

PLANET STORIES



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-RELLY FREAS-52-



Amour, Amour, Dear Planet!

By MARK CLUTTER

*A new and sinless world the anti-pleasure Mohcans sought.
But they depended on their hostage, Spacecaptain Jan
Obrien, to find it for them . . . and he was
an amorous imp from way back.*

SPACECAPTAIN JAN O'BRIEN was plain drunk and in no condition to handle an aircar. Which fact perhaps can be understood for a man who has not tasted the liquor of Terra in ten years and who comes home to his native planet to find it wrecked by the worst of its wars.

O'Brien was in no condition, but nevertheless he was handling an aircar, whizzing down a Rocky Mountain canyon at a couple of hundred miles per hour. The time was barely dawn and the visibility was terrible.

"Slow down, Jan, slow down, slow down!" the sleek young tart in the transparent evening gown kept whimpering. She was not as drunk as Jan. Disgusted with the Chicago nightclub in which he had started his homecoming 12 hours before, Jan had hustled her into the aircar and started out vaguely for Portland or L.A. or both.

A solid cliff suddenly loomed out of the mist ahead. The girl covered her eyes and screamed shrilly. The quick-thinking habits of 20 years were not completely drowned in

liquor. Jan yanked at the controls, and the aircar shrieked in protest as it changed its direction to the vertical. Jan and the girl were hurled so violently into the transparent elastic protector curtain that they were stunned. When Jan came to, they were approximately two miles above Pike's Peak. The sunlight was dazzling.

"Hey, baby, we're still airborne," Jan cried, jabbing his elbow into the girl's ribs.

She looked down at the mountain and groaned.

"It takes more than an old cliff to do a spacecaptain in," Jan yelled. "Look baby, did you know we could do this?" Jan cut the power and let the aircar descend in a series of erratically fluttering loops. The mountain rushed up at them. The girl covered her eyes and sobbed, "Don't, please don't!"

The mountain top was covered with a multitude of people dressed in white. They faced a great golden crescent that gleamed like fire in the rising sun. Jan was so fascinated by the spectacle that his coordination failed him. He was conscious of the white-robed people fleeing in terror as he fought to regain control of the aircar.

They crashed. Their speed had been only about 50 miles per hour and the protectors saved them from injury. They scrambled out to survey the damage.

"Well, it won't fly again soon," Jan said. He breathed deeply of the thin air.

"What a hell of a place to crash," the girl said. "Those are Mohcans holding their spring equinox festival. They'll probably stone me." She looked down at her transparent gown. The white robed people had resumed their places and were singing a hymn as though nothing had happened. It was slow, sad, august, a mighty organ sound of human voices.

The girl's face was chalk white. "Let's run for it," she begged. "They're dangerous. They're dangerous as hell. Please believe me." She turned and started to run down the path that had once been the cogroad, stumbling in her high-heeled shoes.

Jan ran after her, weaving as though the mountain were a deck on the high seas.

He grabbed her by the arm. "Hey, baby, they don't sound dangerous," he said.

"They're just singing a kind of hymn as though nothing happened. The only rise we got out of them was the way they scattered when we started to crash."

"Come on, come on," she cried. "I know about these people. They'll be after us when the hymn stops."

"Okay, but you're talking foolish," he said. They started walking down the mountain. "Hell, those people won't do us any harm. They're too busy singing." He pulled out a pack of cigars and lit one.

"You're space-crazy," she said. "Didn't you ever hear of the massacre of scientists at Harvard, or what they did to the chorus girls in 'Sex Happy'?"

TUGGING at his arm to get him to hurry, she told him about the Mohcans. The sect appeared toward the end of the war. Historically they were a blend of Christian, Mohammedan, Communist, and Hindu. Their prophet and leader, until his martyrdom, was Smith Akandi, an English-Hindu half-caste who was reared in Moscow. Their creed was anti-science and anti-pleasure. Thousands of them were executed during the war, but hundreds of thousands were converted.

