



OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE PULP ERA

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

TACET BOOKS

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

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Kline

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The Author

Kline is best known for an apocryphal literary feud with fellow author Edgar Rice Burroughs, in which he supposedly raised the latter's ire by producing close imitations (The Planet of Peril (1929) and two sequels) of Burroughs's Martian novels, though set on Venus; Burroughs, the story goes, then retaliated by writing his own Venus novels, whereupon Kline responded with an even more direct intrusion on Burroughs's territory by boldly setting two novels on Mars. Kline's jungle adventure stories, reminiscent of Burroughs's Tarzan tales, have also been cited as evidence of the conflict.

While the two authors did write the works in question, the theory that they did so in contention with each other is supported only circumstantially, by the resemblance and publication dates of the works themselves. The feud theory was originally set forth in a fan press article, "The Kline-Burroughs War," by Donald A. Wollheim (Science Fiction News, November, 1936), and afterward given wider circulation by Sam Moskowitz in his book Explorers of the Infinite (1963). Richard A. Lupoff debunked the case in his book Edgar Rice Burroughs: Master of Adventure (1965).

Among the evidence cited by Lupoff discounting the feud: no comment from either writer acknowledging the feud is documented, and family members of the two authors have no recollection of ever hearing them mention it. In response to Lupoff's investigations Moskowitz identified his original source as Wollheim's article, while Wollheim stated, when questioned on the source of his own information: "I made it up!"

The Swordsman of Mars

PROLOGUE

HARRY THORNE opened his eyes and gazed about him with a startled expression. This was not the tawdry hotel bedroom in which he had gone to sleep; it was a small room with bare, concrete walls, a door of hardwood planking studded with bolts, and a barred window. The only articles of furniture were the cot on which he was lying, a chair, and a small table.

So the sleeping pills didn't finish me off, he thought. Now I'm in jail for attempted suicide!

Thorne sat up, then rose unsteadily to his feet and staggered to the window. Supporting himself by gripping the thick iron bars, he peered out. It was broad daylight and the sun was high in the heavens. Below him stretched a deep valley, through which a narrow stream meandered. And as far as he could see in all directions there were mountains, though the highest peaks were all below the level of his own eyes.

He turned from the window at the sound of a key grating in a lock. Then the heavy door swung inward, and a large man entered the cell, bearing a tray of food and a steaming pot of coffee. Behind the man was a still larger figure, whose very presence radiated authority. His forehead was high and bulged outward over shaggy eyebrows that met above his aquiline nose. He wore a pointed, closely cropped Vandyke, black with a slight sprinkling of gray, and was dressed in faultlessly tailored evening clothes.

Thorne got to his feet as his singular visitor closed the door behind him. Then, in a booming bass, the man said, "At last, Mr. Thorne, I have caught up with you. I am Dr. Morgan." He smiled. "And, I might add, not a moment too soon. You gave

us quite a time—Boyd and I managed to get you out of that hotel room and down to the street, passing you off as drunk. Don't you remember a knocking at the door? You weren't quite out when we came in."

Thorne thought for a moment, then nodded. It seemed that there had been a pounding somewhere. "How did you get in? I thought I locked the door."

"You did, but I had skeleton keys with me, just in case. We took you to my apartment, treated you, and brought you out here." Morgan nodded to Boyd, who left the room, then waved his hand invitingly toward the tray. "I ordered breakfast served in your room. I especially urge you to try the coffee. It will counteract the effect of the sedatives I was compelled to use in order to save your life and bring you here."

"You've gone to a lot of trouble to save something I don't want," Thorne said. "May I ask why you are interfering in my affairs?"

"I need you," Morgan replied simply. "And I can offer you adventure such as only one other man of Earth has known—possibly glory, possibly death. But if death, not the mean sort you were seeking."

Harry Thorne frowned. "You referred to a man of Earth as if there were men not of Earth. Are you suggesting a trip to Mars?"

Dr. Morgan laughed. "Splendid, Mr. Thorne. But suppose you tackle this breakfast. It will put you in a better frame of mind for what I am going to tell you. I shall not lock the door as I leave. When you have finished, join me in the drawing room—at the end of the corridor to your right." He paused in the doorway. "You mentioned a trip to Mars, Mr. Thorne. Forgive me if I keep you in suspense for a time, but -

although it is not exactly what you think those words mean -
that is what I am going to propose.”

