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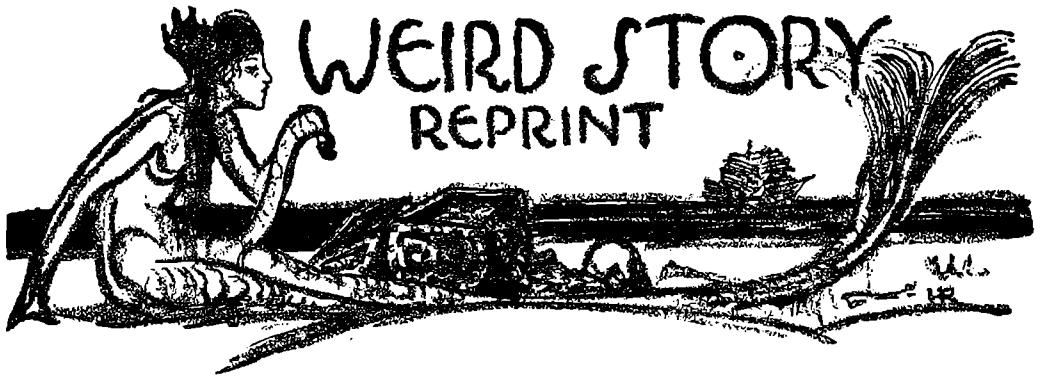
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## When the Green Star Waned\*

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

**R**ON TI is our greatest scientist. Which is to say that he is the greatest in our known universe, for we of the planet Venhez lead all the others in every attainment and accomplishment, our civilization being the oldest and most advanced.

He had called a meeting of seven of us in his "workshop," as he termed his experimental laboratory. There came Hul Jok, the gigantic Commander of the Forces of Planetary Defense; Mor Ag, who knew all there was to know about the types, languages and customs of the dwellers on every one of the major planets; Vir Dax, who could well-nigh bring the dead to life with his strange remedies, powders, and decoctions; Toj Qul, the soft-spoken, keen of brain—the one Venhezian who could "talk a bird off a bough," as the saying goes—our Chief Diplomat of Interplanetary Affairs; and Lan Apo, whose gift was peculiar, in that he could unerringly tell, when listening to anyone, be that one Venhezian, Markhurian, or from far Ooranos—planet of the unexpected—Lan Apo could, I repeat, tell whether that one spoke pure truth or plain falsehood. Nay, he could even read the truth held back, while seemingly listening attentively

to the lie put forward! A valuable man—but uncomfortable to have about, at times!

Lastly, there was myself, whose sole distinction, and a very poor one, is that I am a maker of records, a writer of the deeds of others. Yet even such as I have names, and I am called Hak Iri.

Ron was excited. That was plain to be seen in the indifferent, casual manner he displayed. He is like that. The rest of us were frankly curious, all but that confounded Lan Apo. He wore a faintly superior smile, as who should say: "No mystery here, to me!" I love that boy like a brother, but there are times when I ardently desire to bite him!

Ron stood before a huge dial. Now this is not a record of his invention, but a statement of the strange adventure in which we seven figured because of the events called to our attention by means of that wonderful device, so I shall not attempt its full description, merely saying that it was dial-formed, with the symbols of the major planets graven on its rim at regular intervals, and from its center there swung a long pointer, just then resting at a blank space.

"Listen," commanded Ron, and swung the pointer to the symbol of our own world.

\* From WEIRD TALES, April, 1925.

Instantly there broke forth in that quiet room all the sounds of diversified life with which we Venhezians are familiar. All six of us who listened nodded comprehension. Already our science knew the principle, for we had long had dials that surpassed this one, apparently; for ours, while but attuned to our planet alone, could, and did, record every event, sight, or sound thereon, at any distance, regardless of solid obstacles intervening. But this dial—it bore the symbols of all the inhabited worlds. Could it—?

Ron swung the indicator to the symbol of Markhuri, and the high-pitched uproar that immediately assailed our ears was characteristic of that world of excitable, volatile-natured, yet kindly people.

Planet after planet, near and far, we contacted thus, regardless of space, until Ron swung the pointer to the symbol of Aerth.

And silence was the result!

**R**ON'S look spoke volumes. We looked into each other's faces, and read reflected therein the same anxiety, the same apprehension which we each experienced.

That something was radically wrong with our neighbor, everybody already knew, for many years before the green light of Aerth had become perceptibly dimmer. Little attention, however, had been paid at first, for, by interplanetary law, each planet's dwellers remained at home, unless their presence was requested elsewhere. A wise idea, if one stops to consider. And no call had come to us nor to any other world from Aerth; so we had put it down to some purely natural cause with which, doubtless, the Aerthons were perfectly capable of coping without outside help or interference.

But year by year the green light waned in the night skies until finally it vanished utterly.

That might have been due to at-

mospheric changes, perhaps. Life, even, might have become extinct upon Aerth, so that no one lived to hold communication with anyone on any of the other inhabited worlds of the Planetary Chain, but it was hardly likely, unless the catastrophe were instantaneous; and in that case it would needs be violent. Anything so stupendous as that would have been registered at once by instruments all over the universe.

But now—this invention of Ron Ti's placed a remarkably serious aspect upon the question. For, if Aerth still occupied its own place—and we knew beyond doubt that it did—then what lay behind this double veil of silence and invisibility?

What terrible menace threatened the universe? For whatever had happened on one planet might well occur on another. And if Aerth should perchance be wrecked, the delicate balance of the universe would be seriously shaken, might even be thrown out completely, and Markhuri, so near the sun, go tumbling into blazing ruin. Then horror upon horror, until chaos and old night once more held sway, and the unguessed purposes of the Great Mind would be—

Oh, but such thoughts led to madness! What to do? That course alone held fast to sanity.

"Well?" demanded Hul Jok, the practical. "What are you going to do about it, Ron?"

