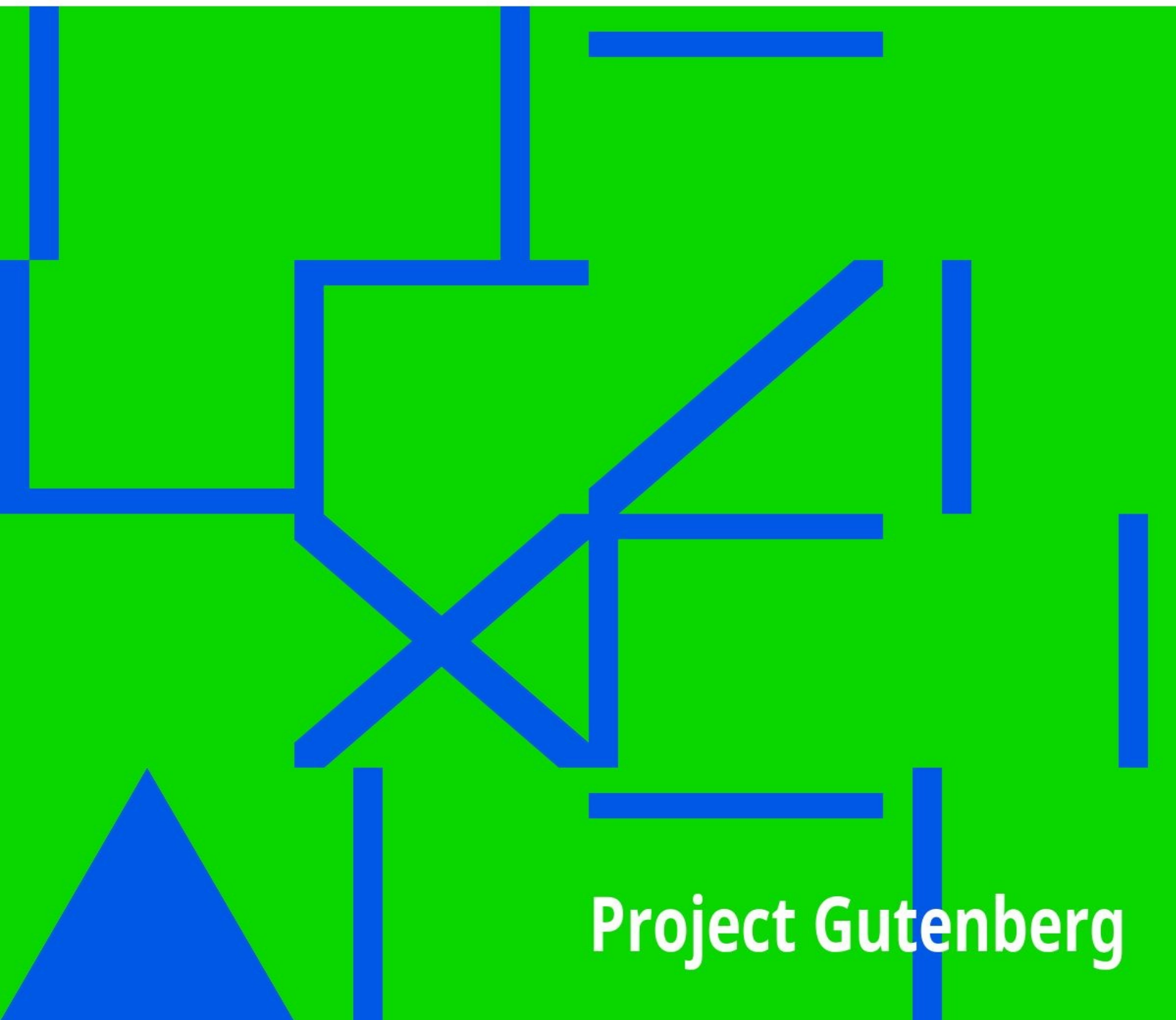


The Long Voyage

Carl Jacobi



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LONG VOYAGE ***

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When we published Carl Jacobi's last story we had no assurance he would be with us so soon again. For when a uniquely gifted science-fantasy writer becomes radio-active on the entertainment meter and goes voyaging into the unknown, he may be gone from the world we know for as long as yesterday's tomorrow. But Carl Jacobi has not only returned almost with the speed of light—he has brought with him shining new nuggets of wonder and surmise.