"Half way I am for them," the girl said. "Just look at me." She tore a bit of her gown contemptuously. "I've given a good time to soldiers, sailors, and spacemen, and a fat lot of happiness it's given me. Jan darling, would you like to settle down with me in a little radioactive suburb and beget a three-headed monster?"

Jan laughed. "Baby, in all the worlds I have never begotten even a two-headed monster. At least, not to my knowledge. But why are they so bitter at science?"

"Why not, stupid? You saw what science did to Chicago."

"Oh, that?" Jan said. "You're taking too limited a view. Chicago is only a speck on a speck out there among the suns and the planets."

"To hell with that talk. I saw my parents burned alive."

"I'm sorry."

They passed the timberline and entered a forest.

"You've convinced me," Jan said. "They're dangerous. Damn these regula-

tions that say a man can't wear his blasters on Terra. If they're looking for us, they'll catch us. We'd better hide out until night."

They found a sun-warmed, grassy spot hidden among three boulders. Jan held her in his arms until she quit shivering from fear and the still chilly mountain air. Then he went to sleep.

He was awakened by a kick in the ribs. He jumped to his feet, clawing desperately for the blasters he didn't have.

"You're covered, space-devil!"

He was ringed by some twenty white robed men armed with weapons ranging from daggers to blasters. Their faces were bearded and their eyes were hot with fanaticism. Their leader was a seven-foot African with a gold ring in his nose.

"Give clothes to the obscene one," the African said.

One of the men threw a white robe around the girl. She wrapped it around her and sat cowering in fright.

"Come with us now, space-devil," the black giant said. "The prophet wants to see you. We won't kill you if you cooperate."

Another Mohcan kicked the girl. "Get up!"

"Leave her alone!" Jan shouted. The African slapped him across the face with the barrel of his blaster.

"She'll get what the chorus girls got," the African said, speaking very slowly. "She'll get what they got if you don't obey. And you will be killed. Now march!"

They climbed the Peak again at a rapid pace. A heel came off the girl's shoe. Two burly Mohcans seized her arms and half-carried, half-dragged her to the top. Jan found it hard to keep pace with them. Whenever he slowed down, the African prodded him with the blaster.

The multitude was still singing. Their eyes were vacant with self-hypnosis as they swayed to the slow, sobbing chant. The girl was turned over to a party of women. The African marched Jan to a place apart from the crowd where a man with a long yellow beard sat crosslegged on a rock.

"This is the Prophet," the African said. "Sit on the ground and wait for him to speak. I will leave you now but I have you covered." He withdrew about twenty yards and squatted on his heels, his blaster across

his knees.

Jan sat down and waited. The prophet sat abnormally still, his legs crossed like a yogi. He was staring upward, almost directly into the sun. He was a lean, youngish man with a beaked nose that gave him a cruel, hawk-like look. The beard, yellow as young cornsilk, fluttered slightly in the breeze. Otherwise, there was no movement. Jan could not even see him breathe.

After a long time, during which Jan felt his face numbly aching from the African's blow, the Prophet suddenly fixed his eyes on him with the same unwavering stare he had devoted to the sky.

"Peace be with you."

"Nuts," Jan replied.

The Prophet took no notice of the remark. "Allah has seen fit to grant me wisdom," he said. "In a dream he has revealed to me the purpose of science."

"How very interesting."

"SCIENCE exists so that a handful of the elect can escape from this doomed planet. It was Allah's will that you should come to us this morning."

"The hell you say."

"I perceive by your uniform that you are a spac captain. How many men can your ship carry?"

Jan did not answer.

"It would perhaps be better for you to cooperate." The Prophet glanced meaningfully toward the African.

"It's no secret. About 100 passengers and a crew of 50."

"About standard size. I suppose about half of your men are on duty."

"Yeah."

"And that is enough to man the ship on a peaceful mission?"

"I have no intention of manning the ship right away."

"I will decide that. We blast off as soon as we can get to Chicago."

"You'll get mighty hungry in space. The ship isn't provisioned."

