# **Half-Breeds on Venus**

Isaac Asimov

The damp, somnolent atmosphere stirred violently and shrieked aside. The bare plateau shook three times as the heavy egg-shaped projectiles shot down from outer space. The sound of the landing reverberated from the mountains on one side to the lush forest on the other, and then all was silent again.

One by one, three doors clanged open, and human figures stepped out in hesitant single file. First slowly, and then with impatient turbulence, they set first foot upon the new world, until the space surrounding the ships was crowded.

A thousand pairs of eyes gazed upon the prospect and a thousand mouths chattered excitedly. And in the other-world wind, a thousand crests of foot-high white hair swayed gracefully.

The Tweenies had landed on Venus!

Max Scanlon sighed wearily, “Here we are!”

He turned from the porthole and slumped into his own special arm-chair. “They’re as happy as children-and I don’t blame them. We’ve got a new world-one all for ourselves- and that’s a great thing. But just the same, there are hard days ahead .of us. I am almost afraid! It is a project so lightly embarked upon, but one so hard to carry out to completion.”

A gentle arm stole about his shoulder and he grasped it tightly, smiling into the soft, blue eyes that met his. “But you’re not afraid, are you, Madeline?”

“Certainly not!” And then her expression grew sadder, “If only father had come with us. You-you know that he meant more to us than to the others. We were the-the first he took under his wing, weren’t we?”

There was a long silence after that as each fell into deep thought.

Max sighed, “I remember him that day forty years ago- old suit, pipe, everything. He took me in. Me, a despised half-breed! And-and he found you for me, Madeline!”

“I know,” there were tears in her eyes. “But he’s still with us, Max, and always will be-here, and there.” Her hand crept first to her own heart and then to Max’s.

“Hey, there, Dad, catch her, catch her!”

Max whirled at the sound of his elder son’s voice, just in time to catch up the little bundle of flying arms and legs that catapulted into him.

He held her gravely up before him, “Shall I give you to your papa, Elsie? He wants you.”

The little girl kicked her legs ecstatically. “No, no. I want you, grand-daddy. I want you to give me a piggy-back and come out with grandmamma to see how nice everything is.”

Max turned to his son, and motioned him sternly away, “Depart, despised father, and let old grand-dad have a chance.”

Arthur laughed and mopped a red face, “Keep her, for Heaven’s sake. She’s been leading me and the wife a merry chase outside. We had to drag her back by the dress to keep her from running off into the forest. Didn’t we, Elsie?”

Elsie, thus appealed to, suddenly recalled a past grievance. “Grand-daddy, tell him to let me see the pretty trees. He doesn’t want me to.” She wriggled from Max’s grasp and ran to the porthole. “See them, grand-daddy, see them. It’s all trees outside. It’s not black anymore. I hated it when it was black, didn’t you?”

Max leaned over and ruffled the child’s soft, white hair gravely, “Yes, Elsie, I hated it when it was black. But it isn’t black anymore, and it won’t ever be black again. Now go run to grandmamma. She’ll get some cake specially for you. Go ahead, run!”

He followed the departing forms of his wife and granddaughter with smiling eyes, and then, as they turned to his son, they became serious once more.

“Well, Arthur?”

“Well, dad, what now?”

“There’s no time to waste, son. We’ve got to start building immediately-underground!”

Arthur snapped into an attentive attitude, “Underground!” He frowned his dismay.

“I know, I know. I said nothing of this previously, but it’s got to be done. At all costs we must vanish from the face of the System. There are Earthmen on Venus-purebloods. There aren’t many, it’s true, but there are some. They mustn’t find us-at least, not until we are prepared for whatever may follow. That will take years.”

“But father, underground! To live like moles, hidden from light and air. I don’t like that.”

“Oh, nonsense. Don’t overdramatize. Well live on the surface-but the city; the power-stations, the food and water reserves, the laboratories-all that must be below and impregnable.”

The old Tweenie gestured the subject away with impatience, “Forget that, anyway. I want to talk about something else- something we’ve discussed already.”

Arthur’s eyes hardened and he shifted his glance to the ceiling. Max rose and placed his bands upon his son’s brawny shoulders.

“I’m past sixty, Arthur. How long I have yet to live, I don’t know. In any case, the best of me belongs to the past and it is better that I yield the leadership to a younger, more vigorous person.”

“Dad, that’s sentimental bosh and you know it. There isn’t one of us that’s fit to wipe your shoes and no one is going to listen for a second to any plan of appointing a successor while you’re still alive.”

“I’m not going to ask them to listen. It’s done-and you’re the new leader.”

The younger man shook his head firmly, “You can’t make me serve against my will.”

Max smiled whimsically, “I’m afraid you’re dodging responsibility, son. You’re leaving your poor old father to the strains and hardships of a job beyond his aged strength.”

“Dad!” came the shocked retort. “That’s not so. You know it isn’t. You—”

“Then prove it. Look at it this way. Our race needs active leadership, and I can’t supply it. I’ll always be here-while I live-to advise you and help you as best I can, but from now on, you must take the initiative.”

Arthur frowned and the words came from him reluctantly, “All right, then. I take the job of field commander. But remember, you’re commander-in-chief.”

“Good! And now let’s celebrate the occasion.” Max opened a cupboard and withdrew a box, from which he abstracted a pair of cigars. He sighed, “The supply of tobacco is down to the vanishing point and we won’t have any more until we grow our own, but- we’ll smoke to the new leader.”

Blue smoke curled upwards and Max frowned through it at his son, “Where’s Henry?”

Arthur grinned, “Dunno! I haven’t seen him since we landed. I can tell you with whom he is, though.”

