the secret. Fine secret! Ever see a circus?"

“Oh, sure. You bet.”

“Like it?”

“Say, there isn’t anything I like better.”

Red was watching out of the corner of his eyes again. “Ever think you would like to be with a circus? I mean, for good?”

Slim considered, “I guess not. I think I’ll be an astronomer like my Dad. I think he wants me to be.”

“Huh! Astronomer!” said Red.

Slim felt the doors of the new, private world closing on him and astronomy became a thing of dead stars and black, empty space.

He said, placatingly, “A circus *would* be more fun.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not. I mean it.”

Red grew argumentative. “Suppose you had a chance to join the circus right now. What would you do?”

“I—I—”

“See!” Red affected scornful laughter.

Slim was stung. “I’d join up.”

“Go on.”

“Try me.”

Red whirled at him, strange and intense. “You meant that? You want to go in with me?”

“What do you mean?” Slim stepped back a bit, surprised by the unexpected challenge.

“I got something that can get us into the circus. Maybe someday we can even have a circus

of our own. We could be the biggest circus-fellows in the world. That's if you want to go in with me. Otherwise—Well, I guess I can do it on my own. I just thought: Let's give good old Slim a chance."

The world was strange and glamorous, and Slim said, "Sure thing, Red. I'm in! What is it, huh, Red? Tell me what it is."

"Figure it out. What's the most important thing in circuses?"

Slim thought desperately. He wanted to give the right answer. Finally, he said, "Acrobats?"

"Holy Smokes! I wouldn't go five steps to look at acrobats."

"I don't know then."

"Animals, that's what! What's the best side-show? Where are the biggest crowds? Even in the main rings the best acts are animal acts." There was no doubt in Red's voice.

"Do you think so?"

"Everyone thinks so. You ask anyone. Anyway, I found animals this morning. Two of them."

"And you've got them?"

"Sure. That's the secret. Are you telling?"

"Of course not."

"Okay. I've got them in the barn. Do you want to see them?"

They were almost at the barn; its huge open door black. Too black. They had been heading there all the time. Slim stopped in his tracks.

He tried to make his words casual. "Are they big?"

"Would I fool with them if they were big? They can't hurt you. They're only about so long. I've got them in a cage."

They were in the barn now and Slim saw the large cage suspended from a hook in the roof. It was covered with stiff canvas.

Red said, "We used to have some bird there or something. Anyway, they can't get away from there. Come on, let's go up to the loft."

They clambered up the wooden stairs and Red hooked the cage toward them.

Slim pointed and said, "There's sort of a hole in the canvas."

Red frowned. "How'd that get there?" He lifted the canvas, looked in, and said, with relief, "They're still there."

"The canvas appeared to be burned," worried Slim.

"You want to look, or don't you?"

Slim nodded slowly. He wasn't sure he wanted to, after all. They might be—

But the canvas had been jerked off and there they were. Two of them, the way Red said. They were small, and sort of disgusting-looking. The animals moved quickly as the canvas lifted and were on the side toward the youngsters. Red poked a cautious finger at them.

"Watch out," said Slim, in agony.

"They don't hurt you," said Red. "Ever see anything like them?"

"No."

"Can't you see how a circus would jump at a chance to have these?"

"Maybe they're too small for a circus."

Red looked annoyed. He let go the cage which swung back and forth pendulum-fashion.

"You're just trying to back out, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. It's just—"

"They're not too small, don't worry. Right now, I've only got one worry."

"What's that?"

"Well, I've got to keep them till the circus comes, don't I? I've got to figure out what to feed them meanwhile."

The cage swung and the little trapped creatures clung to its bars, gesturing at the youngsters with queer, quick motions—almost as though they were intelligent.

II

The Astronomer entered the dining room with decorum. He felt very much the guest.

He said, “Where are the youngsters? My son isn’t in his room.”

The Industrialist smiled. “They’ve been out for hours. However, breakfast was forced into them among the women some time ago, so there is nothing to worry about. Youth, Doctor, youth!”

“Youth!” The word seemed to depress the Astronomer.

They ate breakfast in silence. The Industrialist said once, “You really think they’ll come. The day looks so—*normal*.”

The Astronomer said, “They’ll come.”

That was all.

Afterward the Industrialist said, “You’ll pardon me. I can’t conceive your playing so elaborate a hoax. You really spoke to them?”

“As I speak to you. At least, in a sense. They can project thoughts.”

“I gathered that must be so from your letter. How, I wonder.”

“I could not say. I asked them and, of course, they were vague. Or perhaps it was just that I could not understand. It involves a projector for the focussing of thought and, even more than that, conscious attention on the part of both projector and receptor. It was quite a while before I realized they were trying to think at me. Such thought-projectors may be part of the science they will give us.”

“Perhaps,” said the Industrialist. “Yet think of the changes it would bring to society. A thought-projector!”

“Why not? Change would be good for us.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It is only in old age that change is unwelcome,” said the Astronomer, “and races can be old as well as individuals.”

The Industrialist pointed out the window. “You see that road. It was built Beforethewars. I don’t know exactly when. It is as good now as the day it was built. We couldn’t possibly duplicate it now. The race was young when that was built, eh?”

“Then? Yes! At least they weren’t afraid of new things.”

“No. I wish they had been. Where is the society of Beforethewars? Destroyed, Doctor! What good were youth and new things? We are better off now. The world is peaceful and jogs along. The race goes nowhere but after all, there is nowhere to go. *They* proved that. The men who built the road. I will speak with your visitors as I agreed, if they come. But I think I will only ask them to go.”

“The race is not going nowhere,” said the Astronomer, earnestly. “It is going toward final destruction. My university has a smaller student body each year. Fewer books are written. Less work is done. An old man sleeps in the sun and his days are peaceful and unchanging, but each day finds him nearer death all the same.”