"We have an airtruck loaded with standard rations. There is no use discussing the matter. You and your men will cooperate or die. Brother Samuel, take charge of the prisoner."

The Prophet arose and walked slowly

to the platform beside the Crescent. The singing stopped.

"The time for departure has come. The chosen ones will come forward. Sister Jessie, will you 'phone the hangar?" Brother Samuel marched Jan over to the chosen group.

Jan looked at the hundred men and women and decided that it would be hard to find a better band of pioneers. They were stalwart, healthy, very serious young people.

The multitude began a great throbbing hymn of farewell. It continued until two huge airtrucks, one for passengers and one loaded with freight, arrived, landing carefully at the edge of the crowd.

Jan had been looking for his friend of the night. Finally he found her standing between two powerful females. She did not see him. She seemed to be looking and listening to something far away. Jan realized that she had discovered a new meaning in existence. "Goodbye, baby," he said to himself.

Each pioneer was being issued a blaster as he or she entered the passenger airtruck. The African, Jan, and the Prophet were the last to enter. The Prophet stood for a moment on the last step and raised his arms in benediction. They took off for Chicago.

The Prophet sat beside Jan. "This may seem mad to you, spacecaptain, but I assure you that it is quite sane," he said. "Your arrival was the miracle which will merely make our task easier. I have planned this for months. I picked 50 men and 50 women who seemed most capable of standing life on a new world. About half of them are married. The others will be soon. I have taken a vow of celibacy. We will found a new and better kingdom of Allah out there among the stars.

"Our problem, of course, has been that of getting a ship and a competent crew. None of us are spacemen. Seizing the ship would be easy; to get a proper crew is another matter.

"We have alerted our friends in Chicago by radio, and they are even now assembling at the spaceport. They are well armed and will take care of any trouble from the military or the police. We will, of course, seize your crew."

Jan was finding it hard to think. "If I

say the word, they will fight."

"What folly that would be," the Prophet said. "They would all die. You would be pronouncing a death sentence on your own men. Men with whom you have lived and suffered many things. Godless dog that you are, you couldn't do that."

Jan was silent for a long time. At last he said, "You leave me no choice but to obey."

The airtrucks settled smoothly beside the rocket, the only one on the field. Just before they landed, the Prophet said, "You and Brother Samuel will lead the attack. You will order the gangway watch not to fire."

As the airtruck came to a halt, the Prophet opened the door. "Secure the rocket!" he cried. Jan leaped to the ground with the African close behind him, and ran to the ship, shouting, "Brown Brown, lay down your blaster! Brown, lay down your blaster!"

The Mohcans swarmed aboard, their weapons at the ready. Within two minutes the ship was theirs and the work of loading provisions had begun. Six of them stood guard around the ship.

Volleys of blaster fire broke out around the administration building. Then a police car came racing across the field. The Mohcans on guard and the police opened fire. The action was brief. Only half a dozen shots were fired before the police car went out of control and turned turtle with a shattering crash. One of the Mohcans lay dead. A tall blonde threw herself on him, crying "Jack, Jack, oh, Jack!"

The Prophet went to her and picked her up. "There will be time later for weeping, Sister Ellen," he said. Firmly he carried her aboard the rocket.

THE pioneers had been well trained. Within less time than Jan would have believed possible they had their rations aboard and were in their acceleration compartments. Jan took his place in front of the master controls. The Prophet and the African stood behind him.

He turned on the public address system. "All hands, hear this," he said. "We have been kidnapped and are about to blast off for an unknown destination. Prepare to

blast off."

Jan took a last look at Terra. The administration building was on fire.

"Ready to blast off," he said into the microphone.

"No. 1 ready, sir."

"No. 2 ready, sir."

"No. 3 ready, sir."

Jan looked around for the African and the Prophet. They had taken their places in the acceleration compartments behind him.

"All hands and passengers, we are about to leave Terra for an unannounced destination. You who have never experienced space travel will find the first half hour somewhat uncomfortable. Do not be afraid. You will survive with no damage to your health. We are now leaving Terra." Jan pressed the button.

