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the ninety- minute war

by . . . *Richard E. Lowe*

The war was as swift and as unexpected as a thunderclap in January. But its very brevity shook a spaceman's universe.

SCATTER A handful of diamonds and rubies loosely on a velvet cloth, and then, a short distance away, drop a grain of dirt. Do that, and you'll have a fair approximation of the universe ruled by Tarr, biggest ruby of them all, and her sister planets. And the grain of dirt would be the tiny world of Likk.

Would any man in his right mind, given free choice of the rubies and diamonds choose Likk as the planet of his heart's desire?

Yet the scrubby planet of Likk, scarcely a thousand miles in circumference, did have certain advantages—of one kind, perhaps, to a man on the run from the justice of Kursh of Tarr, and quite another to a venerable citizen, scientist and scholar like Eldo Lite.

To the first man it meant safety from pursuit; to the second, security from intrusion. And the same natural circumstances served both, for Likk was on the fringe, and yet not really a part of the Universe of Tarr. It had never been claimed or settled by Kursh or any of his predecessors in the

In his boyhood Richard Lowe was determined to be an engineer—until he dipped into trigonometry in high school and decided that journalism was more to his liking. A colorful and varied career as a newspaperman followed, interrupted by five years of soldiering. He resides in Miami, and despite a "noisy and spirited" family of youngsters manages to write science fiction of exceptional merit. There's an astounding vigor in Eldo Lite, bermit extraordinary.

long age of universal expansion. In fact, it was difficult to imagine a planet tinier or more useless than Likk, with its spongy interior and atmospheric envelope of thick, muggy fog.

It was enveloped always in perpetual twilight, for it was blessed not only with the suns that shone on the planets of Tarr, but with a larger orb of first-magnitude brightness, hovering close to the rim of another universe. Together the many suns heated Likk around the clock, and from the spongy mass beneath its crust came moisture, oozing, to condense into heavy clinging layers of vapor mist thirty miles thick.

But if a man wanted solitude, Likk was an ideal retreat. The food problem was negligible—for edibles grew wild and a man could thrive simply by hardening his will and burying his longing for meat. And the money problem didn't even exist, for how could money benefit anyone when there was no need for taxes to pay for the building of roads, or fleets of massive spaceships for commerce and for war.

As for the space drifters and the traders who visited Likk with occasional supplies from Tarr—a cargo hold of ore sent them away happy. Yet there was not enough ore to justify colonial expansion and development. Happy Likk!

There was no need even for jails. Likk itself was a giant prison, its inmates voluntarily sentenced

by their own peculiar temperaments to months or years of solitude.

So Eldo Lite was happy, naturally. He had been ever since that memorable day, twenty years before, when he had tired of the glories and honors and brilliancies of life at the court of Kursh, and had consigned his past to history at the age of seventy-six. On that day he had manned his single-place spaceshooter and journeyed out on the long sky voyage to Likk.

It had taken Eldo Lite only six months to solve the problem of the fog. He had utilized one of his own discoveries—Element 113. By patient experimentation and by shooting bombarding particles of that unusual isotope into a mixture of hydrogen, oxygen and one or two obscure bits of matter, he had succeeded in creating a molecular dispeller.

Wherever this machine functioned all the wet, clinging, disagreeable fog dispersed as if by magic, lifting upward and outward like a huge umbrella fifty feet in diameter. And with the fog gone Likk became a more pleasant place to live. Beneath a vast network of air bubbles Lite found that he could move freely about, breathing good air, and it wasn't long before his tortured sinuses gratefully settled back to normal.

For nineteen years Eldo Lite and his companions lived an easy, relaxed and relatively carefree life on

Likk—until one day, pussyfooting timidly down through the upper layers of fog, there descended a long, black cruiser from Tarr.

It disgorged a crew of stern-faced spacemen who proceeded to erect a radio station, and the officer in command promptly informed the startled original colonists that Likk's days of solitude were over. Kursh of Tarr, it appeared, was embarking on a new era of conquest, reaching out for the universe next door. In fact, Likk was already marked on Kursh's maps as Re-supply Depot Number One in the long line of worlds to be conquered. In a matter of days, the advance commander assured Lite, more ships would arrive and huge storehouses would be built, and little Likk would become an active military base.

"A matter of days," muttered Eldo Lite to himself, glowering in bitter anger at the litter of equipment on the long bench in the laboratory he had built to enlarge the horizons of his still vigorous mind. For Eldo Lite, though old, was younger mentally than most men half his age.

