

Blastoff for danger—and

**MARS
IS MY
DESTINATION**

**a Science-Fiction Adventure by
FRANK BELKNAP LONG**



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First printing, June 1962

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MARS

... Earth's first colony in Space. Men killed for the coveted ticket that allowed them to go there. And, once there, the killing went on....

MARS

... Ralph Graham's goal since boyhood—and he was Mars-bound with authority that put the whole planet in his pocket—if he could live long enough to assert it!

MARS

... source of incalculable wealth for humanity—and deadly danger for those who tried to get it!

MARS

... in Earth's night sky, a symbol of the god of war—in this tense novel of the future, a vivid setting for stirring action!

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1

I'd known for ten minutes that something terrible was going to happen. It was in the cards, building to a zero-count climax.

The spaceport bar was filled with a fresh, washed-clean smell, as if all the winds of space had been blowing through it. There was an autumn tang in the air as well, because it was open at both ends, and out beyond was New Chicago, with its parks and tall buildings, and the big inland sea that was Lake Michigan.

It was all right ... if you just let your mind dwell on what was outside. Men and women with their shoulders held straight and a new lift to the way they felt and thought, because Earth wasn't a closed-circuit any more. Kids in the parks pretending they were spacemen, bundled up in insulated jackets, having the time of their lives. A blue jay perched on a tree, the leaves turning red and yellow around it. A nurse in a starched white uniform pushing a perambulator, her red-gold hair whipped by the wind, a dreamy look in her eyes.

Nothing could spoil any part of that. It was there to stay and I breathed in deeply a couple of times, refusing to remember that in the turbulent, round-the-clock world of the spaceports, Death was an inveterate barhopper.

Then I did remember, because I had to. You can't bury your head in the sand to shut out ugliness for long, unless you're ostrich-minded and are willing to let your integrity go down the drain.

I didn't know what time it was and I didn't much care. I only knew that Death had come in late in the afternoon, and was hovering in stony silence at the far end of the bar.

He was there, all right, even if he had the same refractive index as the air around him and you could see right through him. The sixth-sense kind of awareness that everyone experiences at times—call it a premonition, if you

wish—had started an alarm bell ringing in my mind.

It was still ringing when I raised my eyes, and knew for sure that all the furies that ever were had picked that particular time and place to hold open house.

I saw it begin to happen.

It began so suddenly it had the impact of a big, hard-knuckled fist crashing down on the spaceport bar, startling everyone, jolting even the solitary drinkers out of their private nightmares.

Actually the violence hadn't quite reached that stage. But it was a safe bet that it would in another ten or twelve seconds. And when it did there was no chain or big double lock on Earth that could keep it from terminating in bloodshed.

The tipoff was the way it started, as if a fuse had been lit that would blow the place apart. Just two voices for an instant, raised in anger, one ringing out like a pistol shot. But I knew that something was dangerously wrong the instant I caught sight of the two men who were doing the arguing.

The one whose voice had made every glass on the long bar vibrate like a tuning fork was a blond giant, six-foot-four at least and built massive around the shoulders. His shirt was open at the throat and his chest was sweat-sheened and he had the kind of outsized ruggedness that made you feel it would have taken a heavy rock-crushing machine a full half hour to flatten him out.

The other was of average height and only looked small by contrast. He was more than holding his own, however, standing up to the Viking character defiantly. His weather-beaten face was as tight as a drum, and his hair was standing straight up, as though a charge of high-voltage electricity had passed right through him.

He just happened to have unusually bristly hair, I guess. But it gave him a very weird look indeed.

I don't know why someone picked that critical moment to shout a warning, because everyone could see it was the kind of argument that couldn't be stopped by anything short of strong-armed intervention. Advice at that point could be just as dangerous as pouring kerosene on the fuse, to make it burn faster.

But someone did yell out, at the top of his lungs. "Pipe down, you two! What do you think this is, a debating society?"

It could have turned into that, all right, the deadliest kind of debating society, with the stoned contingent taking sides for no sane reason. It could have started off as a free-for-all and ended with five or six of the heaviest drinkers lying prone, with bashed-in skulls.

