SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

THE FORGOTTEN PLANET

I have been asked to record, plainly and without prejudice, a brief history of the Forgotten Planet.

That this record, when completed, will be sealed in the archives of the Interplanetary Alliance and remain there, a secret and rather dreadful bit of history, is no concern of mine. I am an old man, well past the century mark, and what disposal is made of my work is of little importance to me. I grow weary of life and living, which is good. The fear of death was lost when our scientists showed us how to live until we grew weary of life. But I am digressing—an old man's failing.

The Forgotten Planet was not always so named. The name that it once bore had been, as every child knows, stricken from the records, actual and mental, of the Universe. It is well that evil should not be remembered. But in order that this history may be clear in the centuries to come, my record should go back to beginnings.

So far as the Universe is concerned, the history of the Forgotten Planet begins with the visit of the first craft ever to span the space between the worlds: the crude, adventuresome Edorn, whose name, as well as the names of the nine Zenians who manned her, occupy the highest places in the roll of honor of the Universe.

Ame Baove, the commander and historian of the Edorn, made but brief comment on his stop at the Forgotten Planet. I shall record it in full:

"We came to rest upon the surface of this, the fourth of the planets visited during the first trip of the Edorn, eighteen spaces before the height of the sun. We found ourselves surrounded immediately by vast numbers of creatures very different from ourselves, and from their expressions and gestures, we gathered that they were both curious and unfriendly.

"Careful analysis of the atmosphere proved it to be sufficiently similar to our own to make it possible for us to again stretch our legs outside the rather cramped quarters of the Edorn, and tread the soil of still another world.

"No sooner had we emerged, however, than we were angrily beset by the people of this unfriendly planet, and rather than do them injury, we retired immediately, and concluded our brief observations through our ports.

"The topography of this planet is similar to our own, save that there are no mountains,

and the flora is highly colored almost without exception, and apparently quite largely parasitical in nature. The people are rather short in stature, with hairless heads and high foreheads. Instead of being round or oval, however, the heads of these people rise to a rounded ridge which runs back from a point between and just above the eyes, nearly to the nape of the neck behind. They give evidence of a fair order of intelligence, but are suspicious and unfriendly. From the number and size of the cities we saw, this planet is evidently thickly populated.

"We left about sixteen spaces before the height of the sun, and continued towards the fifth and last planet before our return to Zenia."

This report, quite naturally, caused other explorers in space to hesitate. There were so many friendly, eager worlds to visit, during the years that relations between the planets were being established, that an unfriendly people were ignored.

However, from time to time, as space-ships became perfected and more common, parties from many of the more progressive planets did call. Each of them met with the same hostile reception, and at last, shortly after the second War of the Planets, the victorious Alliance sent a fleet of the small but terrible Deuber Spheres, convoyed by four of the largest of the disintegrator ray-ships, to subjugate the Forgotten Planet.

Five great cities were destroyed, and the Control City, the seat of the government, was menaced before the surly inhabitants conceded allegiance to the Alliance. Parties of scientists, fabricators, and workmen were then landed, and a dictator was appointed.

From all the worlds of the Alliance, instruments and equipment were brought to the Forgotten Planet. A great educational system was planned and executed, the benign and kindly influence of the Alliance made every effort to improve the conditions existing on the Forgotten Planet, and to win the friendship and allegiance of these people.

For two centuries the work went on. Two centuries of bloodshed, strife, hate and disturbance. No where else within the known Universe was there ill feeling. The second awful War of the Planets had at last succeeded in teaching the lesson of peace.

Two centuries of effort—wasted effort. It was near the end of the second century that my own story begins.

Commander at that time of the super-cruiser Tamon, a Special Patrol ship of the Alliance, I was not at all surprised to receive orders from the Central Council to report at emergency speed. Special Patrol work in those days, before the advent of the present de-centralized system, was a succession of false starts, hurried recalls, and urgent, emergency orders.

I obeyed at once. In the Special Patrol service, there is no questioning orders. The planet Earth, from which I sprang, is and always has been proud of the fact that from the very beginning, her men have been picked to command the ships of the Special Patrol. No matter how dangerous, how forlorn and hopeless the mission given to a commander of a Special Patrol ship, history has never recorded that any commander has ever hesitated. That is why our uniform of blue and silver commands the respect that it does even in this day and age of softening and decadence, when men—but again an old man digresses. And perhaps it is not for me to judge.

I pointed the blunt nose of the Tamon at Zenia, seat of the Central Council, and in four hours, Earth time, the great craft swept over the gleaming city of the Central Council and settled swiftly to the court before the mighty, columned Hall of the Planets.

Four pages of the Council, in their white and scarlet livery, met me and conducted me instantly to a little anteroom behind the great council chamber.

There were three men awaiting me there; three men whose faces, at that time, were familiar to every person in the known Universe.

Kellen, the oldest of the three, and the spokesman, rose as I entered the room. The others did likewise, as the pages closed the heavy doors behind me.

"You are prompt, and that is good," thought Kellen. "I welcome you. Remove now thy menore."

