

ape's eye view

by...*ROBERT F. YOUNG*

It looked bad for the strange youngster, until his opponent screamed as if some one had stuck a knife through his eyes.

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Here is a gentler story, however, our cover story, about a strange boy.

TODAY you'd never guess that Appleseed Corners was once the scene of an occult phenomenon. It's only been a month now since the entity swooped down cut of the blue and ate poor Pinky Fields, but the people around here have gone back to their usual ruts and their favorite TV chairs already, and nobody even speculates any more as to why the entity ate such a scrawny specimen of humanity as Pinky when there were so many fatter and healthier specimens standing around. I suppose that I'd be back in my own rut and chair too, instead of writing this, if I hadn't ransacked the attic yesterday for my fishing tackle and happened to run across an old book.

It was a book I hadn't read since I was a kid and it wasn't at all the kind of book you'd have expected would throw any light on Pinky Fields and the entity—or anything else, for that matter. Yet the minute I read the title I got a new slant on the entire incident.

I'd better start with Pinky Fields. Not that he's much to start with, but I've got to start somewhere. I was in the same grades with him all through grammar school, and all through high school, so I guess I knew him about as well as anybody did. I never liked him though. No one did. He was too stand-offish for one thing, and too much of a physical wreck for another. And then there was that pink skin of his. You just couldn't get used to it no matter how hard you tried, though I guess none of us ever tried very hard. Calling him Pinky didn't help matters much either, but I don't know what mere appropriate nickname you could give a kid whose complexion resembled a ripe peach without fuzz.

Pinky was a foundling, and the old timers used to tell it around that the reason his folks left him on the Fields' doorstep was because they couldn't stand the sight of him. But I don't think anybody paid much attention at the time, because that was the same summer the meteor landed in Ernie Crumley's apple orchard and ruined four of his best McIntoshes. What with the government mineralogists digging up the place and sifting ashes (that was all they ever found), and the newspaper photographers taking pictures, and the city people snooping around every Sunday, Appleseed Corners probably had too much on its mind to bother about foundlings. Anyway, the Fields took Pinky in and brought him up. They'd lost their first child and couldn't have any more, so I imagine that had a lot to do with it. Maybe they were even glad to get him.

As I said, I went to school with him, but I don't have any clear recollection of him before the fourth or the fifth grade. In one of those grades—I'm not sure which—I had the seat behind him, and I remember staring at the back of his small round head and marveling at his hair. That was another freakish thing about him. It wasn't enough that his complexion should resemble a fuzzless peach; his hair had to

resemble the fuzz.

The next thing that sticks in my mind is his dumbness. In reading class, when the teacher called on him to read a paragraph or two, you'd think he was the village idiot, he read so slow. I can still see him standing there by his desk, his wizened face screwed up, his forehead plowed with little wrinkles, his shriveled lips twisting as though they hurt him, and his skinny arms sagging with the weight of the primary reader.

Not that reading was the only subject that gave him trouble. Every subject gave him trouble. He couldn't add, he couldn't subtract, he couldn't remember history dates, he couldn't get grammar through his head, and to this day I don't think he ever did figure out the difference between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. He just couldn't do anything. And yet he got by. Somehow, somehow, and by the skin of his undersized teeth, he got by.

I suppose he seemed even dumber than he was because you'd naturally expect a kid with such a scrawny body to have a few brains to make up for it. His reflexes were so slow that if you threw a baseball or a basketball to him it was pretty sure to hit him—usually in the face—before he even realized you'd thrown it. He couldn't even chin himself on the horizontal bar, and he ran like a sixty year old man with lumbago. He was hopeless. Around the fifth or sixth grade the coach took pity on him, or gave up in despair—I don't know which—and got him permanently excused from all athletic activities.

It doesn't take much imagination to figure out what the other kids were doing all this time. As I said, they didn't like him anyway, not only because he was different, but because for all his mental and physical inferiority he still seemed to think he was better than anybody else. One day it would be ink smeared on the nape of his neck and the next day it would be a pencil point jabbed into his arm, and every day, day in, day out, it would be persecution by the local example of what psychologists like to refer to as aggressive-neurosis.

At that time, the reigning bully in Appleseed Grammar School was Harve Randall, and with a kid like Pinky Fields available, no bully ever had it so good. And then one day—

I like to remember that day, because while I didn't like Pinky Fields, I didn't like Harve Randall either. In fact, I think I liked him even less than I liked Pinky. It was in May and school had just let out, and Harve had just begun his daily defamation of Pinky's physique. "Chicken ears," he said, elbowing him in the ribs. "Rabbit teeth!"

Pinky didn't say anything. He just kept on walking. Harve followed, "Peach head! Yellow belly... Manna fight?" he added hopefully.

Pinky paused, and right away a crowd began to gather. Nobody really expected anything much would happen, but nobody wanted to take a chance on missing a possible massacre. Besides, it was too early to go home.

