

# PLANET STORIES



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# SPACE TRAP AT BANYA TOR

By W. J. MATTHEWS

**Exciting entertainment, these telecasts of dashing pirates, gorgeous victims and the always stupid Space Patrol, but Jeff Thorne, famed Derelict of Mars, was grimly bent on stopping them—in all their ghastly reality!**

THE THREE PATROLMEN leaped to their feet, saluting as they arose. Bannerman, the Superintendent, extended a hearty fist.

"Welcome, General Wheelwright," he exclaimed, clicking his polished heels.

"Glad to be aboard, gentlemen," rasped the Inspector General of the Planet Patrol, returning the salute. His broad chest, scaled from throat to belt with the medals of twenty worlds, tinkled musically as he rumbled the brusque greeting. "At ease. Resume your game. Bannerman, a word with you, if you please."

As the Superintendent closed the black door behind them, he glanced apprehensively at his superior. The big man had slumped in limp exhaustion into the office chair before Bannerman's desk.

"Well, sir?" Bannerman finally asked. "Chain Lucas?"

"No," replied the General, hardly lifting his head. "Not yet." He stared fixedly at his glittering boots, cool runnels of light glancing along their polished curves.

"Senator Chanler is dead."

"Dead? Old Scrooge?" Bannerman's startled incredulity was tempered by a sudden enthusiasm he made no great effort to conceal. "Who poisoned him?" he inquired.

"Come now, Bannerman," replied Wheelwright, repressing a wan smile. "I grant you he was a parsimonious fool, but at least we managed to skin our appropriations through his committee one way or another."

"Skinned is certainly the word for it, sir" agreed Bannerman shortly.

"I'm afraid we'll remember Scrooge with regret," Wheelwright gloomily rejoined. "What the new Senator on the committee will do to the appropriation will ground half our ships."

"I had hoped for a relief," sighed Bannerman. "Who's the new man?"

"Chanler's daughter, Iris," replied Wheelwright. "Yes, yes, I know," he added testily as Bannerman's jaw fell open. "The girl's a reigning beauty, famous on half a dozen worlds. The World Council appointed her to fill the Senator's unexpired term. Just the usual courtesy, of course, but she flew back from Venus and threw herself wholeheartedly into the job."

"Has she long to serve?"

"She hadn't, but she knows publicity. Had enough of it, Lord knows. She ran for the next term and was re-elected."

"But she's wealthy in her own right, they say. Surely she didn't inherit Chanler's parsimony with his office?"

"Of course not, Bannerman. She's famous for her easy way with money, and her Chanler's daughter. Notorious, if you like. But the girl's a featherbrain, a romantic. Devotee of these gangster telecasts glorifying crime." Wheelwright's snort was eloquent of his disgust.

"I know. We get them here, too. Same old Formula Number One, the Robin Hood motif. Clean-living space-hawk raiding the lanes, confounding the stupid Planet Patrol, scattering his loot to the poor. Very true to life."

"It was corn five hundred years ago," scowled Wheelwright. "But it drags them in today." He pounded the arm of his chair. "Who believes crime does not pay when they can see for themselves on a hundred scanner-screens that it does pay, and handsomely? Of course it's fiction and they know it, but it tends to build up a subtle disrespect for law and the Patrol in their minds. What ruined the old Congress but the popular conception of them as a bunch of hick yokels stumbling over a job too big for their provincial minds?"



*Dallia's head and right shoulder vanished in the searing blast.*

These gangster things run in cycles, of course, but I'd like to see this one run out right now."

"True enough, sir," nodded Bannerman, soberly. "I've noticed their effect on the inner worlds. And you feel they influence the new . . . Senator?"

"I'd bet on it," growled Wheelwright. "When she was appointed, I slipped in operatives. You know how those household groups talk. And we know she had prejudices long before Chanler died. We've had to hold up two or three of her interplanetary junkets on that toy yacht he gave her, for her own safety, of course, but she's not forgotten. And she lived for years with Chanler's groans on the waste and inefficiency of the Patrol."

"Has she his power?"

"With her looks? More. She can block our whole appropriation or pare it to the bone."

"And you think she might?" Bannerman was grimly serious.

"She talks of cutting us down, trimming off the fat, she calls it. Back to the efficiency of the old pioneering days when men were men and rockets were really rockets." He grinned wryly. "Between the screens and Chain Lucas, she thinks it all a big, exciting game staked against the daring outlaw. Romantic," he added.

Bannerman cursed. "I wonder how romantic those poor women thought it was when they were tied up to the 'Orion's' dice bar and beaten to death with iron bars? Or the seven we found cut to pieces in the wreck of the 'Pantagruel?' And the pretty ballad of the 'Stargazer,' her whole crew and most of the passengers pushed through airlocks into the void?"

"Horror retailed from eighty million miles troubles no one," replied Wheelwright. "She's a wild and reckless girl drunk with her own beauty and this new power, Bannerman. Undisciplined, she means to discipline us. She'll push us fifty years back down our own trail. We can't risk it, Bannerman."

**T**HE Superintendent stared thoughtfully at his superior. He tapped his desk gently with the long Mercurian dagger used as letter-opener. "What do you propose, sir? You're not here for nothing."

"You can put that away," said Wheelwright, with some reluctance. "We're not romantic, Bannerman. We'll find a better way."

"Seizing Chain Lucas?"

"A month ago it might have helped. Now, frankly, taking him might do more harm than good."

"His reputation, I suppose."

"Exactly. I suppose he is the prototype of those telecasts we spoke of a moment ago, a daring buccaneer attacking on sight under our very noses, raiding but not killing, the most romantic of them all. Should we get him, the cleverest lawyers of the System would fight to defend him and we'd end up defending our own system against them all. They'd have our blood for persecuting the Robin Hood of the starways."

"Robin Hood!" sneered Bannerman.

"If they could see Banya Tor!"

"Exactly," agreed Wheelwright, grimly. He leaned forward, tapping Bannerman's desk with a lean forefinger, his grey brows fierce over his bright dark eyes. "The one place Lucas slipped his men, let them kill for the sheer piratical joy of killing. We had nothing sure before, but on Banya Tor he spun his own death-rope. Nothing has been touched, as ordered?"

"Nothing, sir. The air-dome is still smashed where he drove his ship through as the Patrol came down from the hills. The . . . the bodies are still just as his butchers left them. Frozen."

Wheelwright leaned back, clasping his knee in its black and silver hose. His eyes fell. "I can't quite feature it. Perhaps he thought he could clean up the asteroid afterward; perhaps his crew just got tired playing Robin Hood. Anyway, letting off steam at Banya Tor is going to cut short Chain Lucas' career before many days are out. I've seen things on the runs we don't talk about, Bannerman, but those women hanged in their own dresses over fires . . ." He shuddered violently. Bannerman nodded.

