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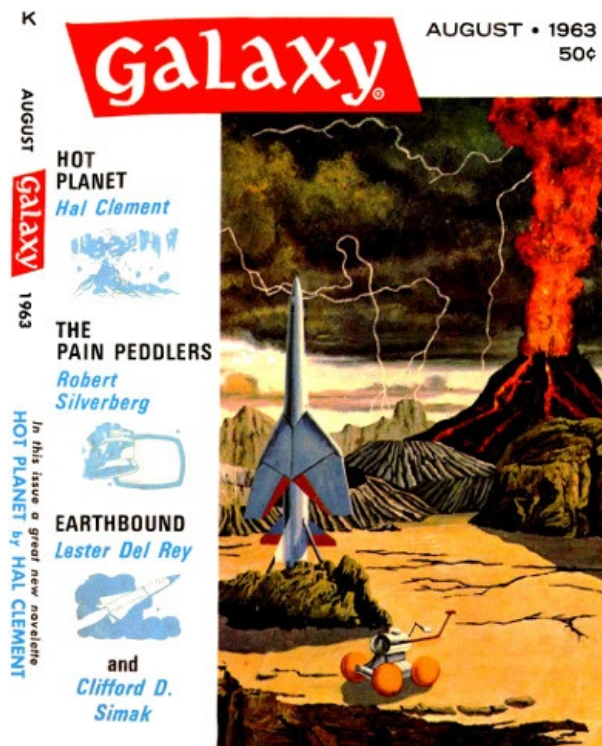
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BIRDS OF LORRANE ***



THE BIRDS OF LORRANE

By BILL DOEDE

Illustrated by BURNS

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Intelligent birds! They knew a dead-end planet when they visited one!

Ingomar Bjorgson knew he was going to die.

He turned his back on his useless ship and went inside the bubble house that had been his home for ninety-nine days. Methodically he donned his all-weather clothes, his environment suit. He did not want to die in this place. Here was food and refrigeration for the days, warmth and comfort for the nights. He could not bring himself to put a gun to his head, or end it by any other direct, willful act. But out there in the desert, away from man-made helps for survival ... there a man could get himself into circumstances where nature took care of it.

That was his reason for being here on this lonely planet, in the first place—the promise of finding intelligent life. For intelligence was rare in the universe, after all. A lone adventurer, a year before, forced down on this planet by a cosmic storm, had waited a week here for the storm to subside, then had landed on Earth with the feverish news of intelligent life. Ingomar Bjorgson had come to investigate.

Birds, yet.

They were only two. Two birds with minds like the edge of a razor, living alone on this planet that was one hundred per cent desert.

He took one last look around the bubble, then walked out, leaving the door open. From ten feet away he watched the sand already blowing in through the doorway, and he felt very lonely and small. He knew that his death, like his life, would never be marked anywhere with any degree of permanence.

He walked. There was no hurry, so he walked slowly, stopping occasionally to turn and stare at the tracks his feet had scuffed in the sand, watching sand drift into them. He smiled wryly. The universe was so eager to be rid of him—as if he were a disease.

He looked up again, studying the whole sky. But there was no movement of wings, no silver streak of a ship coming to pick him up. Only one spot marred the desert's domain—the tiny bright reflection of the burning sun on the now distant bubble.

The birds had promised him. They had been so sure of themselves.

When he knew that the fierce sun and wind would kill him before he could get back to the bubble, he started removing his all-weather clothes. He flung them aside like a dancer. Coat to the left, trousers to the right. The hot wind threw the trousers back against his face. He tore them off with a curse. Shirt to the left. He kept the shoes on, out of respect for his feet. Then he trudged on, wondering vaguely how a half dressed man, dying on his feet, could make the same marks in the sand as a fully clothed, comfortable one.

