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*We are frankly wearied to the point of nausea by speculative articles on extraterrestrial life which begin, "Life as we know it can exist only . . ." The data that follow are always solid — and quite unrelated to the problem of the possibility of life elsewhere. To judge life by the standards prevalent on that mote in the cosmic eye known as Sol III is on a level with pre-Copernican views of the geocentric structure of the universe. But thinking in anthropomorphic terms (always, of course, considering oneself as the only conceivable type of anthropos) will probably characterize most forms of reasoning life on all worlds; and realizing this, Mr. Dryfoos indulges in some ingenious speculation on how we may seem to life of a very different order.*

# Man

by DAVE DRYFOOS

WE USED to think ours was the only world, till the man taught us by the shortness of his visit that there must be others. But of course ours is the best world.

Where else could there exist beings like ourselves, knowing only pure thought and simple joy? We need merely spread our leaves to be bathed in warmth and light. We embrace the air, and dance with zephyrs; hug the earth, and drink its nectar. Our only enemy is fire, a rare and accidental occurrence. The Things scampering among our branches and clinging to our trunks are seldom disturbing, and if they become destructive, we have the means to dispose of them.

Surely no one lives so pleasantly as we do, blooming with the juices of Spring, strengthening in the heat of Summer, transmitting the impulse to life in Fall, and baring our heads every Winter in respect for the Sun that fills our lives with familiar rhythm.

*Familiar* rhythm. Yes. Nothing ever was strange here till the man came.

He, however, spoke of unfamiliar matters: of Systems and Galaxies; of his home, which he termed a planet like our world; of himself and his life-schedule, which was not rhythmic, but ugly; and of fear, which he mentioned continually — in denial. These concepts were strange to us.

We were equally strange to the man. He called us trees, though ad-

mittedly we differed from any trees he had previously experienced. He knew we respond to radiant energy, but did not grasp the extent of our sensitivity. He was totally unaware of the wave lengths affecting us, and could not comprehend our ability to converse by modulating the frequencies we reflect and amplifying them with the electricity of our life-processes.

Because he did not know we can speak, he did not realize we are men, since speech is the distinguishing characteristic of men, the trait by which *we* recognized *him*.

He was ignorant because his perceptions were so inferior to ours. For instance, certain vibrations in the air seemed unpleasantly meaningful to him in ways he mentioned as sound and odor. And reflected light was not to him the carrier of thought, but the cause of useless reactions called shapes and colors.

He lived imprisoned in a world all his own even when among us. It would be absurd to suppose his foreign origin prejudiced us, but inadequate physical and mental endowment doomed him to inferiority — or would have, had he stayed here.

Because this man was an inferior, there were those among us who wished to dispose of him as soon as his emanations became perceptible. Most of us, however, wanted to talk to him first. We who were curious had our way, but not without an attack of disagreement — a disease with which the foreigner seemed to have infected us upon his arrival, and to which he was himself peculiarly susceptible.

But this we did not learn till we had deciphered his language.

Decoding was difficult, and required the collaboration of us all — the pooled perceptions and ratiocinations of our thousandfold individual intellects, each with instantaneous access to the rest. The task was possible only because the man had of course to discuss matters familiar to us — the world, new to him, in which we live. Certain carefully planned operations, such as the simultaneous disposal of all the Things nesting in our branches, helped us by stimulating him to consider subjects known to us in advance.

Thus we learned his names for the Things, which he called animal life-forms, and understood danger, his primary concern. His thought-processes we found more limited than our own, but, as is true of the Things, he was extremely mobile.

Since the Things do not speak at all, he was not quite the lowest being we had experienced, but he spoke only when separated into parts at a distance from one another, not when behaving as a unit. His several parts could rejoin his main body or split off at will, thereby demonstrating that he was an extremely primitive sort of man, since we have long since lost this power of subdivision.

Additional evidence of inferiority lay in the disagreements to which he was subject and with which, as I said, he infected us. We had no way of knowing whether his main body was in a state of conflict within itself, but the subdivisions often argued with that main body when at a distance from it.

The principal area of contention concerned his ignorance of our world. A subdivision would say something like: "Numerous and varied life-forms available here. Request permission to initiate biological collections."

And the reply would be: "Biologists have repeatedly been directed to confine activities to photography, sound-recording, and similar non-destructive research. No specimens may be collected."

Without quite understanding all that was intended, we were well able to comprehend the finality of this reply. It should have settled the matter, but one of our number nevertheless suffered a disfiguring attack on his trunk. Only after destruction had been prevented by our usual means did we learn our attacker was the man, or part of him.

The news came in the form of a message from a subdivision to the main body. "Anderson killed, apparently by falling limb," the subdivision said. "Returning."

This was an exceedingly ignorant remark, since the attack had been prevented, as always, by an electrical discharge. But perhaps ignorance was to have been expected, in view of the apparently limitless divisibility of this man. Not only had he broken apart his main body, but also the segment we had destroyed seemed a mere portion of the subdivision. And even that was not the end.

"Detail driver and jeep only," the main body told the Anderson segment. "Repetition accident considered unlikely. Do not return."

There was more, but we changed frequency to consider our own position. One attack on us had already been made. Other attacks were possible, particularly since the man failed to understand how and why we had disposed of the Anderson-fragment. Further, it was obvious that nothing of value could be learned from so inferior a being.

A little discussion preceded these conclusions, but this was symptomatic of our man-borne infection which itself proved the conclusions to be correct. We sent out our usual emanations unanimously.

The result was somewhat unexpected. In the first place, contrary to what experience with Things had led us to expect, all widely separated parts of the man caught fire, though we were merely trying to electrocute him. Then, just at the wrong time, a wind rose and spread the flames among us.

The effect was disastrous. Most of us were completely consumed. I was lucky to survive even in my present crippled condition.

And the man was not destroyed. His voice seemed enfeebled, but was detectable even when the holocaust was at its height. We paid little attention then, of course, but our survivors tuned in on his frequency in time to hear some reports.

“Primary radio transmitter and receiver destroyed by fire originating from unexplained electrical disturbance of atmospheric origin,” the Anderson portion reported to the main body. “Fire not, repeat not, started by negligence here. Many crippled life-forms, already dying, now available for collection. Request revocation of prohibition against taking biological specimens.”

“Return to base,” was the answer. “Destruction of equipment necessitates immediate departure. Make no, repeat no, collections. Life-forms here not yet well enough known to justify risks of handling, killing, or dissection. Disappointment of biologists regretted, but we cannot safely destroy what we do not understand.”

Like everything else about the man, this explanation seemed strange. One would almost suspect he sensed his inferiority to us.

But that is quite impossible. Self-satisfaction is as characteristic of man as is language itself.