"And the necklaces of hands and eyes Lucas hung on others before his men dismembered them by inches," he added grimly.

"Exactly." General Wheelwright bit his lip. "The man's cracked, mad. How many more atrocities we've found are actually his

rather than the work of lesser pirates we may never know. But to all the worlds he is still the wild, free spirit of Adventure. Knowing nothing of Banya Tor."

"As you ordered," pointed out Bannerman. Wheelwright agreed.

"I have my reasons, Bannerman. Knowing nothing of all this, suppose this Chanler woman could be taken to Banya Tor and shown exactly as he left it in his flight the true horror of this pirate raid, the real nature of piracy, the nature of the tin Robin Hood?"

Bannerman gaped aghast. "You planned that?"

"From the first weak call for help. I reached there about as soon as the Patrol ships and ordered the whole story on ice."

"You can prove to her it *was* Lucas?"

"Easily. They were there three or more days, loafing on solid ground, letting themselves go on the poor devils of the little colony. When the Patrol came in answer to a stolen radic signal, they had time only to fight and run, leaving everything. Two of his trusted lieutenants, known men, Revere and Pahboard, were found dead after the long-range firing when we seized the domes. We can pin it on him with a deadly certainty, Bannerman. We'll tar him with the blackest truth the System has ever seen. Sir Galahad will ride for a little time, perhaps, but he'll ride the calculating fiend we've known him and not the gallant adventurer these cheap telecasts make him out to be. And we'll fling the certain truth in Iris Chanler's painted face to do it!"

Bannerman was gravely sober. "Have you considered the consequences, sir? The girl has been carefully reared. She's wealthy, spoiled, but only a girl. In her revulsion from the ghastly sight you plan to thrust on her, might she not turn on us in reaction? Fling the blame on us for letting him commit the horrors she couldn't deny?"

General Wheelwright lifted an admiring forefinger. "Now that's the way I like to hear my officers talk, Bannerman. Consider all the angles, all the consequences. Follow no set plan blindly." He nodded in stern commendation. "Knowing the woman, I anticipated your thought. The Patrol will not lead her blindly by the hand into Banya Tor, Bannerman. She will be

steered there purely by chance, by a man not known to be of our force. A man above suspicion, above reproach, perhaps I might say above the law itself. Thorne."

He grinned wolfishly. "Call him in, Bannerman. You know his private line."

Bannerman shook his head. "With your permission, sir, I'd rather not. Even those men out there know him only as the richest man alive. That is his value."

Wheelwright was not impressed. "You know best, then I know him as a sot who stumbled on a Vadirrian cache and came out of the desert with more wealth than any man from here to the outer rings. The whole System knows him as no more, but for us it is sufficient that he secretly is a captain in the Patrol and ready to do our bidding. The Chanler woman and a party of her chattering friends are not an hour behind me on the incoming Martian liner for Vulhan City. Take me to Thorne and we shall spread our nets for the magpie if we have to use half his new-found wealth to do it!"

"MY FIRST assignment!" snorted in Geoffrey Thorne as he stood watching the dancers twirling about the huge white ballroom in the Government House. "Escorting some snaggletoothed bandylegs to a desolate little asteroid just to quease her fat little stomach. It's enough to turn my own."

"Patience, Thorne," smiled Bannerman, leaning quietly against a pillar at his side. "She's not bandy-legged."

Thorne stared, then laughed abruptly. "I needn't take your word on that, Bannerman. The General comes."

General Wheelwright, forging through the eddying swarm of dancers, glittered with gold and braid, but it was not at the great man Thorne was staring with such evident approval. At the officer's side stepped a tall, beautifully shaped woman in clinging Ionian spider-weave, her skin glowing brilliantly in the intricate patterns of the skin-tight gown. Her ebon hair, shoulder-length, bore a single brilliant jewel at the ear, but it was her eyes which held Thorne.

Grey-blue as a summer storm, they scanned him as she walked forward, a faint smile parting her lips at his open admiration. It was an approval he made

no effort to conceal, for Jeff Thorne, International, honored no convention against his will, nor had he need. His vast wealth enfolded him like a mantle, and few men on Earth or Mars or any other planet took pleasure in measuring wits or steel with him. Slowly he moved forward to meet the General, the dancers parting unobtrusively before him.

Many eyes followed him, a tall, commanding figure in the heavily brocaded white silk tunic, the broad golden stripe of the International still upon the shimmering black of his close-fitting trousers. Gold sparkled on chest and shoulders and jewels in the hilt of the short, heavy sword slung at his left hip in ceremonial homage to the first Martian colonists. In honor of these, too, was the crisp white turban about the gold-shot scarlet fez, symbolizing the blood they shed and the purity of the ideals for which so many of them had died. The five moonstones of the order of Larcanton glowed sullenly red on his broad chest.

"I hoped you'd be here, Thorne," the General greeted him, as heartily as though he had not made grimly certain the young man would attend. "May I present Miss Iris Chanler, Senator to the Council. Miss Chanler, Captain Thorne." There was a chill disapproval in the General's starched tones.

As they bowed and swept away in the ensuing dance, he joined Bannerman stiffly and stood watching the gay throng with an expression as dour as he could muster.

**T**HORNE and the girl swung lightly in spiraling circles, fingers interlaced, in the intricate, graceful steps of the latest Venusian Glide Roll, the dancers melting about them in light-hearted disregard of all official dignity.

"A handsome couple, sir," nodded Bannerman.

"Handsome enough," agreed Wheelwright, clasping his hands behind him and following the two with brooding, stormy eyes. "Thorne seems to know his business."

He was promptly about it. As the girl melted into his arms, following his every lead with exquisite grace, he grinned down at her upturned, challenging face.

"I almost stayed away," he admitted.

"Because of me?"

"Had you seen the picture of you I conjured up," he sighed, and she laughed.

"And mine of you," she added. "I thought of you as a wrinkled old desert rat, hearing of your fortune."

"We wrinkle easily here on Mars," he smiled. "You'll not stay long enough to know." And his eyes, sweeping her lace-sheathed body, assured her she need not fear wrinkles at the moment.

She smiled. "We sail for Triton on my yacht tomorrow. There's just time for a visit to the Battan caves before I must return to N'Yott for the opening of the fall sessions."

"Those are dangerous parts" he warned. "Your party is very small."

"We have good men," she laughed, eyeing him curiously. "You know that area?"