"Oh Lord, oh Lord," he thought. "This is as bad as the first time." No man ever got used to the horror of blast-off and acceleration. When he was again really conscious, the moon was larger than the earth.

"Prophet," he said, "you can now come out of your compartment. Where are we going?"

The Prophet came and sat beside him.

"I am not a spaceman," he said. "I don't know. Any planet that is uninhabited but suitable for human life will do. Keep away from the human colonies if you value your life."

Jan laughed. "You told me that you had planned all this."

"I planned everything except our destination. On earth we only hear of the human colonies. Spacemen seldom publish their adventures on the uninhabited worlds."

"Well," said Jan, "I could take you to Big America where you could live like Eskimos at the equator. Or I could take you to Mark Twain where there is plenty of fruit and game but where a human being weighs about 400 pounds and usually lacks the energy to lift a hand or pull a trigger. Or how about Satan, which is populated with very intelligent and very poisonous snakes? Or Melville, which is all fresh water ocean and living would be easy if one didn't mind eating fish and if there were anything to make ships out of. Or Boxley, where a

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hundredweight of lead would scarcely keep you on the ground. There are so many places where Terrans can survive."

"Do we have to decide right now?"

"No. We are going in the general direction of the known inhabitable worlds. You will have two weeks, earth time, to decide."

The interview pleased Jan immensely. At least in the most important matter he would be in command if he played his cards right.

The voyage settled down to routine. The passengers sang and prayed about half the time. The crew stayed out of their way as much as possible, which was an ideal situation from the standpoint of morale. There was, of course, the problem of Jimpson, cook third class, who donned a white robe and neglected to shave before ten days had passed. Jan decided to ignore the matter.

Fortunately the crewmen were all non-Terrans. He had wisely let the earthmen have the first liberty in their home port.

The Mohcans had the usual trouble of first passengers in adapting themselves to non-gravity. They bumped their heads rather badly on the bulkheads before they learned that practically no force was required to get from one place to another.

The only passenger who gave him trouble was the one called Sister Ellen, widow of the man who was killed in the fight with the police. After about five days, earth time, he was surprised to find her kneeling outside his stateroom. The fact that she was floating about six inches off the deck made the posture slightly ludicrous. Her face, however, was very beautiful with its expression of calm, serious contemplation.

"What are you doing here?" Jan asked.

"I'm praying for you."

"Why?"

"Because you are a lost soul and because our lives are in your hands."

Jan stared at her in amazement. "I've seen everything now," he thought. She was truly a beautiful woman, tall, strong, very fair. Her long golden hair floated in a cloud about her head.

"Aren't you the woman whose man was killed at the spaceport?"

"Yes. The others have selfish attachments. I have no one. That is why I am praying for you."

Jan had an impulse to order her back to the passengers quarters. The woman was so beautiful and the situation so unprecedented that he didn't do it. Instead, he said, "Thank you for your interest. You must never bother me or my crew with your devotions. No singing or praying aloud. You must stay out of our way while we are working."

"I will, sir."

JAN decided that she was mad. Her vigils were practically continuous. Whenever he came out of his stateroom he usually found her floating in a kneeling position in the passageway. She seemed to have little interest in him as a person, and on the few occasions in which he tried to talk to her, her answers were laconic but sensible enough. After awhile he got so used to seeing her that he was able to ignore the situation.

Jan spent many hours trying to decide on a destination that would suit both him and his kidnappers. He had visited a couple of hundred worlds and read about many others. He was tempted to try for planetfall on a human world, but he realized that the chances against landing successfully without the entire crew being massacred were pretty slight.

He flipped through the microbooks for an idea. The word "Aphrodite" gave him the answer. Nine years before he had spent a brief liberty on that planet. During the next several off-watches he read everything available on that planet.

At last he felt he knew enough to risk an interview with the Prophet.

"I believe I have found the world you want," Jan told him. "It is a planet slightly smaller than Terra. Unlike Terra, it has no continents but numberless islands ranging in size from about that of New Guinea to atolls.

