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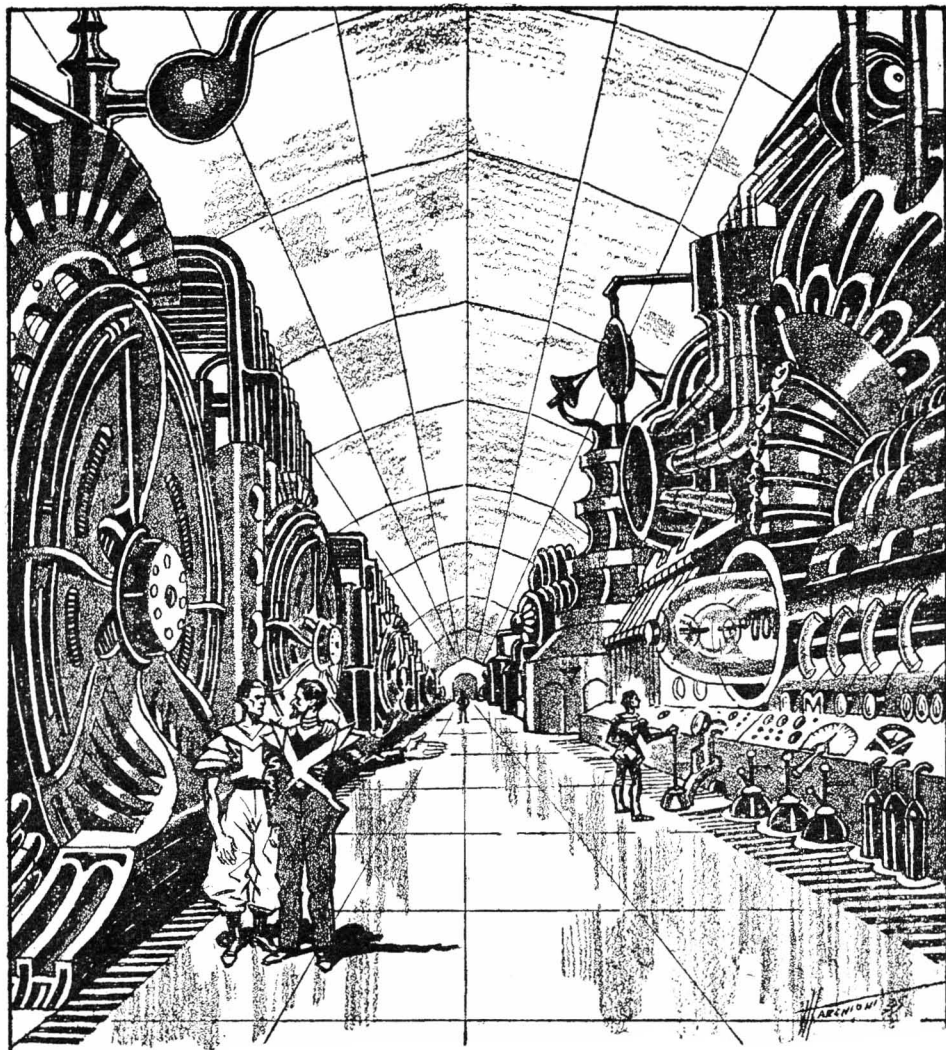
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When the Cycle Met

by David H. Beaumont

THE SUN had grown old. Throughout the interminable centuries it had followed that downward path which is the fate of every incandescent body of the Universe. Until now, at high noon, it glowered a dimly red disk that sent

shimmering shadows dancing across the snow.

Snow? Rather it was the lifeless corpse of a dead and frozen atmosphere that covered the Earth to the depth of several hundred feet. For with the passing of the Sun had come the great

cold. Only in the nine great population centers, crystal-enclosed as they were, did man struggle vainly against coming doom.

High up in his great control tower, a mile and more above the city, Lotar Kavic, chief executive of the sovereign city of Nark, paced the floor restlessly. A buzzer sounded; he threw a switch and a voice flooded the room.

"Observatory reports still no trace of Pluto, sir." He snapped the switch off almost viciously and resumed his pacing.

What had happened to Pluto? Far out on its orbit, almost directly across the Sun from Earth, the planet had suddenly disappeared from the eye of the telescope. Communication had ceased. Rocket cruisers in the vicinity of the planet were missing. Others, farther away, scurried home with the report of the planet's "going out like a light."

"Going out like a light," described it. The planet and its owl-eyed inhabitants had gone in the snap of a finger. Not like Mercury, which had plunged into the Sun twenty-one centuries before. Men had anticipated its end long before it happened. Its lizardlike people had known it when they elected to die with their planet. Pluto had merely "gone out like a light"—and Lotar Kavic paced the floor.

