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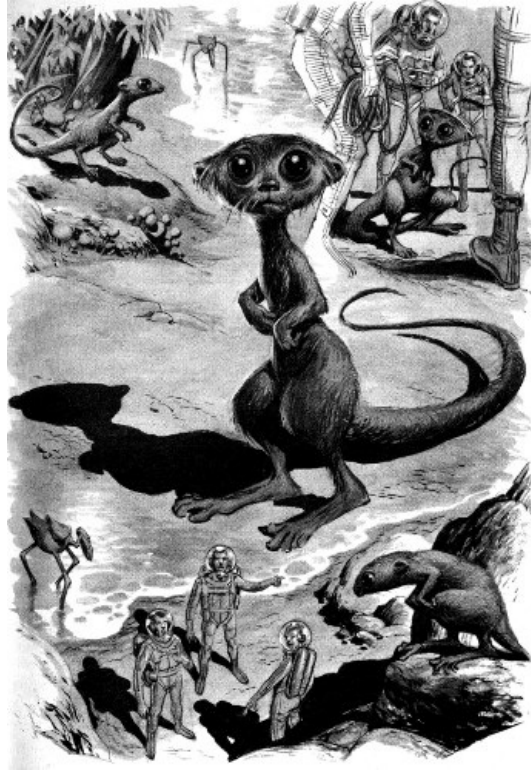


BEACH SCENE

By MARSHALL KING

Illustrated by WOOD

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***It was a fine day at the beach
for Purnie's game—but his new
friends played very rough!***

Purnie ran laughing and shouting through the forest until he could run no more. He fell headlong into a patch of blue moss and whooped with delight in having this day free for exploring. He was free to see the ocean at last.

When he had caught his breath, he looked back through the forest. No sign of the village; he had left it far behind. Safe from the scrutiny of brothers and parents, there was nothing now to stop him from going to the ocean. This was the moment to stop time.

"On your mark!" he shouted to the rippling stream and its orange whirlpools. He glanced furtively from side to side, pretending that some object might try to get a head start. "Get set!" he challenged the thin-winged bees that hovered over the abundant foliage. "Stop!" He shrieked this command upward toward the dense, low-hanging purple clouds that perennially raced across the treetops, making one wonder how tall the trees really were.

His eyes took quick inventory. It was exactly as he knew it would be: the milky-orange stream had become motionless and its minute whirlpools had stopped whirling; a nearby bee hung suspended over a paka plant, its transparent wings frozen in position for a downward stroke; and the heavy purple fluid overhead held fast in its manufacture of whorls and nimbi.

With everything around him in a state of perfect tableau, Purnie hurried toward the ocean.

If only the days weren't so short! he thought. There was so much to see and so little time. It seemed that everyone except him had seen the wonders of the beach country. The stories he had heard from his brothers and their friends had taunted him for as long as he could remember. So many times had he heard these thrilling tales that now, as he ran along, he could clearly picture the wonderland as though he were already there. There would be a rockslide of petrified logs to play on, the ocean itself with waves higher than a house, the comical three-legged tripons who never stopped munching on seaweed, and many kinds of other wonderful creatures found only at the ocean.

He bounced through the forest as though the world was reserved this day just for him. And who could say it wasn't? he thought. Wasn't this his fifth birthday? He ran along feeling sorry for four-year-olds, and even for those who were only four and a half, for they were babies and wouldn't dare try slipping away to the ocean alone. But five!

"I'll set you free, Mr. Bee—just wait and see!" As he passed one of the many motionless pollen-gathering insects he met on the way, he took care not to brush against it or disturb its interrupted task. When Purnie had stopped time, the bees—like all the other creatures he met—

had been arrested in their native activities, and he knew that as soon as he resumed time, everything would pick up where it had left off.

When he smelled an acid sweetness that told him the ocean was not far off, his pulse quickened in anticipation. Rather than spoil what was clearly going to be a perfect day, he chose to ignore the fact that he had been forbidden to use time-stopping as a convenience for journeying far from home. He chose to ignore the oft-repeated statement that an hour of time-stopping consumed more energy than a week of foot-racing. He chose to ignore the negative maxim that "small children who stop time without an adult being present, may not live to regret it."

