

Udine was a planet of green snow and good farmland, and the aborigine natives were easy to get along with—they left the colonists strictly alone. Until the day 13 years after the landing, when one of them said, "You must leave now."

RETURN JOURNEY

by Charles V. De Vet

PROLOG

FOR NEARLY THIRTY SIX HOURS, the colonists in and about the giant space ship waited with stolid patience, while their leaders conferred with the planet Udine's aborigine natives.

Virgil Simmons was fourteen years old, an awkward age. Too young to be accepted as an equal by the elders, and too old to play in the green snow with the youngsters.

On the afternoon of the second day the three colony negotiators returned to the ship. They were solemn, but not for long. Their faces broke into smiles as one of them exclaimed, "They've agreed to let us stay!"

The colonists shouted and cheered. Virgil Simmons forgot his hard-gained dignity and joined in a green snowball fight.

They had found their new home!

Thirteen years later the green snow once again swirled about Simmons. Udine snow. A fragrant, resin-scented snow. Everything on Udine bore some shade of green. The planet was located in the constellation of Cancer, and circled the green sun Zubenes-Chamali. It was the only green star visible from Earth.

Simmons had come up into the hills looking for snow hens, but the gun in his hand was forgotten now. On the ski trail ahead a Udine native had emerged from the background of desolate wintry landscape.

The event was rare enough to arouse Simmons' expectant curiosity. In the years the colony had been here the natives—Jaates, they called themselves—had contacted them only very rarely. There was no hostility between the two races, merely a reserved indifference on the part of the humanoid natives. They were a strange peo-

ple, and the colonists knew little about them.

The alien glided toward Simmons on feet that appeared large and clumsy, but which touched the snow only lightly. They were probably lighter of bone than Earthmen. The Jaate stopped a few yards from Simmons. His angular seven-foot body was clad in the skin of a native yak-like animal they bred for milk, meat, and hide. A skin bag suspended from a cord about his neck served as a carryall.

"You must leave now." The Jaate spoke harshly, with small lip movement. His Earthian was surprisingly good, though the vowel sounds came out somewhat strangely.

"I beg your pardon?" Searching for the emotion back of the command, Simmons studied the Jaate.

All the aborigine's features were oversize. His head was large and craggy, with lidless eyes buried deep in his skull, and long soft-cartiledged ears covering the entire sides of his head. The fair skin was darkened by a flush of blood just beneath the surface.

Yet there was nothing ludicrous about him. Dignity and character were there—and something deeper: a kind of unostentatious assurance that conveyed the impression of great strength. There was no sign of emotion.

"When the sunny years become

clouded, patience must end." The Jaates were fond of speaking metaphorically. Their "sunny years" legend was one of the mysteries that puzzled the colonists. They apparently believed they were able to stop the aging process when they reached the time of life most compatible to each. And with the limited intermingling, no Earthman had ever been able to prove them wrong.

"Why must I leave?" Simmons asked. "What have I done?"

The Jaate's long narrow face broke on both sides of its one-nostriled nose. "You must all go! You must leave our world!"

"Leave your world?" For the moment Simmons was unable to absorb the full significance of what the other had said. "Why?" he asked again, in protest.

"We agreed you could stay in the river delta," (now Simmons was certain he read anger in the Jaate's voice), "but you have gone beyond. You must leave."

Simmons stirred the snow with one ski as he searched for an argument. "Why do you tell me?" he asked. "I'm not in charge here."

"Who knows the ways of the outlanders? You will take my words to those in authority." The native moved a few steps away. "We will meet here tomorrow."

"Wait . . ." Simmons was too late. The Jaate was already twenty yards away. In a moment he vanished in the wind driven snow.

Another mystery. The Jaates appeared to move casually, yet covered distance with incredible speed. No human was able to explain how it was done.

The colony settlement had originally paralleled the river banks, but in later years had expanded on both sides. The first houses had been replaced by stores and other places of business. Homes had been moved farther back, and beyond them were the farms, stretching to the sides of the valley that bounded the river mouth. Now over twenty thousand people lived in the seventy square mile area.

Simmons crossed the green crust of the river, passing two boys fishing through the ice, and went directly to the city administration building. The old wooden structure had been replaced by one of marble that towered five stories high. The office of Thomas Reget, colony governor, was on the first floor. Simmons went in.

Reget looked up as Simmons entered. "Good hunting, Virgil?" He was a big man, bluff and extraverted. An excellent administrator, but short on diplomacy. He had been out from Earth about two years now.

