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Editor

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Martian Homecoming

by Frank Belknap Long

(author of "The Miniature Menace")

Through the veils of illusion, and waves of terrible remorse, they set out to slay the deadly creatures . . .

JIM MALDEN sat with his back to the metal wall of the shack, staring out gloomily into the driven rain. He was huge and hairy-chested, and he sat now with the light of a swollen fire reddening his flesh.

His wife threw another log into the fire and turned with an angry shrug. "Stop brooding, Jim!" she complained. "We came to Mars of our own free will. There's nothing on Earth I miss! *Nothing, you hear?*"

"It's all right for you to talk!" Jim said. "It don't take so much to make a woman happy. A woman never takes to craving things the way a man does."

"What things?" Mary Malden flared. "We've got a roof over our heads, haven't we? When you broke your hand and had to quit the ring you never talked that way. No, sir! You were mighty grateful for a chance to start over on Mars!"

"What did we get?" Jim grumbled. "A roof over our heads, sure. A settler's grant of five grand. But what else?"

"You dare to ask me that?" Mary raged. "The best years of my life I've given you, Jim Malden. I've slaved and denied myself and gone without—"

"Let's not quarrel, Mary!" Jim said, wearily.

He stood up and ran trembling fingers over his calloused, misshapen right fist. He saw again the light-drenched stadium on Earth, his opponent sparring for an opening, the drifting faces of the crowd. He shut his eyes and the bright, splendid vision was gone.

The pinched, gray face of his wife stared at him out of the flick-

ering firelight, her pupils questioning. She was thirty-four, but she looked fifty. Her hair straggled; her cheeks were sallow, and her lips were a tight, thin line.

A sudden tenderness and gratefulness came upon Jim Malden. He went up to her and patted her gently on the shoulder. "You're all right, old girl!" he said. "Better get on with the supper now."

"You're a good man, Jim!" Mary said, her eyes suddenly moist. "A fine figure of a man. You've been a good husband to me."

"Forget it," Jim said.

"It's the emptiness, the loneliness," Mary said. "I feel it too, Jim—especially at night. We've a colony here; we're all together, warm and friendly like we'd be in a little country town on Earth. But there's a difference too!"

"Sure there is," Jim agreed. "The land isn't friendly; that's the big difference. It's just rock and sand, sand and more sand, blowing, drifting around. The canals are either dried up or filled with stagnant water. There's no good, clean moonlight or fresh running water."

Jim Malden forced a grin. "But there's nothing wrong with our neighbors, Mary. No man has a right to fret and complain when he's got a wife like you and good friends to stand by him. It's the folks who make a place, Mary."

"Listen!" Mary said.

OUTSIDE THE shack there arose a shrill clamor. Running footsteps pattered along the quay and a child's terrified scream drowned out the distant boom of a warning rocket.

(illustrated by Luross)



The woman walked slowly, like a somnambulist, to her doom.

Jim rushed to the wall and took down a gun. He looked at his wife, his face as grim as death. "You know what that is, Mary," he said. "Promise me you won't go outside."

"Jim, stay here with me!" Mary pleaded, her lips white. "You don't have to go. Not this time. You've risked your life more often than the others."

"You mustn't talk that way," Jim said; "I can't shirk my duty."

"But you'll be killed, Jim. This time the dreams will kill you. You've a right to think of me. Oh, can't you see? You've been eating your heart out for Earth, for the old life. Your mind's far away, back on Earth with the cheering crowds. You've been longing for the ring again the way a young man longs for a woman."

"Now Mary—"

"You'll be trapped, Jim! Trapped and killed! It's a sickness with you now and you can't fight it. The Martian beast will get inside your mind, and you'll see Earth again, you'll see the ring. You'll be sick and weak, but you won't know how sick."

"I've got to live with myself, Mary! I've got to do my share of the fighting!"

Jim took his wife firmly by the shoulder and drew her back into the warm room with its high-leaping fire. Avoiding her eyes, he walked quickly to the door and threw it open. He walked straight out into the darkness, his huge shoulders squared.

An icy wind lashed his face, tore at his clothes. Up from the dark canal drifted a shimmering cloud as sinister as the barren heart of midnight.

