Lost

Robert Beresford*
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By Robert Beresford

IN ITS GREY bleakness, a snow-covered plain in the waste lands of northern Canada was motionless and still as death—but nevertheless glorious—in cold, keen starlight. The only break in the flat, rippled expanse was a small, low shed of steel and sheet iron, and near it, an opalescent rectangle of polished glass covering several hundred square feet, both virtually lost and invisible. From under all the edges of the metal shield came a rushing blast of warm air, which was dissipated immediately in the intense cold. Down the shaft, in an efficient series of chambers and corridors and levels, were the laboratories of the lost scientist, Dr. Joseph Muirsen.

When he had left the world fifteen years before, in 1935, the few who were really acquainted with him had admitted that he was crazy. But people forget quickly, and Dr. Muirsen was forgotten. His disappearance, with that of a brilliant young engineer named Smith, was merely one of the unsolved mysteries on record.

Thus, in the clean, metal laboratory under the rectangle of plate glass set in a snow-covered plain in northern Canada, where Polaris is high and brilliant, Dr. Muirsen stood before a battery of gauges and meters watching them as he had watched them for hours. They were the indicators of all physical conditions affecting a distillation, at terrifically high temperature, which climaxed the years of his labor.

DR. MUIRSEN’S mouth twisted into a crooked little smile as his eyes caught the shifting glance of a tall, wiry younger man who had just come in. “Smith,” he said, “I’ve done it this time. That distillate which we’ve run into the new crucibles will dissolve almost instantly anything except those containers themselves, and if liberated, will volatilize and form a dense gas that’s almost as powerful as the liquid itself.”
"You mean to say, sir, that this liquid is the long-sought universal solvent?" questioned Smith.

"It is that—and more," was the reply. "Why, there'd be nothing but a hollow, steaming pit here right now except for the new fusion we made for those crucibles." Then in a more businesslike voice, he added, "Is the covered vat finished yet?"

"No, sir, but I can do it right away. Our television screen and transmitter are all set up, though, and all the governments report that theirs are completely ready, except one.

"And which is that—Sinsteran?"

"Yes, sir; I've no idea what is the trouble." He spoke a little too quickly, as if he had decided upon the words before he had come in.

"We must make the arrangements. Report to me as soon as you have it, and then I can send the announcement." He had made his discovery and his decision and wished to hasten to the climax of the announcement. He knew that the liquid in the new crucibles could wipe out whole races, and that he had power either to do that or to sell the discovery to one government and let its people act. That, however, would be refusing a responsibility and quite probably would result in an international disaster for which he would feel personal blame.

As THE FAINT FLUSH of sun-glow was leaving the sky the next day, Smith entered the laboratory where Dr. Muirsen was arranging a sealed, transparent vat so that from outside it a bit of the new chemical could be released upon heaped stone and metal for a proof to the statesmen and the prime ministers of all nations that it was as all-powerful as he claimed it to be.

"All right?" Dr. Muirsen questioned.

"Yes, sir. Here's a message from Sinsteran. I'd better call them now so they will be tuned in," said the younger man.

"Yes, go ahead, Smith; be ready by five o'clock. You will stay at the controls while I talk to the assembly and demonstrate this—." He picked up a heavy flask containing a few cubic centimeters of transparent blood-red liquid sealed with a curious clamp and nozzle.

Smith hurried down to the radio control room. He closed the door and sat down nervously, turned a switch, waited a moment, and called the Sinsteran minister of state. "Smith talking. Muirsen is ready to go at five. During his speech I can get
hold of a flask of this solvent and shoot him with a little of his precious stuff. You'll get the poison and all Muirsen's note­ books, and I, in return, get anything, any time I want it. . . . No, I'm sure no one has heard me. You have the only set in the world capable of receiving this transmission. Be sure to come in at five. Good luck.''

Then the conspirator went calmly about calling the temporary stations of the other nations, but his message to them was just as the doctor had dictated it.

Up in the demonstration laboratory the great television screen, where the whole assembly would appear, began to glow; in its predetermined section came the likeness of the secretary of Dangoren. Dr. Muirsen looked at him directly and smiled. "You see me well, do you not?"

"I see you well enough," gruffly replied the man. "This chemical you've invented: you say it'll dissolve or poison anything? If your demonstration is a success, believe me, I'm prepared to offer you anything in the world."