"If I say I do, will you construe my answer aright?" was his cool rejoinder.

She rose to the bait. "Are you afraid?"

"I have been called rash ere now."

Her eyes glowed up into his. "Should I challenge you, Captain Thorne? Beg you to accompany us?"

His lips hardened and she felt the spring-steel body stiffen. "I am not on display, Miss Chanler. Not even for you."

Her smile faded and she drew away, moving from the hall out upon a deep-niched balcony overlooking the restless Nergal Sea and the nodding Martian ships swaying on the moon-dappled roadstead. The towers of Vulhan City lay about them, dark shadows in the ultramarine of the night, for these Martian cities were not air-domed.

Her eyes sought his, not lightly. "You think I ask selfishly, Captain Thorne. You are right. But not as you think. If I ask you to accompany me for a short cruise, though it be on a flimsy pleasure-yacht, it is not to exhibit you as some glittering prize of the light social whirl I inhabit, believe me. I know your story, of course. One of my duties concerns aspects of public health and I've a bill hearing designed to relieve some of the handicaps space-sick fliers labor under. You are living proof they can overcome the handicaps of disease or drink or drugs. I speak frankly, you see. Figures and charts put the Council nodding. Your name will not."

"I see," he slowly agreed. He looked

away. She had shown him the strength beneath her loveliness.

"You alone cannot abrogate the old laws forbidding t'ang addicts, cured or not, returning to Earth," he countered.

"I can try," she insisted. "I like this position, Captain Thorne, to keep it I have to earn my salary, and social legislation is the coin I pay into the treasury." She laughed, shaking her long black hair about her gleaming bare shoulders. "I have been frank with you, sir. Will you come?"

"You make it a duty," he protested. His slow smile swept her lithe beauty in the moonlight as the music rose again to draw them within the tall white palace.

## II

**B**EFORE DAWN THORNE STOOD quietly on the airport basin, hands buried in the fur of his lined white jacket. As he gave the attentive stewards last-minute instructions for the care of his own space-ship, *Warrior*, lying in her berth not far away, he watched for his own party. Faint lines troubled his forehead.

A thin, gnawing premonition tugged at his brain. Something was wrong with the picture afforded him by Wheelwright. While admitting Iris Chanler's light spirits could mislead younger men than the crusty old General, Thorne had caught a deeper glimpse of the strength and determination beneath the lovely facade.

She came swiftly across the marbled plastic of the drome, her chattering party trailing her in a glittering swarm. Blood-scarlet in a short, daring jacket laced with white and gold, she struck lightly at his immobile arm.

"You Mars-men! Do you sleep?"

"The locks must be cleared for the Venus run within an hour," he shrugged. "The Lines wait for no one, not even estimable folk such as ourselves."

She presented him swiftly to her party, a gay, light-hearted parcel of touring socialites burdened far more with gold than either character or intellect. But he was welcomed pleasantly enough. While mere wealth might have lifted haughty lips, the stupendous weight of his tremendous fortune crushed all barriers and reserve. Nor was he less in his habit than the gayest, a blaze of green and gold beneath the ermine

fur. His boots were sheerest silver. Yet though the heavy gun belted at his thigh was crusted with gold, the ball and slides of the weapon were cold blue steel.

Iris Chanler, however, noted that he was wearing it, and wearing it low. When she rallied him on the precaution, he only smiled grimly.

"You may clothe a desert rat in cloth of gold, Iris," he countered, "But you cannot strip him of his Blandarc." He gestured toward her friends, each with the short ceremonial sword demanded by Martian custom. "Beautiful, but useless."

"Were they made for use?" She laughed. "On whom?"

"You might be wondering," he replied. "In your position. Holding the purse-strings of the Planet Patrol, you should fetch a thrifty ransom."

Her laughter was a beautiful thing to hear.

Her friends, crowding around as the party moved on the vessel they had decided to take passage on, cut him off from any deeper reply. Her yacht being under repair, they had been forced to content themselves with a regular interplanetary trading ship, and in the regulations and formalities of the take-off and acceleration he had no further opportunity for speech with his charge, save at the table. But the evening broadcast, a lurid melodrama of the skyways, gave him better cause to further his mission.

She herself brought up the subject, the starlight gleaming on the white synthetic of her long, pearl-strewn gown, no whiter than the sleek bare leg revealed by the deep V-split in the side of the skirt. Gold sparkled on her sandals and on Thorne's white tunic. The bloody moonstones throbbed sullenly on his broad chest.

"What fools we are," she said abruptly, pausing at the long dural-port of the gallery to stare out across the inky night at the gorgeous sparkle of mighty suns and distant stars winking in the velvety blackness. "Watching a childish sport on a paper screen when this is passing all unnoticed."

"They never tire," he agreed, leaning beside her, the star-shine harsh on his features. "Only we change, passing farther and farther each year into the distance out there. Someday we shall see those suns."

"Not you nor I." Her voice was low.  
 "Only the stars are immortal." He looked down at her. "We content ourselves with lesser things." She looked at him, then walked slowly on, not speaking.

**T**HE long days passed. Hard, rough games provided exercise and amusement, since on these shorter runs between the inner planets and asteroids no suspended animation was necessary. The women were frankly predatory, nor did the men care to antagonize Thorne.

But he was better armed than even General Wheelwright had expected. Women had been no mystery to him since his sudden fortune, nor subservient men with sullen eyes. What the wise and kindly Martian fishermen with whom he had spent his outcast days had not taught him, the attentions of eager parasites had supplied. He was not lightly deceived.

So he entered into the games with frank and open zest, overthrowing the men and being thrown, kissing the women when necessary, and oftener, keeping both victory and defeat light with laughter. He did not seek out Iris, nor challenge her, but when it came to kissing her in the course of one of the Venusian games these cosmopolites had brought with them, he kissed her with considerable enjoyment and found himself being kissed promptly in return. It was a very pleasant voyage and he sincerely regretted that the time was at hand when he must divert it to the approaching asteroid dot known only as Banya Tor. He had not seen what lay there awaiting them, but he had seen other human wreckage left along the star-ways by the wolfpacks raiding interspatial shipping. It would not be a pleasant finale.

Iris and Thorne stood the morning of the fifth day out from Mars at a port in the small pilot cabin with two or three others of their party, oblivious to the ill-concealed resentment of the officers on duty. From the corner of his eye he noted the first tremulous quiver of the director-bar and his lips twitched. The game had begun.