CHAPTER I

“YOU have heard of telepathy, of course—in fact, Mr. Thorne, you experimented with it at one time.”

“How did you know that, doctor?”

“You wrote a letter about your experiments to the editor of a popular magazine. It was published under your own name two months ago.”

Thorne rubbed his brow. “That’s right, I did—been so busy I forgot all about it. But my results were negative.”

Dr. Morgan nodded. “So were mine, for nearly twenty years. It was a hobby when I was in practice, but since my retirement, I’ve devoted my full time to it. Let me brief you on the basics.

“Telepathy, the communication of thoughts or ideas from one mind to another without the use of any physical medium whatever, is not influenced or hampered by either time or space. That is fundamental, but I had to amend it. I failed to achieve anything until I succeeded in building a device which would pick up and amplify thought waves. And even then I would have failed had this machine not caught the waves projected by another machine which another man had built to amplify and project them.”

“You mean you can read minds by radio, as it were?” Thorne asked.

“To a very limited extent. If you had a projector in this room, and I had my receiver here, I could pick up any thoughts you sent me, but only those you consciously projected. I could not read your mind in the sense of picking up anything you did not want me to know.”

Thorne took a cigarette from the box on the table to his right and lit it. "Interesting," he admitted, "but what has this to do with Mars?"

"I made only one amendment to that basic theory, Mr. Thorne. The rest of it holds true: the communication of thoughts or-ideas from one mind to another is not influenced or hampered by time or space. The man who built the thought- projector is on Mars."

"Men on Mars - you mean Martians, or human beings like us? Excuse me, doctor, but that is spreading it a bit thick. I'm well enough up on present-day studies of the planets..."

"... to know that the existence of a human civilization on Mars today is hardly credible," Morgan broke in. "You are quite right. None such exists."

"Then how...?"

"Space or time. I was incredulous, too, when I got in touch with someone who identified himself as a human being, one Lal Vak, a Martian scientist and psychologist. And I might add that Lal Vak found the idea of a human civilization on Earth a bit thick, too. But the explanation, fantastic as it may seem, is quite simple: Lal Vak is speaking to me from the Mars of some millions of years ago, when a human civilization did exist there."

Morgan raised his hand. "Don't interrupt now - hear me out. From that simple exchange of visual and auditory impressions which marked our first communications, we progressed until each one had learned the language of the other to a degree that enabled us to exchange abstract as well as concrete ideas.

"It was Lal Vak who suggested that if we could find a man on Earth and one on Mars whose bodies were similar

enough to be doubles, their brain patterns might also be similar enough so that consciousness could be transferred between them. Thus, Earth of the 20th Century could be viewed through Martian eyes, while the (to us) ancient Mars culture - we cannot yet place it in time relative to Earth - could be seen at first hand by a man from Earth. First Lal Vak projected to me many thought images of Martians willing to make this exchange - so clearly that I was able to draw detailed pictures of them. But that was not enough. I could spend the rest of my life without finding any counterparts of these Martians here. The second thing Lal Vak did was to tell me how to make what we call a mind-compass, and gave me the brain- patterns of his volunteers. I followed his directions and fed the first brain- pattern into the mind- compass."

Thorne leaned forward intently. "What happened?"

"Nothing. The needle rotated aimlessly. This meant that either there was no physical counterpart of this Martian now alive on earth, or any such double did not have a similar brain-pattern. I fed in the second and third patterns with the same result. But with the fourth pattern, the needle swung directly to a given point and remained there." Morgan opened a drawer in the little table and took out some pencil sketches. "Recognize this man?" he asked, handing a sketch to Thorne.

"Your assistant - Boyd, you called him?"

"Correct. Under the influence of Lal Vak's thoughts, I drew a picture of Frank Boyd. To shorten the story, I found him in an Alaskan mining camp. He was interested in the venture I proposed - he is now on Mars."

"But - I just saw him..

“You saw the body of Frank Boyd, which is now inhabited by Sel Han, a Martian. On Mars, Sel Han’s body is occupied by Frank Boyd, an Earthman. But I made one terrible mistake.”

“What was that?”

“In my eagerness to find a volunteer, I did not investigate Frank Boyd. Sel Han has cooperated with Lal Vak and me, but once on Mars, Frank Boyd broke contact - and without his cooperation, it could not be maintained. I have learned through Lal Vak that Boyd has allied himself with a group of Martians who are out to seize power and set up an empire over the entire planet. Mars is presently in a state roughly analogous to our middle ages, socially, though in some branches of science they are in advance of us. But theirs is not a machine civilization, and an adventurer who is also a fighting man - or adept at intrigue - can go far there.”