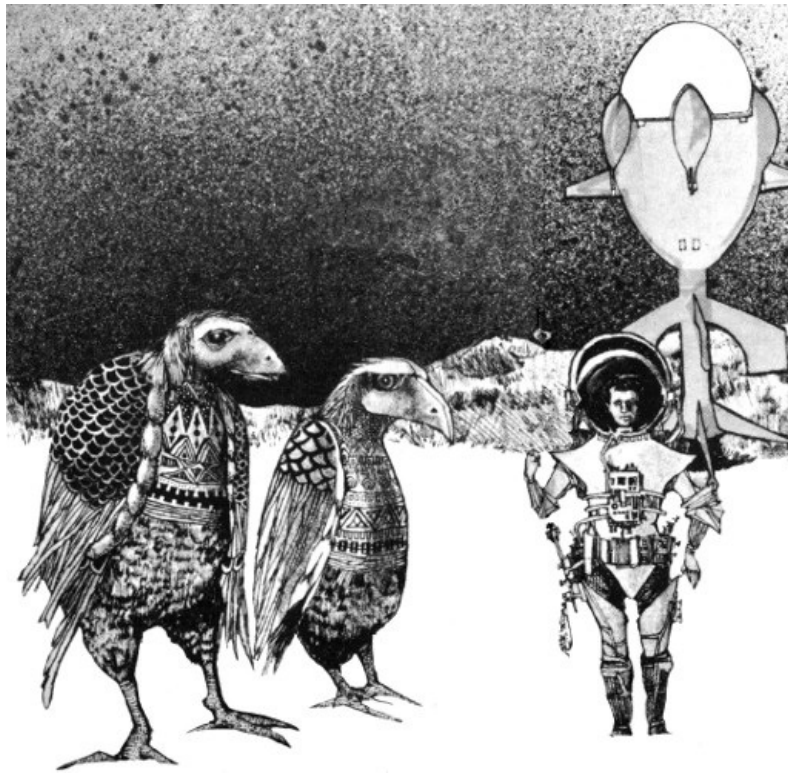
He stumbled on an outcropping of rock. He fell. He picked himself up again. It would be quick, after all. The sun was in league with the rest of the universe. He would die soon.

He fell again.

He had found the planet of Lorrane easily. The adventurer's charts were accurate. It was a dry, barren place, an old, worn-out world where only wind and sand moved, where mountains shoved their eroded peaks into the impotent sky. But Ingomar found, upon emerging from his ship, that there was another movement. Two black dots appeared far away in the sky and rapidly grew larger. He had been told that the planet was populated by an intelligent form of bird life. Two were approaching now.

He smiled to himself. "Imagine that," he said to himself, "A smart bird. How should you meet a smart bird? Should you shake hands?"

The birds alighted in the sand before him. They eyed him with bright, intelligent eyes. They were quite large, standing at least two feet tall. Their gray feathers lay smooth and straight, immaculately cared for. Ingomar cast around in his mind for something to say, or some sign to make that indicated friendship.



Then one of the birds looked at the other and said, "This one is larger."

"Much," the other replied.

Ingomar was astonished. "You can talk?" he asked, "In English?"

"Certainly. Didn't the first man tell how he instructed us?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Ingomar said, confused. "But I didn't remem ... that is.... Well, I didn't believe it."

The birds eyed each other again. "I like him," one said. "If there's anything I hate, it's a completely honest person."

The other gave him a vicious peck on his back. "Shut up!" it said, "Do you want him to think we condone dishonesty?"

"Of course not," the other retorted hotly, "I just meant that, considering social protocol, it is sometimes kind to tell a very small lie."

Ingomar was speechless. He looked back at his ship, standing tall and straight, ready to blast itself into the sky again. He glanced around at the lonely landscape. Finally he said, "It is difficult to see a difference between you two. Do you have names that I might be able to use?"

"Oh, yes. We beg your pardon. How uncivil of us. Our name, translated into your tongue, is Pisces."

"The fish?"

"Well," they said, "from our home planet the constellation does not look like a fish."

