

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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A Complete Short Novel



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MacShane knew of course that the woman wasn't real



If You Don't Watch Out—

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

THOMAS MACSHANE was a legendary figure long before he became a tortured man. I suppose you might call him a hermit. He seldom went into town and there was no friendliness in him when he talked to grownups. But

he knew that Freddy and I saw him through hero-worshipping eyes and he hated to disillusion us.

I was thirteen and Freddy was two years my junior. We used to hang around in front of the vacuum service

To find the threads of his own destiny, young Tim had to save the Martian explorer from the thrall of the beast!

store just waiting for McShane to notice us.

He'd stop and say, "Hello, kids! Any new specimens?"

I'd show him my butterflies then—and the beetles. Freddy collected minerals. I liked to collect living things but Freddy had a flair for minerology. He liked the bright quartz colors, the cobalt gleam and glitter of his big collection of stones.

"Fine, fine!" MacShane would say, his eyes lighting up. "Keep at it, kids! Every great naturalist started early and kept at it despite the sneers. Not many youngsters go in for butterfly collecting—"

He'd look at Freddy then and nod. "Or minerology! If you're fascinated by nature at twelve you'll finish where I did—fifty million miles from Earth with the unknown blowing cold upon you!"

"You can't stop a kid who isn't a little savage to begin with. Start in your own mill pond, your own backyard, and you'll find that nature gets increasingly wonderful the farther out you go."

He always talked like that, with a mounting eagerness in his eyes, as though he were about to tell us exactly what he'd found on Mars that had changed the world for him.

Six feet three he was, gaunt and stoop-shouldered, with unruly black hair that must have hated combs. A long strand of his hair was always falling down over his face and getting in his eyes. His face was so deeply lined it was hard to believe he was only thirty-eight. He never smiled but sometimes he chuckled without smiling as if he couldn't help being amused by something he couldn't bear to talk about.

Big towns change but little towns never do. Not deep down where the roots are dark and tangled and gossip rages like a prairie fire.

The agony that came into MacShane's eyes when people tried to needle him about his fame-years was enough to kindle gossip. An explorer who's been to all the worlds can't shut himself up in one little corner of his native town

without sowing the whirlwind.

He'd been world-famous. Now he was hiding from the world in a dark old house that dated back to the early years of the twentieth century. He was a legend to grownups. But he was also a mirage, a negation, a man who never seemed quite real.

MacShane was entirely real only to Freddy and me. We didn't see him as a morose tortured man. To us he was a great golden man, gaunt and somber only when he went pedaling away on his gyro-bike. Close up and most of the time he blazed.

CHALK up another round in the struggle between youth and age. I think we'd have died for MacShane if he'd underscored the need for dying.

This day was no different from other days. He'd stopped to talk to us and now he was in the service store, ordering his weekly supplies. Neat little packages of boned chicken, wrapped in plasti-glass, to be shuttled up to the old house on the hill. Sweetmeats and dehydrated vegetables and a bottle of cognac. Fresh strawberries, packed in preservofoil, to keep the flavor in and the moisture out. A lot of other edibles in a big square package that had come to him all the way from Chicago by shuttle-post.

We stared in through the window, noticing everything that went into the purchase tube. Then MacShane said, "Good day!" turned on his heel and walked out of the store, knowing the edibles were speeding underground toward the hill and that he wouldn't starve for another week.

He was just about to speak to us when a peal of thunder made him scowl, shake his head and stare up at the sky. A big storm was coming up and the air was charged with electricity.

"I didn't meant to park my bike so close to yours, Mr. MacShane!" Freddy said. "I'll get it out of the way!"

"Oh, that's all right!" MacShane said. He strode to Freddy's bike, lifted it as if he were hefting a fly and set it down again within three feet of Freddy. Then he climbed on his own bike and rode off,

waving a gaunt hand at us.

Five minutes later Ned Graham, who ran the store, came rushing up to us. "Boys, do me a favor!" he pleaded. "My delivery tube will go dead unless MacShane reverses the pressure when his order comes through. There's a big overload on account of the storm."

He scowled up at the sky. "Run up to his place and tell him, will you?"