Harry Thorne grinned. “Let me see if I can guess the rest of the story. You’ve loosed an unsavory character on Mars and feel you’ve wronged your friend, Lal Vak, so you want to undo the damage if you can. You fed more brain- patterns into the object compass, and eventually the brain-pattern of...”

“...This man,” Morgan agreed, passing him another sketch. Thorne took it and saw a drawing of himself in minute detail.

“But that was not enough,” he said. “You didn’t want to repeat your error, so you spent some time investigating me first.”

Dr. Morgan smiled. “And the results were most satisfactory - to me. You had a good war record in Korea, you’ve been on hunting expeditions to Africa, and you’ve been in business. Your recent difficulties, which resulted in the loss of your fiancée and your business - left you a pauper, in fact - came out of your refusal to go along with your partner’s dubious

(though legal) manipulations. He wiped you out and took your girl, too... In short, you are a man who might well do what Lal Vak and I feared impossible."

Harry Thorne nodded. "Assuming that you can send me on this strange mission, what would you want me to do?"

"Only two things. Remain in touch with me, through Lal Vak, as much as possible, and, if you can, kill Frank Boyd - the Martian Sel Han. Otherwise, your life on Mars will be your own, to live as you choose, or as the Martians choose to let you live. If you are able to rise above your environment - as I think you will be - you will find opportunities there you could never hope for here. You will find a world of romance and adventure undreamed of outside of fiction. And if you are not equally quick with sword and wits, you will find death. Knowing you to be an expert fencer - yes, I found out that you had tried to get a job with a fencing instructor and was turned down because you beat him, too easily - I don't think I need worry about you on the first count."

"The prospect appeals to me," Thorne admitted. "But I refuse to murder a man I have never seen."

"If you oppose Sel Han's designs, I assure you that you will have to kill him or be killed. There's no question of murder - it will be simple and justifiable self-defense... Then—you'll go?"

"I'll at least make the attempt, with your assistance. How does this personality-transfer take place?"

"I can only describe it as a sort of phasing of similar vibrations, represented by your brain-pattern and that of the Martian volunteer. But first I must put you under hypnosis. Then I will contact Lal Vak, and we will work together. He will be on hand to meet you when you awake in the body of a Martian. Now come over here and lie on the sofa."

Thorne did as Dr. Morgan directed, and found that he was looking into a mirror painted with alternate circles of red and black. The doctor touched a button and the mirror began to rotate slowly. Morgan's voice came to him, "Now think of that distant world, far off in time and space. Think of it beckoning you."

Thorne obeyed, his eyes fixed on the mirror. He began to feel drowsy, a pleasant lassitude stealing over him. The doctor's voice faded...

CHAPTER II

Thorne opened his eyes and looked up into a cloudless blue-gray sky that was like a vault of burnished steel. A diminutive sun blazed down upon him but oddly enough, with its heat and light seemingly unimpaired.

The heat, in fact, was so great that it made him draw back into the relatively cold shade of the scaly-trunked conifer that towered above him, its crown of needle-like foliage gathered into a bellshaped tuft. Then conviction came to him. He was really on Mars! Wide awake, now, he sat bolt upright and looked about him. The tree that sheltered him stood alone in a small depression, surrounded by a billowing sea of ochre-yellow sand.

He scrambled to his feet, and as he did so, something clanked at his side. Two straight-bladed weapons hung there, both sheathed in a gray metal that resembled aluminum. One, he judged, was a Martian dagger, and the other a sword. The hilt of the larger weapon was fashioned of a metal of the color of brass, the pommel representing a serpent's head, the grip, its body, and the guard, the continuation of the body and tail coiled in the form of a figure eight. The hilt of the dagger was like that of the sword, but smaller.

Thorne drew the sword from its sheath. The steel blade was slender and two-edged, and tapered to a needlelike point. Both edges were armed with tiny razor-sharp teeth which he instantly saw would add greatly to its effectiveness as a cutting weapon. He tested its balance and found he could wield it as easily as any duelling sword he had ever had in his hand.

Replacing the sword in the sheath, he examined the dagger, and found it also edged with tiny teeth. The blade of this weapon was about ten inches in length.