The barkeep made a makeshift megaphone of his two hands and added to the confusion by shouting: "Get back in line or I'll have you run right out of here. I'll show you just how tough I can get. Every time something like this happens I get blamed for it. I'm goddam sick of being in the middle."

"That's telling them, John! Need any help?"

"No, stay where you are. I can handle it."

I didn't think he could, not even if he was split down the middle into two men twice his size. I didn't think anyone could, because by this time I'd had a chance to take a long, steady, camera-eye look at the expression on the Viking character's face.

I'd seen that expression before and I knew what it meant. The Viking character was having a virulent sour grapes reaction to something Average Size had said. It had really taken hold, like a smallpox vaccination that's much too strong, and his inner torment had become just agonizing enough to send him into a towering rage.

Average Size had probably been boasting, telling everyone how lucky he was to be on the passenger list of the next Mars-bound rocket. And in a crowded spaceport bar, where Martian Colonization Board clearances are at a terrific premium, you don't indulge in that kind of talk. Not unless you have a suicide complex and are dead set on leaving the earth without traveling out into space at all.

Now things were coming to a head so fast there was no time to cheat Death of his cue. He was starting to come right out into the open, scythe swinging, punctual to the dot. I was sure of it the instant I saw the gun gleaming in the Viking character's hand and the smaller man recoiling from him, his eyes fastened on the weapon in stark terror.

Oh, you fool! I thought. *Why did you provoke him? You should have expected*

this, you should have known. What good is a Mars clearance if you end up with a bullet in your spine?

For some strange reason the Viking character seemed in no hurry to blast. He seemed to be savoring the look of terror in Average Size's eyes, letting his fury diminish by just a little, as if by allowing a tenth of it to escape through a steam-spigot safety valve he could make more sure of his aim. It made me wonder if I couldn't still get to them in time.

The instant I realized there was still a chance I knew I'd have to try. I was in good physical trim and no man is an island when the sands are running out. I didn't want to die, but neither did Average Size and there are obligations you can't sidestep if you want to go on living with yourself.

I moved out from where I was standing and headed straight for the Viking character, keeping parallel with the long bar. I can't recall ever having moved more rapidly, and I was well past the barkeep—he was blinking and standing motionless, as white as a sheet now—when the Viking character's voice rang out for the second time.

"You think you're better than the rest of us, don't you? Sure you do. Why deny it? Who are you, who is anybody, to come in here and strut and put on airs? I'm going to let you have it, right now!"

The blast came then, sudden, deafening. They were standing so close to each other I thought for a minute the gun had misfired, for Average Size didn't stiffen or sag or change his position in any way and his face was hidden by smoke from the blast.

I should have known better, for it was a big gun with a heavy charge, and when a man is half blown apart his body can become galvanized for an instant, just as if he hasn't been hit at all. Sometimes he'll be lifted up and hurled back twenty feet and sometimes he'll just stand rigid, with the life going out of him in a rush, an instant before his knees give way and there's a terrible, welling redness to make you realize how mistaken you were about the shot going wild.

The smoke thinned out fast enough, eddying away from him in little spirals. But one quick look at him sinking down, passing into eternity with his head lolling, was all I had time for. Pandemonium was breaking loose all around

me, and my only thought was to make a mad dog killer pay for what he had done before someone got between us.

Mad dog killers enrage me beyond all reason. Given enough provocation almost any man can go berserk and commit murder. But the Viking character had let a provocation that merited no more than a rebuke rip his self-control to shreds.

The naked brutality of it sickened me. Something primitive and very dangerous—or perhaps it was something super-civilized—made me out to beat him into insensibility before he could kill again. I felt like a man confronting a poisonous snake, who knows he must stamp on it or blast off its head before it can sink its fangs in his flesh.

I was not alone in feeling that way. All around me there was an angry muttering, a cursing and a shouting. If I needed support, sturdy backing, I had it. But right at that moment I didn't need it. An angry giant had come to life inside of me and we exchanged nods and understood each other.

