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ACROSS THE AGES

by

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Dom Passante.

First published *Future Combined with Science Fiction*, October 1941.

Len was the visionary type of person—and they thought him crazy when he spoke of visiting Mars without a space-ship—then came the call Across the Ages!

As I recall, the business started when Len Brownson, Greg Smith, and I were rooming together in New York. All three of us were in the same line of business—radio and electricity; all of us were pretty much of an age and got along famously together.

Anyway, Greg and I did. We liked baseball and girls—nothing serious though—and the movies and television. . . So did Len Brownson for about a year of our companionship, then the oddest change suddenly came over him.

At the best of times, he was a moody, introspective sort of chap, dark eyed, with a mop of black tumbly hair that was never brought to order. Quite different from Greg and me: we are blue eyed, short necked specimens of the Saxon variety.

I wonder if you have ever come home from a rattling good evening to find a pale-faced, dark young man sitting in the dark before the window, gazing out onto the heavens over the rooftops? Maybe not, but that's the way we found Len on the evening of October 24, 1940. I remember the date well.

Just for a moment, my flesh crawled. The faint light from reflected signs caught the parchment white of Len's skin. His face looked like that of a ghost. His eyes were black pools against it; his hair had fallen over his forehead. From the way his hands clutched the sides of his chair, I thought for a moment he'd contracted catalepsy or something.

Then, with his usual tactlessness, Greg switched on the lights.

"Say, what the heck's going on in here?" he demanded, flinging his hat up onto the peg back of the door. "Snap out of it, Len! What's the idea of sitting in the dark?"

Len turned ever so slightly to look at us. "Have you never liked to sit in the dark?" he asked. He had a quiet, mellow sort of voice.

"Only when there's a dame with me," Greg grinned, and winked as he glanced across at me. Finally, as silence persisted, he straddled a chair and faced Len directly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded bluntly. "You cried off coming along with us tonight—said you'd work to do. Don't tell me this was it!"

It struck me, standing a bit to one side, that Len did not even hear the question. He was still staring out of the window, way out to where the stars were shining.

"Tonight," he said at last, slowly, "I begin to understand. Just imagine it! The slow procession of the centuries—ages—generations. Countless lives, countless people, and yet—Reincarnation! One day it must come again. That same being must return, to love and live again. Must finish that which was formerly undone. . ."

"Huh?" Greg's face was almost comical in its amazement. "What—what the hell are you raving about, Len?"

He got up, disgruntled, and ambled into the kitchen. I half turned to follow him, then hesitated. I stopped in front of Len and regarded him seriously. After a while, his deep, dark eyes glanced up at me. I admit they gave me a bit of a shock. There was a light in them such as I have never seen before or since—a deep, unearthly light, as though he were looking into things beyond the earthly veil.

“You think I’m crazy, eh?” he asked, smiling faintly.

I shrugged. “I know you’re O. K., Len—a regular fellow. . . . But I’m a bit puzzled, naturally.”

“Sit down a moment.” He motioned to Greg’s abandoned chair.

“You have a bit more imagination than Greg,” he said, as I sat gazing at him. “He’s a grand chap, but—well, *you* know! You may understand. . . . *She* is waiting for me. She has been waiting, for tens of thousands of years. I know now that worlds have lived and died while she has waited, locked, at her own wish, deep within her tomb. . . .”

I think I swallowed something. Certainly I could not speak.

“She knew that one day I would come back,” he went on, his voice a droning monotone. “By the law of chance I *must* come back! To think that there could be such a love as hers—that she could wait through endless centuries. Sleeping, not dead—sleeping in the ruins of a world and city that once were great. I know she lives and that her mind is bridging the gulf from her world to Earth. I know because . . . because at last I feel what she is trying to tell me!

“Yes, that is why I am sitting here, concentrating, thinking, brooding. Mentally I can see her, locked in her mausoleum. There is only one way in, and I am the only man who knows that way. But first I must reach her world. . . .”