Max grunted, “I know that, too.”

“The kid’s making hay while the sun shines. It won’t be many years now. Dad, before you’ll be spoiling a second set of grandchildren.”

“If they’re as good as the three of my first set, I only hope I live to see the day.”

And father and son smiled affectionately at each other and listened in silence to the muted sound of happy laughter from the hundreds of Tweenies outside.

Henry Scanlon cocked his head to one side, and raised his hand for silence, “Do you hear running water, Irene?”

The girl at his side nodded, “Over in that direction.”

“Let’s go there, then. A river flashed by just before we landed and maybe that’s it.”

“All right, if you say so, but I think we ought to be getting back to the ships.”

“What for?” Henry stopped and stared. “I should think you’d be glad to stretch your legs after weeks on a crowded ship.”

“Well, it might be dangerous.”

“Not here in the highlands, Irene. Venusian highlands are practically a second Earth. You can see this is forest and not jungle. Now if we were in the coastal regions—” He broke off short, as if he had just remembered something. “Besides, what’s there to be afraid of? I’m with you, aren’t I?” And he patted the Tonite gun at his hip.

Irene repressed a sudden smile and shot an arch glance at her strutting companion, “I’m quite aware that you’re with me. That’s the danger.”

Henry’s chest deflated with an audible gasp. He frowned. “Very funny-And I on my best behavior, too.” He drifted away, brooded sulkily awhile, and then addressed the trees in a distant manner, “Which reminds me that tomorrow is Daphne’s birthday. I’ve promised her a present.”

“Get her a reducing belt,” came the quick retort. “Fat thing!”

“Who’s fat? Daphne? Oh-I wouldn’t say so.” He considered matters carefully, one thoughtful eye upon the young girl at his side. “Now my description of her would be-shall we say-’pleasingly plump,’ or, maybe, ‘comfortably upholstered.’ “

“She’s fat,” Irene’s voice was suddenly a hiss, and something very like a frown wrinkled her lovely face, “and her eyes are green.” She swung on ahead, chin high, and superbly conscious of her own little figure.

Henry hastened his steps and caught up, “Of course, I prefer skinny girls any day.

Irene whirled on him and her little fists clenched, “I’m not skinny, you incredibly stupid ape.”

“But Irene, who said I meant you?” His voice was solemn, but his eyes were laughing,

The girl reddened to the ears and turned away, lower lip trembling. The smile faded from Henry’s eyes and was replaced by a look of concern. His arm shot out hesitantly and slipped about her shoulder.

“Angry, Irene?”

The smile that lit her face of a sudden was as brilliant as the sparkling sheen of her silvery hair in the bright sun.

“No,” she said.

Their eyes met and, for a moment, Henry hesitated-and found that he who hesitates is lost; for with a sudden twist and a smothered laugh, Irene was free once more.

Pointing through a break in the trees, she cried, “Look, a lake!” and was off at a run.

Henry scowled, muttered something under his breath, and ran after.

The scene was truly Earthly. A rapids-broken stream wound its way through banks of slender-trunked trees and then spread into a placid lake some miles in width. The brooding quiet was unbroken save by the muffled beat that issued from the throat-bags of the frilled lizards that nested in the upper reaches of the trees.

The two Tweenies-boy and girl-stood hand in hand upon the bank and drank in the beauty of the scene.

Then there was a muffled splash near by and Irene shrank into the encircling arms of her companion.

“What’s the matter?”

“N-nothing. Something moved in the water, I think.”

“Oh, imagination, Irene.”

“No. I did see something. It came up and-oh, goodness, Henry, don’t squeeze so tightly—”

She almost lost her balance as Henry suddenly dropped her altogether and jerked at his Tonite gun.

Immediately before them, a dripping green head lifted out of the water and regarded them out of wide-set, staring goggle-eyes. Its broad lipless mouth opened and closed rapidly, but not a sound issued forth.

Max Scanlon stared thoughtfully at the rugged foot-hills ahead and clasped his hands behind his back.

“You think so, do you?”

“Certainly, Dad,” insisted Arthur, enthusiastically. “If we burrow under these piles of granite, all Earth couldn’t get at us. It wouldn’t take two months to form the entire cavern, with our unlimited power.”

“Hmph! It will require care!”

“It will get it!”

“Mountainous regions are quake regions.”

“We can rig up enough stat-rays to hold up all Venus, quakes or no quakes.”

“Stat-rays eat up energy wholesale, and a breakdown that will leave us energyless would mean the end.”

“We can hook up five separate power-houses,-as foolproof as we can make them. All five won’t break down at once.”

The old Tweenie smiled, “All right, son. I see you’ve got it planned thoroughly. Go ahead! Start whenever you want-and remember, it’s all up to you.”

“Good! Let’s get back to the ships.” They picked their way gingerly down the rocky, slope.

“You know, Arthur,” said Max, stopping suddenly, “I’ve been thinking about those stat-beams.”

“Yes?” Arthur offered his arm, and the two resumed their walk.

“It’s occurred to me that if we could make them two-dimensional in extent and curve them, we’d have the perfect defense, as long as our energy lasted-a stat-field.”

“You need four-dimensional radiation for that. Dad-nice to think about but can’t be done.”

“Oh, is that so? Well, listen to this—”

What Arthur was to listen to remained hidden, however- for that day at least. A piercing shout ahead jerked both their heads upward. Up towards them came the bounding form of Henry Scanlon, and following him, at a goodly distance and a much more leisurely pace, came Irene.

“Say, Dad, I had a devil of a time finding you. Where were you?”

“Right here, son. Where were you?”

