

the quality of mercy

by ... Robert F. Young

Men may stand as children before the most weighty event in human history. But on Mars in the days of its glory Orlinne stood as a man.

We have never before said of any story appearing in these pages that the writing itself, with all the elusive qualities inherent in its inmost texture, bore the unmistakable stamp of genius. It is a daring statement, and we hesitate to make it now. But this is certainly Robert Young's finest story, and so lyrically splendid have been his contributions in the past that we may perhaps be forgiven for feeling about him as we do, and for believing that the great pleasure he has given us will be widely shared.

THE ROMANTICS had been right after all. There had once been life on Mars, and the memorials of its splendor were buried deep in the rust red sands, and seemed to hover still like ghostly presences over dead cities and blue canals. There were dead sea bottoms too, and eroded hills, and there was even an atmosphere—deficient in oxygen content of course, but bearable enough if you *had* to breathe it.

One of the cities was better preserved than the others and it was in the middle of its central plaza that Captain Farrell had brought the life raft down. He stood now with his crew of two—Lieutenants Tanner and Binns—staring at the mysterious and exotic buildings that rose like pink cliffs into the cloudless purple sky, listening to the tinkling of the wind among the glass leaves of the crystal trees that lined the white stone streets.

After a century of hopes and dreams, Marsfall was a reality. An unpleasant reality.

The three men shivered in the raw wind. It had not been enough for them to go down in human history as the first Earthmen to reach Mars. Their fame would not stop there. They would also go down in history as the first Earthmen to die on Mars.

The life raft carried enough provisions for a week, and by careful rationing they could eke out their lives for a month. But a month was not nearly long enough. It would be many months, perhaps years, before the second ship arrived, and even if by some miracle it did arrive in time, there was no assurance that it would fare any better than had the first ship. There was a quality in the Martian atmosphere that was unkind to atomic drives, that precipitated wholesale disintegration of metal.

Presently the captain said: "Let's take a look around."

Tanner and Binns nodded and the three men started moving away from the raft. They walked unsteadily in the tenuous gravity, stumbling on the glacéed surface of the ancient plaza. Desolation was everywhere.

"Wonder what killed them," Tanner said.

"Probably they starved to death," the captain replied. "There isn't an ounce of topsoil on the whole planet."

"From the looks of the buildings they've been dead for centuries," Tanner mused.

"A good two thousand years," the captain agreed. "Even their bones have turned to dust."

"And blown away." Tanner shuddered in the wind, tightened the hood of his parka around his blunt face.

They came to one of the buildings and paused. Pink rubble choked its ornate entrance, and cracks and fissures zig-zagged up and down its elaborate facade. Its narrow windows were sad staring eyes.

"Ozymandias," the captain said.

Binns was standing beside him. "Beg pardon, sir?"

"Never mind. It's a poor analogy—from Shelley. I don't think it was like that with them."

They went on to the next building and it was the same. Crystal trees stood unconcernedly by in little square plots of listless soil, their quaint leaves sparkling like zircons in the wan afternoon sunlight, tinkling like glass chimes when the wind blew through them.

After a while they came to a structure much larger than the rest. It was fronted by towering marble columns and beyond the columns, at the top of a wide flight of marble steps, was a recessed entrance, free from obstructing rubble. They paused at the feet of the columns, staring at the lofty windows.

The captain started up the steps and Tanner followed. Binns held back. "Do you think it's safe, sir?" he asked.

The captain turned. A smile softened the line of his lips, briefly banished the years from his face. "Safe, Binns? Possibly not. But we're in a position where we can afford to take chances, don't you think?"

Binns' boyish face reddened. "I—I forgot," he said. "That was stupid of me, wasn't it? Forgetting that—"

"Come on!" Tanner said quickly. "We'll never find anything, standing here talking. There might be food in there."

Massive portals confronted them when they reached the entrance, but they creaked open when Tanner applied his heavy shoulders. They stepped into a large vestibule. The dust of centuries covered everything, walls, floor, ceiling. There was a recess in the wall to the right of the door and a small statuette stood upon its single shelf. Otherwise the vestibule was empty.

"Looks almost like a church," Tanner said.

