

PLANET STORIES



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By Jay B. Drexel

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, straggling 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



Mayari

"There goes a pretty decent person," said Burke. "I'm glad we don't have to kill him."

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 eye-hoods 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, Burke, Smith—good God! And talking this *jsu*-twisting *sutz* of a language Martian of all the time speaking!"

Burke chuckled, deep in his sac. "The Psychologists dreamed it up—to make us seem less alien. We speak their sounds. And we take their names. After all, no trouble at all is better than the little they might be able to give us if they got excited."

They went down the street toward the teleport booth, two big octopoids, the sun warming their glistening brown backs.

THE "MARTIAN" was in the cool back room of the restaurant, seated before a group of his kind. This was afternoon rest period, and some freedom to congregate existed then.

A man turned from the wall slit through which he had watched the exit of Burke and Barnes.

"Those things make me sick, Burke," he said to the "Martian". "How can you get so close to them and keep your stomach? They smell."

Burke shrugged. "You get used to it, Barnes."

He bent down and lifted the lid of a box that was stamped: FIRST MARS EXPEDITION—2006. He took out a heavy proton-buster, broke the grip and examined its load of white pellets.

"It's been two days now," he went on, "and I'm convinced at last that this one party is all. Scouts, perhaps, from a parent ship off in deep space. And I've listened to them talk. If they don't return, nobody's going to come looking for them. They come from that kind of society. The others will mark Sol off as a bad bet and move on."

He clicked the gun together. "They still think we're the race pictured in the Martian crypts and temples—and in your translations, Randolph. Coincidence eh? that the old Martians were humanoid and their appearance not discrepant with ours."

"We colonize Mars," mused Randolph, "and Beta Centauri colonizes us as Martians. Ring around the rosy."

Burke stood there, the proton-buster in

his hand. "And it was cosmic coincidence that the Centurians landed their ship at practically the same spot we'd set down only three days before. And it's almost incredible that they came to this village where we had taken up headquarters and addressed us in English!" He turned to Barnes. "You're the Psych-man . . . let's have it again. Slowly."

Barnes half turned from the wall slit where he had been keeping an eye out for Centaurians. "They found our ship and took it to be a primitive shrine of some sort, never dreaming it was a vehicle, a space-craft." He waved another man to the slit and stretched his legs as he sat down on a crate. He struck a match and cupped it into his pipe. "I'm almost certain that they didn't even recognize the mechanisms as such. Their ship, as you've all seen, is a cube of pure energy, configured—they're that alien. Also, I believe they're military men, soldiers and minor technicians. The top specialists are probably on the other ship, away from possible danger and biding their talents until called."

The watcher's hand went up and fluttered for silence, and Barnes paused while heavy, meaty footsteps scuffled the clay outside. When they had passed, he spoke again, softly:

"Fortunately, there wasn't room in our ship for a library, or they might have encountered the Terrestrial mind and caught on. But they learned our language—English, and a damned neat trick—from Randolph's written translations of the Martian *inscriptions sensuales* he was working on. And when they came here and addressed us in that language and we responded, nolens-volens they took us for Martians and judged us by the context of those translations—foolish, vain and harmless, but perhaps with some value as workers. They even took our names from the nameplates on our bunks, something that would have found favor with the perverse Fourth-Era Martians they presumed us to be." He sucked at his pipe which had gone out. "Their Psychologists are clever—maybe a little too clever. They think we have no violence potential."

Randolph seemed almost entranced. "But how could they have worked out the phonetics?"

Barnes grinned, lifted a shoulder in admiration and envy. "I don't know . . . Ask *them*."

"They couldn't know they were *our* names," said Randolph.

"No, but they thought they were native names. Thank God, we got the pitch right off and were able to carry the farce."

"Why didn't they just kill us?"

BARNES FROWNED and struck another match. "That would've been the really smart thing to do, Dolph, but they're not brutes and they're not making war. Their intention is to colonize, and we might as well be insects for all we could mean to them or do to stand up to them."

"But if we have to be dealt with at all, we're in the way—"

Barnes had the pipe going. He shook his head. "We're not in their way; we're underfoot, and only a sick mind makes a point of stepping on ants. Would you kill a talking louse?"

Randolph grinned. "Yes."

"No, you wouldn't—not until you'd given it a going over."