I glanced up at him swiftly. This must surely be an important matter, that I was asked to remove my menore band.

It will, of course, be understood that at that time we had but a bulky and clumsy instrument to enable us to convey and receive thought; a device consisting of a heavy band of metal, in which were imbedded the necessary instruments and a tiny atomic energy generator, the whole being worn as a circlet or crown upon the head.

Wonderingly, I removed my menore, placed it upon the long, dark table around which the three men were standing, and bowed. Each of the three, in turn, lifted their gleaming circlets from their heads, and placed them likewise upon the table before them.

"

You wonder," said Kellen, speaking of course, in the soft and liquid universal language, which is, I understand, still disseminated in our schools, as it should be. "I shall explain as quickly and as briefly as possible.

"We have called you here on a dangerous mission. A mission that will require tact and quickness of mind as well as bravery. We have selected you, have called you, because we are agreed that you possess the qualities required. Is it not so?" He glanced at his two companions, and they nodded gravely, solemnly, without speaking.

"You are a young man, John Hanson," continued Kellen, "but your record in your service is one of which you can be proud. We trust you—with knowledge that is so secret, so precious, that we must revert to speech in order to convey it; we dare not trust it, even in this protected and guarded place, to the menore's quicker but less discreet communication."

He paused for a moment, frowning thoughtfully as though dreading to begin. I waited silently, and at last he spoke again.

"There is a world"—and he named a name which I shall not repeat, the name of the Forgotten Planet—"that is a festering sore upon the body of the Universe. As you know, for two centuries we have tried to pass on to these people an understanding of peace and friendship. I believe that nothing has been left undone. The Council and the forces behind it have done everything within their power. And now—"

He stopped again, and there was an expression of deepest pain written upon his wise and kindly face. The pause was for but an instant.

"And now," he went on firmly, "it is at an end. Our work has been undone. Two centuries of effort—undone. They have risen in revolt, they have killed all those sent by the Alliance of which this Council is the governing body and the mouthpiece, and they have sent us an ultimatum—a threat of war!"

"What?"

Kellen nodded his magnificent old head gravely.

"I do not wonder that you start," he said heavily. "War! It must not be. It cannot be! And yet, war is what they threaten."

"But, sir!" I put in eagerly. I was young and rash in those days. "Who are they, to make war against a united Universe?"

"I have visited your planet, Earth," said Kellen, smiling very faintly. "You have a tiny winged insect you call bee. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"The bee is a tiny thing, of little strength. A man, a little child, might crush one to

death between a thumb and finger. But the bee may sting before he is crushed, and the sting may linger on for days, a painful and unpleasant thing. Is that not so?"

"I see, sir," I replied, somewhat abashed before the tolerant, kindly wisdom of this great man. "They cannot hope to wage successful war, but they may bring much suffering to others."

"Much suffering," nodded Kellen, still gently smiling. "And we are determined that this thing shall not be. Not"—and his face grew gray with a terrible and bitter resolve—"not if we have to bring to bear upon that dark and unwilling world the disintegrating rays of every ship of the Alliance, so that the very shell of the planet shall disappear, and no life ever again shall move upon its surface.

"But this," and he seemed to shudder at the thought, "is a terrible and a ruthless thing to even contemplate. We must first try once again to point out to them the folly of their ways. It is with this mission that we would burden you, John Hanson."

"

It is no burden, but an honor, sir," I said quietly.

"Youth! Youth!" Kellen chided me gently. "Foolish, yet rather glorious. Let me tell you the rest, and then we shall ask for your reply again.

"The news came to us by a small scout ship attached to that unhappy world. It barely made the journey to Jaron, the nearest planet, and crashed so badly, from lack of power, that all save one man were killed.

"He, luckily, tore off his menore, and insisted in speech that he be brought here. He was obeyed, and, in a dying condition, was brought to this very chamber." Kellen glanced swiftly, sadly, around the room, as though he could still visualize that scene.

"Every agent of the Alliance upon that hateful planet was set upon and killed, following the working out of some gigantic and perfectly executed plan—all save the crew of this one tiny scout ship, which was spared to act as a messenger.

"'Tell your great Council,' was the message these people sent to us, 'that here is rebellion. We do not want, nor will we tolerate, your peace. We have learned now that upon other worlds than ours there are great riches. These we shall take. If there is resistance, we have a new and a terrible death to deal. A death that your great scientists will be helpless against; a horrible and irresistable death that will make desolate and devoid of intelligent life any world where we are forced to sow the seeds of ultimate disaster.

"'We are not yet ready. If we were, we would not move, for we prefer that your Council have time to think about what is surely to come. If you doubt that we have the power to do what we have threatened to do, send one ship, commanded by a man whose word you will trust, and we will prove to him that these are no empty words.'"

"

That, as nearly as I can remember it," concluded Kellen, "is the message. The man who brought it died almost before he had finished.

"That is the message. You are the man we have picked to accept their challenge. Remember, though, that there are but the four of us in this room. There are but four of us who know these things. If you for any reason do not wish to accept this mission, there will be none to judge you, least of all, any one of us, who know best of all the perils."