“Well, well,” said the Industrialist.

“No, don’t dismiss it. Listen. Before I wrote you, I investigated your position in the planetary economy.”

“And you found me solvent?” interrupted the Industrialist, smiling.

“Why, yes. Oh, I see, you are joking. And yet—perhaps the joke is not far off. You are less solvent than your father and he was less solvent than his father. Perhaps your son will no longer be solvent. It becomes too troublesome for the planet to support even the industries that still exist, though they are toothpicks to the oak trees of Beforethewars. We will be back to village economy and then to what? The caves?”

“And the infusion of fresh technological knowledge will be the changing of all that?”

“Not just the new knowledge. Rather the whole effect of change, of a broadening of horizons. Look, sir, I chose you to approach in this matter not only because you were rich and influential with government officials, but because you had an unusual reputation, for these days, of daring to break with tradition. Our people will resist change and you would know how to handle them, how to see to it that—that—”

“That the youth of the race is revived?”

“Yes.”

“With its atomic bombs?”

“The atomic bombs,” returned the Astronomer, “need not be the end of civilization. These visitors of mine had their atomic bomb, or whatever their equivalent was on their own worlds, and survived it, because they didn’t give up. Don’t you see? It wasn’t the bomb that defeated us, but our own shell shock. This may be the last chance to reverse the process.”

“Tell me,” said the Industrialist, “what do these friends from space want in return?”

The Astronomer hesitated. He said, “I will be truthful with you. They come from a denser planet. Ours is richer in the lighter atoms.”

“They want magnesium? Aluminum?”

“No, sir. Carbon and hydrogen. They want coal and oil.”

“Really?”

The Astronomer said, quickly, “You are going to ask why creatures who have mastered space travel, and therefore atomic power, would want coal and oil. I can’t answer that.”

The Industrialist smiled. “But I can. This is the best evidence yet of the truth of your story. Superficially, atomic power would seem to preclude the use of coal and oil. However, quite apart from the energy gained by their combustion they remain, and always will remain, the basic raw material for all organic chemistry. Plastics, dyes, pharmaceuticals, solvents. Industry could not exist without them, even in an atomic age. Still, if coal and oil are the low price for which they would sell us the troubles and tortures of racial youth, my answer is that the commodity would be dear if offered gratis.”

The Astronomer sighed and said, “There are the boys!”

They were visible through the open window, standing together in the grassy field and lost in animated conversation. The Industrialist’s son pointed imperiously and the Astronomer’s son nodded and made off at a run toward the house.

The Industrialist said, “There is the Youth you speak of. Our race has as much of it as it ever had.”

“Yes, but we age them quickly and pour them into the mold.”

Slim scuttled into the room, the door banging behind him.

The Astronomer said, in mild disapproval, “What’s this?”

Slim looked up in surprise and came to a halt. “I beg your pardon. I didn’t know anyone was here. I am sorry to have interrupted.” His enunciation was almost painfully precise.

The Industrialist said, “It’s all right, youngster.”

But the Astronomer said, “Even if you had been entering an empty room, son, there would be no cause for slamming a door.”

“Nonsense,” insisted the Industrialist. “The youngster has done no harm. You simply scold him for being young. You, with your views!”

He said to Slim, “Come here, lad.”

Slim advanced slowly.

“How do you like the country, eh?”

“Very much, sir, thank you.”

“My son has been showing you about the place, has he?”

“Yes, sir. Red—I mean—”

“No, no. Call him Red. I call him that myself. Now tell me, what are you two up to, eh?”

Slim looked away. “Why—just exploring, sir.”

The Industrialist turned to the Astronomer. “There you are, youthful curiosity and adventure-lust. The race has not yet lost it.”

Slim said, “Sir?”

“Yes, lad.”

The youngster took a long time in getting on with it. He said, “Red sent me in for something

good to eat, but I don't exactly know what he meant. I didn't like to say so."

"Why, just ask cook. She'll have something good for young'uns to eat."

"Oh, no, sir. I mean for animals."

"For animals?"

"Yes, sir. What do animals eat?"

The Astronomer said, "I am afraid my son is city-bred."

"Well," said the Industrialist, "there's no harm in that. What kind of an animal, lad?"

"A small one, sir."

"Then try grass or leaves, and if they don't want that, nuts or berries would probably do the trick."

"Thank you, sir." Slim ran out again, closing the door gently behind him.

The Astronomer said, "Do you suppose they've trapped an animal alive?" He was obviously perturbed.

"That's common enough. There's no shooting on my estate and it's tame country, full of rodents and small creatures. Red is always coming home with pets of one sort or another. They rarely maintain his interest for long."

He looked at the wall clock. "Your friends should have been here by now, shouldn't they?"

III

The swaying had come to a halt and it was dark. The Explorer was not comfortable in the alien air. It felt as thick as soup and he had to breathe shallowly. Even so—

He reached out in a sudden need for company. The Merchant was warm to the touch. His breathing was rough, he moved in an occasional spasm, and was obviously asleep. The Explorer hesitated and decided not to wake him. It would serve no real purpose.

There would be no rescue, of course. That was the penalty paid for the high profits which

unrestrained competition could lead to. The Merchant who opened a new planet could have a ten year monopoly of its trade, which he might hug to himself or, more likely, rent out to all comers at a stiff price. It followed that planets were searched for in secrecy and, preferably, away from the usual trade routes. In a case such as theirs, then, there was little or no chance that another ship would come within range of their subetherics except for the most improbable of coincidences. Even if they were in their ship, that is, rather than in this —this—*cage*.

The Explorer grasped the thick bars. Even if they blasted those away, as they could, they would be stuck too high in open air for leaping.