He stroked the back of the furry *basik* he kept for a pet, and the round little animal blinked uncomprehendingly up at him. Happy beast, thought Eldo—too small to get in the way, all bones and skin and fur and thus no temptation to the appetite.

"A matter of days," he repeated, and went resolutely to work.

Long years ago Eldo had conceived a daring idea which he now set about executing. He had shelved the original plans because he had grown weary of aiding Kursh of Tarr in his conquests and ambitions. But the challenge now was of more vital concern to him.

He took a spare dispeller and dismantled it. To the combustion chamber, where his Element 113 ceaselessly bombarded the hydro-oxy core, he carefully added another rare isotope which he called Eldurium—a substance unknown to anyone else in all the worlds of Tarr.

Painstakingly he remounted the new core in the dispeller case, made a few more minor alterations, and slowly withdrew a tapered controller a fraction of an inch in length. Then he took a large ballpeen hammer and struck directly toward the box. It stopped, literally in mid-air, and bounced back as though it had been pounded on a ball of rubber.

Eldo smiled, and stroked the *basik's* back again. This was his answer to all the ruthlessly ambitious plans of Kursh of Tarr: a matter repeller of undreamed-of power.

It needed only to be duplicated on a much larger scale, and his triumph would be assured. No, there was one thing more. He needed a thin, but strong film of—of what? The answer came as he continued to stroke the *basik*.

Anti-force. He struck at the box again, and carefully measured the distance from the stopped hammer at its core to its much wider perimeter.

He withdrew the controller another fraction of an inch and tested again. The wall of anti-force moved out three feet, then six, then twelve. He continued to experiment, using a radio to move the controller. He was unable to get past the anti-force himself, but quickly discovered that invisible waves of non-matter could surmount that obstacle without difficulty.

Eldo instantly calculated that even in its experimental small size the anti-force would erect an impenetrable sphere a full mile in diameter. Exultantly he caused the controller to be pushed home, effectively neutralizing the machine, and went to work again with pencil and paper to design a repeller capable of enveloping the entire planet of Likk with a sphere of force fifty miles above the ground.

When Eldo finished the big machine, some eighteen hours later, he was tired, and the *basik* was hungry. Eldo had stopped neither to rest nor to eat, and although it was unlike him to forget the *basik* even while fiercely preoccupied, who within reason could blame him now?

Eldo grasped the controlling rod and pulled it gently toward the designated stop point. As he did so the *basik*, impatient at last,

leaped to his shoulder. Eldo flinched, and the controller came cleanly and *completely* out of the repeller.

He froze, horrified. He saw the loose objects in the room sway and tumble as the anti-force swept through and past them—so swiftly that they remained unharmed. But he knew that once the wave stopped moving, neither speed nor force nor mass could find a way through the tight-meshed particles in their frozen upward spiral.

And with no controller—Eldo sighed. What did it matter? The sphere should expand until it encircled the planet to a height of fifty miles, and stop. The accident simply meant there was now no way to neutralize the anti-force. The core had closed itself over the hole into which the controller had originally been inserted. With the rod fully withdrawn, the elements and nuclei inside had immediately sealed over the opening.

Eldo knew that Eldurium had an extremely long half-life. There would be a time interval of a hundred and twenty years, three days, four minutes and fifty-eight seconds—measured from the time the *basik* had jumped upon his arm—before the repeller would consume enough of itself to reduce below critical mass, and the anti-force would cease to exist.

Very well, he thought. So be it. He got the starving *basik* a pan of strained *outra* and watched the beast gobble it down. Then Eldo

Lite stretched out on a cot in his laboratory and slept. Incredibly, for the first time in his life, he slept brain and all.

A THOUSAND miles from the planet Likk a warship of Tarr hurtled silently through the black night of space with an eager fourth lieutenant in the commander's chair. Behind the warship a convoy of bulky freighters maintained a steady pace, each ship's presence accounted for by glowing lights on the battle cruiser's locator panel.

Everything was in order and the future seemed bright indeed to the lieutenant in command. Not many young men only six months out of Leaders Academy could look back on two promotions scarcely a fortnight apart. Briskly he gave orders to reverse ship, set the stern rockets to half blast and commence the long descent toward Likk.

The advance communication party had radioed that complete preparation had been made for the arrival of the main supply party, and that no resistance from any source was anticipated.

The young officer glanced at the deceleration dial. It showed a normal curve. But even as he stared the back of his chair began to press harder against him. He stirred in consternation, unable to believe that in less than five seconds the dial hand had fallen sharply. Deceleration was ten times normal, and he couldn't move. What could it mean? All

other instruments were functioning normally. There were no other malfunctions anywhere in the control room. Could the ship be running, rear-on, into an obstacle?