"You say, sir," I said quietly, although my heart was pounding in my throat, and roaring in my ears, "that there would be none to judge me.

"Sir, there would be myself. There could be no more merciless judge. I am honored that I have been selected for this task, and I accept the responsibility willingly, gladly. When is it your wish that we should start?"

The three presiding members of the Council glanced at each other, faintly smiling, as though they would say, as Kellen had said a short time before: "Youth! Youth!" Yet I believe they were glad and somewhat proud that I had replied as I did.

"You may start," said Kellen, "as soon as you can complete the necessary preparations. Detailed instructions will be given you later."

He bowed to me, and the others did likewise. Then Kellen picked up his menore and adjusted it.

The interview was over.

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What do you make it?" I asked the observer. He glanced up from his instrument.

"Jaron, sir. Three degrees to port; elevation between five and six degrees. Approximate only, of course, sir."

"Good enough. Please ask Mr. Barry to hold to his present course. We shall not stop at Jaron."

The observer glanced at me curiously, but he was too well disciplined to hesitate or ask questions.

"Yes, sir!" he said crisply, and spoke into the microphone beside him.

None of us wore menores when on duty, for several reasons. Our instruments were not nearly as perfect as those in use to-day, and verbal orders were clearer and carried more authority than mental instructions. The delicate and powerful electrical and atomic mechanism of our ship interfered with the functioning of the menores, and at that time the old habit of speech was far more firmly entrenched, due to hereditary influence, than it is now.

I nodded to the man, and made my way to my own quarters. I wished most heartily that I could talk over my plans with someone, but this had been expressly forbidden.

"I realize that you trust your men, and more particularly your officers," Kellen had told me during the course of his parting conversation with me. "I trust them also—yet we must remember that the peace of mind of the Universe is concerned. If news, even a rumor, of this threatened disaster should become known, it is impossible to predict the disturbance it might create.

"Say nothing to anyone. It is your problem. You alone should leave the ship when you land; you alone shall hear or see the evidence they have to present, and you alone shall bring word of it to us. That is the wish of the Council."

"Then it is my wish," I had said, and so it had been settled.

Aft, in the crew's quarters, a gong sounded sharply: the signal for changing watches, and the beginning of a sleep period. I glanced at the remote control dials that glowed behind their glass panel on one side of my room. From the registered attraction of Jaron, at our present speed, we should be passing her within, according to Earth time, about two hours. That meant that their outer patrols might be seeking our business, and I touched Barry's attention button, and spoke into the microphone beside my bunk.

"Mr. Barry? I am turning in for a little sleep. Before you turn over the watch to Eitel, will you see that the nose rays are set for the Special Patrol code signal for this enar. We shall be close to Jaron shortly."

"Yes, sir! Any other orders?"

"No. Keep her on her present course. I shall take the watch from Mr. Eitel."

Since there have been changes since those days, and will undoubtedly be others in the future, it might be well to make clear, in a document such is this, that at this period, all ships of the Special Patrol Service identified themselves by means of invisible rays flashed in certain sequences, from the two nose, or forward, projectors. These code signals were changed every enar, a period of time arbitrarily set by the Council; about eighteen days, as time is measured on the Earth, and divided into ten periods, as at present, known as enarens. These were further divided into enaros, thus giving us a time-reckoning system for use in space, corresponding roughly to the months, days and hours of the Earth.

I retired, but not to sleep. Sleep would not come. I knew, of course, that if curious outer patrol ships from Jaron did investigate us, they would be able to detect our invisible ray code signal, and thus satisfy themselves that we were on the Council's business. There would be no difficulty on that score. But what I should do after landing upon the rebellious sphere, I had not the slightest idea.

"

Be stern, indifferent to their threats," Kellen, had counseled me, "but do everything within your power to make them see the folly of their attitude. Do not threaten them, for they are a surly people and you might precipitate matters. Swallow your pride if you must; remember that yours is a gigantic responsibility, and upon the information you bring us may depend the salvation of millions. I am convinced that they are not—you have a word in your language that fits exactly. Not pretending ... what is the word?"

"Bluffing?" I had supplied in English, smiling.

"Right! Bluffing. It is a very descriptive word. I am sure they are not bluffing."

I was sure of it also. They knew the power of the Alliance; they had been made to feel it more than once. A bluff would have been a foolish thing, and these people were not fools. In some lines of research they were extraordinarily brilliant.

But what could their new, terrible weapon be? Rays we had; at least half a dozen rays of destruction; the terrible dehydrating ray of the Deuber Spheres, the disintegrating ray that dated back before Ame Baove and his first voyage into space, the concentrated ultra-violet ray that struck men down in fiery torment.... No, it could hardly be a new ray that was their boasted weapon.

What, then? Electricity had even then been exhausted of its possibilities. Atomic energy had been released, harnessed, and directed. Yet it would take fabulous time and expense to make these machines of destruction do what they claimed they would do.

Still pondering the problem, I did fall at last into a fitful travesty of sleep.

I was glad when the soft clamor of the bell aft announced the next change of watch. I rose, cleared the cobwebs from my brain with an icy shower, and made my way directly to the navigating room.