Far beneath him the atomic generators groaned with their ever increasing task of heating the huge city. The room trembled with their hum.

Lotar Kavic's life had always been like theirs, an ever increasing burden from one day to the next. A direct descendant of Sodan, the law giver, he had been early recognized as the greatest leader of the system, and as such, most of the task of guiding the people as they fought certain death, fell to his lot.

He strode to the window and looked out. From his vantage point, the city

spread out like the spokes of a wheel to the confines of the crystal dome. Beyond, stretched the lifeless fields of "snow." Above, the noonday sky was blue-black, stars twinkled dimly. Different stars they were from those which had looked down on the discovery of this continent of America, thousands upon thousands of years before. The solar system had traveled an unthinkable distance since that time.

Now the Sun was nearly spent. The planets too were near their death. Only he and a few of his trusted aids knew the terrific amount of energy being consumed daily in keeping the city alive. And now, what had happened to Pluto?

A red light glowed on his switchboard. He stepped over and pushed in a plug. "Rocket Cruiser A340XB three hundred thousand miles off Neptune reports that planet's abrupt disappearance three minutes ago. Am returning to Venus immediately."

Lotar Kavic sat a moment, stunned. Neptune, also across the Sun from Earth, had "gone out like a light."

Sixty-four hours later it was again high noon. Lotar Kavic was holding conference with the high commands of the six remaining planets.

Nenum Kuk of Venus was speaking: "It appears to be an approaching wall of oblivion." He shivered. "If it is, Venus will be next, as you fellows are all on this side of the Sun."

Thoric, of Jupiter spoke up. "Perhaps it is better if we go this way. Death, as we know, is only a matter of time."

"And even the time grows short," put in swarthy Lukik, of Mars. "The Sun is cooling faster than ever before."

"It seems almost as though the cold of space were getting a hold," agreed the master of Saturn.

"My generators will soon get a much needed rest." This from the bold son of icy Uranus, his huge eyes wrinkling in silent laughter.

Lotar Kavic rose to his feet. The others knew that he had come to a decision and they were glad it was so. The lines of his face, deepened from years of heavy burdens, seemed even deeper in this moment of stress.

"Gentlemen, there is no doubt in our minds that this system is doomed. We could not exist without the Sun so why should we fear this new peril? Why not praise it as a fitting end to our long struggle? Let us announce the facts as we know them to our people and prepare to die like men. I know," he spoke proudly, "that my people on Earth can face oblivion as bravely as did the lizard folk of Mercury twenty-one centuries ago. This is the counsel that I offer you; let us act upon it."

Nenum Kuk, always the impetuous and dramatic, stood up. "I vote 'aye' to that counsel. I go now to prepare my people for death and my planet for destruction." He turned and strode from the room.

Four days later the gray orb of Venus winked out and the remaining planet waited breathlessly for the next blow to fall.

Lotar Kavic drummed impatient fingers on his desk and glanced at his timepiece. If his calculations were correct, the Sun should cease to exist in exactly three minutes. Slowly the seconds crawled by. Suddenly he sprang to his feet; the time had come and the Sun was gone. Not a trace remained where it had glowed redly in the sky only a few seconds before—

THE THOUGHT that only a day and a half of existence remained to them, threw the characters of men into bold relief. To many, the disappearance of the Sun was the last straw. They gave themselves over to the mad revelry which has always been the subterfuge of certain types of man in time of great stress.

Others, in direct opposition, walked

the streets in studied indifference. While still others went about their work with the same zest with which they had followed it all their lives. These were the scientists of the planet who worked diligently and hard to find a cure for a situation which had no cure.

The main body of people, however, the strong middle class which had always been the pride of Earth since the days of the first rocket ship, spent their time quietly at home with their wives and children.

Lotar Kavic was making his last inspection. He stepped into a lift and was dropped far beneath the surface of the Earth to where the atomic generators labored at their task. He stepped out on a platform that fairly swayed with their terrific pounding. He walked to where the superintendent of power awaited him. They stepped into a soundproof room; the sound receded to a low hum.

"Good evening, sir," the official stated in respectful tones. "I have to report that the mirroroid bearings in No. 43 generator showed such wear that it was necessary to suspend its operation. We can ill spare it." He smiled wryly and glanced out at the other huge glittering machines. "No. 17 over there is also showing a slight vibration of the countershaft, and we are not nearly finished with repairs on 51 and 92. They were never designed to operate with absolutely no aid from the Sun as you well know."

