

PLANET STORIES



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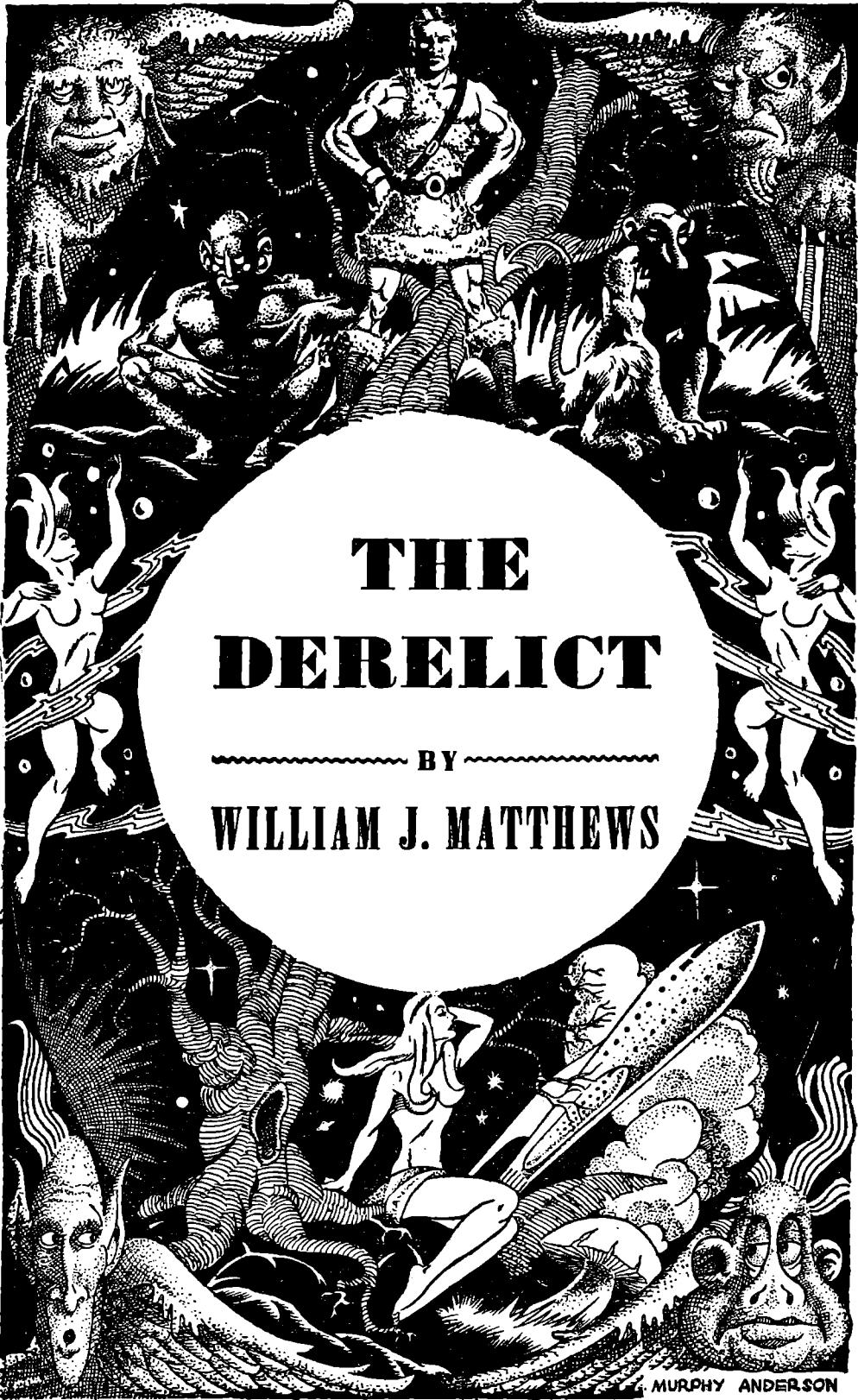
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THE DERELICT

— BY —
WILLIAM J. MATTHEWS

MURPHY ANDERSON

The end of the trail . . . he knew it, she knew it, old Hanu knew it and so Jeff Thorne stumbled off into the Martian desert—to die. But death takes strange forms out there . . .

GEOFFREY THORNE was "on the beach." Face down on it, in fact, head and shoulders deep in the brackish eddies of the slowly rising tide, the sluggish waters of the North Nergal Polar cap. And it was odds he would die there miserably in his drunken stupor, had not there come a sudden interruption of the t'ang-ridden miasm in which he lay.

A sibilant rush of feet dashed across the worn Martian sand, splashed into the shallows, and Thorne felt quick, vital hands snatch and roll him face up, slapping a dull sensitivity into his addled wits. He shook his head dazedly, realized his predicament, and feebly struggled to rise. It was beyond his power.

With a snort of disgust, his rescuers caught him under the arms and dragged him unceremoniously backward. Once clear enough of the dull waters rolling languidly upon the low, hot beach, he let go and Thorne sat down heavily in the sand.

"I'd call that a waste of effort," a well-fed voice coldly observed.

"Paul, please!" replied a woman's softer voice. Thorne shook his head viciously, raised himself on one arm, and sought to focus his blurred vision on the group facing him.

There were a dozen or so, well-dressed, well-fed, bright with color and metal in the sunshine. Tourists. He looked up at the young petty officer of International who had dragged him from the water. There was a pained look of weary resignation on the clean-cut young face as he turned to his temporary charges.

"I must apologize, ladies and gentlemen. This bit of local color was unscheduled. It happens occasionally on the inner planets. Conditions grow too rigorous and a man—uh—goes down."

Thorne laughed, a dreadful, choked hacking that set the fluttering tourists back a step or two in sheer fright.

"A man goes down, kid." He rubbed his eyes and leered at them. "Damned far down that you show him off like a Martian

The officer of International Airways,

Inc., winced and then added, to his group, "He's right, you know. Privacy's about all that's left up here on this station. Shall we go on? There are the caves I promised to show you, farther along."

He moved up the beach, the tourists straggling after him, still looking back at the dejected figure of Thorne half-lying, half-sitting in the hot sand. Their voices came drifting back upon his throbbing consciousness.

"But, Mr. Atlee," a woman's voice urged, "we can't just leave him there like that. Mightn't he drown?"

"The tide doesn't come much higher, Miss Thurland. He'll be all right. Once out of that coma, he won't drop into it again for a day or two, unless he gets more t'ang."

"What is this t'ang, Mr. Atlee?" another woman asked. "A Martian drink?"

"Yes, it is. High explosive . . . and one drink wrecks a man for life. They never get it out of their systems, and they don't much care. It's like the opium off Jupiter, only worse. They'd kill for it. Fortunately, they can't get it any too easily—but it's not fortunate for poor devils like Thorne."

They were gone, then. The last had vanished in the misty haze spun by the blazing sunshine on the northern rocks. Heading for the Vulhan caves farther along no doubt. Rock crystals and ancient weapons from some forgotten battle there for the picking up, glittering gew-gaws to pleasure lazy, personally-conducted school-teachers and insurance-brokers on holiday. A crooked grin twisted Thorne's lips. It hadn't been so easy a few years ago.