**the
long
voyage**

by ... Carl Jacobi

The secret lay hidden at the end of nine landings, and Medusa-dark was one man's search for it—in the strangest journey ever made.

A SOFT gentle rain began to fall as we emerged from the dark woods and came out onto the shore. There it was, the sea, stretching as far as the eye could reach, gray and sullen, and flecked with green-white froth. The blue *hensorr* trees, crowding close to the water's edge, were bent backward as if frightened by the bleakness before them. The sand, visible under the clear patches of water, was a bleached white like the exposed surface of a huge bone.

We stood there a moment in silence. Then Mason cleared his throat huskily.

"Well, here goes," he said. "We'll soon see if we have any friends about."

He unslung the packsack from his shoulders, removed its protective outer shield and began to assemble the organic surveyor, an egg-shaped ball of white carponium secured to a segmented forty-foot rod. While Brandt and I raised the rod with the aid of an electric fulcrum, Mason carefully placed his control cabinet on a piece of outcropping rock and made a last adjustment.

The moment had come. Even above the sound of the sea, you could hear the strained breathing of the men. Only Navigator Norris appeared unconcerned. He stood there calmly smoking his pipe, his keen blue eyes squinting against the biting wind.

Mason switched on the speaker. Its high-frequency scream rose deafeningly above us and was torn away in unsteady gusts. He began to turn its center dial, at first a quarter circle, and then all the way to the final backstop of the calibration. All that resulted was a continuation of that mournful ululation like a wail out of

eternity.

Mason tried again. With stiff wrists he tuned while perspiration stood out on his forehead, and the rest of us crowded close.

"It's no use," he said. "This pickup failure proves there isn't a vestige of animal life on Stragella—on this hemisphere of the planet, at least."

Navigator Norris took his pipe from his mouth and nodded. His face was expressionless. There was no indication in the man's voice that he had suffered another great disappointment, his sixth in less than a year.

"We'll go back now," he said, "and we'll try again. There must be some planet in this system that's inhabited. But it's going to be hard to tell the women."

Mason let the surveyor rod down with a crash. I could see the anger and resentment that was gathering in his eyes. Mason was the youngest of our party and the leader of the antagonistic group that was slowly but steadily undermining the authority of the Navigator.

This was our seventh exploratory trip after our sixth landing since entering the field of the sun Ponthis. Ponthis with its sixteen equal-sized planets, each with a single satellite. First there had been Coulora; then in swift succession, Jama, Tenethon, Mokrell, and R-9. And now Stragella. Strange names of strange worlds, revolving about a strange star.

It was Navigator Norris who told us the names of these planets and traced their positions on a chart for us. He alone of our group was familiar with astrogation and cosmography. He alone had sailed the spaceways in the days before the automatic pilots were installed and locked and sealed on every ship.

A handsome man in his fortieth year, he stood six feet three with broad shoulders and a powerful frame. His eyes were the eyes of a scholar, dreamy yet alive with depth and penetration. I had never seen him lose his temper, and he governed our company with an iron hand.

He was not perfect, of course. Like all Earthmen, he had his faults. Months before he had joined with that famed Martian scientist, Ganeth-Klae, to invent that all-use material, *Indurate*, the formula for which had been stolen and which therefore had never appeared on the commercial market. Norris would talk about that for hours. If you inadvertently started him on the subject a queer glint would enter his eyes, and he would dig around in his pocket for a chunk of the black

substance.

"Did I ever show you a piece of this?" he would say. "Look at it carefully. Notice the smooth grainless texture—hard and yet not brittle. You wouldn't think that it was formed in a gaseous state, then changed to a liquid and finally to a clay-like material that could be worked with ease. A thousand years after your body has returned to dust, that piece of *Indurate* will still exist, unchanged, unworn. Erosion will have little effect upon it. Beside it granite, steel are nothing. If only I had the formula ..."

