

The stars: were they, as the old ones said, lights that the Master of the Mountain had strung up in the sky? Or were they something else? Blazer had brushed them with his finger tips and had come dangerously close to the truth.

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PITHECANTHROPUS ASTRALIS

THE trees had been thinning out around Blazer for some time. He could see the cave-pocked face of the cliff now, and the evening cook-fires burning along its base. The apron of cleared land that fronted it was white with the season's first snow; the dead leaves that had rustled beneath his feet yesterday morning when he had set forth on his journey to the stars were no longer visible, and winter had followed him home.

At last he left the trees behind and stepped into the open. His bleeding feet soiled the immaculate whiteness of the clearing, just as they had soiled the immaculate whiteness of the forest floor. He did not even notice. He had forgotten that he had feet—or legs or arms or hands. He had forgotten everything except the stars—the stars that he had tried to reach despite the disapproval of the Master of the Mountain; the stars whose light had brushed his finger-tips when he had tried to touch them, the while laughing at him for believing them to be so close when they were so far away.

But he knew them now—if not for what they were, then at least for what they were not. Regardless of what the Old Ones said, they were not lights that the Master of the Mountain had strung up in the sky to illumine the way for his Mistress-mother the Moon. They were more—far more—than that. And the world itself—that, too, was far more than Blazer had been led to believe. It was not confined to the forested valley where the Tribe lived—far from it. It did not end at the foot of the mountain, as Blazer had been told. It went on and on and on—perhaps forever.

A wind, faint but bitter cold, was blowing from the direction of the cliff. It brought with it the smell of wood smoke and the aroma of roasted flesh. But even though Blazer had not eaten since yesterday, he did not feel hungry—not in the usual sense of the word. But in another sense, he was terribly hungry—hungry to impart his great discovery.

He would tell Councilman first—this was only fitting. And then Councilman would tell the rest of the Tribe. Probably he would call all of them together and make a public announcement, detailing Blazer's accomplishment and praising Blazer's courage. True, Blazer had gone contrary to the wishes of the Master of the Mountain—had even defied him in a way. But Councilman was known for his broadmindedness in such matters, and it was unlikely that he would disapprove of Blazer's apostasy. Had he not said time and time again that each member of the Tribe should learn as much as possible about the world he lived in, because the more he learned the longer he would probably live?

Blazer could make out figures squatting around the cook-fires now, and he could hear the appreciative grunts of the People as they stuffed their bellies with half-cooked meat. He moved toward the biggest fire—the one that burned before the entrance of the dwelling place of Councilman. He obtained an inkling of how exhausted he was when he stumbled over a small stone and nearly fell. The long journey to the mountain and the perilous ascent of its slopes had taken their toil. But Blazer had no regrets. He had reached the stars, had he not? Or, if he had not quite reached them, he had come far closer to them than any man before him.

He was about to step into the semi-circle of firelight fronting Councilman's cave when he found his

way barred by the hulking figure of Hunter, Councilman's oldest son. "What would you at Councilman's fire, Blazer?"

Blazer tried to keep his voice steady, found that he could not. "I would speak with him," he said, "about a matter of great interest."

"What matter? It had better be important. He is in conference with Lawmaker and Lawkeeper, and does not wish to be disturbed."

Blazer took a deep breath. "I have been to the stars." His exultation was such that he uttered the words more loudly than he intended to, and they seemed to fill the whole night.

Hunter took a step backward, raised his spear. "You lie!"

Blazer did not flinch. "No, Hunter, I speak the truth. And I would speak it to Councilman."

"No one would dare go to the stars! The Master of the Mountain would not permit it!"

"I dared to go to them. And the Master of the Mountain did nothing. He did not even show himself."

"Blasphemer!"

A thin but authoritative voice came from the cave mouth. It was Councilman's. "Hunter, why do you shout? And at whom?"

"At Blazer, father. He claims he has been to the stars."

There was a silence. Then, "Bring him to the fire."

A weakness came into Blazer's knees as he accompanied Hunter into the firelight. But his exultation enabled him to overcome both his awe of Councilman and his physical exhaustion, and he saw the scene into which he presently stepped with clear and objective eyes.

In the entrance of the cave, legs extended toward the fire, Councilman sat. In his hands he held a split bone, and the marrow he had been sucking from it coated his withered lips and dripped from his bearded chin onto his bearskin tunic. He was an old man, Councilman was, without a single tooth in his head. Some said he had seen fifty winters, some fifty-five. His unkempt hair was long, and had the hue of snow clouds. His eyes had receded far back beneath show-cloud brows, and glowed like embers in deep dark caves. So emaciated was he with age that his tunic seemed too large for him.

On his right sat Lawmaker. Lawmaker was old, too, but not nearly as old as Councilman. But as though to compensate for this, his beard was longer. It was black and curly, and fell all the way to his groin. However, the effect was marred by the beard's resemblance in both color and texture to his bearskin tunic, and by the fact that his arms and legs were exceedingly hairy. In the firelight, bearskin and beard were one, and Lawmaker looked more bear than man.

The official on Councilman's left also wore a bearskin tunic, but his beard was relatively short and his arms and legs were relatively hairless; thus, it was easy to tell where bear left off and man began. This was Lawkeeper, the youngest member of the trio. But despite his comparative youth—or perhaps because of it—there was a quality in his pale eyes that was as old as death.

Councilman said, "Speak, Starman—speak. Are you no more than a stick of wood come to throw itself on the fire? And you, Hunter—go. This is not a matter for your addled mind to mull over."

Hunter departed. Sullenly.