Depending from the belt on the other side, and heavy enough to balance the weight of the sword and dagger, was a mace with a short brazen handle and a disk-shaped head of steel which was fastened fanwise on the haft, thick at the middle and tapering out at the edges to sawlike teeth, much coarser and longer than those on sword or dagger.

Thorne turned his attention to his apparel. He was wearing a breechclout of soft leather. Beneath this, and down to the center of his shins, his limbs were bare and considerably sunburned. Below this point were the rolled tops of a pair of long boots, made from fur and fitted with clasps which were obviously for the purpose of attaching them to the bottom of the breechclout when they were drawn up.

Above the waist his sun-tanned body was bare of clothing, but he wore a pair of broad metal armlets, a pair of bracelets with long bars attached, evidently to protect the forearm from sword cuts, and a jewelled medallion, suspended on his chest from a chain around his neck and inscribed with strange characters.

On his head was a bundle of silky material with a short, soft nap, rolled much like a turban and held in place by one brass-studded strap that passed around his forehead, and another that went beneath his chin.

Beyond a large sand dune, and not more than a quarter of a mile distant, he saw the waving bellshaped crowns of a small grove of trees similar to the one that sheltered him. He started toward the clump of conifers.

As soon as he stepped out into the blaze of the midday sun, Thorne began to feel uncomfortably warm. Soon he noted

other signs of Martian life. Immense, gaudily tinted butterflies, some with wing spreads of more than six feet, flew up from the flower patches at his approach. A huge dragon fly zoomed past, looking much like a miniature airplane.

Suddenly he heard an angry hum beside him, and felt a searing pain in his left side. Seemingly out of nowhere a fly, yellow and red in color and about two feet in length, had darted down upon him and plunged its many-pointed proboscis into his flesh. Seizing the sharp bill of his assailant, he wrenched it from his side.

The insect buzzed violently but Thorne, still clinging to its bill, reached for his dagger with the other hand and cut off its head. Flinging the hideous thing at the body, he caught up a handful of sand to stanch the bleeding of his wound. Presently, he started forward once more.

He was nearing the top of the dune when he saw, coming over the ridge from the other side, a most singular figure. At first glance it looked much like a walking umbrella. Then it resolved itself into a man wearing a long loose-sleeved cloak which covered him from the crown of his head to his knees. Below the cloak the end of a scabbard was visible, as were a pair of rolled fur boots like those worn by Thorne. The face was covered with a mask of flexible transparent material.

Thorne stopped, and instinctively his hand went to his sword hilt.

The other halted, also, at a distance of about ten paces, and swept off his mask. His face was smooth shaven and his hair and eyebrows were white.

"I have the honor of being the first man to welcome you to Mars. Harry Thorne," he said in English, and smilingly

added: "I am Lal Vak."

Thorne returned his smile. "Thank you, Lal Vak. You speak excellent English."

"I learned your language from Dr. Morgan, just as he learned mine from me. Aural impressions are as readily transmitted by telepathy as visual impressions, you know."

"So the doctor informed me," said Thorne. "But where do we go from here? I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable in this sun."

"I've been inexcusably thoughtless," apologized Lal Vak. "Here, let me show you how to adjust your headcloak." Reaching up to Thorne's turban like headpiece, he loosened a strap. The silky material instantly fell down about the Earthman, reaching to his knees. A flexible, transparent mask also unrolled, and Lal Vak showed him how to draw it across his face.

"This material," he said, "is made from the skin of a large moth. The people of Xancibar, the nation of which you are now a citizen, use these cloaks much for summer wear, particularly when traveling in the desert. They keep out the sun's rays by day, and keep in considerable warmth at night. As you will learn, even our summer nights are quite cold. The mask is made from the same material, but is treated with oil and has the nap scraped off to make it transparent."

"I feel better already," said Thorne. "Now what?"

"Now we will get our mounts, and fly back to the military training school, which you, as Borgen Takkor, must continue to attend. At the school I am an instructor in tactics."

As they approached the small clump of trees which Thorne had previously noticed, he saw that they surrounded a small pool of water. Splashing about in this pool were two immense winged creatures, and Thorne noted with astonishment that they were covered with brown fur instead of feathers. They had long, sturdy legs, covered with yellow scales. Their wings were membranous, and their bills were flat, much like those of ducks, except that they had sharp, down-curved hooks at the end. And when one opened its mouth, Thorne saw that it was furnished with sharp, triangular teeth, tilted backward. These immense beast-birds, whose backs were about seven feet above the ground, and whose heads reached to a height of about twelve feet, were saddled with seats of gray metal.

