



by
Frank Belknap Long

And Someday to **MARS**

He was the first man on Mars, and the last to find happiness

YOUNG JIM stood on the high bleached hill, staring down at the Martian village. It had stopped raining, and there was a smell of burning autumn leaves in the air. Not the raked-over autumn leaves of Earth, brown and crisp and sere, but the blue lichenous leaves of Mars, many-petaled, poppy fragrant.

Young Jim straightened his shoulders and went striding down into the village he'd helped to build.

He sang a song as he went, a trivial little song he'd picked up at his mother's knee long ago on Earth.

Someday to Mars
We'll all be going
It will be like stepping

From neighbor's house to
neighbor's house.

It hadn't been quite that easy, but the villages were growing fast now, and the rocket ships were coming in three, four times a month.

It was good to be one of the younger settlers, to look forward rather than back, to swing along at a merry pace under the bright Martian sky.

The town started quite far out in the desert. It was just a little sleepy town at first, with a house here, a house there, separated by a road that wasn't even paved. But it got larger and more bustling with every step he took.

The Harveys didn't live very close to the bustling part. They had a fine large house right on the outskirts, where the road was paved, but not really fit to travel on.

The Harvey children were playing in the back yard. Susan was baking mud pies and Bobby was impaled on the horns of a dilemma. He was trying to hold open the cellar door with his shoulder while he reached down inside for a basket of ripe tomatoes.

His mother was standing on the lawn scolding him. Bobby was actually trying to hold the door open and lift out the basket at one and the same time. It was a feat for a young Samson and Bobby wasn't quite that.

"Wait a minute, Bobby!" Jim shouted from the roadway. "I'll give you a hand!"

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Jim!" Bobby said, trying to squirm about and get a good look at one of the tallest men on Mars. Susan turned too, wondering how a man could be so strong.

Bobby missed his footing. His shoulder slipped, and the cellar door closed with a crash.

"Oh, be careful!" Mrs. Harvey cried, ten seconds too late.

Bobby was now impaled between the cellar door and a mash of spilled tomatoes.

"You were brought up on Mars, son," Jim said. "You ought to be accustomed

to the light gravity by now."

Chuckling, he bent and raised the cellar door.

"Never try to do two things at once, son," he advised. "Otherwise you kind of miscalculate your strength. Either your arm overshoots the mark, or your knee flies up and hits your funnybone—a real hard smack!"

Bobby scrambled to his feet.

Susan stared at her brother, her eyes glinting. "Fud, fud, Bobby's all blood!" she improvised.

"Go wash your face, Bobby!" Mrs. Harvey said.

She gripped her son by the shoulder, turned him about and started him toward the house.

"Jim Westrum!" she said, over her shoulder. "Where have you been keeping yourself? What a way to treat old friends!"

"Hello, Mrs. Harvey!"

"Jim, you go straight inside and sit yourself down."

"Well, I could do with a cup of coffee, Lucy," Jim said. "One of your fine waffles, too, if it won't be putting you to too much bother."

A girl came into the yard. She was the kind of girl men dream about on Earth, and sometimes find on Mars. Not often, though. She had red-gold hair, which fell to her shoulders, and her eyes were the color of the Martian skies. Shifting, changing, shot through with flame tints.

She laughed and put a slender arm around Jim. She kissed him on the cheek.

"Handsomest man on Mars," she said. "Mmmm."

"You spoil me, Miss Harvey," Jim said.

"Miss Harvey! Did you hear that, Mom? We're practically strangers to the men!"

"Doesn't seem quite right to call you 'Ellen,'" Jim said. "You're so terribly pretty. Kathy might not like it."

"Kathy again!" Mrs. Harvey said. "Come on into the kitchen Jim. We can talk better over some coffee."

THEY went into the house. The children ran upstairs, Ellen descended into the cool room for some preserves and Jim and Mrs. Harvey made their way to the kitchen.

Jim seated himself in a chair by the window and crossed his long legs. He fumbled in his pocket for a pipe.

"Ellen will make some man a fine wife," Lucy Harvey said.

"One of these days you'll be marrying again yourself, Lucy," Jim said. "You're a mighty handsome woman. If I was free to pick and choose—"

"If I was twenty years younger I might take that for a hint, Jim," she said.

"There isn't a woman on Mars I'd rather marry if I wasn't already spoken for," Jim said.

