

*Robert F. Young has written 39 stories for F&SF over the years, and we can think of only three writers who have contributed as much fiction as Mr. Young (Poul Anderson, Avram Davidson and Ron Goulart). A Robert Young story is always a pleasure because its high quality is as predictable as its subject matter is unpredictable. Here, he begins with an old sf notion — "They built the spaceship in Larry's back yard..." — and creates something quite different and affecting.*

## *The First Mars Mission*

**BY  
ROBERT F. YOUNG**

**T**hey had built the spaceship in Larry's back yard. His back yard was bigger than either Chan's or Al's. This was because his parents' house was on the outskirts of town where the houses were far apart and did not belong to blocks, where in some cases the whole countryside stretched away from your back door.

Larry had had no idea then that someday he would become a real astronaut. Mars had fascinated him as much as it had Al and Chan, but in his heart what he'd really wanted to become was a fireman.

For landing jacks they used a pair of old sawhorses Al found in the loft of his father's garage. Upon them they nailed the deck — a platform constructed of scrap lumber they swiped from behind the new school building. Chan's father, who was a junk dealer, had already told them they could borrow the big conical vented tin smokestack he'd "collected" when the old Larrimore grain machinery factory was torn down, and one simmering July afternoon they freed it from the debris in the rear of the fenced-in junkyard and rolled it all the way across town to Larry's house. There, panting and perspiring, they jockeyed it onto the deck and braced it with three toenailed two-by-fours.

Scraping and painting the stack took them two days. It didn't cost them anything, though, because there were all kinds of paint cans in Larry's basement, with varying quantities of paint still in them. No two of the colors were the same, but by mixing the brightest ones together they came up with a beautiful greenish blue.

On the third day, after the paint had dried sufficiently, they installed the ion-drive — a 3-HP Briggs & Stratton motor Al's father had saved when he got rid of his old power mower. They'd already sawed out a 2'x2' section of the deck and constructed a lock that functioned on the same principle as a trap door. Lastly they installed the control panel — a 1957 Ford dash donated by Chan's father.

Look out, Mars — here we come!

All this was before Mariner 4 pulled the plug on Giovanni Schiaparelli's *canali*, Percival Lowell's canals and Edgar Rice Burroughs' "waterways," and prematurely "proved" that Mars was both geologically and biologically dead.

Weird, their choice of a landing site. Downright weird.

The map they used had all sorts of mysterious shaded areas that designated seas and lakes and swamps and whatnot, and they picked a region that was partially bordered by one of the larger of these areas. They could have picked any one of a half dozen other regions for the same reason. But they hadn't.

The site selected, they began thinking up names for the spaceship, finally agreeing on *The Martian Queen*. Next, they scheduled lift-off for 2200 hours the following night. Mars should be visible at that hour, enabling them to set their course. Since the round trip would probably take at least two hours and

they wanted plenty of time to explore, they had to get their parents' permission to stay out all night. Chan and Al had no trouble on this score, but Larry's mother had a fit, and only the intervention of his father had made his participation in the historic Marsflight possible.

They spent the next day loading equipment and supplies on board, painting *The Martian Queen* in big black letters on the ship's prow and speculating on what they would find when they reached their destination. The equipment consisted of three sleeping bags and Larry's father's flashlight. The supplies comprised three ham-salad sandwiches (courtesy of Chan's mother), three eight-ounce cans of Campbell's Pork & Beans (lifted by Larry from his mother's kitchen cupboard) and three cartons of chocolate milk.

They loaded the supplies on last.

"Maybe we ought to take along some kind of weapons," Al suggested. "In case the life-forms turn out to be unfriendly." Chan went home and got a hatchet; Al, a baseball bat; and Larry went up to his room and got the Boy Scout knife that used to be his father's. It had four blades, one of them a can opener that would come in handy opening the Campbell's Pork & Beans.

Nine o'clock arrived. Nine thirty. The stars began to come out. "I see Mars!" Chan cried. "Right up there!"

It was like a beacon in the night sky, orange and beckoning.

"Let's go," Al said. "We can set our course now."

"But it's not 2200 hours yet," Larry objected.

"What difference does that make?"

"It makes a lot of difference. Space missions are supposed to follow a strict timetable."

"Not when you've got an ion-drive. When you've got an ion-drive, you just say 'Let's go!' and you go."

Larry gave in. "All right. It's almost lift-off time anyway."