“Oh, just around. Listen, Dad. You know those amphibians the explorers talk about as inhabiting the highland lakes of Venus, don’t you? Well, we’ve located them, lots of them, a regular convoy of them. Haven’t we, Irene?”

Irene paused to catch her breath and nodded her head, “They’re the cutest things, Mr. Scanlon. All green.” She wrinkled her nose laughingly.

Arthur and his father exchanged glances of doubt. The former shrugged. “Are you sure you haven’t been seeing things? I remember once. Henry, when you sighted a meteor in space, scared us all to death, and then had it turn out to be your own reflection in the port glass.”

Henry, painfully aware of Irene’s snicker, thrust out a belligerent lower lip, “Say, Art, I guess you’re looking for a shove in the face. And I’m old enough to give it to you, too.”

“Whoa there, quiet down,” came the peremptory voice of the elder Scanlon, “and you, Arthur, had better leam to respect your younger brother’s dignity. Now here. Henry, all Arthur meant was that these amphibians are as shy as rabbits. No one’s ever caught more than a glimpse of them.”

“Well, we have. Dad. Lots of them. I guess they were attracted by Irene. No one can resist her.”

“I know you can’t,” and Arthur laughed loudly.

Henry stiffened once more, but his father stepped between. “Grow up, you two. Let’s go and see these amphibians.”

“This is amazing,” exclaimed Max Scanlon. “Why, they’re as friendly as children. I can’t understand it.”

Arthur-shook his head, “Neither can I, Dad. In fifty years, no explorer has ever gotten a good look at one, and here they are-thick as flies.”

Henry was throwing pebbles into the lake. “Watch this, all of you.”

A pebble curved its way into the water, and as it splashed six green forms turned a back somersault and slid smoothly below the surface. With no time for a breath between, one was up again and the pebble arced back to fall at Henry’s feet.

The amphibians were crowding closer in ever increasing numbers now, approaching the very edge of the lake, where they grasped at the coarse reeds on the bank and stared goggle-eyed at the Tweenies. Their muscular webbed, legs could be seen below the surface of the water, moving back and forth with lazy grace. Without cessation, the lipless mouths opened and closed in a queer, uneven rhythm.

“I think they’re talking, Mr. Scanlon,” said Irene, suddenly.

“It’s quite possible,” agreed the old Tweenie, thoughtfully. “Their brain-cases are fairly large, and they may possess considerable intelligence. If their voice boxes and ears are tuned to sound waves of higher or lower range than our own, we would be unable to hear them-and that might very well explain their soundlessness.”

“They’re probably discussing us as busily as we are them,” said Arthur.

“Yes, and wondering what sort of freaks we are,” added Irene.

Henry said nothing. He was approaching the edge of the lake with cautious steps. The ground grew muddy beneath his feet, and the reeds thick. The group of amphibians nearest turned anxious eyes toward him, and one or two loosened their hold and slipped silently away.

But the nearest held his ground. His wide mouth was clamped tight; his eyes were wary-but he did not move.

Henry, paused, hesitated, and then held out his hand, “Hiya, Phib!”

The “Phib” stared at the outstretched hand. Very cautiously, his own webbed forelimb stretched out and touched the Tweenie’s fingers. With a jerk, they were drawn back, and the Phib’s mouth worked in soundless excitement.

“Be careful,” came Max’s voice from behind. “You’ll scare him that way. His skin is terribly sensitive and dry objects must irritate him. Dip your hand in the water.”

Slowly, Henry obeyed. The Phib’s muscles tensed to escape at the slightest sudden motion, but none came. Again the Tweenie’s hand was held out, dripping wet this time.

For a long minute, nothing happened, as the Phib seemed to debate within itself the future course of action. And then, after two false starts and hasty withdrawals, fingers touched again.

“Ataphib,” said Henry, and clasped the green hand in his own.

A single, startled jerk followed and then a lusty return of pressure to an extent that numbed the Tweenie’s fingers. Evidently encouraged by the first Phib’s example, his fellows were crowding close now, offering hosts of hands.

The other three Tweenies slushed up through the mud now, and offered wetted hands in their turn.

“That’s funny,” said Irene. “Everytime I shake hands I seem to keep thinking of hair.”

Max turned to her, “Hair?”

“Yes, ours. I get a picture of long, white hair, standing straight up and shining in the sun.” Her hand rose unconsciously to her own smooth tresses.

“Say!” interrupted Henry suddenly, “I’ve been noticing that, too, now that you mention it. Only when I shake hands, though.”

“How about you, Arthur?” asked Max.

Arthur nodded once, his eyebrows climbing.

Max smiled and pounded fist into palm. “Why, it’s a primitive sort of telepathy-too weak to work without physical contact and even then capable of delivering only a few simple ideas.”

“But why hair, dad?” asked Arthur.

“Maybe it’s our hair that attracted them in the first place. They’ve never seen anything like it and-and-well, who can explain their psychology?”

He was down on his knees suddenly, splashing water over his high crest of hair. There was a frothing of water and a surging of green bodies as the Phibs pressed closer. One green paw passed gently through the stiff white crest, followed by excited, if noiseless, chattering. Struggling amongst themselves for favored vantage-points, they competed for the privilege of touching the hair until Max, for sheer weariness, was forced to rise again.

“They’re probably our friends for life now,” he said. “A pretty queer set of animals.”

It was Irene, then, who noticed the group of Phib? a hundred yards from shore. They paddled quietly, making no effort to approach closer, “Why don’t they come?” she asked.

She turned to one of the foremost Phibs and pointed, making frantic gestures of dubious meaning. She received only solemn stares in return.