There was a crash behind me, but I ignored it. What was harder to ignore was the barkeep straddling the bar and coming down flatfooted in the wake of two reeling drunks who were lunging for the killer with a crazy, wild look in their eyes. I didn't want them to get to him ahead of me.

He hadn't moved at all and had a frightened look on his face, as if the blast had jolted some sanity back into him and made him realize that you can't gun a man down in a crowded bar without adjusting a noose to your own throat and giving fifty men a chance to draw it tight.

The gun he'd killed with might still have saved him, if he'd swung about and started shooting up the bar. But I didn't give him a chance to recover.

I ploughed into him, wrenched the gun from him and sent him reeling back against the bar with a solidly delivered blow to the jaw, luckily aimed just right.

Then they were on him, five or six of them, and I couldn't see him for a moment.

I held the gun tightly and looked at it. It was still warm and just the feel of it sent a shiver up my spine. A gun that has just been wrenched from the hand of a killer is unlike any other weapon. There's blood on it, even if no

laboratory test can bring it out.

I didn't know I'd lost anything until I looked down and saw my wallet lying on the floor at my feet. The energy I'd put into the blow had not only sent a stab of pain up my wrist to my elbow. It had jarred something loose from my inner breast pocket that had a danger-potential, right at that moment, that could have turned the tide of rage that was sweeping the bar away from the killer and straight in my direction. Some of it anyway, splitting it down the middle, causing the drunks who were divided in their minds about what he had done to change sides abruptly.

In my wallet was a perforated card, all stippled with tiny dots down one side, and it said that I was on the passenger list of the next Mars-bound rocket, and that the Martian Colonization Board clearance was of a peculiar kind ... very special.

The wallet had fallen open and the card was in plain view for anyone to read. It could be recognized by its color alone—a light shade of blue—and if anyone who felt the way the killer had done about Average Size had caught sight of it and made a grab for the wallet—

I was bending to pick it up when a voice whispered close to my ear. "Don't let anyone see that card—if you want to stay in one piece. You'd better get out of here before they start asking questions. They won't wait for the Spaceport Police to get here. Too many of them will be in trouble if they don't find out fast where everyone stands. They'll know how to go about it."

I couldn't believe it for a minute, because I hadn't seen her come in. I'd noticed two women at the bar, but not this one—it would have been impossible for me to have failed to notice so slim a waist or hips so enchantingly rounded, or the honey-blonde hair piled high, or the wide, dark-lashed eyes that were staring at me out of a face that would have made a good many men with their lives at stake forget the meaning of danger.

Even if she'd been wedged in tightly between two male escorts at the bar, I'd have noticed a part of all that. Just one glimpse of the back of her head, with the indefinable, special quality that makes beauty like that perceptible at a glance, so that you know what the whole woman will look like when she turns, would have made so deep an impression on me that not even the violence I'd participated in a moment afterwards could have blotted it from

my mind.

It left me speechless for an instant. I just snatched up the wallet, put it safely back in my pocket and returned her stare in complete silence.

"Better keep the gun," she advised. "Your fingerprints are all over it now. You could clear yourself all right, considering who you are. But it would be much simpler just to toss it into Lake Michigan, especially if they decide to let him go and lie about who did the killing."

I could have wiped the gun clean and tossed it on the floor, but I knew what was in her mind. You just don't leave a murder weapon lying around in plain view when you've picked it up right after a killing. It can lead to all kinds of complications.

I nodded and stood up. "Thanks for the advice," I said, finding my voice at last. "There are enough eye-witnesses here to convict him without this, if just a few of them have a conscience."

"Don't count on it," she said. "They're angry enough to kill him right now, because they don't like to see anyone gunned down like that. But when they've had time to think it over—"

She was right, of course. There were six or seven men struggling with the killer now but there were others who weren't. A fight had started near the middle of the bar and someone was shouting: "The ugly son deserved what he got! Every man who gets a Mars clearance now has to play along with the Colonization Board! He has to turn informer and help them set a trap for anyone who gets in their way. Just depriving us of our rights doesn't satisfy them. They're scheming to get the whole Mars Colony for themselves."