It was too bad. They had landed twice before in the scout-ship. They had established contact with the natives who were grotesquely huge, but mild and unaggressive. It was obvious that they had once owned a flourishing technology, but hadn't faced up to the consequences of such a technology. It would have been a wonderful market.

And it was a tremendous world. The Merchant, especially, had been taken aback. He had known the figures that expressed the planet's diameter, but from a distance of two light-seconds, he had stood at the visi-plate and muttered, "Unbelievable!"

"Oh, there are larger worlds," the Explorer said. It wouldn't do for an Explorer to be too easily impressed.

"Inhabited?"

"Well, no."

"Why, you could drop your planet into that large ocean and drown it."

The Explorer smiled. It was a gentle dig at his Arcturian homeland, which was smaller than most planets. He said, "Not quite."

The Merchant followed along the line of his thoughts. "And the inhabitants are large in proportion to their world?" He sounded as though the news struck him less favorably now.

"Nearly ten times our height."

"Are you sure they are friendly?"

"That is hard to say. Friendship between alien intelligences is an imponderable. They are not dangerous, I think. We've come across other groups that could not maintain equilibrium after the atomic war stage and you know the results. Introversion. Retreat. Gradual

decadence and increasing gentleness.”

“Even if they are such monsters?”

“The principle remains.”

It was about then that the Explorer felt the heavy throbbing of the engines.

He frowned and said, “We are descending a bit too quickly.”

There had been some speculation on the dangers of landing some hours before. The planetary target was a huge one for an oxygen-water world. Though it lacked the size of the uninhabitable hydrogen-ammonia planets and its low density made its surface gravity fairly normal, its gravitational forces fell off but slowly with distance. In short, its gravitational potential was high and the ship’s Calculator was a run-of-the-mill model not designed to plot landing trajectories at that potential range. That meant the Pilot would have to use manual controls.

It would have been wiser to install a more high-powered model, but that would have meant a trip to some outpost of civilization; lost time; perhaps a lost secret. The Merchant demanded an immediate landing.

The Merchant felt it necessary to defend his position now. He said angrily to the Explorer, “Don’t you think the Pilot knows his job? He landed you safely twice before.”

Yes, thought the Explorer, in a scout-ship, not in this unmaneuverable freighter. Aloud, he said nothing.

He kept his eye on the visi-plate. They were descending too quickly. There was no room for doubt. Much too quickly.

The Merchant said, peevishly, “Why do you keep silence?”

“Well, then, if you wish me to speak, I would suggest that you strap on your Floater and help me prepare the Ejector.”

The Pilot fought a noble fight. He was no beginner. The atmosphere, abnormally high and thick in the gravitational potential of this world whipped and burned about the ship, but to the very last it looked as though he might bring it under control despite that.

He even maintained course, following the extrapolated line to the point on the northern continent toward which they were headed. Under other circumstances, with a shade more

luck, the story would eventually have been told and retold as a heroic and masterly reversal of a lost situation. But within sight of victory, tired body and tired nerves clamped a control bar with a shade too much pressure. The ship, which had almost levelled off, dipped down again.

There was no room to retrieve the final error. There was only a mile left to fall. The Pilot remained at his post to the actual landing, his only thought that of breaking the force of the crash, of maintaining the spaceworthiness of the vessel. He did not survive. With the ship bucking madly in a soupy atmosphere, few Ejectors could be mobilized and only one of them in time.

When afterwards, the Explorer lifted out of unconsciousness and rose to his feet, he had the definite feeling that but for himself and the Merchant, there were no survivors. And perhaps that was an over-calculation. His Floater had burnt out while still sufficiently distant from surface to have the fall stun him. The Merchant might have had less luck, even, than that.

He was surrounded by a world of thick, ropy stalks of grass, and in the distance were trees that reminded him vaguely of similar structures on his native Arcturian world except that their lowest branches were high above what he would consider normal tree-tops.

He called, his voice sounding basso in the thick air and the Merchant answered. The Explorer made his way toward him, thrusting violently at the coarse stalks that barred his path.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

The Merchant grimaced. “I’ve sprained something. It hurts to walk.”

The Explorer probed gently. “I don’t think anything is broken. You’ll have to walk despite the pain.”

“Can’t we rest first?”

“It’s important to try to find the ship. If it is spaceworthy or if it can be repaired, we may live. Otherwise, we won’t.”

“Just a few minutes. Let me catch my breath.”

The Explorer was glad enough for those few minutes. The Merchant’s eyes were already closed. He allowed him to do the same.

He heard the trampling and his eyes snapped open. Never sleep on a strange planet, he told

himself futilely.

The Merchant was awake too and his steady screaming was a rumble of terror.

The Explorer called, "It's only a native of this planet. It won't harm you."

But even as he spoke, the giant had swooped down and in a moment they were in its grasp being lifted closer to its monstrous ugliness.

The Merchant struggled violently and, of course, quite futilely. "Can't you talk to it?" he yelled.

The Explorer could only shake his head. "I can't reach it with the Projector. It won't be listening."

"Then blast it. Blast it down."

"We can't do that." The phrase "you fool" had almost been added. The Explorer struggled to keep his self-control. They were swallowing space as the monster moved purposefully away.

"Why not?" cried the Merchant. "You can reach your blaster. I see it in plain sight. Don't be afraid of falling."

"It's simpler than that. If this monster is killed, you'll never trade with this planet. You'll never even leave it. You probably won't live the day out."

"Why? Why?"

"Because this is one of the young of the species. You should know what happens when a trader kills a native young, even accidentally. What's more, if this is the target-point, then we are on the estate of a powerful native. This might be one of his brood."

That was how they entered their present prison. They had carefully burnt away a portion of the thick, stiff covering and it was obvious that the height from which they were suspended was a killing one.