He stopped talking. He was breathing hard from his emotions; a light perspiration had gathered on his face. Greg had come in with an apron tucked by the corners into his waistcoat pockets, two plates in his hands. As he heard the last bit he screwed up his pug nose.

“Say, is this a nut house or an apartment for three electricians?” he demanded.

“Mars. . . .” Len breathed. “That is her world.”

Dead silence descended on all of us at that. Then, suddenly, Len sprang to his feet, looked at Greg and me with blazing eyes. “Don’t you understand?” he demanded, with a desperation that was somehow uncomfortable to witness. “I have to go to Mars—to *her*!”

“Oh, yeah—sure,” Greg nodded consolingly, looking at me. “We’ll fix it for you all right—same way as they fix Napoleon and Abe Lincoln,” he added sourly. “Quit fooling, Len! Supper’s nearly ready and—”

“You—you dunderhead!” Len shouted hoarsely, suddenly gripping the astonished Greg by the wrists. “You think this is a *joke*? I mean it—every word of it! You are my friends, the only two in the world who understand me. . . . This is something tremendous, so tremendous I only half understand it myself. To me has been given a secret—Space-travel!”

“What!” I yelled, jumping up.

“I mean it!” he cried earnestly; and it was comforting to see something of that weird intensity drop from him. “I realized it this evening for the first time. For weeks I’ve been trying to get it, and now tonight— Came all in a rush! Maybe the conditions were better for telepathy—”

“Telepathy? Space-travel?” Greg’s mouth was an O of amazement. “B-but how the heck can we build a space-ship, even if such a thing were possible?”

“Who said anything about a space-ship?” Len snapped.

“You said it, you dope—”

“I said nothing about a ship. I shall reach Mars because no earthly power can hold me back. It is the inevitable law of chance which must operate. Earth is not my real home. I realize it now. I am as inevitably a part of Mars as you two are of Earth. . . . Oh, it’s all so complex! If only you’d try to understand.”

“I’ll say it’s complex!” Greg snorted, dumping the plates down. “I think you’re plain screwy—’Scuse me, the stew’s boiling over.”

He dashed back into the kitchen and left me looking at Len in curiosity. Quietly, he laid a hand on my arm.

“Really, it’s the truth,” he said seriously. “To explain it now with the thing only half done is next to impossible, but I believe there may be a way. Tonight—probably in about six hours—I shall go to Mars. I know that with absolute certainty. Don’t be alarmed, Dick—it just has to be. When the adventure is over I’ll see to it that you know the whole truth. Somehow I’ll get word to you—from Mars.”

“You ask me to believe a lot,” I muttered. “I guess I’m your friend, and— Well, don’t blame me for disbelieving you. It’s so crazy!” I insisted. “For instance, what is this law of chance you keep talking about? What the hell *is* it?”

He shrugged. “As near as I can tell you now, it means that if a certain set of conditions, bodily conditions, exactly fit another set of conditions, there must be a dissolution from the state that is wrong to the one that is right. Can you figure that out?”

I scratched my head over it. “Damned if I can!” I said. “Maybe we’ll get it clearer when you get to Mars,” I grinned.

He did not smile back at me. That light of strange wisdom had come back into his dark eyes. . . .

It was like having supper with a ghost that evening. Len hardly said a word as he ate, kept his eyes fixed on the window. He burst once into a frenzy when Greg moved over to draw the shade down. . . . Greg returned to the table with concern written all over his big face. Time and again he glanced at me—but what could I do? I felt just as uncomfortable and uneasy as he did.

We got to bed at last. I had promised myself that I would keep awake and watch for anything that might happen. The three of us had separate beds, Greg between Len and me. I know Len was awake a long time, staring at the sky signs flashing out their incessant glares through the night.

Then I guess I dozed. From remote distances, it seemed, I heard one or two strange noises. I was conscious too of a cold such as I have never known before or since. It felt like solid ice ramming down my back. . . . With a slamming heart I awoke violently.

I saw something I shall never forget—and Greg saw it too.