"I didn't do much hunting." Simmons took a seat to the left of Reget's desk and stretched out his long legs. "I met one of the Jaates today. He told me we have to get off Udine."

Reget's eyebrows raised. "He did, eh? And what did you tell him?"

"What could I?"

"You could've told him to go salve his belly," Reget growled.

"I wouldn't take his warning lightly."

"You wouldn't . . . Damn it, Simmons. How am I supposed to take it? Tell everybody to pack up, that we're going back home?"

"I don't know the answer," Simmons replied. "I wish I did."

"But you do take it seriously?"

"Very much so."

"The Jaate spoke for his entire race, I suppose?"

"It's always been that way."

"What's his complaint?"

"It seems that when we first came here we agreed to stay within the boundaries of the river delta. We haven't kept that agreement."

Reget considered for a minute. "Other than a few small mines in the hills, we have. Oh yes, and the marble quarry."

"We opened those several years ago," Simmons said. "I believe he had in mind the farm land above the northeast corner. That was cultivated for the first time last summer. Several of the farmers have their homes there too."

Reget grunted irritably. "Virgil, we have to expand. This colony is growing. There's no longer room enough for us in the valley."

"I realize that. But I'm afraid the argument wouldn't carry much weight with the Jaates."

"What would you suggest?"

Simmons shrugged noncommittally.

Reget rose, kicking his chair to one side. "This looks to me like a case of blackmail, Virgil. You go back and find out what the fellow wants. Give it to him, if he doesn't ask for too much. If he does, give him some plain talk instead. Let him know we want to be good neighbors, but that we don't intend to be pushed around. That should straighten him out."

"It won't be that simple."

"We don't have anything he wants?"

"That's about it."

"Look, Virgil . . ." Reget sat down again. "The policy of Earth is to get along with aliens. It's true we won't colonize a world without the consent of its natives, and I'll admit we made certain commitments here. But that was thirteen years ago, and it's too late to go back now." Reget slapped his desk with the flat of his hand. "We're staying, and that's final. If the Jaates start trouble, it'll be their own doing. I hate to think what we'd have to do to them if they come at us with their knives and lances. You go back there tomorrow and remind your friend of that."

The next afternoon, as Simmons reluctantly packed his gear, John Harpley the colony ethnologist, came into the yard. He had

hiking skis trapped to his back. "Reget thought you might like me to go with you." He added, smiling a bit self-consciously, "I'm supposed to be the leading authority on the Jaates, you know."

"Glad to have you," Simmons assured him. "Lord knows I can use any help I get." He had considerable respect for Harpley's intelligence.

A stray mongrel dog followed them up the street past the Masonic Lodge as they started out. Harpley was quiet, obviously feeling himself an intruder, despite Simmons' reassurance.

"On the surface the Jaates seem like quite ordinary aborigines," Simmons tried again to put Harpley at ease. "But the more I see of them the less I understand them."

"That's a fact!" He had touched Harpley's major field of interest and the man became instantly voluble. "All gregarious races have certain common characteristics—'learned' or 'social' virtues, we call them—necessary for their survival and the function of their communities. These include respect for law and authority, cooperation, a sense of duty to other members, perhaps even compassion and tenderness—all the do-as-you-would-be-done-to virtues. In that way the Jaates and humans, both being gregarious, are alike. It's in the more basic characteristics that they differ." He hesitated and glanced at Simmons.

"Go on," Simmons prompted.

"The basic characteristics of a race are less obvious than the social characteristics—farther beneath the surface. They might include instincts, sexual patterns, family relations, special abilities, and so forth. These are harder to detect."

"I think there's more to it than that, John." They had reached the edge of town by this time and stopped by a small graveyard to buckle on their skis. "I remember one time," Simmons went on, "shortly after we landed here. I had been out in the hills, and I lost my way and wandered into one of their villages. They were more friendly then, if you remember. It seems they were about to have a funeral. One of the Jaates, quite young, was wandering about rubbing cheeks with the others. After awhile I understood that he was the one about to be buried."

Simmons paused and took a deep breath. "I still can hardly believe what I saw. The young Jaate lay down, and for a moment something else caught my attention. When I looked back, he had become an old, old man. And he'd stopped breathing. He was dead."

"I've heard of that," Harpley said. "Naturally I've given this power, or gift, of theirs considerable thought," he said. "And I've decided that it doesn't always operate the same way. In your illustra-

tion it was purely a personal thing, affecting no one except the Jaate who allowed himself to die. However, in other instances it also affects others. Once I was standing on a hill; below me, about a quarter mile away, I could see a Jaate walking along the river. Just as he reached the edge of a stand of timber I spotted one of the big striped cats on a branch above his path. I shouted a warning, but he was too far away to hear me. The cat sprang, and landed on his back. I could see it clawing savagely at the Jaate.

