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TWELVE TIMES ZERO

By Howard Browne

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The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Old Martians, by Roger Phillips Graham

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The OLD MARTIANS

By Rog Phillips

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They opened the ruins to tourists at a dollar a head but they reckoned without The OLD MARTIANS.

The man with the pith helmet had his back toward me. Hunched forward, he was screaming at the girl in the lens of his camera. "Don't just stand there, Dotty! Move! Do something! Back up toward that column with inscriptions on it...."

The girl was tall and longlegged with ideal body proportions, her features and skin coloring a perfect norm-blend with no throwback elements. Right now she seemed confused and half-frightened as she tried to comply with the directions of the man with the movie camera. She smiled artificially, turned her head to look at the fragment of a wall behind her, reached out with a finger and started tracing the lines of an almost obliterated inscription in its stone surface.

The camera stopped whirring. Its owner straightened and grumbled, "That's all."

Now the girl was allowed to go back to her worrying. Swiftly she surveyed the crowd, but didn't find the person she was looking for. She started moving toward one of the arches that led deeper into the ruins.

I followed her slowly.

She passed through the arch, stopped, and turned her head toward the right, her eyes on something out of sight. She'd found him, but she saw me at the same time and her worry deepened.

When she moved back into the crowd, I strolled casually through the archway.

There was a vaguely defined passageway, the roof over it gone for half a million years, of course. And twenty feet away, oblivious of his surroundings except for what was directly in front of him, was my man.

His height and build were somewhat less than the norm. But it was his profile that drew my attention. A remarkable throwback; a throwback of a distinct type.

In fact, he might well have served as the model in the types textbooks labeled British. The resemblance was subtle. Only one trained to differentiate would ever have noticed it.

I let my attention take in his whole figure. His elbows had a habit of making fluttery movements when his exploring hands paused so that a strange birdlike impression was given. Also an air of ungainliness in the lines of the lean body, rather than the feline smoothness and grace of the norm-blend. It was so in keeping with his features that it served to strengthen the psycho diagnosis.

A throwback to an era ten thousand years in the past, and therefore, as the textbooks say, prone to mental instability. It was no wonder that the girl called Dotty had had the air of being perpetually worried!

She appeared now, from the far side of the ruin and approached the man.

He sensed rather than saw her and straightened up, every line of him etched with excitement.

"Dotty!" he said. "I've found it. I've found the proof. I've been here before, thousands of years ago when this wasn't a ruins. I *remember*."

The girl's manner reflected weariness, "Please, Herb. You've got to forget all about it. You'll talk too much!"

His shoulders stiffened. "Don't worry. I won't talk until I have proof to convince even them. Somewhere around here something lies buried. Something I will be able to remember. They will dig where the rocks haven't been touched for five thousand centuries and find what I say is there."

Dotty was shaking her head. "No, Herb, If it were on Earth I might half believe you. But not here on Mars. These—these people weren't even humanoid!"

"*Neither was I*," Herb whispered hoarsely.

I sighed regretfully. I'd seen too many cases like this one. I'd grown to dread them. But it was a job and a man had to eat.



The guide began herding the tourists back to the bus. I mingled with the crowd, and when Dotty and Herb climbed aboard I managed to stick close to them.

"Where'd you two go to?" the man in the pith helmet called from where he was sitting. "Stick close to me. I put a new roll in the camera. At the next place I want to get some shots of both of you together."

"All right, George," Dotty said obediently.

She and Herb were forced to find separate seats. They would do no talking, so I faced around and studied the three alternately. The man in the pith helmet, George, was a normal blend; totally unconcerned about his reactions on others so long as he could pursue his hobby.

The bus detoured a roped-off area in the center of the ancient city, the part considered too dangerous because of cave-in possibilities, and made its way out to the northern edge of ruins to the part that resembled the ancient cemeteries on Earth. The only major difference was that there were no remains under the evenly spaced stones. There was some doubt that it had been a cemetery. But the guide announced it as one. And that announcement as the bus came to a stop had a pronounced effect on Herb. He began his fluttery elbow movements again and looked around at Dotty with a triumphant smile. I moved up quickly to keep him in earshot.

He protested when George insisted on taking camera shots, then gave in and cooperated in order to get it over with.

Finally George snapped his camera shut. Herb mumbled something to Dotty that I didn't catch, and started down one of the lanes between rows of stones as though headed for a definite goal.

I couldn't very well follow after they left the main group. It would have been obvious. Instead, I veered off to one side, gambling that when they reached their destination I would be able to read their lips.