The vessel began to shudder. The deceleration pointer spun the rest of the way around and came to a dead stop. The ship seemed bent on mushing for a moment and then, still under the force of Half Blast, stern, took off in the opposite direction.

Now the acceleration dial came abruptly to life, and the lieutenant recovered his wits.

"Cut rockets," he said calmly into his phone. "Forward rockets—full blast to halt. Radioman, order space freighters to change their course one hundred and eighty degrees and orbit until you receive further orders."

The ship was running smoothly again, drifting to a stop.

"Open rear vision plates," the lieutenant commanded.

He stepped quickly to the port and stared out. Likk was just becoming visible far below, a red-orange disk faintly aureoled in light.

"One-eighth blast on forward tubes," he ordered, and slowly the ship started backwards, nosing down again towards the tiny planet.

Again it mushed, but more gently this time under the lesser momentum. Then suddenly, and despite the force of the forward

rockets, it reversed its direction, and picked up speed.

The lieutenant realized he was up against something the Academy had forgotten to teach him. There was absolutely no visible impediment beneath the rocket. But something *bad* to be there, some obstacle the ship couldn't get past!

He ordered the ship into an orbit which would circle Likk. Instruments showed him now to be seventy-five miles above the surface. He nosed down slowly: 70 miles, 65 . . . 60 . . . 55 . . . and it happened again. The ship leveled off involuntarily, bounced upward and, off orbit now, started out into space in a wide ellipse.

Quickly he corrected course and tried the maneuver again. The results were just as incomprehensible.

"Radioman," he said, still calm of voice, as his training had taught him to be. "Contact the advance commander on Likk."

He got the commander on the phone, told him what had happened.

"See if it's anything controlled from down there," he ordered.

An hour later the radio signaled back.

"There's an ancient colonist down here," the commander said. "He seems to be obsessed with his own importance. He's rigged up a device he calls anti-force. He boasts that you can't penetrate it."

"Well, by Tarr," snapped the lieutenant. "Can you get control of it, and turn it off?"

"We have control of it," the commander replied. "But there's no way to turn it off. It's broken. The old gent says it'll turn itself off—in about a hundred and twenty years."

The lieutenant turned pale. "Who's he kidding?" he yelled, forgetting his lessons in calm. The crew looked at him, startled.

Another voice came through.

"Yes, gentlemen," it said, deep and vibrant but definitely permeated with an air of relaxed enjoyment. "This is Eldo Lite, at your service."

There was dead silence in the control room.

Fourth Lieutenant Eldo Lite, III, sat immobile in front of the radio staring at nothing, his eyes wide with shock.

There was good stuff in Eldo Lite the Third. He did not cry out, "Grandfather! This is little Eldo. Let me through!"

For that matter, Eldo III had never seen his great-grandfather, and had hardly even heard of him, if the truth must be told, except in study at the Academy.

There the name of Eldo Lite, Senior, was still revered despite the old man's scandalous behavior of twenty years before.

Still, there's something about family that gets a man. Also, there's something about living to a hale and hearty ninety-six that inspires respect and awe. So Eldo knew a few moments of shocked surprise after he heard the voice

on the radio. To his everlasting credit, he did not reveal his identity even when he was once more in command of himself.

"Sir," he said. "This is the Commander of the Warship *Lauren Sea*, of the Space Navy of Kursh of Tarr. I order you to allow us to land."

Old Eldo chuckled. How long had it been since he'd heard a young voice speaking in that manner? He almost wished he hadn't been so impulsive in building the repeller, or at the very least, that the *basik* hadn't jumped on him. He sighed.

"Alas, my young friend," he said. "Even if I wished to, I could not. Tell your Kursh of Tarr he'll have to find another supply base."

"Sir," repeated young Eldo, more firmly this time, "It is my duty to warn you. Since the planet of Likk has never been officially claimed by the Universe of Tarr, your actions place you in the category of an enemy. If you persist, I shall be forced to report to my superiors and request permission to open war against you. I shall not hesitate once the order comes through."

Eldo, Sr., did not need to be told how fully prepared the ship was for war. He had conceived her basic design himself nearly fifty years before. The vessel carried three interplanetary missiles of 10-A power, each one powerful enough to disintegrate a world twice the size of Likk. In addi-

tion, its arsenal included five space-to-ground missiles of 3-A power, and a full hundred ship-to-ship shells of $1/2$ -A each.