Now, once again, the prison-cage shuddered and lifted in an upward arc. The Merchant rolled to the lower rim and startled awake. The cover lifted and light flooded in. As was the case the time before, there were two specimens of the young. They were not very different in appearance from adults of the species, reflected the Explorer, though, of course, they were considerably smaller.

A handful of reedy green stalks was stuffed between the bars. Its odor was not unpleasant but it carried clods of soil at its ends.

The Merchant drew away and said, huskily, "What are they doing?"

The Explorer said, "Trying to feed us, I should judge. At least this seems to be the native equivalent of grass."

The cover was replaced and they were set swinging again, alone with their fodder.

IV

Slim started at the sound of footsteps and brightened when it turned out to be only Red.

He said, "No one's around. I had my eye peeled, you bet."

Red said, "Ssh. Look. You take this stuff and stick it in the cage. I've got to scoot back to the house."

"What is it?" Slim reached reluctantly.

"Ground meat. Holy Smokes, haven't you ever seen ground meat? That's what you should've got when I sent you to the house instead of coming back with that stupid grass."

Slim was hurt. "How'd I know they don't eat grass. Besides, ground meat doesn't come loose like that. It comes in cellophane and it isn't that color."

"Sure—in the city. Out here we grind our own and it's always this color till its cooked."

"You mean it isn't cooked?" Slim drew away quickly.

Red looked disgusted. "Do you think animals eat *cooked* food. Come on, take it. It won't hurt you. I tell you there isn't much time."

"Why? What's doing back at the house?"

"I don't know. Dad and your father are walking around. I think maybe they're looking for me. Maybe the cook told them I took the meat. Anyway, we don't want them coming here after me."

“Didn’t you ask the cook before you took this stuff?”

“Who? That crab? Shouldn’t wonder if she only let me have a drink of water because Dad makes her. Come on. Take it.”

Slim took the large glob of meat though his skin crawled at the touch. He turned toward the barn and Red sped away in the direction from which he had come.

He slowed when he approached the two adults, took a few deep breaths to bring himself back to normal, and then carefully and nonchalantly sauntered past. (They were walking in the general direction of the barn, he noticed, but not dead on.)

He said, “Hi, Dad. Hello, sir.”

The Industrialist said, “Just a moment, Red. I have a question to ask you?”

Red turned a carefully blank face to his father. “Yes, Dad?”

“Mother tells me you were out early this morning.”

“Not real early, Dad. Just a little before breakfast.”

“She said you told her it was because you had been awakened during the night and didn’t go back to sleep.”

Red waited before answering. Should he have told Mom that?

Then he said, “Yes, sir.”

“What was it that awakened you?”

Red saw no harm in it. He said, “I don’t know, Dad. It sounded like thunder, sort of, and like a collision, sort of.”

“Could you tell where it came from?”

“It *sounded* like it was out by the hill.” That was truthful, and useful as well, since the direction was almost opposite that in which the barn lay.

The Industrialist looked at his guest. “I suppose it would do no harm to walk toward the hill.”

The Astronomer said, "I am ready."

Red watched them walk away and when he turned he saw Slim peering cautiously out from among the briars of a hedge.

Red waved at him. "Come on."

Slim stepped out and approached. "Did they say anything about the meat?"

"No. I guess they don't know about that. They went down to the hill."

"What for?"

"Search me. They kept asking about the noise I heard. Listen, did the animals eat the meat?"

"Well," said Slim, cautiously, "they were sort of *looking* at it and smelling it or something."

"Okay," Red said, "I guess they'll eat it. Holy Smokes, they've got to eat *something*. Let's walk along toward the hill and see what Dad and your father are going to do."

"What about the animals?"

"They'll be all right. A fellow can't spend all his time on them. Did you give them water?"

"Sure. They drank that."

"See. Come on. We'll look at them after lunch. I tell you what. We'll bring them fruit. Anything'll eat fruit."

Together they trotted up the rise, Red, as usual, in the lead.

V

The Astronomer said, "You think the noise was their ship landing?"

"Don't you think it could be?"

"If it were, they may all be dead."

“Perhaps not.” The Industrialist frowned.

“If they have landed, and are still alive, where are they?”

“Think about that for a while.” He was still frowning.

The Astronomer said, “I don’t understand you.”

“They may not be friendly.”

“Oh, no. I’ve spoken with them. They’ve—”

“You’ve spoken with them. Call that reconnaissance. What would their next step be? Invasion?”

“But they only have one ship, sir.”

“You know that only because they say so. They might have a fleet.”

“I’ve told you about their size. They—”

“Their size would not matter, if they have handweapons that may well be superior to our artillery.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“I had this partly in mind from the first.” The Industrialist went on. “It is for that reason I agreed to see them after I received your letter. Not to agree to an unsettling and impossible trade, but to judge their real purposes. I did not count on their evading the meeting.”

He sighed. “I suppose it isn’t our fault. You are right in one thing, at any rate. The world has been at peace too long. We are losing a healthy sense of suspicion.”

The Astronomer’s mild voice rose to an unusual pitch and he said, “I *will* speak. I tell you that there is no reason to suppose they can possibly be hostile. They are small, yes, but that is only important because it is a reflection of the fact that their native worlds are small. Our world has what is for them a normal gravity, but because of our much higher gravitational potential, our atmosphere is too dense to support them comfortably over sustained periods. For a similar reason the use of the world as a base for interstellar travel, except for trade in certain items, is uneconomical. And there are important differences in chemistry of life due to the basic differences in soils. They couldn’t eat our food or we theirs.”

“Surely all this can be overcome. They can bring their own food, build domed stations of lowered air pressure, devise specially designed ships.”