"Spoken for! Land sakes, Jim—"

"Sure it has a funny sound," Jim said. "A man saying that. But that's how it was between Kathy and me, right from the start."

Jim nodded, his face lighting up.

"You see, when I was a kid and Kathy was no older, about seventeen, we were lying in a wheat field staring up at the sky. Kathy and me alone on Earth, everything else shut out.

"Alone with goldenrod in country lanes and the melting snows of April and rusty blackbirds on the wing. Only it wasn't April. It was October, and the woods were russet gold and, looking up the hillside, we could see pumpkins.

"But mostly we kept our eyes on the sky, on the rockets that would someday be blazing a path to the stars. And Kathy turned to me and said: 'Are you spoken for, Jim?'

"It was a funny thing for her to say, and I don't know what put it into her head. But I smiled and said: 'No, Kathy.' I didn't call her 'darling' or anything like that. I was too young to know how to be tender.

"I just said, no, I wasn't spoken for.

"Then I'm speaking for you right now, Jim," she said.

"And I'm speaking for you, Kathy,"

I said, meaning every word.

"Forever and ever, Jim?"

"For as long as we both shall live."

Jim lit his pipe and tilted his chair back against the windowsill.

"Kathy's coming on the next rocket!" he said.

There was a clatter by the stove. Lucy dropped her waffle iron, picked it up, and wiped her steaming face with her sleeve.

"I—I'm glad for you, Jim!"

"Lucy, now I can talk about it. I can tell you just how lonely I've been. Watching the rockets come in, envying all the men with wives. I had to keep telling myself that a man of twenty-eight could afford to wait awhile."

Jim laughed. "But I got to envying even the very young lads who could go roaming in the moonlight and kiss their girls and walk a ways and kiss them again."

"I'm really glad, Jim."

There was a clatter on the stairs. The children came into the kitchen, Bobby first. His face was flushed with excitement.

"The rocket's ahead of time!" he said.

"The welcome flag just went up at the skyport. They're sending up flares too."

"You can see it from the roof!" Susan exclaimed.

Jim leaped to his feet. "That doesn't give me much time, Lucy."

"Do you know somebody on the rocket, Mr. Jim?" Susan asked.

"Just the girl he's going to marry," Lucy said. "If you hurry you can make it, Jim. You can be the first to welcome her."

"You're swell, Lucy," Jim said.

He kissed her and crossed the kitchen in three long strides. He was out the door before the children could ply him with questions.

He walked straight through the town he'd helped to build, his shoulders held straight, his eyes on the flares ahead. The flares were red, orange, blue, green, yellow. They cascaded down the sky, they burst in dazzling star formations.

The air trembled to the boom of the flares.

And out of each house he passed came a relative or friend or well-wisher of the new Martian colonists. Dogs barked and children raced to join their parents.

A procession formed and moved forward with Jim. It was a ragged procession with many stragglers, even though the ranks kept filling with new arrivals.

JIM walked so fast he outdistanced his neighbors and for a block or two he was quite alone, and for a block or two he was walking with ghosts and memories.

The houses no longer seemed quite real. He was walking through a cornfield on Earth, and he was walking with his head in the clouds.

Mars with its neat houses, wired for every comfort, seemed remote, unreal. The houses he'd known as a kid were huge and rambling, with attic rooms filled with musty cobwebs, and you could look out the windows at boughs swaying in the moonlight and imagine yourself in a haunted forest, imagine yourself buried alive in some vast and shadowy tomb.

He shook the illusion off. Mars was bright and new, a world of drenching sunlight, and igneous rocks so dazzling you had to shield your eyes when you were out in the desert on a clear day.

Jim knew every man and woman in town. Sometimes it took a week or two to get acquainted with a new colonist, but Jim was a neighborly person with a great deal of perseverance.

Now his neighbors kept catching up with him, and striding along at his side.

"Rocket's a day early, Jim! I told the missus—"

"Wait a minute, Magruder. I've got first call on him. He promised me some advice yesterday—then just walked off and forgot about it."

"You don't do that often, Jim! Got something on your mind?"

"Somebody you know on the rocket, Jim?"

"Jim, do you mind if I phone you tonight? I'd like to get your opinion on that new linoleum I told you about. Tom says it won't stay flat, no matter how hard you press it down."

"Mr. Jim, fix my top!"

"First one gets to the skyport gets an agate! You be the judge, Mr. Jim!"