For a moment Harve was so taken aback that he couldn't say anything. He just stood and stared at the smaller boy, his puffy eyes round with astonishment, his jaw even slacker than usual. But it didn't take him long to recover himself. He stuck out his chest and knotted up his fists. "I'll knock your teeth down your throat!" he said in the best aggressive-neurotic tradition.

Slowly, solemnly, Pinky laid down his books (he was always behind on his homework). He tightened his own fists into little white knobs and raised them in front of his face. If he was afraid, he didn't show it.

Harve laughed, and swung contemptuously. Anybody else would have seen the punch coming and would have dodged it easily, but not Pinky. The blow caught him in the neck and sent him toppling and in an instant Harve was on top of him, pummeling away like mad. All I could think of was a young gorilla attacking a muscular dystrophy victim.

It looked bad for Pinky and little as I liked him I couldn't help feeling sorry for him and wishing I was big enough to pull Harve away. And then, all of a sudden, Harve stopped punching and started to scream. It was the shrillest scream I'd ever heard—the kind of a scream a person might give out with if somebody stuck a knife through his eye. But Pinky hadn't done anything so far as I could see, though he did seem to have some kind of a hold on Harve's head—if you can call pressing your thumbs against somebody's forehead a hold.

Harve thrashed around for a while, though he didn't scream any more, and then—I don't know why, because there wasn't any sound—I got the impression that something snapped inside his head, and right after that he lay still. I don't mean he passed out, or anything like that. He just stopped thrashing around and lay there on his back as though the school lawn was the most logical place in the world to lie down on.

Pinky had removed his thumbs by then, and now he picked up his books and got to his feet. His nose was bleeding and his cheek was skinned, otherwise he was none the worse for wear. He walked off without saying a word, leaving the rest of us standing there with our jaws hanging almost to our knees.

Pretty soon Harve seemed to get tired of lying in one position and he rolled over on his side. There were a couple of dandelions growing right by his nose and he picked one of them and held it up and stared at it. From the look that came into his eyes you'd have thought it was the most beautiful flower in the world instead of just a plain dandelion. After a while he sat up and fastened it in one of the buttonholes in his shirt, then he got up and walked away as though there wasn't anybody else in the whole world besides him. To this day I don't think he realizes that there is anybody besides him. There's always a blank look on his face when you pass him in the street, and all he ever does, when he's not working on his father's farm, is look at trees, watch birds, and pick flowers.

Well, you'd naturally have expected Pinky's popularity to take a turn for the better after that. But it didn't. Nobody picked on him any more, that's for sure, but nobody liked him either. And then too, his victory over Harve never got the publicity it deserved, because the very next day Abel Struey snagged a skeleton when he was plowing the south patch he'd let go fallow twenty years back.

According to the coroner's statement in the Appleseed Corner's Gazette, the skeleton was that of a small woman, or girl, and had gone undiscovered from five to ten years. There was no evidence of foul play, and in a way that was disappointing because there's nothing like a good local murder mystery to stimulate intellectual activity in a Place the size of Appleseed Corners. Even so, kids and grown-ups talked of nothing else for a whole week, and by that time Pinky's victory was ancient history.

The next thing that comes to mind about Pinky is his dislike for girls. All boys dislike girls at a certain age—or if they don't, they pretend to—but Pinky seemed to despise them, and the older he grew the more he seemed to despise them. The girls in his grammar school classes, and later on in his high school classes, weren't by any means the most beautiful girls in the world, but they weren't the slimy reptilian monsters he seemed to think they were either. Yet whenever he looked at one, he actually shuddered.

But I don't think any of the girls ever noticed. They were too busy shuddering themselves.

That brings me to Pinky's high school days.

To say that his high school days approximated his grammar school days would be almost, but not quite, true. He went on being awkward and conceited and everybody went right on disliking him, but as the subjects grew harder and more complex, his dumbness began to fade. Not that he ever became smart—he graduated with an average in the low eighties—but compared to the way he'd been before, he *seemed* smart. And the odd part of it was, you got the impression that if he'd gone on to college he'd have become smarter and smarter. But that's a matter for pure speculation, because he never went to college. He went to work on his father's farm instead. And now we'll never know, because a month ago the entity ate him.

Everybody knows about the entity by now—about the way it swooned down into Appleseed Corners on that hot Saturday afternoon and scooped Pinky right out of the crowd of shoppers with its long red tongue and swallowed him whole. I didn't see it myself—I had to repair the north pasture fence and couldn't get to town that day—so I have to take other people's word for the way it looked. According to Mrs. Hitchcock, who runs the post office, it was as big as Ben Snedley's new barn, had six enormous blue eyes, a big slavering mouth, and no body. But Abe Moorehouse, who tends bar at the Horse and Wagon, has a different description. He says that the entity had green eyes, was at least twice as big as Ben Snedley's new barn, and had three golden legs and a long silver tail. I don't know about Abe, though. He does a lot of sampling when he's behind the bar and is liable to see anything.