The tips of each creature's wings were perforated, and tethered to the saddle by means of snap-hooks and short chains, evidently to prevent their taking to the air without their riders.

Lal Vak made a peculiar sound, a low quavering call. Instantly both of the grotesque mounts answered with hoarse honking sounds and came floundering up out of the water toward them. One of them, on coming up to Thorne, arched its neck then lowered its head and nuzzled him violently with its broad bill.

"Scratch his head," said Lal Vak, with an amused smile. "Borgen made quite a pet of him, and you are now Borgen Takkor to him."

After a second prod from the huge beak, Thorne hastily scratched the creature's head, whereupon it held still, blinking contentedly, and making little guttural noises in its throat. He noticed that there was a light strand of twisted leather around its neck, fastened to the end of a flexible rod,

which in turn was fastened to the ringshaped pommel of the saddle.

“Is that the steering gear?”

“You have guessed right, my friend,” replied Lal Vak. “Pull up on the rod, and the gawr will fly upward. Push down and he will descend. A pull to the right or left and he will fly, walk or swim in the direction indicated according to whether he is in the air, on the ground, or in the water. Pull straight backward, and he will stop or hover.”

“Sounds easy.”

“It is quite simple. But before we go, let me warn you to speak to no one, whether you are spoken to or not. Salute those who greet you, thus.” He raised his left hand to the level of his forehead, with the palm backward. “I must get you to your room as quickly as possible. There you will feign illness, and I will teach you our language before you venture out.”

“But how can I remember all the friends and acquaintances of Borg—Borgen Takkor. What a name! Suppose something should come up...”

“I’ve provided against all that. Your illness will be blamed for your temporary loss of memory. This will give you time to find out things, and the right to ask questions rather than answer them. But, come, it grows late. Watch me carefully, and do as I do.”

Lal Vak tugged at a folded wing, and his mount knelt. Then he climbed into the saddle and unfastened the snap-hooks which tethered the wings, hooking them through two rings in his own belt. Thorne imitated his every movement, and was soon in the saddle.

“Now,” said Lal Vak, “slap your gawr on the neck and pull up on the rod. He’ll do the rest.”

Thorne did as directed, and his mount responded with alacrity. It ran swiftly forward for about fifty feet, then with a tremendous flapping of its huge, membranous wings, it took off, lurching violently at first, so that the Earthman was compelled to seize the saddle pommel in order to keep from falling off.

After he had reached a height of about two thousand feet, Lal Vak relaxed the lift on his guiding rod and settled down to a straightaway flight. Thorne kept close behind him.

When they had flown for what Thorne judged was a distance of about twenty-five miles, he noticed ahead of them a number of cylindrical buildings of various sizes, with perfectly flat roofs, built around a small lake, or lagoon. The oasis on which it was situated had a man-made look, as both it and the lagoon it encircled were perfectly square. The cylindrical buildings and the high wall surrounding the square enclosure shone in the sunlight like burnished metal.

Rising from and descending to the shores of the lagoon were a number of riders mounted on gawrs. And as they drew near, there flew up from the inclosure a mighty airship.

No passengers were visible, but a number of small round windows in the sides of the body indicated their positions.

Lal Vak’s mount now circled and then volplaned straight toward the margin of the lagoon. Thorne’s gawr followed. As it alighted with a scarcely perceptible jar, an attendant came running up, saluted Thorne by raising his hand, palm-inward, to the level of his forehead, and took charge of his mount, making it kneel by tugging at one wing.

Thorne returned the salute and seeing that Lal Vak had dismounted, followed his example. As he stood on his feet a sudden dizziness assailed him. He braced himself to walk away with Lal Vak as if there were nothing the matter.

The scientist led him toward one of the smaller buildings, which Thorne now saw were made of blocks of a translucent material like clouded amber, cemented together with some transparent product.

As they were about to enter the circular door of the building, two men came hurrying out, and one lunged heavily against Thorne. Harry suppressed a groan with difficulty, for the fellow's elbow had come in violent contact with his wound.