That was Hul Jok all over! He was Ron's best friend and ardent admirer. He knew Ron's scientific ability, and firmly believed, should Venhez crack open, that inside of an hour Ron Ti would have the crevice closed tight and re-welded until inspection would fail to find any traces of the fracture! But at that, all Venhez thought the same way about Ron Ti's abilities, so Hul Jok was, after all, no better than the rest.

"It is matter for the Supreme Council," replied Ron gravely. "I propose that we seven obtain permis-

sion to visit Aerth in one of the great Aethir-Torps, bearing credentials from the council explaining why we have trespassed, and, if it be possible, try to ascertain if this be a thing warranting interference or no."

Why record the obvious? When such as Ron Ti and Hul Jok make request to the Supreme Council, it is from necessity, not for amusement.

The council saw it in that aspect, and granted them free hand. We started as promptly as might be.

**T**HE great Aethir-Torp hurtled through space in smooth, even flight, Hul Jok in command. And who better fitted? Was he not our war prince, familiar with every device known for purposes of offense and defense? Surely he whose skilled brain could direct whole fleets and armies was the logical one to handle our single craft, guide her, steer her, and, if need arose, fight her!

With this in mind I asked him casually yet curiously:

"Hul Jok, if the Aerthons resent our inquiry, and bid us begone, what will you do?"

"Run!" grinned the giant, good-humoredly.

"You will not fight, should we be attacked?"

"Hum!" he grunted. "That will be different! No race on any planet may boast that they have attacked an Aethir-Torp of Venhez with impunity. At least," he added, decisively, "not while Hul Jok bears the emblem of the Looped Cross on his breast!"

"And if it be pestilence?" I persisted.

"Vir Dax would know more about that than I," he returned, shortly.

"And if——" I recommenced; but the giant released one hand from the controls, and clamped his great thick fingers on my shoulder, nearly crushing it.

"If," he growled, "you do not cease chattering when I am on duty,

I shall most assuredly pitch you out through the opening of this conning-tower into space, and there you may start on an orbit of your own as a cunning little planet! Are you answered?"

I was. But I grinned at him, for I knew our giant; and he returned the grin. But he was quite right. After all, speculations are the attempts of fools to forestall the future. Better to wait, and see reality.

And as for surmises, no one could possibly have dreamed any such nightmare state of affairs as we found upon our arrival.

A faint, dull, but lurid reddish glow first apprised us that we were drawing near our destination. It was Aerth's atmosphere, truly enough, but thick, murky, almost viscous, like a damp, soggy smoke.

So dense it was, in fact, that it became necessary to slow down the speed of our Aethir-Torp, lest the intense friction set up by our passage should melt the well-nigh infusible plates of Berulion metal of which our Aethir-Torp was built. And the closer we drew to Aerth's surface, the slower were we obliged to proceed from the same cause.

But finally we were gliding along slowly, close to the actual surface; and, oh, the picture of desolation which met our eyes! It happened that we had our first view where once had stood a great city. Had stood, I say, for now it was but tumbled heaps of ruins, save that here and there still loomed the shape of a huge building; but these, even, were in the last stages of dilapidation, ready to fall apart at any moment.

In fact, one such did collapse with a dull, crashing roar, merely from the vibrations set up by the passing of our Aethir-Torp—and we were a good half-mile distant when it fell!

In vain we sounded our discordant *howtar*; no sign of life could we discern, and we all were straining our

eyes in hopes. It was but a dead city. Was all Aerth thus?

Leaving behind this relic of a great past, we came to open country. And here the same deadly desolation prevailed. Nowhere was sign of habitation, nowhere was trace of animate life, neither bird, nor animal, nor man. Nor anywhere could we discern evidence of cultivation, and even of vegetation of wild sorts was but little to be seen. Nothing but dull, gray-brown ground, and sad-colored rocks, with here and there a dingy, grayish-green shrub, stunted, distorted, isolate.

WE CAME eventually to a low range of mountains, rocky, gloomy, and depressing to behold. It was while flying low over these that we for the first time saw water since we arrived on Aerth. In a rather wide valley we observed a narrow ribbon of sluggish, leaden-hued fluid meandering slowly along.

Ron Ti, who was then at the controls, brought our craft to a successful landing. This valley, especially near the stream banks, was the most fertile place we had thus far seen. There grew some fairly tall trees, and in places, clumps and thickets of pallidly green bushes as high as Hul Jok's head, or even higher. But tree-trunks and bushes alike were covered with dull red and livid purple and garish yellow fungi, which Vir Dax, after one look, pronounced poisonous to touch as well as to taste.

And here we found life, such as it was. I found it, and a wondrous start the ugly thing gave me! It was in semblance but a huge pulpy *blob* of a loathly blue color, in diameter over twice Hul Jok's height, with a gaping, triangular-shaped orifice for mouth, in which were set scarlet fangs; and that maw was in the center of the bloated body. At each corner of this mouth there glared malignant an oval, opaque, silvery eye.

Well it was for me that, in obedience to Hul Jok's imperative command, I was holding my Blastor pointing ahead of me; for as I blundered full upon the monstrosity it upheaved its ugly bulk—how, I do not know, for I saw no legs nor did it have wings—to one edge and would have flopped down upon me, but instinctively I slid forward the catch on the tiny Blastor, and the foul thing vanished—save for a few fragments of its edges—smitten into nothingness by the vibrations hurled forth from that powerful little disintegrator.

It was the first time I had ever used one of the terrific instruments, and I was appalled at the instantaneous thoroughness of its workings.

The Blastor made no noise—it never does, nor do the big Ak-Blastors which are the fighting weapons used on the Acthir-Torps, when they are discharging annihilation—but that nauseous ugliness I had removed gave vent to a sort of bubbling hiss as it returned to its original atoms; and the others of the party hastened to where I stood shaking from excitement—Hul Jok was wrong when he said it was fear!—and they questioned me as to what I had encountered.