He chose, instead, to picture the beaming praise of family and friends when they learned of his brave journey.

The journey was long, the clock stood still. He stopped long enough to gather some fruit that grew along the path. It would serve as his lunch during this day of promise. With it under his arm he bounded along a dozen more steps, then stopped abruptly in his tracks.

He found himself atop a rocky knoll, overlooking the mighty sea!

He was so overpowered by the vista before him that his "Hurrah!" came out as a weak squeak. The ocean lay at the ready, its stilled waves awaiting his command to resume their tidal sweep. The breakers along the shoreline hung in varying stages of disarray, some having already exploded into towering white spray while others were poised in smooth orange curls waiting to start that action.

And there were new friends everywhere! Overhead, a flock of spora were frozen in a steep glide, preparatory to a beach landing. Purnie had heard of these playful creatures many times. Today, with his brothers in school, he would have the pets all to himself. Further down the beach was a pair of two-legged animals poised in mid-step, facing the spot where Purnie now stood. Some distance behind them were eight more, each of whom were motionless in a curious pose of interrupted animation. And down in the water, where the ocean ran itself into thin nothingness upon the sand, he saw standing here and there the comical tripons, those three-legged marine buffoons who made handsome careers of munching seaweed.

"Hi there!" Purnie called. When he got no reaction, he remembered that he himself was "dead" to the living world: he was still in a zone of time-stopping, on the inside looking out. For him, the world would continue to be a tableau of mannikins until he resumed time.

"Hi there!" he called again; but now his mental attitude was that he expected time to resume. It did! Immediately he was surrounded by activity. He heard the roar of the crashing orange breakers, he tasted the dew of acid that floated from the spray, and he saw his new friends continue the actions which he had stopped while back in the forest.

He knew, too, that at this moment, in the forest, the little brook picked up its flow where it had left off, the purple clouds resumed their leeward journey up the valley, and the bees continued their pollen-gathering without having missed a single stroke of their delicate wings. The brook, the clouds, and the insects had not been interrupted in the least; their respective tasks had been performed with continuing sureness. It was time itself that Purnie had stopped, not the world around him.

He scampered around the rockpile and down the sandy cliff to meet the tripons who, to him, had just come to life.

"I can stand on my head!" He set down his lunch and balanced himself bottoms-up while his legs pawed the air in an effort to hold him in position. He knew it was probably the worst head-stand he had ever done, for he felt weak and dizzy. Already time-stopping had left its mark on his strength. But his spirits ran on unchecked.

The tripon thought Purnie's feat was superb. It stopped munching long enough to give him a salutary wag of its rump before returning to its repast.

Purnie ran from pillar to post, trying to see and do everything at once. He looked around to greet the flock of spora, but they had glided to a spot further along the shore. Then, bouncing up to the first of the two-legged animals, he started to burst forth with his habitual "Hi there!" when he heard them making sounds of their own.

"... will be no limit to my operations now, Benson. This planet makes seventeen. Seventeen planets I can claim as my own!"

"My, my. Seventeen planets. And tell me, Forbes, just what the hell are you going to do with them — mount them on the wall of your den back in San Diego?"

"Hi there, wanna play?" Purnie's invitation got nothing more than startled glance from the animals who quickly returned to their chatter. He scampered up the beach, picked up his lunch, and ran back to them, tagging along at their heels. "I've got my lunch, want some?"

"Benson, you'd better tell your men back there to stop gawking at the scenery and get to work. Time is money. I didn't pay for this expedition just to give your flunkies a vacation."

The animals stopped so suddenly that Purnie nearly tangled himself in their heels.

"All right, Forbes, just hold it a minute. Listen to me. Sure, it's your money that put us here; it's your expedition all the way. But you hired me to get you here with the best crew on earth, and that's just what I've done. My job isn't over yet. I'm responsible for the safety of the men while we're here, and for the safe trip home."

"Precisely. And since you're responsible, get 'em working. Tell 'em to bring along the flag. Look at the damn fools back there, playing in the ocean with a three-legged ostrich!"

"Good God, man, aren't you human? We've only been on this planet twenty minutes! Naturally they want to look around. They half expected to find wild animals or worse, and here we are surrounded by quaint little creatures that run up to us like we're long-lost brothers. Let the men look around a minute or two before we stake out your claim."