"Maybe it is," said Binns. "They must have had some kind of religion."

The captain stepped over to the recess. Shadows filled it, half-hiding the lonely statuette. He moved closer, straining his eyes in the gloom. Then, wonderingly, he reached in and lifted the statuette from the shelf.

He examined it closely. It was exquisitely sculptured from an Earth-like granitic and its subject was so familiar that for a moment the incongruity of his finding it thirty-five million miles from home didn't occur to him. When it did occur to him he was speechless.

There was a superimposed alienage in the design of course, and there was an unusual quantity of detail. But there was no mistaking, that uniquely human implement of torture, and there was no mistaking the tortured figure nailed upon it: the pain-racked body, the thin suffering face, the dark haunting eyes, compassionate even in death.

The statuette was a crucifix.

"But *we* don't know, sir," Binns said. "They *could* have had Christ."

The captain shook his head. He had never been a religious man, but there were some things he knew were true. "There was only one Christ," he said.

"But how—"

"I don't know. Perhaps we'll find out." The captain returned the statuette to the shelf, setting it carefully in the small dust-free area where it had reposed for two thousand years. Then he walked across the vestibule to the inner doors. Tanner and Binns followed.

The doors opened at the captain's touch and the three Earthmen entered an enormous chamber. Far above them was a great prismatic dome through which the weak sunlight filtered its a wan rainbow light.

Below the dome were curved stately walls enhanced by three dimensional murals. Circular benches, regularly interspersed by radiating aisles, covered the floor, encompassing a central dais upon which was mounted a twelve-foot sculptured cross with a life-size sculptured figure nailed upon it.

The captain recovered from his inertia first and began walking slowly down the nearest aisle. After a moment, Binns moved after him, and then Tanner. At the base of the dais the captain stopped. Before him, on a marble lectern, lay a thin metallic volume. He touched it with trembling fingers. Tentatively he raised the cover, exposing three paper-thin metallic sheets stamped with tiny characters.

"Binns," he said, breaking the silence that had reigned for two thousand years, "you're the linguist. Come here."

Binns came forward diffidently, leaned over the ancient volume. "I can't make any of the characters out, sir," he said. "The light's too dim."

The captain felt in his pockets, and produced a torch. He flicked it on. He heard Binns gasp. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Why—why it's incredible, sir! I can't believe it!"

"What's incredible? What can't you believe?"

"The book, sir. This Martian book. It's written in Aramaic."

The silence that had reigned for two thousand years reigned again. Binns' face was white in the unsteady light of the captain's torch and Tanner had become an ungainly statue. The immobile figures in the concave murals gazed mutely out at the scene, unaware that for the first time in millennia it had changed.

And then the silence rolled back again, grudgingly making room for the captain's voice: "Read it, Binns."

"But, sir, do you think we ought to? I mean, isn't it kind of sacrilegious even to *be* here?"

"I think it's appropriate for us to be here. Churches are built to help men die. Even Martian churches."

The statue of Tanner quivered, came to life. "Sir, I don't think—"

"I think you're both afraid," the captain said. "I think you're both afraid that we'll discover something here that will make it harder for us to die." He looked up at the silent figure on the cross, at the haggard face and the pain-filled eyes. "There's nothing here to be afraid of," he went on softly. "Absolutely nothing ...Read it, Binns."

"Yes, sir." Binns bent over the metallic sheets.

"The Scripture of Saint Orlinne:

"On the sixty-third day we commenced orbital descent and established Duide's hypothesis that Earth skies are blue. The land rose up, deeply green, and vast seas, green too, but of a paler green than the land. We remained in the upper atmosphere until the scanners had located the center of the civilized sector, then we descended to within tele-view distance of the cities.

The main city, situated on a mountainous peninsula that jutted into a small sea, told us all we needed to know concerning the ruling race. The architecture betrayed the builders, as it invariably does. It was ponderous in this instance, and heavily ostentatious, with incongruous touches here and there of simple beauty which in turn betrayed the influence of another race, greater, though obviously less proficient in the art of war, than the race in power.