“They can. And how glibly you can describe feats that are easy to a race in its youth. It is simply that they don’t have to do any of that. There are millions of worlds suitable for them in the Galaxy. They don’t need this one which isn’t.”

“How do you know? All this is their information again.”

“This I was able to check independently. I am an astronomer, after all.”

“That is true. Let me hear what you have to say then, while we walk.”

“Then, sir, consider that for a long time our astronomers have believed that two general classes of planetary bodies existed. First, the planets which formed at distances far enough from their stellar nucleus to become cool enough to capture hydrogen. These would be large planets rich in hydrogen, ammonia and methane. We have examples of these in the giant outer planets. The second class would include those planets formed so near the stellar center that the high temperature would make it impossible to capture much hydrogen. These would be smaller planets, comparatively poorer in hydrogen and richer in oxygen. We know that type very well since we live on one. Ours is the only solar system we know in detail, however, and it has been reasonable for us to assume that these were the *only* two planetary classes.”

“I take it then that there is another.”

“Yes. There is a super-dense class, still smaller, poorer in hydrogen, than the inner planets of the solar system. The ratio of occurrence of hydrogen-ammonia planets and these super-dense water-oxygen worlds of theirs over the entire Galaxy—and remember that they have actually conducted a survey of significant sample volumes of the Galaxy which we, without interstellar travel, cannot do—is about 3 to 1. This leaves them seven million super-dense worlds for exploration and colonization.”

The Industrialist looked at the blue sky and the green-covered trees among which they were making their way. He said, “And worlds like ours?”

The Astronomer said, softly, “Ours is the first solar system they have found which contains them. Apparently the development of our solar system was unique and did not follow the ordinary rules.”

The Industrialist considered that. “What it amounts to is that these creatures from space are

asteroid-dwellers.”

“No, no. The asteroids are something else again. They occur, I was told, in one out of eight stellar systems, but they’re completely different from what we’ve been discussing.”

“And how does your being an astronomer change the fact that you are still only quoting their unsupported statements?”

“But they did not restrict themselves to bald items of information. They presented me with a theory of stellar evolution which I had to accept and which is more nearly valid than anything our own astronomy has ever been able to devise, if we except possible lost theories dating from Beforethewars. Mind you, their theory had a rigidly mathematical development and it predicted just such a Galaxy as they describe. So you see, they have all the worlds they wish. They are not land-hungry. Certainly not for our land.”

“Reason would say so, if what you say is true. But creatures may be intelligent and not reasonable. Our forefathers were presumably intelligent, yet they were certainly not reasonable. Was it reasonable to destroy almost all their tremendous civilization in atomic warfare over causes our historians can no longer accurately determine?” The Industrialist brooded over it. “From the dropping of the first atom bomb over those islands—I forget the ancient name—there was only one end in sight, and in plain sight. Yet events were allowed to proceed to that end.”

He looked up, said briskly, “Well, where are we? I wonder if we are not on a fool’s errand after all.”

But the Astronomer was a little in advance and his voice came thickly. “No fool’s errand, sir. Look there.”

VI

Red and Slim had trailed their elders with the experience of youth, aided by the absorption and anxiety of their fathers. Their view of the final object of the search was somewhat obscured by the underbrush behind which they remained.

Red said, “Holy Smokes. Look at that. It’s all shiny silver or something.”

But it was Slim who was really excited. He caught at the other. “I know what this is. It’s a space-ship. That must be why my father came here. He’s one of the biggest astronomers in the world and your father would have to call him if a space-ship landed on his estate.”

“What are you talking about? Dad didn’t even know that thing was there. He only came here because I told him I heard the thunder from here. Besides, there isn’t any such thing as a space-ship.”

“Sure, there is. Look at it. See those round things. They are ports. And you can see the rocket tubes.”

“How do you know so much?”

Slim was flushed. He said, “I read about them. My father has books about them. Old books. From Beforethewars.”

“Huh. Now I know you’re making it up. Books from Beforethewars!”

“My father *has* to have them. He teaches at the University. It’s his job.”

His voice had risen and Red had to pull at him. “You want them to hear us?” he whispered indignantly.

“Well, it is, too, a space-ship.”

“Look here, Slim, you mean that’s a ship from another world.”

“It’s *got* to be. Look at my father going round and round it. He wouldn’t be so interested if it was anything else.”

“Other worlds! Where are there other worlds?”

“Everywhere. How about the planets? They’re worlds just like ours, some of them. And other stars probably have planets. There’s probably zillions of planets.”

Red felt outweighed and outnumbered. He muttered, “You’re crazy!”

“All right, then. I’ll show you.”

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“Down there. I’m going to ask my father. I suppose you’ll believe it if *he* tells you. I suppose you’ll believe a Professor of Astronomy knows what—”

He had scrambled upright.

Red said, "Hey. You don't want them to see us. We're not supposed to be here. Do you want them to start asking questions and find out about our animals?"

"I don't care. You said I was crazy."

"Snitcher! You promised you wouldn't tell."

"I'm *not* going to tell. But if they find out themselves, it's your fault, for starting an argument and saying I was crazy."

"I take it back, then," grumbled Red.

"Well, all right. You better."

In a way, Slim was disappointed. He wanted to see the space-ship at closer quarters. Still, he could not break his vow of secrecy even in spirit without at least the excuse of personal insult.

Red said, "It's awfully small for a space-ship."

"Sure, because it's probably a scout-ship."

"I'll bet Dad couldn't even get into the old thing."

So much Slim realized to be true. It was a weak point in his argument and he made no answer. His interest was absorbed by the adults.

Red rose to his feet; an elaborate attitude of boredom all about him. "Well, I guess we better be going. There's business to do and I can't spend all day here looking at some old space-ship or whatever it is. We've got to take care of the animals if we're going to be circus-folks. That's the first rule with circus-folks. They've got to take care of the animals. And," he finished virtuously, "that's what I aim to do, anyway."

