

CLASSICS TO GO

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Amazing Stories

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The Crowded Colony

Oh, how decadent these Martians were! Burke, Barnes and the rest of the Conquerors laughed loudly at the dusty shrines, those crude and homely temples in the desert. More softly laughed the Martians, who dreamed of laughing last....

When the Martians had built the village of Kinkaaka there had been water in the canal, a cool, level sweep of green water from the northern icecap. Now there was none, and Kinkaaka clung to the upper swell of the bank and curved its staggered residential terraces like tragic brows over the long slope of sand and clay, the dead wall baked criss-cross by the sun, that bore at its deep juncture with the opposite bank the pitiful, stragglng trench cut by Mars' last moving waters an untold time ago.

Kinkaaka's other side, away from the canal, was coated rust-red by the desert winds that came with sunset. Here were the crumbling market arenas of the ancient traders, the great mounds of underground warehouses long empty; and here now, with Mars' conquest, was the "native" section into whose sandstone huts the village's few inhabitants were shoved firmly, but not brutally, to rest when they weren't needed to work.

Like most of the Conquerors, Jack Burke and his companions preferred the canal side of Kinkaaka. There they could sit in the stone-cool shade of the Expedition Restaurant and look through the broad glassless windows down the sun-scalded canal bank, across to the opposite slope with its dotting of

nomad caves, the desert beyond and the red-tainted blue of the sky.

"Happy day we came to Mars," said Jack Burke. He picked up his stone mug and drank with a shudder.

He was big and brown, typical of the Conquerors, and spoke, as they all did when within earshot of natives, the Martian dialect which the Linguistics Squad had translated and reasoned to completion from the pages of script found in the metal cairn, half-buried in desert sands and upon which they had conveniently almost landed their space-cube upon arrival two days ago.

That was one of the dicta of the Psychologists: Always speak the native tongue, and learn it preferably from graphics or a specimen before contacting the native collective.

There were other policies as strange, or more so; but the Psychologists, off-world in the home-ship and poring over the translations beamed to them, must know what they were doing.

Barnes looked up in quick response to Burke's sarcasm. Of the three Conquerors at this table, he was the smallest. He fiddled nervously with his one-pronged fork, turning a piece of badly cooked *huj* over and over, not looking at it.

"That," he said, and he included the *huj*, "is a mouthful. There doesn't seem to be a Martian in this village who can cook worth a damn, and you—" this to the pasty faced Martian who stood attentively by—"are no exception. You're getting off easy with this job, Martian. Or would you rather go back to digging up history with the rest of your tribe?"

"I am sorry." The Martian advanced and bobbed his head. "The preparation of your foodstuffs is difficult for me to comprehend. Would you care to try something else, perhaps?"

Barnes skidded the fork onto the plate and put his hands flat on the stone table. "No. Just take this away."

The Conquerors watched the creature as it moved silently off with the plate of *huj*. All except Randolph, the youngest of the trio.

He sat nearest the stone-silled window, his gaze reaching out distantly over the sandscape. On the far bank of the canal he could see a few natives with their guards, emerging from a wood and stone structure that thrust finger-shaped into the pink sky.

"No race should have its soul dissected," he said slowly. "Not, at least, until they're extinct and can't feel it." He avoided Barnes' sudden, sharp look. "Our Archaeologists over there —" pointing at the moving dots—"are poking around in burial crypts or sacred temples or whatever—it's like cutting someone up alive. We don't know what those things mean to these Martians."

Barnes laughed, more of a snort. "You speak as if 'these Martians' were people." He leaned forward and blinked his emphasis. "What in hell ever happened to you that you've got such ideas? Primitive, misshapen morons—you can't think of them as persons! Don't let an Intelligence Officer hear you talking that way or you'll find yourself getting shipped home!"

Randolph's eyes flicked Barnes' heavy face, then turned to the mural on the restaurant wall.

"This is very beautiful," he said. He bent closer, examining the delicate work. "This isn't moronic. You're wrong, Barnes."