"Everything tidy, sir," said Eitel, my second officer, and a Zenian. He was thin and very dark, like all Zenians, and had the high, effeminate voice of that people. But he was cool and fearless and had the uncanny cerebration of his kind; I trusted him as completely as I trusted Barry, my first officer, who, like myself, was a native of Earth. "Will you take over?"

"Yes," I nodded, glancing at the twin charts beneath the ground glass top of the control table. "Get what sleep you can the next few enaros. Presently I shall want every man on duty and at his station."

He glanced at me curiously, as the observer had done, but saluted and left with only a brief, "Yes, sir!" I returned the salute and turned my attention again to the charts.

The navigating room of an interplanetary ship is without doubt unfamiliar ground to most, so it might be well for me to say that such ships have, for the most part, twin charts, showing progress in two dimensions; to use land terms, lateral and vertical. These charts are really no more than large sheets of ground glass, ruled in both directions with fine black lines, representing all relatively close heavenly bodies by green lights of varying sizes. The ship itself is represented by a red spark and the whole is, of course, entirely automatic in action, the instruments comprising the chart being operated by super-radio reflexes.

Jaron, the charts showed me at a glance, was now far behind. Almost directly above—it is necessary to resort to these unscientific terms to make my meaning clear—was the tiny world Elon, home of the friendly but impossibly dull winged people, the only ones in the known Universe. I was there but once, and found them almost laughably like our common dragon-flies on Earth; dragon-flies that grow some seven feet long, and with gauzy wings of amazing strength.

Directly ahead, on both charts, was a brilliantly glowing sphere of green—our destination. I made some rapid mental calculations, studying the few fine black lines between the red spark that was our ship, and the nearest edge of the great green sphere. I glanced at our speed indicator and the attraction meter. The little red slide that moved around the rim of the attraction meter was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was from straight ahead; the great black hand was nearly a third of the way around the face.

We were very close; two hours would bring us into the atmospheric envelope. In less than two hours and a half, we would be in the Control City of what is now called the Forgotten Planet!

I glanced forward, through the thick glass partitions, into the operating room. Three men stood there, watching intently; they too, were wondering why we visited the unfriendly world.

The planet itself loomed up straight ahead, a great half-circle, its curved rim sharp and bright against the empty blackness of space; the chord ragged and blurred. In two hours ... I turned away and began a restless pacing.

An hour went by; an hour and a half. I pressed the attention button to the operating room, and gave orders to reduce our speed by half. We were very close to the outer fringe of the atmospheric envelope. Then, keeping my eye on the big surface-temperature gauge, with its stubby red hand, I resumed my nervous pacing.

Slowly the thick red hand of the surface-temperature gauge began to move; slowly, and then more rapidly, until the eyes could catch its creeping.

"Reduce to atmospheric speed," I ordered curtly, and glanced down through a side port at one end of the long navigating room.

We were, at the moment, directly above the twilight belt. To my right, as I looked down, I could see a portion of the glistening antarctic ice cap. Here and there were the great flat lakes, almost seas, of the planet.

Our geographies of the Universe to-day do not show the topography of the Forgotten Planet: I might say, therefore, that the entire sphere was land area, with numerous great lakes embedded in its surface, together with many broad, very crooked rivers. As Ame Baove had reported, there were no mountains, and no high land.

"Altitude constant," I ordered. "Port three degrees. Stand by for further orders."

The earth seemed to whirl slowly beneath us. Great cities drifted astern, and I compared the scene below me with the great maps I took from our chart-case. The Control City should be just beyond the visible rim; well in the daylight area.

"Port five degrees," I said, and pressed the attention button to Barry's quarters.

"Mr. Barry, please call all men to quarters, including the off-duty watch, and then report to the navigating room. Mr. Eitel will be under my direct orders. We shall descend within the next few minutes."

"Very well, sir."

I pressed the attention button to Eitel's room.

"Mr. Eitel, please pick ten of your best men and have them report at the forward exit. Await me, with the men, at that place. I shall be with you as soon as I turn the command over to Mr. Barry. We are descending immediately."

"Right, sir!" said Eitel.

I turned from the microphone to find that Barry had just entered the navigating room.

"We will descend into the Great Court of the Control City, Mr. Barry," I said. "I have a mission here. I am sorry, but these are the only instructions I can leave you.

"I do not know how long I shall be gone from the ship, but if I do not return within three hours, depart without me, and report directly to Kellen of the Council. To him, and no other. Tell him, verbally, what took place. Should there be any concerted action against the Tamon, use your own judgment as to the action to be taken, remembering that the safety of the ship and its crew, and the report of the Council, are infinitely more important than my personal welfare. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Too damned clear."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Don't worry," I said lightly. "I'll be back well within the appointed time."

"I hope so. But there's something wrong as hell here. I'm talking now as man to man; not to my commanding officer. I've been watching below, and I have seen at least two spots where large numbers of our ships have been destroyed. The remaining ships bear their own damned emblem where the crest of the Alliance should be—and was. What does it mean?"