"Bah! Bunch of damn children."

As Purnie followed along, a leg shot out at him and missed. "Benson, will you get this bug-eyed kangaroo away from me!" Purnie shrieked with joy at this new frolic and promptly stood on his head. In this position he got an upside down view of them walking away.

He gave up trying to stay with them. Why did they move so fast, anyway? What was the hurry? As he sat down and began eating his lunch, three more of the creatures came along making excited noises, apparently trying to catch up to the first two. As they passed him, he held out his lunch. "Want some?" No response.

Playing held more promise than eating. He left his lunch half eaten and went down to where they had stopped further along the beach.

"Captain Benson, sir! Miles has detected strong radiation in the vicinity. He's trying to locate it now."

"There you are, Forbes. Your new piece of real estate is going to make you so rich that you can buy your next planet. That'll make eighteen, I believe."

"Radiation, bah! We've found low-grade ore on every planet I've discovered so far, and this one'll be no different. Now how about that flag? Let's get it up, Benson. And the cornerstone, and the plaque."

"All right, lads. The sooner we get Mr. Forbes's pennant raised and his claim staked out, the sooner we can take time to look around. Lively now!"

When the three animals went back to join the rest of their group, the first two resumed walking. Purnie followed along.

"Well, Benson, you won't have to look far for materials to use for the base of the flag pole. Look at that rockpile up there.

"Can't use them. They're petrified logs. The ones on top are too high to carry down, and if we move those on the bottom, the whole works will slide down on top of us."

"Well—that's your problem. Just remember, I want this flag pole to be solid. It's got to stand at least—"

"Don't worry, Forbes, we'll get your monument erected. What's this with the flag? There must be more to staking a claim than just putting up a flag."

"There is, there is. Much more. I've taken care of all requirements set down by law to make my claim. But the flag? Well, you might say it represents an empire, Benson. The Forbes Empire. On each of my flags is the word FORBES, a symbol of development and progress. Call it sentiment if you will."

"Don't worry, I won't. I've seen real-estate flags before."

"Damn it all, will you stop referring to this as a real-estate deal? What I'm doing is big, man. Big! This is pioneering."

"Of course. And if I'm not mistaken, you've set up a neat little escrow system so that you not only own the planets, but you will virtually own the people who are foolish enough to buy land on them."

"I could have your hide for talking to me like this. Damn you, man! It's people like me who pay your way. It's people like me who give your space ships some place to go. It's people like me who pour good money into a chancey job like this, so that people like you can get away from thirteen-story tenement houses. Did you ever think of that?"

"I imagine you'll triple your money in six months."

When they stopped, Purnie stopped. At first he had been interested in the strange sounds they were making, but as he grew used to them, and as they in turn ignored his presence, he hopped alongside chattering to himself, content to be in their company.

He heard more of these sounds coming from behind, and he turned to see the remainder of the

group running toward them.

"Captain Benson! Here's the flag, sir. And here's Miles with the scintillometer. He says the radiation's getting stronger over this way!"

"How about that, Miles?"

"This thing's going wild, Captain. It's almost off scale."

Purnie saw one of the animals hovering around him with a little box. Thankful for the attention, he stood on his head. "Can you do this?" He was overjoyed at the reaction. They all started making wonderful noises, and he felt most satisfied.

"Stand back, Captain! Here's the source right here! This little chuck-walla's hotter than a plutonium pile!"

"Let me see that, Miles. Well, I'll be damned! Now what do you suppose—"

By now they had formed a widening circle around him, and he was hard put to think of an encore. He gambled on trying a brand new trick: he stood on one leg.

"Benson, I must have that animal! Put him in a box."

"Now wait a minute, Forbes. Universal Law forbids—"

"This is my planet and I am the law. Put him in a box!"

"With my crew as witness, I officially protest—"

"Good God, what a specimen to take back. Radio-active animals! Why, they can reproduce themselves, of course! There must be thousands of these creatures around here someplace. And to think of those damn fools on Earth with their plutonium piles! Hah! Now I'll have investors *flocking* to me. How about it, Benson—does pioneering pay off or doesn't it?"

"Not so fast. Since this little fellow is radioactive, there may be great danger to the crew—"

"Now look here! You had planned to put *mineral* specimens in a lead box, so what's the difference? Put him in a box."