Casually he herded the laughing young people from the cabin on the pretext of a fencing match already pre-arranged in anticipation of the expected attack. Andrews, his opponent, was a good blade and the

match drew most of the party and crew off-duty, as he had intended. The two ships coming up fast astern would be Bannerman's faked pirates and he intended their attack to lose no point in surprise to those for whom the effect was being staged. To insure it, he slyly broke the wires leading to the standard directo-gauge as they crowded noisily out of the cramped little room. Once Bannerman's ships were near enough to be spotted by the visual scanner, the slow passenger ship could never hope to evade the planned attack.

Less than thirty minutes later the brazen clamor of a bugle split the air of the lower deck where Thorne and Andrews were deftly matching blades before a shouting crowd. The silence that instantly dropped was broken by the glacial clang of alarm bells from end to end of the stubby little liner.

"Battle stations!" shouted Thorne, snatching up his gun belt from Isis. He seized her hand and bounded from the enclosed hall amidst the yelping pack pouring up the companions, snatching whatever weapons lay to hand. But the sight that met their eyes as they emerged upon the saloon deck, panelled with Vinite, struck the brashest of them dumb on the instant.

Fanned out to either side of the racing liner, two sleek grey racers of fast, if obsolescent design, whirled silently through the void. They bore a red sun on needle prows.

"You wanted adventure," Thorne dryly chided Iris. Her deep breast heaved and her hands were clenched, but there was no fear in her beautiful face.

"I wanted life," she retorted, flashing him a glance of impatience.

"This is Death," he replied grimly.

"They live on our trip," she laughed, seizing his arm. "We've been dead since leaving Earth, you Mars-crawler. I could kiss them!"

Thorne laughed aloud, flinging an arm about her. "They may afford you the opportunity, you scatter-brain," he returned. "We have no armament."

"All ships carry toss-mines today," she snapped.

"They are already abreast of us," he pointed out. "They're calling the Patrol by now, of course."



"The Patrol!" she scoffed. "Shiny ships and sleepy men! Rather an honest pirate than a butter-brain in black and gold!"

Her open sneer cut short as from the nearer of the ships drawing closer and closer abeam sprang a pink glow and a stabbing beam of golden yellow to reach out and gently tap the liner.

It rocked under the impact of the force beam and the steady, drumming roar of the engines broke unevenly. The beam snapped off, but the engines sputtered and gasped, throwing the vessel off course. Again the yellow beam lanced out, crushing the tall stern fans and sending the liner staggering drunkenly. Futile in her agony, she launched the tiny throw mines which were her only armament, but the sleek raiders easily avoided their slow trajectories. The throbbing engines were gasping and barking as the vessel rolled on her uneven course.

Metallic voices broke the frightened silence in which the huddled passengers watched the unequal combat. Over the intercom pilots spoke sharply: "Stand by. Patrol ship within sight, coming up fast. Hold your positions."

**E**VEN as they cried out in relief, the attacking ships suddenly arced upward and swung away toward Venus, their fiery wakes a long trail of incandescent crystal in the inky veil. Their parting shots missed the liner as she swerved on a new course to avoid just such vengeful rage, and a moment later they were lost among the sparkling stars. A sleek cruiser of the Planet Patrol swept by far astern, angling to cut off the fleeing pirates, but already too far away to more than frighten them from the prey they had already accounted theirs.

A joyous babble of voices broke out as the passengers reacted from their scared immobility. The liner was limping badly but not structurally damaged, and with that assurance the light butterflies aboard relaxed into their earlier gaiety.

Iris Chanler, however, did not seem to so easily recover from the brief flurry of adventure which she had so ardently applauded. She was all Senator, and spoke with sharp feeling on the subject of the Planet Patrol and its many and manifest

shortcomings. So outspokenly angry did she become that Thorne almost hesitated to continue the planned routine, fearing to drive her through sudden shock into outright denunciation of a service which apparently could not prevent such hideous tragedies as lay ahead on Banya Tor. Wise in women, he made no effort to counter her fury, nor point out that if the Planet Patrol was undermanned and ill equipped, she had no one to blame but her own parsimonious father, "Scrooge" Chanler. He wondered uneasily if the scowling old miser had indeed returned in the more attractive guise of the lovely daughter.

When she learned the liner's rocket tubes had been so damaged she could not proceed to Triton, but must put in at the nearby asteroid of Banya Tor, she exploded furiously. Thorne blandly pointed out that this was merely a minor inconvenience in the romantic interlude of the pirates and all but had his head taken off for his pains. Her revulsion seemed complete, but he determined to continue the plan in which the faked attack had only been intended as a means of diverting the ship to Banya Tor without arousing her suspicion when she found what horror she had been led to witness. The iron was hot and he must strike quickly before her natural light-heartedness overcame her frightened wrath.

It was a race against time, for they were still two days out of Banya Tor the following evening and she had apparently recovered. As a lark, she and the other girls had taken over the galley and prepared the evening meal for all hands. It had been a surprising success and they were relaxing with music in the inner saloon when Iris rejoined them.

Switching from domesticity with her usual flare, she was enticingly cased in a long black evening gown sweeping to the polished floor. A cluster of Mercurian fire stars blazed on her deep bosom and there were others netted in the rippling waves of her dark hair. She brushed aside the attentions of her party and came to Thorne, sitting in the front row of the little group facing a blonde girl seated before them with a minature oval instrument on which she evoked sharp, wild music foreign to any he had ever heard. Seeing his absorption, Iris settled in a

lounge a little to his rear. He nodded, but did not speak.

From his place, he could see the deserted outer saloon and the wheeling circles of the passing stars. He paid no attention, however, concentrating on the lovely player before the silent group. But, as he glanced again through the parted leaves of the inner doorway, he froze in sudden horror.

The huge bulk of a space-ship, blotting out the stars, was already upon them.

Its ports glowed suddenly red, as though with internal explosions, and a wide cone of golden light sprang from her prow to envelope the unsuspecting liner. Too late Thorpe remembered he had not replaced the broken wires activating the directo-beam and the regular crew had apparently not discovered the damage. And the black ship rushing upon them was already not a thousand feet away.

Thorne's warning shout was never uttered. As the golden ray struck, the room was livid with its sudden glare, then dark and sullen red.

The girl with the musical instrument, cutoff in midflight, bowed stiffly forward and fell heavily to the floor at his feet. Her accompanist swayed sideways and toppled like a wooden doll from his low seat. A cold chill bit into Thorne, numbing him from neck to heels, but leaving his brain only too clear. Sudden thuds behind him as members of the Chanler party fell to the floor only confirmed his dread. If it were not the Avitt paralysis, it was a starker ray he had never known. A more dreadful fear which had been nagging at his subconscious for days bit deep and, as he turned his head with painful slowness, came to horror-stricken realization.