“That’s not the way, Irene,” admonished Max, gently. He 229 held out his hand, grasped that of a willing Phib and stood motionless for a moment. When he loosed his grip, the Phib slid into the water and disappeared. In a moment, the laggard Phibs were approaching shore slowly.

“How did you do it?” gasped Irene.

“Telepathy! I held on tightly and pictured an isolated group of Phibs and a long hand stretching out over the water to shake theirs.” He smiled gently, “They are quite intelligent, or they would not have understood so readily.”

“Why, they’re females,” cried Arthur, in sudden breathless astonishment “By all that’s holy,-they suckle their young!”

The newcomers were slenderer and lighter in color than the others. They advanced shyly, urged on by the bolder males and held out timid hands in greeting.

“Oh-h,” Irene cried in sudden delight. “Look at this!”

She was down on her knees in the mud, arms outstretched to the nearest female. The other three watched in fascinated silence as the nervous she-Phib clasped its tiny armful closer to its breast.

But Irene’s arms made little inviting gestures, “Please, please. It’s so cute. I won’t hurt him.”

Whether the Phib mother understood is doubtful, but with a sudden motion, she held out a little green bundle of squirming life and deposited it in the waiting arms.

Irene rose, squealing with delight. Little webbed feet kicked aimlessly and round frightened eyes stared at her. The other three crowded close and watched it curiously.

“Its the dearest little thing, it is. Look at its funny little mouth. Do you want to hold it. Henry?”

Henry jumped backwards as if stung, “Not on your life! I’d probably drop it.”

“Do you get any thought images, Irene?’ asked Max, thoughtfully.

Irene considered and frowned her concentration, “No-o. It’s too young, mayb-oh, yes! It’s-it’s—” She stopped, and tried to laugh. “It’s hungry!”

She returned the little baby Phib to its mother, whose muscular arms clasped the little mite close. The tiny Phib swiveled its little green head to bend one last goggling look at the creature that had held it for an instant.

“Friendly creatures,” said Max, “and intelligent. They can keep their lakes and rivers. We’ll take the land and won’t interfere with them.”

A lone Tweenie stood on Scanlon Ridge and his field-glass pointed at the Divide ten miles up the hills. For five minutes, the glass did not waver and the Tweenie stood like some watchful statue made of the same rock as formed the mountains all about.

And then the field-glass lowered, and the Tweenie’s face was a pale thin-lipped picture of gloom. He hastened down the slope to the guarded, hidden entrance to Venustown.

He shot past the guards without a word and descended into the lower levels where solid rock was still being puffed into nothingness and shaped at will by controlled blasts of super-energy.

Arthur Scanlon looked up and with a sudden premonition of disaster, gestured the Disintegrators to a halt.

“What’s wrong, Sorrell?”

The Tweenie leant over and whispered a single word into Arthur’s ear.

“Where?” Arthur’s voice jerked out hoarsely.

“On the other side of the ridge. They’re coming through the Divide now in our direction. I spotted the blaze of sun on metal and—” he held up his field-glass significantly.

“Good Lord!” Arthur rubbed his forehead distractedly and then turned to the anxiously-watching Tweenie at the controls of the Disinto. “Continue as planned! No change!”

He hurried up the levels to the entrance, and snapped out hurried orders, “Triple the guard immediately. No one but me or those with me, are to be permitted to leave. Send out men to round up any stragglers outside immediately and order them to keep within shelter and make no unnecessary sound.”

Then, back again through the central avenue to his father’s quarters.

Max Scanlon looked up from his calculations and his grave forehead smoothed out slowly.

“Hello, son. Is anything wrong? Another resistant stratum?”

“No, nothing like that.” Arthur closed the door carefully and lowered his voice. “Earthmen!”

For a moment. Max made no movement. The expression on his face froze for an instant, and then, with a sudden exhalation, he slumped in his chair and the lines in his forehead deepened wearily.

“Settlers?”

“Looks so. Sorrell said women and children were among them. There were several hundred in all, equipped for a stay-and headed in this direction.”

Max groaned, “Oh, the luck, the luck! All the vast empty spaces of Venus to choose and they come here. Come, let’s get a firsthand look at this.”

They came through the Divide in a long, snaky line. Hard-bitten pioneers with their pinched work-worn women and their carefree, half-barbarous, wilderness-bred children. The low, broad “Venus Vans” joggled clumsily over the untrodden ways, loaded down with amorphous masses of household necessities.

The leaders surveyed the prospect and one spoke in clipped, jerky syllables, “Almost through, Jem. We’re out among the foothills now.”

And the other replied slowly, “And there’s good new growing-land ahead. We can stake out farms and settle down.” He sighed, “It’s been tough going this last month. I’m glad it’s over!”

And from a ridge ahead-the last ridge before the valley-the Scanlons, father and son, unseen dots in the distance, watched the newcomers with heavy hearts.

“The one thing we could not prepare for-and it’s happened.”

Arthur spoke slowly and reluctantly, “They are few and unarmed. We can drive them out in an hour.” With sudden fierceness, “Venus is ours!”

“Yes, we can drive them out in an hour-in ten minutes. But they would return, in thousands, and armed. We’re not ready to fight all Earth, Arthur.”

The younger man bit his lip and words were muttered forth half in shame, “For the sake of the race. Father-we could kill them all.”

“Never!” exclaimed Max, his old eyes flashing. “We will not be the first to strike. If we kill, we can expect no mercy from Earth; and we will deserve none,”

“But, father, what else? We can expect no mercy from Earth as it is. If we’re spotted,-if they ever suspect our existence, our whole hegira becomes pointless and we lose out at the very beginning.”

“I know. I know.”