It was easy to fix a doll or a child's top. Harder to fix what needed mending inside of a man. No child should be allowed to grow up thinking everything could be fixed, Jim told himself. They should be taught instead that even mended things came apart right when you needed them most.

On the other side of the town the houses thinned again. But the road remained paved, for the skyport was close to the town and the town had to stay dressed up in proximity to so much splendor.

Jim could see the rocket now. Everyone could see it, and a great shout went up.

The rocket was descending through the sky like a silver minnow swimming in a lake of fire. It grew larger, became a flashing silver trout. In almost no time at all it was a sporting porpoise, a hundred-foot whale breathing fire through its nostril slits.

Jim watched the flames dwindle, the great column of dust shoot up.

He moved forward like a man in a dream, tossing about on a bed of air as wide as the gulfs between the stars.

In the skyport winds played idly over fluttering flags, raised little clouds of cinder dust.

She was the last to emerge. She stood on a high silvery platform just under the mooring cables, the great rocket towering above her. The hot Martian sun was blazing down and filling the air with a brightness which hovered like a sheet of flame between the crowds and the rocket. But her beauty was like the night, like the eyes which Nature dusts on the wings of night-flying moths, all velvet and dusky gold.

Jim climbed the ladder and walked

straight toward her, his lips feverish with the words he must say.

She hadn't changed. That was the really incredible thing. She was still wearing the small tilted hat she'd worn the last time he'd seen her. He wondered if her hair would be bound in the same simple way with a bright golden band.

He'd have to remove her hat to find out. He pictured himself smiling and gently whisking the hat from her head, seeing the dark splendor of her hair come into view, ruffling her hair with his big, clumsy fingers.

"Oh, darling, please! Everybody's looking at us!"

He could almost hear the whispered words, like honey dripping with exploring gentleness into the secret recesses of his mind.

He could hardly believe that she was not already talking to him and laughing, that they were not even now descending the ladder arm in arm, as joyous as two eager young lovers climbing down from a haystack beneath a red harvest moon.

She was still thirty feet away, and just turning. Would she recognize him instantly or would joy and tenderness creep slowly into her eyes? The thought that he might seem like a stranger to her, if only for an instant, gave him a feeling of weakness about the knees.

She had turned now and was staring straight at him. Her lips were slightly parted, and her lashes seemed to be sprinkled with star dust.

Inside Jim a floodgate of emotion broke, and the words he must say came in a shout.

"Kathy! Kathy! I've waited so long!"

THE GIRL on the platform did not move at all. Surprise came into her eyes, and an almost instant warmth and friendliness. But it was not the warmth of recognition, and when Jim put out a hand to touch her she took a full step backward.

"I'm afraid—you've mistaken me for someone else," she said.

Jim's heart ceased to beat. His eager-

ness had been all emotion, but now his mind took charge. A dryness, a crackling horror of thought made him look unflinchingly into her eyes.

"You—you don't know me?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said, with good-humored gentleness. "My name's Barbara—"

Jim turned slowly, a sob strangling in his throat. He moved to the edge of the platform, and gripped the waist-high upper rungs of the ladder, as if steadying himself against an almost unbearable shock.

His temples throbbed with the dull ache of a mental anguish he had known before, and had hoped never to know again. He seemed to age as he stood there facing the rocket, to grow too weary to descend. He brought up one hand and ran it over his brow. Then slowly he started downward, his shoulders stark against the skyport glow.

Someone touched the girl on the arm and said: "Sorry if he startled you, Miss. In a way he's the sanest man on Mars. But once in a while he forgets. His mind slips a notch, like a metal bearing that's been triggered too fine."

"But who is he?"

"Who? That is Jim Westrum—the first earthman on Mars."

The skyport official was a young man with clear blue eyes that tightened a little when the girl looked at him in puzzled wonder.

"But why did he call me Kathy?" she asked.

"Why? The loneliness, most likely, the long, empty years. Fifty years ago he came to Mars. In the rocket that couldn't be built and yet was built. The rocket no one really believed in.

"It was the first great, tremendous space flight, but no one on Earth, least of all the astronomers, could know whether he ever reached Mars. And when you don't know, when you can't be sure, you cease to care. Interest dies."