The Martian seemed all eyes. Vicious and furtive, it drifted straight past Jim and then drifted slowly back. Like a great, night-shadowed jellyfish it swirled along the stagnant tide, its eyes shifting about and lighting up its dark bulk.

Far down the village street a woman wailed in torment. She came slowly into view, tottering along the quay, moving like a somnambulist through the shadows. She wheeled

suddenly, her face a livid mask of terror.

"Wait!" Jim shouted. "Get back!"

The woman continued to move forward, her hands pressed to her throat. She leapt with a despairing scream into the canal.

Jim heard the splash, saw the Martian sweep forward to wrap itself about her.

White-lipped, Jim raised his gun to his shoulder. As he took careful aim two tall figures emerged from shadows to stand at his side.

Instantly a warm sense of comradeship in danger swept over Jim. The man at his right was lean and sallow, with a gaunt, weather-beaten face. Jim recognized him. Grant Trask, a gentle, scholarly man who had spent his best years teaching school on Earth.

"Careful with your aim, Jim!" Trask said. "It's sending out merciless cruel thoughts now—punishing thoughts. But soon it will be making us see the things we want most in life."

"That woman must have done something mighty horrible to throw herself into the canal at the first touch of its mind!" Jim muttered.

"Not so horrible, Jim. Just something human she's been trying all these years to hide from herself. Martians can make the pangs of guilt and remorse seem intolerable!"

The Martian was in motion again. It was coming closer, swirling up from the canal. Its eyes flashed, and shifted.

Jim blasted. Lightning forked from his gun, brightening the canal.

The Martian horror swirled back, quivered, and swept straight toward the three men like a devouring cloud. "Run for your life, Jim!" Trask shouted. "Run, run!"

Jim turned and ran along the quay. The quay was filling with frightened villagers swarming from their shacks. As another warning rocket boomed Jim halted abruptly, aware of a firm hand on his arm.

"It was a good try, Jim!" Trask said.

Jim stared. Far in the distance a dark cloud faintly flecked with

light was drifting desertward over the awakened village.

"We'll have to track it down now, Jim," Trask said. "It has the taste of people in its dark mind. It will come back and kill again."

GRANT TRASK knew more than Jim did about the Martians. His insatiable scholar's curiosity had taken him often to the towering ruins in the northeastern desert where a vanished humanoid race had built vast monuments beneath the stars.

Tremendous frescoes covered walls of crumbling stone, their pigments time-defying, gaudy with sun colors. Life on Mars had followed a strange evolutionary pattern. A primitive, amoebic form of intelligent life had survived the evolution of a humanoid race and the rich, exuberant growth of a humanoid culture.

The humanoids had been resourceful, creative, self-reliant; the amoebic life form parasitic and greedy. The amoebic life form, its powers of reproduction weakened by the slow drying up of the Martian deserts, had preyed on the humanoids in their great stone cities.

Ever more insatiably it had drained the vital energies of the big-brained bipeds who resembled men. The lure it used was a psychic prod, inhuman, unnatural. It could make a man see the fulfillment of all his dreams in a blaze of glory. For thousands of years the humanoids, alone and in groups, driven and fearful, aspiring and maddened, had walked forward into the illusionary blaze of that deeper richer life—to be consumed utterly.

Most of the amoeba forms had succumbed to exhaustion and drought, but a few had lingered on, surviving the dying of the humanoid culture, sleeping for long ages in the desert wastes.

Now Earthmen, coming in rockets from Earth, had awakened them from their long slumber, filled them with a devouring hunger which nothing but death could slake.

The second man who had stood with Jim on the quayside came up,

his face flushed with excitement. "No sense in making it a big party, Jim!" he said. "We'll take care of it—just the three of us!"

Dave Rawson was a big man with a shrewd, small, practical mind. When Martians threatened the village with their strange powers he was always in the forefront of the struggle.

Dave Rawson ran an inn. An innkeeper has to be popular and fearless; an innkeeper has to stand behind a wide bar with his sleeves rolled to his elbows—a jolly, fearless man.