Shortly afterward, Hul Jok found another one and called us all to see it, threw a rock the size of his head at it, hit it fairly in the center of its mouth; and the rock vanished inside and was apparently appreciated, for the nightmare quivered slightly, rippled a bit, and lay still. Hul Jok tried it with another rock, but had the mischance to hit his little pet in the eye—and seven Blastors sent that livid horror to whatever limbo had first spawned it! And it was above our heads in the air, hurling downward upon us when we blew it apart! Lightning scarcely moves swifter! Even Hul Jok was satisfied thereafter, when encountering one, to confine his caresses to pointing his Blastor and pressing the release stud,

instead of trying to play games with it.

But that was, after all, the sole type of life we found in that valley, although what the things fed upon we could not then ascertain, unless they devoured their own species.

We found others like them in another place—blob-things that could not be destroyed by our Blastors; and we saw, too, what they were fed with. But that in its proper place!

We spent some time here in this valley, but then finding nothing new, we again took to our craft and passed over the encircling mountains, only to find other mountains beyond. Also, other valleys.

At length we came to a larger valley than any we had before seen. This was, rather, a plain between two ranges, or, to speak more accurately, a flat where the range divided and formed a huge oval, to re-unite and continue as an unbroken chain farther on.

And here we again landed where a grove of trees gave concealment for our Aethir-Torp in case of—we did not know—anything! But upon us all there lay a heavy certitude that we were in a country inimical to our very continuance of existence.

Why? We could not tell that, yet each of us felt it, knew it, and, to some extent, feared it—for the bravest may well fear the unknown.

IT WAS Mor Ag who had spoken the words which guided our actions for some time past.

“Were Aerth inhabited as we understand the word,” he had said, sententiously, “the great city we saw would be no ruin, but teeming with life and activity, as was the custom of the Aerthons before the light of the Green Star waned. So, if any be still alive, it is in the wilderness we must seek them. Wherefore, one place is as another, until we learn differently.”

How utterly right he was, speedily became manifest.

The pit-black murk of night slowly gave place to the pallid, wan daylight wherein no actual sunlight ever shone, and as we gathered up our Blastors and other impedimenta, preparatory to setting forth, Toj Qul raised a hand in warning.

There was no need for speech. We all heard what he did. I think the dead must hear that infernal, discordant din every time it is sounded. Describe it? I can not. There are no words adequate!

When our ears had somewhat recovered from the shock, Vir Dax shook his head.

“O-o-o-f-f-f!” he exclaimed. “To hear *that* very often would produce madness! It is agony!”

“Perhaps,” growled Hul Jok. “But I have already gone mad because of it—gone mad with curiosity! Come along.”

He was commander. We went, leaving our Aethir-Torp to care for itself. But never again were we thus foolish.

We proceeded warily, spread out in a line, each keeping within sight of the next. The noise had come from the north side of the flat, and thither we directed our steps. Well for us that we were hidden by the trees and bushes!

As one we came to a sudden halt, drew together in a group, staring amazed, incredulous, horrified.

We were at the very edge of the high-bush, and before us was open space clear to the foot of the towering cliff-walls, which rose sheer to some ten times the height of a tall male.

Half-way up this there stuck out a broad shelf of rock, extending completely across the face of the cliff from the western end to the eastern, and at regular intervals we could perceive large, rectangular openings, covered, or closed, by doors of some dully glinting, leaden-hued metal.

And all the space between the edge of bush-growth and the foot of the cliff was occupied by the same sort of loathly monstrosities as we had previously encountered! There they lay, expectant, apparently, for their attentions were seemingly concentrated upon the shelf of rock high in air above them.

A door close to the western end opened and a procession emerged therefrom. At last we had found—

“Great Power of Life!” ejaculated Mor Ag profanely. “Those beings are no Aerthons!”

And he was right. Aerth never had produced any such type as we then beheld!

They had faces, and they had not faces! They had forms and they were formless! How may I describe that which baffles description? We are accustomed to concrete, cohesive, permanent types of form and faces, and these were inchoate! Never in any two moments were their aspects the same. They elongated, contracted, widened, expanded. At one moment the lower parts of one of these beings would apparently vanish while the upper parts remained visible, and again, conditions were reversed. Or a front aspect faded instantaneously, leaving but the rear section visible, only to promptly reverse the phenomenon. Or a left side disappeared, leaving the right side perceptible; then—but picture it for yourself! I have said enough!

It made me dizzy; it provoked Mor Ag because he could not name them; it enraged Hul Jok, inflamed him with desire to attack the whole throng, shatter them—he could not have told why, but looking at them made him feel that way.

Ron Ti was mildly curious; Vir Dax frantic with ambition to study such beings. Our Lady of Bliss deliver me from the curiosity of such as Vir Dax, his methods of study!

Only Toj Qul and Lan Apo remained unperturbed; Toj Qul be-

cause he is a diplomat, therefore in nowise startled or amazed at, or by, anything. And Lan Apo was contemptuous; for as he looked at them, any race thus shifting as to bodily aspect must inevitably be shifty as to minds, and he had naught but despal for a liar of any sort. Strange argument, strange stimulus to courage, yet perhaps as good as any!

Only one permanency had these beings—and even that fluctuated. They were of a silvery color, and they were black, of that blackness which is blacker than black. Later, we learned what manner of beings these were, and whence they came to afflict Aerth with their presences.

They formed in a row well back from the shelf-edge, and then, from out the same door from which they had emerged, came another procession, or rather, a rout or rabble. These were, as Mor Ag at once asserted, unmistakably Aerthons. But how had that once wise and mighty race fallen! For these men were little better than brutes. Naked, round-shouldered, bowed of heads, cringing, shambling of gait, matted as to hair, and bearded—the males, at least—and utterly crushed, broken, dispirited!

It had long been a proverb on all the inhabited planets, “As beautiful as the Aerthon women;” but the females we were then beholding were, if anything, more abject, more deteriorate, than the males.

Many things became apparent to us who stared at these poor unfortunates. Very evidently, some *things*, from some *where*, had enslaved, debased that once mighty race who were, or had been, second to none in all the universe—and this, *this*, was the result!

**H**UL JOK shifted his feet, stirred uneasily, growling venomously deep in his throat. Despite our giant’s ferocious appearance, his heart was as a little child’s, or like



that of a girl, gentle, tender, and sympathetic where wrong or oppression dared rear their ugly heads. And here, it was all too apparent, both those pit-born demons had been busily at work.