"Oh. Well, are both of you named Pisces? Oh, I see. That is your species. I am called Man; you are called Pisces."

"Of course not," they said, "You were right the first time. Pisces is our name. You can say, 'Pisces, get me that ship.' And we would do so."

"How can both of you have the same name? Are you actually one intelligence? And see that you keep your hands ... I mean, see that you leave my ship alone."

One said, "We wouldn't think of touching your ship." The other said, "No, we are two separate entities."

Ingomar passed a hand over his face, thinking. The two very Earth-looking birds stood quietly before him, their feet buried in the sand so that it looked like their legs were two stilts shoved into the ground. At last he said, "Well, I know what we'll do. I will call you Pisces I," he pointed to the bird on his left, "and your companion Pisces II."

The identical birds glanced at each other, then leapt into the air. They circled high above his head. They swooped low. They engaged in marvelous aerial gymnastics wonderful to see. Ingomar made notes in his book concerning their agility. Finally they came to rest before him

again, so suddenly that he stepped backward quickly, frightened.

"Now," they said, "which one of us is Pisces I and which is Pisces II?"

Puzzled, Ingomar studied them carefully. The one with the quick temper might show this characteristic in some way. He pointed to the bird on his right. "You," he said, "are Pisces I."

They laughed. It was a verbal sound only. No expression showed in their eyes.

"All right," Ingomar said, after some thought. "I can fix that." He entered his ship and rummaged around in his clothes locker, then emerged with a brilliant red ribbon of plastic. "I'll tie this to your leg. That way I'll know that you are Pisces I. If you promise not to move it from one to the other."

"We promise."

He stooped over to tie the plastic on the leg of the one he thought was Pisces I, and was almost caught in the sudden flurry of slashing beaks and raking claws, like a mating fight in an aviary.

"I am Pisces I," one screamed, administering a resounding peck on the other's back.

"No, you're not. I am." This one leapt into the air and landed on the other's back. He raked vicious, long talons across the well-groomed feathers. "I am more intelligent than you. I should be Pisces I."

From a safe ten feet away, Ingomar threw the ribbon at them. "Stop it!" he yelled.

They obeyed instantly, and stood quietly side by side facing him. Ingomar drew his hand gun and pointed it at them. "Now stop your fighting, or I'll blow you to kingdom come."

"Fine," they said. "Anything to get off this miserable planet. How far is it?"

Ingomar smiled, in spite of his anger. "It's an expression. It means I will destroy you."

One of the birds quickly picked up the plastic ribbon and carried it to the other, and dropped it near the leg. Then both took it in their beaks and together they tied it around the leg. It was done so quickly that Ingomar stood there aghast, surprised into immobility. He had never before seen birds tie knots.

"It would not be wise to destroy us," Pisces I said. "We can help you."

"How?"

"You need help," Pisces II said. "A storm is coming."

"A cosmic storm?" Ingomar asked. "I'm not worried about that. I'll stay here until it moves on."

Pisces I shook his head. "A planetary storm."

"When?"

"Sometime tonight."

"Okay," Ingomar said. "Thanks. I'll stay inside."

"It's not so easy as that. You must blast off and put your ship in orbit for the night."

"Why? Do you know how much fuel it takes to get into orbit? I have none to spare."

Pisces II scratched in the sand with his claws, thinking. Then he said, "Only one alternative exists. If you remain, the storm will wreck your ship. Take us aboard now, and blast off for your home planet. To stay here means death."

Ingomar snorted and turned back toward his ship. He thought, "Take them aboard my ship? Not in a million years." He saw their plan, now. They wanted to get into his ship. Then, by some means he could not now foresee, they would take the ship away from him.

He was so shaken by this conclusion that he quickly retreated to safety, closing the airlock. The birds stayed outside. They were arguing between themselves. He could tell by the gesticulations they made with their heads. Once Pisces I attacked Pisces II viciously, raking him mercilessly with sharp talons. Pisces II fought back ferociously. They rolled over and over in the sand. Ingomar threw a switch that gave him communication outside the ship, and yelled at them.