"I consulted with M'naith and Preith as to the advisability of conducting our pre-invasion study on the peninsula. We concurred unanimously that such a procedure would involve useless risk, and that the information we required could be garnered in any of the nearby occupied countries. We chose an extremely primitive one at the eastern end of the elongated sea and waited for the pre-dawn belt to cross it. When this transpired we landed cautiously within convenient distance of a small white city.

"We concealed our ship in a deep ravine and at dawn we set out for the city. It was a land of rocky hillsides. The soil was barren, as barren almost as the soil of our native planet. Primitive stone dwellings were scattered among the hills, and on the road primitive people rode or led

fantastic double

humped beasts of burden. We attracted little attention. Our simple robes and sandals approximated the prevailing dress of the natives, and though most of the men wore beards, there were a few who did not—enough to save our own smooth faces from being conspicuous.

"Physically, of course, there was very little difference between us and the Earthmen. As Therin has pointed out in his third law of intelligence: 'Given an ecology fundamentally the same, there can be no racial variation in the physical structure of intelligent beings, regardless of the distance that separates their planetary habitats'.

"The morning light grew stronger around us and traffic increased on the dusty road. We moved as rapidly as we could but nevertheless our pace was slow. The heat was oppressive after the coolness of our own land, and the stronger gravity, despite our conditioning, dragged at our sandaled feet. The sun, tremendous to our alien eyes, rose blindingly into the amazing blue of the sky, and the city shimmered like an enchanted dhu in the distance.

"Half the morning had passed before we arrived at the walls. M'naith had his concealed micro-camera in operation by then, and Preith had begun to record the conversation of the people around us for a later analysis of the language. We reconnoitered at the base of a small hill, discussing the obvious technological immaturity of the simple culture we had chosen for our study, all of us agreeing that unless the race in power was on a vastly higher technological level, invasion could begin at once.

"As we stood there a column of people began to emerge from the city.

"In the vanguard were a number of men mounted on handsome four-legged animals. They wore crude metal breastplates, and crested metal helmets adorned their heads. Barbaric sandals were laced halfway up their naked calfs. Their faces held a suggestion of nobility, but the nobility was marred by arrogance, contorted by brutality. They were laughing and talking in hoarse voices, sometimes slapping their muscular thighs to accentuate their amusement.

"We realized immediately that they were warriors from the kingdom on the distant peninsula.

"Behind them were others like them, but these were walking. And in their midst another walked, or tried to walk—a man in a scarlet robe, a man wearing a crown of thorns, a man overburdened by the weight of a huge wooden cross, a man racked with pain, marked with the bruises and lacerations of a recent scourging . . ."

Silence shouldered back into the chamber as Binns paused. The rainbow light from the dome lay softly on the sculptured figure on the huge granite cross, bathed the anguished face in gentle radiance as though trying to alleviate its pain.

The captain's voice was hoarse: "Go on, Binns."

"Sir, do you realize what we've found? Why, it's unbelievable! It's—"

"I said, 'Go on!'"

"Yes, sir."

"As we watched the overburdened man faltered and fell. Immediately the nearest warrior turned upon him and began to beat his shoulders and back with a barbed whip. A huge crowd of men and women had followed the column from the city. Some of them cheered the brutal warrior, some of them stood by indifferently. A few of them stared at the ground, their faces white, and a very few of them wept.

"The man managed to gain his feet and tried to shoulder the cross. He went a few more steps, then staggered and fell again. The merciless lashing was resumed. None of us spoke. I could see Preith's delicate face writhing in agony with each descent of the whip, and I could see the horror in his eyes. M'naith's features were impassive, but knowing his gentle nature, his empathy and kindness, I knew the chaos of his thoughts.

"And I knew the chaos of my own thoughts; I knew my helpless rage. Involuntarily I moved closet to the stricken man, forcing my way through the crowd. And then, for the first time, I saw

the man's eyes. I saw the suffering in them, and saw the pain, and behind the suffering and the pain, shining like gentle light out of the darkness of his torture, I saw the pity—

"The pity for the child-men who were maltreating him.

"I stepped back then, shocked, for I had not expected to find emotional maturity in so youthful a civilization. Certainly not an emotional maturity so deep and penetrating that it made my own seem petty and contemptible by contrast. Suddenly I saw myself and my surroundings in a new perspective. I saw myself standing there in a crowd of children, a child myself, less vindictive perhaps, but no less cruel than the other children.