Freddy started to put out his hand for the dime he half expected but I got in front of him. "Sure, Mr. Graham!" I said. "We'll bike right up and tell him!"

It was five minutes by jet-bike to the hill and for one full minute Freddy just glowered at the sky. We were side by side on our bikes, riding through a high haze that had come up in the lee of the storm. Ahead of us the road rose sharply and we could see MacShane's dark old house, anchored to the black earth like a mooring beetle on a rockbound moon.

"What are you sore about?" I demanded.

Freddy's reply was evasive. "Why doesn't he have a visiphone?"

"So people can't call him up and bother him," I said.

"How do you know we won't bother him by showing up without being asked?" Freddy demurred logically.

"Don't be a dope!" I said. "We're not just breaking in on him without an excuse. Besides he likes us. We'll never get a chance like this again. I bet he invites us in and shows us his specimens. All of 'em maybe!"

I turned and looked at Freddy. "You almost spoiled it when you tried to chisel a dime out of Mr. Graham!" I told him. "When he saw you stick out your hand he almost changed his mind!"

"Yeah!" Freddy agreed. "He'd rather go himself than shell out a dime—the old skinflint!"

"MacShane's the greatest explorer who ever lived!" I said with boyish grandiloquence. "He didn't just explore the explored places. He went off by himself. He explored the little moons of Mars with a lot of special equipment.

"There's no air on Phobos and hardly any gravity. He told me it was like walking around a big chunk of ice, revolving so fast you could practically meet yourself coming back!"

"There are only two Venusian and three Martian animals!" Freddy said. "McShane didn't capture any new ones."

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"You can't keep a thing like that secret," Freddy said. "Look how many people went to San Francisco last year just to look at the Martian exhibit!"

"What did you think of them?" I asked.

"Aw, people are the same everywhere!" Freddy grunted.

"Don't be a dope! I mean—what did you think of the animals?"

"The stink was awful!" Freddy said. "If you poured glue on an anteater you'd get a Martian animal without the stink. Why don't somebody try it?"

THE storm was racing up the hill and getting there ahead of us. It was bleak up ahead with a big cloud-burst building in the middle of the sky. But we really didn't care how soon the rain came because we had skid-guards on our bikes and the countryside needed cooling off and we liked getting drenched.

It was Freddy who dismounted first. He drew in to the side of the road, leaned his bike against a tree and started up the hill on foot as though he'd made up his mind to remain angry because I'd blocked his attempt to chisel a dime out of Mr. Graham.

He reached the front porch ahead of me, then turned and waited for me to come up. I could see that his courage had failed him just when he needed it most.

"There's a light out in back!" he said. "What's the sense of ringing the doorbell if Mr. McShane's out in the kitchen? He'll be plenty burned up if he has to come to the front door just to let us in!"

I gave Freddy a scornful glance and brushed right past him. I had climbed

the porch and was reaching out for the bell when I heard the strange noise. It wasn't a very loud noise but it set my teeth on edge. It was a funny sort of tinkling like a lot of little icicles falling off a roof.

Tinkle, tinkle, *crash*—echoing right through the house.

I turned and stared at Freddy. "Come on!" I said.

There was only one glowing window at the back of the house and Freddy and I approached it cautiously, our steps as light as thistledown. It's funny how silent two frightened boys can be when there's spying to be done. Our shoes didn't make a sound on the long grass of the lawn as we crept up close to the window and crouched down.

There was a drowsy hum of insects just below the sill. A big blundering June bug went buzzing past my ear and from the ivy overhead a cricket chirped shrilly. But the tinkling had stopped. I nudged Freddy's arm.

"Stay down!" I whispered. "If we both look in he'll be twice as sure to see us!"

MacShane was sitting just inside the window. He was facing away from me, his heavy shoulders looming against a glare that spread out from him like a bonfire crackling and leaping high on a dark street at midnight.

I thought for a minute the glare was coming from MacShane—but it wasn't really. It was coming from a big iron-barred cage, which towered in shadows on the far side of the room. Swirling out from the cage and creeping around MacShane until he seemed to be on fire, too.

