

the image of God, born free and equal, and masters of their environment. He pecked curiously at a protruding eyeball. The lid did not flutter.

The sun moved on toward the west and sank into the jagged horizon. As the sun sank there was no steam . . . Only fire behind the man-made mountains.

—Robert J. Avey, Sci. Sr.



An Old Man's Fancy

"UNMANNERED devils—little beasts," he said, glowering at the children playing in the park. "You've got to watch them, Henry, or they'll throw you right over. The parks just aren't safe anymore with these little animals being allowed to scurry about so. Simply no regard for others . . ."

"What can you expect, Charles?" his elderly friend asked. "This is Spring, you know. Or haven't you realized?"

The other continued grumbling as they walked. He nodded his head up and down and from side to side in the manner typical of people of his age. With his head down, he appeared to be watching every step his unsure legs made as they carried him hesitatingly along the cobbled path.

"I'm quite aware it is Spring."

"Then look about you. See! The day is glorious! You barely lift your face from the ground."

Charles snorted angrily as two youngsters, shouting wildly, tore between them, chasing each other. "Little beasts," he muttered, "ought to be leashed and muzzled . . ."

"Ah, but they're so carefree — you can't tie children down. And when they have such a good time of it — well, I can't understand your point of view. Why, Charles, if I were even half my age I think I'd be right out there jumping around with them."

"Hummmph — ha!" Charles snorted. "Somehow, Henry, I can't see it."

"Well, laugh. But seriously, I can't help thinking how completely without anxieties they are. No responsibilities. No wor-

ries. Yes, they are like little animals, I suppose — but not beasts as you call them. To me, they're like little sprites or—or fauns. Why look at them! All they need are reed pipes and pointed ears!"

"Most of them have pointed skulls," the other remarked.

"Oh please, Charles, don't talk that way. I know you can't mean it. Surely you remember your own youth. Or have you forgotten?"

They sat down on a bench set apart from the others. Charles adjusted a pince-nez attached by a black ribbon to his vest. Slowly and methodically he unfolded a newspaper which had been just as methodically folded to fit into his pocket. He paused to glance over at his friend.

"No, I haven't forgotten," he said, looking past him with a fixed, serious look, his head nodding. "No, it's not a matter of forgetting, you see. There's nothing to remember, Henry." He spoke with a wistful melancholy. For a moment neither of them spoke, then Henry said softly, "I didn't know. Forgive me for bringing up a sensitive memory. We aren't all fortunate—with happy childhoods."

Charles dropped the newspaper to his lap, turning impatient.

"You don't understand," he nodded irritably, "you don't understand what I mean . . ."

"But you said—"

"What I meant," Charles interrupted, "is that childhood, actually, is not at all what we think it to be — later, reminiscing—"

"But Charles — I can remember mine distinctly!"

"Yes, so can I. But that roscate glow we think childhood is surrounded by—the wonderful freedom, the irresponsibility, all the rest, —that's the picture seen only from the vantage point of age. It is only in retrospect, Henry. We can't ever see what childhood really is . . ."

Questioningly, Henry searched his friend's face. Words struggled at his lips, but he turned them aside as useless. Charles shrugged and sighed and returned to his newspaper. Forlornly Henry continued to brood. Suddenly he turned back, "I can't believe it. It's just a morbid theory you've evolved, Charles. How can you live with such pessimism?"

His companion smiled, pitying him. But before he could

reply, their attentions were distracted by loud shouts of warning, and a ball bounded menacingly toward them.

"Hey! Get the ball, mister?"

"Throw it here, will ya? Please?"

Two small boys were shouting from a distance.

Henry thrust out a foot, deflecting the ball. He bent forward grasping for it clumsily and managed finally to capture it in both hands. Panting noticeably, he straightened and looked to his friend for a sign of approval. From behind the pince-nez the other mumbled, "You see! Children don't watch where they're throwing dangerous objects —jeopardizing the safety of the public parks. Little beasts —" He returned to his newspaper.

"Throw it back, Grandpa," the boys chorused.

But the portly gentleman raised his arm to throw, then reconsidered, doubting his accuracy. He held the ball in outstretched hand, motioning for the boys to come and get it. With a weary toss of his shoulders, the boy nearest them walked over. The ball wasn't to be regained that easily.

"Do you enjoy playing ball, young man?" Henry put the ball behind him, holding it as a prize.

