

# FUTURE

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Robert W. Lowndes

Editor

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# a BIG MAN with the girls

Jealousy can sometimes lead to very important discoveries!

by James MacCreigh  
& Judith Merrill



(illustration by Luroo)

**B**ART MANDELL was not, really, a jealous man; he'd been around enough to know it didn't pay. But he'd been around enough, too, to understand Sally.

She was a sweet kid: pretty as a sweet-pea from the neck up, and absolutely terrific all the way down. Faithful, and loyal, and loving, too. But a party girl, always on the move, fast on her feet and quick with a quip. Not the sitting-home type at all.

Which explains why Bart decided that two hours' sleep would have to do him.

He hadn't seen Sally for forty-eight hours—not since the search began;

that was just about twenty-eight hours too long, and the last time he called she'd sounded pretty much indifferent to whether she ever saw him again. He had eight hours and that was all, before he had to go back out with the search-party again. So he caught a fast, couple of hours of sacktime, washed the sleep out of his system in the sharp spray of the shower, and started down to her house.

The street was lit up like a carnival. It was crazy; here the whole Army was on twenty-four hour duty, with the National Guard working alongside, and the cops out, too. The city—the whole world, maybe—was in danger,

and folks who weren't actually out hunting were having themselves a time. He couldn't figure out where the stuff had come from so quickly, but every store along the street had souvenirs and gadgets for sale; maps of Mars, toy rocket ships, and mechanical Martians with green skin and red eyes. Kids were peddling illustrated reprints of the government White Paper on Mars. The bars were full, and even the ice-cream parlors were doing a land-office business.

And all the time, out there in the woods, grim parties of sleepless men were beating the bushes for some sign of the invader.

Bart strode angrily down the street, pushing his way past the meandering groups. His uniform gave him right-of-way, fortunately for the revelers.

He was almost at the side-street where Sally lived, when he realized he had forgotten the flowers.

There was no florist nearby. He stopped at a hastily-constructed sidewalk stand, picked out the biggest and fanciest of the toy rockets, sourly paid three times what it was worth, and turned off to Sally's.

He had to wait at the door just a minute too long when he rang. Then she opened up, and he found out why—she had an apron on, and the house was full of the nicest smell in the world, french fries frying. She stayed in his arms just long enough for him to work himself up to the kind of kiss he really wanted to give her, then she pulled away.

"The potatoes!" She turned and ran out to the kitchen, bronze curls bobbing as she ran. Bart closed his mouth, stopped gasping, and followed her, just in time to see her slide two inches of steak into the broiler.

"You are," he said, watching her, "beyond any possible doubt, the most wonderful woman on any planet, let alone on Earth."

The corners of her mouth tilted, and she caught her lower lip with her teeth just in time to stop a full-fledged smile. Bart watched the even white

edges press down on the full redness of the lip, and decided he wasn't very hungry after all.

"Oh," he remembered, "I brought you a present." He went back to the entry, and got the package he'd dropped to get his arms free when she opened the door.

She unwrapped it while the steak sizzled and the potatoes crisped. "Why, that's sweet," she said, but Bart failed to note much enthusiasm.

"Look." He showed her how the nose unscrewed, and then set the hollow metal tube down on its rocket nozzles on the kitchen table. "You use it for a vase," he explained. "You can put flowers in."

"How cute! Listen, why don't you take it in and put it on the table? Take the jonquills out of the green pitcher and put them in here."

He felt a little better "Sure thing," he said. He didn't even try to kiss her on the way out.

**T**HE TABLE looked wonderful, set just for two, in front of the fireplace. Bart whistled while he transferred flowers and water to the shiny souvenir rocket, and placed it carefully off-center on the table. He didn't want it getting in the way of the view. He stood back to survey the effect, and saw that the fire was laid, ready to be lit.

Nice touch. He walked around the table, knelt down, and scratched a match on the hearthstones, then stopped, staring, while the match flared in his fingers.

He dropped the match. So that was why she hadn't gone into rhapsodies over his present!

The rocket on the hearth was a good two feet tall—almost twice as big as his—and a really beautiful job. Shiny, silver-colored metal, not cast, but seamed along the sides...even a miniature air-lock standing open. Bart leaned closer, and saw that the surface was not as new and shiny as it had looked at first; it was scarred and dented in spots. But it was a

beautiful job He glowered at the hunk of tin he'd brought.

*Who...?*

Bart ran through a quick review of the men he knew Sally knew, but none of them were quite the rocket-buying type. Seemed like there was some new competition in the field.

He touched the gleaming toy; it was warm.

Bart struck another match savagely, and lit the fire, then jumped up and paced over to the window. He stared out gloomily. Some joker had been there all afternoon—most likely, had brought Sally the rocket. He turned on his heel, and started back to the kitchen. Even an unjealous man could be pushed too far.