"My inhumanity was refined and carefully rationalized, but it was no better than the inhumanity of the warriors and the crowd. In a way it was far worse, for I was an integral part of a complex operation the object of which was to rob an entire people of their birthplace.

Finally even the warrior with the lash realized that the condemned man was physically unable to carry the cross and he impressed a man in the crowd to bear it. The column began ascending the small hill, stopping without the walls of the city. Preith, M'naith and myself fell in behind it with the rest of the people, and I noticed for the first time that there were two other men bearing crosses. But these were totally unlike the first man. They were big, insensitive, brutal—and there was nothing but the fear of death in their eyes.

"At the summit of the hill the column came to a halt.

"I am not qualified to record the scene that followed. There is a magnificence shining through it that is far too transcendent for a man as simple as myself to put into words, especially alien words. I am, not qualified to record it but I must record it, for if there be a particular task for each human to perform during his life span, surely the task of writing the first Martian scripture is mine.

"The two insensitive men were tied to their crosses and their crosses were raised against the sky. He who had fallen was divested of his scarlet robe and his hands were nailed to the wooden arms and his feet were nailed to the wooden shaft and a placard was hung about his neck; and his cross was raised against a sky from which the blue had fled.

"The warriors took his robe and spread it upon the ground and began to cast white cubes upon it. A silence settled over the land, broken only by the rattling of the cubes, the coarse laughter of the warriors and the weeping of women. Three of the women stood a little apart from the rest, looking up at the drawn gray face above them, and in their misted eyes there was a love so vast that it radiated from them, enveloping the agonized figure on the cross in a gentle, almost perceptible aura.

"None of us spoke, neither Preith nor M'naith nor myself. We stood there silently on the hilltop, our mission forgotten, each of us nailed upon his own cross, staring up into the face that was dying against the lowering sky.

"Time passed. A wind came up, a desert wind, but cold, and swept across the land.

"He cried out once in a feeble voice. One of the warriors glanced up, then, laughing, affixed a sponge to a pole, wetted it from an earthen container, and held it aloft. The pain on the face deepened as the lips touched the liquid, and the thin body writhed. The warrior laughed louder, and his companions joined in, but their laughter was a small sound in the vastness of the darkening day.

"I looked up into his eyes, marveling at the compassion that still shone from their depths, and suddenly he saw me. He saw me and he knew me instantly: knew me for what I was, for what I stood for; recognized me as a member of a race that was dying and that was too emotionally immature to confront the reality of death.

"And his eyes filled with pity: pity for me, pity for my race; pity for all peoples who go through life as children, whose psychological growth lags far behind their physical and technological maturity. Shame overcame me then, and suddenly I understood the meaning of an ancient idea, an idea which we have neglected for so long that we have nearly forgotten its existence—the idea of humility ...

"Presently his eyes left mine and moved over the crowd and over the city at the base of the hill; and his lips quivered and words came, words that had no meaning to me then because I did not understand the language in which they were spoken, words that had no meaning to the barbaric Earth people either, for although they understood the language in which the words were spoken, they were too immature to understand their concept.

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

"His head dropped upon his breast. There was a sound of thunder in the distance—"

"Let's get out of here!" Tanner said. "Martian scripture isn't going to help us, even if it is written in coined Greek, even if it does have the same theme as our own. We should be looking for food!"

"I'm afraid that this is the only food we're going to find on Mars," the captain said. "And in the last analysis it's the kind we need most." The hoarseness had left his voice and his torch had steadied. "Read the rest of it, Binns," he said.

"There isn't much more, sir—"

"—and the approaching storm cast a sickly shadow over the land.

"On the hilltop all was motionless. The crosses, with their anguished bodies, the warriors, frozen in the midst of their game, the awed crowd, the three weeping women; M'naith, Preith and myself. There was a sense of waiting, of expectation.

