

the quetenestel towers

by . . . Robert F. Young

**A vision of beauty becomes a part of the mind that rejoices in its splendor.
No wonder the Martian towers Menaced Thorton's sanity.**

In the fullest, most audacious sense Robert F. Young is a completely unspoiled writer. He may never be an inordinately prosperous writer---he may even occasionally -go hungry. We don't know and we refuse to venture a prediction. But when a writer is true to himself, and wholly dedicated to an inner vision of soaring beauty and abiding worth Time has often a curious way of making him famous overnight. You'll see what we mean when you read this memorable story.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

SOMEHOW Thorton had not felt like going with the others. Something in him had rebelled against squandering the last precious hours of his vacation in the flamboyant carnival town across the canal, and he had stayed behind.

It was comfortable there in the late afternoon sunlight, his body propped lazily against the soft grass of the canal bank. It was calm and peaceful, and a million miles from tomorrow. That was where tomorrow belonged, Thorton thought. A million miles—or sixty million, which was the same thing—away. He never wanted it to come any closer.

Beyond the vivid blue of the canal he could see the Quetenestel Towers rising into the violet sky. The mild sunlight had caught their crystalline patterns and transformed them into a dazzling tapestry of light shards. The towers were as integral a part of the Martian landscape as the canal was, Thorton thought.

They were as endemic as the yellow sea of Martian maize rolling away beyond them to the distant crimson mountains: They looked as though they had been standing there for a million million years, the scintillating culmination of all the art of old Mars. They were the sort of monument you'd have expected a great civilization to leave behind it—the sort of symbol you *wanted* a great civilization to leave behind it.

Quetenestel, according to the little guide book issued by *Interplanetary, Inc.*, had lived during the hedonistic centuries preceding the Martian siroccos. While his contemporaries were frantically burrowing underground, excavating the intricate system of grottoes that were so shortly and tragically to become catacombs, he had made his last defiant gesture against mortality and built his fabulous towers.

Thorton's mind evoked a vivid image of an old and wizened man, his elfin face crinkled by two Martian centuries, his scrawny arms *gesticulating*, his bird-like voice shrill as he strode back and forth along the canal bank directing the exacting creation of his ultimate masterpiece. Like some fantastic Cheops. Like some alien Ozymandias.

Thorton saw the towers rising, section by shining section, the scintillating columns stabbing ever higher into the swiftly darkening sky; he saw the first drab murk of the dust storms curtaining the horizon. And then he saw the dust-misted years swirl leadenly by, the sun a bloodshot eye in a lowering sky that had forgotten day and remembered only night.

And all the while the timeless towers remained standing, while the blue canals became pitiful striations wrinkling the faces of newborn deserts and the cities became memories choked with dust. Standing, still, when the first survivor poked his blanched face out of his mountain burrow and crept into the slowly brightening sunlight. Standing, sedate and calm, to greet the space-jaundiced eye of the first Earthman to step from the bowels of the first Earth-Mars spaceship.

"You admire the towers, *senir*?"

Very startled, Thorton twisted around. He saw the little Martian peasant standing on the canal path just above him. The peasant bowed in the humble courtesy of his race.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you," he said. "I was but passing to my *batiqueno* when I saw you sitting there contemplating an ancient art form of my race. Without propriety the question rushed to my lips."

"I do admire the towers," Thorton admitted.

"My heart is warned that you find pleasure in the art of my people. To us the towers are priceless because behind their immortality lies a lesson we shall never forget."

"A lesson?" Thorton's face must have betrayed his interest because the Martian, after hesitating a moment, descended the slope and stood before him. "You would like to hear?" he asked.

"Sit down," Thorton said.

"No, *senir*. It is not fitting. I am but a poor tiller of the land while you—you are an Earthman, a dweller in one of the great cities of your planet. But I shall be glad to impart the meager information I possess if you are interested."

His small leathery face was inscrutable, yet Thorton had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being ridiculed. His curiosity, however, was rapidly becoming unbearable.

"I am very interested," he said.

"Thank you, *senir*. I shall tell you about the towers. But, first, in order that you may understand, I shall tell you about my people.

"Once we were a big race, a brave, bold race. Much like your own race today, *senir*, though of course not quite so bold, nor nearly so brave. Our culture of that period, judged in the light of the set of values that shaped it, was the glorious consummation of a way of life.

"To use a simple expression, we were object-worshippers. We adored *things*. Not things with meaning behind them; not symbols. But things that we made, things that we built. Vehicles, machines, buildings. Most of all buildings, *senir*. Buildings, and, of course, those agglomerations of buildings—cities.

We loved our tall white edifices with their gleaming facades, their magnificent spires and pinnacles. We lived in them completely. We carried on our lives' work in them, hurrying, when it was necessary, from one to the other, but never for long remaining in the sunlight.