Slim said, "What for, Red? They've got plenty of meat. Let's watch."

"There's no fun in watching. Besides Dad and your father are going away and I guess it's about lunch time."

Red became argumentative. "Look, Slim, we can't start acting suspicious or they're going to start investigating. Holy Smokes, don't you ever read any detective stories? When you're trying to work a big deal without being caught, it's practically the main thing to keep on

acting just like always. Then they don't suspect anything. That's the first law—"

"Oh, all right."

Slim rose resentfully. At the moment, the circus appeared to him a rather tawdry and shoddy substitute for the glories of astronomy, and he wondered how he had come to fall in with Red's silly scheme.

Down the slope they went, Slim, as usual, in the rear.

VII

The Industrialist said, "It's the workmanship that gets me. I never saw such construction."

"What good is it now?" said the Astronomer, bitterly. "There's nothing left. There'll be no second landing. This ship detected life on our planet through accident. Other exploring parties would come no closer than necessary to establish the fact that there were no super-dense worlds existing in our solar system."

"Well, there's no quarreling with a crash landing."

"The ship hardly seems damaged. If only some had survived, the ship might have been repaired."

"If they had survived, there would be no trade in any case. They're too different. Too disturbing. In any case—it's over."

They entered the house and the Industrialist greeted his wife calmly. "Lunch about ready, dear."

"I'm afraid not. You see—" She looked hesitantly at the Astronomer.

"Is anything wrong?" asked the Industrialist. "Why not tell me? I'm sure our guest won't mind a little family discussion."

"Pray don't pay any attention whatever to me," muttered the Astronomer. He moved miserably to the other end of the living room.

The woman said, in low, hurried tones, "Really, dear, cook's that upset. I've been soothing her for hours and honestly, I don't know why Red should have done it."

“Done what?” The Industrialist was more amused than otherwise. It had taken the united efforts of himself and his son months to argue his wife into using the name “Red” rather than the perfectly ridiculous (viewed youngster fashion) name which was his real one.

She said, “He’s taken most of the chopped meat.”

“He’s eaten it?”

“Well, I hope not. It was raw.”

“Then what would he want it for?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. I haven’t seen him since breakfast. Meanwhile cook’s just furious. She caught him vanishing out the kitchen door and there was the bowl of chopped meat just about empty and she was going to use it for lunch. Well, you know cook. She had to change the lunch menu and that means she won’t be worth living with for a week. You’ll just have to speak to Red, dear, and make him promise not to do things in the kitchen any more. And it wouldn’t hurt to have him apologize to cook.”

“Oh, come. She works for us. If we don’t complain about a change in lunch menu, why should she?”

“Because she’s the one who has double-work made for her, and she’s talking about quitting. Good cooks aren’t easy to get. Do you remember the one before her?”

It was a strong argument.

The Industrialist looked about vaguely. He said, “I suppose you’re right. He isn’t here, I suppose. When he comes in, I’ll talk to him.”

“You’d better start. Here he comes.”

Red walked into the house and said cheerfully, “Time for lunch, I guess.” He looked from one parent to the other in quick speculation at their fixed stares and said, “Got to clean up first, though,” and made for the other door.

The Industrialist said, “One moment, son.”

“Sir?”

“Where’s your little friend?”

Red said, carelessly, “He’s around somewhere. We were just sort of walking and I looked around and he wasn’t there.” This was perfectly true, and Red felt on safe ground. “I told him it was lunch time. I said, ‘I suppose it’s about lunch time.’ I said, ‘We got to be getting back to the house.’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ And I just went on and then when I was about at the creek I looked around and—”

The Astronomer interrupted the voluble story, looking up from a magazine he had been sightlessly rummaging through. “I wouldn’t worry about my youngster. He is quite self-reliant. Don’t wait lunch for him.”

“Lunch isn’t ready in any case, Doctor.” The Industrialist turned once more to his son. “And talking about that, son, the reason for it is that something happened to the ingredients. Do you have anything to say?”

“Sir?”

“I hate to feel that I have to explain myself more fully. Why did you take the chopped meat?”

“The chopped meat?”

“The chopped meat.” He waited patiently.

Red said, “Well, I was sort of—”

“Hungry?” prompted his father. “For raw meat?”

“No, sir. I just sort of needed it.”

“For what exactly?”

Red looked miserable and remained silent.

The Astronomer broke in again. “If you don’t mind my putting in a few words—You’ll remember that just after breakfast my son came in to ask what animals ate.”

“Oh, you’re right. How stupid of me to forget. Look here, Red, did you take it for an animal pet you’ve got?”

Red recovered indignant breath. He said, “You mean Slim came in here and said I had an animal? He came in here and said that? He said I had an animal?”

“No, he didn’t. He simply asked what animals ate. That’s all. Now if he promised he wouldn’t tell on you, he didn’t. It’s your own foolishness in trying to take something without permission that gave you away. That happened to be stealing. Now have you an animal? I ask you a direct question.”

“Yes, sir.” It was a whisper so low as hardly to be heard.

“All right, you’ll have to get rid of it. Do you understand?”

Red’s mother intervened. “Do you mean to say you’re keeping a meat-eating animal, Red? It might bite you and give you blood-poison.”

“They’re only small ones,” quavered Red. “They hardly budge if you touch them.”

“They? How many do you have?”

“Two.”

“Where are they?”

The Industrialist touched her arm. “Don’t chivvy the child any further,” he said, in a low voice. “If he says he’ll get rid of them, he will, and that’s punishment enough.”

He dismissed the matter from his mind.

