

Undeniably Cute: A Cautionary Tale

by Marta Randall

Someone, they decided, had used the place as a prison planet for pesky savages. There was no sign of putative jailors but the prison-planet theory explained the circumstances with the least possible fuss: no direct evolutionary link to the indigenous hominids, a culture (if it could be so termed) far too primitive to produce tools, and, the most telling point of all, no means of reproduction. The inhabitants, from the most wrinkled ancient to the callowest adolescent, were without exception male. And, concluded the crew of the starship Mellora, three years out of port on an exploratory voyage and hungry for anything to break the monotony, they were undeniably cute.

The captain decided on an unscheduled and unreported landing, set the Mellora down at the edge of a broad plain in full view of the natives, and be damned to Federation regulations. They were, after all, on a real-estate hunting expedition and not hampered by ethnologists, exobiologists, and other such unwanted cargo, all of whom came with stiff necks and total ignorance on the subject of space crews, boredom, and the unhappy combination of the two. The atmosphere was safe and fresh, the local sun shone brightly, a sweet lake glimmered nearby, and the natives, frozen with stupefaction, stood gripping their rocks and sticks and staring open-mouthed at the Mellora's roughened sides. The crew didn't want to wait and the captain didn't intend to make them. Grinning, arms open in signs of peace, hungry as wolves, the crew tumbled onto the green grass.

Within two days the Mellora's crew had settled into the native village and the natives themselves were both presentable and happy about it. Once the crew had them scrubbed down and spruced up they looked, as the ship's doctor admitted from a hammock slung in the shade, unutterably cute. And frisky. And very obliging.

The natives supplied an endless stream of fresh fruits and palatable meats; introduced by the chief engineer to the pleasures of beer, they provided endless, harmless, and athletic entertainment. The dietician and the cook together emptied the Mellora's holds of food and proceeded to create extravagant meals. It was, the navigator opined, Paradise. The captain, beguiled by a lithe blond native with, really, remarkable blue eyes, languidly agreed. The analyst said that it was only logical to view the natives as pets, since it was, indeed, so nice to pet them and they, in turn, so nicely petted back. The Mellora, scrubbed, repaired, and spaceworthy, sat locked in a meadow and stayed that way.