"It means," I said slowly, "that I shall have to rely upon every man and officer to forget himself and myself, and obey orders without hesitation and without flinching. The orders are not mine, but direct from the Council itself." I held out my hand to him—an ancient Earth gesture of greeting, good-will and farewell—and he shook it vigorously.

"God go with you," he said softly, and with a little nod of thanks I turned and quickly left the room.

Eitel, with his ten men, were waiting for me at the forward exit. The men fell back a few paces and came to attention; Eitel saluted smartly.

"We are ready, sir. What are your orders?"

"You are to guard this opening. Under no circumstances is anyone to enter save myself. I shall be gone not longer than three hours; if I am not back within that time, Mr. Barry has his orders. The exit will be sealed, and the Tamon will depart immediately, without me."

"Yes, sir. You will pardon me, but I gather that your mission is a dangerous one. May I not accompany you?"

I shook my head.

"I shall need you here."

"But, sir, they are very excited and angry; I have been watching them from the observation ports. And there is a vast crowd of them around the ship."

"I had expected that. I thank you for your concern, but I must go alone. Those are the orders. Will you unseal the exit?"

His "Yes, sir!" was brisk and efficient, but there was a worried frown on his features as he unlocked and released the switch that opened the exit.

The huge plug of metal, some ten feet in diameter, revolved swiftly and noiselessly, backing slowly in its fine threads into the interior of the ship, gripped by the ponderous gimbals which, as the last threads disengaged, swung the mighty disc to one side, like the door of some great safe.

"Remember your orders," I smiled, and with a little gesture to convey an assurance which I certainly did not feel, I strode through the circular opening out into the crowd. The heavy glass secondary door shot down behind me, and I was in the hands of the enemy.

The first thing I observed was that my menore, which I had picked up on my way to the exit, was not functioning. Not a person in all that vast multitude wore a menore; the five black-robed dignitaries who marched to meet me wore none.

Nothing could have showed more clearly that I was in for trouble. To invite a visitor, as Kellen had done, to remove his menore first, was, of course, a polite and courteous thing to do if one wished to communicate by speech; to remove the menore before greeting a visitor wearing one, was a tacit admission of rank enmity; a confession that one's thoughts were to be concealed.

My first impulse was to snatch off my own instrument and fling it in the solemn, ugly faces of the nearest of the five dignataries; I remembered Kellen's warning just in time. Quietly, I removed the metal circlet and tucked it under my arm, bowing slightly to the committee of five as I did so.

"I am Ja Ben," said the first of the five, with an evil grin. "You are the representative of the Council that we commanded to appear?"

"I am John Hanson, commander of the ship Tamon of the Special Patrol Service. I am here to represent the Central Council," I replied with dignity.

"As we commanded," grinned Ja Ben. "That is good. Follow us and you shall have the evidence you were promised."

Ja Ben led the way with two of his black-robed followers. The other two fell in behind me. A virtual prisoner, I marched between them, through the vast crowd that made way grudgingly to let us pass.

I have seen the people of most of the planets of the known Universe. Many of them, to Earth notions, are odd. But these people, so much like us in many respects, were strangely repulsive.

Their heads, as Ame Baove had recorded, were not round like ours, but possessed a high bony crest that ran from between their lashless, browless eyes, down to the very nape of their necks. Their skin, even that covering their hairless heads, was a dull and papery white, like parchment, and their eyes were abnormally small, and nearly round. A hateful, ugly people, perpetually scowling, snarling; their very voices resembled more the growl of wild beasts than the speech of intelligent beings.

Ja Ben led the way straight to the low but vast building of dun-colored stone that I knew was the administration building of the Control City. We marched up the broad, crowded steps, through the muttering, jeering multitude into the building itself. The guards at the doors stood aside to let us through and the crowd at last was left behind.

A swift, cylindrical elevator shot us upward, into a great glass-walled laboratory, built like a sort of penthouse on the roof. Ja Ben walked quickly across the room towards a long, glass-topped table; the other four closed in on me silently but suggestively.

"That is unnecessary," I said quietly. "See, I am unarmed and completely in your power. I am here as an ambassador of the Central Council, not as a warrior."

"Which is as well for you," grinned Ja Ben. "What I have to show you, you can see quickly, and then depart."

From a great cabinet in one corner of the room he took a shining cylinder of dark red metal, and held it up before him, stroking its sleek sides with an affectionate hand.

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Here it is," he said, chuckling. "The secret of our power. In here, safely imprisoned now, but capable of being released at our command, is death for every living thing upon any planet we choose to destroy." He replaced the great cylinder in the cabinet, and picked up in its stead a tiny vial of the same metal, no larger than my little finger, and not so long. "Here," he said, turning again towards me, "is the means of proving our power to you. Come closer!"

With my bodyguard of four watching every move, I approached.

Ja Ben selected a large hollow hemisphere of crystal glass and placed it upon a smooth sheet of flat glass. Next he picked a few blossoms from a bowl that stood, incongruously enough, on the table, and threw them under the glass hemisphere.

"Flora," he grinned.