Anyway, I've talked to most of the people who were in town shopping that day and I've come to the conclusion that none of them saw same thing. Either the entity came and went so fast that no one got a

good look at it, or everybody was so scared they couldn't see straight, or both.

You'd have thought an event like that would furnish conversational material for at least a year in a place the size of Appleseed Corners. But when it became fairly evident that the entity wasn't going to come back down and eat anybody else, and the army and the F.B.I and the sanitation worker, who won the \$64,000 Question in the H.P Lovecraft category, had all gone back to wherever they'd come from, people around here stopped standing on the streetcorners, talking and watching the sky, and went back to their usual ruts and their favorite TV chairs, and now no one ever even mentions the entity any more.

As I said, I'd probably be in my own rut and chair too—in fact, I'd probably be watching TV right now instead of writing this—if I hadn't ransacked the attic yesterday and happened to run across this old book. Ever since I picked it up, I've been thinking of Pinky Fields and the entity in a different way and I think I've got the answer to what really happened.

Pinky's dumbness is the key. If he'd been unusually brilliant in his schoolwork people would have paid more attention to him and maybe someone would have connected his unusual brilliance with his unusual body, and then gone one step further and connected both qualities with the meteor that landed in Ernie Crumley's apple orchard. But it never occurred to anyone that the meteor might have been something more than an ordinary hunk of metal, or that Pinky might be something more than an ordinary foundling because you'd naturally assume that any child of a race of people intelligent enough to develop space travel would make human children look sick when it came to learning the three R's, playing games, and being the life of the party.

But think for a minute. Suppose an airliner crashed in some remote spot in the Belgian Congo and caught fire and burned. Suppose there were only two survivors—a mother and her infant son. There aren't any native villages in the vicinity; there's no civilization of any kind. The highest form of life is a tribe of apes.

Now suppose the mother was badly injured in the crash and knows she is going to die. Her son, however, is unhurt, and if she can find some way to keep him alive until the rescue ship comes, he'll be returned to civilization. So she does the only thing she can do. Before she dies; she puts him some place where the apes will find him, hoping they'll adopt him.

So two of the apes find and adopt him and the kid survives. But he's different from the rest of the tribe, and he knows it and they know it. He conforms to ape society and tries to do as the apes do. At first you might think that, being human, he would be able to do as the apes can do and be able to do it better, and that when it came to absorbing ape lore, he would be a star pupil. But think again.

About the only things the apes could teach him would be the best way to find a grub under a log, how to climb a tree, how to get from one tree to another tree, and so forth. How talented do you think this kid would be in any of those subjects? Wouldn't the apes think he was pretty dumb? And wouldn't the younger apes chitter at him and pick on him every time they got the chance?

Now suppose that one of the younger apes is the anthropoid equivalent of an aggressive-neurotic and keeps pestering the kid all the time. The kid realized that he'll have to do something or he'll never have any peace. Out of desperation, he figures out a simple wrestling hold—say a hammer-lock—and when the showdown comes, he breaks the ape's arm. The apes wouldn't be able to understand what he'd done, to say nothing of being able to understand how he'd done it. But they'd start leaving him alone.

So from that point on, the kid grows up unmolested. Pretty soon, though, the male apes start noticing another peculiarity about him. Every time he looks at a she ape he shudders.

Now I know that a man can look at a she ape almost any day in the week and not be particularly revolted. But suppose that every time he looked at one he was reminded of the fact that some day he would probably marry one. How would he look at her then?

Anyway, the kid continues his jungle education, and as the years go by, enough facts accumulate in his mind so that he can start using his superior reasoning powers and begin to think. He still seems dumb to the apes, but not quite so dumb as he seemed before. It begins to look as though some day he may be a whizz at finding a grub under a log, but it is still extremely doubtful if he'll ever master the fine art of

brachiating.

And that brings us to the rescue ship. For the sake of comparison we'll have to assume that it took nearly thirty years for the rescue party to get organized and make the flight to the jungle. Finally, though, the ship lands in a clearing close to the spot where the first ship crashed, and lowers a red gangplank. The kid, instinctively recognizing his own kind, runs up the gangplank and into the ship's belly, and all the apes hanging in the nearby trees think the ship ate him and wonder why it didn't eat them instead.

And that's the way it was with Pinky. When the "entity" swooped down into Appleseed Corners, it didn't stick out its tongue and lap him up the way it seemed to the natives. It merely protruded its equivalent of a gangplank and Pinky ran up it and joined his own kind. He'd probably seen enough humans by then to last him the rest of his life.

The book I found in the attic? You've probably guessed the title by now, though in developing the analogy. I had to take a lot of liberties with the plot and the main character. In case you haven't, its "Tarzan of the Apes".

If there are imaginative writers on Pinky's world, maybe one of them will get an idea for a similar book when the news of his adventures gets around. But since Pinky's ancestors climbed down from the trees at least a million years before ours did, the book is bound to have a slightly different title.

"Tarzan of the Men" would be my guess.