But he had only half the formula, the half he himself had developed. The other part was locked in the brain of Ganeth-Klae, and Ganeth-Klae had disappeared. What had become of him was a mystery. Norris perhaps had felt the loss more than any one, and he had offered the major part of his savings as a reward for information leading to the scientist's whereabouts.

Our party—eighteen couples and Navigator Norris—had gathered together and subsequently left Earth in answer to a curious advertisement that had appeared in the Sunday edition of the *London Times*.

WANTED: A group of married men and women, young, courageous, educated, tired of political and social restrictions, interested in extra-terrestrial colonization. Financial resources no qualification.

After we had been weeded out, interviewed and rigorously questioned, Norris had taken us into the hangar, waved a hand toward the *Marie Galante* and explained the details.

The *Marie Galante* was a cruiser-type ship, stripped down to essentials to maintain speed, but equipped with the latest of everything. For a short run to Venus, for which it was originally built, it would accommodate a passenger list of ninety.

But Norris wasn't interested in that kind of run. He had knocked out bulkheads, reconverted music room and ballroom into living quarters. He had closed and sealed all observation ports, so that only in the bridge cuddy could one see into space.

"We shall travel beyond the orbit of the sun," he said. "There will be no turning

back; for the search for a new world, a new life, is not a task for cowards."

Aside to me, he said: "You're to be the physician of this party, Bagley. So I'm going to tell you what to expect when we take off. We're going to have some mighty sick passengers aboard then."

"What do you mean, sir?" I said.

He pointed with his pipe toward the stern of the vessel. "See that ... well, call it a booster. Ganeth-Klae designed it just before he disappeared, using the last lot of *Indurate* in existence. It will increase our take-off speed by five times, and it will probably have a bad effect on the passengers."

So we had left Earth, at night from a field out in Essex. Without orders, without clearance papers, without an automatic pilot check. Eighteen couples and one navigator—destination unknown. If the Interstellar Council had known what Norris was up to, it would have been a case for the Space-Time Commission.

Of that long initial lap of our voyage, perhaps the less said the better. As always is the case when monotony begins to wear away the veneer of civilization, character quirks came to the surface, cliques formed among the passengers, and gossip and personalities became matters of pre-eminent importance.

Rising to the foreground out of our thirty-six, came Fielding Mason, tall, taciturn, and handsome, with a keen intellect and a sense of values remarkable in so young a man. Mason was a graduate of Montape, the French outgrowth of St. Cyr. But he had majored in military tactics, psychology and sociology and knew nothing at all about astrogation or even elemental astronomy. He too was a man of good breeding and refinement. Nevertheless conflict began to develop between him and Navigator Norris. That conflict began the day we landed on Coulora.

Norris stepped out of the air lock into the cold thin air, glanced briefly about him and faced the eighteen men assembled.

"We'll divide into three groups," he said. "Each group to carry an organic surveyor and take a different direction. Each group will so regulate its marching as to be back here without fail an hour before darkness sets in. If you find no sign of animal life, then we will take off again immediately on your return."

Mason paused halfway in the act of strapping on his packsack.

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded. "There's vegetation here. That's all that seems to be necessary."

Norris lit his pipe. "If you find no sign of animal life we will take off immediately on your return," he said as if he hadn't heard.

But the strangeness of Coulora tempered bad feelings then. The blue *hensorr* trees were actually not trees at all but a huge cat-tail-like growth, the stalks of which were quite transparent. In between the stalks grew curious cabbage-like plants that changed from red to yellow as an intruder approached and back to red again after he had passed. Rock outcroppings were everywhere, but all were eroded and in places polished smooth as glass.

There was a strange kind of dust that acted as though endowed with life. It quivered when trod upon, and the outline of our footsteps slowly rose into the air, so that looking back I could see our trail floating behind us in irregular layers.