Sally saved him from the biggest mistake he could have made. The minute he showed his face in the kitchen door, she shoved a tray at him, smiled enchantingly, and said, "Take it in there, will you?" He carried the laden tray back to the other room, and cooled down on the way.

Bart Mandell, after all, was not *really* a jealous man. And he certainly knew better than to make a scene because some other character came visiting.

**I**T TOOK a little while to get back in the mood, but the salad was good, and the steak was better. Sally sat across the table, smiling and sparkling. The fire flickered, then roared, then settled down to a cheerful dance of flame and smoke and sparks. The shadows deepened, and the other man's present was not so obstrusive any more.

Bart helped her with the dishes. It was one of the things he'd learned, hither and yon. Nothing less likely to make a girl answer kindly next time you call up, than if her most recent memory of you is the dirty dishes you left behind. They stood close together in the bright kitchen, and when they went back to the living room, there was peace and intimacy between them.

Except, that is, when Bart decided

it was time to ask a casual question.

He added some wood to the fire, and before he stood up again, he said, "Nice gadget you've got there," pointing to the rocket on the hearth.

"Hmm-mh. Come sit down."

"Something new?" He was very off-hand.

"Hmm-mh."

"Haven't seen anything like it anywhere," he pursued, though he knew she was stiffening up.

"Most likely not," she said briskly; "do you want the radio on?"

That settled that. It was another man, or she would have told him.

"Sure," he agreed. "But wouldn't you rather go out? I thought we might take in a show." It was the last thing in the world he'd thought of. All he wanted right now was to sit in the dim room with Sally as close to him as she'd get.

"I don't know," she said. "Why don't we just stick around here? You must be worn out."

She was a sweet kid. Bart relaxed. After all, the other guy was gone; he, Bart, had the center of the stage now, and he might as well make use of it while it lasted.

"Not so bad," he told her. "I felt knocked out before, but something around here seems to be good for me."

"The steak maybe?" she teased.

"Could be." He fiddled with knobs on the radio, flicked past the news he wanted to hear, and found some music. "Like that?" He turned and held out his arms. She floated into them, and for a half an hour he forgot about the search, the Army, the Martian, and everything else.

Then the music gave way to news again, and Bart went to change the station, but Sally passed another miracle. "Leave it, why don't you?" she said. "Don't you want to hear?"

He did, but he *knew* she never did. She sure was working overtime tonight to keep him happy. Guilty conscience, maybe. He flicked the thought away almost quickly enough.

"...latest opinion from authorita-

tive sources," the commentator said breathlessly, "is that the Martian invader space ship must have landed under cover of the dark, before the search began. One officer at the search headquarters believes that the Martian disembarked and sent his ship back into the sky on automatic controls while he is reconnoitering our defenses. The search for the Martian is spreading throughout this area. Civilian volunteers are being called on now to assist the armed forces, fire and police departments, already engaged in an intensive dragnet search.

"To summarize: there has been no trace of the Martian spaceship since it stopped broadcasting, and RDF installations lost it fifty-six hours ago. They have never been detected by radar. Government heads of all countries are conferring today on an island in the Pacific, formulating a world-wide cooperative policy in case of hostile activity on the part of the Martian. The search in this area, where the alien ship is believed to have put down, is being intensified.

"Stay tuned for further news..."

**T**HE MUSIC came on again, but Sally didn't want to dance. She turned to Bart with a frown furrowing her lovely forehead. "I just don't understand it, Bart. I thought the Martians were supposed to be so friendly just like us, and all."

"That's what we all thought from the first radio messages," he told her. "Maybe they are; who knows? It's just that everybody got scared when they stopped broadcasting and the radar couldn't pick them up. That means they've got some kind of a screen that can stop us from tracking them, and naturally we don't like that. So we want to find out where they—I mean *he*—landed. That's all. Nothing to worry about really."

There was plenty to worry about. The Martians were too smart; that's what it came down to. Two years of communication with them...but they

were the ones that started it; they were the ones who learned Earth languages, first English, then Russian; they were the ones who could build a spaceship to come and visit.

From their own descriptions they sounded just like human beings. But they were too smart; they could have figured out what people looked like, and just said they were that way. They could have...oh, anything.

There was no sense in getting wrought up about it, and there was certainly no sense in getting Sally worried. In two more hours he'd have to leave and go out hunting Martians again; that was enough for him to do. Meanwhile, he was going to relax.

"Come on, honey." Bart slid an arm around her waist, and moved his feet in time to the music, not really dancing, just doing enough to give him an excuse to hang onto her. "You stick to the steaks, and let Old Uncle Bart chase Martians. It'll work out better that way."

She smiled up at him, and he stopped pretending to be dancing.