Instantly the man who had jostled him, a huge fellow with a flat nose, beetling brows and a prognathous jaw, turned and spoke rapidly to him, his hand on his sword hilt.

Lal Vak whispered in Thorne's ear. "This is regrettable. The fellow claims you purposely jostled him, and challenges you to a duel. You must fight, or be forever branded a coward."

"Must I fight him here and now?"

"Here and now. Doctor Morgan told me you were a good swordsman. That is fortunate, for this fellow is a notorious killer."

Both men drew their swords simultaneously. Thorne endeavored to raise his blade to engage that of his adversary, but found he was without strength. His sword dropped from nerveless fingers and clattered to the pavement.

A sardonic grin came to the face of his opponent. Then he contemptuously raised his weapon and slashed the Earthman's cheek with the keen, saw-edged blade.

For an instant Thorne felt that searing pain. Then he pitched forward on his face and all went black.

CHAPTER III

THORNE woke to a weirdly beautiful sight. Two full moons were shining down on him from a black sky in which the stars sparkled like brilliant jewels. He was lying on a bed which was suspended by four chains on a single large flexible cable which depended from the ceiling, and had his view of the sky through a large circular window.

He turned on his side, the better to look around him, and as he did so, saw Lal Vak seated on a legless chair suspended, like his bed, on a single cable which was fastened to the ceiling.

"Hello, Lal Vak," he said. "What happened?"

"I regret to inform you that you are in disgrace. If you had told me, before the duel, that you were weak from loss of blood, I could have delayed the meeting. It was only after I had brought you here that I discovered your wound, and by that time the news had gone about that you were afraid - that you had dropped your sword when faced by Sel Han."

"Sel Han! Why, that's the man Doctor Morgan wanted me to kill!"

"The same. On Earth he was Frank Boyd, a robber of mines and a jumper of claims, so the doctor informed me."

"I'll challenge Sel Han as soon as I'm up and around again. That ought to square everything, and if I win, why, the first part of my mission will have been accomplished."

"Unfortunately," replied the scientist, "that will be impossible. According to our Martian code, it would be unethical for you, under any circumstances, to provoke another duel with Sel Han. He, on the other hand, may insult

or humiliate you all he likes, so long as he uses no physical violence, and does not have to stand challenge from you, for he is technically the victor."

"Then what am I to do?"

"That will rest with Sheb Takkor. As Borgen Takkor, you are, of course, son of Sheb, the Rad of Takkor. If he were to die, your name would become Sheb. As it is, you are the Zorad of Takkor. Zorad, in your language, might be translated viscount, and Rad, earl. The titles, of course, no longer have meaning, except that they denote noble blood, as the Swarm has changed all that."

"The Swarm?"

Lal Vak nodded.

"I can think of no other English equivalent for our word Kamud. The Kamud is the new order of government which took control of Xancibar about ten Martian years, or nearly nineteen Earth years ago. At that time, like other Martian viles, or empires, of the present day, we had a Vil, or emperor. Although his office was hereditary, he could be deposed at any time by the will of the people, and a new Vil elected.

"For the most part, our people were satisfied. But there suddenly rose into power a man named Irintz Tel. He taught that an ideal community could be attained by imitating the communal life of the black bees. Under his system the individuals exist for the benefit of the community, not the community for the benefit of the individuals.

"Irintz Tel did not gather many followers, but those who flocked to his banner were vociferous and vindictive. At length, they decided to establish their form of government by force. Hearing this, Miradon, our Vil, abdicated rather

than see his people involved in a civil war. He could have crushed the upstart, of course, but many lives would have been lost, and he preferred the more peaceful way.

“As soon as Miradon Vil was gone, Irintz Tel and his henchmen seized the reins of government in Dukor, the capital of Xancibar. After considerable fighting, he established the Kamud, which now owns all land, buildings, waterways, mines and commercial enterprises within our borders. He promised us annual elections, but once he was firmly established as Dixtar of Xancibar, this promise was repudiated. Theoretically, like all other citizens, Irintz Tel owns nothing except his personal belongings. But actually, he owns and controls all of Xancibar in the name of the Kamud, and has the absolute power of life and death over every citizen.”

“What do people think of this arrangement?” asked Thorne. “Do they submit to such tyranny?”

“They have no choice,” replied Lal Vak. “Irintz Tel rules with an iron hand. His spies are everywhere. And those detected speaking against his regime are quickly done away with.