Above us the star that was this planet's sun shown bright but faintly red as if it were in the first stages of dying. The air though thin was fit to breathe, and we found it unnecessary to wear space suits. We marched down the corridors of *hensorr* trees, until we came to an open spot, a kind of glade. And that was the first time Mason tuned his organic surveyor and received absolutely nothing.

There was no animal life on Coulora!

Within an hour we had blasted off again. The forward-impact delivered by the Ganeth-Klae booster was terrific, and nausea and vertigo struck us all simultaneously. But again, with all ports and observation shields sealed shut, Norris held the secret of our destination.

On July twenty-second, the ship gave that sickening lurch and came once again to a standstill.

"Same procedure as before," Norris said, stepping out of the airlock. "Those of you who desire to have their wives accompany you may do so. Mason, you'll make a final correlation on the organic surveyors. If there is no trace of animal life return here before dark."

Once our group was out of sight of the ship, Mason threw down his packsack, sat down on a boulder and lighted a cigarette.

"Bagley," he said to me, "has the Old Man gone loco?"

"I think not," I said, frowning. "He's one of the most evenly balanced persons I know."

"Then he's hiding something," Mason said. "Why else should he be so concerned with finding animal life?"

"You know the answer to that," I said. "We're here to colonize, to start a new life. We can't very well do that on a desert."

"That's poppycock," Mason replied, flinging away his cigarette. "When the Albertson expedition first landed on Mars, there was no animal life on the red planet. Now look at it. Same thing was true when Breslauer first settled Pluto. The colonies there got along. I tell you Norris has got something up his sleeve, and I don't like it."

Later, after Mason had taken his negative surveyor reading, the flame of trouble reached the end of its fuse!

Norris had given orders to return to the *Marie Galante*, and the rest of us were sullenly making ready to start the back trail. Mason, however, deliberately seized his pick and began chopping a hole in the rock surface, preparatory apparently to erecting his plastic tent.

"We'll make temporary camp here," he said calmly. "Brandt, you can go back to the ship and bring back the rest of the women." He turned and smiled sardonically at Navigator Norris.

Norris quietly knocked the ashes from his pipe and placed it in his pocket. He strode forward, took the pick from Mason's hands and flung it away. Then he seized Mason by the coat, whipped him around and drove his fist hard against the younger man's jaw.

"When you signed on for this voyage, you agreed to obey my orders," he said, not raising his voice. "You'll do just that."

Mason picked himself up, and there was an ugly glint in his eyes. He could have smashed Norris to a pulp, and none knew it better than the Navigator. For a brief

instant the younger man swayed there on the balls of his feet, fists clenched. Then he let his hands drop, walked over and began to put on his packsack.

But I had seen Mason's face, and I knew he had not given in as easily as it appeared. Meanwhile he began to circulate among the passengers, making no offers, yet subtly enlisting backers for a policy, the significance of which grew on me slowly. It was mutiny he was plotting! And with his personal charm and magnetism he had little trouble in winning over converts. I came upon him arguing before a group of the women one day, among them his own wife, Estelle. He was standing close to her.

"We have clothing and equipment and food concentrate," Mason said. "Enough to last two generations. We have brains and intelligence, and we certainly should be able to establish ourselves without the aid of other vertebrate forms of life.

"Coulora, Jama, Tenethon, Mokrell, R-9, and Stragella. We could have settled on any one of those planets, and apparently we should have, for conditions have grown steadily worse at each landing. But always the answer is no. Why? Because Norris says we must go on until we find animal life."

He cleared his throat and gazed at the feminine faces before him. "Go where? What makes Norris so sure he'll find life on any planet in this system? And incidentally where in the cosmos is this system?"

One of the women, a tall blonde, stirred uneasily. "What do you mean?" she said.

"I mean we don't know if our last landing was on Stragella or Coulora. I mean we don't know where we are or where we're going, and I don't think Norris does either. *We're lost!*"

That was in August. By the last of September we had landed on two more planets, to which Norris gave the simple names of R-12 and R-14. Each had crude forms of vegetable life, represented principally by the blue *hensorr* trees, but in neither case did the organic surveyor reveal the slightest traces of animal life.