But deep in his heart Dave Rawson was a blackguard. He cheated, lied and beat his wife; he liked to bully lesser colonists, the little men who came and went.

Jim stared into the man's deepset eyes and shrugged. "We'd better get started!" he said.

The three men walked down the street and out of the village. Until the houses dwindled, the children followed them, admiring their air of fearlessness. The women watched from doorways with shining eyes. Some of the men made earnest efforts to join the party, but Grant Trask had a quiet, sure way of making his will prevail.

"Next time, George. You've done more than your share of tracking!"

"Stay with your wife, Fred. She's ill and needs you."

BYOND THE town the bleak Martian desert closed in like a flapping shroud. The wind howled and moaned, sending sandballs careening down steep slopes, filling the air with a continuous rustling.

Jim ploughed on with lowered head, dust stinging his nostrils, his gun jogging in the crook of his arm.

"I can't forget there were human beings on Mars once," Trask said. "Big-brained bipeds who walked erect. Builders and dreamers with brain pans as large as ours. They hurled a torch to us from a dead and buried past. They gave us the moral right to carry on the fight."

"We're men," Rawson grunted. "The Martians are crawling blobs

of slime. That's enough for me!"

"The Martians are as intelligent as we are," Trask said. "They can get inside our minds and make our secret thoughts real, three-dimensional. They can bring back Earth. They can offer men paradise, the forbidden fruit, the lost Eden. If men refuse to eat they can turn the human sense of guilt into a cruel, punishing reality. One way or another, all men, are vulnerable."

"Where do you think it went, Grant?" Jim asked.

"It will seek a deep hollow in the desert," Trask said: "It is sluggish now with death, fat like a grave worm with the life of that tortured woman."

Shadows leapt across the desert, purpled the rolling dunes. On the far horizon a cloud floated, assuming grotesque shapes.

Dawn was breaking over the desert when they found the Martian. It lay in a hundred foot hollow in the tumbled sand, sluggish with its feasting, its eighty eyes almost motionless in the chill light.

The three men descended into the hollow with their guns in readiness, their faces tight and strained. Trask was the calmest of the three. "Don't shoot until we're close," he warned. "We can't afford to miss this time."

Rawson said: "It's watching us! Its eyes—"

Rawson's speech congealed.

Rawson saw a light shine out from the beast. It was white and dazzling. The beast's eyes began to move, to shift about.

As Rawson stared the eyes melted and ran together and became a lake of fire.

"Dave, come back!" Trask shouted. "Dave, in the name of heaven—"

RAWSON WAS already running down into the hollow, his eyes bright with an eagerness such as he had never known. He tossed his gun aside, waved his arms. He ran faster.

Ahead of him the lake of fire brimmed with a rosy radiance. Out of it floated an immense translucent bubble. The bubble was not empty.

Within it a woman stirred and opened sleepy eyes.

The woman reclined at full length, her arms extended in voluptuous appeal. She had green cat's eyes, and a mass of tumbled golden hair that encircled her pale face like a garland. Rubies scintillated against her fair skin.

The bubble with its tantalizing burden floated toward Rawson, and the woman looked out at him, and desire rained hot coals on his blood.

He fell to his knees and reached up with both arms as the bubble descended.

"Dave, get up! Get to your feet, man! You're looking at nothing, you're staring into vacancy!"

The hands on Dave's arm and shoulder were like steel bands. The hands of Grant Trask.

Rawson swung about with a curse, his eyes red-rimmed. "It's a lie! You want that woman for yourself. Get away from me or I'll kill you!"

"No, Dave!" Trask pleaded. "It's an illusion; there's nothing there!"

Rawson struck Trask in the face. He gritted his teeth and pivoted away from Trask on his knees. He saw blood run from Trask's mouth over his chin.

He was glad that he had hurt Trask. He could see the bubble again and the woman was still extending her arms toward him.

He got to his feet and staggered forward, his throat parched.

Trask bent and picked up his gun. He followed Rawson patiently, anxiously. He did not think of himself, of his own safety. The savage blow which he had received meant nothing to him. Safe at home, in the village, he would have lain Rawson out cold.