I got well away from stragglers and took out my mirrorscope, pointing it off in the distance and swinging the objective lens around until it centered on them. I was lucky. They were facing in my direction.

"It isn't a cemetery," Herb was saying with emphatic motions of his hands. "It was a parking area, and this stone was where I parked my airsled. I can remember it as though it were yesterday."

If this was a cemetery, the old Martians should have been here. But there were no voices—no bones.

I had to admire the man's subconscious. It was a remarkably shrewd guess. The experts wouldn't play along with it, but they would probably never be able to prove him wrong on that count. But Dotty was arguing with him. "How can you prove it was a parking area?" Her eyes roamed over the large field with its regularly spaced stones. "It certainly looks impractical for a parking lot."

"Just the same, that's what it was. I wish I had a shovel here. I seem to remember burying something near my stone. If I could find that it would prove I really remember."

"Why don't you forget it?" Dotty pleaded. "After all, even if it were true, what does it matter *now*?"

"It matters to me. Ever since we arrived here I've seen familiar things. Too familiar to be coincidence. I never felt this way before. I always considered reincarnation as ancient superstitious belief, just like everyone else. But not any more. I *know*. I lived here when all this was new."

"But can't you just be satisfied to feel that you did and let it go at that?" Dotty asked. "I'm afraid of what they would do to you if they found out what you're thinking."

"Hah!" Herb snorted. "I have a feeling that before we leave Mars I'll be able to prove it to them. Somewhere in this city is something that only I know exists. It's hidden under stones that haven't been disturbed since man first set foot on the planet. It isn't entirely clear yet, but it will come—it will come. Then I'll make them listen. They'll dig, and they'll find what I say is there. You wait and see."

"They'll lock you up, darling," Dotty said. "They won't believe you."

The guide was calling everyone back to the bus. I watched Herb scowl fiercely at the stone marker that he believed to have been his, open his mouth to say something, then turn away so that his lips were out of sight. Regretfully I put the

microscope away and went back to the bus.

I knew where we were going next, and I was uneasy about it. Herb and Dotty managed to sit together and I got a place right behind them where I could eavesdrop. But they sat in silence.

The bus had left the ancient city behind, to head out over the desert toward one of the few structures on Mars which had withstood the ravages of time without crumbling. An immense dome of solid concrete reinforced with pure copper rods harder than steel. The Martians had known what Earth civilization didn't learn until around the year three thousand: that copper can't be tempered, but pure copper becomes tempered of itself in a thousand years.

That immense dome was a honeycomb of passageways and rooms, some of which were not open to tourists. It would be a natural for Herb.

The bus stopped. The people were piling out and staring curiously at the smooth surface of the dome. Especially at places where the reinforcement rods were protruding and glittering like tarnished gold.

Two of the permanent guards had come out to take charge of the tour. I caught the eye of one of them and nodded toward Herb. The guard caught my meaning, edged over to his partner, and soon both men were warned that Herb was to be closely watched.

I felt better, knowing that a couple of others knew about him. Maybe it would have been smarter to have taken him in custody right then. But it would have meant a scene.

The procedure of the tour was for the guide to do all the talking, leading the procession through the roped off parts of the dome, while the two guards followed along behind to make sure no stragglers got left.

I let three or four people move in front of me so Herb wouldn't get suspicious. Dotty was sticking close to him, plainly worried. And he was more excited than he had been at any of the other spots. He fairly quivered, his eyes caressing the walls with a fevered look.

Dotty didn't miss his increased agitation. Especially after he whispered in her ear

a couple of times.

The guide took the usual path. Straight into the dome, pausing at half a dozen small rooms with carved walls, to arrive at a bank of elevators installed in the exact center; then straight up to the roof and the observation platform from which miles and miles of desert and ruins could be seen. Then back down to the second level, a zig-zag course through other rooms, and finally down a flight of steps to where the tour started.

I kept my eyes on the back of Herb's head. You can tell a lot by doing that. At first his head turned this way and that, indicating he was full of curiosity. I was waiting for that telltale sudden tensing, with the head directed at some spot, that would tell of a sudden "memory" stirring in the man's mind.

I almost missed it when it came, because it was between two passages—a blank wall. The briefest pause, then Herb was going on again as though nothing had happened.

But now his head had stopped its curiosity-motivated pivotings. It was the head of a man who was no longer curious—who has made up his mind about something. I didn't like it.

And when the group emerged into open air once more without Herb having tried anything I knew as certainly as I had ever known anything that he intended coming back here, and soon.