It had been hard. Too hard for Jeff Thorne.

Well, there was always t'ang.

HE HEAVED himself up, shook the sand from his ragged clothes, and lurched unsteadily to the water's edge. Kneeling, he splashed the cool, brackish stuff on his muddy face, his swollen hands. He was running them listlessly through his dark hair, trying to conquer its wild *thok*, buddy."

disorder, when a sound behind him brought him about with an oath. His brows darkened.

"You're missing the show at the Caves," he pointed out, a sneer in his rasping voice. "Or do you prefer this?" He waved rudely at the hot sand, the dulling ripples, the low, pulpy vegetation crowning the long slope up the beach.

The girl watched him steadily, her hands tight upon a small red and white bag, and under her grave, slow regard a dull flush crept along his check-bones to lose itself in the stubby tangle of beard. The dark blue eyes were soft and thoughtful and more than a little sad. Mirrored in them, for the first time in many months, Thorne saw for a moment what he had become and the flush died away in a gray-white pallor. It was not pleasant.

"You—are Mr. Geoffrey Thorne?" she asked. The rich tones of her voice sent a tingle through the hapless derelict of the void. How long since he had heard a woman say "Mister Thorne"? How long since he had heard a woman so much as address him? His crooked grin returned. "My name is . . . Jeff Thorne, Miss," he replied.

She smiled in answer, a smile only slightly less awry. "You don't know me, Mr. Thorne. I'm Helen Thurland. A friend of mine, Nancy Bertrand, was once stewardess on your Venus-Titan run. She thought the world of you."

"Then I'm glad she didn't accompany you," Thorne rasped. He plunged raggedly up the slope toward the inviting shade of the floppy vegetable trees cresting the rise. "Get out of that sun, girl. It's hotter than you think."

In silent obedience she followed, but he turned at the top to lower at her. "Is Miss Bertrand at Vulhan City?" he demanded. "If she is, and you bring her here to look at . . . at me . . ."

The girl looked down at the glittering sunlight on the sea. "Nancy isn't at the City."

He sighed gustily with relief. "I thought plenty of her myself," he admitted, slumping down against a thick tree-trunk. "The best I . . ." He paused; then looked out to sea himself, fingering his whiskers.

"The best stewardess you ever had," she completed. Taking off the huge, floppy hat affected by tourists in the Martian

heat, she looked down thoughtfully at him.

"She's dead, you know."

He stiffened, "Nancy?"

"Yes. A meteor in the tubes, they said. And the pilot couldn't land anywhere but on Io—and not good even there. There weren't many left. She's buried there, by a little green lake. I went there first this spring. I—I wish I hadn't. And just now, when Mr. Atlee named you, I thought of a space-pilot who wouldn't have left those stones on Io. The best pilot International ever had."

His lean, dirty fingers wrung aimlessly together. His heel ploughed a recurrent furrow in the shadows. "That pilot is as dead—as Nancy. Poor little kid." He gnawed his lip. It would not do to go maudlin. Not now.

"You are Geoffrey Thorne, International?" she insisted, sitting on a fallen trunk and dropping her hat at her side. Leaning forward, she watched his pallor darken. "You are the pilot who pioneered the Jupiter and Pluto runs, who rescued the Argonaut expedition, who broke up the Wind River and Merton gangs?"

HE LOOKED at her and she shrank from the pain in his glare. "You heard Atlee. I'm Thorne, if that's anything. You saw him, a green space-kid fresh from the Lunar way-stations with two-year ratings on his pretty red uniform . . . saw him drag a sodden bum from what passes for a gutter here. He was nice to me, Atlee. They're all nice to me. But I can't even enter Vulhan City any more. One of the worst sink-holes in the System and I can't get in . . . I can't get in . . ." his voice trailed away aimlessly and he picked at a thread dangling from his burst tunic.

"But—is there anything for you?" she asked. "It is a sink-hole. I suppose that's why Mr. Atlee was detailed to take us out to these caves on the stop-over. But there's no work there, no good chance for a pilot such as you."

He laughed. It was a better effort than the one he had achieved on the beach, but she preferred the former. "No chance, indeed! But there's t'ang. There's always t'ang!" he laughed, then caught at his ribs as a shuddering spasm tore at him.

"Please!" She touched him, ever so slightly, shaking his trembling body.

"You mustn't! Is there nothing you can do? Nothing? Can you not go home?"

He faced her squarely and his eyes, she noted, were less bloodshot and oddly steady as he looked into hers. "You don't know. It isn't generally known, I suppose, anywhere in the System. We can't go back."

"You can't give it up?"

"That among other things. But no ship will take a t'anger, even as a passenger. That's what they call us, when not worse. They say it's incurable. Lord knows I couldn't disprove it. I can't give it up, and, if they took it away from me . . ." he shrugged and a chill rippled up her spine. "You might say we're marooned here, on Mars, on Pluto, on Venus . . . all who take up with these weird native brews and weirder natives. We don't go back. We can't. And we don't want to."

"I can't believe that," she protested. Then, at his tragic, sidelong glance, she hastened on. "But this t'ang? What is it? How—how did *you* ever come to—to get mixed up with such . . .?" She floundered helplessly, and some inborn instinct of gentility prompted him to rise and scan the sea for a moment. Then he turned, watching her. Again his eyes and fingers sought a ragged strip of scarlet tunic to twist aimlessly.

"It wasn't much," he admitted. "There was a crash a couple of years ago. Faulty tube drive. We lost some passengers and all our stores. It was a two-hundred mile trek to Luxtol City, over the Phidian desert. I suppose you saw it, flying up here. Nothing but t'ang bushes . . . and their berries to eat. I got the taste and it's . . ." His voice faded away and, looking up, she saw a strange wryness pass over his face.

THEN HE SHRUGGED, laughing. "What's the use? You're not for that old line. Just a line. A sponger's plea." His voice stung. "It got money once. Handouts. And now it's worn out and I can tell you the truth . . . a simpler truth than a simple lie. No, I didn't get the taste in any such soul-satisfying way. T'ang berries are deadly poisonous.

"I was young and a fool for luck with gun or ship. I dragged in a little fame, notoriety if you will, breaking up a gang or two preying on the International. We

pioneered, those days, and drank. Lots of things, among them t'ang. Grandstanding to the old-timers. Nothing could down the great Jeff Thorne. I took a drink—and another. You see the result. Two years ago I was cock of the walk and king of the space-ways; today a snotty drags me out of the muck to keep me from stifling . . . and no great favor, either."

She was silent for a long time. Then she took up her hat and slowly rose to her feet. "It's too late, then?" There was sadness in her eyes as she met his sullen glance. He shrugged and turned away, deliberately rude. There was the rumble of the sea beneath it all.

"Too late."

"Is—is there anything . . .?"

"Thank you, no." He did not see her hesitate, then open her bag. Several paper notes were thrust into his lax hand. He turned angrily, but she looked so shame-faced and embarrassed he cut short his first instinctive outburst. She put out her hand. "Please. It isn't much—for either of us. Let it be a present from Nancy, too. To Jeff Thorne, International."