"Your power will do you no good," he said. "All the power in Kursh's universe cannot blast open my anti-force field. But if you use it, it can—and probably will—bounce back and travel through space until it strikes something solid. Do you want to be responsible for that?"

Young Eldo considered. It sounded impossible—an anti-force field that couldn't be breached. The old man was brilliant—even a genius. But he must be bluffing.

He broke off contact abruptly, retreated with his warship to a point one hundred miles from Likk, and established communication with Bullo Alman, Master General of the Spaceways, and the very brilliant new supply commander for Kursh's war of conquest.

Alman took the information through channels until it reached Kursh himself. As might have been expected, the consternation in Universe Headquarters was considerable at the intelligence that old Eldo Lite was still alive and still a problem. But in a few moments word went winging back to young Eldo authorizing him to declare war on Likk and take whatever action he deemed desirable, including a call for armed help if necessary.

Young Eldo prepared an elab-

orate and very determined course of action before he got his advance commander on the radio.

Full Lieutenant Arma Kak liked old Eldo Lite, despite the trouble he was causing. When he relayed the warship commander's ultimatum the old man just grunted. But Kak thought he saw a sad, compassionate look in his unblinking gray eyes.

"Sir," Kak said, "I'll try again to explain to the lieutenant exactly what he's up against. Somehow I don't think you're bluffing. I guess having your blood in him is making Lieutenant Lite sort of—well—" Kak floundered. He had started to say bull-headed, but thought better of it.

Old Lite jumped to his feet. "Did you say Lite—Lieutenant Eldo Lite?"

"Why, yes," said Kak.

Eldo resumed his seat. Eldo . . . that would be Eldo Lite III, then. No punishment was too dire for parents who refused to give their children individual names. He had named his son Kory, but Kory had deliberately turned around and named his first boy Eldo II. Now there was an Eldo the Third. Maybe he should let the young fool blow himself up, and wipe out the line. Blundering idiots!

He looked up, startled. What in all conscience could be done about it? The kid had stubborn Lite blood in his veins—though probably not a full cargo of Lite brains. But it was too late—tragically too

late—to do anything about that now.

"Kak," he said, "you say that Lieutenant Lite has given me until seventeen-thirty to turn off the anti-force field?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then he's going to blast it?"

"That's right, sir. With every weapon on his ship. He says he prefers to warn you in advance. He intends to locate your repeller, and focus his missiles on a point of the anti-force directly above it."

Eldo inclined his head in bitter resignation.

"And his ship is carrying ninety-five A's of power. By Tarr! There's enough potential in that to blow up half the universe if it's exploded all at once. It probably won't penetrate the anti-force shell. But if it does, there won't be enough left of Likk to—" He shuddered.

He looked at Kak's wrist clock. He had no watch of his own, because no one on Likk had worried about keeping track of time for years.

"Seventeen-thirty. Why, that's only fifty minutes from now. The boy is a fast worker."

"Yes, sir, said Kak. What else *could* he say?"

"Go away now," said Eldo. "But keep me informed. I want to think. Confound it, I'm not a malicious old man. I'm responsible for that lad, in a way, and I've got to at least try to save him from himself."

Kak retired to his temporary headquarters, his lips set in tight lines. He tried again, with all the persuasiveness at his command, to get young Eldo to change his mind. But the youngster was adamant. He explained that he was backing off two hundred miles and at the proper time would release his missiles as rapidly as possible—all of them timed to reach and explode simultaneously at the designated point, and at exactly 1830 hours, Tarr Standard Time.

Eldo Lite, feeling old now for the first time in his ninety-six years, wished desperately for an instant that he had a clock. Then he was glad that he didn't possess one. He was reasonably sure that not even ninety-five A's of power would crack the anti-force field. But it would certainly demolish anything in its path as it fled back through space.

He perked up finally, from a lifetime's force of habit and began to juggle the intangibles in his mind. There was another way to neutralize the anti-force—a quite simple way. *Destroy the repeller.*

It could be destroyed if a micrograin of Eldurium could be fired into it, overbalancing its present state of relatively stable instability. It would explode, and the anti-force would collapse.

But—if the field exploded would anything be left of Likk? He began making rapid calculations on a pad at his elbow. If

young Eldo—stupid young pup—exploded *all* his power at a strategic point a terrific dent would be made in the field before the charge was deflected back into space.

Now, suppose the repeller were to be exploded at that precise instant? And suppose further that the two blasts, working together from opposite sides of the weakened point in the anti-force shell, succeeded in cracking it an instant before it collapsed beneath the disruptive impact of its own explosion?