“We can’t change now,” continued Arthur, passionately. “We’ve spent months preparing Venustown. How could we start over?”

“We can’t,” agreed Max, tonelessly. “To even attempt to move would mean sure discovery. We can only—”

“Live like moles after all. Hunted fugitives! Frightened refugees! Is that it?”

“Put it any way you like-but we must hide, Arthur, and bury ourselves.”

“Until-?”

“Until I-or we-perfect a curved two-dimensional statbeam. Surrounded by an impermeable defense, we can come out into the open. It may take years; it may take one week. I don’t know.”

“And every day we run the risk of detection. Any day the swarms of purebloods can come down upon us and wipe us out. We’ve got to hang by a hair day after day, week after week, month after month—”

“We’ve got to.” Max’s mouth was clamped shut, and his eyes were a frosty blue.

Slowly, they went back to Venustown.

Things were quiet in Venustown, and eyes were turned to the top-most level and the hidden exits. Out there was air and the sun and space-and Earthmen.

They had settled several miles up the river-bed. Their rude houses were springing up. Surrounding land was being cleared. Farms were being staked out. Planting was taking place.

And in the bowels of Venus, eleven hundred Tweenies shaped their home and waited for an old man to track down the elusive equations that would enable a stat-ray to spread in two dimensions and curve.

Irene brooded somberly as she sat upon the rocky ledge and stared ahead to where the dim gray light indicated the existence of an exit to the open. Her shapely legs swung gently back and forth and Henry Scanlon, at her side, fought desperately to keep his gaze focussed harmlessly upon air.

“You know what. Henry?”

“What?”

“I’ll bet the Phibs could help us.”

“Help us do what, Irene?”

“Help us get rid of the Earthmen.”

Henry thought it over carefully, “What makes you think that?”

“Well, they’re pretty clever-cleverer than we think. Their minds are altogether different, though, and maybe they could fix it. Besides-I’ve just got a feeling.” She withdrew her hand suddenly, “You don’t have to hold it. Henry.”

Henry swallowed, “I-I thought you had a sort of unsteady seat there-might fall, you know.”

“Oh!” Irene looked down the terrific three-foot drop. ‘There’s something in what you say. It does look pretty high here.”

Henry decided he was in the presence of a hint, and acted accordingly. There was a moment’s silence while he seriously considered the possibility of her feeling a bit chilly-but before he had quite decided that she probably was, she spoke again,

“What I was going to say, Henry, was this. Why don’t we go out and see the Phibs?”

“Dad would take my head off if I tried anything like that.”

“It would be a lot of fun.”

“Sure, but it’s dangerous. We can’t risk anyone seeing us.”

Irene shrugged resignedly, “Well, if you’re afraid, we’ll say no more about it.”

Henry gasped and reddened. He was off the ledge in a bound, “Who’s afraid? When do you want to go?”

“Right now, Henry. Right this very minute.” Her cheeks flushed with enthusiasm.

“All right then. Come on.” He started off at a half-run, dragging her along.-And then a thought occurred to him and he stopped short.

He turned to her fiercely, “I’ll show you if I’m afraid.” His arms were suddenly about her and her little cry of surprise was muffled effectively.

“Goodness,” said Irene, when in a position to speak once more. “How thoroughly brutal!”

“Certainly. I’m a very well-known brute,” gasped Henry, as he uncrossed his eyes and got rid of the swimming sensation in his head. “Now let’s get to those Phibs; and remind me, when I’m president, to put up a memorial to the fellow who invented kissing.”

Up through the rock-lined corridor, past the backs of outward-gazing sentries, out through the carefully camouflaged opening, and they were upon the surface.

The smudge of smoke on the southern horizon was grim evidence of the presence of man, and with that in mind, the two young Tweenies slithered through the underbrush into the forest and through the forest to the lake of the Phibs.

Whether in some strange way of their own the Phibs sensed the presence of friends, the two could not tell, but they had scarcely reached the banks when approaching dull-green smudges beneath water told of the creatures’ coming.

A wide, goggle-eyed head broke the surface, and, in a second, bobbing frogheads dotted the lake.

Henry wet his hand and seized the friendly forelimb outstretched to him.

“Hi there, Phib.”

The grinning mouth worked and made its soundless answer.

“Ask him about the Earthmen, Henry,” urged Irene. Henry motioned impatiently.

“Wait a while. It takes time. I’m doing the best I can.”

For two slow minutes, the two, Tweenie and Phib, remained motionless and stared into each other’s eyes. And then the Phib broke away and, at some silent order, every lake-creature vanished, leaving the Tweenies alone.

Irene stared for a moment, nonplussed, “What happened?”

Henry shrugged, “I don’t know. I pictured the Earthmen and he seemed to know who I meant. Then I pictured Earthmen fighting us and killing us-and he pictured a lot of us and only a few of them and another fight in which we killed them. But then I pictured us killing them and then a lot more of them coming-hordes and hordes-and killing us and then—”

But the girl was holding her hands to her tortured ears, “Oh, my goodness. No wonder the poor creature didn’t understand. I wonder he didn’t go crazy.”

“Well, I did the best I could,” was the gloomy response. “This was all your nutty idea, anyway.”

Irene got no further with her retort than the opening syllable, for in a moment the lake was crowded with Phibs once more. “They’ve come back,” she said instead.

A Phib pushed forward and seized Henry’s hand while the others crowded around in great excitement. There were several moments of silence and Irene fidgeted.

“Well?” she said.

“Quiet, please. I don’t get it. Something about big animals, or monsters, or—” His voice trailed away, and the furrow between his eyes deepened into painful concentration.

He nodded, first abstractedly, then vigorously.