VIII

Lunch was half over when Slim dashed into the dining room. For a moment, he stood abashed, and then he said in what was almost hysteria, “I’ve got to speak to Red. I’ve got to say something.”

Red looked up in fright, but the Astronomer said, “I don’t think, son, you’re being very polite. You’ve kept lunch waiting.”

“I’m sorry, Father.”

“Oh, don’t rate the lad,” said the Industrialist’s wife. “He can speak to Red if he wants to, and there was no damage done to the lunch.”

“I’ve got to speak to Red alone,” Slim insisted.

“Now that’s enough,” said the Astronomer with a kind of gentleness that was obviously manufactured for the benefit of strangers and which had beneath it an easily-recognized edge. “Take your seat.”

Slim did so, but he ate only when someone looked directly upon him. Even then he was not very successful.

Red caught his eyes. He made soundless words, “Did the animals get loose?”

Slim shook his head slightly. He whispered, “No, it’s—”

The Astronomer looked at him hard and Slim faltered to a stop.

With lunch over, Red slipped out of the room, with a microscopic motion at Slim to follow.

They walked in silence to the creek.

Then Red turned fiercely upon his companion. “Look here, what’s the idea of telling my Dad we were feeding animals?”

Slim said, “I didn’t. I asked what you feed animals. That’s not the same as saying we were doing it. Besides, it’s something else, Red.”

But Red had not used up his grievances. “And where did you go anyway? I thought you were coming to the house. They acted like it was my fault you weren’t there.”

“But I’m trying to tell you about that, if you’d only shut *up* a second and let me talk. You don’t give a fellow a chance.”

“Well, go on and tell me if you’ve got so much to say.”

“I’m *trying* to. I went back to the space-ship. The folks weren’t there anymore and I wanted to see what it was like.”

“It isn’t a space-ship,” said Red, sullenly. He had nothing to lose.

“It is, too. I looked inside. You could look through the ports and I looked inside and they were *dead*.” He looked sick. “They were dead.”

“Who were dead.”

Slim screeched, “Animals! like our animals! Only they aren’t animals. They’re people-things from other planets.”

For a moment Red might have been turned to stone. It didn’t occur to him to disbelieve Slim at this point. Slim looked too genuinely the bearer of just such tidings. He said, finally, “Oh, my.”

“Well, what are we going to do? Golly, will we get a whopping if they find out?” He was shivering.

“We better turn them loose,” said Red.

“They’ll tell on us.”

“They can’t talk our language. Not if they’re from another planet.”

“Yes, they can. Because I remember my father talking about some stuff like that to my mother when he didn’t know I was in the room. He was talking about visitors who could talk with the mind. Telepathery or something. I thought he was making it up.”

“Well, Holy Smokes. I mean—Holy Smokes.” Red looked up. “I tell you. My Dad said to get rid of them. Let’s sort of bury them somewhere or throw them in the creek.”

“He *told* you to do that.”

“He made me say I had animals and then he said, ‘Get rid of them.’ I got to do what he says. Holy Smokes, he’s my Dad.”

Some of the panic left Slim’s heart. It was a thoroughly legalistic way out. “Well, let’s do it right now, then, before they find out. Oh, golly, if they find out, will we be in trouble!”

They broke into a run toward the barn, unspeakable visions in their minds.

IX

It was different, looking at them as though they were “people.” As animals, they had been interesting; as “people,” horrible. Their eyes, which were neutral little objects before, now seemed to watch them with active malevolence.

“They’re making noises,” said Slim, in a whisper which was barely audible.

“I guess they’re talking or something,” said Red. Funny that those noises which they had heard before had not had significance earlier. He was making no move toward them. Neither was Slim.

The canvas was off but they were just watching. The ground meat, Slim noticed, hadn’t been touched.

Slim said, “Aren’t you going to do something?”

“Aren’t you?”

“You found them.”

“It’s your turn, now.”

“No, it isn’t. You found them. It’s your fault, the whole thing. I was watching.”

“You joined in, Slim. You know you did.”

“I don’t care. You found them and that’s what I’ll say when they come here looking for us.”

Red said, “All right for you.” But the thought of the consequences inspired him anyway, and he reached for the cage door.

Slim said, “Wait!”

Red was glad to. He said, “Now what’s biting you?”

“One of them’s got something on him that looks like it might be iron or something.”

“Where?”

“Right there. I saw it before but I thought it was just part of him. But if he’s ‘people,’ maybe it’s a disintegrator gun.”

“What’s that?”

“I read about it in the books from Beforethewars. Mostly people with space-ships have disintegrator guns. They point them at you and you get disintegrated.”

“They didn’t point it at us till now,” pointed out Red with his heart not quite in it.

“I don’t care. I’m not hanging around here and getting disintegrated. I’m getting my father.”

“Cowardy-cat. Yellow cowardy-cat.”

“I don’t care. You can call all the names you want, but if you bother them now you’ll get disintegrated. You wait and see, and it’ll be all your fault.”

He made for the narrow spiral stairs that led to the main floor of the barn, stopped at its head, then backed away.

Red’s mother was moving up, panting a little with the exertion and smiling a tight smile for the benefit of Slim in his capacity as guest.

“Red! You, Red! Are you up there? Now don’t try to hide. I know this is where you’re keeping them. Cook saw where you ran with the meat.”

Red quavered, “Hello, ma!”

“Now show me those nasty animals? I’m going to see to it that you get rid of them right away.”

It was over! And despite the imminent corporal punishment, Red felt something like a load fall from him. At least the decision was out of his hands.

“Right there, ma. I didn’t do anything to them, ma. I didn’t know. They just looked like little animals and I thought you’d let me keep them, ma. I wouldn’t have taken the meat only they wouldn’t eat grass or leaves and we couldn’t find good nuts or berries and cook never lets me have anything or I would have asked her and I didn’t know it was for lunch and—”

He was speaking on the sheer momentum of terror and did not realize that his mother did not hear him but, with eyes frozen and popping at the cage, was screaming in thin, piercing tones.