The rabble of Aerthons halted at the very edge of the shelf, grouped together, about equidistant from each end of the long line of the Things we could not name. And as the Aerthons stood there, the animate abhorrences on the ground fixed their malignant eyes upon the wretched creatures, the triangular mouths gaped wide, and from all that multitude of loathly *blobs* came beating against our shrinking, quivering, tormented ear-drums that same brain-maddening discordance we had previously heard, even before we left the Aethir-Torp.

Of a sudden the Things standing behind the Aerthons ceased flickering, became fixed as to forms, although the change was anything but improvement. For, although they became in shape like other living, sentient, intelligent beings, their faces bore all evil writ largely upon them.

Acquaint yourself with all depravity, debauchery, foul indecency ever known throughout the universe since the most ancient, forgotten times, multiply it even to Nth powers, limitless, and then you have not approximated their expressions!

Personally, even beholding such aspects made me feel as if, for eons uncountable, I had wallowed in vilest filth! And it affected the others the same way, and we knew, by our own experience, what had befallen the Aerthons.

Had such foul things once gained foothold on the great central sun, even the radiant purities of that abode of the perfected would have become tainted, polluted by a single glance at such unthinkable corruptiveness!

They, the Things, slowly raised

each an arm, pointed at one Aerthon in the group. He, back to them as he was, quivered, shook, writhed; then, despite himself, he slowly rose in the air, moved out into space, hung above the *blobs* that waited, avid-mouthed. The Aerthon turned over in the air, head down, still upheld by the concentrated wills of the things that pointed. . . .

Breathless, my eyes well-nigh starting from my head at sheer horror of what must in another moment befall, I stared, waiting the withdrawal of the force upholding the wretched Aerthon.

Half consciously, I saw Hul Jok's Blastor swing into line with the poor shrieking victim, and, just as he commenced dropping toward those triangular, gaping, hideous orifices which waited, slaving, saw him vanish—and silently blessed Hul Jok for his clemency and promptitude.

Then, momentarily, we all went mad! Our Blastors aimed, we pressed the releases, and swept that line of Things. And, to our aghast horror, nothing happened. Again and again we swept their line—and they were unconscious that aught was assailing them! The deadly Blastors were impotent!

Ron Ti first grasped the situation.

"These Things are not 'beings'—they are but evil intelligences, of low order, crafty, vile, rather than wise! They are of too attenuate density—the vibrations of disintegration can not shatter, but pass unfelt through their atomic structures! We can do naught save in mercy slay those poor Aerthons, and destroy those foul corruptions which wait to be fed."

We did it! It was truest kindness to the Aerthons. Yet, despite the seeming callousness of our deed, we knew it for the best. And one thing it proved to us—low as the Aerthons had sunk, they had not fallen so far from their divine estate but that in each the silver spark that distinguishes the soul-bearers from the

soulless was still present. For as each body resolved back to the primordial Aethir from whence it was formed, the silver spark, liberate at last, floated into the air until in distance it disappeared. Then we turned our attention to the blob-things.

But even as we smote the filthy Things, we noted that the strange beings on the rock-shelf had grasped the fact that a new phase of circumstance had entered into Aerth's affairs. They stood, amazed, startled, bewildered for a space of perhaps a minute, then passed into activity with a promptitude well-nigh admirable.

Several of them calmly stepped from the rock-shelf into air and came hurtling toward us. In some way they had sensed our direction. In no time, they hovered above us, descended, and confronted us.

One, evidently of importance among his fellows, made articulate sounds, but we could not understand. Nor did we wish to! For with such as those there can be but one common ground—unrelenting war!

And so, again and again we tried the effect of the Blastors, and, as previously, found them impotent. I caught Hul Jok's eye. He was fairly frothing at the mouth with wrath.

**T**HE Things, close by, seemed to emanate a vibration that was abhorrent, stultifying. Little by little I felt a silent but urgent command to start toward the foot of the rocky cliff. Unthinkingly, I took a step forward, and Hul Jok's mighty arm slammed me back.

"I can feel it, too," he snarled at all six of us. "But," he thundered sternly, "I command you by the Looped Cross itself, that you stand fast. 'Tis but their *wills!* Are we babes, that we should obey?"

Suddenly—I laughed! Obey the wills of such as these? It was ridiculous! Answering laughter came from the rest of our party. Hul Jok nodded approvingly at me.

"Well done, Hak Iri!" he commended. "The Looped Cross thanks you—the Supreme Council shall give you right to wear it, for high courage, for service rendered!"

And he had promised me our planet's supremest gift, highest honor for—laughter! Yet, though I myself say it, perhaps the service was not so trivial after all. For there is, in final analysis, no weapon so thoroughly potent against evil as is laughter, ridicule! To take evil seriously is to magnify its importance; but ridicule renders its venom impotent, futile. Try it, you who doubt—try it in your hour of utmost need!

The Things became all black, no silvery tints remaining. One attempted to seize me, thrust me in the desired direction. Something—I had not known that it lay dormant within me—flamed into wrath. My hand closed, became a hard knot, my arm swung upward from my side with no volition on my part, and my fist drove full into the face of the Thing—left a horrible, blank orifice which slowly filled into semblance of a face again. The Thing emitted a strange, gasping squawk of pain.

"Aho!" shouted Hul Jok, gleefully. "They may not be shattered nor slain, but—they can be hurt!" And he swung his Blastor up as a truncheon and brought it down full on the head of the nearest. The stroke passed through the Thing as through soft filth, yet that Thing, evidently having enough, rose hurriedly into air and sped to safety, followed by the rest.

"Back to the Aethir-Torp!" commanded Hul Jok, and we retreated as swiftly as legs would take us. At that, we did not arrive there first.

To our dismay, we found it in possession of a horde of those Things. They were all over it, even inside; and worse still, all about it on the ground were Aerthons, a great crowd of them formed in solid masses, all facing outward, bearing in their

hands long, shimmering blades of brightly glinting metal, sharp as to points, with keen cutting edges.