It was the Big Lie—the charge that had done more damage to the Mars Colony than the shortages of food and desperately needed construction materials, and almost as much damage as the two major power conflicts and the transportation difficulties that never seemed to get solved.

I wanted to go right up to him and grab hold of him and hit him as hard as I'd hit the Viking character, because he was a killer too—a killer of the dream.

But the blonde who seemed to know all the answers and what was wise and sane and sensible was tugging at my arm and I couldn't ignore the urgency in her voice.

"Time's running out on you, Mr. Important Man. If they find out just who you are, you won't have a chance of getting out of here alive. Every one of them will be clamoring for your blood. The pity of it, the terrible pity, is that most of them hate violence as much as you do. They hate what that wild beast just did. But the Big Lie has made them hate the Colonization Board even more. Do we go?"

It came as a surprise that she was leaving with me, and that was downright idiotic, in a way. With the place in an uproar, a killer still trying to break loose and a fight under way it would have been madness for her to stay, and the two other women had vanished without stopping to talk to anyone. But in moments of stress you can overlook the obvious and wonder about it afterward.

We had to move fast and we ran into trouble when two struggling drunks got in our way. I shouldered one aside and rammed an elbow into the stomach of the other and we reached the street without being stopped by anyone who didn't want us to leave. The card was back in my pocket and not a single one of them had X-ray eyes.

In another minute or two someone would have probably remembered that I'd disarmed the Viking character and could have had a reason for the fast violent way I'd gone about it. Then I'd have been in for the kind of questioning the blonde had mentioned—a kangaroo court interrogation before the Spaceport Police could get there. And if my answers had failed to satisfy them they would have wasted no time in turning my pockets inside out.

I'd been spared all that, thanks to that same blonde. And—I didn't even know her name!

2

We'd been talking for twenty minutes and I still didn't know her name. She wasn't being secretive or coy or holding out on me because she didn't trust me as much as I trusted her. I just hadn't gotten around to asking her, because we were both still talking about what had happened at the bar and it was so closely tied in with what was happening in New York and London and Paris and every big city on Earth—and on Mars as well—that it dwarfed our puny selves—extra-special as the blonde's puny self happened to be from the male point of view.

I didn't know whether she was Helen or Barbara, Anne or Ruth or Tanya. I just knew that she was beautiful and that we were sipping Martinis and looking out through a wide picture window at New Chicago's lakeshore parklands enveloped in a twilight glow.

The restaurant was called the Blue Mandarin and it conformed in all respects to the picture that name conjures up—a diaphanous blue, oriental-ornate eating establishment with nothing to offer its patrons that was new, original, exciting, unique.

But there it was and there it would remain—until Lake Michigan froze solid. For the moment its artificial decor wasn't important to either of us. Only the Big Lie and what it was doing to the Martian Colonization Project.

"My father was one of the first," she said. "Do you know what it means, to stand in an empty, desolate waste, forty million miles from home, and realize you're one of the chosen few—that a city will some day grow from the seeds you've planted and nourished with your life blood?"

"I think I do," I said. "I hope I do."

"He died," she said, "when he was thirty years old, from a Martian virus they hadn't discovered how to combat until two-thirds of the first two thousand colonists succumbed to it."

"Why didn't he take you with him?" I asked. "There were no passenger restrictions then. The Colonization Board had great difficulty in finding enough volunteers."

"My mother refused to go," she said. "I'm afraid ... most women are more conservative than men. Father died alone, and five years later Mother married a man who didn't want to be one of the first ten thousand—or the first sixty thousand. He had no problem. He wasn't like the men we saw tonight."

"If every man and woman on Earth wanted to go to Mars," I said, "the Colonization Board would have no problem. A demand on so colossal a scale could not be met—in a century and a half. And laws would be passed to prevent the scheming that's taking place everywhere, the hatred and the violence. The Big Lie would not be believed."

"I know," she said. "It's when only twenty thousand can go and five million want to go that you have a problem. A little hope filters through, and the five million become envious and enraged."