They climbed up into the ship, closed the lock and sat down in the darkness. Larry switched on the flashlight, shone the beam on the control panel and set their course.

Al began the countdown. When he reached zero, Larry "activated" the ion-drive. "We're on our way!" he shouted.

Since there wasn't anything else to do, they ate the ham-salad sandwiches and washed them down with the chocolate milk. After they finished eating, Larry switched off the flashlight to save the batteries. Then they sat in silence for what seemed like hours, but since no one had thought to bring a watch, the hours, for all they knew, may have been minutes. Another thing they'd forgot to do was install a view-port. However, there was a crack in the bulkhead where the two ends of the sheet metal that formed the stack were welded together, and finally Larry got to his feet and peered through the narrow opening.

"What d'you see?" Chan asked.

"Stars," Larry said.

"Gosh, we ought to be there by now," Al said. "Here, let me look."

Larry relinquished the makeshift viewport. "Hey!" Al shouted a moment later. "I see it! Dead ahead!"

"Okay, Al," Larry said. "I'll put her in orbit and you sing out when you spot the landing site."

"Hey! I see a canal! Two of them! Three!"

"Never mind the canals. Just keep your eye peeled for the landing site."

"I see it now. Right below us. It's a great big plain with a canal running through the middle of it. Hey! I see a city!"

"We're too high up for you to see a city."

"I don't care. I see one anyway. Take her down, Larry. Take her down!"

"I've got to turn her over first so we'll land right side up. Hang on, everybody!"

The maneuver completed, Larry revved up the ion-drive for a soft landing. Minutes went by. Or maybe only seconds. Suddenly there was a faint jar.

There couldn't have been, but there was.

Al in the lead, the three astronauts lowered themselves through the lock and crawled out from under

the ship and stood up. In their haste, Al forgot his baseball bat; Chan, his hatchet; and Larry, his father's flashlight.

There *was* a city.

**I**t stood at the confluence of three canals, the nearest of which bisected the broad plain on which the ship had landed. It had two towers as tall as the Empire State Building. Myriad lights gleamed above its lofty wall, and a pair of wide gates provided ingress and egress.

The air was clear and cold. Stars so bright they hurt yours eyes to look at them glittered in a stark-black sky. There were two tiny moons. One overhead, the other climbing rapidly above the horizon.

As they stood there staring at the distant city, a sound resembling thunder came from behind them. It crescendoed, separated itself into a swift succession of muffled hoof beats. Turning, they beheld a huge beast with a great gaping mouth bearing down upon them, a rider on its back. They shrank back against the ship. The beast had eight legs and a long, flat tail. It pounded past them like a flesh-and-blood locomotive, the ground trembling beneath its awesome tread. Larry gasped when he glimpsed the rider's face.

It was the face of a beautiful woman.

If she saw either the three astronauts or *The Martian Queen* — and she could hardly have missed seeing the latter — she gave no sign. The beast continued on across the plain, rapidly diminishing in size. When it reached the wall of the city, the gates swung open long enough for it and its rider to pass between them, then swung to again.

Al took a deep breath. "We must be dreaming."

"We must be," echoed Chan.

Larry didn't say anything. The woman had been tantalizingly familiar. *Where had he encountered her before?*

And that horrid eight-legged beast. It, too, had rung a bell.

"Well," Chan said, a quaver in his voice, "now that we're on Mars, what're we going to do?"

"We're going to explore, of course," Larry said, with far more confidence than he felt.

"The — the city?"

"I — I think we'd better skip the city. Let's take a look at that canal."

"Race you!" Al cried, setting off at a run.

His first step took him halfway to the nearer bank. He landed lightly on his back, bounced to his feet. "Hey, this is fun!"

Larry and Chan followed at a more conservative pace, taking little leaps and trying to come down feet-first. Sometimes they succeeded and sometimes they didn't. Al was already standing on the bank gazing down into the water when they got there. The water was so pellucid that the canal bottom seemed pebbled with stars. The opposite bank was perhaps a half-mile away. Funny-looking buildings stood at intervals along it, yellow light showing in their windows.

Numerous flat stones littered their side of the canal and they began shying some of them onto the water, seeing who could skip one the farthest. Al won. He shied one so hard it skipped almost all the way to the other bank.

"Something's coming!" Chan whispered.

Larry heard the sound then: the *thump-thump-thump* of padded hoofs. It came from the direction of the city.

At first he could see nothing. Then three shapes grew out of the moon-and the starlight. The shapes of three gargantuan beasts surmounted by the figures of three riders.