There was, however, a considerable difference in physical appearance between R-12 and R-14, and for a time that fact excited Norris tremendously. Up to then, each successive planet, although similar in size, had exhibited signs of greater age than its predecessor. But on R-12 there were definite manifestations of younger geologic development.

Several pieces of shale lay exposed under a fold of igneous rock. Two of those pieces contained fossils of highly developed *ganoids*, similar to those found on Venus. They were perfectly preserved.

It meant that animal life had existed on R-12, even if it didn't now. It meant that R-12, though a much older planet than Earth, was still younger than Stragella or the rest.

For a while Norris was almost beside himself. He cut out rock samples and carried them back to the ship. He personally supervised the tuning of the surveyors. And when he finally gave orders to take off, he was almost friendly to Mason, whereas before his attitude toward him had been one of cold aloofness.

But when we reached R-14, our eighth landing, all that passed. For R-14 was old again, older than any of the others.

And then, on October sixteenth, Mason opened the door of the locked cabin. It happened quite by accident. One of the *arelium-thaxide* conduits broke in the *Marie Galante's* central passageway, and the resulting explosion grounded the central feed line of the instrument equipment. In a trice the passageway was a sheet of flame, rapidly filling with smoke from burning insulation.

Norris, of course, was in the bridge cuddy with locked doors between us and him, and now with the wiring burned through there was no way of signalling him he was wanted for an emergency. In his absence Mason took command.

That passageway ran the full length of the ship. Midway down it was the door leading to the women's lounge. The explosion had jammed that door shut, and smoke was pouring forth from under the sill. All at once one of the women rushed forward to announce hysterically that Mason's wife, Estelle, was in the lounge.

Adjoining the lounge was a small cabin which since the beginning of our voyage had remained locked. Norris had given strict orders that that cabin was not to be disturbed. We all had taken it as a matter of course that it contained various kinds of precision instruments.

Now, however, Mason realized that the only way into the lounge was by way of that locked cabin. If he used a heat blaster on the lounge door there was no telling what would happen to the woman inside.

He ripped the emergency blaster from its wall mounting, pressed it to the

magnetic latch of the sealed cabin door and pressed the stud. An instant later he was leading his frightened wife, Estelle, out through the smoke.

The fire was quickly extinguished after that and the wiring spliced. Then when the others had drifted off, Mason called Brandt and me aside.

"We've been wondering for a long time what happened to Ganeth-Klae, the Martian inventor who worked with Norris to invent *Indurate*," he said very quietly. "Well, we don't need to wonder any more. He's in there."

Brandt and I stepped forward over the sill—and drew up short. Ganeth-Klae was there all right, but he would never trouble himself about making a voyage in a locked cabin. His rigid body was encased in a transparent block of amber-colored solidifex, the after-death preservative used by all Martians.

Both of us recognized his still features at once, and in addition his name-tattoo, required by Martian law, was clearly visible on his left forearm.

For a brief instant the discovery stunned us. Klae dead? Klae whose IQ had become a measuring guide for the entire system, whose Martian head held more ordinary horse sense, in addition to radical postulations on theoretical physics, than anyone on the planets. It wasn't possible.

And what was the significance of his body on Norris' ship? Why had Norris kept its presence a secret and why had he given out the story of Klae's disappearance?

Mason's face was cold as ice. "Come with me, you two," he said. "We're going to get the answer to this right now."

We went along the passage to the circular staircase. We climbed the steps, passed through the scuttle and came to the door of the bridge cuddy. Mason drew the bar and we passed in. Norris was bent over the chart table. He looked up sharply at the sound of our steps.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" he said.

It didn't take Mason long to explain. When he had finished, he stood there, jaw set, eyes smouldering.

Norris paled. Then quickly he got control of himself, and his old bland smile returned.