I looked at her. I was feeling the glow now, the warmth creeping through the cells of my brain, the recklessness that alcohol can generate in a man with a worry that looms as big as the Big Lie, to the part of himself that isn't dedicated to combating the Lie. The ego-centered, demandingly human part, the woman-needing part, the old Adam that's in all of us.

And suddenly I found myself thinking of Paris in the Spring, and the sparkling Burgundies of France and vineyards in the dawn and what it had meant to have a woman always at my side—or almost always—and in my bed as well.

New York, flag-draped for Autumn, London in a swirling fog, the old houses, the dreaming spires, anywhere on the round green Earth where there was laughter and music and a woman to share it with....

All that had been mine for ten years. But now, like a fool, I wanted Mars as well. Mars was in my blood and I could no longer rest content with what I had.

Take it with me to Mars? And why not? It was no problem ... when you didn't have my problem. A quite simple problem, really. The woman I'd married wouldn't go with me to Mars.

She seemed to sense that I was having some kind of inward struggle, and was feeling a decided glow at the same time, for she reached out suddenly and took firm hold of my hand.

"Something's troubling you," she said. "Why don't you tell me about it while you're feeling mellow. Considering the kind of world we're living in, mellow is the best way to feel. It wears off quickly enough and next day you pay for it. But while it lasts, I believe in making the most of it. Don't you?"

Should I tell her, dared I? I might have to pay for it with a vengeance, for she'd probably think me quite mad. And I still had some old-fashioned ideas about loyalty and happened to be in love with my wife.

It was crazy, it made no sense, but that's the way it was.

I looked at the woman sitting opposite me and wondered how a man could be in love with one woman and find another so attractive that he'd been on the verge of coming right out and asking her if she'd go with him to Mars.

I looked at her blonde hair piled up high, and her pale beautiful face and wondered how it would be if I hadn't been married to Joan at all.

I shut my eyes for a moment, thinking back, remembering the quarrel I'd had with my wife that morning, the quarrel I'd tried my best to forget over four straight whiskies at the spaceport bar late in the afternoon.

It was almost as if it was taking place again, right there at the table, with another woman sitting opposite me who could not hear Joan's angry voice at all.

"I mean every word I'm saying, Ralph Graham. You either tell them you're staying right here in New Chicago or I'm divorcing you. I won't go to Mars with you—tomorrow or next year or five years from now. Is that plain?"

It was plain enough. To cushion the shock of it, and ease the pain a little I stared into the fireplace, seeing for an instant in the high-leaping flames a red desert landscape and a city that towered to the brittle stars ... white, resplendent, swimming in a light that never was on sea or land.

All right, the first Earth colony on Mars wasn't that kind of a city. It was rugged and sprawling and rowdy. It was filled with tumult and shouting, its prefabricated metal dwellings scoured and pitted by the harsh desert winds.

But I liked it better that way.

I wanted to walk its crooked streets, to rejoice with its builders and creators, to be one of the first sixty thousand. With my mind and heart and blood and guts I wanted to be there before the cautious, solemn, over-serious people ruined it for the kind of man I was.

"I mean it, Ralph," Joan said. "If you go—you'll go alone. All of my friends are here, all of my roots. I won't tear myself up by the roots even for you. Much as I love you, I just won't."

It was five in the morning, and we'd been arguing half the night. In two more hours daylight would come flooding into the apartment again, and I'd probably have the worst talk-marathon hangover of my life.

I suddenly decided to go out into the cool dawn without saying another word to her, slamming the door after me to make sure she'd realize just how angry she'd made me.

I wouldn't even switch on the five A.M. news telecast or stop to take in the cat on my way out. Women and cats had a great deal in common, I told myself bitterly. They were arbitrary and stubborn and mysteriously intent on having their own way and keeping you guessing as to their real motives.

By heaven ... if I had to go alone to Mars I'd go.

So I'd really hung one on, had gone out and made a round of the lakeside bars. All morning until noon and then I'd sobered up over coffee and a sandwich and started out again early in the afternoon. It just goes to show what a quarrel like that can do to a man's nerves and peace of mind and all of his plans for the future, for I'm not even a moderately heavy drinker.