They stopped fighting at once. He said, "Have you two lost your minds?"

Pisces II laughed. "Now how could one lose his mind? It goes with him everywhere."

"All right," Ingomar said. "I meant, have you become insane?"

"Of course not," Pisces I said. "We are peaceful entities. We intentionally developed this argument to break the monotony of life here."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"It is terrible. Will you take us aboard?"

Ingomar did not answer, but switched the communicator off and busied himself with recording

his observations. He took advantage of their continued presence and took photographs.

Finally, after several hours, they leapt into the air and flew away toward the distant mountains. Ingomar was sorry to see them leave, and more than once checked his instruments for signs of a coming storm in case they were right. But nothing outside had changed.

After they had left he opened the ship and stepped outside, taking readings with instruments to record the character of the planet. He trudged through the eternally drifting sand, looking for some sign of life. No plants, insects, animals anywhere. Only the fine, mobile sand, occasionally an outcropping of rock not yet eroded away. And the heat! Ingomar was forced to turn the controls of his environment suit almost all the way up to keep comfortable. Then, when the sun receded behind the ghostly barren mountains, the cold came creeping in. Ingomar turned his controls in the other direction, while walking back to his ship. He was afraid he would not keep the cold outside.

The landscape, with the sun's absence, was dark and fearful. Shadows moved in the wind, shadows of drifting sand that took on the shapes of monsters lurking in the darkness. Ingomar was not one to frighten easily, but the night took on such ominous sighs and moans and movements that his imagination began to magnify them beyond recognition. When he finally saw the ship loom up before him he ran, stumbling toward it. He fumbled in the darkness for the control knob to open the lock and found it at last. He leapt inside, accompanied by a cold blast of wind and sand, and stood there panting, hearing his heart pound in his ears.

The night was long and lonely. He was too far from civilization for his radio equipment to bring the comfort of familiar sounds. He tried to read, but found concentration impossible. He thought of the birds, wondering where they were now, how they kept from freezing to death at night. He rewrote his notes, adding remembered facts and impressions. Finally he decided sleep was the most painless way of spending the night, and swallowed a small capsule designed to induce total sleep for at least six hours.

He awoke the next morning standing on his head.

The bed, horizontal the night before, was now vertical. The whole room was vertical. Panic swept over him like a wave of burning fire. He scrambled to the airlock. It opened grotesquely.

The ship, which last night had stood so proudly, now lay on its side. And in his drugged sleep he had not known when it fell. For Ingomar, the bottom dropped out of everything, and his heart dropped with it. There was no resetting of a ship once it had fallen. This took special equipment. Ingomar Bjorgson was a doomed man, and he knew it.

While he stood outside in the morning sun, staring at the horrible spectacle before him, the two birds alighted, one on each side.

"Why didn't you listen to us?" Pisces I said in an accusing tone.

"Yes," Pisces II echoed angrily. "You make me sick, thinking you're so smart, coming down here in your big ship and strutting around like you think you're a God, or something. Now, how big do you feel? Do you realize that this is our first opportunity to leave this planet? I've a good notion to peck your stupid eyes out right here and now."