The three astronauts stood there transfixed.

There were other sounds. A rattling, as of weaponry. A creaking, as of leather harnesses.

The beasts were like the one that had thundered past them earlier. The fact that these particular ones were walking instead of running didn't make them one whit less formidable.

Gradually, as the intervening distance continued to shrink, the three riders stood out more and more distinctly. The one on the left was a handsome, dark-haired white man of indeterminate age wearing leather-like trappings and with a long sword hanging at his side. The one in the middle was the beautiful woman who had zoomed past the three astronauts shortly after their arrival. Possibly the mount she was riding now was the same one she had ridden then: there was no way of telling. Her coiffed black hair was held in place by a golden net; golden breastplates, encrusted with jewels, cupped her breasts, and a skirt comprised of innumerable golden strands alternately concealed and revealed her legs. The darkness of her skin indicated either that it was deeply tanned or that it had a natural reddish tone.

The rider on the right, presumably a male of his species, towered high above the other two and was armed with a ten-foot long rifle as well as a sword. His trappings were similar to those of the handsome, dark-haired white man, but there all similarity ended. He had white, gleaming tusks, and his eyes were located on the sides of his head. Antenna-like ears sprouted just above them, and in the exact center of his face two vertical crevices took the place of a nose. His size and features would have been enough in themselves to demoralize the three astronauts, but there was more: instead of one pair of arms, he had two; and while the moon-and the starlight raining down upon him left much to be desired in the way of reliable illumination, it strongly suggested that his skin was green.

Rocks. Everywhere you looked, rocks.

Mars had come to be associated with rocks. The relatively small ones photographed by Viking landers I and II; the two big ones in the sky called moons.

Standing in the wan sunlight beneath the oddly bright sky, Larry wondered if Hardesty, the astronaut stationed by the landing module training the television camera on him (the one mounted on the module had failed to pass the final series of equipment tests), was as disappointed with the landing site as he was.

NASA's choice of the site had been altruistically motivated, but it did the planet an injustice. Mariner 9 Mars, as it had come to be called, was a far cry from the romantic Mars postulated by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century astronomers, but it was fascinating in its own right. East of where Larry stood, well below the horizon, Hecates Tholus, Albor Tholus and Elysium Mons brooded above the broad bulge in the Martian crust known as Elysium. On the opposite hemisphere, just south of the equator, stretched the awesome complex of canyons known as Valles Marineris. Northwest of the complex lay the massive Tharsis Ridge and the shield volcanoes Arsia Mons, Pavonis Mons and Ascraeus Mons, giants in their own right; while farther yet to the north and west the mightiest of them all, Olympus Mons, rose almost fifteen miles into the Martian sky.

But it was the Isidis Region that had got the nod from NASA. Prosaic it might be, but it had posed a minimum of risk and proffered a maximum of safety. NASA had decided as long as a year and a half ago that if man were to walk on Mars, here was where he would walk first.

Only Owens, the third astronaut, orbiting the command module, was seeing the planet as it should be seen; alternately viewing its two "faces" —the young one and the old. In a way, Larry envied him.

MISSION CONTROL: "Everything okay, Commander Reed?"

LARRY: "Everything's fine. Just getting my bearings."

MISSION CONTROL: "You're television's newest star, Larry. The brightest one ever. The eyes of the whole world are on you."

His wife's eyes. His mother's and his father's. The eyes of his twelve-year-old daughter and his ten-year-old son.

Everyone's eyes.

He tried to feel all those eyes, but he couldn't. He felt nothing at all. It was his moment in the sun and he felt nothing.

Fatigue, that was why. Not physical fatigue, although he knew that too, but emotional. The inevitable result of spending month after month in a cramped environment in the constant company of two other human beings and trying not to become paranoid.

He had paused in the midst of his Marswalk not merely to get his bearings but to try to make sense

out of the flight of *The Martian Queen*, out of the Mars he and Chan and Al had seemingly landed on. Now he began moving farther away from the landing module. He had been on camera ever since helping Hardesty plant the metallic flag. The landing site was slightly to the north of the Isidis basin. During the final few minutes of the descent Larry had had to take over manually in order to bring the craft down in a relatively clear area. It squatted there now on its spindly legs, in grotesque contrast to its surroundings. The rocks and boulders that had spewed forth eons ago during the moment of the immense impact-crater's creation stretched away in all directions: southward to the wind-eroded rim, eastward to lowlands marked with mesas, westward to crater-pocked plains and northward seemingly forever.