"Swords," gasped Mor Ag. "I had thought such weapons obsolete on Aerth ten thousands years ago! Ware point and edge!"

"*Hue-hoh!*" shouted Hul Jok. "The Blastors, quick!"

Oh, the pity of it! I know that tears streamed from my eyes before it was finished. Ron Ti was equally affected. Hul Jok himself was swearing strange oaths, and, had it not been for Lan Apo, I doubt if we had had the necessary fortitude to go through with the ghastly affair. But as the silver sparks floated upward, a smile, almost beatific, came upon his set, white face.

"But they are rejoicing!" he cried out to us who grieved even while we smote. "I can feel their gratitude flowing to us who give them release from a life which is worse than death. They are glad to depart thus painlessly!"

And thereafter we sorrowed no more.

THE Aerthons were almost all disposed of when Mor Ag shouted: "Catch one or more of those slaves—alive! I would question——"

Hul Jok leapt forward, caught one by the wrist, wrenched his blade from his hand, slammed him against the hull of the Aethir-Torp, knocking him limp, threw him to us; and dealt likewise with another.

Meanwhile, our Blastors played unrelentingly, and presently there were no more of the unfortunate Aerthons to be seen. Yet, the Things who, through sheer will-force alone, had compelled the Aerthons to face annihilation—for they could not fight; the Blastors slew from far beyond reach of sword-blade or hurled rock—those Things still held our Aethir-Torp. Surely, Our Lady of Venhez kept them from guessing that they had but to slide the stud atop

one of the great Ak-Blastors from the white space to the black one, and we—ugh! Well for us that there was no Lan Apo among them to catch our thoughts!

A long while afterward, we found out that they were acquainted with the principle of the Ak-Blastors—and I can only account for their not using those on us by the supposition that they wished to capture us alive in order to gratify their fiendish propensities, so refrained from slaying us, willing to go to any lengths rather than do so, for the dead can nowise be made to suffer!

We drew back, shaking from excitement and from the strain induced by their evil minds, or wills, beating upon us; for, though they could not make us obey, still that force they directed was almost solid in its impact. Our craft was still in their possession, and we were standing on open ground, and sorely perplexed as to how we were to regain possession of our Aethir-Torp.

Hul Jok, war prince, solved our dilemma. He grasped a young tree, thick as his wrist, tore it from the ground, broke it across his knee—

"Club!" he grunted. "Our million-year-ago ancestors used such on Venhez. There are records of such in the Central War Castle!"

Hurriedly he prepared one for each of us, talking as he wrought.

"They can *feel*," he growled, "for all that they may not be slain. Very well! We will beat them from the Aethir-Torp!"

And that is precisely what occurred. On Venhez I had, at times, worked with my hands, for sheer delight of muscle-movement. But never had I dreamed what actual hard work was until that hour, during which, club in hand, we stormed our own craft, until at last we stood watching the last of the Things as they rapidly passed through the air toward their cliff-abode—all but one, which we had finally cornered alone

in a compartment into which it had strayed from the rest. We hemmed it about, beat it with our clubs until it cringed from the pain. Then Ron Ti thrust his face close to its face. . . .

We caught Ron's idea, added our wills to his, overbore that of our captive. It became confused, bewildered, shifted from silver to black, to silver again; the black became dull, smoky; the silver paled to leaden hue; the Thing crouched, palpitant with fear-waves, manifest in dim coloration.

"We have learned enough," declared Ron Ti solemnly. "Back to Venhez! This is matter for the Supreme Council, as I feared even before we started. Here we can not cope with conditions; we seven are too small a force. Back to Venhez!"

"Nay," Hul Jok demurred. "Let us remain and clean Aerth of this spawn!" And he indicated the captive Thing with a contemptuous gesture of his foot.

But Vir Dax added his voice to that of Ron Ti; and I—I was eager to go—to stay—I knew not which. The others felt as I did. Both courses had their attractions—also their drawbacks. For myself, I fear me very greatly that I, Hak Iri, who ever held myself aloof from all emotions of violence, desiring clear mind that I might better chronicle the deeds of others—I fear, I say, that in me still lives something of that old Hak Iri, my remote ancestor who, once in the Days of Wilderness of which our minstrels still sing, made for himself a name of terror on all Venhez for his love of strife.

But Mor Ag really settled the argument.

"We have this—Thing," he declared. "It must be examined, if we would learn aught of its nature, and that must be done if we hope ever to cope with such as it has proved to be in structure"—here an unholy light shone transient in the keen, cold eyes of Vir Dax—"and we can, while on

the return to Venhez, learn what has actually happened to Aerth from the two Aerthons——"

"One Aerthon!" interrupted Vir Dax. "The other died. Hul Jok knows not his own strength!"

He bent over, examined the living Aerthon and promptly brought him back to consciousness. Mor Ag spoke to him. The Aerthon brightened a trifle as he became assured we meant him no harm. He brightened still more when he observed that we held captive one of his former masters.

Then the Thing caught the Aerthon's eye, and Lan Apo hastily turned to Hul Jok.

"It were well to confine this—where the Aerthon may not win to it," he warned emphatically. "Otherwise the will of the Thing will compel the enslaved fool to assist it to escape or work us harm in some manner."

We left the captive Thing in the little room, fastened the sole door, and Hul Jok retained the ward-strip which alone could unlock it again. The Aerthon said something to Mor Ag, who smiled and patted him on the shoulder, reassuringly.

"He thanked us for putting it beyond his power to obey——"

He broke off to ask the Aerthon another question, then gasped.

"Dear Mother of Life!" he ejaculated. "The Things are from the dark side of the Moun, Aerth's satellite!"

The Aerthon nodded.

"*Avitchi!*" he exclaimed, and added another word: "Hell!"

We knew not his language—that is, none save Mor Ag—but we all caught his meaning. He referred to the abode of evil, as it was understood on Aerth.