"Be silent, Captain Thorne," came a cold hard voice. "No sound, or you die." It was the voice of Iris Chanler.

### III

**F**OR A LONG MINUTE HE STUDIED her, over the barrel of the small Blandarc she had whipped up from the cushions of her lounge seat. And at last he saw what it was that had been troubling him so long. Her hair was dark and her color and figure warm and sultry, but the hard grey eyes were flinty pale and glinting. Killer's eyes . . .

"So you *were* a pirate, after all," he breathed, slowly.

Her icy laugh crawled over his twitching skin. "Did you think I had my wealth from my father's dribbling salary? He left me a better legacy, Captain Thorne."

"The family business, apparently," he returned, his dry lip twisting. For much was only too painfully clear. Her eyes narrowed, but she did not move.

"In a way. But I branch out."

"What's the deal?" he asked roughly. He had recovered full use of his faculties moments after the first paralyzing shock, but to her he seemed as immobile as all who lay sprawled unconscious about the saloon. If she had prepared for his partial resistance to the effects of the ray, due to the unusual condition of his t'ang-soaked nerves, she had fatally underestimated his powers of recovery. But he remained motionless. At the moment, helpless under her Blandarc, he could see the pirate vessel swinging along-side.

"Your friends?" he added, glancing through the door at the growing bulk of the raider. She smiled.

"My partners, rather."

"How do you work it, Senator?"

"As my father did, Captain Thorne. Years ago the outlaws banded together and made up an annual purse for the member of the appropriation committee who controlled the funds of the Planet Patrol. To obstruct and cut down the bill was his only duty. My father took it over from Senator Denton and I managed to take over from him after his death."

It was so simple. And had been so effective, hamstringing the Planet Patrol in its own bases.

"And now, open piracy. You destroy yourself, Senator. What does it get you?" He watched her, brows knit. She shrugged.

"You, Captain Thorne. Just you."

There was no need to explain. The wealthiest man since Croesus, an enormous ransom could well be torn from him, to say nothing of what could also be extracted from the families of the young folk lying senseless about them. And, in all probability, capping the situation with a trim jest, a tidy sum for the safe return of the excellent Senator Iris Chanler herself. It was very clever, and no less disturbing.

The liner quivered and groaned as the pirate ship hooked on, a black merchantman of latest design. There came the hiss of air and the clang of bolts as the pirates began to come aboard through the connecting airlocks. He looked back to Iris, sitting tensely in her deep blue lounge seat.

"Chain Lucas?"

"There is no Chain Lucas," she smiled, coldly. As he digested that startling remark, footsteps resounded along the passage and the saloon door was thrust rudely open.

Framed in the opening, a tall, raffish fellow in trim blue grinned at them. Iris leaped to her feet and ran to him, flinging her arms about his neck as he engulfed her in a bearish hug. Thorne took no advantage of their preoccupation, for several other hard-looking men in flying clothes were crowding into the room, gun in hand. As they began picking up the unconscious passengers and shoving them roughly back into their seats, the pirate and the girl broke their enraptured embrace and moved coolly over to Thorne.

"You really got him," he exulted, sallow skin glowing with an unhealthy tinge. He was not unhandsome, but his full lips had an ugly downward curl Thorne disliked.

"This is Captain Thorne," she replied, a certain pride in her voice.

"We're through, Iris," he crowed, clasping her with one long arm. "Through."

"Through with life," agreed Thorne, coldly. He eyed the intruder arrogantly, his body motionless, his eyes intent. "Your name, you?"

The pirate leader sprang backward, releasing Iris his hand on his gun. "You turned your back on him, you fool, and he awake!"

Iris laughed. "Captain Thorne has a very unusual constitution, my dear. I did not trust the crystals entirely, but though he can move his head, he is as paralyzed as the rest of them."

Thorne turned a contemplative eye upon his erstwhile companion of the misdirected adventure. "I remember, you were our cook this merry evening, Senator Chanler."

His formal insistence upon her betrayed trust did not trouble her. "The yellow ray is entirely harmless unless the prospective

victim has certain mineral salts in his system. I supplied them in your food."

"Eating none yourself," he agreed. "A clever method. You had no qualms, striking down your friends for this gay blade?"

"They go to ransom, as you do," she replied, her lovely face hardening. "No friends of mine, Captain Thorne. If they accepted me, it was because I had money and position. I have no love for their silly kind."

The pirate chief swaggered forward, grinning. "Let us leave the moral questions for others, Captain Thorne, and speak of more solid matters. Solid gold, let us say."

THORNE balked instantly. Time was all he had left to play, aside from his unsuspected ability to move and his ruthless speed with guns, time for Bannerman or General Wheelwright to realize something had gone amiss with the plan to expose Iris Chanler to the bloody ruins of Banya Tor. He could have wept with rage at the futility with which they had laid their ingenious trap.

"If you refer to a ransom," he coldly replied, "I demand something better than the word of a flash-gun rock-trader like yourself that you have any right to hold me at all."

They gaped at him. "We hold you, Captain Thorne. Is that insufficient?" demanded Iris, teeth glinting between livid and unpleasant lips.

"You know what I mean," he sternly accused her. "You yourself told me you pirates had banded in this attempt to bribe and suborn members of the Government. As you well know," he added, his scorn dying her cheeks angrily.

"If this . . . merchant receives the ransom, how may I be sure twenty more of your association will not be instantly upon us for their share, if not for a separate ransom for all?"

It was not a worry which would trouble him greatly once the money had been paid, he knew, for neither he nor any of those aboard the liner stood any real chance of surviving at all. These people talked too freely. They would see none repeated their confidences.

"You misunderstand, Captain Thorne," Iris replied, her voice earnest with con-

viction. "There is no syndicate, no organization among us. Fifty thousand credits annually is the sum paid my father, and now myself. When all who feel they gain by sabotaging the Planet Patrol have left what they can on a deserted asteroid, the money is paid in at New Yott. There is no more than that to the cooperation I mentioned. There are no partners, no associates." She laid a hand on her companion's arm. "This is Captain Thomas Dallis," she added, with some pride in which Thorne took no pleasure at all. He eyed the tall fellow unpleasantly.

"The name is familiar. Export business?"

"Of course. Most of us," he added. A thin grin split his pale face. "So convenient to explain our unusual cargoes."

"Shall we do business?" wondered Iris calmly, seating herself facing Thorne on a lounge Dallis thrust forward. He slouched comfortably on the arm, watching the granite-faced captive. The other pirates had left the room.

"If we can come to terms," Thorne assented, quietly. "You say it will be to you the ransom must be paid?"

"Exactly."

"What of Chain Lucas?"