"I expected you to blunder into Klæ's body one of these days," he said. "The explanation is quite simple. Klæ had been ill for many months, and he knew his time was up. His one desire in life was to go on this expedition with me, and he made me promise to bury him at the site of our new colony. The pact was between him and me, and I've followed it to the letter, telling no one."

Mason's lips curled in a sneer. "And just what makes you think we're going to believe that story?" he demanded.

Norris lit a cigar. "It's entirely immaterial to me whether you believe it or not."

But the story was believed, especially by the women, to whom the romantic angle appealed and Mason's embryonic mutiny died without being born, and the *Marie Galante* sailed on through uncharted space toward her ninth and last landing.

As the days dragged by and no word came from the bridge cuddy, restlessness began to grow amongst us. Rumor succeeded rumor, each story wilder and more incredible than the rest. Then just as the tension had mounted to fever pitch, there came the sickening lurch and grinding vibration of another landing.

Norris dispensed with his usual talk before marching out from the ship. After testing the atmosphere with the ozonometer, he passed out the heat pistols and distributed the various instruments for computing radioactivity and cosmic radiation.

"This is the planet Nizar," he said shortly. "Largest in the field of the sun Ponthis. You will make your survey as one group this time. I will remain here."

He stood watching us as we marched off down the cliff side. Then the blue *hensorr* trees rose up to swallow him from view. Mason swung along at the head of our column, eyes bright, a figure of aggressive action. We had gone but a hundred yards when it became apparent that, as a planet, Nizar was entirely different from its predecessors. There was considerable top soil, and here grew a tall reed-shaped plant that gave off varying chords of sound when the wind blew.

It was as if we were progressing through the nave of a mighty church with a muted organ in the distance. There was animal life too, a strange lizard-like bird that rose up in flocks ahead of us and flew screaming overhead.

"I don't exactly like it, Bagley," he said. "There's something unwholesome about this planet. The evolution is obviously in an early state of development, but I get the impression that it has gone backward; that the planet is really old and has reverted to its earlier life."

Above us the sky was heavily overcast, and a tenuous white mist rising up from the *hensorr* trees formed curious shapes and designs. In the distance I could hear the swashing of waves on a beach.

Suddenly Mason stopped. "Look!" he said.

Below us stretched the shore of a great sea. But it was the structure rising up from that shore that drew a sharp exclamation from me. Shaped in a rough ellipse, yet mounted high toward a common point, was a large building of multiple hues and colors. The upper portion was eroded to crumbling ruins, the lower part studded with many bas-reliefs and triangular doorways.

"Let's go," Mason said, breaking out into a fast loping run.

The building was farther away than we had thought, but when we finally came up to it, we saw that it was even more of a ruin than it had at first appeared. It was only a shell with but two walls standing, alone and forlorn. Whatever race had lived here, they had come and gone.

We prowled about the ruins for more than an hour. The carvings on the walls were in the form of geometric designs and cabalistic symbols, giving no clue to the city's former occupants' identity.

And then Mason found the stairs leading to the lower crypts. He switched on his ato-flash and led the way down cautiously. Level one ... level two ... three ... we descended lower and lower. Here water from the nearby sea oozed in little rivulets that glittered in the light of the flash.

We emerged at length on a wide underground plaisance, a kind of amphitheater, with tier on tier of seats surrounding it and extending back into the shadows.

"Judging from what we've seen," Mason said, "I would say that the race that built this place had reached approximately a grade C-5 of civilization, according to the Mokart scale. This apparently was their council chamber."

"What are those rectangular stone blocks depending from the ceiling?" I said.

Mason turned the light beam upward. "I don't know," he said. "But my guess is that they are burial vaults. Perhaps the creatures were ornithoid."

Away from the flash the floor of the plaisance appeared to be a great mirror that caught our reflections and distorted them fantastically and horribly. We saw then that it was a form of living mold, composed of millions of tiny plants, each with an eye-like iris at its center. Those eyes seemed to be watching us, and as we strode forward, a great sigh rose up, as if in resentment at our intrusion.