WE WOULD have questioned the Aerthon further through the medium of Mor Ag, for we all were intensely curious, but just then that occurred which put an end to questioning, and served likewise to hasten

our departure from this sorely afflicted planet.

A crackling, sizzling hiss of lightning and a terrific crash of thunder—the world, so far as we were immediately concerned, all one blinding glare of violet-tinted light—and the great Aethir-Torp rocked under the impact.

“Aho!” shouted Hul Jok. “What now?” And he dashed to one of the lookout openings just as another levin-bolt struck.

We joined him, and one glance was enough. All about us and above us were swarming great iridescent globes, and it was from these that there now came incessant streaks and flashes of lightning—powerful electric currents.

Our commander leapt into the conning-tower, and the others of us sprang each to his station at one of the Ak-Blastors, of which our craft mounted six, and we promptly left the ground.

We had little to fear, for the metal Berulion, of which Aethir-Torps are built, could in nowise be harmed by lightning, nor could we who were inside be shocked thereby. But some part of the controlling mechanism might have been seriously disarranged by the jarring concussions, and, besides, it was not part of our natures to submit tamely to attacks from any source.

With a *swoosh* we shot into air and Hul Jok headed the sharp-pointed nose of our great fighting cylinder straight into the thick of the shining globes that swooped and floated and swirled about and above us. Their thin walls gave them no protection against our impact, and we shattered them as easily as breaking the shells of eggs.

With the Ak-Blastors we could and did shatter some of the globes which we failed to ram, but the vibrations of disintegration from these had no more effect upon the occupants of the globes than had the little hand

Blastors previously—and Hul Jok fairly stamped in rage.

“Ron Ti,” he exclaimed wrathfully, “your science is but a fraudulent thing! We mount your improved model Blastors, purported to slay aught living, disintegrate anyone, and now——”

His anger well-nigh choked him.

“Content you,” soothed Ron. “If we come again to Aerth——”

“If we come again to Aerth,” Hul Jok asserted grimly, “Aerth will be *cleaned*, or I return no more to Venhez! But,” he went on, imperatively, “you must find that which will destroy these Lunarions. We shattered and rammed their foolish globes, from which they play with the powers of thunder and lightning, but them we might not harm. They did but float, insolent, safely down to Aerth!”

“We have one Lunarion upon whom to experiment,” suggested Vir Dax meaningly.

“Ay,” snapped Hul Jok. “And I look to you and Ron Ti to produce results! See to it that you fail not!”

I have known the giant commander since we were children together, but never had I seen him in such a mood. He seemed beside himself with what, in a lesser man, I should have classed as humiliation, but I realized, as did the others, that it was merely that in him the dignity of the Looped Cross had been proffered insult, amounting well-nigh to defeat, and that to him the Looped Cross, emblem of our planet, was a sacred symbol, his sole object of adoration; and his high, fierce spirit was sore, smarting grievously, and could nowise be appeased until, as he himself had phrased it, “Aerth was clean!”

**WE** HAD formally made report to the Supreme Council and had handed over to them, for disposal, both the Aerthon and the Lunarion we had brought back with us. And the Supreme Council, in their wisdom, had commanded Mor Ag and

Vir Dax to examine and question the Lunarion, with me to make records of aught he might say—but he would say naught, seemingly taking fiendish delight in baffling us.

The Aerthon, whose name was Jon, had told Mor Ag, while we were on our homeward flight, all that was to be known as to the conditions on Aerth. Here is no space to record it all, but briefly it was as follows:

Centuries ago, the Aerthons, divided into nations, warred. A mighty empire, hoping to dominate the planet, attacked a little country as a commencement. Another and larger nation hastened to the rescue of its tiny neighbor. A great island kingdom was drawn into the fray. A powerful republic overseas took hand in the matter; so, ended the strife.

But rather than ending warfare, it did but give fresh incentive to inventions of deadly devices. Somebody found that the element—metal—gold, had strange qualities, previously unguessed. Another discovered that gold could be produced by artificial means, synthetically, to use Aerthly terminology. But the producing was by drawing it from out the storehouse of the universe, the primordial Aethir, wherein, dormant, are all things objective and subjective. And the drain on the Aethir opened strange doors in space, which heretofore, by fiat of the Great Wisdom, had been fast sealed.

Scientists of a great race, Mongulions, made too free use of the Aethir, hoping in their turn to subjugate the races of the West. Because of the vibrations set up in their labors, they made easy passage from Aerth to Moun. And on the dark side of the Moun dwelt a race of fiends, soulless, beyond the pale of the Infinite Mercy, who moved about to keep the Moun's bulk always between them and the hated light of the Sun. These had ever hated Aerth and its dwellers, for once they had inhabited that fair planet, until

they became too wicked, and they, and the Moun, broken from its parent Aerth by Almighty wrath, had been set apart in the sea of space. The Moun, although circling ever about its parent planet, revolved never on an axis, so had one side turned ever toward Aerth; and these Lords of the Dark Face, in their eon-old hate, saw chance, at long last, to regain their lost world, upon which they looked with envy when the lunar phases brought them during the dark of the Moun to the side facing Aerth. In their Selenion globes they invaded Aerth, availing themselves of the openings the Mongulions had unwittingly established.

Aided by these unholy powers of evil, the Mongulions had dominated, even as they had planned, all other races, reduced them to conditions of abject servitude, and were, in turn, subjugated by the Lords of the Dark Face, through sheer will-energy alone.

So, reduced to conditions wherein they were less than beasts, the Aerthons had remained, prey to their fiendish conquerors, subjected to such treatments as even now, while I write, sicken my soul within me to think of, and are unfit to describe—for why afflict clean minds with unnecessary corruptions?

Only those who have heard that Aerthon's story can conceive of what had, for ages, taken place in the ghastly orgies of the Lunarions—and we who did hear will never again be quite the same as we were before our ears were thus polluted:

So utterly abhorrent were conditions on Aerth that our Supreme Council decreed that such must be abolished at any cost. Not the planet, but the state of affairs prevailing. For they feared that the very Aethir would become putrescent, and moral degeneracy reach eventually to every planet of the Universal Chain!