He was headed in a northerly direction. He walked slowly, carefully. On Mars, he weighed less than ninety pounds, but the terrain was anything but conducive to giant steps.

Wryly he remembered Al's giant step; recalled once more the canals, the city and the plain. Had the whole thing been a dream? he wondered. And if so, had he dreamed the dream alone or had Chan and Al dreamed it too? He had been afraid to ask them afterwards, afraid of being made fun of. Perhaps for the same reason they had never asked him. Or each other.

After all these years he still didn't know.

The three riders brought their monstrous mounts to a halt half a dozen yards from where the three mesmerized astronauts were standing on the canal bank.

It dawned on Larry finally who they were. He had met them before. In books.

So had Al and Chan, although they probably didn't remember.

But knowing who the riders were didn't help. Meeting them in fictive form was one thing; seeing them in the flesh was another. He was no less terrified than Chan and Al when the one on the right shifted his rifle from his lower to his upper pair of hands, and when they turned and fled, he did too.

Two giant steps apiece brought them to *The Martian Queen*. They crawled inside, closed the lock and huddled together in the darkness. No one thought to "activate" the ion-drive, but apparently it "activated" itself. In any event, dawn had found them safely back on Earth.

The rocks had a reddish cast in the enervated sunlight. Larry was about to circumvent one that was considerably larger than the others when a faint gleam near its base caught his eye. Bending down, he saw a small, oblong object. He picked it up.

Straightening, he held it in his gloved hand, staring disbelievingly down at it through the tinted visor of his helmet. He knew that nothing would be the same for him again. Ever.

After Chan and Al went home, carrying their sleeping bags and promising to return the next morning and help dismantle the ship (it had been tacitly taken for granted that there would be no more Marsflights), Larry put the flashlight back in the glove compartment of his father's car and replaced the three unopened cans of Campbell's Pork & Beans in the kitchen cupboard. Then he ate a bowl of cereal and milk and crept upstairs to bed.

He hadn't missed his Boy Scout knife till late that afternoon. He searched the ship for it. He combed the back yard. He looked for it high and low, far and wide. But he had never found it.

MISSION CONTROL: "Commander Reed, a moment ago you bent down and apparently picked something up. Have you found something of scientific interest, by any chance?"

Larry hesitated. If he told the truth, would anyone believe him?

NASA might. They would more or less have to. Before being given the okay to enter the command module, he and Hardesty and Owens had been so exhaustively scanned that they couldn't have sneaked so much as a pin on board.

But whether NASA did or didn't, others would.

Not very many, but a few.

His mother and his father would. His wife.

His twelve-year-old daughter and his ten-year-old son.

*They* would believe him implicitly. Did he *want* them to?

Did he want his children, who, like their peers, had been breast-fed on technology, to believe that three kids had traveled to Mars in a tin smokestack in 1/6000th the time it had taken three adult astronauts to make the same journey in the most sophisticated space vehicle that technology had ever devised?

Did he want them to believe that on the cosmic scales Mariner 9 Mars weighed no more than the Mars postulated by Percival Lowell and populated by Edgar Rice Burroughs?

Did he want them to know that reality was a big joke, and that the joke was on the human race?

Did he want them to doubt — as he was doomed to doubt — the objective existence of everything under the sun and, for that matter, the objective existence of the sun itself?

MISSION CONTROL: "Commander Reed, have you found something of scientific interest? Come in, Reed."

Valles Marineris was worth a thousand silly canals. Olympus Mons dwarfed the tallest tale the romantics had ever told.

Did it really matter that both might be made of air?

LARRY: "So far, all I've found are rocks."

MISSION CONTROL: "So be it.... In a few minutes you and Commander Hardesty will be returning to the module to rest up for your experiments. Before doing so, Larry, would you care to say a few words to commemorate this historic moment?"

LARRY: "I'll try. Today, Commander Hardesty, Captain Owens and myself have surmounted a pinnacle in man's long and perilous journey to the stars. That we have been able to do so is owing infinitely less to ourselves than to the base camps that technology pitched along the way."

MISSION CONTROL: "That's great, Larry. No one could have said it better. Commander Hardesty, before you and Commander Reed return to the module, would you give the world one more view of the flag?"

Larry waited till he was off camera; then he let the knife fall to the ground. He kicked dust over it. As he turned to walk back to the module, a distant twin-towered city wavered tantalizingly on the periphery of his vision. It faded quickly away.