Yes, that would do it! The force of the repeller explosion, seeking the path of least resistance, would funnel straight upwards toward the weak point. It would do so because at the fragile moment all the rest of the anti-force sphere would still be intact. The repeller, sweeping up, would gather young Eldo's 95-A blast with it, and the two blasts would dwindle and vanish in space, for at the critical time the anti-force's bounce would cease to exist. The combined forces would not carom off into the void to become an interstellar monsoon of dreadful and unguessed terror.

Hurriedly Eldo went to Kak's quarters.

"There's no time to explain," he said. "Evacuate everybody to at least five miles from my laboratory—beyond that range of low hills. Make sure the distance is considerable. What time is it?"

"Seventeen-ten," Kak said.

"Can you do it?"

"With luck," Kak replied, and ran out shouting orders.

Eldo went back to his laboratory. He set up the micro-cannon, aimed it at the core of the repeller, and connected it to a portable transceiver. Then he rushed out, sweeping up the *basik* in one arm, and jumped aboard Kak's airsled just as it was getting under way.

They waited behind the shelter of a low volcanic hummock, out of which issued wisps of fog and vapor. The vapor cloud enveloped them completely, for they were no longer protected from that obscuring blight by the community of fogless bubbles created by the molecular dispellers.

Nervously Eldo watched Kak's clock hand sweep around. Seventeen twenty-five — six — seven— The seconds fled as he fingered lightly the key on the radio signaller.

At precisely 1730 he pressed the key.

Fourth Lieutenant Eldo Lite III tightened his lips, his face drained of all color. The last missile had left the warship and he was convinced that in a few seconds it would all be over—one way or another. Either the anti-force field would be broken, and he would be safely on his way to Likk or—the explosion would fail and he would be on his way out of the service, disgraced, broken, with

the future a nightmare of uncertainty.

Then it came.

The missiles reached their target, gathered together by their intricate, interior mechanisms. They exploded in a fury of incandescent light and flashings such as young Eldo had never dreamed could be created in the dark immensity of space.

The smoke boiled and roiled and plummeted above the planet of Likk, and shock waves made blurs across the vision plate. Almost he regretted that there was no air between Likk and the ship to carry the sound to him.

Then out of the billowing mass of clouds a long, thick black column of fire and smoke arose, and shot up like a huge log. It climbed and climbed, high above Likk's atmosphere and out into space, traveling on and on . . .

After half an hour Eldo impatiently ordered the warship forward. The freighters were still orbiting a few hundred miles out, awaiting further orders. General Alman was probably getting impatient for news.

The warship nosed downward, passing the fifty-mile point with no resistance. He had succeeded, Eldo thought—the anti-force shell was gone. His triumph should teach that old goat a lesson . . .

Likk's fog was tossing and tumbling uneasily in the aftermath of the blast. But the rocket didn't need human eyes. It settled, slowly,

and a slight jar made its crew aware that the ground had been reached . . .

The old man doesn't look so tough, thought young Eldo. They faced each other at the edge of the former laboratory site. Nothing remained of that imposing edifice now but a tremendous hole—and a very curious phenomenon.

Straight upward it spiraled, a great round tunnel of nothingness resembling a child's-nightmare conception of a giant pipe thrusting to the sky. Fog swirled to its edges and all around it, but there was no smoke in the tunnel itself. Neither was there any mist.

"That's where the anti-force and my molecular displacers went when your blast broke through and shocked the repeller," Eldo Lite, Sr., said meekly. *Darned young pup*, he thought. *Standing there with that smug look on his face, thinking he's done something tremendous. Well, let him think so . . .*

Kak looked at old Eldo knowingly, but remained silent. The old man must have a great deal of bluff in his nature after all, he told himself. But why doesn't he

inform the lieutenant that if it hadn't been for his great-grand-daddy . . .

A messenger came from the radio room of the warship. He handed a written message to Lieutenant Lite, who swiftly glanced at it and passed it to Kak.

"Congratulations on successful conclusion of war with planet of Likk," Kak read. He shook his head. Lite had requested permission to fire on Likk at 1600 hours. At 1730 the battle was over. Maybe the only ninety-minute war in history, he thought.

Eldo Lite, Sr., coughed.

Now, he thought, *I guess my solitude is over for good. Perhaps it's just as well. This boy of mine has some excellent stuff in him, if anyone will take the trouble to bring it out. Too much of me in him, maybe. The way he went blundering into this thing, taking no advice . . .*

He coughed again, and hugged the shivering *basik* close.

"By Tarr, Eldo," he said, "you went and busted up all my displacers and the fog's back in again. Got any raincoats aboard that fancy warship of yours?"