The pair of us sat shuddering with cold, gazing at the incredible sight of a transparent Len floating slowly from his bed toward the window! He was apparently asleep, motionless with his arms at his sides, bare feet out-thrust from the legs of his pajamas.

In blank horror we waited for the smashing of the window glass—but none came! He went through the solid glass like a wraith. Out, out, over the now darkened roofs toward the pale dawn. . . . We could see him for a while becoming even more transparent. Then he was gone!

And as he went, the fearful cold relaxed. Shaking with fright and reaction, Greg and I fell back onto our beds, too stunned to speak or move.

Naturally Greg and I discussed the horrible night for weeks afterward. And we had the practical side to deal with too. At first we got into a pretty stiff tangle with the law trying to explain why Len had disappeared.

Fortunately, he had no parents living, so inquiries from this direction were not forthcoming; but things might have gone badly for us had we not happened on a letter in his desk, in his own handwriting, explaining that he had gone away indefinitely to “experiment.” Pretty vague, but since there was no disputing his handwriting after expert study, it put us in the clear again.

Both Greg and I lost something of our liking for pleasures as time went on. We hung around the apartment after our day’s work, somehow half expecting Len would reappear. But nothing happened.

We bought astronomical journals and studied up the latest observations on Mars. Again we drew blanks—dry as dust articles, steeped in technicalities, carrying no clues at all. Inwardly, I think, we both bitterly reproached ourselves for the way we’d treated Len on the night of his departure. But after all—! Well, we’re only human beings, and he had sounded pretty cock-eyed.

I once thought of writing up the whole truth, as I have done now—but at that time, I had no proof, and so refrained. It is only now, in the light of absolute facts, that I can put the real story together without fear. For at last, after four months of the most dreary winter I have ever known, a message arrived.

We had no idea then *how* it arrived. All we realized was that in an evening in early January, we returned from work to find a curious burnished cylinder lying on the sitting room table. The doors and windows of the apartment had been tightly locked, and our landlady was certain nobody had called, nor had she been up to our apartment all day.

It took us half an hour to get the cylinder unfastened, and out of it sprang a thick wad of heavy, parchment-like manuscript, covered in Len’s familiar handwriting. I do not recall clearly what we did. My only recollection is that we pored over that manuscript together while seated on the divan—reading and reading until the fire went out and our eyes ached.

LEN'S STORY

My very dear friends, Greg and Dick [the manuscript ran], I have reached Mars. Let me tell you of the strangeness, the infinite wonder, of my voyage.

I knew when I bade you "Goodnight" that evening that I had also said "Good-by." It was not long before I felt the fast governing compulsion of scientific forces overpowering me. I have a remembrance of rising from my bed, of a window moving swiftly toward me.

Then there was New York below me, spread out like a map, the rivers shining dull silver. It receded incredibly. I no longer saw a mighty metropolis, but all the continent of America. Then the whole western hemisphere of earth, under its blanket of night.

Outward toward the eternal stars. I was cold, yes, but I only knew it with a certain sense of detachment. I seemed to have no body. I was either a disembodied thought hurtling over the wastes of space, else my body had been forced into complete subjection by my mind. The latter theory I found later to be correct.

The stars, the sun, the moon . . . they were all around me, all save the sun vaguely terrifying in their solitary, inhumanly cold grandeur. For a while I saw and wondered at the titanic prominences of the sun, the unearthly glory of its corona. Then Mars was all that mattered to me in this vast, overpowering universe of powdered stars and cosmic dust—Mars, toward which I was hurtling almost with the speed of thought, faster than light itself. Onwards and onwards, silent and inevitable.

I reached Mars at last. It was night when I arrived. I do not clearly remember the last moments leading up to my arrival. I simply recall that I found myself alone in a waste of reddish desert, standing beside a long dead vegetation-smothered canal. Yes, it was cold—horribly so. The air, too, was thin. But somehow it did not seem to matter. My body was still as adaptable as it had been in space.