"He'll die."

"I have you under contract, Benson! You are responsible to me, and what's more, you are on my property. Put him in a box."

Purnie was tired. First the time-stopping, then this. While this day had brought more fun and excitement than he could have hoped for, the strain was beginning to tell. He lay in the center of the circle happily exhausted, hoping that his friends would show him some of their own tricks.

He didn't have to wait long. The animals forming the circle stepped back and made way for two others who came through carrying a box. Purnie sat up to watch the show.

"Hell, Captain, why don't I just pick him up? Looks like he has no intention of running away."

"Better not, Cabot. Even though you're shielded, no telling what powers the little fella has. Play it safe and use the rope."

"I swear he knows what we're saying. Look at those eyes."

"All right, careful now with that line."

"Come on, baby. Here you go. That's a boy!"

Purnie took in these sounds with perplexed concern. He sensed the imploring quality of the creature with the rope, but he didn't know what he was supposed to do. He cocked his head to one side as he wiggled in anticipation.

He saw the noose spinning down toward his head, and, before he knew it, he had scooted out of the circle and up the sandy beach. He was surprised at himself for running away. Why had he done it? He wondered. Never before had he felt this fleeting twinge that made him want to protect himself.

He watched the animals huddle around the box on the beach, their attention apparently diverted to something else. He wished now that he had not run away; he felt he had lost his chance to join in their fun.

"Wait!" He ran over to his half-eaten lunch, picked it up, and ran back into the little crowd. "I've got my lunch, want some?"

The party came to life once more. His friends ran this way and that, and at last Purnie knew that the idea was to get him into the box. He picked up the spirit of the tease, and deliberately ran within a few feet of the lead box, then, just as the nearest pursuer was about to push him in, he sidestepped onto safer ground. Then he heard a deafening roar and felt a warm, wet sting in one of his legs.

"Forbes, you fool! Put away that gun!"

"There you are, boys. It's all in knowing how. Just winged him, that's all. Now pick him up."

The pang in his leg was nothing: Purnie's misery lay in his confusion. What had he done wrong? When he saw the noose spinning toward him again, he involuntarily stopped time. He knew better than to use this power carelessly, but his action now was reflex. In that split second following the sharp sting in his leg, his mind had grasped in all directions to find an acceptable course of action. Finding none, it had ordered the stoppage of time.

The scene around him became a tableau once more. The noose hung motionless over his head while the rest of the rope snaked its way in transverse waves back to one of the two-legged animals. Purnie dragged himself through the congregation, whimpering from his inability to understand.

As he worked his way past one creature after another, he tried at first to not look them in the eye, for he felt sure he had done something wrong. Then he thought that by sneaking a glance at them as he passed, he might see a sign pointing to their purpose. He limped by one who had in his hand a small shiny object that had been emitting smoke from one end; the smoke now billowed in lifeless curls about the animal's head. He hobbled by another who held a small box that had previously made a hissing sound whenever Purnie was near. These things told him nothing. Before starting his climb up the knoll, he passed a tripon which, true to its reputation, was comical even in fright. Startled by the loud explosion, it had jumped four feet into the air before Purnie had stopped time. Now it hung there, its beak stuffed with seaweed and its three legs drawn up into a squatting position.

Leaving the assorted statues behind, he limped his way up the knoll, torn between leaving and staying. What an odd place, this ocean country! He wondered why he had not heard more detail about the beach animals.

Reaching the top of the bluff, he looked down upon his silent friends with a feeling of deep sorrow. How he wished he were down there playing with them. But he knew at last that theirs was a game he didn't fit into. Now there was nothing left but to resume time and start the long walk home. Even though the short day was nearly over, he knew he didn't dare use time-stopping to get himself home in nothing flat. His fatigued body and clouded mind were strong signals that he had already abused this faculty.

When Purnie started time again, the animal with the noose stood in open-mouthed disbelief as the rope fell harmlessly to the sand—on the spot where Purnie had been standing.

"My God, he's—he's gone."

Then another of the animals, the one with the smoking thing in his hand, ran a few steps toward the noose, stopped and gaped at the rope. "All right, you people, what's going on here? Get him in that box. What did you do with him?"

