

Abridged excerpt from the book *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein

In his 1961 science fiction novel Stranger in a Strange Land, Robert Heinlein tells the story of Michael Smith, a human born and raised by Martians on Mars, who faces challenges in trying to “grok” (completely understand) humanity when he comes to Earth. In this scene, Mike and his girlfriend Jill visit a zoo. I have shortened and edited the text to focus on the parts of interest to our studies of humor.

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 monkey; 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 knuckles 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 monkey 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 – 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.

“Stop it, Mike!”

He became somewhat more quiet but continued to chuckle, laugh aloud, chuckle again, while she wiped his eyes. “I’m all right. At last I’m all right.”

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

“I know. I was scared, too, the first time I heard laughing. Come here, and put your head on my shoulder and tell me a joke.”

“Just tell you a joke?”

“Tell me a joke I’ve never heard and see if I laugh at the right place. I will, I’m sure of it – and I’ll be able to tell you why it’s funny.”

“But how, darling?”

“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.”

Jill looked puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

“Ah, but you grew up with people. I didn’t. I’ve been like a puppy raised apart from other dogs, who couldn’t be like his masters and had never learned how to be a dog. So I had to be taught. Brother Mahmoud taught me, Jubal taught me, lots of people taught me ... and you taught me most of all. Today I got my diploma – and I laughed. That poor little monkey.”

“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 it hurt so much I found myself laughing.”

“But- Mike dear, laughing is something you do when something is nice, not when it’s horrid.”

“Is it? Think back to Las Vegas -- When all you pretty girls came out on the stage, did people laugh?”

“Well ... no.”

“But you girls were the nicest part of the show. I grok now, that if they had laughed, you would have been hurt. No, they laughed when a comic tripped over his feet and fell down ... or something else that is not a goodness.”

“But that’s not all people laugh at.”

“Isn’t it? Perhaps I don’t grok all its fullness yet. But find me something that really makes you laugh, sweetheart ... a joke, or anything else – but something that gave you a real belly laugh, not a smile. Then we’ll see if there isn’t a wrongness in it somewhere and whether you would laugh if the wrongness wasn’t there.”

Doubtfully but earnestly Jill started digging into her memory for jokes that had struck her as irresistibly funny, ones which had jerked a laugh out of her ... incidents she had seen or heard of which had made her helpless with laughter:

“-her entire bridge club.”

“Should I bow?”

“-broke her leg.”

“-and his mother-in-law fainted.”

“Stop you? Why, I bet three to one you could do it!”

“Something has happened to Ole.”

“-and so are you, you clumsy ox!”

She gave up on “funny” stories, pointing out to Mike that such were just fantasies, not real, and tried to recall real incidents. Practical jokes? All practical jokes supported Mike’s thesis, even ones as mild as a dribble glass. What else? The time Elsa Mae had lost her monogrammed panties? It hadn’t been funny to Elsa Mae. Or the- She said grimly, “Apparently the pratfall is the peak of all humor. It’s not a pretty picture of the human race, Mike.”

“Oh, but it is! I had thought – I had been told – that a ‘funny’ thing is a thing of a goodness. It isn’t. Not ever is it funny to the person it happens to. Like that sheriff without his pants. The goodness is in the laughing itself. I grok it is a bravery ... and a sharing ... against pain and sorrow and defeat.”

“But- Mike, it is not a goodness to laugh at people.”

“No. But I was not laughing at the little monkey. I was laughing at us. People. And I suddenly knew that I was people and could not stop laughing.” He paused. “This is hard to explain, because you have never lived as a Martian, for all that I’ve told you about it. On Mars there is never anything to laugh at. All the things that are funny to us humans either physically cannot happen on Mars or are not permitted to happen – sweetheart, what you call ‘freedom’ doesn’t exist on Mars; everything is planned by the Old Ones – or the things that do happen on Mars which we laugh at here on Earth aren’t funny because there is no wrongness about them. Death, for example.”

“Death isn’t funny.”

“Then why are there so many jokes about death? Jill, with us – us humans – death is so sad that we must laugh at it. All those religions, they contradict each other on every other point but every one of them is filled with ways to help people be brave enough to laugh even though they know they are dying.”