It was a superior sort of kiss, but after only a very short eternity, Sally broke and stayed that way. They wound up in separate chairs in front of the fireplace, watching the flame-pictures, and Bart decided it was probably the next-best thing. It was quiet and peaceful, and as long as he stayed at arm's length Sally was very sweet.

Once or twice he almost went to sleep, but he kept himself awake trying to figure out what had got into his girl. She didn't want to go out. She didn't want to dance; she listened to the news; she asked serious questions.

He added it all up, and the answer was too good to be true. When he had to leave at eleven-thirty, he wandered off down the street in a happy daze. Could Sally, the party girl, the on-again, off-again girl—could Sally have made up her mind? She sure was acting like a lady with honorable intentions. Bart smirked and smiled, and

somehow found his way back to the barracks.

He really *wasn't* a jealous man, because he'd already forgotten about the model rocket on the hearth and the other guy who got there first with the most.

**T**HEY WENT back to the woods at midnight, a truckful of weary G. I.'s, none of them caring much whether they ever got to see a Martian. They were dropped at a godforsaken spot in the wilderness, completely unidentifiable in the dark, and given the coordinates to aim for. For three hours they beat through the bush, cross-country, to the next highway, where they met another truckful of men coming out of the dim stretches on the other side of the road, just as discouraged as they were.

Somebody passed out coffee and doughnuts; they had fifteen minutes to sit around and wish the coffee was hot. Then they all got loaded in a couple of different trucks. They were driven about a mile further down the road, then dumped out and ordered back through the woods again. In the greyest dawn on record, they fought their way through the tangled undergrowth toward the road they'd started on. Nothing happened except twigs snapping in their faces, brambles scratching their hands, and roots tripping them up. They met no living creatures more alien or dangerous than a million murderous mosquitoes. When they came out on the highway the bag was still empty.

Captain Connors was waiting with the trucks, his face grey. While he conferred with the non-coms, Bart edged closer to listen. A sergeant was saying, "He got away clean, Cap'n. If there was anything bigger than a chipmunk in these woods we'd've found it."

The captain shook his head. "The Martian couldn't get away," he said worriedly. "He's still in this area. Got to be. If we can't find him, there's

only one answer; somebody's hiding him."

The first sergeant grunted in a shocked tone. "Hiding him? What kind of a rat would hide a monster like that?"

"He might not be a monster; he might be quite good-looking."

"He's a Martian, ain't he?" the first sergeant grumbled.

Bart didn't hear the captain's answer, because just then the order came to mount the trucks and the noise drowned it out. But it is doubtful that he would have heard anyhow...

**S**ALLY WASN'T expecting company.

She was wearing a printed wrap-around sort of dress, and a bright colored scarf on her head. Peeping out from the edges of the scarf, Bart could see a few tightly bobby-pinned loops of lovely bronze-colored hair. She had no makeup on; she must have thought it was the laundryman at the door.

The funny part was it didn't make a bit of difference, Bart thought. She took his breath away just as thoroughly as she did when the glamour aids were intact.

"Hi," he said weakly. "We just got in from patrol. I thought maybe you'd give a soldier a cup of coffee." He almost added, "Or you could marry me instead." But there was a little matter to be cleared up first.

"You could have called first."

"I would have, if I'd been sure you'd say yes."

She hesitated, looked down at herself, and then the damage had already been done. "All right," she relented. It was hard to believe, but her smile was even prettier without lipstick. "Come on in. But you can't stay."

She led the way to the kitchen, Bart trying to figure a way to get another look at that toy rocket in the living room. Then he decided it wasn't necessary.

There was a new toy now, perched on top of the refrigerator. Bart knew for sure it hadn't been there last night. He remembered taking the cubes out

of the box, and putting them on top there while he looked for glasses.

It was one of the little toy robots this time. This one was extra-small, not more than an inch-and-a-half high, Bart realized when he got up to take a closer look. And it wasn't a robot; there was a tiny manikin inside, dressed in a miniature space-suit affair. Attached to the arm of the suit was a weird-looking machine, higher than the figure itself, and covered with minute dials and meters.

"Come and get your coffee," Sally called, but there was an edge of apprehension in her voice.

Bart reached out to pick up the toy, and instantly Sally was at his side. "Leave that alone!" she said sharply.

"Something special?" he asked, trying to look surprised.

"Yes," she said shortly. "Something special; now come drink your coffee if you want it, and leave that alone."

Bart turned back to the table. That little figurine was just the right size. It went with the rocket all right. And it had the same kind of fine workmanship in it. Bart wondered how you started this kind of a showdown.

"You're certainly acting peculiar, Bart Mandell!" Sally said.

HE LOOKED straight into smouldering brown eyes. "You're being a little strange yourself," he told her. "I'll tell you what I think," he said bluntly. "I think they're looking for that Martian in the wrong place."

"What are you talking about?" She was very haughty.