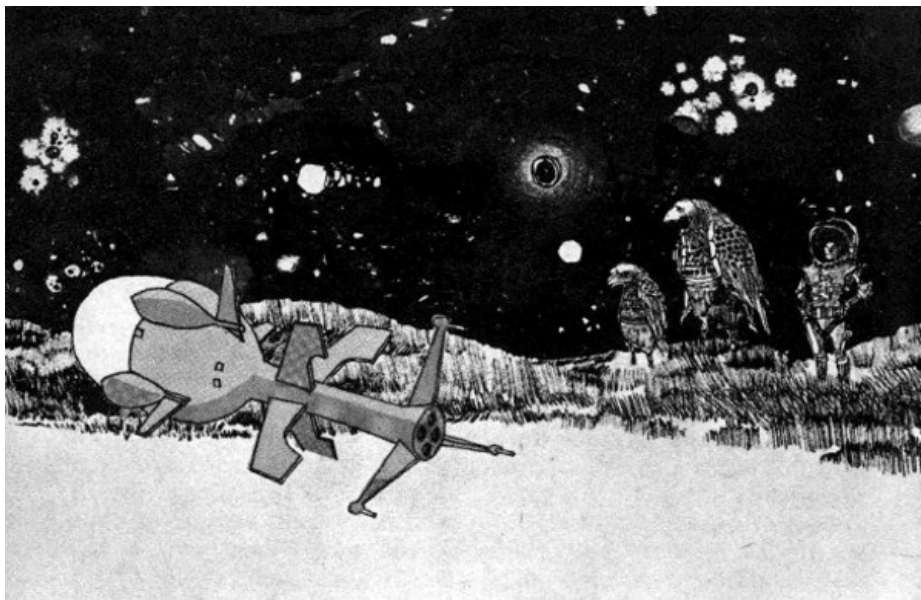
"Leave him be," Pisces I said. "He may not be so bright, but I think he would have taken us with him, after he got used to us and saw how harmless we are."

Pisces II leapt at him, almost knocking Ingomar off his feet. "Shut up! I've a good notion to peck your eyes out, too."

"Oh, stop it!" Ingomar said wearily. "We're all doomed to spend the rest of our lives here. How was I to know that the storm would be so bad? My instruments gave no indication whatever."

"Actually, it was our fault," Pisces II said, more calmly. "We failed to mention the nature of the storm. We thought you knew. It was a magnetic storm. A shifting of magnetic currents surrounding the planet. We had no idea that you would think of the weather."

They walked with him around the fallen ship. It was not injured, that much Ingomar could see. The soft bed of sand had cushioned its fall. If it could only be righted! Ingomar knew it was impossible.



"It is pointed toward that knoll out there. See? Suppose we all got inside and blasted off. We would slide along and maybe when we reached the knoll we'd have enough speed to keep on going in a straight line until we could point her nose upward."

Ingomar shook his head, but he appreciated the suggestion. It indicated that they were willing to try anything. He knew their motives were not entirely philanthropic, but he liked them more for it, anyway.

He said, "There is only one way out, and that is for someone to come in and get us."

"Well," Pisces II said, "What are you waiting for? Call them."

"I can't. We are too far out for communication."

The two gray birds eyed one another in disbelief. Pisces I scratched his breast impolitely. Then he said, "Are you telling us that you have come this far from your own solar system, knowing that you could not call for help, if necessary?"

Ingomar nodded.

Pisces II snorted through his beak, and scratched in the sand. "Stupidity," he said. "There is no other word for it."

"Yes, there is," Pisces I answered, somewhat sharply. "In fact, there are several possible words. Bravery. Desperation. Actually I think it is a combination of both. I am sure that you are aware how rare intelligent life is in the universe. When you heard of us, you rushed out here at once. I would call it bravery to go beyond the sound of the voices of your kind. You are desperate because you are lonely in an almost empty universe."

"We must help him," said Pisces II.

"Of course. But first let's make him comfortable. It will be a long wait."

"Thank you," Ingomar said, moved by their sympathy. "But you cannot help. Or do you have a way to send messages?"

"Yes, in a way," Pisces II said, "You see...."

Pisces I lifted a huge wing and knocked Pisces II in the sand. He turned to Ingomar. "Do you promise to take us with you, if we should succeed in getting help?"

Ingomar did not think it over. "Yes," he said.

"Then we will do it. But first we must make you comfortable. Do you have equipment for shelter, besides the ship?"

"Yes, there is the bubble. It can be expanded to become a house."

"Get it," Pisces II said.