X

The Astronomer was saying, “A quiet burial is all we can do. There is no point in any publicity now,” when they heard the screams.

She had not entirely recovered by the time she reached them, running and running. It was minutes before her husband could extract sense from her.

She was saying, finally, "I tell you they're in the barn. I don't know what they are. No, no—"

She barred the Industrialist's quick movement in that direction. She said, "Don't you go. Send one of the hands with a shotgun. I tell you I never saw anything like it. Little horrible beasts with—with—I can't describe it. To think that Red was touching them and trying to feed them. He was holding them, and feeding them meat."

Red began, "I only—"

And Slim said, "It was not—"

The Industrialist said, quickly, "Now you boys have done enough harm today. March! Into the house! And not a word; not one word! I'm not interested in anything you have to say. After this is all over, I'll hear you out and as for you, Red, I'll see that you're properly punished."

He turned to his wife. "Now whatever the animals are, we'll have them killed." He added quietly once the youngsters were out of hearing, "Come, come. The children aren't hurt and, after all, they haven't done anything really terrible. They've just found a new pet."

The Astronomer spoke with difficulty. "Pardon me, ma'am, but can you describe these animals?"

She shook her head. She was quite beyond words.

"Can you just tell me if they—"

"I'm sorry," said the Industrialist, apologetically, "but I think I had better take care of her. Will you excuse me?"

"A moment. Please. One moment. She said she had never seen such animals before. Surely it is not usual to find animals that are completely unique on an estate such as this."

"I'm sorry. Let's not discuss that now."

"Except that unique animals might have landed during the night."

The Industrialist stepped away from his wife. “What are you implying?”

“I think we had better go to the barn, sir!”

The Industrialist stared a moment, turned and suddenly and quite uncharacteristically began running. The Astronomer followed and the woman’s wail rose unheeded behind them.

XI

The Industrialist stared, looked at the Astronomer, turned to stare again.

“Those?”

“Those,” said the Astronomer. “I have no doubt we appear strange and repulsive to them.”

“What do they say?”

“Why, that they are uncomfortable and tired and even a little sick, but that they are not seriously damaged, and that the youngsters treated them well.”

“Treated them well! Scooping them up, keeping them in a cage, giving them grass and raw meat to eat? Tell me how to speak to them.”

“It may take a little time. Think *at* them. Try to listen. It will come to you, but perhaps not right away.”

The Industrialist tried. He grimaced with the effort of it, thinking over and over again, “The youngsters were ignorant of your identity.”

And the thought was suddenly in his mind: “We were quite aware of it and because we knew they meant well by us according to their own view of the matter, we did not attempt to attack them.”

“Attack them?” thought the Industrialist, and said it aloud in his concentration.

“Why, yes,” came the answering thought. “We are armed.”

One of the revolting little creatures in the cage lifted a metal object and there was a sudden hole in the top of the cage and another in the roof of the barn, each hole rimmed with

charred wood.

“We hope,” the creatures thought, “it will not be too difficult to make repairs.”

The Industrialist found it impossible to organize himself to the point of directed thought. He turned to the Astronomer. “And with that weapon in their possession they let themselves be handled and caged? I don’t understand it.”

But the calm thought came, “We would not harm the young of an intelligent species.”

XII

It was twilight. The Industrialist had entirely missed the evening meal and remained unaware of the fact.

He said, “Do you really think the ship will fly?”

“If they say so,” said the Astronomer, “I’m sure it will. They’ll be back, I hope, before too long.”

“And when they do,” said the Industrialist, energetically, “I will keep my part of the agreement. What is more I will move sky and earth to have the world accept them. I was entirely wrong, Doctor. Creatures that would refuse to harm children, under such provocation as they received, are admirable. But you know—I almost hate to say this—”

“Say what?”

“The kids. Yours and mine. I’m almost proud of them. Imagine seizing these creatures, feeding them or trying to, and keeping them hidden. The amazing gall of it. Red told me it was his idea to get a job in a circus on the strength of them. Imagine!”

The Astronomer said, “Youth!”

XIII

The Merchant said, “Will we be taking off soon?”

“Half an hour,” said the Explorer.

It was going to be a lonely trip back. All the remaining seventeen of the crew were dead and their ashes were to be left on a strange planet. Back they would go with a limping ship and the burden of the controls entirely on himself.

The Merchant said, “It was a good business stroke, not harming the young ones. We will get very good terms; very good terms.”

The Explorer thought: Business!

The Merchant then said, “They’ve lined up to see us off. All of them. You don’t think they’re too close, do you? It would be bad to burn any of them with the rocket blast at this stage of the game.”

“They’re safe.”

“Horrible-looking things, aren’t they?”

“Pleasant enough, inside. Their thoughts are perfectly friendly.”

“You wouldn’t believe it of them. That immature one, the one that first picked us up—”

“They call him Red,” provided the Explorer.

“That’s a queer name for a monster. Makes me laugh. He actually feels bad that we’re leaving. Only I can’t make out exactly why. The nearest I can come to it is something about a lost opportunity with some organization or other that I can’t quite interpret.”

“A circus,” said the Explorer, briefly.

“What? Why, the impertinent monstrosity.”

“Why not? What would you have done if you had found him wandering on your native world; found him sleeping on a field on Earth, red tentacles, six legs, pseudopods and all?”

XIV

Red watched the ship leave. His red tentacles, which gave him his nickname, quivered their regret at lost opportunity to the very last, and the eyes at their tips filled with drifting yellowish crystals that were the equivalent of Earthly tears.

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