In the comfort station before boarding the bus I scrawled a hasty note to the guards to investigate the spot halfway between passageways 14 and 15 on the first level, and slipped it to one of them as I passed him to get on the bus.

We visited four other spots on the tour. When Herb showed no real interest in them it only clinched what I was already sure of, that he planned on returning.



At the Ancient City Hotel once again, I gave the high sign, and shortly Herb and Dotty were being watched by capable men, leaving me free to go to my room.

Once there, I called the dome. They were just getting the X-ray setup in place to explore that wall and promised to call me as soon as they were finished. Next I called C.I. and made my report. I was still making it when the operator broke in.

"Steve Merrit wants to talk to you," she said crisply.

"Make the circuit three way," I said.

Steve's voice came in. "I had to get to you, Joe. This guy Herb and his wife just left the hotel."

"C.I.'s listening too," I said. "Did they say anything that would point to where they're going?"

"To the cemetery first. He swiped a couple of knives and forks when they finished eating their dinner. Maybe for weapons."

"I doubt that," I said. "But I think it's time to pick him up. He's got to be committed."

"Wait a minute," C.I. said. "Joe, you catch up with them. Join them and play along. Tell this guy Herb you overheard him and guessed what was going on. Gain his confidence if you can."

"That's pretty dangerous!" I replied. "That guy's—"

"It's orders," C.I. said. "Steve, you lay the net so that whatever happens we can contain it."

That was that. Orders. But I still didn't like it.

I went to the desk and took out my compact paralysis tube. Then, reluctantly, I put it back. I would have to play the part. The paralysis tube would give me away as an agent. It would have to be up to Steve and the others to contain the threat.

Down in the lobby I saw Steve waiting impatiently. He was uneasy, too. "What's come over C.I.? They're toying with dynamite on this."

"I think I know what they want, they want to let him go far enough so we can see more of the nature of the danger. And I hope nobody gets killed. They should have spotted this Herb guy and not let him come here at all. I suspect they did spot him, and let him come to conduct another of their damned experiments. They don't want to leave well enough alone."

We were outside now. No one was around. The sun was just beginning to set, and the instant it disappeared the night would be pitch-black. Even if one of the

moons was out.

"We'll be watching on the standard C.I. band," Steve assured me. "They're at the temple right now, waiting for it to get dark." He grinned. "Good luck." There was a mixture of genuineness, half mockery, and worry in his voice.

At the temple ruins I found them easily enough and took the simplest course. I walked right up to them.

"Hello," I said. "I thought I'd find you here. I want to go along with you. I'm interested."

"What do you mean?" Herb was hostile and suspicious.

"You remember me. I was on the tour this afternoon. I accidentally overheard you. It would *be* something if reincarnation could be proven."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

I frowned as though being cautious. "I don't know." Then I put a disarming grin on my lips. "Since believing in it is legally classified as insanity, for the records, no." It was a nice statement. It could imply that I did, and Herb took that implication. He accepted me. Dotty was different.

"How do you know he isn't an agent?" she asked Herb uneasily.

"If I am, the fat's in the fire," I told her. "But wouldn't I be locking him up?" This quieted, but didn't satisfy her. "Anyway," I said, "if you can dig up something that you remember burying, an extra witness won't do any harm. That's what you're after, isn't it? Proof that will end the last bit of doubt?"

"That's right," Herb said. "And you can help me dig."

"Okay then," I said. And it was settled. We introduced ourselves, then lapsed into silence while we waited for the sun to set. It wasn't long.



The place looked more like a cemetery than ever in the eerie glow of black light pencils as we made our way along a row of stone markers. Herb strode purposefully. Dotty stuck close to him, still a little suspicious of me. I trailed half a step behind.

Finally Herb stopped beside one of the markers. "This is it," he said softly. I blinked at the marker, then at Herb. It wasn't the one he had singled out in the afternoon. Was he mixed up?

If he wasn't he was a good actor. He took out one of the dinner knives and squatted down and started to probe the soil, loosening it so that it could be scraped out by hand.

I watched him dig. Part of the time I helped him. We found nothing. After a reasonable amount of this Herb stood up with a resigned sigh. "Guess I was wrong," he said.

"Poor Herby," Dotty said.

"Yeah, poor Herby," Herb said with every appearance of tiredness and defeat. "But—that's that. Sorry to have gotten you all excited about nothing, Joe. Guess it was too much to expect anything." He turned to Dotty. "As long as we're out here, let's take a walk by ourselves. Huh?"

That was as obvious a cue as I had ever been handed. Neat. I was confronted with the alternatives of scrambling or calling him a liar.