“Some are executed, charged with some trumped-up offense, usually treason to the Kamud. Men in high places are often challenged and slain by Irintz Tel’s hired swordsmen. Others are sent to the mines, which means that they will not live long. I will leave you, now. You must sleep.”

“My wounds - I had forgotten them.” Thorne raised his hand to his face where the sword of Sel Han had slashed him. He felt no soreness, only a porous pumicelike protrusion traveling the length of the gash. The wound in his side was covered with a similar substance.

“I had them dressed as soon as you were brought here,” said the scientist. “They should not pain you, now.”

“They don’t. And what a strange dressing.”

“It is rjembal, a flexible aromatic gum which is antiseptic, protects the wound from infection, and is porous enough to absorb seepage. Wounds closed with this gum usually heal quickly, painlessly, and without leaving scars.

“I go now. Sleep well, and tomorrow I will come to give you your first lesson in our language.”

* * *

Early the next morning Thorne was awakened. He saw the white-haired Lal Vak smiling down at him. Behind him stood an orderly, who carried a large bowl which he placed on a tripod beside the bed. The orderly saluted and withdrew.

The bowl was divided into sections like a scooped-out grapefruit. In one section reposed several slices of grilled food. In another was a whole raw fruit, purple in color, and cubical in shape. In the third was a hollow cube containing an aromatic pink beverage.

Thorne sampled one of the grilled slices. The flavor baffled him, as it did not appear to be either flesh or vegetable. Having finished the strange grilled food, he tasted the pink beverage. It was slightly bitter and about as acid as a ripe orange. A sip sent an instant glow through his veins. “What’s this stuff?” he asked.

“Puho. A single cup is stimulating, but many are intoxicating.”

Thorne finished the beverage, and Lal Vak instantly set about teaching him the things he must know in order to establish himself as Borgen Takkor.

Although Thorne's wounds healed in a few days, Lal Vak used them as a pretense to keep him in his room for about twenty. The Earthman learned the language quickly, for stored in the braincells of the Martian body which had become his were the recollections of all the sounds and their meanings.

One day an orderly came to announce that there was a man below calling himself Yirl Du, who asked to see Sheb Takkor.

"Let him come up," said Lal Vak. When the orderly had gone out he said to Thorne: "You heard what he said? He asked for Sheb Takkor."

"Yes. What does it mean?"

"It means that Sheb Takkor, father of Borgen Takkor, is dead. Hence, you are Sheb Takkor. This is one of the Takkor retainers who knows you, so call him by name when he appears before us."

A moment later, a short, stocky man entered the room. His features were coarse, but kindly. He raised one huge hand in salute, saying: "I shield my eyes, my lord Sheb, Rad of Takkor."

Thorne smiled and returned his salute. "Greetings, Yirl Du. This is my instructor, Lal Vak."

"I shield my eyes, excellency."

"You forget that under the Kamud all men are equal," said Lal Vak, returning his salute, "and one man no longer says to another: 'I shield my eyes,' 'my lord,' or 'excellency.' "

"I do not forget that I am hereditary Jen of the Takkor Free Swordsmen, nor that Sheb Takkor is my liege. From our isolated position, we of Takkor know little of the Kamud. We have submitted to it because our Rad, emulating Miradon

Vil, saw fit to do so. So long as Takkor Rad rules us, though he is only the agent of the Kamud, we are content, and life goes on much as usual."

"You have come to escort your new Rad back to Takkor, I presume."

"That is my purpose, excellency."

"Then suppose you see about the gawrs while we make ready for the journey. I will accompany your Rad, and spend a few days with him."

"I go, excellency." Yirl Du saluted and withdrew.

"Strange," said Thorne, when he had gone. "He said nothing about the death of Sheb Takkor, the elder."

"His words conveyed the tidings," said Lal Vak. "A dead man's friends or relatives must not speak of him nor of his death until his ashes have been ceremonially scattered."

"When will that take place?"

"Upon your arrival. As his son and successor, you should be present at the ceremony. When it is completed, you may talk as freely as you like."

While they were talking both men had belted on their weapons and adjusted their head-cloaks. They descended to the courtyard and crossed to the lagoon, where Yirl Du waited with three gawrs attended by orderlies.

Lal Vak edged close to him. Watch Yirl Du and me, and set your course as we do," he whispered. "You will be supposed to lead but as you don't know the way you will have to depend on one or the other of us for guidance."