Hurrying to the other end of the room, he reached into a large flat metal cage and brought forth three small rodent like animals, natives of that world. These he also tossed carelessly under the glass.

"Fauna," he grunted, and picked up the tiny metal vial.

One end of the vial unscrewed. He turned the cap gently, carefully, a strained, anxious look upon his face. My four guards watched him breathlessly, fearfully.

The cap came loose at last, disclosing the end of the tube, sealed with a grayish substance that looked like wax. Very quickly Ja Ben rolled the little cylinder under the glass hemisphere, and picked up a beaker that had been bubbling gently on an electric plate close by. Swiftly he poured the thick contents of the beaker around the base of the glass bell. The stuff hardened almost instantly, forming an air-tight seal between the glass hemisphere and the flat plate of glass upon which it rested. Then, with an evil, triumphant smile, Ja Ben looked up.

"Flora," he repeated. "Fauna. And death. Watch! The little metal cylinder is plugged still, but in a moment that plug will disappear—simply a volatile solid, you understand. It is going rapidly ... rapidly ... it is almost gone now! Watch ... In an instant now ... ah!"

I saw the gray substance that stopped the entrance of the little metal vial disappear. The rodents ran around and over it, trying to find a crevice by which they might

escape. The flowers, bright and beautiful, lay untidily on the bottom of the glass prison.

Then, just as the last vestige of the gray plug vanished; an amazing, a terrible thing happened. At the mouth of the tiny metal vial a greenish cloud appeared. I call it a cloud, but it was not that. It was solid, and it spread in every direction, sending out little needles that lashed about and ran together into a solid mass while millions of little needles reached out swiftly.

One of these little needles touched a scurrying animal. Instantly the tiny brute stiffened, and from his entire body the greenish needles spread swiftly. One of the flowers turned suddenly thick and pulpy with the soft green mass, then another, another of the rodents ... God!

In the space of two heart beats, the entire hemisphere was filled with the green mass, that still moved and writhed and seemed to press against the glass sides as though the urge to expand was insistent, imperative....

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What is it?" I whispered, still staring at the thing.

"Death!" grunted Ja Ben, thrusting his hateful face close to mine, his tiny round eyes, with their lashless lids glinting. "Death, my friend. Go and tell your great Council of this death that we have created for every planet that will not obey us.

"We have gone back into the history of dealing death and have come back with a death such as the Universe has never known before!

"Here is a rapacious, deadly fungus we have been two centuries in developing. The spores contained in that tiny metal tube would be invisible to the naked eye—and yet given but a little time to grow, with air and vegetation and flesh to feed upon, and even that small capsule would wipe out a world. And in the cabinet,"—he pointed grinning triumphantly—"we have, ready for instant use, enough of the spores of this deadly fungas to wipe out all the worlds of your great Alliance.

"To wipe them out utterly!" he repeated, his voice shaking with a sort of frenzy now. "Every living thing upon their faces, wrapped in that thin, hungry green stuff you see there under that glass. All life wiped out; made uninhabitable so long as the Universe shall endure. And we—we shall be rulers, unquestioned, of that Universe. Tell your doddering Council that!" He leaned back against the table, panting with hate.

"I shall tell them all I have seen; all you have said," I nodded.

"You believe we have the power to do all this?"

"I do—God help me, and the Universe," I said solemnly.

There was no doubt in my mind. I could see all too clearly how well their plans had been laid; how quickly this hellish growth would strangle all life, once its spores began to develop.

The only possible chance was to get back to the Council and make my report, with all possible speed, so that every available armed ship of the universe might concentrate here, and wipe out these people before they had time to—

"I know what you are thinking, my friend," broke in Ja Ben mockingly. "You might as well have worn the menore! You would have the ships of the Alliance destroy us before we have time to act. We had foreseen that, and have provided for the possibility.

"As soon as you leave here, ships, provided with many tubes like the one just used for our little demonstration, will be dispersed in every direction. We shall be in constant communication with those ships, and at the least sign of hostility, they will be ordered to depart and spread their death upon every world they can reach. Some of them you may be able to locate and eliminate; a number of them are certain to elude capture in infinite space—and if only one, one lone ship, should escape, the doom of the Alliance and millions upon millions of people will be pronounced.

"I warn you, it will be better, much better, to bow to our wishes, and pay us the tribute we shall demand. Any attempt at resistance will precipitate certain disaster for your Council and all the worlds the Council governs."

"At least, we would wipe you out first," I said hoarsely.

"True," nodded Ja Ben. "But the vengeance of our ships would be a terrible thing! You would not dare to take the chance!"

I stood there, staring at him in a sort of daze. What he had said was so true; terribly, damnably true.

If only—

There was but one chance I could see, and desperate as it was, I took it. Whirling the heavy metal ring of my menore in my hand, I sprang towards the table.

If I could break the sealed glass hemisphere, and loose the fungus upon its creators; deal to them the doom they had planned for the universe, then perhaps all might yet be well.

Ja Ben understood instantly what was in my mind. He and his four aides leaped between me and the table, their tiny round eyes blazing with anger. I struck one of the four viciously with the menore, and with a gasp he fell back and slumped to the floor.