He broke away and seized Irene’s hands. “I’ve got it-and it’s the perfect solution. We can save Venustown all by ourselves, Irene, with the help of the Phibs-if you want to come to the Lowlands with me tomorrow. We can take along a pair of Tonite pistols and food supplies and if we follow the river, it oughtn’t to take us more than two or three days there and the same time back. What do you say, Irene?”

Youth is not noted for forethought. Irene’s hesitation was for effect only, “Well-maybe we shouldn’t go ourselves, but -but I’ll go-with you.” There was the lightest accent on the last word.

Ten seconds later, the two were on their way back to Venustown, and Henry was wondering, if on the whole, it weren’t better to put up two memorials to the fellow who invented kissing.

The flickering red-yellow of the fire sent back ruddy highlights from Henry’s lordly crest of hair and cast shifting shadows upon his brooding face.

It was hot in the Lowlands, and the fire made it worse, yet Henry huddled close and kept an anxious eye upon the sleeping form of Irene on the other side. The teeming life of the Venusian jungle respected fire, and the flames spelt safety.

They were three days from the plateau now. The stream had become a lukewarm, slowly-moving river, the shores of which were covered with the green scum of algae. The pleasant forests had given way to the tangled, vine-looped growths of the jungle. The mingled sounds of life had grown in volume and increased to a noisy crescendo. The air became warmer and damper; the ground swampier; the surroundings more fantastically unfamiliar.

And yet there was no real danger-of that, Henry was convinced. Poisonous life was unknown on Venus, and as for the tough-skinned monsters that lorded the jungles, the fire at night and the Phibs during day would keep them away.

Twice the ear-splitting shriek of a Centosaur had sounded in the distance and twice the sound of crashing trees had caused the two Tweenies to draw together in fear. Both times, ‘I the monsters had moved away again. •

This was the third night out, and Henry stirred uneasily. The Phibs seemed confident that before morning they could start their return trip, and somehow the thought of Venustown was rather attractive. Adventure and excitement are fine and with every passing hour the glory of his scintillating bravery grew in Irene’s eyes-which was wonderful-but still Venustown and the friendly Highlands were nice to think about.

He threw himself on his stomach and gazed morosely into the fire, thinking of his twenty years of age-almost twenty years.

“Why, heck,” he tore at the rank grass beneath. “It’s about time I was thinking of getting married.” And his eye strayed involuntarily to the sleeping form beyond the fire.

As if in response, there was a flickering of eyelids and a vague stare out of deep blue eyes.

Irene sat up and stretched.

“I can’t sleep at all,” she complained, brushing futilely at her white hair. “It’s so hot” She stared at the fire distastefully.

Henry’s good humor persisted. “You slept for hours-and snored like a trombone.”

Irene’s eyes snapped wide open. “I did not!” Then, with a voice vibrant with tragedy, “Did I?”

“No, of course not!” Henry howled his laughter, stopping only at the sudden, sharp contact between the toe of Irene’s shoe and the pit of his own stomach. “Ouch,” he said.

“Don’t speak to me anymore. Mister Scanlon!” was the girl’s frigid remark.

It was Henry’s turn to look tragic. He rose in panicky dismay and took a single step towards the girl. And then he froze in his tracks at the ear-piercing shriek of a Centosaur. When he came to himself, he found his arms full of Irene.

Reddening, she disentangled herself, and then the Centosaurian shriek sounded again, from another direction,-and there she was, right back again.

Henry’s face was pale, in spite of his fair armful. “I think the Phibs have snared the Centosaurs. Come with me and I’ll ask them.”

The Phibs were dim blotches in the grey dawn that was breaking. Rows and rows of strained, abstracted individuals were all that met the eye. Only one seemed to be unoccupied and when Henry rose from the handclasp, he said, “They’ve got three Centosaurs and that’s all they can handle. We’re starting back to the Highlands right now.”

The rising sun found the party two miles up the river. The Tweenies, hugging the shore, cast wary eyes towards the bordering jungle. Through an occasional clearing, vast grey bulks could be made out The noise of the reptilian shrieks was almost continuous.

“I’m sorry I brought you, Irene,” said Henry. “I’m not so sure now that the Phibs can take care of the monsters.”

Irene shook her head. “That’s all right, Henry. I wanted to come. Only-I wish we had thought of letting the Phibs bring the beasts themselves. They don’t need us.”

“Yes, they do! If a Centosaur gets out of control, it will make straight for the Tweenies and they’d never get away. We’ve got the Tonite guns to kill the ‘saurs with if the worst comes to the worst—” His voice trailed away and he glanced at the lethal weapon in his hand and derived but cold comfort therefrom.

The first night was sleepless for both Tweenies. Somewhere, unseen in the blackness of the river, Phibs took shifts and their telepathic control over the tiny brains of the gigantic, twenty-legged Centosaurs maintained its tenuous hold. Off in the jungle, three hundred-ton monsters howled impatiently against the force that drove them up the river side against their will and raved impotently against the unseen barrier that prevented them from approaching the stream.

By the side of the fire, a pair of Tweenies, lost between mountainous flesh on one side and the fragile protection of a telepathic web on the other, gazed longingly towards the Highlands some forty miles off.

Progress was slow. As the Phibs tired, the Centosaurs grew balkier. But gradually, the air grew cooler. The rank jungle growth thinned out and the distance to Venustown shortened.

Henry greeted the first signs of familiar temperate-zone forest with a tremulous sigh of relief. Only Irene’s presence prevented him from discarding his role of heroism.

He felt pitifully eager for their quixotic journey to be over, but he only said, “It’s practically all over but the shouting. And you can bet there’ll be shouting, Irene. We’ll be heroes, you and I.”