A horrible fear clutched the pit of my stomach. A huge hairy animal was pacing about just inside the bars, its heavy claws clattering on the bright metal floor of the cage.

It was no good my telling myself that a boy who took to natural history as a duck to water had no right to fear a caged animal. I couldn't tear my eyes from the slow ungainly movements of the beast. I kept remembering how I'd once fled in terror from a big South

American tree sloth, swinging itself from limb to limb in a cage at the zoo.

To my childish eyes the sloth had seemed to move in a way that was unnatural, revolting. *The sloth will get you if you don't watch out.* It will climb up a drainpipe into your room and claw out your eyes with merciless slowness.

The beast in the cage wasn't a sloth. It resembled more a great star-headed mole except that the star was luminous, the source of the light that flooded the room from floor to ceiling.

But the beast moved as a sloth, back and forth and around and around in the same hideously deliberate way, with the same spine-chilling slowness. And from the star on its head came a glow that made me think of dead burning leaves being raked over in October, the sky bright behind them and all horror lurking behind the brightness.

Then I saw that MacShane was sitting beside a low table, the light washing not only his face and hands but glimmering on the long barrel of a pencil-ray gun.

The weapon was lying on the table well within reach of MacShane's strong hairy hand. I remembered thinking a little wildly how like a harvest spider MacShane's hand seemed, the fingers bunching themselves in the glare.

Suddenly MacShane's voice rang out in the stillness. "How can I make you understand? Surely you must know that I would set you free if I could. But when you struck at me with your mind you made me your captive. If I freed you now my life would be over."

It wasn't the voice of a proud confident man, at home anywhere in space. It was the voice of a man tortured in body and mind, crying out from the depths of some great despair.

The beast stopped pacing and for an instant the light in the room grew so dazzling that the shrubbery outside the window reflected the radiance, driving away the blackness of the storm.

FREDDY was no longer crouching down. When I turned my head I could see his white face on a level with

my own, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

My mouth was dry and I had difficulty in swallowing. But I didn't think I could be as scared as Freddy looked. I took pride in that until another tinkling crash brought my head around with a jerk. I stared into the room again, struck numb by the strangeness of what I saw.

The walls had vanished and I was staring at a tumbled waste of red sand. I was staring straight out over a Martian landscape, bathed in a sultry glare. I recognized the landscape from pictures I had seen of the great weed-choked canals, filled with broken, rusting machines, built by a race that had perished when man was a snarling primate on a steamy jungle Earth.

There's only one Martian landscape. If you set your camera up anywhere near a canal all of the photographs are pretty much the same. Desolation is the keynote. The high walls of the canals look blue-black and thronged with shadows. The sand is always tumbled, wind-blown, stretching away for miles. The mountains are more dismal than the mountains of Earth. Snow-capped but without grandeur—craggy, remote, casting long ugly shadows on the waste.

There was light behind and above MacShane and suddenly as I stared the light exploded in a fiery burst and the beast was back in its cage again, the walls of the room looming solidly behind it.

"I'll *kill* you!" MacShane muttered hoarsely. "Then I'll be free of you forever!"

MacShane's hand closed over the pencil-ray gun as he spoke. The room had become as still as death but the instant MacShane raised the weapon the tinkling began again.

As the nerve-shattering sound echoed across the room a blazing crescent of light swept out from the glowing star on the beast's head. For an instant the light hovered in the air between MacShane and the beast. Then it filled the room, blotting out both beast and cage.

Straight out of the glow a woman

walked. She wore a strange garment, shining, golden-textured. Her lips were slightly parted and her bosom rose and fell as she held out her arms to MacShane.

To the boy who stared, just awakening to life's greatest wonder, the face of that woman was an enigma and a challenge. I saw it with a strange stirring, a pounding at throat and temples. But I could not see it through MacShane's eyes and I remember it only as the face of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

For a moment MacShane sat staring, utter torment in his eyes. He knew of course that the woman wasn't real. He knew she was a lure set floating in the room to ensnare him and draw him within reach of the beast's claws.