There was a small triangular dais in the center of the chamber, and in the middle of it stood an irregular black object. As we drew nearer, I saw that it had been carved roughly in the shape of this central building and that it was in a perfect state of preservation.

Mason walked around this carving several times, examining it curiously.

"Odd," he said. "It looks to be an object of religious veneration, but I never heard before of a race worshipping a replica of their own living quarters."

Suddenly his voice died off. He bent closer to the black stone, studying it in the light of the powerful ato-flash. He got a small magnifying glass out of his pocket and focused it on one of the miniature bas-reliefs midway toward the top of the stone. Unfastening his geologic hammer from his belt, he managed, with a sharp, swinging blow, to break off a small protruding piece.

He drew in his breath sharply, and I saw his face go pale. I stared at him in alarm.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He motioned that I follow and led the way silently past the others toward the stair shaft. Climbing to the top level was a heart-pounding task, but Mason almost ran up those steps. At the surface he leaned against a pillar, his lips quivering spasmodically.

"Tell me I'm sane, Bagley," he said huskily. "Or rather, don't say anything until we've seen Norris. Come on. We've got to see Norris."

All the way back to the *Marie Galante*, I sought to soothe him, but he was a man

possessed. He rushed up the ship's gangway, burst into central quarters and drew up before Navigator Norris like a runner stopping at the tape.

"You damned lying hypocrite!" he yelled.

Norris looked at him in his quiet way. "Take it easy, Mason," he said. "Sit down and explain yourself."

But Mason didn't sit down. He thrust his hand in his pocket, pulled out the piece of black stone he had chipped off the image in the cavern and handed it to Norris.

"Take a look at that!" he demanded.

Norris took the stone, glanced at it and laid it down on his desk. His face was emotionless. "I expected this sooner or later," he said. "Yes, it's *Indurate* all right. Is that what you want me to say?"

There was a dangerous fanatical glint in Mason's eyes now. With a sudden quick motion he pulled out his heat pistol.

"So you tricked us!" he snarled. "Why? I want to know why."

I stepped forward and seized Mason's gun hand. "Don't be a fool," I said. "It can't be that important."

Mason threw back his head and burst into an hysterical peal of laughter. "Important!" he cried. "Tell him how important it is, Norris. *Tell him.*"

Quietly the Navigator filled and lighted his pipe. "I'm afraid Mason is right," he said. "I did trick you. Not purposely, however. And in the beginning I had no intention of telling anything but the truth. Actually we're here because of a dead man's vengeance."

Norris took his pipe from his lips and stared at it absently.

"You'll remember that Ganeth-Klae, the Martian, and I worked together to invent *Indurate*. But whereas I was interested in the commercial aspects of that product, Klae was absorbed only in the experimental angle of it. He had some crazy idea that it should not be given to the general public at once, but rather should be allocated for the first few years to a select group of scientific organizations. You see, *Indurate* was such a departure from all known materials that Ganeth-Klae feared it would be utilized for military purposes.

"I took him for a dreamer and a fool. Actually he was neither. How was I to know that his keen penetrating brain had seen through my motive to get control of all commercial marketing of *Indurate*? I had laid my plans carefully, and I had expected to reap a nice harvest. Klæe must have been aware of my innermost thoughts, but Martian-like he said nothing."

Norris paused to wet his lips and lean against the desk. "I didn't kill Ganeth-Klæe," he continued, "though I suppose in a court of law I would be judged responsible for his death. The manufacture of *Indurate* required some ticklish work. As you know, we produced our halves of the formula separately. Physical contact with my half over a long period of time would prove fatal, I knew, and I simply neglected to so inform Ganeth-Klæe.

"But his ultimate death was a boomerang. With Klæe gone, I could find no trace of his half of the formula. I was almost beside myself for a time. Then I thought of something. Klæe had once said that the secret of his half of the formula lay in himself. A vague statement, to say the least. But I took the words at their face value and gambled that he meant them literally; that is, that his body itself contained the formula.

"I tried everything: X-ray, chemical analysis of the skin. I even removed the cranial cap and examined the brain microscopically. All without result. Meanwhile the police were beginning to direct their suspicions toward me in the matter of Klæe's disappearance.