"Guess I might as well go back to the hotel," I said cheerfully. "See you in the morning."

I headed back the way we had come until I was sure they couldn't hear me or see me with their black light pencils. Then, ducking down next to a marker I waited. After a couple of minutes I heard cautious footsteps.

"It's me, Joe—Steve."

"Good," I grunted. "What are they doing now? They gave me the brush-off."

"I got the play," Steve said. "Slick. Should we close in now, or wait?"

"I think I'll play my part a little further. Don't want C.I. to think we're timid."

"Okay," Steve said. "The next funeral we attend may be our own."

"Yeah," I said. "It might."

I moved into the darkness, not using my black light pencil, but keeping my sensitized glasses on so I could see Herb's if I got close enough.

I reached the spot where we had done the digging. I hesitated, then kept on, toward the spot where Herb and Dotty had been so engrossed that afternoon. In my mind's eye I knew exactly where it was.

My hands explored ahead of me, searching out each stone marker along my path, clinging to it as I passed it, and slipping off as I went on to the next. They were my only contact with reality in this total blackness.

I was thinking, too. I was thinking of what Herb had said about this being a parking area for airsleds back before the earliest known records of man on Earth when this city was alive. He was probably right about it at that. Analysis had shown the presence of copper and aluminum in the top surface of some of the markers that could only be accounted for by some metallic object setting atop each one long ago, and remaining so that molecular and atomic creep could set in, carrying such atoms deep into the surface crystals of the stone.

And I was wondering what it was he hoped to dig up. If it were some sort of weapon it probably wouldn't work after all this time. It couldn't! Or could it? A few things had been pieced together about the ancient Martian civilization. Not much, but enough to be sure that they knew a few things we had never discovered. They had been masters at creating machines with no moving parts. The electronic devices we had found had proven they knew far more about V.H.F. than we did.

I could see what C.I. was aiming at now. We might not even recognize what Herb was searching for. It would be better to let him find it, and get it from him before he could use it. If it was a weapon.

And it probably was a weapon. I was pretty sure his main objective was hidden in the wall in the dome, and that this thing in the cemetery was something that would help him get to that objective.

My thoughts came back to my surroundings. I was less than a dozen feet from where Herb and Dotty should be. I stopped. There was no trace of black light. I held my breath and listened. And I heard the faint scraping of the knife against stone.



I wished fervently that I had a standard C.I. infrascoppe so that I could see. Steve

probably knew more of what was going on than I did. I had counted on watching Herb by his own black light pencil, and he was working in darkness.

Carefully I stole forward, inch by slow inch, my ears tuned for the faintest significant sound such as a grunt of satisfaction that would tell of finding what he was digging for.

And a million thoughts taunted me, thoughts about the latest discoveries in disintegration frequencies, thoughts about how little we knew of that ancient Martian civilization.

But also I was figuring what Herb would do. He would find the object he was digging for. Unwittingly he would grunt his triumph. Dotty might forget his strict warnings to be quiet, and say something. Regardless of that, he would stand up slowly, fondling what he had found, remembering what it was and how it worked. There would be a few seconds before it would become a weapon in his hands, seconds that I had to make the most use of, and be ready for.

"Uh!" It was the triumphant grunt I had known would come.

Sudden panic made me cast aside whatever vague plan of action I had had.

I turned on my pencil, bathing the two in its black light. At the same time I said, "I *thought* it was a scheme to get rid of me."

It was the element of surprise that saved me. A still picture of the scene the black light disclosed etched itself into my mind. There was an object in Herb's hand. A strange, meaningless object, dirty, yet with definite form. It was cradled in his hand like a weapon. It was pointed almost at me.

I dropped my pencil and went in low, diving for his legs. I felt the air crackle where I had just stood. As my arms encircled his legs I heard thunder exploding nearby.

Training has its advantages. The moment I felt contact with Herb that training took over. I jerked and rolled in a movement calculated to throw him to the ground face down, the motion ending in a backbreaker hold.

But only a part of my mind was concerned with that. The other part was frozen with horror. Approximately a half acre of the cemetery was glowing. I saw Steve in the center of it with Herb's weapon pointing his way. The very inertia of matter held Steve together for that brief instant, then he was falling apart,

melting and evaporating at the same time, just like the stone markers and the ground around him.

I had the thing away from him suddenly, and I wondered what to do next. Running footsteps gave me the answer. It was other C.I. agents closing in.

Seconds later they had Herb under control. Dotty was wringing her hands and crying.

Me, I was holding the thing, afraid to let go of it and afraid to keep on holding it. But as the seconds passed without it exploding into destructive action again I began to let myself think I might live a while longer.