But that, again, involved every planet in the matter. So they, the council, sent out invitation to all

other planets for conference. Then came delegates from them all. They talked, discussed, debated, consulted—and that was all.

Hul Jok, the practical, violated interplanetary etiquette, finally.

“Talk!” he shouted, rising from where he sat with the other Venhezians. “What does talk do? We be no nearer than when we started. Since none can offer helpful suggestion, hear me! I am War Prince of Venhez, not a sage, but I say that Ron Ti, if allowed sufficient time, can find that which will slay these Lunarions—all of their evil brood, and that is what is needed. Leave this matter to us of Venhez!”

A gravely genial delegate from Jopitar rose in his place.

“Oh, you of Venhez,” he said in his stately, courtly speech, “your War Prince has spoken well. Since Ron Ti is acknowledged greatest of inventors on any world, he has but to demand, and if we of Jopitar can place aught at his disposal to further his investigations, he has but to communicate with us, and what we have is at his disposal.”

One by one, delegates from all the planets confirmed the Jopitarian’s proffer, repeating it for those whom they represented. And one delegate, a huge, red-hued, blue-eyed being, went even farther, for, springing to his feet, he thundered:

“But if there is to be actual affray, we of Mharz demand that we participate!”

Hul Jok strode forward and slapped the Mharzion on the shoulder.

“Aho!” he laughed. “One after my own heart! Brother, it is in my mind that crafts and fighters from all the planets will be needed before this matter is ended!”

**I**T SEEMS cruel, I know, but what else was there to do? From then on, that captive Lunarion was subjected to strange, some of them frightful, tests. Poisons and acids

Vir Dax found had no effect upon him. Cutting instruments hurt, but failed to injure him permanently. Already we knew that the Blastors—deadliest weapons known to any planet—were ineffective.

Ron Ti was at his wits’ end! Two of our Venhezian years passed, and all to no progress. Then a girl solved for him the one problem he was beginning to despair of ever solving for himself.

He had a love—who of all Venhez has not?—and she, entering fully into his ideals and ambitions with that sweetly sympathetic understanding none but a maid of Venhez can bestow, had free access at all times to his workshop, wherein he toiled and studied for planetary benefit.

And she one day seeing his distress at bafflement in his researches, saying naught, withdrew, returning shortly bearing in her arms her chiefest treasure, an instrument of many strings from which she proceeded to draw sweet strains of music, hoping thus to soothe his perturbed mind.

There came a wondrously sweet strain recurring in her melody, and the first time it sounded, the Lunarion winced. Repetition of that strain made him howl! And realization came to Ron Ti in one blinding flash of lightlike clarity.

“Harmony!” he shouted, rejoicing. “The blob-thing is discordant in its essential nature!”

Never a maid of all Venhez was so proud just then as that love-girl of Ron Ti’s. She had, at least, produced some sort of impression on the fiend, made it suffer grievously. So over and over she played that selfsame strain, and, ere many minutes had passed, the Lunarion fell prone, writhing in anguish, howling like a thing demented.

“Enough, Alu Rai,” Ron bade her after watching the captive’s misery for a space. “You have rendered the universe a service! Now depart, for I would think. Herein lies the

secret of the weapon which will purge an afflicted world of its wo!"

IT WAS a mighty fleet which started for Aerth on that never-to-be-forgotten expedition of rescue and reprisal. Practically speaking, all the craft were of similar appearance, for the Aethir-Torps had long been conceded to be the most efficient type for inter-spatial voyaging. Even the Aerthons had used them before they were subjugated, and Jon the Aerthon stated that the Lunarions themselves had a large fleet of them housed away in readiness against the day when they might desire to win to other worlds. But, he likewise told us, until the Lunarions had exhausted Aerth's resources, they would remain there, and for Aerthly voyaging in air their Selenion globes were more satisfactory to them, moved by will-force as they were, than the great Aethir-Torps which were managed by purely mechanical methods.

Naturally, the Aethir-Torps from the different planets varied slightly, as, for example, those of Venhez had the conning-towers cylindrical in shape, and placed midway from nose to stern; the noses sharply pointed, sterns tapering to half the size of the greatest diameter—that of the waist of the craft; our Ak-Blastors were long, slender, copper-plated. The Aethir-Torps from Mharz were lurid red in color; blunt of nose; rounded as to sterns; with short, thick Ak-Blastors; and their conning-towers were well forward of the middle; octagonal in shape. But why amplify? Surely the Aethir-Torps of each planet are familiar to the dwellers of all the other planets.

And, of course, each craft bore the symbol of its home-world. The Mharzions bore the Looped Dart in gold, even as we of Venhez painted upon the nose of ours the Looped Cross—but the symbols of the worlds are too well known to require description.

Ron Ti and Hul Jok had full authority over the entire squadron, although the war-commanders from all the worlds fully understood the carefully laid plans of aggression. And all the Aethir-Torps, in addition to the Ak-Blastors, now mounted before their conning-towers a new device consisting of a large tube, much like an enormous *houtar*, terminating at the snout-end in five smaller tubes.

IT WAS black night when Aerth was reached. And it was not until the sickly, wan daylight broke that actual operations commenced.

Spreading out, we quartered the air until the great oval flat showed plain. It was our good luck that it was our own craft which was the first to come above it, and, as we identified it, Hul Jok's eyes glowed in wrathful joy—if such emotion may be thus contradictorily described. He caught Ron Ti's eye and nodded.

Ron Ti, obeying, threw over a lever. A most dreadful and terrific din shook the air with its uproar. From afar to the northward came a similar bellowing howl. Then from the eastward the same sound reached our ears, being replied to, a moment later, by the signal from the distant west. And from the southward came the answering racket, and we knew that all Aerth's surface was under surveillance of one or more of the Aethir-Torps comprising the Expeditionary Fleet.