Ingomar did. He dragged it outside and began to unfold it, in preparation for inflation. But Pisces II stopped him. "Not here," he said. "It will be a long time. Our calculation is that it will take at least forty-five days to get help. The trip from your planet alone is at least forty days. You will not wish to stare at your toppled ship for so long. I suggest we go beyond the first knoll."

Pisces I laughed and said to Ingomar, "For once he is using his brain. We will carry it."

He grasped the bubble in his claws, flapped his enormous wings and sailed off. Soon he returned, and among the three of them all his food and books and any equipment he might need was

carried over the knoll out of sight of the wrecked ship.

"We will not return," they said, "until the rescue ship arrives. So make yourself comfortable. Do not stray too far from the ship. This is the most miserable planet in the universe. Give us plenty of time. We know we can summon help, but we do not know how long it will take. We may need as many as seventy-five days."

Ingomar settled down to wait.

The fierce, burning sun had turned Ingomar's face and naked arms into fried areas of intense pain, but he regained consciousness when he felt the coolness of the ointment. It penetrated deep down, under the burned skin, into flesh and muscle, soothing injured cells.

He opened his eyes. He moved his head. The eyes were burned and bloodshot, but he could see a ship standing a hundred feet away. It was not sleek and long, pointing its needle nose at the sky, though. It was round, dull white, like a giant egg laid by a giant bird.

Bird? Ingomar chuckled, senses returning, thinking through his pain of Pisces I or Pisces II laying an egg. Then he laughed aloud.

He stopped, quite abruptly, and looked again. The egg was still there, but it was not an egg. It was actually a ship and the airlock was open and Pisces II was backing out, dragging a sort of stretcher on wheels.

"It's a ... a ... ship!" he exclaimed, tears running down his cheeks, over the ointment. "Whose ship is it?"

"Ours," said Pisces I.

"Yours?" Ingomar said, after a long pause while the pain raged over his skin. He tried to sit up, and Pisces I got behind him and pushed, nudging him upright. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh," Pisces II interrupted. "We had it all the time."

"Shut up!" Pisces I yelled. "He asked me."

"Hold your tongue," Pisces II retorted hotly, "or I'll take off and leave you here. I've had enough of you in the past century to last a lifetime."

Pisces I said to Ingomar, "Pay no attention to that peasant." He helped Pisces II push the stretcher next to Ingomar. Then he pushed a lever and the stretcher reduced itself to ground height. It was too short for Ingomar's body, having been designed for the body of a bird. "He's right, though," Pisces I continued, giving the stretcher a kick because it wasn't long enough. "We had the ship all along. It was despicable of us to deceive you, but our ship was defective, and we needed yours for parts."

Ingomar shook his head. "There was no magnetic storm?"

Pisces II nodded his head. "Oh, yes, there was a storm. But not a natural phenomenon, I'm sorry to say. Too bad. The natural storms are much more beautiful."

"And you had the bubble set up away from the ship so I wouldn't see you steal the parts?"

They hung their heads. "Despicable," they said. "A rotten thing to do."

Ingomar was too ill for anger. "Let me understand this," he said. "You ruined my ship to get parts for yours. Why? Why not just take my ship?"

"Too slow," Pisces II said. He took the container of ointment in his beak and set it beside Ingomar's hand. "Here, you can rub it on by yourself now. Get busy."

Pisces I said, "By your standards our planet is a terrible distance away. Your ship would take too long. Hurry, now. We've got to take you to ... what do you call it, Earth? What an odd name! We're in sort of a hurry to get home, as you might imagine."

Ingomar hurried. With the help of the mysterious, healing ointment he was soon able to get up and make his way to the ship.

"One more question," he said. "Your ship was defective and you set down here and you've been here for a long time, and you're a long way from home. What were you doing so far from home, in the first place?"

"What do you suppose?" said Pisces I irritably. "We were looking for intelligent life. Get a move on, now. If we don't waste too much time on this Earth, we may still find some!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BIRDS OF LORRANE ***

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