Blazer stood alone, looking across the fading flames of the fire at his king. He found it difficult to breathe. While this was in large part due to his excitement, it was also due to the difference between the clean cold air he had become accustomed to on the mountain and the settlement-sullied air he had to cope with now.

He could see the figures of Councilman's brood in the darkness beyond the mouth of the cave. He felt their eyes upon him. He felt other eyes upon him, too, and although he could not see them he knew that the members of the Tribe had formed a large semi-circle beyond the perimeter of the firelight and were eagerly watching the proceedings.

Blazer felt proud. It was the first time in his young life that he had ever been the center of attention. He stood as tall as he could, and said, "I, Blazer of Trails, have been to the stars!"

Councilman grunted. "So I have been told. You found them in good working order, I trust?"

Blazer blinked. It was not the response he had expected. Unable to think of anything else to say, he said again, "I have been to the stars. The stars, Councilman —the *stars!*"

"Did the Master of the Mountain give you permission?"

Again, Blazer was taken aback. "I—I did not ask him."

Councilman turned to Law-keeper. "Did *you* give him permission?"

Lawkeeper's pale eyes grew even paler. "He did not ask me, but it would have done him no good if he had. I would never dream of superseding the Master of the Mountain's authority."

Councilman addressed Blazer again. "Tell us about the stars."

It was the opportunity Blazer had been waiting for. But now that it had arrived he found the task of communicating what he had seen and felt considerably beyond his powers. "The stars," he murmured. "The stars . . ." And then, "Yes, yes, I will tell you about them. I must. They are beautiful and terrible. It is possible to see them much better from the mountaintop than from here, but they still seem almost as far away. I reached up and tried to touch them, and it seemed that I almost could, but I knew that this was true only in my mind. They are unbelievably high in the sky—far higher than even the Master of the Mountain could reach, and this alone proves that he could not have put them there himself. And there are more of them beyond the mountain, and there is another forest, too. And beyond this forest there are other mountains, so—"

He became aware that someone was shouting. It was Lawmaker. "Liar! Blasphemer! You not only presume to break the Master of the Mountain's law, you presume to question his omnipotence as well!"

"That will do, Lawmaker," Councilman said. To Blazer, he said, "Why did you climb the mountain, Blazer?"

Blazer thought for a moment. Then he said, "I have spent many nights looking up at the stars. Many seasons, many cycles. And the more I looked up at them, the more I thought about them, and the more I thought about them the more I realized how little we know about them. They are always there at night, looking down at us, almost like the Great Light of Day, and it occurred to me that perhaps there was another reason for their being there than the one we have always taken for granted. And I thought that if I climbed the mountain I would be close enough to them to find out what this reason was. But the mountain is not high enough, and I failed.

But this was only the first attempt, Councilman. I think that if I were to climb it again with some of the other members of the Tribe, we could build a tall tower atop it that might enable us to get close enough to find out this reason." Excitement had been building up in Blazer all the while he talked. Excitement and enthusiasm. Now, both emotions took command of him, and it seemed that he was no longer standing by the cook-fire in the presence of his king but was soaring high into the heavens toward the stars, the world shrinking swiftly beneath him, the new world—the world of the stars—opening up before him in almost unbearable grandeur. "We can start tomorrow, Councilman. I will lead the way. We will build the tower tall, Councilman, tall and strong. And I will climb to its very top and extend my arms and touch—yes, touch—a star!"

Councilman looked at the radiant figure of the young man who so short a time ago had been a useful member of the Tribe. He sighed. He turned toward Law-keeper. "Kill him," he said.

After the last of Blazer's screams had been borne away by the wintry wind, Councilman addressed Lawmaker who, no longer capable of experiencing pleasure in witnessing another man's death throes, had remained by the fire beside his king. "Was my judgment sound?"

"Oh yes, Councilman. It could not have been more so. As a blasphemer and a liar, Blazer deserved to die."

Wearily, Councilman shook his head. "Blazer neither blasphemed nor lied. In my own mind there is no doubt but what the stars are far more than we let ourselves believe and the world we live in but a small part of a larger one."

He fell silent and did not speak for a long time. When at last he spoke again his eyes were fixed on the fading fire, and it was as though he were talking to the flames. "But what purpose would it serve for men to regard the stars as something more than lights in the sky, or for them to think of the world as a vast, rather than a small, wilderness? A man has but three functions in life: to propagate himself, to fill his belly and the bellies of his brood, and to provide himself and his brood with garments with which to keep

warm. He can perform these three functions best if he keeps his eyes fixed upon the ground and learns as much as possible about the world he lives in. If he looks too often heavenward, his spear may not find its mark; and if he concerns himself with those parts of the world which he does not live in, he will learn less about that part of it which he does live in.

"But it was not because of these things alone that I had Blazer killed.

"Consider. Any pursuit not related to the fulfilling of the three functions of life would cause men to think they have a fourth, or even a fifth, function. This is especially true of the pursuit Blazer had in mind. Such a pursuit would be disastrous. It would cause men to lose track of what they are—which is nothing—and to bestow upon themselves qualities which they do not possess. They would then be forced to pretend to be something which they are not, and this pretense would influence all their decisions. Worse, it would be like a pall of smoke hovering continually before their eyes, and they would be unable to solve the simplest of problems because they would be incapable of seeing the problem for what it really was. Only when men can see themselves for what they are can they discern the truth.

"There will be other men like Blazer. They, too, must be destroyed. If they are not destroyed, then they will destroy us.

"So let the stars continue to be what they have always been—lights in the sky that the Master of the Mountain installed there to light the way for his Mistress-mother the Moon. And let us pray nightly to both Master and Mistress that the hunting will be good and that our bellies will not go empty and that there will always be children to carry on our ways. For this is all we know, and all we need to know, and all we want to know.