He looked down at the money, System credits on Terran banks. "Twenty. You know where it'll go, I suppose. For t'ang"

"That's no matter, Mr. Thorne. It's your life. I spend most of my time telling others what and what not to do, as a teacher. Let me forget on my vacation."

He smiled through the tangle of his unkempt beard, an almost savage gleam of white teeth in the shadows. "I'll forget, won't I? I've forgotten so much already, you see." He crushed the credits in grimy fingers. "This, too. But . . . I thank you . . . and you'd better go. Beach-combers, even on Mars, aren't any more savory than the old kind on Earth, and I'd not have those others talking, Miss. I'll remember Nancy and I'll remember her friend; you forget Jeff Thorne, unless to point a moral to your students."

She smiled, holding out a hand, pink-palmed and clean. "Not that, Mr. Thorne. Goodbye."

Instinctively he met her grasp, using the hand which he clutched her money. For a moment he paused, then slowly let his hand drop back to his side.

"Not that way, either, Miss . . . Miss Thurland. Just goodby."

He watched her walk swiftly up the beach, a slender, graceful figure in the bright sunlight. Sleek and clean and decent, copper-tinted hair glittering about her small head until she put on her hat. She did not pause or look back. And then she was gone.

A fresh shadow fell across the sand. Thorne, breaking in upon his moody abstraction, turned with a start to face a tall Martian native who stood impassively watching him. A slim spear glittered and twinkled in the moving foliage above the man's grey-polled head.

A smile spread vacuously across Thorne's countenance, loosening his lean jaw and dulling his eyes. He held out the credits. "Look, Hanu! Money! We can send one of your young men now to the City. I shall have it again."

The Martian did not stir. From the thick grey mane of hair mantling his lean and apish countenance two great unblinking eyes stared disconcertingly at the be-draggled Earthman he had fed and sheltered this past year. The bony figure on its thin legs did not seem to breathe, so still he remained, and Thorne shambled forward in slow alarm, mumbling a question. The Martian evaded him with silken ease, but as he stepped aside his thin arm stretched out, prehensile fingers extended like claws. They struck the notes from Thorne's lax hand.

"Here! What the devil, Hanu?" Indignation stirred the returning lethargy gripping the derelict, and he came up with an angry jerk. The long fish-spear dropped, the razored blade resting across the fallen money as if to slice it in two. The Martian's voice was thin, but gravely dignified.

"No, Thorne. No man goes to the City."

"What the devil do you mean?"

HANU GROPED for words in the lingua franca which served the races for communication on all the inner worlds. He stroked thoughtfully at his thick Boer beard, pain in his great round eyes.

"You came here, friend Thorne, in great trouble. The devil-juice was in your blood and your friends had driven you forth as all who drink the t'ang must go. We are simple folk. My people were glad

of you, for we have been friendly to your Earthmen, and I have been glad, truly glad. You have been good and our friend, in spite of the t'ang. We have asked nothing of you."

"I know that," Thorne rapped impatiently. He edged nearer the fallen money. "I've had food, clothing, and shelter from your people. Perhaps I've even had friendship. I needed it. But why refuse me now?"

The Martian impaled a note on his spear and held it out to Thorne. His long-nosed face grew stern and the lean body tightened. "We refuse nothing, friend Thorne. You are no longer with us, or of us. Take up your money if you will, but go."

"Why?"

The great eyes swung up the beach, then back to the sagging beachcomber. The note fluttered from his blade. "A woman's money, friend Thorne. Not even t'ang can excuse beggary."

Thorne staggered back. Shuddering, icy nausea ripped through his worn frame. Clenching his fists, he turned his back on the tall Martian that his blinding shame might not be seen. A rustle of paper told him the native chieftain was gathering up the fallen currency. He did not turn. But a gentle poke from the spear-butt awoke him from his daze and he turned at last, to find his money presented at his breast upon the chief's blade. Slowly he took it, slowly tore it across and across, dropping it listlessly upon the sand.

"Where shall I go?" he asked, more of the empty air than of the grave Martian watching him so sadly. The native shook his grey-maned head.

"Where shall any t'anger go?" he replied. The sting of the epithet, although innocently meant by the generous Martian, twisted Thorne's sodden mind until he pounded his temples with a groan of empty pain.

"Where, indeed, good Hanu?" Almost he laughed, throwing wide his tattered arms in the remnants of the brave red International jacket. "To the north Vulhan City and the gutter, to the south your people and a greater contempt than theirs, for I have tried to be their friend. Oh, I know, Hanu! It's in your eyes. It's in mine, too. There for good and all. So

what's left but the sea again . . . and no petty fool to drag me forth to shame me even before you, the last of all my friends."

"I am your friend always, friend Thorne." The Martian's voice was gentle. "But you have come to the end. You know that now. But not in the sea."

"Where else?" Thorne sat down abruptly, his legs giving way beneath him. A haze was descending over his foggy mind and he pressed his temples again, burying his face in his hands. Hanu nodded to the left.

"The desert."

Thorne looked up, amazed. "That horror!"

"The desert is slow . . . but not unkind. There will be many things to think on as you walk." Hanu leaned on his spear, regarding the sunken wreck sitting before him. "Our old men go forth in the evening when they no longer care to live. Our wicked pass from us across the sand, for we do not kill. There is peace there . . . and rest. What else, we do not know. They never return."

A shudder passed over the beachcomber. Slowly he rose to his feet. "No," he admitted, staring with a grudging, affectionate admiration at the grey one. "You do not kill." Abruptly he offered his hand. "Before I go?"

Hanu smiled, pulling his whisker. "You will go? The woman is already gone and we will forget her like yesterday's tide, but we shall not forget the man who was with us that far-off day. We shall not forget." The pink-palmed, five-fingered hand clasped Thorne's. "Forget us not, friend Thorne."

"I won't, Hanu. Goodby . . . and thanks. It's all I can leave you, friend, but I know it counts, even from a space-rat like myself." Abruptly he wheeled and trudged away up the slope toward the higher trees back of the beach. He did not look back, even when Hanu's spear plunged into the sand twenty feet ahead and the grieving Martian wailed a piercing call of farewell.

Taking the gift, Thorne staggered wearily on. Trees rose and fell about him, rude, stubby giants with the fat, pulpy stems designed to catch and store the precious polar waters melting before the first summer sun. The ridge passed and the rolling, bushy foothills along the coast led him

endlessly down through the salt marshes where strange shapes moved and stirred at sight of the alien intruder. Then the arid hills beyond and, at last, cresting a bush-straggled rise, Thorne saw before him the first dun sweep of the vast inland deserts that have laid Mars waste and brought low a proud civilization.

He slept there that first night, hollowing a little scoop of reddish sand for his ragged hip and a mound for this neck. For a time, after the first quick darkness, he lay watching Mar's rolling moons wheel across the horizon, silvering all the desolation and shimmering into a clear, alien beauty the ruin time had brought.

Hanu, the chief, had been right. There were thoughts. But gradually the bitterness and ache of defeat sank away on a flood-tide of weariness and Thorne slept beneath the Martian moons.