"But that flight fired the imagination of all men!" the girl exclaimed, in vehement protest. "I remember my grand-

father saying—”

“For a few short months it did. But at that time rocket flight, even to just beyond Earth’s atmosphere, was still in an experimental stage. Interplanetary travel as we know it was still in the blueprint stage.

“We had a great deal of inertia to overcome, human indifference, human refusal to put first things first. And we had another war to win. It took forty years.”

“You mean—”

The official nodded. “For forty years he was alone on Mars. Alone in the desert waste, with only a few ordinary mechanical devices from the rocket to help him with problems of food and shelter and make it a little easier for him to stay alive. Alone with the hot days and cold nights, the blinding sand storms, and the pelting snow and sleet.”

The girl seemed hardly to be listening. She was staring at the outlines of misty hills, rising into the bright sky. Her eyes sought out the town and stared beyond it, as though measuring the breadth, and height and depth of one man’s influence under the sun.

“He’s not forgotten on Earth now,” she said.

The official nodded. “He’s in the history books, if that means anything. In the popular mind he’s very much Mr. Big. But here he’s just a good neighbor and friend.”

He smiled. “Ten years ago he was here, hale and hearty, to welcome the first settlers. He was seventy then and he’s crowding eighty now. I like to think he’ll be here when the towns are cities, and Mars is a stepping stone to the stars.”

“He will be,” the girl said.

“He ought to be. He’s still sound of body and mind. If his mind slips a notch now and then, that’s to be expected in a man his age who has lived a dozen lives to the full.”

“His neighbors and friends—do they understand?”

The official nodded. “Completely. They fall in with his mood, even the children, but not in a patronizing way. If you think Jim Westrum isn’t a great man to his neighbors—”

“I don’t think that. Tell me, does he happen to mistake some strange young girl for his Kathy every time a rocket arrives?”

“No—that only occurs once or twice a year.”

“I see.”

When the official left the girl stood with her lips slightly parted and her eyes shining as if some great wonder had come upon her thoughts with hoofbeats of flame.

A FAMILY resemblance could be a startling thing. She remembered a faded photograph in an album thick with dust. A contact lens had brought a contrast of light and shade, an illusion of serious maturity to the features of a girl still in her teens. There was a tennis court and a resort hotel in the background, and if she had been born three generations earlier that girl might have been herself.

A small painting she’d treasured as a child showed an even more striking resemblance, for Aunt Catherine had been convinced for a long time that Jim Westrum would return, and a patient defiance looked out of her eyes, the conviction that nothing could ever be truly lost in space and time.

“Great Aunt Catherine!” the girl on the platform said aloud. “You don’t rest under the willows at all. I bet you’re walking at this moment at his side, even if he doesn’t see you.”

“He needs you as a thirsty harvest needs rain, and that means more than just being remembered. You couldn’t be loved like that, and stay under a white stone marker in a fenced-in New England spring. The hushed small woodlands wouldn’t be great enough to hold you!”

“Aunt Catherine, if you’ve lagged behind, if he’s a few steps ahead of you,

go join him. Don't stay here to stare at me. Hurry, Aunt Catherine!"

On the white road leading back into town Jim Westrum strode with his shoulders squared, feeling again the slim hand in his that had never really been withdrawn, hearing the sweet clear voice and feeling against his cheek the blowing hair fragrant with meadow mist.

"Jim! Jim, darling! I'm speaking for you right now!"

The town he'd helped build an arabesque of beauty was beckoning him homeward, and the sky at his back was a cauldron now, glowing with crystal fires. Two visions blurred his sight. Through the Martian brilliance and splendor he saw again the russet October

hills, the rambling, musty houses, the beautiful disordered landscape of so long ago. The slim girl at his side was so much a part of that landscape—wild, young, free, restless in the lovely, simple land.

She would listen, her eyes full of wonder, to his dreams of rockets and other planets, but the lights in her eyes would dim when he spoke of the gaps in time and space that must lie between them until she too, could share his new land.

"Jim, no matter how long it takes, no matter what happens, we'll always be together," she smiled up at him. "I'll be at your side."

Walking toward his city, he heard the words so clearly and quickened his step. Jim Westrum, the first man on Mars.



*A feast of science fiction classics, plus several outstanding new stories
in the Winter Issue of*

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

featuring

THE EVENING STAR by David H. Keller, M.D.

VIA DEATH by Gordon A. Giles

and many others!

NOW ON SALE — 25c AT ALL STANDS

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Novelet by **KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN**

The REGAL