Iris laughed aloud, a mocking, airy sound that rang eerily through the silent ship.

"A myth, a shadow," she explained. "Some poor romantic fool we hired to play at pirate. He serves as the herring to draw across the train of Dallis here and others who really do the pirate's work."

"You *hired* him?" Thorne was frankly startled.

"Of course. He was sailing to and fro in a cape and mask, cutting out single ships, raiding mining camps, playing Robin Hood. But he was colorful and had made a reputation for chivalry we needed. We bought it. He continues these daring raids as before, robbing the rich and helping the weak, covering the real attacks by unknown pirates who leave no trace."

"Me," said Dallis, softly. "No trace at all, Thorne."

"Others cash in on the exploits," she admitted. "But it is Tom who pays him. A good investment, all considered."

"To show up the Planet Patrol?" wondered Thorne. "An investment in obstruction." He looked at her with dawn-

ing comprehension. "I begin to see," he added, slowly. "Those telecasts . . . your work?"

She smiled. "Of course. One of my first. I bought into a cheap little movie company and put out the first blood and rocket melodrama." A laugh bubbled to her red lips. "It made money. We expanded and started the whole cycle years ahead of its normal course. We still make money."

"You seem to have it all worked out," he said. "A normally apathetic public, soothed by a whole cycle of propaganda telecasts, a finger in the heart of the Planet Patrol, an honest, open business that takes you anywhere in the System, and a masked front man to take credit for the whole witches brew." He laughed shortly. "I suppose I can guess what will happen. Once you have the ransom you go respectable for good, leaving the unfortunate Chain Lucas to cover your trail and take the blame."

Both Dallis and Iris laughed, a merry, discordant jangle.

"Perhaps," said the man, rising to stand over Thorne. "But enough of Lucas. What of you?"

"How much?"

"Who knows how much you have?" Dallis ground out. "Set up half for us and you go free. We know half will be ample for any need."

"Then free these others," Thorne argued. "Their ransoms will be unnecessary."

"Nonsense." Iris rose and stood over Thorne, her breast heaving. "Ransoms for all, or there may be suspicion. The Council may pay mine," she added contemptuously.

**T**HORNE did not laugh or move. Looking beyond the precious pair, at the heavy merchantman Dallis had turned into a raider, he sat amazed beyond speech as it slowly, silently fell away from the liner's airlocks and drifted off to starboard, its black sides crumpling visibly. A lifeboat, spurting from its little lock, snapped and broke as a violet ray from some unseen vessel above the liner cut it down. The pirate crew were trapped aboard and died there in soundless fury. The few aboard the liner were cut off from any retreat.

Neither Dallis nor Iris had noticed the loss of their ship, as sound did not penetrate the liner's hull. Thorne set himself to hold their attention until it should be too late.

"Break this paralysis, then," he growled, apparently making a fierce and unsuccessful struggle to move his arms as they lay along the padded rest of his deep lounge. "I can do nothing here."

"We can do nothing for you," shrugged Dallis. "Your body will remain paralyzed until it has absorbed the chemicals activated by the ray. Perhaps a day." He eyed Thorne in some admiration. "You withstand it very well."

"Thanks," said Thorne, shortly. It was not necessary to tell Dallis that he had withstood the paralysis so effectively nothing could save the exultant pirate should Thorne drop his hand the few inches to the heavy butt of the Blandarc he still wore. But the death of the sly-faced raider was the least of Thorne's desires.

"What is your own estimate of your wealth, Captain Thorne?" asked the woman, hewing as always to the main issue. He shook his head, remembering just in time not to shrug.

"Offhand, I couldn't say. It's not all liquid. The Vadirrian I retained to steady the market cannot be touched, of course, nor the foundations set up throughout the System for education and other purposes." He pondered a moment. "Say thirty billion on call," he finally replied.

They goggled.

Iris recovered soon enough. "Then let us call upon it, Captain Thorne," she enjoined. "We'll scale down our demand in cash. Half that sum would drown us in gold and criminals. We'll settle for six billion, share and share alike."

"Most reasonable, I'm sure," he agreed. "Will you still require the fifty thousand blood-money this fellow pays you?"

She slapped him, hard. "Remember your place, you dope addict," she snapped viciously.

"I am," he replied evenly. A black ship, ribbed with scarlet, was easing gently, silently into position at the airlocks from which it had blasted the pirate vessel. He could feel the gentle thump in his toes as she bit in and fastened her grips. The others, lost in wealth, felt and saw

nothing but the golden Midas sitting immobile before them.

"You've left me little else," he added, directing a cold glare at the man standing before him. "How do you mean to collect this ransom? The usual way?"

"As usual." Dallis' eyes were glittering. The red lips were parted, glistening. He was no longer handsome.

"And, once collected, what of these people? Your party?"

They glanced carelessly about at Iris' sprawled companions.

"They have seen nothing, know nothing," she replied. "Our ransoms will arrive together. We'll go back to Earth together."

"Dallis to join you later, giving up his hazardous merchant trade," agreed Thorne. "And what of me?"

They stared at him. Moment by moment the mirth and exultation died from their faces. As he saw the darkness descend, he knew only too well what would become of himself, what had been in their evil minds from the first. He could not be permitted to survive.

"I see." He was grimly calm. "I knew it all along, of course, but I wanted to see your faces. They're very expressive."

"What could you expect, you fool?" burst out Iris, taking refuge in anger. "Why did you resist the paralysis? Can we leave you at large to reach out and destroy us?"

"Then you may go whistle for your ransom," he snapped. "Shall I buy my own death warrant?"

**H**ER face went hard and the full lips thinned cruelly. The blue eyes turned pale as ice.

"There are men on Dallis' ship who can change your mind, Captain Thorne."

"With hot irons, I suppose," he sneered. "You're a primitive sort of brute, Iris."

"We won't touch you, Thorne," interposed Dallis, coldly. "But we'll put these kids under the knife one by one until you sign." He nodded to the unconscious group about them. "Shall they deal with them as they did to the passengers of the 'Orion' and the 'Pantagruel' and a dozen others? It'd be slow and ugly, Thorne."

He looked from one to the other of them. Greed and weakness marred the

symmetry of their handsome faces, drawing down their lips in cruel, heartless determination that would brook no obstacle. They would not falter.

He was spared an answer by a thunderous bang in the liner's engine room. A second and a third echoed instantly, then a rolling crescendo of fast pistol-shots.

Iris looked back with a cry, her skin blanching as she flung up her gun, but Dallis only laughed uproariously. "They didn't all sample your wares, Iris," he jeered her. "The boys must have found some conscious back there."