AN INQUISITIVE sand-lizard, poking at his spear with its horny nose, awoke him before dawn. Not hungry enough to destroy the little monstrosity, Thorne shooed it away and scrambled up. There was a thirst inside him blurring his vision . . . but not for the water he was abandoning. Again, as so often in the recent past, he would have sold what remained of his soul for a bottle of the dreadful, numbing t'ang. But here one was as remote as the other. He gritted his teeth and moved slowly down the ridge toward the distant south.

Hour after hour plodded wearily on as the dull-eyed Earthling lurched in a slow, dreadful stride farther and farther into the blazing Martian desert. The hot sunlight glanced and blazed in glittering splendor from his keen spearblade, slung across his back with a strip torn from his ragged tunic. It scorched fiercely and persistently at the hat he had made from a withered desert plant's dun leaf. It burned the reddening sands to blister the man's half-bare soles through the torn pilot's boots. It crisped the thin atmosphere to nostril-tingling flame . . .

From time to time he came on bushes, tiny, low-squatting bushes with yellow pads for leaves and deadly stings for thorns. Their flesh was death. Twice he passed a thin-stalked t'ang bush, hiding in the lee of some crested dune, flaunting

its crimson and black fruit at the weary, shuddering traveler. There, too, was death. Thorne grinned. And what else but the slower death and decay brewed from these devil-berries drove him thus hopeless into the wastes to be at peace and die?

The second day he found a body. Perhaps one of the old men of Hanu's wise, grave tribe, setting out into the sunset like Ulysses to seek one last wonder before the long night overtook him. Perhaps a condemned man sent gravely forth to wander and seek repentance before suffering his natural penalty. Thorne could not tell. It was a skeleton by now. A polished spear lay across the arching ribs and the bony hands were clasped upon it in a strange gesture of resignation, as though the man had laid himself down at last to rest.

He found two more such skeletons before night. The spear of one lay through the broken ribs, and he shuddered. The man had not waited. Although his body, numbed and ravaged by the fires of t'ang, required little now to sustain its life, it was weakening fast and a deeper lethargy was creeping over him. He wondered when it would be that he, too, must lie down at last, folding his hands on his breast, and watch the sun go down or rise for the last time. Well, it would find him ready.

For Hanu had been right and all his tribesmen in their strange, funereal rites had known well what they had been about. The great, eternal waste of rolling sand and barren rock, the solemn passing of the ageless sun and silent moons had borne down upon Thorne until from their unhurried peace had been born a quieter peace within his breast. Hunger and thirst, numbed by the strain of the t'ang in his system, faded almost unnoticed into a lethargy. Even the screaming need of the drugging liquid which had tortured him at first was fading.

Soon there would be nothing left but the silent golden sun, the ruddy sands . . . and another quiet skeleton watching the brassy sky with dark, unseeing eyes of bone. Thorne cracked his tortured lips in a grin. At least it would not be in a gutter of Vulhan City or face down in the flooding Nergal tide, a shoaling hulk . . .

Slowly he moved on through the night. He had lost track of how many nights. It was cooler so. He watched Phobos rise

in cool splendor far across the sands, a thin black streak standing upright across her shining disk. For a moment he stared in dull, uncomprehending wonder, then bent his head and plodded quietly onward.

Why he walked he did not know, for he had long ceased to question this strange, ultimate Odyssey on which he had embarked. He only knew he must go on and on, the one unreasoning urge linking him to the old, proud heritage of the pioneers of trail and sea and space. And for such as he there was no turning back . . .

When he tripped upon a rotted balk of timber and pitched headlong to the sand he did not know. For a moment he lay there, unmoving. Then, with a sigh, he attempted to rise, but exhaustion swept over his relaxed body in a shuddering flood and he sank back, asleep almost before he touched the sand.

It was the growing heat of the sun that awakened him, well past mid-day. Dull, lack-lustre eyes opened and stared unseeing upward. Grimy, wasted hands twitched weakly upon the sand. A faint breath like a sigh crept between the cracked and swollen lips.

IT WAS minutes later, as he instinctively groped for his friend's spear to lay across his chest as had those others ere they died, that Thorne came to realize he could not see the sun. Hot, dusty radiations danced about over his head, and glimmering motes hung in the shadowy depths beyond his weakened vision, but somehow, faintly, the realization of shadow crept over his worn-out consciousness. With the realization came a slowly growing perception of light as he focused his eyes upon the tapering, unbelievable mass of the gigantic monolith looming over him.

Three thousand feet it leaped into the Martian sky, a ragged, broken tower of grey-white stone, turreted with fantastic decay, eroded and pitted by the storms and dust of twice ten thousand years.

He turned his head. Beyond it loomed another, only slightly less massive, but far more eroded. Here and there, standing in a rough semi-circle, other towers reared their broken heads into the brassy bowl of the sky, mere shattered heaps of dusty rubble.

Slowly Thorne sat up. He was huddled

at the base of the tallest monument atop a sloping pile of broken sand and shards drifting down from the decaying walls. Beneath him long gray shadows of what had once been piers crept out into a low, extensive basin of sand, broken here and there by heaped mounds jagged with age-greyed timber.

"Ships!" he whispered. "By all the Krue of Mars, ships!"

He dragged himself upright. A glance behind him showed him the futility of hope. The tremendous edifice at whose base he had fallen had ages since crumbled within itself until, collapsing inward, it had fused into one solid pillar of worn masonry and powdered sand. The others were even less preserved, but wrecked, shattered, decaying as they were, there remained about their hoary turrets a splendor so great he instinctively straightened his weary form. In the presence of so magnificent a declaration by man, he took on a new dignity worthy of their unyielding might.

HERE, THEN, lay one of those ancient citadels of a long-gone race, the ancestors of the silent, peaceful Martians of today. A teeming metropolis of the North, it had shrunk and perished with the death of the drying seas whose disappearance had all but ruined the once-green planet, leaving up the blowing sands its gigantic bones in grisly memory of what once had been. And here, among these empty monoliths, Thorne knew at last he had come to the end of the spaceman's trail. He would go no farther.

Well, for such as he it should not be unwelcome. He took his hand from the powdery wall and weakly shook his head. It was a tedious business, this dying.

What it was that drew him out of the shadow and down the slope he never knew. Perhaps it was the numb indifference of despair, perhaps only the last, momentary flicker of that indomitable curiosity which had drawn the Earthman adventuring across the world and now flings it light-years wide over the Solar System. It served, nevertheless, to draw him wearily down from the rubble beneath the gigantic tower into the low basin which had been the tight harbor of this long-gone city of Mars. Automatically he trudged onward,

to bring up presently before one of the low mounds dotting the harbor floor.

It had been a ship, he knew. What forgotten wood made up its mouldering bones to outlast the crumbling stone of its home port he did not know, nor greatly care. There had been so many great and wonderful things on Mars forgotten long since by the sad, wistful remnants of her dying peoples.