And I had my body now because I could see it, but in the process of my journey I had lost my earthly attire. I was stark naked under the stars, a lone being in a graveyard of a world. Horrible, you think? No, not to me. I realized, I *knew*, that I was back on the world where once, very long ago, I had been born. My mind was completely in tune with my surroundings, so much in tune indeed that I experienced but little discomfort from thin air, cold, and light gravity—though after a while, I did collect some of the canal vegetation and fashion it into a rough garment.

Maybe you cannot conceive of an urge greater than life or death itself, an all consuming force? That was what governed me. Food, sleep, rest—they meant nothing. I had to go on and on—to *her*! So I started off.

Perhaps I walked ten miles, fifty, a hundred—I do not know. But I do know that an unerring sense of direction was guiding me. I knew exactly what I expected to see, but when I reached the spot where I expected to see it, there was nothing. No, I am incorrect. There *was* something, like a ghost out of a past age.

Imagine it in the cold, constantly changing light of the two moons of Mars. Imagine those remains of a city—vast columns of naked stone reaching to the heavens, silhouetted against the stars—columns standing alone, the sentinels of a city that had once been great, all that remained of a titanic industry and purpose. A city, a world indeed, defeated by Nature, by lack of water, by crawling rust eating the very heart out of vast machines.

There it lay, the ruins of Ralidon, once master-city of Mars where I had been born. As I walked its somber shadow-ridden recesses, brooded alone in the silence, it came back to me, little by little. I had lived here, yes—a Martian—and between Martians and Earthlings there is little physical distinction. The only difference is that Earthlings are grosser and less intelligent.

I saw her clearly now—tall, young, magnificently blonde, superbly commanding. Womanly indeed. My betrothed. Iana, my beloved. . . . Then what—? Yes! My experiments in the laboratory. Suddenly, the remembrance of a blinding explosion, and darkness. So that was how I had died untold generations before? I had been blown to pieces by an experiment, torn away from my beloved, parts of my disintegrated being hurled in atomic bits into the cosmos.

Swirling, swirling, in the void. A bit here, a bit there. Parts of it on Earth, parts on Mars, parts not united. I lived again, in another body, reincarnated, but with no memory of my past.

Yes, I recollected that much as I sat there. The rest I had still to piece together in scientific explanation and order. For the moment, though, only one thing mattered.

Iana still waited, knowing far better than I had done at the time of the explosion, that I must one day come back. She was somewhere near in this buried ruin of a city. Had not her thoughts reached out to me across the gulf? Near—in suspended animation, her body locked but her mind free. Unguessable ages it must have searched for me, until now.

I got to my feet, moved with unerring purpose toward a fallen mass of masonry to the east of the city. Methodically I began to move aside the stones. I worked constantly, without fatigue, until the Martian dawn had come.

By that time, I had pulled aside endless numbers of stones, had raised the heavy slab covering the entrance to the underground mausoleum. On Earth I could not have shifted it. On Mars its weight was just sufficient for me.

Below there weighed an intense and heavy gloom, filled with the moldering odor of age. There were sarcophagi all around me, some of them heavy stone of an early period, others transparent glass-like metal containing still the embalmed bodies of Iana's own ancestors. *They* were embalmed, yes, but she—

At last I saw her, in a transparent coffin isolated from the others. Around its edges, where the glass fitted into sockets, were tiny wire wound coils, glowing softly, still giving off energy that had so long held her in suspended animation.

I do not know how long I stood there contemplating her. She was so incomparably beautiful, so untouched by the ravages of time!—alabaster white, her masses of rippling golden hair flowing down over the whiteness of her pillow. Her hands were folded gently on her breast. She was smiling, ever so slightly.

For a long time, I hesitated over breaking that case, for to do it would mean her dissolution. I would be back again at that moment for which we had both waited so long. No, before I did that I must find a means of projecting to Earth the true story of my experiences. Only then could I feel that I had completely discharged my obligations to Earthly science for them to debate as they might see fit.