Early morning bar traveling is barbarous, a lunatic-fringe pastime, and it was the first time in my life I'd resorted to it. But resort to it I did, and as the day wore on I gravitated from the lakeside taverns toward the spaceport in slow stages, and twice in five hours reached the stage where I couldn't have passed the straight-line test. If I hadn't sobered up a little at noon I'd have reached the big, dangerous bar as high as a man can get without falling flat on his face.

The Colonization Board hadn't even tried to stop what goes on there around the clock, because there are explosive tensions and hard to uncover areas of

criminality in a city as big as New Chicago it's wise to provide a safety valve for—when Mars fever is running so high practically all of us are living in the shadow of a totally unpredictable kind of violence.

If anyone had asked me toward the middle of the afternoon what was drawing me, despite all of my better instincts, in the direction of death and violence I'd have come right out and told him.

I had Mars fever too. I hated the Big Lie and all of its ramifications, knew that every charge that was being hurled at the Colonization Board was untrue. But I knew exactly how all of the tormented, desperate men felt, the ones who fought the Big Lie and still had the fever and needed to be cradled in strangeness and vastness—needed space and a new frontier to keep from feeling strapped down, walled in, prisoners in a completely new kind of torture chamber.

The restlessness was growing because Man had lived too long in a closed-circuit that had almost destroyed him. The great barrier that was no longer there had brought the world to the brink of a universal holocaust, and just knowing that it had been shattered forever was enabling men and women everywhere to lead healthier lives, set their goals higher.

There was nothing wrong with that. Only—not one man or woman in fifty thousand would see with their own eyes the rust-red plains of Mars, and the play of light and shadow on a world covered over much of its surface with wide zones of abundant vegetation. Not one in fifty thousand would have a new world to rejoice in, after the long journey through interplanetary space. A world laden with springtime scents, in the wake of the crash and thunder of the polar ice caps dissolving.

Or possibly snow piled high on a sleeping landscape, with a thaw just starting, and the prints of small furry creatures on the white blanket of snow, for the first colonists had taken animals with them.

It would take another thirty years for newer, swifter rockets to be built and the supply problem to be brought under control and the colony to outgrow its birth pangs and its tumultuous adolescence and become a white and towering city, as huge as New Chicago.

And there were some who could not wait, for whom waiting was destructive

to body and mind, a kind of living death too terrible to be sanely endured.

The fingers of the woman sitting opposite me were becoming restive, tightening a little on my hand. It seemed incredible to me that I could have gone off on that kind of thinking-back tangent when I was so close to paradise.

For paradise was there, seated directly across the table from me, in that crazy twilight hour, if I'd had the courage to seize it boldly—and if I hadn't been still in love with Joan.

I could still make a stab at finding out for sure, I told myself, if I brushed aside all obstacles, if I refused to let my mind dwell on how I'd feel if something happened to Joan and I lost her forever. How could she have been so stubborn and foolish, when she was sophisticated enough to know that no man is insulated against temptation when he is lonely and despairing and paradise can be his for the taking, if he can kill just one part of himself and let the rest survive.

"What is it?" she asked. "You haven't said a word for five minutes. I'm a good listener, you know. I always have been—perhaps too good a listener."

It was the moment of truth, when I had to decide. Mars—and a woman too. Mars—and the big, important job, and the clatter and bright wonder of tremendous machines, with swiftly moving parts, whirring, blurring, dust and the stars of morning, and a woman like that in my arms.

I had to decide.

"What is it?" she asked. "Can't you tell me?"

"Someday I'll tell you," I said. "But not now. I've a feeling we'll meet again. Where and how and when I don't know, because by this time tomorrow I'll be on my way to Mars."

A pained look came into her eyes and she quickly released my hand.

"But we've just started to get acquainted," she protested. "You know nothing about me—or hardly anything. I thought—"

"It might be best not to know," I said, and I think she must have realized then just how it was, must have read the truth in my eyes, for a faint flush suffused her face and she said quickly: "All right. If that's the way it must be."