"Abruptly, a great bolt of lightning cleft the sky like a macrocosmic sword. Its thunder crashed and the rain began. It was a cold rain, falling slowly at first, then coming down in huge drops, the rising wind catching them and throwing them in blinding sheets against the hillside. The crowd began to disperse, hurrying toward the city like frightened tli.

"M'naith and Preith took my arms and led me away, for I could not see. The rain was in my eyes, but there were tears in them also, and as I cried the last vestiges of my childhood fell away.

"I became the first Martian capable of facing the extinction of the Martian race . . .

"I write this now in the ship during Earth-Mars trajectory, using the language spoken by him who died upon the cross. It is appropriate that this should be so, and that is why I would not leave Earth till I had mastered both the written and spoken dialect of the district where the crucifixion took place. As I write, Preith and M'naith are at my side, approving of every word I set down, approving, too, of my decision to return to our planet and spread the gospel that I divined on Golgotha.

"We shall never conquer Earth. We do not have the right. Our race is an old race, yet it has never produced a single mature individual. It has built prodigiously of sticks and stones, but its structures of the mind are stunted affairs, scarcely worth a second glance. It lacks the ideology which a race needs to justify its continued existence.

"It is true, as Therin states in 'Land and Man,' that 'the longevity of a race is commensurable to the longevity of its native planet.' If it is to have a greater longevity it must be worthy of it. Our race is not.

"We have lived out our years. We have known this truth for centuries but we have refused to face it. We have evaded it by developing one hopeless soil stimulant after another, by building space ships, by planning the conquest of our nearest planetary neighbor. But we can evade it no longer. Maturity encompasses many things, but most of all it encompasses mercy. In the final analysis, it is mercy. And if we consider ourselves a mature race, then we must comport ourselves like mature people.

"This was the insight I divined on Golgotha, and this is the gospel I shall spread, with Preith's and M'naith's assistance, upon my return. It will not be difficult, for the entire incident is recorded on M'naith's microfilm and Preith's tapes. One need merely look into the crucified man's eyes to know that the time has come for Earth to live and the time has come for Mars to die

"With quiet dignity . . ."

The three Earthmen stood silently in the Martian cathedral. Above them loomed the huge crucifix, and around them the empty benches curved. Dust motes iridesced like microcosmic suns in the rainbow light of the dome.

Binns spoke first. "You were right, sir," he said to the captain. "They didn't have a Christ . . . But they needed one."

"And they found one," the captain said. "They found ours. That's something we never did. They interpreted him differently, of course, but that was because they were an alien race, a relatively mature race. They worshipped him as men. We worship him as children."

"Sounds like a gruesome religion to me," Tanner said. "Let's get out of here!"

The captain looked at him. Then he raised his eyes to the immobile face on the cross. "All right," he said finally. "We really don't belong here after all."

They walked up the aisle in the deep dead silence. The rainbow light was paler now, and they knew that the long Martian afternoon had nearly ended. The captain paused before the mural nearest the entrance, gazing at the ancient lifelike figures. Tanner and Binns joined him.

The mural showed an old man in a white robe standing on an eroded hill. To his right was an oval screen depicting the crucifixion. People covered the slopes of the hill, their faces rapt as they stared at the screen. They were unquestionably Martians, but except for an intangible alienage of feature they could have passed for Caucasian anywhere on Earth.

Beneath the mural was an inscription etched into the marble wall. The captain pointed to it with his torch. "Can you read it, Binns?" he asked.

Binns leaned forward. "Yes, sir," he said presently. "It's in Aramaic too. 'Saint Orlinne teaching the New Maturity.'"

"What in hell difference does it make!" Tanner shouted suddenly, "So they died! So what?"

"I was just wondering how they did it," the captain said softly, "We're going to need to know." Outside the pallor of late afternoon filled the plaza. Tanner built a fire in the lee of the life raft and the three of them sat around it while the stars came brightly out. The wind sprang up in the streets and played sad songs in the crystal trees.

After a while Tanner got up and entered the life raft. He returned with a bottle. "I've been saving this for a long time," he said.

The captain got up and walked around the fire. He took the bottle out of Tanner's hands and threw it into the darkness. There was a lonely sound of glass shattering. The captain returned to his place by the fire and sat down.

"We too shall die with quiet dignity," he said.