"About your new toys; that's what I'm talking about!"

"There is no need to scream at me," she said icily. "I can hear you perfectly..."

"Well, then, listen a while," he interrupted, lowering his voice. "That rocket you've got in the living room—and this little gadget here on the refrigerator—I want to know where you got them."

"I don't think that's any of your business!"

Bart got up and advanced a step, towering over her.

"Sally," he said angrily, "this is a serious matter. The United States Government is involved in this. If you can prove to me where you got those things, I'll apologize or anything else you want. But *you have to answer me.*"

"Bart, you've gone out of your head! If you want to know, *nobody* gave them to me! I got them for myself!"

"Where?"

"If you were the last man on Earth, I wouldn't tell you! Now will you leave politely before I... Bart, stop that!"

Halfway to the refrigerator he stopped and turned back.

"Sally, can you honestly say to me that you don't know anything about the Martians?"

"What in the world would *I* know?" All wide-eyed innocence, but just a bit too much of it, after being so angry.

"Just where you've got him hidden, that's all you'd know!" Now *he* lost his temper. "And why, that's what I don't understand. *Why?* Good Lord, Sally, I could stand anything but this! I wouldn't mind so much if you were seeing some other *man* behind my back. But a Martian! Sally, have you no discrimination? Don't you realize he's dangerous? Don't you understand that the whole world is looking—"

Sally laughed.

It was the wrong thing to do. She laughed, and pointed a shaking finger at Bart, and choked out, "Oh, you look so *funny.*" She subsided a little, while he stood rooted to the floor, keeping himself in control. "Bart, you look so funny when you get mad. Now *let's* be sensible and stop fighting. Let's go out on the porch and talk a while, and then..."

He whirled around and reached out. Just before his hand closed on the miniature space suit, he heard her say, "Bart, stop! You'll hurt him!" Then he knew he was right.

CAPTAIN CONNORS took some convincing.

The first result of Bart's effort to call him with the news was the arrival of an MP, with instructions to bring in some drunken soldier. The MP came, and saw, and listened. Most especially he listened to Nong Kay, the one-inch high Martian, talking with the aid of his two-inch high metal larynx—the gadget with the knobs and buttons.

The MP went away with his story, and after a while a sergeant came, and went through the routine again. *He* called the captain.

Captain Connors listened, not only to the diminutive "Martian monster" but also, at great length, to Sally. She explained again how she'd found the spaceship on her lawn the morning before, and took them out to show them the scorched spot where the rocket exhaust had burned away the grass.

It was still too hot to touch when she found it, but she had had no idea what it was. Captain Connors had a hard time believing that; but Bart knew Sally, and he knew it was true.

She'd taken it indoors just out of curiosity, with the help of several thicknesses of pot-holders. She left it on the hearth to cool off...and when she came back in the door was open, and the little mannikin was outside, with his voice-box.

"He was real cute," Sally told the captain, looking up at him earnestly out of those big brown eyes. "And polite, too; he thanked me for taking him in, and explained all about why he turned off his radio the way he did."

"That would take some explaining," the captain said grimly.

"Not from Nong's point of view, sir," Bart said. "You see, he didn't know..."

"I think you can let the young lady tell her own story." The captain looked at Sally again, and Bart began to burn. Sally, flushed and excited, was all too easy to look at.

"Well, the poor little fellow!" she said indignantly. "How would *you* feel if you suddenly found out the folks you were going to visit were—well *hundreds* of times bigger than you were? You might get scared, too! So he landed in the woods, and... Bart, you better explain. I'm not sure about the rest of it."

Bart managed not to smirk at Captain Connors. As simply as he could, he relayed what Nong Kay had told him about taking a quick and frightening look around at the fierce beasts—squirrels!—and giant trees, and then hopping over to Sally's lawn, in the middle of a human settlement. Then, when Sally told him how everyone was hunting for him, he begged her to keep him hidden for a few days, until he had a chance to find out what he was getting into. It was all that simple.

The captain listened, not too patiently, nodded his understanding, and went away, after shaking Sally's hand just one moment too long. Nong Kay and the "model" rocket went, too, on the seat of the Army car—right next to the captain. Bart, not having received orders to do otherwise, stayed.

He put his time to good use, too.

Captain Connors came back, minus his small chum. He rang the bell, and stood on the porch, hat in hand, his eyes so fully occupied with Sally in the doorway, that he never even noticed Bart standing behind her in the hall.

"We're having an official welcoming for the little fellow," the captain said, "and I thought perhaps you ought to be there ma'am. I'd be glad to escort you..."

Bart Mandell was not a jealous man, but he knew when a good thing was going too far...and he knew it was wise to put one's foot down early.

"That's all right, sir," he said as respectfully as possible, pulling the door open a little farther. "Anywhere my brand-new fiancée goes, I will be delighted to escort her myself,"