The resumption of time meant nothing at all to those on the beach, for to them time had never stopped. The only thing they could be sure of was that at one moment there had been a fuzzy creature hopping around in front of them, and the next moment he was gone.

"Is he invisible, Captain? Where is he?"

"Up there, Captain! On those rocks. Isn't that him?"

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Benson, I'm holding you personally responsible for this! Now that you've botched it up, I'll bring him down my own way."

"Just a minute, Forbes, let me think. There's something about that fuzzy little devil that we should.... Forbes! I warned you about that gun!"

Purnie moved across the top of the rockpile for a last look at his friends. His weight on the end of the first log started the slide. Slowly at first, the giant pencils began cascading down the short distance to the sand. Purnie fell back onto solid ground, horrified at the spectacle before him. The agonizing screams of the animals below filled him with hysteria.

The boulders caught most of them as they stood ankle-deep in the surf. Others were pinned down on the sand.

"I didn't mean it!" Purnie screamed. "I'm sorry! Can't you hear?" He hopped back and forth near the edge of the rise, torn with panic and shame. "Get up! Please get up!" He was horrified by the moans reaching his ears from the beach. "You're getting all wet! Did you hear me? Please get up." He was choked with rage and sorrow. How could he have done this? He wanted his friends to get up and shake themselves off, tell him it was all right. But it was beyond his power to bring it about.

The lapping tide threatened to cover those in the orange surf.

Purnie worked his way down the hill, imploring them to save themselves. The sounds they made carried a new tone, a desperate foreboding of death.

"Rhodes! Cabot! Can you hear me?"

"I—I can't move, Captain. My leg, it's.... My God, we're going to drown!"

"Look around you, Cabot. Can you see anyone moving?"

"The men on the beach are nearly buried, Captain. And the rest of us here in the water—"

"Forbes. Can you see Forbes? Maybe he's—" His sounds were cut off by a wavelet gently rolling over his head.

Purnie could wait no longer. The tides were all but covering one of the animals, and soon the others would be in the same plight. Disregarding the consequences, he ordered time to stop.

Wading down into the surf, he worked a log off one victim, then he tugged the animal up to the sand. Through blinding tears, Purnie worked slowly and carefully. He knew there was no hurry—at least, not as far as his friends' safety was concerned. No matter what their condition of life or death was at this moment, it would stay the same way until he started time again. He made his way deeper into the orange liquid, where a raised hand signalled the location of a submerged body. The hand was clutching a large white banner that was tangled among the logs. Purnie worked the animal free and pulled it ashore.

It was the one who had been carrying the shiny object that spit smoke.

Scarcely noticing his own injured leg, he ferried one victim after another until there were no more in the surf. Up on the beach, he started unraveling the logs that pinned down the animals caught there. He removed a log from the lap of one, who then remained in a sitting position, his face contorted into a frozen mask of agony and shock. Another, with the weight removed, rolled over like an iron statue into a new position. Purnie whimpered in black misery as he surveyed the chaotic scene before him.

At last he could do no more; he felt consciousness slipping away from him.

He instinctively knew that if he lost his senses during a period of time-stopping, events would pick up where they had left off ... without him. For Purnie, this would be death. If he had to lose consciousness, he knew he must first resume time.

Step by step he plodded up the little hill, pausing every now and then to consider if this were the moment to start time before it was too late. With his energy fast draining away, he reached the top of the knoll, and he turned to look down once more on the group below.

Then he knew how much his mind and body had suffered: when he ordered time to resume, nothing happened.

His heart sank. He wasn't afraid of death, and he knew that if he died the oceans would roll again and his friends would move about. But he wanted to see them safe.

He tried to clear his mind for supreme effort. There was no *urging* time to start. He knew he couldn't persuade it by bits and pieces, first slowly then full ahead. Time either progressed or it didn't. He had to take one viewpoint or the other.

Then, without knowing exactly when it happened, his mind took command....

His friends came to life. The first one he saw stir lay on his stomach and pounded his fists on the beach. A flood of relief settled over Purnie as sounds came from the animal.

"What's the matter with me? Somebody tell me! Am I nuts? Miles! Schick! What's happening?"

"I'm coming, Rhodes! Heaven help us, man—I saw it, too. We're either crazy or those damn logs are alive!"