Before I could break through the opening, however, Ja Ben struck me full in the face with his mighty fist; a blow that sent me, dazed and reeling, into a corner of the room. I brought up with a crash against the cabinet there, groped wildly in an effort to steady myself, and fell to the floor. Almost before I struck, all four of them were upon me.

They hammered me viciously, shouted at me, cursed me in the universal tongue, but I paid no heed. I pretended to be unconscious, but my heart was beating high with sudden, glorious hope, and in my brain a terrible, merciless plan was forming.

When I had groped against the cabinet in an effort to regain my balance, my fingers had closed upon one of the little metal vials. As I fell, I covered that hand with my body and hastily hid the tiny tube in a deep pocket of my blue and silver Service uniform.

Slowly, after a few seconds, I opened my eyes and looked up at them, helplessly.

"Go, now!" snarled Ja Ben, dragging me to my feet. "Go, and tell your Council we are more than a match for you—and for them." He thrust me, reeling, towards his three assistants. "Take him to his ship, and send aid for Ife Rance, here." He glanced at the still unconscious figure of the victim of my menore, and then turned to me with a last warning.

"Remember, one thing more, my friend: you have disintegrator ray equipment upon your ship. You have the little atomic bombs that won for the Alliance the Second War of the Planets. I know that. But if you make the slightest effort to use them, I shall dispatch a supply of the green death to our ships, and they will depart upon their missions at once. You would take upon yourself a terrible responsibility by making the smallest hostile move.

"Go, now—and when you return, bring with you members of your great Council who will have the power to hear our demands, and see that they are obeyed. And do not keep us waiting over long, for we are an impatient race." He bowed, mockingly, and passed his left hand swiftly before his face, his people's sign of parting.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and, hemmed in by my three black-robed conductors, was hurried down the elevator and back through the jeering mob to my ship.

The glass secondary door shot up to permit me to enter, and Eitel gripped my shoulder

anxiously, his eyes smoldering angrily.

"You're hurt, sir!" he said in his odd, high-pitched voice, staring into my bruised face. "What—"

"It's nothing," I assured him. "Close the exit immediately; we depart at once."

"Yes, sir!" He closed the switch, and the great threaded plug swung gently on its gimbals and began to revolve, swiftly and silently. A little bell sounded sharply, and the great door ceased its motion. Eitel locked the switch and returned the key to his pocket.

"Good. All men are at their stations?" I asked briskly.

"Yes, sir! All except these ten, detailed to guard the exit."

"Have them report to their regular stations. Issue orders to the ray operators that they are to instantly, and without further orders, destroy any ship that may leave the surface of this planet. Have every atomic bomb crew ready for an instant and concentrated offensive directed at the Control City, but command them not to act under any circumstances unless I give the order. Is that clear, Mr. Eitel?"

"Yes, sir!"

I nodded, and turned away, making my way immediately to the navigating room.

"Mr. Barry," I said quickly and gravely, "I believe that the fate of the known Universe depends upon us at this moment. We will ascend vertically, at once—slowly—until we are just outside the envelope, maintaining only sufficient horizontal motion to keep us directly over the Control City. Will you give the necessary orders?"

"Immediately, sir!" He pressed the attention button to the operating room and spoke swiftly into the microphone; before he completed the order I had left.

We were already ascending when I reached the port forward atomic bomb station. The man in charge, a Zenian, saluted with automatic precision and awaited orders.

"You have a bomb in readiness?" I asked, returning the salute.

"Those were my orders, sir."

"Correct. Remove it, please."

I waited impatiently while the crew removed the bomb from the releasing trap. It was

withdrawn at last; a fish-shaped affair, very much like the ancient airplane bombs save that it was no larger than my two fists, placed one upon the other, and that it had four silvery wires running along its sides, from rounded nose to pointed tail, held at a distance from the body by a series of insulating struts.

"Now," I said, "how quickly can you put another object in the trap, re-seal the opening, and release the object?"

"While the Commander counts ten with reasonable speed," said the Zenian with pride. "We won first honors in the Special Patrol Service contests at the last Examination, the Commander may remember."

"I do remember. That is why I selected you for this duty."

With hands that trembled a little, I think, I drew forth the little vial of gleaming red metal, while the bombing crew watched me curiously.

"I shall unscrew the cap from this little vial," I explained, "and drop it immediately into the releasing trap. Re-seal the trap and release this object as quickly as it is possible to do so. If you can better the time you made to win the honors at the Examination—in God's name, do so!"

"Yes, sir!" replied the Zenian. He gave brisk orders to his crew, and each of the three men sprang alertly into position.

As quickly as I could, I turned off the cap of the little metal vial and dropped it into the trap. The heavy plug, a tiny duplicate of the exit door, clicked shut upon it and spun, whining gently, into the opening. Something clicked sharply, and one of the crew dropped a bar into place. As it shot home, the Zenian in command of the crew pulled the release plunger.

"Done, sir!" he said proudly.

I did not reply. My eye fixed upon the observation tube that was following the tiny missile to the ground.