Lean, broken ribs thrust upward rudely through the golden sands, wooden-pegged planks still clinging forlornly to their splintered shafts. There had been metal, too . . . copper, bronze, iron bolts, and silver trim on the poop. All had long since been looted by the wandering desert tribes who wandered furtively through these tremendous monuments of their forgotten past.

From mound to mound Thorne trudged with a weary indifference. As well to die thus on his feet as face up in the sun. For die he must. Water there was none, and the only vegetation an occasional low death-bush with utter agony buried in its flat, leprous leaf-pads. A cluster of brilliant t'ang sprays glittered savagely in the shady lee of a shattered wreck, and Thorne shuddered.

Here, too, death crept in wait, a death already fastened fang-deep in his sodden, pain-wracked body from a score of dingy Vulhan t'ang-hells. But what odds? The death from those dark and crimson fruits was quick and terrible, perhaps, but only quicker than the fate already lying in his veins. Let there be an end, even to this aimless wandering.

Slowly Thorne walked up to the bush. There were many, growing in strange luxuriance along the dust-worn flanks of an ugly wreck half-buried in the sand. Other wrecks flanked it, three of them, lean, wicked skeletons of ancient Martian fighting ships, one with her broken prow yet buried in the freighter's bulging side. He touched the nearest plank and it drifted into powdered dust beneath his fingers, leaving a round hole in the grey wall. Again he put his hand through the ship's side. Another hole was puffed out as cleanly as by a dis-ray.

Curiosity stirred in him once more. Picking up a stone, he broke open the wreck's side, bring down the entire flank

in an almost soundless crash of powdering timbers and dissolving decks. The hold, pierced upon the farther side by the ram of the dead warship which had undoubtedly sunk the two of them, lay open to the sunlight, barred by the ragged shadows of the broken stern works.

"Jars," muttered Thorne. The hold had been packed to the deck with fat, yet not ungraceful clay jars eight feet high and three wide. He lurched through the opening he had made.

"Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," he mumbled. Maxfield Parrish jars, Oriental and sinister enough to have held a pair of the ancient robber band. He patted one, and weak though the blow was, the jar dissolved into drifting mist.

Thorne stared.

Preserving the graceful shape of the vanished jar, a beautiful block of some golden amber substance stood twinkling among its fellows. He pounded another jar. It, too, shuddered into misty dust, leaving its petrified contents, blazing like tawny fire in the Martian sun. Down the long row Thorne went, poking and kicking. Jar after par dissolved, leaving a shimmering stack of solid amber blocks shaped with inhuman perfection to the mound of the clay in which for countless forgotten centuries they had been petrifying beneath the dying seas and deserts. Incredibly hard and smoother than glass, their sleek flanks ripped and gleamed, shimmering in the bars of sunlight slanting down through the rotted deck. But other than these, the ship lay bare and lifeless.

"Frozen oil," mumbled Thorne, turning away at last. Even had he been able to melt and eat the stuff, the thought of prolonging life had become insupportable. Weakly he stumbled toward the broken wall he had pushed in to enter. Here there was naught for him, but beyond, in the shadows, lay the deadly t'ang and its berries. Well, it had begun this ghastly Odyssey and it was fitting it should end it in the only way it could be ended.

He groped in the shadows for his spear. Lifting it, he thrust a plank into drifting dissolution, clearing a way out. For a moment, staring at the sunlight beyond the opening, he did not see. Then his eyes were drawn to the blade of his spear

as it sagged in his lax grasp, for, resting on the sand within the ship's overcast, it gleamed with a strange radiance. White fire blazed intermittently along its wide, polished blade.

THORNE FROWNED. He lifted the blade. In the sunlight the light dancing on his spear became white-hot, intolerable. He thrust it back into the shadows where a broken bit of deck overhung the ruined hold. A shattering blaze of cold, blue-white light blasted along the hammered steel, casting its eery radiance upon Thorne's bearded, dusty face in a wild dance of light and dark. It gleamed madly in his mad, staring eyes. It shook like flame in his trembling hands, then fell like a shooting star upon the dusty sands as the weapon sagged from his relaxing grip. Slowly Thorne pivoted, his wild eyes fixed in awed amaze upon the rows and heaps of amber jars lying in such glowing luster among the fallen wreckage of the deck he had shattered. Sunlight ran and danced mockingly along their smooth flanks, sparkled and blazed with a fierce glow upon curve and highlight. He dropped his eyes to the fallen spear, blazing like a meteor in the dusk, half-buried in the sand, then lifted them again to the fabulous wealth lying before him.

"Vadirrian oil!" he whispered, choking.

Steel-hard, imperishable, the few fragments of the ancient oil of the Vadirrian tree which had been such a common article of commerce in the olden days commanded today a price so astronomical men were made wealthy for life through the discovery of a mere pinhead scrap or drifting grain. Radio-activated through the ages by the action of Mar's inner core, it had come to mean salvation in scores of the terrible new plagues introduced among the planets by the advent of space-travel. There were perhaps no more than six to eight ounces in the hospitals of the entire Universe at the present time, worth over three hundred and sixty billion credits. Here, in perfect condition, lay sixty tons.

He had come into the desert seeking death and the release it brought; he had found fortune inestimable. The irony of his plight brought a wry, bitter smile to his cracked lips, for, after all, he could hardly be said to have been cheated of his

earlier aim. Fortune or none, death sat grinning at him from the broken timbers of the ancient ship, gleaming from the petrified oil still in its original shape from jars now dust and less than dust. Without food or water, he stood already dead and nothing here in the shadows could save him from the inexorable end he had so persistently sought.

Thorne stumbled from the freighter and stood once more in the hot, bright Martian sunlight. The giant tower of the deserted city loomed behind him, but he did not look that way. He stared a moment at the blade of his spear, faintly gleaming even in this bright glare, then all around him at the rolling desolation which had once been the proud, rich harbor of the great city now mouldering in silence along the powdered quays behind him. There was no life.

Blindly he moved away, scuffing through the sand. The excitement of his find wore down and the gripping pangs of torment again seized and wrenched at him. Yet it was not with the same aimless shamble with which he had entered the sunken harbor bowl that he left it, but, instinctively, he found himself trying to follow his own plainly marked trail across the shallow sand hills. He might make it.

He did not, of course. Weakened and broken by his long, waterless march into the desert, sapped by his own excesses, he followed his trail for mile after mile until it blurred and spun before his eyes and melted at last into one blinding haze of flaming Martian heat. The trail vanished, though he did not know he had wandered from it. Presently he knew nothing but that, somehow, he must keep going on and on. Why, he could no longer remember, but the dim, instinctive urge was there and served to motivate him when he would have fallen to die with the others over whose mummies he more than once stumbled.

The hunger was the worst. The terrible ravages of t'ang had somewhat blunted his need for liquids, but he still could starve. Yet here and there upon his way he chanced on little bushes and clumps of plants, thick-leaved, leprous, yellow and blue and horrid purple, essence of poisonous death to all things Terrestrial or Martian.

Here and there, also, he encountered dried mummies or the skeletons of such weird Martian life as had succumbed to hunger and tasted the spiny death blooming across the desert sands. And there were t'ang bushes, heavy with the bright red and purple berries whose fermented juice had wrought him such deadly havoc. Thorne stared dully, conscious of the fitness of things which set these horrors blooming only in such fatal wastelands.