There were no further sounds and she lowered her gun, smiling weakly. Neither saw Thorne's hand slip half-way down the lounge arm to pause directly above the butt of his Blandarc. But he had one more card to play.

"What of your own crews?" he demanded. "What of your dupe, Chain Lucas?"

The thin mask of restraint broke and the mean, naked soul of Thomas Dallis glared venomously at him. Even Iris stared at her boon companion in alarm.

"We take care of our own crews our own way, you fool! If you go, they go with you. There'll be no blackmailing us when we roll ashore, my friend, if that's what you mean. There'll be no one left. I saw to that." His sharp teeth gleamed.

Thorne was not perturbed. The panel door behind the intent conspirators, where Dallis had first appeared, was slowly inching open.

"And a like end for your other dupe, Chain Lucas," he contemptuously replied. Dallis grinned again, wolfishly.

"Of course. We'll wreck this ship and plaster her with evidence tying him with every piracy for the last ten years. The Patrol can hunt him down."

"He won't like that," offered Thorne, gently. Dallis swore in exasperation.

"Do I care?" he shouted. "Why worry over Chain Lucas, you gilded idiot?"

A beatific smile overspread Thorne's face. "Principally," he admitted, "because he is standing directly behind you, Dallis."

Iris' choked scream ripped the silence and her gun fell thumping to the floor. Dallis, half-turning, stared transfixed at

the tall figure standing quietly in the doorway, hands on the side.

#### IV

**T**HE GOLDEN CHAINS WHICH had given him his name glimmered richly in the soft light, sparkling across his broad chest and about the rich black tunic. A black-masked steel helmet concealed the face no one living had ever seen.

For a space wherein a man might count to six, the guilty pair stared motionless at the silent Lucas. Then, knowing himself doomed, Dallis broke the trance and drew. To Thorne, sitting immobile in his self-imposed paralytic trance, it was like the slow-motion haste of a lumbering bear. Dallis, whatever else he might be, was no gunman, little though it would have availed him even had he been. Thorne did not see Lucas draw, but the heavy weapon was in the outlaw's hand even as Dallis swung, slamming its deep, heavy report from the recoiling slides. Dallis' head and right shoulder vanished in a searing blast, shivered to atoms, the gun he had never drawn spinning across the saloon. The hand and forearms went pinwheeling grotesquely with it to thud against the wall and fall to the floor in a hideous splash. He turned dizzily on his heel, a mockery of a man, and fell with a crash between two chairs where the paralyzed bodies of his own victims still sat motionless, blind deaf to his fall.

Iris screamed once, a shriek of horror and fury, then flung herself on Lucas. He wasted no effort, deflecting her blow with his left hand, his right chopping down with the whistling Blandarc to crush the long barrel against her temple, shattering her fragile skull. A mask of glistening scarlet shot instant threads across her livid face. She fell heavily, collapsing across the twitching corpse of her late partner, Dallis. The light gleamed on her outflung arms and upon the blood slowly running down their ivory slopes to drip more slowly still from her lax and impotent fingers.

Scorn tinged Lucas' whole bearing as he glanced across at the shocked and silent figure still motionless in his lounge-prison.

"You blind fool," he flung contemptuously at Thorne.

The latter did not answer for a long, slow minute. Then he nodded

"So it seems, Lucas," he replied, quietly.

The big pirate shrugged, flinging back his long cape to holster his gun, and a vivid flower of scarlet bloomed in the doorway as the lining caught the light.

"I suppose they told you your paralysis is incurable," he said, walking forward with no further glance at his victims. "You'll be out of it by noon tomorrow. But now, just to dispel any fond hope you might be entertaining, Captain Thorne, you may consider your personal fortunes as unchanged. You are still for sale... to yourself."

"At what price?"

"Twenty-five billion."

"You raise the price?"

"Do you think I am one of these?"

Lucas sneered, nodding at the dead beside him. "Petty thieves using my name for a shield." He sat down, crossing his black-sheathed legs. "Now, Captain Thorne, let us discuss the terms. I am a busy man."

"And I am not," growled Thorne, angrily, staring full into the evil-looking mask Chain Lucas wore as the visor of his helmet. "I've had a hard day, Lucas, and I'm tired...tired of merchants and Senators turned pirate...tired of masks...Suppose you remove yours...General."

**F**OR a long, taut moment the outlaw did not move. Then he slowly unbuckled his linked chin strap, removing his steel helmet and the black hood within it. Thorne smiled wickedly.

"Good evening, General."

Chain Lucas was General Wheelwright, Inspector-General of the Planet Patrol.

"How did you know?" The outlaw's voice was flat, expressionless.

"Your voice. Your evident contempt."

"Well?"

"Why should I have suspected Iris Chanler? Did I know she was in your pay, sponsored as she was? Your tone implied me a fool to have succumbed to her charms, to have let myself be lulled into this fool's trap. But it was I who was to have led her into the trap of Banya Tor, and if I failed in that, who knew I had

attempted it save you and Bannerman? And your walk and voice are not Bannerman's."

"You guessed."

"I knew. Why I had been taken into the Patrol with my drunken antecedents all against me, why sent on this fool's errand? And who alone had authority to arrange for all that has befallen?"



Wheelwright nodded, his face impassive. "I see. It was I. All the way." He kicked idly at the dead foot of Dallis. "These poor fools never knew. They hired me as Chain Lucas to play the hero and be their shield in trouble, and I used them in their turn. I gave them information and the hidden routes of ships. I postured when I attacked, scattering my loot openhandedly, for the loot they stole was far surpassing mine and I knew the cave on Luna in which they keep it. I'll leave it there, I suppose."

He leaned back, a faint smile twisting the hard mouth. "It looked big once, Thorne. Big enough to kill for. Now..." he shrugged expressively. The golden chains winked brightly across his chest.

"Now it's a drop in a very big bucket,"

Thorne concluded. "What happens if I fill it for you?"

"What could happen, Thorne? You die. You all die. The ship vanishes, as others have vanished. Chain Lucas will be seen no more."

"You can't destroy or hide a liner, General. Your own Patrol will track you down."

Wheelwright shrugged again. "A high-orbit course, over the trade lanes, and I send the ship and you into the Sun. Will you seek fingerprints there?"

Thorne fell silent, watching Wheelwright from narrowed eyes. Finally he spoke.

"It's been your plan from the start, hasn't it?" It was not a question.

"From the moment Bannerman told me he had taken you into the Patrol, for all your record. I could have taken you at any time. But I wanted more than the ransom you can pay. I wanted peace in which to enjoy it."

Slowly Thorne's eyes widened. "You...you yourself ordered the massacre at Banya Tor."