Irene’s attempt at enthusiasm was feeble. “I’m tired. Henry. Let’s rest.” She sank slowly to the ground, and Henry, after signalling the Phibs, joined her.

“How much longer, Henry?” Almost without volition, she found her head nestling wearily against his shoulder.

“One more day, Irene. Tomorrow this time, we’ll be back.” He looked wretched, “You think we shouldn’t have tried to do this ourselves, don’t you?”

“Well, it seemed a good idea at the time.”

“Yes, I know,” said Henry. “I’ve noticed that I get lots of ideas that seem good at the time, but sometimes they turn sour.” He shook his head philosophically, “I don’t know why, but that’s the way it is.”

“All I know,” said Irene, “is that I don’t care if I never move another step in my life. I wouldn’t get up now—”

Her voice died away as her beautiful blue eyes stared off towards the right. One of the Centosaurs stumbled into the waters of a small, tributary to the stream they were following. Wallowing in the water, his huge serpentine body mounted on the ten stocky pairs of legs, glistened horribly. His ugly head weaved towards the sky and his terrifying call pierced the air. A second joined him.

Irene was on her feet. “What are you waiting for. Henry. Let’s go! Hurry!”

Henry gripped his Tonite gun tightly and followed.

Arthur Scanlon gulped savagely at his fifth cup of black coffee and, with an effort, brought the Audiomitter into optical focus. His eyes, he decided, were becoming entirely too balky. He rubbed them into red-rimmed irritation and cast a glance over his shoulder at the restlessly sleeping figure on the couch.

He crept over to her, and adjusted the coverlet.

“Poor Mom,” he whispered, and bent to kiss the pale lips.

He turned to the Audiomitter and clenched a fist at it, “Wait till I get you, you crazy nut”

Madeline stirred, “Is it dark yet?”

“No,” lied Arthur with feeble cheerfulness. “Hell call before sundown. Mom. You just sleep and let me take care of things. Dad’s upstairs working on the stat-field and he says he’s making progress. In a few days everything will be all right.” He sat silently beside her and grasped her band tightly. Her tired eyes closed once more.

The signal light blinked on and, with a last look at his mother, he stepped out into the corridor, “Well!”

The waiting Tweenie saluted smartly, “John Barno wants to say that it looks as if we are in for a storm.” He handed over an official report.

Arthur glanced at it peevishly, “What of that? We’ve had plenty so far, haven’t we? What do you expect of Venus?”

“This will be a particularly bad one, from all indications. The barometer has fallen unprecedentedly. The ionic concentration of the upper atmosphere is at an unequalled maximum. The Beulah River has overflowed its banks and is rising rapidly.”

The other frowned, “There’s not an entrance to Venustown that isn’t at least fifty yards above river level. As for rain- our drainage system is to be relied upon.” He grimaced suddenly. “Go back and tell Barno that it can storm for my part -for forty days and forty nights if it wants to. Maybe it will drive the Earthmen away.”

He turned away, but the Tweenie held his ground, “Beg pardon sir, but that’s not the worst. A scouting party today—”

Arthur whirled. “A scouting party? Who ordered one to be sent out?”

“Your father, sir. They were to make contact with the Phibs,-I don’t know why.”

“Well, go on.”

“Sir, the Phibs could not be located.”

And now, for the first time, Arthur was startled out of his savage ill-humor, ‘They were gone?”

The Tweenie nodded, “It is thought that they have sought shelter from the coming storm. It is that which causes Barno to fear the worst.”

“They say rats desert a sinking ship,” murmured Arthur. He buried his head in trembling hands. “Godi Everything at once! Everything at once!”

The darkening twilight hid the pall of blackness that lowered over the mountains ahead and emphasized the darting flashes of lightning that flickered on and off continuously.

Irene shivered, “It’s getting sort of windy and chilly, isn’t it?”

“The cold wind from the mountains. We’re in for a storm, I guess,” Henry assented absently. “I think the river is getting wider.”

A short silence, and then, with sudden vivacity, “But look, Irene, only a few more miles to the lake and then we’re practically at the Earth village. It’s almost over.”

Irene nodded, “I’m glad for all of us-and the Phibs, too.”

She had reason for the last statement. The Phibs were swimming slowly now. An additional detachment had arrived the day before from upstream, but even with those reinforcements, progress had slowed to a walk. Unaccustomed cold was nipping the multi-legged reptiles and they yielded to superior mental force more and more reluctantly.

The first drops fell just after they had passed the lake. Darkness had fallen, and in the blue glare of the lightning the trees about them were ghostly specters reaching swaying fingers towards the sky. A sudden flare in the distance marked the funeral pyre of a lightning-hit tree.

Henry paled. “Make for the clearing just ahead. At a time like this, trees are dangerous.”

The clearing he spoke of composed the outskirts of the Earth village. The rough-hewn houses, crude and small against the fury of the elements, showed lights here and there that spoke of human occupancy. And as the first Centosaur stumbled out from between splintered trees, the storm suddenly burst in all its fury.

The two Tweenies huddled close. “It’s up to the Phibs,” screamed Henry, dimly heard above the wind and rain. “I hope they can do it.”

The three monsters converged upon the houses ahead. They moved more rapidly as the Phibs called up every last bit of mental power.

Irene buried her wet head in Henry’s equally wet shoulder, “I can’t look! Those houses will go like matchsticks. Oh, the poor people!”

“No, Irene, no. They’ve stopped!”

The Centosaurs pawed vicious gouges out of the ground beneath and their screams rang shrill and clear above the noise of the storm. Startled Earthmen rushed from their cabins.