The man was confidential and spoke guardedly and quickly. "What do you say?"

Struggling to maintain his composure, Muirsen replied quietly: "This compound is not for sale. I intend to use it as a force for international disarmament so that peace and cooperation will be our international prime-movers. In a few moments we shall discuss the best means of putting it to that use. You see, the others are coming in now."

And so they were; one after another, faces became sharply defined on the great screen and voices came clearly to Dr. Muirsen. They were mostly arrogant, questioning voices, but each stopped when the doctor began, his voice clear and calm: "Gentlemen, I am Joseph Muirsen. I finally have discovered and perfected a most powerful solvent with which I hope we, together, can abolish any possibility of war. I cannot tell you much about this chemical except that it is very complex and that I can make sufficient quantities of it to do any amount of terrestrial destruction.''

The earnestness of the doctor's speech commanded rapt attention. "A real demonstration will do much more than a description of its powers, and I have arranged one in this sealed, transparent vat, made of a new fusion product we've had to develop as an inert container."

Dr. Muirsen smiled and continued, "In it I have sealed pieces of the most durable metals and minerals known to you, besides
some smaller samples of the most valuable and inert products of the scientists. In the upper, sealed flask is a fraction of a cubic centimeter of the new solvent which, when I tip the whole crucible, thus”—he grunted in the effort to do so—“is released and—.”

A sharp grunt of uneasiness interrupted him as every man thrust himself forward to see better the phenomenon. There, in two short seconds, the neat plates of polished metal and the samples of rock and plastic had been reduced to a red liquid which barely covered the bottom of the vat. In the remaining space was a uniform red tinge which filled every corner of the box. For a moment the men relaxed, silent.

“Dr. Muirsen and statesmen,” spoke a kindly-looking, dignified old man, the representative of the greatest of the Three Powers, “indeed, you hold a weapon so powerful I scarcely dare to suppose what would happen if one unscrupulous man could use it. With the introduction of this force, no nation will dare to risk an international fight. It would be my suggestion that every country be given free access to a supply of this Red Death. For a few years there may be threats to use it, but after a time it will be forgotten in the mutual benefits of good-will and exchange.”

QUICKLY a little, sparrow-like man addressed the assembly in a nervous, chirping voice. “Gentlemen, our fine friend is placing a little too much faith in the angelic natures of men. Such a scheme would result in ruin for some and possibly every living thing on this globe. If you give one nation control of the chemical, and of course, simultaneously, the dictatorship of the world, it seems—”

He was interrupted by an uneasy murmur of habitual dissent. Most members of the group were angrily calling for attention; some few appeared frightened and worried. Dr. Muirsen, with a grave mask of despair disfiguring his dignified countenance, raised both hands and tried to stop the rising wave of angry argument. “Please, gentlemen, will you cease quibbling and listen to me. Please—.”

Crash! Clatter!—and silence.

In his nervous haste to get into the room, Smith had pushed a stack of metal diaphragm blanks onto the floor, and there he stood, wild-eyed, holding the flask with its curious clamp pointed toward the doctor.
"Smith! Put that down and go back to the control room!"
"No, sir! I've got it now; I'm going to sell this stuff if I have to kill you to do it!" he cried hysterically.
"No! Put it down!" Dr. Muirsen leaped across the room and clasped the neck of the bottle at the very instant Smith swung it over his shoulder, trying to squirm free. Crack! and it was shattered against the cabinet corner. For an instant there was a red tinge and every statesman's receiver went blank. Then sinking, melting destruction—and finally black nothing—.

In the grey bleakness of a snow-covered plain in northern Canada was a great, gaping, jagged pit—stark with black ruin. But the land of snow and ice was motionless and still as death, and the heavens were glorious with cold, keen starlight.

A Friend
By J. H. Pederson

The rain beat down in sheets upon my head
And trickled down my back—a chilly rain
Blown swiftly by a wind that howled in pain
As southward, through the leafless trees, it sped.
I heard a crashing here and there, as dead
Limbs, torn from trees, fell to the ground. In vain
I splashed along—no friendly window pane
Appeared to guide me to a house, and bed.

I groped through blackness till I reached a tree.
Its bark was rough enough that I could squeeze
My fingers in its cracks. It seemed to lend
A hand for me to grasp; it rested me—
Took weight from tired feet—left me at ease.
I'd been alone, but found this tree—a friend.