"It is closer to its sun than Terra is to Sol; consequently, the equator is uninhabitable. The sea actually boils in that region. But both hemispheres, from the poles to the tropics, are ideal for Terrans. Incidentally, the sea is so fresh that you can drink it without any bad effects from the salt. The soil is very fertile, and the low gravity makes it possible to do a great deal of farming with much less effort than on Terra,

The only reason why this world has never been colonized is that it offers practically nothing for trade. There are no known mineral deposits of any consequence. Fish and vegetables are scarcely interstellar commodities."

"I don't like the name of the planet," the Prophet said.

"What's in a name?" Jan asked. "It was named by a bunch of sex-crazy spacemen. Change it to Houri or Mahomet or what you will."

"Is there any humanoid life?" the Prophet asked. "I have seen those misbegotten sons of the Evil One. They are even worse than the lost sons of Terra."

Jan became cautious. "There are no humanoids," he said. "The dominant race is bird-like. No one knows much about them. They have a language of their own, and they can understand some human ideas. They are very intelligent, according to some explorers, but they have no science. They seem to have some primitive idea of God. Perhaps you could make them see the Truth.

"I have seen them and even talked with them, if you can call it talking. They are about the size of eagles, but they are not predatory against land animals. They are very clever fishers and will teach you the art. They are friendly and curious.

"I'll tell you what you can do. We have approximately a week before we have to decide. Why don't you read the microbooks? They will tell you everything that the spaceships have discovered."

For the next earth week the Prophet, his legs crossed like a yogi, floated above the deck in front of a microbook screen.

"The planet called Aphrodite, which will be called Houri from henceforth, is my choice," he said at last.

Jan went into his stateroom and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he busied himself with the complications of setting a course for Houri nee Aphrodite.

The rest of the voyage was uneventful. They made a successful landing on the large north pole island. For several hours they waited for the molten glass of the blasted beach to cool before venturing to open the hatch. Both Mohcans and crew were sick with the pangs of restored gravity. The Mohcans attempted hymns of deliver-

ance but broke them off breathlessly before they were finished.

Jan hoped to unload his unwanted passengers and then blast off for the nearest planet with a human colony. Quietly he had passed the word to all the crew except Jimpson the convert.

He had reckoned without taking into consideration the cunning of the Prophet. When Jan gave the word to open the hatch, each crewman found himself covered by a pair of blasters.

"Leave the ship," the Prophet ordered.

They marched slowly, heavily, in the unfamiliar gravity across the beach to the forest. The trees were filled with the bird-like dominant race. One of the Mohcans lifted a blaster.

"I don't think I would do it," Jan said. "No one knows just what these creatures can do. It might be the last act of our lives."

"Don't shoot," said the African. "Halt! Wait for the Prophet."

THEY stood drooping with the weight of gravity looking toward the rocket in its field of glass and the pink and violet surf beyond. Jan glanced at the bird creatures in the nearest tree. A big cock with green and lavender plumage said, "Coo?" in a definite question.

Jan shook his head unhappily. The bird looked at him for a moment with big lavender eyes, then lifted with easy grace on great wings and flew slowly from tree to tree singing a troubled message.

The Prophet came from the rocket ship. He walked extremely fast considering the gravity. When he reached the group he handed Jan a slip of paper.

"I made these adjustments," he said. "Tell me, won't the ship explode in about half an hour?"

Jan studied the figures on the paper.

"Yes," he said dully.

"You are indeed fortunate," the Prophet said. "I figured it out by studying the micro-books. I had determined from the day we left earth that I would never permit you to leave and spread the alarm. I would have killed you all. But Allah tells us to be merciful. Perhaps I will let you live now."

"We will all die if we don't get out of

here fast."

He turned and began to run into the forest. The birds seemed to understand and rose in a swarm from the trees. The crew and the Mohcans followed in sudden panic.

The weeks of no-gravity played havoc with them. They ran heavily, sobbing and falling, through the woods. Some of them lost their way. They struggled ever so slowly through the open forest and slowed down to a walk on the mountain side that rose abruptly before them. Jan found a huge boulder and crouched behind it. Sister Ellen came after him. She was gasping with fatigue and terror.