But now Rawson was walking to his death, and had a claim on him. Friend or enemy; bully, sadist or coward—what did it matter? Rawson was a human being in deadly peril, a man in desperate need of help. Rawson shared with Trask a common humanity. They were both men, facing a threat that was alien to humanity.

JIM HAD seen the struggle and was advancing on the run, his gun raised. "Don't shoot, Jim!" Trask called. "He sees something we can't see! We've got to save him from himself!"

Jim nodded and lowered his gun. But he still ran on.

Trask caught up with Rawson fifty feet from the Martian. He seized his arm and jerked him about.

"Listen to me, Rawson" he pleaded. "You're following a mirage. The beast has got inside your mind!"

Rawson wrenched his arm free, his lips shaking. "That's a lie! She's beautiful and I'll hold her in my arms if I die for it! She's singing to me! Can't you hear her?"

"There's nothing but empty desert ahead of us, Dave."

"You want her for yourself. I warned you before. Now—"

Rawson lurched suddenly. He grabbed Trask's wrist and twisted it viciously.

Rawson wrenched the gun from Trask's hand and gave him a shove. As Trask went reeling backward Rawson raised the gun to his shoulder and took careful aim.

Rawson fired, putting bullet after bullet into Trask, spinning him about and hurling him to the ground.

The desert sand spurted up about Trask sinking down in a red welter. Horror and pity looked for an instant out of Trask's glazing eyes. He fell forward upon his face, twisted convulsively; he lay still.

White with rage, Rawson crouched low as the sunlight threw a filmy haze between his reeling senses and the dead man.

He saw Jim coming toward him through the glare, armed and furious.

"Stay back, Jim!" Rawson warned. "Don't come any closer."

"I'm going to kill you, Rawson!" Jim said. "You shot Trask down in cold blood. He was the best friend you'll ever have, and you shot him dead."

"Stay where you are, Jim! I warn you!"

Jim's face hardened.

He was about to squeeze the trig-

ger of his gun when something in the desert between Rawson and the Martian stayed his hand. A flickering and a whirling, a deepening of the shadows which surrounded the Martian.

The shadows became vertical shafts of darkness in a matter of seconds. They converged and became a solid, moving wall closing in about Rawson.

Rawson turned with a startled cry.

The wall was circular and it swept in upon Rawson and embraced him from three sides. He was caught in a dark, circular trap which loomed swiftly up above him in chill and dripping darkness.

The walls of a prison courtyard, the stones mottled and unyielding.

Rawson began to shake.

Far off in the dawn a bell tolled.

Rawson recoiled, his back to the wall of the courtyard, a convulsive horror in his stare.

A cold wind blew across the desert, stirring the sand at his feet. Around the edge of the wall came a procession of guards, walking slowly and two abreast.

The rising sun hid behind a cloud.

"No, no, I don't want to die!" Rawson screamed.

He dropped to his knees in pleading despair as the procession halted directly in front of him. A dark figure in the uniform of a prison warden spoke sharply.

"Get up! Must we help you to walk?"

Rawson cowered back against the wall, pleading, screaming.

Two guards stepped forward and took hold of him. They dragged him to his feet.

The walls of the prison swept away into chill, gray distances.

The electric chair loomed out of shadows, wrapped in a pale blue light.

Rawson was dragged screaming to the chair and strapped in.

Rawson shook his head in dazed horror and saw that he was walking straight forward into a blinding light. He was not condemned after all. His conscience had deceived him.

He had murdered Trask, but the justice of Earth could not touch him. On Mars—

The eyes of the Martian shifted about in the chill dawn as it moved forward to enfold Rawson. Its amoeba-like bulk flowed over him, in hideous, greedy folds.

JIM STOOD motionless, his lips white, the gun still at his shoulder.

He had seen Rawson back away from him, and then rush straight toward the Martian with a scream of terror. He now saw Rawson disappear. He could only guess at the reason for the mad act. But now a great white glow came from the Martian. It swept toward Jim like the waves of an advancing sea. Out of the whiteness came voices, faces, a turbulent tide of moving, shouting people.

Jim sucked in his breath.