"It was during that period that the Quetenestel Towers were built—"

"No!" Thorton objected.

The Martian looked at him puzzledly. "Why do you shout 'No', *senir*?"

"Because an age like that simply can't produce art."

"But that age produced the Quetenestel Towers."

"You must be mistaken!"

"Possibly, *senir*, but I do not think so."

Thorton waited for him to go on. But the Martian stood there quietly, a strange reticence in his opaque brown eyes. Thorton became impatient. "You mentioned a significance behind the towers," he prompted. "A lesson."

"I did, *senir*. Primarily, the towers signify that which they unequivocally state. Are you familiar with our simple language?" Thorton shook his head. "It does not matter. You will observe the first tower. In a bizarre fashion it resembles the 'K' in your alphabet. Actually it is a gigantic symbol for our language sound 'Q.' The second tower, comparable to the inverted 'N' in your alphabet, is our way of indicating the sound 'Ten.'

Then there is the symbol, very much like your 'S,' except that its curve is less pronounced, which—"

"Are you trying to say—" Thorton began. Then he stopped, wordless. He was staring across the canal, not quite believing, yet desperately wanting to believe, wanting to be the first Earthman to make the amazing discovery.

"I am trying to say, *senir*, that the Quetenestel Towers are the word 'Quetenestel' spelt out, on a prodigal scale, in the symbols of our simple alphabet."

"I'll be damned!" Thorton was frozen in an attitude of intense concentration, his whole being focused

through his eyes at the suddenly revealed letters which, a moment ago in inane illiteracy, he had believed to be towers. And yet, paradoxically, they were still towers, and still beautiful despite his disillusionment.

"To think," he said, "that all this while people have come here sightseeing, that some, like myself, have come here for the express purpose of seeing those towers, and all the while no one knew, no one dreamed— But why? Why didn't you, or others of your race, tell us?"

"No one asked us, *senir*."

Thorton sat there quietly for a long time. Finally he said, "You implied a deeper significance, a lesson—"

"Yes, *senir*. Object worship flourished during the centuries immediately preceding the dust storms. As I have explained, we were devoted to material objects. Nothing to us had value unless it had been manufactured by ourselves, unless it was immediately pleasing to the eye, and had, supposedly, a necessary function to perform.

"Also, as I have explained, we loved our buildings and our cities most of all. We spent our long cool evenings drinking our clear incomparable wine, looking up from our sidewalk cafes at tall stately facades, at pinnacles lost in the stars. While it lasted, *senir*, it was a pleasant way of life. But, of course, it could not last.

"When the dust storms came we burrowed underground. We could not take our buildings or our objects with us. We had to leave out lovely houses and our beloved cities to the mercy of the wind and the dust. And the wind and the dust were not merciful.

"No race can continue to maintain an ideal that is not durable, that will not forbear turning into a rusty hulk or a pile of misshapen ruins the day after tomorrow. When the remnants of my people crept out into the sun they saw nothing of their adored cities, nothing of their cherished objects. They saw nothing but—"

Suddenly the Martian knelt and plunged one hand into the ground. He scooped up a handful of dark red silt and let it trickle through his fingers.

"All of my people today, *senir*, are tillers of the soil. We live as closely to the soil as we can get. When we crept forth from our burrows we found our heritage and humbly accepted it. The land."

"But the towers—" Thorton said.

"Yes, yes, *senir*. The towers. They too remained. The towers and the dust. There is always an exception to prove every rule, but seldom has a rule been proven as ironically as the towers proved this rule ... When we looked across the desolation of our land and saw the towers, we knew in our hearts that we would never build another building, or another city."

"But why?"

The Martian pointed across the canal. Dusk had begun to creep down from the crimson mountains, across the yellow fields of maize. The towers stood, pale and cold and lonely. At their feet the neon veins of the carnival town had begun to glow. "Look at them, *senir*. Read them. Can you not see why?"

"I see four tremendous letters of your alphabet immortalizing the name of the artist who constructed them," Thorton said.

"Artist?"

"Certainly. The fact that he used his own name in the configuration of his masterpiece doesn't in the least detract from his genius. Egotism is typical of all great artists, and Quetenestel undeniably was a very great artist. The fact that his towers were the only buildings to survive the siroccos merely accentuates his greatness."

The Martian was staring at him oddly. "I keep forgetting, *senir*, that you are unfamiliar with our history, that you do not understand our language . . . Why did you come to Mars, *senir*?" he asked abruptly.

Thorton was taken aback. The sudden change of subject caught him off guard and he answered without thinking, without rationalizing.

"Why," he said, "to find something to take back with me."

"Thank you for telling me, *senir*."

