

From *Stranger in a Strange Land*

Robert A. Heinlein

The second reading today is from Robert Heinlein's 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The novel is the story of Valentine Michael Smith, abandoned on Mars as a baby, raised by Martians, and finally returned to Earth. It's probably best known today for introducing the word "grok" to our English. "To grok" in Martian means literally "to drink", but it has a host of metaphorical meanings, perhaps best summed up as "to understand completely". In this excerpt, Mike and his friend and lover Jill are touring incognito with a small carnival, and take time out to visit a zoo. (Note that Mike sometimes calls Jill his "brother", as the Martian language has no gender as we understand it.)

But today even the unmitigated misanthropy of the camels could not shake Mike's moodiness; he looked at them without smiling. Nor did the monkeys and apes cheer him up. They stood for quite a while in front of a cage containing a large family of capuchins, watching them eat, sleep, court, nurse, groom, and swarm aimlessly around the cage, while Jill surreptitiously tossed them peanuts despite "No Feeding" signs.

She tossed one to a medium-sized monk; before he could eat it a much larger male was on him and not only stole his peanut but gave him a beating, then left. The little fellow made no attempt to pursue his tormentor; he squatted at the scene of the crime, pounded his knucks against the concrete floor, and chattered his helpless rage. Mike watched it solemnly.

Suddenly the mistreated monkey rushed to the side of the cage, picked a monkey still smaller, bowled it over and gave it a drubbing worse than the one he had suffered—after which he seemed quite relaxed. The third monk crawled away, still whimpering, and found shelter in the arm of a female who had a still smaller one, a baby, on her back. The other monkeys paid no attention to any of it.

Mike threw back his head and laughed—and went on laughing, loudly and uncontrollably. He gasped for breath, tears came from his eyes; he started to tremble and sink to the floor, still laughing.

Worried that Mike will go catatonic, something he often did soon after arriving on Earth, Jill gets him home.

“I’m all right. At last I’m all right.”

“I hope so.” She sighed. “You certainly scared me, Mike.”

“I’m sorry, Little Brother. I know. I was scared too, the first time I heard laughing.”

“Mike, what happened?”

“Jill... I grok people!”

[...]

“But how, darling? Can you tell me? Does it need Martian? Or mind-speak?”

“No, that’s the point. I grok people. I *am* people... so now I can say it in people-talk. I’ve found out why people laugh. They laugh because it hurts so much... because it’s the only thing that’ll make it stop hurting. [...] That poor little monk.”

“Which one, dear? I thought that big one was just mean... and the one I flipped the peanut to turned out to be just as mean. There certainly wasn’t anything funny.”

“Jill, Jill my darling! Too much Martian has rubbed off on you. Of course it wasn’t funny; it was tragic. That’s why I had to laugh. I looked at a cageful of monkeys and suddenly I saw all the mean and cruel and utterly unexplainable things I’ve seen and heard and read about in the time I’ve been with my own people—and suddenly I hurt so much I found myself laughing.”

From the uncut 1991 edition, pp. 357-9, with two deletions of my own as indicated.