The area of destruction was molten now. Its heat was like that of an open blast furnace.

We skirted it and headed toward the road, lights in the distance telling us that cars were on the way to get us.

I saw Dotty stumble. I took her arm. She looked up at me, recognized me in the light from the glowing pool of bubbling lava, and tried to pull away.

"Take it easy," I said gruffly. "I'm your friend. Maybe the only friend you've got here."

Her look told me she didn't believe me, but she didn't pull away any more.

We walked along, and after a moment she seemed to struggle up out of her mental paralysis.

"Herb was right!" she said in a low, wondering tone. "He really did remember."

"It was plain coincidence," I said sharply, "and don't ever let yourself think differently. He's insane. It's a recognized form of insanity. He'll be sent to a good mental hospital, and in a year or two he'll come out good as new."

"Coincidence?" she echoed. Then she laughed. It was mirth that drifted quickly into hysterical hopelessness. I dug my fingers into her flesh until the pain brought her to her senses.

"Coincidence," I said. "Nothing more. I've seen seventeen cases just like his. How else did I spot him? I recognized the type. None of the others found what they rationalized themselves into thinking they remembered from the time they

were Martians. Eventually one of them would stumble onto something. That's coincidence. Not incarnated memory."

She turned her head and blinked at me. I nodded grimly. "I'm an agent," I said. "I go out on the tours for one purpose only—to spot psychos and make sure they don't get out of control. You'd be surprised how many there are. Some of them, like your husband, probably show no sign of instability until they get here. They look around at the evidence of a civilization that existed before *homo sapiens* had evolved on the Earth, and it throws them. If you want to understand more about it read the medical books. They get irrational pre-memories. They look at something and the idea of familiarity associates with the new impression. They look around a corner and see something, and build up the conviction that they had consciously known what was there before they looked around the corner."

I felt that I was making headway with her. I wanted to. I had to.

"You—you say there were others, and they didn't find anything?" she said. She was groping for something logical to grasp. I had to give her that something.

"That's right," I said. "And the law of averages said that someday someone would uncover something that's been missed."

She was nodding slowly now, accepting what I was saying. It was authoritative. She would find confirmation in authoritative books. If she wanted to pursue the subject she would find plenty of evidence, real evidence, to support it. It is a common form of insanity. It was important that she believe that.

We reached the road. C.I. had been prepared. There was a car to take her back to the hotel, a stationwagon for Herb who was now very submissive and somewhat dazed, and a third car for me and my precious cargo.



Ten minutes later I was in the Science Building basement, laying the thing on a wooden table, very gently. It seemed solid, each integral part of its form being of a different metal.

None of the men watching me lay it down discounted the danger it contained. They knew too much about how shape and dimension can affect the electronic properties of metal. They knew the thing probably didn't contain an erg of power

of its own, but probably triggered and directed the release of cosmic energies as yet unknown to them.

They stared at it. One of them reached out to touch it, then slowly drew his finger back.

I could see the decision crystallizing in their minds behind their serious eyes. This thing would go with the other strange and incomprehensible machines locked in vaults in a concrete building far out on the Martian desert away from the tourist trails of this dead planet. It would remain there until the day when human science advanced far enough to understand it.

"What about the wall in the dome?" I asked.

"They roped it off. They're afraid of it."

"Did you convince his wife he's insane?" one of the science staff asked.

I nodded. "I used the same old line. Told her there were dozens like him, and the law of averages made it certain at least one of them would find something."

He nodded, grinned without humor. "How we love to lie."

I turned away. There was a bitter taste in my mouth from all the lies I'd told—all the bilge.

But I knew the truth, too. I was as sure of that as I was of anything. It wasn't insanity, of course. And it wasn't reincarnation. It seemed to be, because the mind has a habit of *possessing* for its very own anything that enters it.

The truth of the matter was that somehow, in some incomprehensible way, the Martians were still with us. They hated us and they knew how to use our weak ones.

The old Martians—and their science.

I took a last look at the weapon lying on the table, then left the room and climbed the stairs to the first floor. I walked down the silent, empty hall to the exit and out into the night.

I let my eyes roam the blackness of the lifeless Martian desert. With an effort I pulled them away and fixed them on the warmth, the human warmth, beckoning from the hotel.

I started walking toward that bit of comfort, and as I walked the eternal question that haunted all of us in C.I. hovered in the background of my thoughts.

Would we be able to *contain* the Martians until we understood the terrible machines they had left as a deadly heritage?

Tonight we almost hadn't....

I thought of Steve.

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