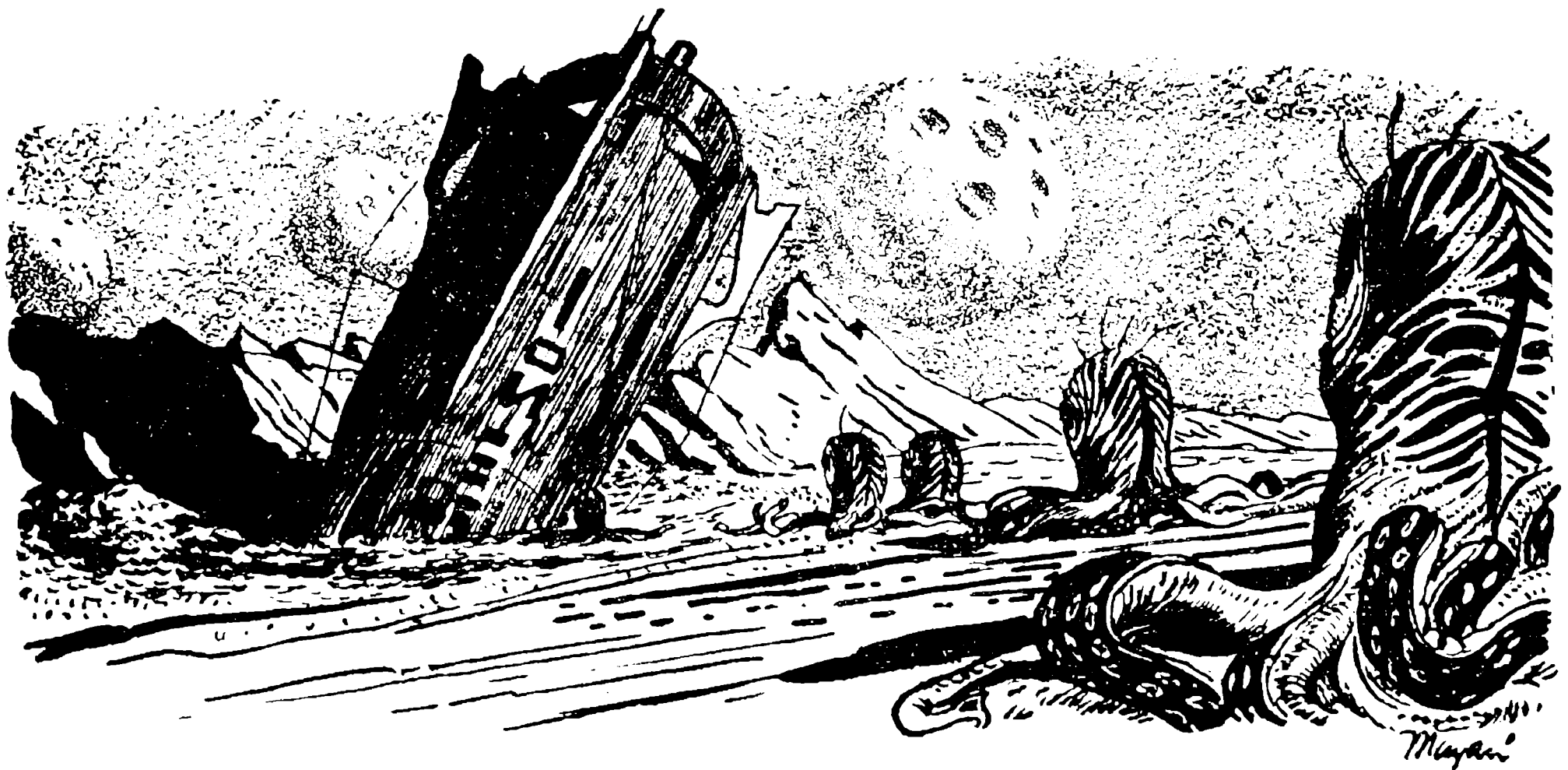
"They're not sick in a killing way," Burke grunted, "but they seem to feel that their colonizations act as cathartic to wayward worlds. Just look at them, and you know that's sick."

"The people," said Barnes, "at the bottom of any movement—a pun, gentlemen—are always fed on dream-stuff. Soldiers always are. Truth is, maybe the big boys at home think they can find enough use for us to warrant keeping us alive. As laborers, as subjects for experimentation, as pets."

Burke looked out the window at the reddening sky. Then he gathered their attention by standing up.

"If we hadn't been here," he said, "they would have gone on to Earth and taken over. As is, they think Mars is nothing to write home about, but they're sticking around to study awhile—not us, the supposed latter Martians, the degenerates, but to search out and study the bones of Mars' civilization back when it was dynamic. Maybe there's something worth learning. That's what they think."

He hefted the proton-buster. Barnes and Smith and Kirk and Randolph and



Jason and all the others got guns from the box.

There was a hiss and they turned to the window. Rising above the visible cluster of roof-domes from some point in the other side of the village was a smaller edition of the Centaurians' space-cube. It glinted once, high up, and was gone.

"There goes a pretty decent person," said Burke. "I'm glad we don't have to kill him. He appreciated Randolph's water-color painting of the canal." His voice

was regretful. "How alien can you get? *His* name was Randolph, and he's going home in disgrace."

Night was coming. Burke's face hardened. The Centaurians would be coming too, ready to herd the Martians into their sleeping huts.

"One alien ship, terribly armed," Burke went on, "and sixty Centaurians walking around unarmed because they think we're pansies." He cocked the gun. "They'll never leave Kinkaaka to bring back more."