Caught unprepared-most having been roused from sleep -and faced with a Venusian storm and nightmarish Venusian monsters, there was no question of organized action. As they stood, carrying nothing but their clothes, they broke and ran.

There was the utmost confusion. One or two, with dim attempts at presence of mind, took wild, ineffectual pot-shots at the mountains of flesh before them-and then ran.

And when it seemed that all were gone, the giant reptiles surged forward once more and where once had been houses, there were left only mashed splinters.

“They’ll never come back, Irene, they’ll never come back.” Henry was breathless at the success of his plan. “We’re heroes now, and—” His voice rose to a hoarse shriek, “Irene, get back! Make for the trees!”

The Centosaurian howls had taken on a deeper note. The nearest one reared onto his two hindmost pairs of legs and his great head, two hundred feet above ground, was silhouetted horribly against the lightning. With a rumbling thud, he came down on all feet again and made for the river-which under the lash of the storm was now a raging flood.

The Phibs had lost control!

Henry’s Tonite gun flashed into quick action as he shoved Irene away. She, however, backed away slowly and brought her own gun into line.

The ball of purple light that meant a hit blazed into being and the nearest Centosaur screamed in agony as its mighty tail threshed aside the surrounding trees. Blindly, the hole where once a leg had been gushing blood, it charged.

A second glare of purple and it was down with an earthshaking thud, its last shriek reaching a crescendo of shrill frightfulness.

But the other two monsters were crashing towards them. They blundered blindly towards the source of the power that, had held them captive almost a week; driving violently with all the force of their mindless hate to the river. And in the path of the Juggernauts were the two Tweenies.

The boiling torrent was at their backs. The forest was a groaning wilderness of splintered trees and ear-splitting sound.

Then, suddenly, the reports of Tonite guns sounded from the distance. Purple glares-a flurry of threshing-spasmodic shrieking-and then a silence in which even the wind, as if overawed by recent events, held its peace momentarily.

Henry yelled his glee and performed an impromptu war-dance. “They’ve come from Venustown, Irene,” he shouted. ‘They’ve got the Centosaurs and everything’s finished! We’ve saved the Tweenies!”

It happened in a breath’s time. Irene had dropped her gun and sobbed her relief. She was running to Henry and then she tripped-and the river had her.

“Henry!” The wind whipped the sound away.

For one dreadful moment. Henry found himself incapable of motion. He could only stare stupidly, unbelievingly, at the spot where Irene had been, and then he was in the water. He plunged into the surrounding blackness desperately.

“Irene!” He caught his breath with difficulty. The current drove him on.

“Irene!” No sound but the wind. His efforts at swimming were futile. He couldn’t even break surface for more than a second at a time, his lungs were bursting.

“Irene!” There was no answer. -Nothing but rushing water and darkness.

And then something touched him. He lashed out at it instinctively, but the grip tightened. He felt himself borne up into the air. His tortured lungs breathed in gasps. A grinning Phib face stared into his and after that there were nothing but confused impressions of cold, dark wetness.

He became aware of his surroundings by stages. First, that he was sitting on a blanket under the trees, with other blankets wrapped tightly about him. Then, he felt the warm radiation of the heatlamps upon him and the illumination of Atomo bulbs. People were crowding close and he noticed that it was no longer raining.

He stared about him hazily and then, “Irene!”

She was beside him, as wrapped up as he, and smiling feebly, “I’m all right, Henry. The Phibs dragged me back, too.”

Madeline was bending over him and he swallowed the hot coffee placed to his lips. “The Phibs have told us of what you two have helped them do. We’re all proud of you, son-you and Irene.”

Max’s smile transfigured his face into the picture of paternal pride, “The psychology you used was perfect. Venus is too vast and has too many friendly areas to expect Earthmen to return to places that have shown themselves to be infested with Centosaurs-not for a good long while. And when they do come back, we shall have our stat-field.”

Arthur Scanlon hurried up out of the gloom. He thwacked Henry on the shoulder and then wrung Irene’s hand. “Your guardian and I,” he told her, “are fixing up a celebration for day after tomorrow, so get good and rested. It’s going to be the greatest thing you ever saw.”

Henry spoke lip, “Celebration, huh? Well, I’ll tell you what you can do. After it’s over, you can announce an engagement”

“An engagement?” Madeline sat up and looked interested. “What do you mean?”

“An engagement-to be married,” came the impatient answer. “I’m old enough, I suppose. Today proves it!”

Irene’s eyes bent in furious concentration upon the grass, “With whom. Henry?”

“Huh? With you, of course. Gosh, who else could it be?”

“But you haven’t asked me.” The words were uttered slowly and with great firmness.

For a moment Henry flushed, and then his jaws grew grim, “Well, I’m not going to. I’m telling you! And what are you going to do about it?”

He leaned close to her and Max Scanlon chuckled and motioned the others away. On tip-toes, they left.

A dim shape hobbled into view and the two Tweenies separated in confusion. They had forgotten the others.

But it wasn’t another Tweenie. “Why-why, it’s a Phib!” cried Irene.

He limped his ungainly way across the wet grass, with the inexpert aid of his muscular arms. Approaching, he flopped wearily on his stomach and extended his forearms.

His purpose was plain. Irene and Henry grasped a hand apiece. There was silence a moment or two and the Phib’s great eyes glinted solemnly in the light of the Atomo lamps. Then there was a sudden squeal of embarrassment from Irene and shy laugh from Henry. Contact was broken.

“Did you get the same thing I did?” asked Henry.

Irene was red, “Yes, a long row of little baby Phibs, maybe fifteen—”

“Or twenty,” said Henry.

“—with long white hear!”