"But you don't understand," Thorton said. "It's not what you're thinking. It's nothing simple. It's

nothing I can pick up and put into my pocket, or take home and place on my mantel. It's nothing like that—"

"I *do* understand, *senir*. You want something to take home. Something that will make going home easier. You want a memory that will not rust, that will remain dean and shining throughout the quiet years of your life. Something lasting that you can hang on to when doubts assail you. A touchstone that your own civilization is unable to provide." He lowered his eyes, staring at the dark red soil in his thin hand. "All of us are like that, *senir*."

The Martian raised his eyes again. "I am proud that my humble race is able to lend you such a touchstone," he said. He stood up slowly. Then he raised one arm in a wide gesture. "The Quetenestel Towers, *senir*. Take them. Quetenestel was, as your guidebook states, a famous Martian artist. If, when my people gaze upon his masterpiece, they know that they shall never build again, it is because they are ashamed of their clumsy hands. It is because they are afraid that their noblest efforts can never touch the consummate art work of the master."

He bowed. "I am sorry to have disturbed you," he said. "I was but passing to my *batiqueno* when I saw you sitting here. I am grateful for the time of day you have so graciously granted me. And now, *quis san foruita*. Farewell."

He turned and started tiredly up the slope to the canal path.

"Wait," Thorton said, rising. He felt vaguely dissatisfied, vaguely afraid that something essential had escaped him. But the Martian did not pause. He climbed up the slope to the path and walked down the path, blending finally into the deepening evening shadows.

Thorton would have followed, but he heard the high-pitched drone of the returning launch and knew that the others were on their way back from the carnival town.

He waited there on the canal bank, and when the launch came in he helped his wife and his son up the slope, losing, in the sudden cessation of the afternoon's loneliness, some of the doubts that had infiltrated his mind. He took his wife's arm and his son's small hand and walked with them and the rest of the tourists back to the neat row of prefabricated cottages facing the canal.

Behind him the kaleidoscopic veins of the carnival town flowed brightly through the intensifying night. And then—Thorton paused on his small front lawn to watch—liquid light leaped vividly through the huge vowels and consonants of the Quetenestel Towers, etching their creator's name in purest scarlet against the star-haunted Martian night.

And suddenly Thorton's heart was full. Suddenly he was able to face tomorrow. His vacation had not been in vain. He had his touchstone.

The matter probably would have ended there, and Thorton doubtless would have endured the abyss of time separating him from his next vacation with more patience and equanimity than he could usually summon to meet the rigors of civilized living. If he had not been curious; if, deep, deep in the innermost reaches of his mind there had not lurked one tiny nagging doubt.

He had been home less than two months when the Tri-Planetary Historical Society announced the opening of the first Martian micro-film library in Lesser New York. Thorton spent a whole week doing battle with himself. He presented himself with a hundred excellent reasons why it would be a waste of time for him to sit in a long narrow room ruining his eyes over 3-D films, listening to prosaic descriptions of a planet he had seen at first hand.

"What can they tell me about Mars?" he asked himself again and 'again. "I've been there!"

The libro-specialist in the long narrow room—the Q—S room—said: "What topic, sir?"

Thorton was embarrassed. "The Quetenestel—" he began. Somehow he could not say the rest.

"Oh, the towers," the girl said. "Won't you sit down, sir?"

He was sweating. The seat was supposed to be form-adjusting, yet it failed utterly to align itself to his shifting posture. The long room darkened and abruptly there was the blue canal flowing slowly across the 3-D screen before him, and just beyond it the crystalline towers rising, with patches of violet sky showing exquisitely between their delicate fretworks.

A wave of such poignant nostalgia swept over him that he felt that the room could no longer contain him, the room, or Earth for that matter; that he must get up and flee; .run down the grassy bank of the

canal and plunge into the blue blue water, striking out with long strong strokes toward the magic pinnacles waiting forever on the farther shore.

"The Quetenestel Towers," the narrator's flat voice said: "a remarkable example of Martian mass art dating from the last century of the old modernism. Formerly and romantically believed to represent the attempt of a poet-architect named Quetenestel to immortalize himself by spelling his name in grandiose letters along the *Suriul* canal.

"Actually an example of the advertising ingenuity—and the extravagance—of a huge Martian winery. The Quetenestel Vintners. . The towers bear a startling resemblance, when properly understood, to the much smaller neon lettering used to promulgate similar products on Earth during the twentieth century."

"Is something wrong, sir?"

Thorton realized that he was standing. "No, no. Nothing," he said.

Somehow he found his way out of the room into the corridor. He walked down the corridor to the elevators and descended to street level.

They crawled out of their burrows into the sun; he kept thinking. Into the sun, and they saw the dust covering their broken cities. And in all their land nothing stood except the towers, the towers immortalizing the vintage they had drunk for centuries to rationalize their brick and mortar civilization . . .

Thorton stepped through the street entrance into the bleak November sunshine. He saw the naked street and the tall white buildings lining it. And the people hurrying. He shuddered.