"Yes," was the quick reply. What could he say? Of course he enjoyed it. With a look of marvelous toleration, inconceivable on any but a child's face, he resigned himself to what lay ahead.

"You like it, hey?"

"Yes," the boy repeated, scuffing his shoes impatiently.

"This is a lovely day for it, isn't it?" the old man persisted.

"Yes . . . sir." It was a nice day. Anyone could see that.

"I can remember playing ball when I was your age, sonny. Nothing I liked better. Played it by the hour. It's wonderful, isn't it—being able to play anytime you want to — go wherever you like . . . well, what I mean is, just doing the things you want to?"

The boy was perplexed. He nodded his head uncertainly. What did the old man want? He suddenly remembered the hushed whispers between his father and mother not so long ago, after an excited call from the mother of a friend of his. He hadn't been able to catch a word of it, but it had seemed important and mysterious. His parents forbade him to enter the park, after that, at certain times, and never to speak to strange men.

"Please give me the ball now, mister?" he asked anxiously.

"But you haven't answered my question, young man," the florid-faced gentleman insisted. "You must tell me what it's like—how does it feel to be out there playing on the grass, feeling the sun? What do you think about on a fine Spring day like this? Hey?"

The older, thinner man on the bench had seemed intent on his newspaper but now the boy was startled by a snort from him. The youngster drew back a step, looking from one to the other of the old men, noticing the frown on the face of the fat one, holding the ball in an odd way as if he'd forgotten he had it.

"Please, mister," the boy stammered, "let us have the ball? My mother wants me to come back in half an hour, so I don't have much time to play. Please?"

The other boy, who'd been waiting and calling from out in the field, stopped calling now and started over.

"What's the matter, Tommy?" he demanded, trotting up. "Won't the old guy give you back the ball? Hey, it was a mile from him. It never would'a hit him!" He came and stood beside Tommy, bristling. Tommy frowned.

"Nothing's the matter, Jim. He's just been asking me some questions. He'll give the ball back soon's I answer—he's not gonna keep it."

"Well, chee! Answer 'em then," the bigger boy commanded, "We ain't got all day, you know."

"All right." Tommy's lips worked and he looked up with a transparent bravado. "You will give us the ball now, won't you mister?"

The old man couldn't decide. He looked from face to face, blinking before their steady stares. A smile pulled at the lips of the other old man on the bench, but he did not raise his eyes from his newspaper.

"You see, mister," Tommy made one final attempt to explain, "my mother said not to talk to strange men in the park . . ."

His young friend forgot his impatience and laughed raucously, "Ya! What a mama's baby!" he howled. "Your mother won't let you talk to strange men . . ."

"But, Jim, I—I don't mean I can't—I could, but, honest my mother just says she'd rather . . ."

"Ya-a-a! Wait'll I tell the guys!" Jimmy jeered. "His mama only lets him play for a half an hour. His mama makes him come

straight home from school. His mama won't let him talk to strange men. What about strange girls, Tommy?" There was merciless sarcasm in his voice, and the younger boy cringed under its lash.

"Aw, don't. Please don't," he begged, his eyes beginning to brim, "I can't help it—"

"Sissy —sissy Tommy! Can't even get his own ball back from an old man!"

A clock chimed from across the park. "I—I gotta go home," Tommy said, starting up the path.

"Yeah, go on home to your mother, baby! Be sure you don't talk to anybody on the way, though." The older boy spat in disgust and turned on his heel and took a few steps in the opposite direction. Suddenly he stopped, his chin jutting out, and he swung back to face the stunned old gentlemen.

"Give me the ball, Grandpa," he demanded roughly. "I gotta go, too. My old man'll beat the dickens out'a me if I don't get home and help with the deliveries. It's not your ball. Give it here."

The florid-faced, portly gentleman silently surrendered the ball.

"Thanks."

Stuffing the ball in his pocket, the youngster hurried purposefully off. The old man sat down slowly, staring after him. He hunched over, gazing intently at the ground.

He sighed. He was an old man. The newspaper dropped down to the lap of his companion. After a time, the portly gentleman met the gaze of his friend. There was greater compassion in his gaze now, and he nodded his head in the way that he had, and looked out, for a moment, over the bright green grass where the boys had been playing. Then he, too, sighed, and went back to his reading.

—Herbert Perluck, Sci. Sr.