The great stadium loomed before him, bathed in dazzling light.

Jim looked down over himself. He saw a firm-fleshed torso, black tights, the legs of a younger man. Far off in the glow he saw the ring, a figure he knew standing in one corner waiting for him.

With a shout he moved forward between the crowds, pushing his way down the aisle, a surge of strength and pride mounting in him. His manager came toward him, slapped him soundly on the back.

"Jim, Jim lad! He's a pushover, Jim! The championship's in the bag, Jim! Go in there, son, and let him have it! Hear those cheers? They're all for you, Jim boy, all for you!"

Light, excitement, joy, pride in a man's own strength. The crowds shouting, pushing; the bright, light-flooded ring; the great moment; the breathless hour of glory and triumph.

Jim stood very still, shaken, white, feeling the gun in his clasp, telling himself that he must not fail.

Even the rope which rasped his palm as he climbed into the ring seemed as real as the gun. But he was aware of the gun too, aware of a dim, dark stirring just beyond the splendid vision.

He was in the ring and he was not in the ring. He was two men at once. Beyond the glimmering stadium lights, beyond that white, steady blaze, luminous spots shifted about in a web of darkness.

The eyes of the Martian beast were trained upon him, with a devouring greediness.

Jim recoiled from the ringside, forcing his mind away from the referee, the big man in white tights facing him, the gleaming faces of the crowd.

His fingers tightened on the gun.

Jim blasted with a sudden, terrible concentration of all his faculties. He felt the gun leap in his clasp, saw the splendid vision dim and vanish.

The Martian desert came wavering back, wrapped in the chill light of dawn. Grayness, chillness, came sweeping back forty million miles from Earth.

The Martian beast shriveled in the searing blast. Its eyes opened, shut, puckered and ran hideously together on its shrinking bulk. Ten eyes became one, swelled to a hugely blinking orb filled with smoky light. Other eyes grew smaller, turned to blind lumps like gall blisters on terrestrial tree stumps.

The Martian became a black, oozing mass of charred jelly. It heaved and bubbled and ran in thin trickles over the sand. It became a thing of no real substance, a smudged residue like the jellyfish patterns cast up on the beaches of Earth by the resistless tides.

Most of the jellyfish gone, dried out by the sun. Just water, dissolving, running away, leaving only a faint, skeletal stain on the white and gleaming sand.

JIM WAS trembling when he turned. The desert had never seemed so chill. Before his eyes stretched only desolation, emptiness, a bleak and hostile land.

He started walking, vaguely aware that he was returning toward the village, but making no effort to follow a single trail.

His anger at fate had something in it of the burnt out land.

But then, miraculously, his despair ebbed a little. A man must carry on, he told himself grimly.

Soon the sun was a bright blaze in the distance and he could see the village, and the gleaming waters of the canal. He had never thought of the village as a part of himself before. It was curious, but he had never actually thought of the village as something he had helped to build.

Jim Malden, realist. Neither too good nor too bad. Just a stubborn fighter, liking his neighbors, liking kids and the rain on his face, and the good morning smell of frying bacon. Dogged, stubborn, wanting to do his part to make the Mars colony the kind of town a man could be proud of.

Jim entered the town and walked down the silent quayside in the dawn, his huge shoulders squared.

His shack had never seemed quite worth defending before. His wife and neighbors, sure—but not the shack itself. But now it wasn't just a tin-walled squatter's shack set down in a chill waste forty million miles from Earth.

It was—home.

Jim opened the door and went inside. His wife had thrown herself down on a sofa, fully clothed, and her face in the dawn light was haggard and worn.

Jim knelt beside the sofa and put his arms around her.

"Time for breakfast, Mary!" he said.

Mary opened her eyes. "Jim!"

"I've come home, Mary! Thinking about Earth all the time, dreaming about Earth, was no good. I've come home to all the things a man never gets around to missing until he's lost them."

His wife stared at him with shining eyes.

"A man's home is wherever he's fought and struggled and really lived, Jim," she said. "Everybody changes. Everybody starts over every time the sun comes up. I knew you'd find that out someday, Jim. You've come home to Mars!"

Jim kissed her.