Burke spoke harshly: "You'd better shut up, Randolph. You're sitting there emoting over decadent art and there's an Intelligence Officer at the bar."

Young Randolph stiffened and forced a smile. "Of course, the Martians are a degenerated race. Our Archaeologists have revealed that Mars was spiritually effeminized thousands of years ago. Our colonization will have a reforming effect upon them. It is a healthy thing. That is our mission in time and space."

The Martian had returned and was again standing at service. Randolph caught his eye and flushed, returned his gaze to the mural.

Burke cleared his throat. The Intelligence Officer at the bar was still looking icily at Randolph's back, twiddling his drink with a wooden mixer.

"You cannot doubt," Barnes took up the fraying thread, "that our conquest of these Martians is a very good thing. For them. I ... for *us*, too.... That is our mission in time and space. The first desert shrine—the metal one from which we learned this tongue we speak—is ugly enough proof. Sheaves of manuscript, recording the most disgusting standards and attitudes. And the contents of subsequently found structures—like that one across the canal—show an even greater decline into sensualism and the subjugation of creative energies."

The Martian stood quietly, his small-featured face blank and smooth. He was meant to hear all this.

"I heard one of our Archaeologists say something about the language of that first shrine—the metal one—being different from all the others." Randolph shifted his great bulk to lean back against the wall. "The others are mostly alike, but this one we learned is totally different."

The Martian's eyes flickered.

"So what?" Barnes grunted. "Dialects. Same thing at home."

"But, I mean they—"

"But what? These Martians here speak the language we learned, don't they?"

"But—"

"Hell! Do you speak *Ahrian*?"

"You know I don't."

"So when we get through investigating here and move on to other villages, we'll find Martians who speak the other dialects."

The Martian said: "Will there be anything else, sirs?"

"Not," said Barnes, "unless you would like to try some *noedan*."

"No thank you, sir."

Randolph and Burke raised their eyehoods humorously. Then they looked a little less amused as Barnes' voice hardened.

"You might like it, Martian. Try it." He pulled a tough green wad of *noedan* from his pouch and tore off a strip. "I think the sooner you Martians get used to doing as we do and liking the things we like, the better off you'll be. Now take this *noedan* and use it."

"Oh, for hell's sake, Barnes—" Randolph put out a hand. "Let him alone. He doesn't want it. It makes him sick."

The Intelligence Officer got up from the bar and started for the table, his eyes hard, his aural fronds quivering with emotion.

Burke spotted him and seemed to shrug. "You asked for it, kid," he told Randolph. "Give my love to the home worlds. You're through on Mars."

"Maybe that's what I wanted," said Randolph.

The Intelligence Officer halted beside the table and Randolph got up without a word and left with him.

Burke and Barnes watched them down the winding clay street, saw them enter a portable teleport booth, one of the several scattered about Kinkaaka to facilitate trips to and from the space-cube. The door closed, the light blinked on and off, then the booth was open again, empty.

"On his way back to the home-ship and Parna," grunted Burke, "and I don't know but that I envy him."

"You too?"

"Yeah. Now that there's no damned Intelligence Officer around, me too."

"Disgrace and all?"

"That's what stops me—" and noticing the angry color to Barnes' *uiye*—"and the glory of our mission. Hell, anyone can get homesick, can't they?"

During the few moments of Randolph's arrest and departure the Martian had disappeared. Barnes grunted and shoved the *noedan* back into his pouch and finished his drink.

"You'll never get anywhere acting like that," said Burke after a short silence. "You can't shove our ways down their throats and get cooperation."

Barnes got up a little angrily. "Who wants to get anywhere? What do we want out of these creatures? They smell! How are we *supposed* to act? We own their smelly little world—"

"Randolph might say we don't own it."

"Shut up, Burke. I'm sick of that!"

Barnes started for the door and Burke got up to follow. They stepped out onto the hot clay of the street, moving their top-skins against the tight-fitting impact of the sun's rays.

"I don't want anything from them, Burke. *I'm* the one who should be sent home. *I* want to go home. Why should we go around labeled with Martian names? Barnes, Randolph,