The Control City was directly below us. I lost sight of the vial almost instantly, but the indicating cross-hairs showed me exactly where the vial would strike; at a point approximately half way between the edge of the city and the great squat pile of the administrating building, with its gleaming glass penthouse—the laboratory in which, only a few minutes before, I had witnessed the demonstration of the death which awaited the Universe.

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. "Smartly done, men!" I turned and hurried to the navigating

room, where the most powerful of our television discs was located.

The disc was not as perfect as those we have to-day; it was hooded to keep out exterior light, which is not necessary with the later instruments, and it was more unwieldy. However, it did its work, and did it well, in the hands of an experienced operator.

With only a nod to Barry, I turned the range band to maximum, and brought it swiftly to bear upon that portion of the city in which the little vial had fallen. As I drew the focusing lever towards me, the scene leaped at me through the clear, glowing glass disc.

Froth! Green, billowing froth that grew and boiled and spread unceasingly. In places it reached high into the air, and it moved with an eager, inner life that was somehow terrible and revolting. I moved the range hand back, and the view seemed to drop away from me swiftly.

I could see the whole city now. All one side of it was covered with the spreading green stain that moved and flowed so swiftly. Thousands of tiny black figures were running in the streets, crowding away from the awful danger that menaced them.

The green patch spread more swiftly always. When I had first seen it, the edges were advancing as rapidly as a man could run; now they were fairly racing, and the speed grew constantly.

A ship, two of them, three of them came darting from somewhere, towards the administration building, with its glass cupola. I held my breath as the deep, sudden humming from the Tamon told me that our rays were busy. Would they—

One of the enemy ships disappeared suddenly in a little cloud of dirty, heavy dust that settled swiftly. Another ... and the third. Three little streaks of dust, falling, falling....

A fourth ship, and a fifth came rushing up, their sides faintly glowing from the speed they had made. The green flood, thick and insistent, was racing up and over the administration building now. It reached the roof, ran swiftly....

The fourth ship shattered into dust. The fifth settled swiftly—and then that ship also disappeared, together with a corner of the building. Then the thick green stuff flowed over the whole building and there was nothing to be seen there but a mound of soft, flowing, gray-green stuff that rushed on now with the swiftness of the wind.

I looked up, into Barry's face.

"You're ill!" he said quickly. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Yes," I said, forming the words with difficulty. "Give orders to ascend at emergency speed!"

For once my first officer hesitated. He glanced at the attraction meter and then turned to me again, wondering.

"At this height, sir, emergency speed will mean dangerous heating of the surface; perhaps—"

"I want it white hot, Mr. Barry. She is built to stand it. Emergency speed, please—immediately!"

"Right, sir!" he said briskly, and gave the order.

I felt my weight increase as the order was obeyed; gradually the familiar, uncomfortable feeling left me. Silently, Barry and I watched the big surface temperature gauge as it started to move. The heat inside became uncomfortable, grew intense. The sweat poured from us. In the operating room forward, I could see the men casting quick, wondering glances up at us through the heavy glass partition that lay between.

The thick, stubby red hand of the surface temperature gauge moved slowly but steadily towards the heavy red line that marked the temperature at which the outer shell of our hull would become incandescent. The hand was within three or four degrees of that mark when I gave Barry the order to arrest our motion.

When he had given the order, I turned to him and motioned towards the television disc.

"Look," I said.

He looked, and when at last he tore his face away from the hood, he seemed ten years older.

"What is it?" he asked in a choked whisper. "Why—they're being wiped out; the whole of that world—"

"True. And some of the seeds of that terrible death might have drifted upward, and found a lodging place upon the surface of our ship. That is why I ordered the emergency speed while we were still within the atmospheric envelope, Barry. To burn away that contamination, if it existed. Now we are safe, unless—"

I pressed the attention button to the station of the chief of the ray operators.

"Your report," I ordered.

"Nine ships disintegrated, sir," he replied instantly. "Five before the city was destroyed, four later."

"You are certain that none escaped?"

"Positive, sir."

"Very good."

I turned to Barry, smiling.

"Point her nose for Zenia, Mr. Barry," I said. "As soon as it is feasible, resume emergency speed. There are some very anxious gentlemen there awaiting our report, and I dare not convey it except in person."

"Yes, sir!" said Barry crisply.

This, then, is the history of the Forgotten Planet. On the charts of the Universe it appears as an unnamed world. No ship is permitted to pass close enough to it so that its attraction is greater than that of the nearest other mass. A permanent outpost of fixed-station ships, with headquarters upon Jaron, the closest world, is maintained by the Council.

There are millions of people who might be greatly disturbed if they knew of this potential menace that lurks in the midst of our Universe, but they do not know. The wisdom of the Council made certain of that.

But, in order that in the ages to come there might be a record of this matter, I have been asked to prepare this document for the sealed archives of the Alliance. It has been a pleasant task; I have relived, for a little time, a part of my youth.

The work is done, now, and that is well. I am an old man, and weary. Sometimes I wish I might live to see the wonders that the next generation or so will witness, but my years are heavy upon me.

My work is done.