He reached out and seized her white robe. "Here," he cried. "Take cover here."

Her hand closed on his desperately. Then she let go in terror and fell to her knees beside him. She locked her hands across her breast and looked upward to the pale green-blue sky.

Suddenly it seemed as though the whole earth were on fire. The sky turned to absolute white and the tops of the trees glowed orange red. There was a rending crash beyond any possibility of sound; then the absolute darkness and deafness of too much.

Jan struggled back to consciousness with a sense of beatitude. He was locked with Sister Ellen in a complete embrace, mouth to mouth, breast to breast, hip to hip. He watched the sky flame orange and red and finally gray black through her hair. He knew in that moment that without a ship, almost without humanity, life was good on Aphrodite.

And then the woman was struggling with him. "Oh, Allah, oh Buddha, oh Lenin, oh Lord, I have sinned, I have sinned!" she cried, and fled aimlessly into the burning forest.

Hours later, attracted by shot after shot from the Prophet's blaster, they assembled on a mountaintop. The fire had spent itself in the damp forest. Below them was a blackened area down to the sea. There was a bay where the rocket ship had been.

It was a sad and tired little column that filed down to the sea. On the beach they knelt and sang a hymn of deliverance and a service for the dead. Jan and the 13 surviving spacemen stood uncertainly in a group apart from the others.

At last the Prophet, who had taken his posture on a large, sea-worm boulder, arose and held up his hands for silence.

"With us are certain godless ones. We will spare their lives but there is no need to associate with them. I order the spacemen to march immediately to the north end of the island. We will not communicate with them or have any dealings with them. I warn them on pain of death to stay to themselves. Spacemen, march!"

Jan and the others trudged down the beach. As they left the group Jimpson grinned insolently.

"You'll pay for that grin," Jan whispered.

They had not marched more than two miles up the beach when they heard the sound of blasters. They looked back and saw hundreds of the great birds rising from the trees. Other hundreds joined them as they wheeled northward. The sky above them was filled with the rush of frightened wings and low, throaty whimpers of terror. Then a dozen birds turned back and began to fly low over the treetops.

"I'll bet those are spies," Jan told his spacemen.

They marched on until the brief arctic night came. Then, weary with excitement and fatigue, they dropped to the beach.

"I'm sorry, men," Jan said. "I hoped we would be able to outwit them some way, but it looks like the Mohcans have licked us. However, I'm just as glad we weren't present when they shot the birds. Those creatures are believed to be highly intelligent."

"What do you call them, chief?"

"The books refer to them as Species X-78 because no naturalist has ever made a study of their habits. Spacemen call them lovebirds or loverbirds because they can talk and because they're very affectionate with each other. When I was here before they learned to talk to us in no time at all. They're not real birds. They're life-bearing-like mammals but don't nurse their young."

As a matter of discipline, Jan posted a guard although he felt confident that the Mohcans were at least as exhausted as the spacemen. He had slept for only an hour or two when the man on watch woke him.

"Here's one of the birds to talk to you, captain."

It was very light. There were three full moons in the sky and the sky was reddening toward dawn.

The lovebird was a giant cock with bright red wing tips.

"I remember you, spaceman, from the other time you were here. I was a young fellow then but I can still talk." He spoke carefully in a low, cooing manner.

"You are friends, aren't you? The ones in white are enemies. They killed and ate three of us. We never heard of intelligent beings eating each other."

"We are friends, and the ones in white are our enemies," Jan said.

"You will be happy, then, if we destroy them?"

"I will be very happy. But how will you do it? Remember, they have very dangerous weapons. We have none."

"First we must learn about them. Tell us all you know. Then we will spy on them for a long time."

Jan told him all that he knew of the Mohcans as individuals and as a sect. The sun was well up when he finished. The bird leaped into the air with a long musical cry as piercing as a trumpet call. In a few moments hundreds of birds settled about them with fruit and fish in their claws.