"I ran down into the woods toward them. Something very odd happened then. I know I didn't get lost or go in a circle, and I'm certain I ran forward, yet suddenly I found myself at the foot of the hill behind me. I went up the hill and down into the woods again. Finally I reached the spot where the Jaate and the cat had been, but there was no sign of them. A few minutes later I saw a Jaate going over a hill on the far side of the river—and it was the same one I'd seen before. I looked around carefully to make sure, and I found cat tracks—I even climbed the tree, and saw marks of its claws on the tree limb. But there was no evidence of a struggle on the ground. No blood or scuffed up sand. Yet I had seen the cat attack him."

"That's just the sort of thing I mean," Simmons said. "We've all

witnessed them—yet how can you explain them?"

Harpley shook his head. "I don't know. The explanation of our incidents very probably has to do with something as natural to them as our five senses are to us. Possibly an advanced psi ability."

"I don't quite follow you," Simmons demurred.

"Well, let's say their particular psi-type ability is a conscious control of glandular and cellular functions. That could account for what you saw at the funeral."

"But not for your episode of the Jaate and the cat."

Harpley smiled in concurrence. "If I had a theory that covered everything, I'd have the answer. Now I can only make more or less intelligent guesses."

On the side of a hill ahead, a Jaate waited.

"That's our man?" Harpley asked.

Simmons nodded.

"Should we go . . ." Harpley's voice trailed off as the Jaate moved toward them.

Simmons took over when it became apparent the Jaate waited for them to speak. "Our governor asked that you reconsider," he said.

The Jaate's only reply was a setting of his bleak features.

"Is there anything we can offer, to keep the peace?" Simmons asked.

The Jaate made an impatient gesture with one hand.

"Would you be satisfied if we withdrew back to the delta?" Simmons tried desperately.

"An empty solution. You are children." The Jaate spoke shortly, his voice without patience. "Children to not behave rationally."

Harpley seemed to catch something in the last sentence. "You believe we are not civilized enough?" he asked with interest.

"As a race, you are young. It takes millennia for a people to reach maturity."

"Nowhere in the galaxy have we met a race more advanced than ourselves," Harpley challenged.

The Jaate seemed to be searching for the right words to show he was not being unreasonable. "A child acts without thought for the future," he said. "A young race does the same. You humans breed without restraint, with no concern for your natural limitations. You are despoilers. You exploit and waste your resources, deplete the good soil, and burst out in overpopulation. Until there is not enough for all. Then you must find more living space, or suffer hunger and want. Are those the actions of a mature race?"

"What else can we do?" Harpley asked. His voice had lost its earlier conviction.

"You can develop that which is within you. . . . Now," the

Jaate said, weary of talk, "we must have your answer."

Simmons spread his hands wide helplessly. Harpley said nothing. "Then we must act."

As they started back to the settlement, both men were lost in thought. At the rim of the valley, Harpley clutched Simmon's arm. "Look!" He pointed below.

Simmons felt a heavy weight in his stomach, and a taste of brass in the run of saliva in his mouth. Where the farms had been was now only wild, undeveloped terrain!

The ground beneath Simmons' feet lost its solidity, turned fluid. His stricken gaze passed on to the city. It had become curiously dimmed and flattened, without dimension. Even as he watched, the edges of the settlement were shrinking in toward the center. Another minute passed—and the valley was empty. Nothing remained except trees and rock and the land itself.

"My God!" Dully Simmons heard Harpley's half sob, and felt the hurt of Harpley's fingers digging into his arm.

"Virgil!" Harpley's voice was thin and high. "I know the Jaates' secret! Time! They can control

. . ." There was a soft implosion of air—and Harpley was gone.

Simmons opened his mouth and cried out without sound . . .

EPILOG

For nearly thirty-six hours, the colonists in and about the giant ship waited with stolid patience, while their leaders conferred with the planet Udine's aborigine natives.

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On the afternoon of the second day the three colony negotiators returned to the ship. They were solemn. "They won't permit us to stay," one of them muttered.

Simmons dropped the handful of green snow he held and glanced back at the river valley below. For a moment he had a brief, bright vision of a settlement there. (How vivid it was!) Then his mind blinked clear and he turned and joined the colonists trooping into the ship.

The long journey must go on—they had still to find their new home.