"It's not the logs. How about us? How'd we get out of the water? Miles, we're both cracking."

"I'm telling you, man, it's the logs, or rocks or whatever they are. I was looking right at them. First they're on top of me, then they're piled up over there!"

"Damn it, the logs didn't pick us up out of the ocean, did they? Captain Benson!"

"Are you men all right?"

"Yes sir, but—"

"Who saw exactly what happened?"

"I'm afraid we're not seeing right, Captain. Those logs—"

"I know, I know. Now get hold of yourselves. We've got to round up the others and get out of here while time is on our side."

"But what happened, Captain?"

"Hell, Rhodes, don't you think I'd like to know? Those logs are so old they're petrified. The whole bunch of us couldn't lift one. It would take super-human energy to move one of those things."

"I haven't seen anything super-human. Those ostriches down there are so busy eating seaweed—"

"All right, let's bear a hand here with the others. Some of them can't walk. Where's Forbes?"

"He's sitting down there in the water, Captain, crying like a baby. Or laughing. I can't tell which."

"We'll have to get him. Miles, Schick, come along. Forbes! You all right?"

"Ho-ho-ho! Seventeen! Seventeen! Seventeen planets, Benson, and they'll do anything I say! This one's got a mind of its own. Did you see that little trick with the rocks? Ho-ho!"

"See if you can find his gun, Schick; he'll either kill himself or one of us. Tie his hands and take him back to the ship. We'll be along shortly."

"Hah-hah-hah! Seventeen! Benson, I'm holding you personally responsible for this. Hee-hee!"

Purnie opened his eyes as consciousness returned. Had his friends gone?

He pulled himself along on his stomach to a position between two rocks, where he could see without being seen. By the light of the twin moons he saw that they were leaving, marching away in groups of two and three, the weak helping the weaker. As they disappeared around the curving shoreline, the voices of the last two, bringing up the rear far behind the others, fell faintly on his ears over the sound of the surf.

"Is it possible that we're all crazy, Captain?"

"It's possible, but we're not."

"I wish I could be sure."

"See Forbes up ahead there? What do you think of him?"

"I still can't believe it."

"He'll never be the same."

"Tell me something. What was the most unusual thing you noticed back there?"

"You must be kidding, sir. Why, the way those logs were off of us suddenly—"

"Yes, of course. But I mean beside that."

"Well, I guess I was kind of busy. You know, scared and mixed up."

"But didn't you notice our little pop-eyed friend?"

"Oh, him. I'm afraid not, Captain. I—I guess I was thinking mostly of myself."

"Hmmm. If I could only be sure I saw him. If only someone else saw him too."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, sir."

"Well, damn it all, you know that Forbes took a pot shot at him. Got him in the leg. That being the case, why would the fuzzy little devil come back to his tormentors—back to us—when we were trapped under those logs?"

"Well, I guess as long as we were trapped, he figured we couldn't do him any more harm.... I'm sorry, that was a stupid answer. I guess I'm still a little shaky."

"Forget it. Look, you go ahead to the ship and make ready for take-off. I'll join you in a few minutes. I think I'll go back and look around. You know. Make sure we haven't left anyone."

"No need to do that. They're all ahead of us. I've checked."

"That's my responsibility, Cabot, not yours. Now go on."

As Purnie lay gathering strength for the long trek home, he saw through glazed eyes one of the animals coming back along the beach. When it was nearly directly below him, he could hear it making sounds that by now had become familiar.

"Where are you?"

Purnie paid little attention to the antics of his friend; he was beyond understanding. He wondered what they would say at home when he returned.

"We've made a terrible mistake. We—" The sounds faded in and out on Purnie's ears as the creature turned slowly and called in different directions. He watched the animal walk over to the pile of scattered logs and peer around and under them.

"If you're hurt I'd like to help!" The twin moons were high in the sky now, and where their light broke through the swirling clouds a double shadow was cast around the animal. With foggy awareness, Purnie watched the creature shake its head slowly, then walk away in the direction of the others.

Purnie's eyes stared, without seeing, at the panorama before him. The beach was deserted now, and his gaze was transfixed on a shimmering white square floating on the ocean. Across it, the last thing Purnie ever saw, was emblazoned the word FORBES.

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