"Of course. You should know by now, Captain Thorne, that my men do not get out of hand. They tortured and killed at my word, that I might have a spectacle savage enough to justify calling in both you and the late Senator Chanler. She came at the suggestion of the pirate Chain Lucas, planning the treachery you heard. She never knew how futile it was."

"A masterpiece," agreed Thorne, dryly. His hand had slipped loosely from the arm of the lounge and fallen to his side. His head nodded wearily.

"These two betrayed their friends, their country, and would have betrayed each other as they did us once the money was paid," he went on, watching the quiet bodies on the deck. A thin trickle of darkening blood runneled out across the magnificent carpet to stain Wheelwright's polished boot. "You know what you have betrayed, General Wheelwright. You live a lie even in your greater lie. You fail your own pose of mock-hero, grasping more than you can hold."

"I hold you, Thorne."

"I pay you nothing, you pirate!" flashed back Thorne, defiant even in his apparent helplessness.

"You haven't seen Banya Tor," snarled Wheelwright. "My men can change that tune."

"You lie," returned Thorne, coldly. "You killed your own lieutenants, Revere and Pahboard, merely to provide convincing proof you had caused the Banya Tor massacre. You destroyed Dallis' ship and crew and the men he brought aboard this ship. Would a treacherous snake like you leave any alive behind him to share the loot? Would you spare your own crew of cutthroats?"

GENERAL Wheelwright grinned malevolently. "You are very clever, Captain Thorne. And very daring. I could have used you." He shook his head. "Of course, none remain. Dallis' men are dead. My own died at mess, poisoned. Only I am left...and I am Chain Lucas." There was pride in his voice, a hard, brittle savagery rasping through the charged atmosphere of the littered saloon.

"You are a fool, General Wheelwright," replied Thorne, evenly. "I came to this assignment better prepared than you think."

"What's that?" Wheelwright leaned forward, his amusement vanishing.

"There are three button dictographs in this room," jeered Thorne. "There are fifty scattered throughout the ship to record Iris Chanler's reaction to Banya Tor, should she have desired backing out once we returned to base. My idea, Wheelwright."

"You hound!" cried Wheelwright, springing to his feet and half-drawing his Blandarc. "You threaten me?"

"Your own words convict you, not I."

Suddenly the pirate renegade thrust back his gun and flung back his grizzled head in a splutter of laughter. "What odds, Thorne? This ship goes into the sun and they with it."

"But we're not going into the sun," said Thorne.

"And who's to stop me?" demanded Wheelwright, laughing still.

"Myself," said Thorne, abruptly coming to his feet with a tigerish surge, the barrel of his gun leaping from the holster on which his hand had been resting, the lethal volt-ball at its muzzle square between Wheelwright's startled eyes.



Jaw agape, the General could only stare and stare, his hands lax at his side, and Thorne went softly on.

"You spun your webs too fine, Lucas. I told you, as I told Bannerman, I was cured of the t'ang habit. He believed. You refused to believe. Now you pay for it."

"You...you weren't paralyzed at all?" stammered Wheelwright, sheer unbelief still apparent in his eyes.

"My t'ang-soaked body did not absorb the catalytic salts Iris fed us," smiled Thorne, bleakly. "If I can no longer drink, neither can I be poisoned. Your cat's paw and his ray meant nothing to me." His voice tightened. "Enough, renegade! Your gunbelt! Unbuckle it. Drop it."

Slowly the General unfastened the broad gold buckle of his rich belt, his head bowed. Then, as he released it, he suddenly thrust up his left arm to free his black cloak, jerked the belt forward smartly, and clipped Thorne across the wrist with the buckle. The belt, weighted down by the heavy gun, was torn from his grasp, but it had at least knocked the Blandarc from Thorne's hand as well.

Snatching a knife from the lining of his cape, Wheelwright plunged forward with a snarl of triumph. He was all Chain Lucas now, all black-and-scarlet pirate.

But as he leaped, his own treachery rose up to avenge his victims upon himself. Thorne flashed out his heavy Martian sword...and Lucas stepped on Iris Chanler's dead and blood-soaked arm.

He went staggering sideways, slipping in the half-dried blood she and Dallis had spilled so thickly across the carpeted deck, and as he struck in vain at Thorne the Captain leaned swiftly forward across Iris' body and drove his straight blade halfway to the hilt between the golden links of the pirate's golden chain.

He did not die easily, Chain Lucas. Sprawled across the corpse of Dallis, he writhed and screamed, a hideous, bubbling scream of anger and fear. He clawed for the gun Thorne had dropped and Thorne pierced his arm to the bone. And when he managed to scabble to his knees, still wielding the knife, the Captain stepped forward relentlessly.

"This for Banya Tor," he whispered. And Chain Lucas, once the Inspector-

General of the Planet Patrol, died as he had lived, a renegade and a traitor.

**S**LOWLY Thorne sheathed his sword. He did not wipe it. He put his gun in the holster at his belt.

Looking down at the dead, he spun the jeweled dial set in his own massive golden belt-buckle. He lifted a tiny ball from the hidden compartment revealed by the opening and spoke wearily into the screen set in the polished sphere.

"You heard, Captain Bannerman?"

"Everything, Thorne. Everything." Bannerman's voice quavered and broke. "Unbelievable."

"I never thought I'd have to kill him." Thorne shook his head, "I never thought to see Chain Lucas dead at my feet."

"Where better?" Bannerman was more practical. "The Senator? Any hope, Thorne?"

He looked down at Iris. She was no longer beautiful, but her blood had doubtless saved his life. "She loved the romance of piracy, Bannerman. She's paid in full."

"I put her on the air, Thorne," said Bannerman, grimly. "Cut all telecasts from Earth to Pluto and every word went out crystal clear. The main bands are broken and the pirate cult forever discredited, Thorne. Lucas and his lieutenants wiped out." His voice thickened. "We can't give you a reward, Thorne. Not to you."

"I did a job. Not for reward."

"The Senate heard you, Thorne. Listened to Chanler and Lucas and the whole thing. The President called. The law's been repealed. You can go home."

"I don't understand, Bannerman."

"You're free of the ban, son. They say if you can cure yourself of the t'ang habit, as you just proved to every living one of them listening tonight, then they can cure the others who suffer with it. You lifted the law with your own hands, Thorne. You freed yourself. They repealed it not ten minutes since."

Bannerman's voice sharpened, rose abruptly. "We're sending ships. Hold the fort, Captain Thorne. You're an Earthman again!"

Slowly Thorne closed the sending ball. He stood tall and straight among the frozen and the dead. He was going home.