But I didn't know. Even when MacShane leapt to his feet with a terrible despairing cry and went stumbling toward her I thought he was about to embrace a flesh-and-blood woman. He told me later that his arms swept the empty air, embraced a chill emptiness. But for the barest instant a living woman did seem to hang limp in MacShane's arms like a beautiful white moth, her limbs fluttering.

Then the light blazed and soared all about MacShane and the walls of the room came wavering back.

MacShane was struggling in the grip of the beast. It towered above him, the glowing star on its head as red as blood. It had ripped off his shirt, and was clawing his back as it held him pressed tight to the bars.

I had never fired a pencil-ray gun in my life. But I climbed into the room and I picked the gun up and I used it to save MacShane. It all happened so fast that I can't remember just how the beast died—whether it fell convulsively back into the cage as I fired, or simply slumped down, releasing its grip on MacShane.

But I do remember one thing clearly. When the ray pierced the beast's head it gave a great cry and the glowing star went out. Then it lay still.

I had a brief glimpse of Freddy's

white face just outside the window with the blackness of the storm all about him. I remember how superior I felt until Freddy's face went whipping away into emptiness and I crashed to the floor in a dead faint.

* * * * *

I promised MacShane I'd be at the station when he returned to Lakeview with his bride of a week and I kept that promise to the dot.

I was standing behind a baggage truck when they both stepped down from the train. She saw me peeking out from behind the truck and came running toward me through the rain.

"Tim!" she cried. "Oh, I'd know you anywhere! Look for freckles, Tom said, a lot of them, and the kind of shyness that hides courage and—"

She wasn't like the woman MacShane had risked his life to embrace in the old dark house. She had a crinkly nose and a few freckles too. She had friendly blue eyes. She wasn't glamorous at all.

She bent down and kissed me and I think she was crying because I could feel a wetness on my face.

"That beast had to die first, Tim!" she said. "There was no other way Tom could have freed himself. He's terribly human, Tom is, and I've never stopped loving him!"

MACSHANE came up then and laid a grateful hand on my shoulder. "I don't deserve her, Tim!" he said. "A man who can't be loyal to just one real woman doesn't deserve Molly!"

Molly laughed. "Tom uses a lot of big words, Tim, but if you ask me that beast was just plain downright malicious. Tom thinks it flashed three-dimensional memory pictures from the star on its head as an adaptive mechanism during its mating season on Mars. The female liked to see what the courting male had on its mind or something like that.

"The mechanism worked so well it could use it on human beings too. It could get inside a man's mind and build up a picture in its own mind of a man's biogenetic mate. Then it could televise

that image—"

"Let me explain it, darling," MacShane said. "By biogenetic mate, Tim, I mean the kind of woman my ancestors had dreamed about for generations. You see, beauty is relative and each man carries a different subconscious picture of the one perfect woman about with him.

"The beast knew how to get at that picture and reproduce it in colors as a walking three-dimensional image. It showed me that woman in a blaze of glory, week after week, to torture me and force me to set it free again on Mars."

"But you didn't!" I said.

"No, Tim! By trying to free itself it enslaved me. I couldn't give her up, Tim! You saw how real she seemed!"

MacShane's hand tightened on my shoulder. "Stay away from Mars, Tim! When you grow up, I mean. More of those beasts will be captured and brought to Earth. Don't you be the one to do the capturing. Leave that to naturalists who aren't the dreamy romantic sort."

He looked at me and nodded. "You're the kind of lad who'd never marry a real woman if you once saw how—well, how perfect a woman can be!"

* * * * *

It's strange how the memory of that far-off day comes drifting back. The shadows are lengthening on the red Martian waste and I can hear—the tinkling. I'm armed, and ready.

She won't be real—how could she be? But I'll see her face to face and she'll be real to me. As real as Orion or the Pleiades or moonlight on a forest pool or flaming orchards in the dawn.

I'll be in no real danger as long as I remember that the Martian race has been dead for three million years. I have more will power than MacShane. No beast can really enslave me.

That silly little line that keeps running through my head. It's nonsense, of course. Utter nonsense—gibberish. I'd be crazy to take it seriously. *The Martians will get you if you don't watch out!* Why, the Martian race—