The mind of Iana directed me once again. In other quarters of the ruined city, underground, I found writing materials, together with a cylinder able to withstand the ravages of space and land on another world safely. But the complexity of the system of transit! Four-dimensional it was—yes, four-dimensional and controlled by thought waves.

I spent hours pondering it, sitting in the matrix of complicated unaged machinery determining all the mathematical factors for a reintegration of the cylinder on Earth—it was

like a problem in television, how to reassemble the electronic image once it had been transmitted. Hours I spent, thinking, thinking, and thinking. . . . Until at last I was sure that I had mastered the problem sufficiently to project the cylinder not only to Earth, but with a certain mathematical certainty that would bring it right to my old apartment. Only you can know if I have been successful.

But for the interests of psychical and scientific research I must, I know, explain the scientific reason of my strange adventure.

You will know, or at least scientists will, that a given aggregate of molecules and atoms, whether in the form of a man or an inanimate object, can, by the law of chance, break up to reform one day in exactly the same pattern.

Sir Arthur Eddington has propounded the chances of such a re-formation, admitting that should the chance occur, it was something like 1 plus 27 ciphers to one against it. Remember Sir Arthur's famous simile about monkeys plugging blindly on typewriters being able finally, by the law of chance, to type correctly all the books in the British Museum? Not through knowledge, but *chance*!

Some of us carry over from a past life the definite memory of an existence gone before. We remember strange people and strange places. There are times when we are sure we have visited a certain place before in some other existence. Such a memory has always been with me—vague, subdued, blotted out by the urgency of events around me, at times—until recently, when I definitely felt telepathic impulses.

Time and again I must have died and lived once more, but by the inevitable law of chance, the atoms that had originally been the Martian began to move nearer and nearer to their original formation. Each one had its own place in the composite that was *me*, but how many bodies I have had, in the interval, I do not know.

At last I was born as Len Brownson of Earth. There indeed was nearly the complete atomic formation I had once had. Daily in our life we lose atoms and pick up others. So it must have been with me. While I was still incomplete in atomic formation, I had only a vague knowledge of a vast might-have-been. But all around me, by mathematical law, those original atoms had drifted toward my one particular gravity. By degrees I picked them up in my daily life, unconsciously, until at last—on that evening when I so startled you—I realized that it was only a matter of hours before the original Martian form I had once would be in being again.

It happened. With what consequence? Surely it is clear? A specific build up of atoms, no matter what the time period in which it occurs, relating to a particular organization of atoms and surroundings, must fit itself *to* those conditions. Nothing I could do could prevent it. I would inevitably return by immutable law to those surroundings where those atoms had formerly been, because they were moulded to the pattern of that particular part of space. . . . Think for a moment of the thousands of people a year who mysteriously vanish. Why? Because they have achieved a condition they possessed ages ago and have suddenly been transported into conditions appropriate to their changed state.

So I came back to Mars, conscious only of the former identity because I was he—am he—again. Only a vague memory of obligations to Earth remain. I know again of my beloved of that other life—Iana, know exactly what to do, because throughout the generations, she, the mistress of science and its laws, knew that one day I *must* return, as all things must return and begin again. The universe itself is a cycle, so is the life within it.

But now I am through. You have the story, the explanation to put on it what construction you will. When I open Iana's case, the artificial conditions in which she has lain so long will cease. In one sweep, time will catch up with itself. With her union with me, the existent atomic frameworks re-formed from the past will shatter and pass away, assume their proper perspective in ageless time.

We shall vanish, only to be born again, together. Why? Because we are now both masters of mind and can control our birth—together, as it should have been so long ago.

The deserts of Mars will be truly empty. The eternal thin winds will sigh over them, carry memories of a former greatness; but for Iana and me, there will be a new beginning.

Good-by, my very dear friends. I go now to fire the cylinder across the void to Earth. When that is done. . . .

Iana!

[The end of *Across the Ages* by John Russell Fearn (as Dom Passante)]