"You know the rest. It was necessary that I leave Earth at once and go beyond our system, beyond the jurisdiction of the planetary police. So I arranged this voyage with a sufficient complement of passengers to lessen the danger and hardship of a new life on a new world. I was still positive, however, that Klæe's secret lay in his dead body. I took that body along, encased in the Martian preservative, solidifex.

"It was my idea that I could continue my examination once we were safe on a strange planet. But I had reckoned without Ganeth-Klæe."

"What do you mean?" I said slowly.

"I said Klæe was no fool. But I didn't know that with Martian stoicism he suspected the worst and took his own ironic means of combating it. He used the last lot of *Indurate* to make that booster, a device which he said would increase our take-off speed. He mounted it on the *Marie Galante*.

"Mason, that device was no booster. It was a time machine, so devised as to catapult the ship not into outer space, but into the space-time continuum. It was a mechanism designed to throw the *Marie Galante* forward into the future."

A cloud of fear began to well over me. "What do you mean?" I said again.

Navigator Norris paced around his desk. "*I mean that the Marie Galante has not once left Earth, has not in fact left the spot of its moorings but has merely gone forward in time. I mean that the nine 'landings' we made were not stops on some other planets but halting stages of a journey into the future.*"

Had a bombshell burst over my head the effect could have been no greater. Cold perspiration began to ooze out on my forehead. In a flash I saw the significance of the entire situation. That was why Norris had been so insistent that we always return to the ship before dark. He didn't want us to see the night sky and the constellations there for fear we would guess the truth. That was why he had never permitted any of us in the bridge cuddy and why he had kept all ports and observation shields closed.

"But the names of the planets ... Coulora, Stragella, and the others and their positions on the chart...?" I objected.

Norris smiled grimly. "All words created out of my imagination. Like the rest of you, I knew nothing of the true action of the booster. It was only gradually that truth dawned on me. But by the time we had made our first 'landing' I had guessed. That was why I demanded we always take organic surveyor readings. I knew we had traveled far into future time, far beyond the life period of man on Earth. But I wasn't sure how far we had gone, and I lived with the hope that Klæ's booster might reverse itself and start carrying us backwards down the centuries."

For a long time I stood there in silence, a thousand mad speculations racing through my mind.

"How about that piece of *Indurate*?" I said at length. "It was chipped off an image in the ruins of a great building a mile or so from here."

"An image?" repeated Norris. A faint glow of interest slowly rose in his eyes. Then it died. "I don't know," he said. "It would seem to presuppose that the formula, both parts of it, was known by Klæ and that he left it for posterity to discover."

All this time Mason had been standing there, eyes smouldering, lips an ugly line. Now abruptly he took a step forward.

"I've wanted to return this for a long time," he said.

He doubled back his arm and brought his fist smashing onto Norris' jaw. The Navigator's head snapped backward; he gave a low groan and slumped to the floor.

And that is where, by all logic, this tale should end. But, as you may have guessed, there is an anticlimax—what story-tellers call a happy conclusion.

Mason, Brandt, and I worked, and worked alone, on the theory that the secret of the *Indurate* formula would be the answer to our return down the time trail. We removed the body of Ganeth-Klae from its solidifex envelope and treated it with every chemical process we knew. By sheer luck the fortieth trial worked. A paste of carbo-genethon mixed with the crushed seeds of the Martian iron-flower was spread over Klae's chest and abdomen.

And there, in easily decipherable code, was not only the formula, but the working principles of the ship's booster—or rather, time-catapult. After that, it was a simple matter to reverse the principle and throw us backward in the time stream.

We are heading back as I write these lines. If they reach print and you read them, it will mean our escape was successful and that we returned to our proper slot in the epilogue of human events.

There remains, however, one matter to trouble me. Navigator Norris. I like the man. I like him tremendously, in spite of his cold-blooded confession, and past record. He must be punished, of course. But I, for one, would hate to see him given the death penalty. It is a serious problem.

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