He moved on and on, his eyes aching to the ceaseless play and counterplay of mirages and kindred phantoms that swept the changing landscapes like magic lanterns. Again and again he found himself walking into the streets of a dead city, or perhaps one peopled by living beings. But even as his feet touched the cobbled walks the phantom dissolved and he plunged into a marsh that vanished as quickly when he bent to taste the water splashing about his torn feet. It was the final blow and he went down heavily and lay sprawled there on the powdery, dusty slope where no marsh had lain for ten thousand years.

A N HOUR LATER he wearily opened his eyes. The sun was lower, but the heat and pain had not lessened perceptibly. A hundred feet away a little copse of t'ang bushes flowered gracefully in thin sprays of twig and serried little fruit arching up and out like frozen fountains of death. Thick-leaved, monstrous cactus plants crouched in the scanty shade flung by the taller t'angs. Cruel rows of gleaming spines thrust outward belligerently, as though there were creatures even on waterless Mars mad enough to rend and tear their poisonous flesh for the pitiful moisture distilled from her lean breast. He grinned weakly and began crawling forward. Mirages, at least, need no longer haunt his wheeling brain.

He ate the plants. Stripping the t'ang bushes of their scarlet, bursting rows, he gobbled down the berries like peanuts. It no longer mattered that death salted the repast. But here, deep in the desert, the berries were dry and flat, insufficient for his need. Recklessly he tore open the broad-leaved plants at his feet, slicing and ripping their hideous flesh with his spear, and gulping great chunks of the dripping pulp as avidly as though he ate in silken

Kyra, the pleasure dome on Io. No plant escaped him.

He destroyed them all, eating what he would of their softer hearts. When he had wiped out the little group, he lurched onward to another, and another, sampling each and devouring many to their very roots. Although he had eaten enough pulped death to destroy a city, the counteraction of varying poisons neutralized each other for a while, but he could not go on forever.

Within an hour, as he stumbled on, revived for the moment by this foul repast, the pains struck him down as though by lightning, stiffening his weakened body from head to toe in a fiery spasm. A great ball of flame burst in his belly and spread scintillating all through his frame until he screamed aloud and made no sound in the doing, until he twitched and writhed no more, until he lay at last in the cooler shades of night . . . a limp, white thing across an ancient dune of Martian sand, one more thing for the quiet, dreaming desert to claim and softly fold away in her drifting dust with other remnants of the past.

BUT GEOFFREY THORNE was not of the past. That he was of the present, and not good, he became painfully aware some time later. There was a low humming, drumming roar in his ears, and the bed on which he lay vibrated softly. He did not open his eyes. Here was another mirage, and a cruel one. He had not thought to die dreaming of the old days when Geoffrey Thorne was among the great ones of the space-world. He lay in a rocket bunk—and the ship was in motion.

A hard, rough hand shook his shoulder. "Ye're awake, lad." The voice, like the hand, was hard, yet not unkind. It was strangely familiar and he opened his eyes. The grizzled face staring down at him broke into a short, choppy smile. "Easy lad, easy. Just lie still."

"Captain Fraser!" Thorne mumbled. "Joy Fraser . . . how . . . am I on your ship?"

"Sure, sure, Thorne." Fraser patted his shoulder. "Ye're on the *Moonfire*, an hour out of Vulhan City. I'll get ye to a hospital quick as I can."

"Hospital? What hospital? I feel—

ghaaaaa!" Thorne fell back heavily, gagging, as he remembered the incredible miscellany he had been gnawing just before it had struck him down in agony. Death-agony, he had thought, but yet—apparently . . .

"Ye're ghostly, lad," rumbled the long-faced Scotchman, pushing down the impatient derelict. "Were ye lost long in the sand?"

"I don't know. A long time . . . a long . . . time . . ." Thorne lay still for a while, his hand over his eyes.

There was a strange, puzzled look in Fraser's eyes as he watched the man who had once been his friend. Jeff Thorne had been among the best of five worlds, and now . . .

"Could I get ye anything, lad?" he asked, gently. The other shook his head.

"I feel all right," he said, finally. "Dead-tired, but all right."

"Pumped water into ye," Fraser grinned. "Soaked ye in it. Ye lay in ma bath near five hours, out and all. Does wonders up here."

"You must have worked miracles, Joy," acknowledged Thorne, wonderingly. "What did you do? I know I was dying."

The rocket captain looked down, flushing miserably. He picked at a fleck on his purple tunic.

"Well, lad, you know . . . we hear things in the trade. I knew . . . you drank t'ang. So I remembered I had a bottle. Stuff in the armory for trading, ye remember. You had half a glass."

Thorne smiled wryly. "Yes? Thanks, Fraser. You took a risk, dispensing the stuff without a permit, but the patient—" His eyes widened and he came suddenly to his elbow, disregarding Fraser's attempt to thrust him down in the bunk again. "Half a glass, you said?"

"Sure, lad. That's all." He looked anxiously at the bearded derelict. "Ye don't mean it was too much?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Thorne waved aside the other's troubled protest, his brows knitting. He had had more than that before, but even to stronger men than himself such a dose meant stunned, broken stupor that might well last from two to four days. Yet he felt nothing.

"Fraser, when you found me, where was I?"

"Out cold on a sand-hill, lad. O'Leary spotted you from the engine room as we sailed by. Ye had a Martian spear . . . and something else I want to talk to you about later."

Thorne did not catch the other's meaning, but pressed on. "There was no city near?"

"City!" Fraser stared. "Ye mean . . . oh, ye mean a deserted city, eh? No, there was no city. No cities in those parts to my knowledge. Mirage country, ye know, lad. One o' them?"

"Could you remember—were there plants near me—Martian desert plants like cactus—maybe t'ang bushes?"

"Can't say, Thorne. None right near ye, anyhow. Just clear sand. Why?"

"Could you find the spot again?"

"Sure. Right in the log. Aimin' to go back?"

"Perhaps . . . some day. But you don't understand, Joy. Those plants . . . I had been eating them."

Fraser started back in horror, coming to his feet as his stool clattered across the smooth steel floor. "But my Lord, man . . . them things is fatal! One nibble and ye're a cooked goose!"

"I know. I've seen men who died that way, and I wanted to go out as quickly. I couldn't take it any more. But I ate everything—all colors and all the tastes you could find in your foulest nightmares. I even ate the t'ang berries. Am I dead?"

"Lord knows why you ain't, lad!"

"I know I ate the things, Joy. But that's not what I meant. Perhaps the things counteracted themselves in me, I ate so many. I meant the t'ang."

"You—it didn't affect you!" Fraser eyed his patient in growing astonishment. There were no indications Thorne had sopped up a heavy dose of the lethal drug.

"No. I feel nothing. Just like I'd had a good sleep, though I'm still worn out and weak. Dead tired and hungry, but I have no thirst. And my craving for the stuff is classic, Joy."

"I've heard that, lad." Fraser shook his head, remembering the wild tales.