"We will help you to live, and, in return, you and your men must teach all of us your language."

For three weeks Jan and his men lived idly on the beach without turning a hand for food. They made friends with the birds and taught them language. In return, the birds taught them of the ways of the planet. Neither birds nor spacemen went near the Mohcans except for small groups of winged spies.

"THE Mohcans are doing well," the red-winged chief reported. "They are catching fish and they know what fruit is good. Every morning and evening they come together on the beach and sing."

Then, several days later, the bird chief said to Jan, "Tonight we attack. There will be no moons for several hours."

"What will you do?"

"Listen and learn."

"If you can, spare the woman named Sister Ellen."

"I promise nothing, but we will try."

As the sun sank, the sky was suddenly filled with a great rhythm of wings. For a quarter of an hour there was silence. Then there began a song with a sensual quality to it, a low, sad insistent yearning. It became stronger, more determined, more vibrant with urgency. Jan thought of all the women he had had and of those he had longed to have, and finally the dream woman who existed on none of the worlds but only in his own mind.

And then the music shifted, and he began to hate the men who had taken women away from him and the women he could never have because of the men who had them.

Suddenly there was a blow and a shout of pain in the darkness, and Jan could dimly see two spacemen fighting, an almost unheard of thing among those men conditioned and disciplined to comradeship. Jan leaped between them. They had their hands clenched on each other's throats and it was not easy to separate them.

"What's the matter with you, Smith? Have you gone crazy, Knorsky?" Jan shouted.

"It's that dame on Tartarus, Captain. He stole her from me."

Jan remembered the dame, a sloe-eyed little spaceman's tart. Smith and Knorsky had placed playful bets on who would have her first. Smith won, and Knorsky paid with a laugh. They were the best of friends.

"Calm down, you guys—" Jan started to say. Suddenly there was a rattle of blaster fire. A moment's silence was followed by more shots. Then random shots with decreasing frequency. The bird song had ceased completely.

Then a long silence broken by a sound like laughter. It grew wilder and wilder. Then it came north on wings. The birds settled on the beach and in the forest. The red-winged chief strutted beside Jan.

"It was easy to do, spacecaptain," the bird said. "We watched them until we understood how many longed for each other's mates. Then we drove the men to women who did not belong to them and the women to the men. Then we turned to the foolishness of jealousy. There are 27

men and seven women less. There now remain 10 men and 23 women."

"Is the woman named Ellen all right?"

"Yes. She stayed on her knees throughout the fight and no one touched her."

At sundown the next evening the bird chief said, "Perhaps we will complete our victory tonight."

Jan made his men stuff medical cotton in their cars. It was a wise precaution. The bird song, muted by the cotton was one of pure hate and the desire for vengeance. Jan remembered that he was a captain and that his men might have cause to resent his discipline. He crept quietly away and hid in the woods.

And at last came the sound of blasters, burst after burst in the clear night air. And then silence, followed by the wild thunder of bird laughter.

"The black one was the first to act," the bird chief said. "He killed the one called the Prophet in a terrible manner, burning off his arms and legs with the blaster."

"Then someone killed the black man, and after that there was a general battle. The foolish spaceman named Jimpson tried to dig a hole in the sand, but 20 of us flew down and picked him up and carried him out to sea. He could not swim. There are now no men and 20 women left, including your woman called Ellen."

The next evening the birdsong did not begin until two moons arose. It was pleasant, calm, full of promise. Without any discussion the spacemen started to walk south along the beach. They had not gone far when they saw the Mohcan women walking toward them. Both parties began to run.

Jan held Ellen in his arms. "I thought it was a sin, what I was feeling for you. Now I know it isn't. The birds are telling us that it isn't, aren't they, darling?"

For answer, Jan kissed her.

Later he talked to all of them. "There are 14 men and 20 women," he said. "There will be polygamy, but there must be no jealousy. We must work everything out reasonably."

"You will be reasonable," the bird chief said. "We have songs which will make you be reasonable."