Lotar Kavic clapped his aid on the shoulder in friendly style. "I know, Daton, it is perhaps well that their services will be no longer required in about four hours." He sighed. "It seems odd to know that the long struggle is at an end at last." Glancing at his timepiece, he said, "It is now seventy-three. Come to my office at eleven, all the high officials of Earth will be there."

Eleven o'clock in the office atop the

huge tower found the ruling officials of the nine cities of Earth gathered about a long table. The minutes dragged by. Finally Lotar Kavic addressed them:

"Gentlemen, we are facing a fate no more dreadful than that which overtook the lizard people of Mercury long ago. We are about to show them that the human race is their equal in courage. I have nothing more to say; you have ten minutes left in which to prepare yourselves." He turned to the window and looked out.

Below, the city was quiet, not a vehicle moved in the streets. Women clung to men and men knelt in silence as the moment paused on the threshold.

Lotar Kavic felt a lump rise in his throat. The end was so absolute, no man could turn from it. The young and the old were equal before it. He held up his timepiece and counted the seconds left.

Eight — seven — six — five — four — three — two — a prolonged roar beat in his ears, flecks danced before his eyes. Pain shot through his body as nerve and muscle seemed to separate. A brilliant flash seared his brain; he slumped to the floor——

Lotar Kavic stirred and tried to open his eyes. His head ached dully and his limbs felt like lead. His eyes twitched from a strong light as he opened them to small slits and blinked unbelievably.

Through his window were coming parrallel bars of blue-white light. He reeled to the window and slipped to his knees, looking out.

In the east was the Sun—their Sun—shining with a brilliance he had never seen. Already the snowlike atmosphere was rising in heavy mists under its rays. In the street men were stirring, coming out to behold the new glory in the east. Daton, of the heating plant, knelt beside his chief.

"The Sun—rejuvenated," were his words.

LOTAR KAVIC again sat alone at his desk. The Sun, westering in a day that would apparently take only about twenty hours, made patterns on a sheaf of reports before him. The first was from Pluto, reporting the safety of the missing rocket cruisers with the exception of two which had collided during the transition. The second was from Neptune, announcing some calculations on the heat of the reborn Sun. The third was an almost hysterical note from Nenum Kuk, of Venus, telling of the reappearance of clouds for the first time in seventy thousand years.

His gaze wandered to the window; wonderful, this sunlight. Rising, he looked out. Wonderful to bask in its rays. He stood there a minute contentedly. Then the scientist in him gained the upper hand.

The explanation for this phenomena? What had caused this sudden change? Looking out at the fast melting "snow" fields, they seemed to beckon him, to hold forth a message.

His brow furrowed as he watched the rising mists, felt the heat of the blazing Sun. Suddenly he brightened; his step was almost spritely as he hurried over to his control panel and snapped a switch.

"Hello, Norvum? I want you to run an errand for me, to the archives of the observatory."

That night saw the officials of the nine cities again in council. This time it was a gay and cheery number that gathered around the long table. Lotar Kavic addressed them:

"I know with what overwhelming joy you have greeted the return of our Sun. But"—here he paused, a half smile lurking at the corners of his mouth—"I also know how you hunger for the explanation of this miracle. I am confident that I have that explanation here," He picked up a sheet of paper. His listeners leaned forward in their chairs.

"Do you gentlemen recall in your histories of the Earth, the records written thousands of years ago which describe a prehistoric ice age?"

Several nodded their heads.

"I have here a copy of certain calculations made by an ancient astronomer showing the approximate locations of the stars at the close of that period. Will you step to the window a minute?"

He dimmed the lights to better see the heavenly bodies. New stars they were, different stars in new locations.

"These stars, strange to us, were part of the everyday life of the ancients. According to my chart, that blue-white star is Vega, while below it and in the southwest is Antares. That red star in the north is the great dipper and the North Star, Polaris. That is enough to prove my point, I think. Now, the explanation of all this.

"There is, on record in the observatory, an ancient theory, long discarded,

that states the fact that space and time are one. That time as well as space is curved. It is a well established fact that if one travels long enough in space he is bound to arrive at his starting point. This theory stated that so it was with time.

"Gentlemen, we have lived through the proof of that theory. The Sun has, in its long travels, completed its cycle. Time, too, has completed its cycle. We are about to emerge from another ice age. We have seen proof of a very old theory, and the answer to an older question. In my opinion we have never paid enough tribute to the scientists of another day. Let us do so now."

He glanced at his hearers and then again out into the night. Suddenly a brilliant red star flicked into view. Brightly it shone in the constellation of Scorpio.

"Mars has returned to the fold," he said softly.