"I don't *want* a drink, Joy!"

THORNE STRUGGLED to a seat on the edge of the bunk, unshaven, his hair brush-wild, his eyes red and rheumy,

a derelict to the soles of his torn boots. Yet he did not want a drink, he whose passion had been drink, whose only joy and only thought had been drink until it had swept him from the heights to such depths that even a Martian refused longer to shelter him and sent him forth into the desert to find death.

"Maybe ye've just been numbed," suggested Fraser. "I gave ye half a glass, I told ye."

"It should have laid me out cold."

"Anyone else it would," returned Fraser, somewhat brutally. "You been lapping it up so thick you might be a little immune, ye know. I took the chance."

"It wouldn't have made any difference if I had been laid out another day or two, anyhow," Thorne returned, as brutally. "I might be getting a little thick. I could take more than I could at first. But I wanted it just as bad, or worse. Now I don't want it. Have you any left?"

"Most of the bottle."

"May I have a glass?"

Fraser snorted, his Scotch coming through almost visibly. "Don't want it, eh?" He pulled a squat, green bottle from the wall cabinet beside the bunk. "Just how big a glass, Mr. Thorne?"

"Full."

He filled the glass and handed it in stony silence to the ex-pilot. Thorne took it and looked into the turgid green depths. He smelled the sweet, cidery odor. He passed it to and fro under his nose. No reaction. Nothing.

"It's just water, Joy." He looked up at Fraser, wide-eyed, grinning.

"It's high-test Royal Seal," retorted the freighter captain. "It cost me plenty and you know it."

"Yes, but—to me—me, the biggest sot on Mars—it's just water! No taste, no smell, no nothing." He lifted the glass to his lips. There was a short pause. Slowly he lowered his hand, a glare of madness in his eyes. Fraser drew back, but, fascinated, made no effort to interfere.

"It's still . . . water, Joy. Water. Tastes like water, smells like water. The stuff doesn't affect me at all." He flung up his hand, gulping down the terrible t'ang like mad, spilling it down his stubby chin and staining his rags a dirtier color than before. Only when the last drop had

vanished did he lower the glass, and Fraser, watching in amazement, saw that no tinge of exhilaration swayed his patient. A thimblefull of the stuff would set off a jag in an ordinary man that made a whiskey-drunk look like an ice-cream festival. Thorne, saturated with the wicked juice, sat in quiet, deliberate possession of his every sense and faculty.

"I've had my drink, Joy. I didn't want it, except as I would want any drink when thirsty. I didn't taste a thing. I feel nothing." He stumbled erect, holding onto the upright of the bunk. "I'm tired, dead-tired. I could sleep a week. But I'm not drunk, Joy. I'm not drunk. I can't get drunk. Never again. I can't be poisoned. I'm saturated with poison. You'll have to shoot me to get rid of me, Joy."

"We don't want to get rid of you, Jeff." There were unaccustomed lines in the freighter captain's face and a softness which had not been there since he bade goodby to his children back on Earth five months ago. "We've hated to lose you. And now you're back again, you want us to shoot you!"

Their hands met and wrung hard together. "Welcome back!" It was a pleasant thing for the derelict Thorne to hear once more. But he knew.

"I can't come back, Joy, though I thank you. I'm a t'ang drinker and, as such, I lose all rights."

"You're cured, man! You've proved that. You're alive! The berries and leaves you ate destroyed your craving. We can prove it in any court of law, any space commission. Drink a barrel of the stuff in their faces."

"Perhaps I'm cured. I think so now, but there may be a relapse. Anyhow, cured or not, there's a strict law on the books and it isn't going to be lifted to allow me to return to Earth or any of the Lines. Too many aren't cured."

Fraser scowled. "You are. What about the others? Can't they—?"

"Do I know what I ate? The proportions? What went with what and how much? I was dizzy as a loon. All I really remember clearly is eating t'ang berries. Deadly poison. Can a cure be mixed with ingredients like that?"

Fraser was not daunted. "Perhaps you can't force the law, Thorne. But you do know what cured you. Work out a cure.

Get the botanists and biologists on it, man. Let them do the work, if it *is* your clue. Flying isn't the only thing in life, Jeff."

"Do I look like a fountain, to start research on the course, Joy?" Thorne surveyed his rags in a spotted mirror on the wall of the freighter's little surgery. "I look like the subject matter."

"You can do anything with money, lad."

"And do I look like money, Joy?"

"Not at present, of course. But when we reach Vulhan City, you can look as you like. Ye're wealthy, lad. Wealthier than Donaldson o' the Line."

"Which of us has been drinking the t'ang, Joy?"

"This is no dream, pipe or any other kind, Jeff." The captain held up a small, broken sliver of iridescent golden amber, clamped in a leaden grip, which he had taken from the cabinet as Thorne jeered. "I think you'll find it worth about one hundred and seventy thousand, lad. One hundred and seventy thousand. Think it over. Ye had it caught in your clothes when we found ye."

MARTINEAU, Captain of the Port at Vulhan City, snapped the inter-office switch in impatience. His voice cracked sharply. "I will not see Captain Thorne, Miss Gurn. You know that as well as I do! You hear?"

Miss Gurn's voice was tremulous, but determined. "I know, sir, but he insists on seeing you. It is—"

"Have Williams throw him out, Miss Gurn," snapped the Port Captain. "How in Karac's name did you let him in, anyway?"

"He says it is Government business, sir. He refuses to go. And Lieutenant Williams is not here."

"Government business?" Martineau glowered. "Then send him in. I'll deal with this t'anger myself." Snapping off the phone switch, he flipped another. The local Patrol Superintendent looked up at him in the screen. "Bannerman, could you step in a moment? I think Thorne's going to make trouble and I'm going to deal with him right here and now."

"Of course, Martineau. I've been expecting him." The big, white-haired officer heaved himself up and picked up his glittering helmet. "Be right in." The screen faded as Thorne was ushered in

by a wide-eyed Miss Gurn.

Trim and stiffly neat in the scarlet tunic and blue-black trousers of the International, Thorne stood coolly at attention, thin and worn but clean-shaven, scrubbed, and pressed. Gold sparkled on his close-fitting helmet and on the butts of his twin Blandars. Under one scarlet arm he carried a small black box.

"Well, Thorne," broke in Martineau as the other door opened to admit the bulk of the Patrol Superintendent. "Your business, please."

Thorne flushed, but did not move. He could not afford to resent discourtesies he had become so bitterly accustomed to receiving these past two years. He laid the box on the Port Captain's desk.

"This is to return to Earth at once, sir. It is extraordinarily valuable. I am requesting passage on the first battle rocket leaving Mars."

The Patrolman intervened quietly. "You know you cannot return to Earth, Captain Thorne."

"I know, sir. I request passage for this consignment only."

"What is it . . . t'ang?" Martineau asked, brutally, pushing roughly at the box.

A grim smile touched Thorne's dry lips. "No, sir. It is a little over an ounce of —petrified Vadirrian oil!"

Martineau leaped erect with a strangled cry, his face going crimson with anger. The Superintendent, having known what was in the box, made no sound but watched them with a grim smile.