Slowly, deliberately, we began circling above that infernal ovoid valley. But after that one hideous, bellowing howl, the tubelike arrangements before the conning-towers changed their tones, and from them came the same wondrously sweet, heart-thrilling, soul-shaking strain of melody as that which Alu Rai, the love-maid of Ron Ti, had produced to the exquisite torment of our captive Lunarion.



Over and over the strains were played, and still nothing happened. The idea was Ron Ti's, and I began to wonder if in some manner he had miscalculated. Suppose it did not affect all the Lunarions alike? In that case not only would the expedition be doomed to failure, but the name of Ron Ti would become the subject for many a jest on many a world. And we of Venhez must, perforce, walk with bowed heads.

But Ron Ti was smiling, and Hul Jok's fierce face bore an expression of confident, savage expectancy, and I—I waited, curious, hopeful still.

So swiftly that we could barely see it, an iridescent globe spun through the air, rising diagonally from the cliff-base, shooting straight at our Aethir-Torp. A touch of Ron's hand, and the strain of music sounded even louder, clearer, sweeter.

The globe, when within a quarter of a mile, shot straight upward, discharged a terrific, blinding flash of chain-lightning against our craft, followed it by a second and even more intense discharge—and still the sweet strain of harmony was all our reply.

The globe swooped until it nearly touched us—and I slid forward the stud on the Ak-Blastor behind which I stood.

The Lunarion bubble was not more than a hundred feet away at that instant, and, like a bubble, it vanished incontinently. As ever, for all that we could shatter their Selenion Globes, those demoniacal Lunarions themselves we could not disintegrate, or so we deemed then, and I know that I said wrathful profanities in my impotent disappointment.

But Hul Jok grinned, and Ron Ti nodded reassuringly to me, saying consolingly: "Wait!"

Well, I waited. What else could I do? But by this time the same game was going on all over the Aerth. Wherever the Lunarions had abode, the strains of melody were driving

them into a frenzy of madness, and they came swarming forth in their globes, hurling lightning-flashes at our Aethir-Torps, which might not thus be destroyed.

Yet, in a way, honors were even, for if they could not damage our Aethir-Torps, neither could we do aught but blow their globes into nothingness, while they themselves did but flee through the air back to their abodes, unharmed by the vibrations from the Ak-Blastors.

And in this manner, for three days and nights the futile warfare continued, and by morning of the fourth day I doubt if there was left to the Lunarions a single Selenion Globe. At least, for two days and nights, we continued playing that music over and over until all Aerth vibrated from the repetitional sound-waves.

But on the next morning following, we had clear proof that the Lunarions had had all that they could endure of suffering. An Aethir-Torp, of a far different model from any we were acquainted with, shot into air with incredible speed, and catching a craft of Saturn unawares, rammed it in midair, completely wrecking it—only to be shattered into dust in its turn by the Ak-Blastors of a Markhurian Aethir-Torp. The crew of the ill-fated craft we could not save, but they were amply avenged ere long.

It happened that we witnessed this ramming, and Mor Ag shouted his surprize.

"But that Aethir-Torp, despite its speed, is of an age-old model," he affirmed excitedly, and Hul Jok nodded agreement.

"Our Lady of Love grant that their Ak-Blastors be of equally antiquated model," he chortled. "If they are, their vibrations are of too long and too slow wave-lengths to affect the modern Berulion metal of which we now build our fighting craft!"

And so it later proved to be.

WE COULD very easily have shattered their old-model crafts, taking our own good time therefor, but to what avail? It would leave us the same old problem. The Lunarions, with their levitational powers, would descend safely to the ground and would still inhabit Aerth, overrunning it like the evil vermin that they were.

But the far-thinking brains of Ron Ti and Hul Jok had laid out a carefully evolved plan, and aside from continuing to drive the Lunarions mad with the hated music and evading further collisions with their Aethir-Torps (no light task, either, considering their speed) we of the expedition refrained from using our Ak-Blastors until the Lunarions must have come to the very conclusion our master-strategists desired them to reach eventually—that in some manner we had exhausted our vibratory charges.

At last, one morning we were made the objects of a concerted attack. From all points came hurtling those old-style Aethir-Torps, and we—we fled from before them! Finding that their old-model Ak-Blastors had little or no effect upon us, protected as we were by the Berulion plates, they fell back on their levin-bolts, and these they hurled incessantly, until they, as well as we, were well out of Aerth's atmosphere, and into the great Ocean of Aethereal Space.

But ever we played that same maddening music, and it acted as powerful incentive to hold them to the pursuit, for they had lost all caution in their rage. And ever, as we fled from before them, we laughed.

And at last, some five million miles from Aerth's surface, we turned upon them!

Stretched out in a long, curved line, we awaited their coming, and as they came within our range, every Aethir-Torp commenced whirling about as if on a transverse axis, presenting one moment the nose, next a

side, then the stern, and again the other side, and once more the stem or prow, in this manner giving play to all six Ak-Blastors—the forward one, the two on each side, and the one pointing to rearward.

And the Lunarions, although heretofore we might not injure them, were soon without protection, their Aethir-Torps shattered, left exposed to the deadly chill of outer space, and their forms, loose though they were in structure, subjected to the awful pressure of the inelastic Aethir!

It compressed their bodies as if they had been density itself. And, having no defense, they instinctively drew close to each other—and Aethiric pressure did all that was necessary.

They were jammed into a single mass, and *then* we played upon that with the Ak-Blastors until that mass, too, became as nothing!

Only from that blank space where the fiends, the Lords of the Dark Face, had been, floated in all directions a shower or swarm of dull red sparks, which, even as we watched, slowly flickered and burned out in depths of Abysmal Night!

RON TI bowed his head in reverence to that great Power which had permitted us to be the instruments of its vengeance, signing in the air before him the Looped Cross, symbol of Life.

"As I suspected," he said, gravely, "they were soulless. They had naught but form and vitality, mind and will—life of the lower order, non-enduring. The red sparks proved that—and even those have burned out, resolved back into the Sea of Undifferentiated Energy. Our work is ended. Let Aerth work out its own rehabilitation. That wondrous race of Aerthons will soon rear the foundations of an even greater civilization than their world has ever before known."