"If this is a joke, you bush-bum," choked the Port Captain, "I'll see personally you suffer for it, Thorne. The hard way. You dare come here and—"

"It is not a joke, sir," broke in Bannerman, at last. "We have been notified of this strike. It is registered in our files and the specimen is entirely genuine. I recommend that Captain Thorne's request be fulfilled." His voice was crisp and clear.

Martineau sagged, staring at the little box. "But—but there's a fortune there, sir. Thousand on thousands—where did this—this man locate such a treasure? The Martian government has been notified?"

"All necessary steps have been taken, sir," Thorne smiled. "The declared value of this specimen is one hundred and eighty-

two thousand credits. Proper amounts have been forwarded to the Vulhan General Hospital, with others to Loxthal City, Andobre, Vlax, and New Luna. This is directed to the Universal Laboratories at New Yatt, North America, vested in the name of Miss Helen Thurland."

"You make no claim to accompanying it?"

"None, sir. I am cured of t'ang, but there is no known medical way to prove that to anyone's satisfaction but my own. I know the law and am willing to abide by it. I claim its protection in this matter."

"Fair enough, Captain Thorne," agreed Martineau, reluctantly, seating himself and poking gingerly at the fortune on his desk. "You have that right."

"You accept the shipment?"

"It shall be sent on the *Warhorse* next Thursday, by way of Luna. Here is your receipt and your insurance papers. Present them to the Starmail office next week and receive your arrival receipt. About the twentieth, I believe."

"What is the charge?"

Bannerman quietly intervened. "There is no charge. The Vadirrian is for the Universals, and as such travels light."

Thorne bowed stiffly, as Martians do, and stepped back. "I thank you, gentlemen. I know the Vadirrian is in good hands."

Bannerman heaved himself up. "Step into my office a moment, will you, Thorne? If the Captain will excuse us?" Martineau nodded, saluting sharply. There was no more talk of "bush-bums".

The Superintendent of Patrol, however, was not impressed. Seated at his own desk, he pinned Thorne with an eagle glare. "I don't ask for information, Captain Thorne, but I must request you to show cause why you should not be removed from Vulhan City as a t'anger and—uh—general undesirable."

"I am cured of the t'ang habit, sir. So far as medical authority here can go, they give me a clean bill of health. I have witnesses, pictures, papers."

BANNERMAN SNORTED. "If I take so much for granted, and, mark you, I have no right to assume that out of hundreds you alone have managed to cure yourself. Medics or no, I must still

ask what means of subsistence you have. We cannot tolerate relief cases here on Mars, Captain," he added, sternly.

A dull red flush stained Thorne's worn features. "I have never been on your rolls, sir."

"Granted. But can you keep off them? Do you have a job?"

"Who will hire me now?"

"Have you money?"

"All I possess lies on Captain Martineau's desk yonder, sir. When I found I had unwittingly carried off a scrap of the petrified oil in my torn boot, I felt I had no true right to it under the circumstances in which I made the discovery."

"Highly commendable," rasped Bannerman, rubbing his chin in exasperation. "Didn't you think it would leave you as flat as you have been the last year or so, man? What shall you live on? Will you go back to the natives, shaming us all?"

"They are good people, sir. I could do worse."

"You could, by hang! And have, sir! You have no hope of relocating the main bulk of this treasure?"

"None, sir. It was in the mirage country, you know, and I have nothing to search even plain and simple desert, let alone that weird district. Perhaps some day I may be able to push my claim and make up an expedition."

"And until that time . . ."

"With your permission, sir, I should like to write a letter to accompany the Vadirrian. Then . . . I shall go home."

"Home?"

"My . . . beach home, sir. I have considerable property fronting on the Nergal Sea, you know. As far as I care to walk," he added with some bitterness.

Bannerman shrugged. "Public property, Thorne. There are pens and paper there. I'll see your letter off with the box."

"Thank you, sir."

But, pen in hand, Thorne sat staring into space, nibbing thoughtfully at the tip. It was not easy. Finally, he began to write, slowly, awkwardly forming the letters he had not shaped for two years and more. But, presently, warming to the unaccustomed task, they came more easily and the pen scratched briskly in the silent office. Bannerman buried himself in his paper work, ignoring the visitor at the other table.

Dear Miss Thurland,

You will remember me, I think, even if only as a poor space-bum dragged by the heels from the Nergal Sea, on Mars, just outside Vulhan City. You were kind to give me money, twenty credits.

You may remember I told you the money would be for t'ang. It wasn't, however, nor has it been spent at all. You showed me what I was, Miss Thurland, and I didn't like the picture.

Notice of receipt will come to you, perhaps before this letter, that a parcel has been deposited in your name at the Foundation in New Yatt. It is the fortune I found in the desert. I know you would not accept such a gift from me, so please believe me I do not intend it as a gift, nor even as a payment for the credits you gave me. One cannot repay things like that, even with the parcel at the Foundation.

It is pure Vadirrian oil, petrified, valued at more than one hundred and eighty thousand credits. I am sure you realize how valuable, far more than in mere credits, this find can be. It will give new life to hundreds of stricken people suffering the strange disease we transmit between the planets with this new commerce.

You spoke of my ex-steward, Nancy Bertrand. We can do nothing for her now, buried on Io, but because you were her friend, I would ask you to set up the fund as a memorial to her, to train nurses and stewards for the space-runs and to insure that girls as fine as she are given the chance she made for herself to go out into the world and do work as important as hers. I know that is not too much to ask of you, Miss Thurland. Your own expenses for the transaction are included in the fund. Because I may not return to Earth, now or ever, I have taken the liberty of imposing this bequest on you, knowing that, as you loved Nancy, it will give you pleasure to insure her some fitting memorial.

Any reply will reach me if addressed to Captain B. Bannerman, Superintendent of Patrol, Vulhan City, Mars. Again, let me thank you. My life is worth little to myself or others, but you gave me back my self-respect.

I shall hope to see you again one day, should you visit beyond the moon.

Sincerely,
Geoffrey Thorne

AN HOUR or so later, Vulhan City only a dim glow of light in the evening sky behind him, Thorne was walking quietly along the beach.

There was someone waiting for him on the low headland beyond which lay his own particular cove where he had spent so much and so unworthily the time lying heavily on his hands.

The Martian, Hanu, his grizzled whiskers blowing about his wizened, elfish face stood alone, an armed man.

"I have returned, Hanu."

"It was not to return you left this cove," the Martian replied, sternly. His great round eyes were fixed on the other.

"My debt is paid, Hanu."

"Money will not repay. Can your gold buy back your honor, or ours?"

"I did not repay in gold, friend, but in the golden oil your ancestors left us all—the Vadirrian. I bought opportunity and happiness for many others with its price. For myself, you see me as I am. I have nothing else. I return as I left, a derelict."

A slow, wise smile crept over the Martian's wrinkled monkey-face. He pulled at his whiskers. Then he linked arms with the ex-pilot. "Come, friend Thorne. You have paid the debt. Let us go down to the village and see what the women have laid for the evening meal. We shall welcome you . . ."
