

The Greatest City in the World Bows Before a Biological Barrage as Invisible Doom Cloaks Humanity in a Mantle of Madness!

CHAPTER I *Mystery Blight*

THERE was a crash in Ward C and an answering scream. Then followed a series of violent concussions, quick shouts, the sound of people staggering across the floor. The in a hospital gown dashed out, followed by disheveled orderlies.

The fugitive patient raced down the corridor, bowling over the amazed desk nurse in his path. He paused long enough to wrench a fire-extinguisher from the wall, spin about and hurtle it in the faces of his pursuers. Then, using his bare fists, he smashed out the heavy panes of a window and dived through to the ground—and freedom—a floor below.

Phones jangled wildly, call bells rang, and emergency lights blinked. Nurses leaped to their stations and interns poured out of the staff house, struggling into their jackets. At the great iron gates that bordered the hospital's grounds, guards looked about nervously, wondered what in blazes was going on. Near Emergency, across the way from the ambulance garages, someone shouted once and then, a few seconds later, again, this time feebly. The hunting interns veered sharply in their tracks and caught sight of a tall slender figure flitting through the shrubbery. It was the escaping patient.

An intern dashed out of Admissions and plunged into the brush. In another instant the crowd saw him spin around between the hot-houses a few yards behind the fleeing patient. As they broke into the clear, he left his feet in a flying tackle that brought both sliding to a halt along the gritty soil. Then the others came up and seized the furiously struggling patient. It needed four powerful orderlies to drag him off to Psychiatric.

The intern brushed himself off, shook his head once, and limped painfully until he reached the Administration Offices. He pushed through, kicked open the inner door and seated himself with a sigh. The big man in tweeds at the important-looking desk looked up in astonishment and threw down his pen.

"Now then, Lewis," he said, "what the—"

"Doctor Cole to you," grinned the intern. He squirmed around in the leather chair and smiled amiably. "Oh worshipful Director, I am bearer of evil tidings. On second thought, Mr. Miller, I think you'd better call me Hero Cole."

"What's on your mind?" Miller snapped irritably. "I'm a busy man, Cole."

"Not too busy for what I have to say."

MILLER looked up shrewdly at the young intern. "I know what you're going to say."

"So you've guessed it already, eh?" Cole said. "Yep, this makes the fifth in three days. And now there's something else."

"Something else?" Miller frowned, puzzled.

"Something very much else." Cole dug into his pocket and withdrew a sheaf of notes. "When five apparently harmless, patients go violently mad that's not so awful. But when you look at these admissions figures"—Cole tossed the notes across the desk—"and find that ninety per cent of the patients admitted at Queens County Hospital during the past week were suffering from malignant tumors and some peculiar cancer types, you begin to smell something rotten somewhere."

"It's unbelievable," gasped Miller. He scanned the notes hurriedly and then looked up at Cole. "Unbelievable."

"It's worse," answered Cole, his voice crisp. "I haven't got the reports yet, but wait until you see those diagnoses. Cancer! What's wrong with those patients just vaguely resembles cancer. I tell you, Chief, we're up against an epidemic of something that hasn't yet been seen inside the pages of a medical

book!"

"You're mad!" shouted the director. "A new disease? That's impossible."

"See for yourself," answered Cole. He grabbed Miller's arm, pulled him to the door. "They've all been placed up in the South Wing. Come and take a look."

The two men walked quickly to the elevator and were whisked up to the Roentgenology Floor.

Reaching the floor above, they walked slowly around the great, high-ceilinged room that was lined with beds. The sight that met their eyes was almost incredible. The patients lay restlessly, in no pain whatever. The charts showed normal temperature, normal pulse, normal blood counts, and thoroughly normal data for each. But nevertheless the patients were sick, for all had changed from thoroughly healthy specimens to misshapen, distorted caricatures of humanity.

Some had suddenly sprouted miniature legs on one shoulder or developed extra fingers in the middle of the palms. Others were turning Cyclopean, one great eye bulging out in the middle of the forehead. There were patients with small spheres budding over the entire body that turned them into human mulberries.

All were twisted and changed, as though Nature had suddenly decided to add extra lumps of clay to the human race, willy-nilly.

"How long has this been going on?" whispered Miller. "Why hasn't there been word in the papers?"

"Less than a week. These growths practically expand under your eyes. It's as though human flesh has suddenly taken on independent life of its own."

Cole lit a cigarette, puffed nervously.

"About those patients who suddenly went mad," he went on. "The first one died. Jumped from the fifth floor. Well, we had a post mortem." Cole nodded at the glint in the other's eye. "You've guessed again, haven't you? Yes, it was tumor of the brain drove him mad. God! There's no telling what the infective source is. There's no telling who may be hit next—or where. These growths develop damnably fast. You or I may have the germ of horror growing within us this minute . . . to push out anywhere, even in the brain. And it's going to spread fast, too. From epidemic to endemic and from endemic to pandemic. Miller, we've got to do something to stop this before the city finds out!"

BUT the city did find out. Slowly but inexorably, with the slow steady march of news that had all the relentlessness of Beethoven's Eroica Symphony.

On Monday the *Times* ran an editorial directed against the slipshod methods of Queens County Hospital, where seventeen mad patients had run riot for three hours. And on one of the back pages was an obscure item about a two-headed snake that had been found in the Central Park Zoo.

Tuesday papers announced a sudden onslaught of horrible murders, evidently the work of a new crime band, somewhat similar to the late Murder, Inc., ring. The newspapers also reported the statement of Professor Higgleston at Columbia University, who alleged he had seen a swarm of pterodactyls roosting in the eaves of the Museum of Art.

But when Wednesday morning came around and half the city went to work to find that the other half was mysteriously absent, matters turned suddenly from the casual to the serious. The telephone company was forced to suspend service when hordes of key technicians failed to report. The morning newspapers were not on the stands. Half the shops were closed, half the police force off duty, half of all communications silenced. The city was half-stifled, choking with stagnation.

Citizens returned home almost immediately to get to their radios and wait for some news that would give them a clue. At home they found themselves surrounded with a monstrous sickness whose only symptoms were the horrible distortions of its victims, distortions that they had laughed at only a few days before. The radios failed to explain much. Newscasters told their listeners what they already knew. Told them that half the city was stricken with a strange new blight that was turning man into a caricature of himself.

In the Queens County Hospital there was no time to wait for bulletins over the air. Admissions had jumped so high there was no time nor reason to calculate it in terms of percentage.

The staff worked indiscriminately. Nurses took over, orderlies took over, even probationers were

suddenly elevated to R.N.s and pitched in to help stem the hopeless tide.

Only Doctor Cole stood back just enough to try for a clear comprehensive view. Restlessly he roamed the wards and temporary sick rooms of the hospital, hunting, searching for some telltale clue that might give the stricken city the relief it needed so urgently.

"It isn't cancer," he muttered over and over, "at least not the cancer we've known. There's no sense diagnosing. But what's the infective agent? Bacteria? Protozoa? Virus? What the devil could it be?"

HE ran down to Pathology and peered in. Alone in a welter of topsy-turvy apparatus sat Dr. Dunn. "Well?" asked Cole.

Dunn shrugged wearily.

"Nothing," he said, "nothing at all. I've sectioned and used every stain known to the business. I've been working for hours." He blinked bloodshot eyes. "And there's nothing. I'm afraid I can't hold out much longer. Maybe it's got me. What's the first symptom?"

"That's the hell of it," answered Cole. "There just isn't any symptom."

He patted Dunn on the shoulder and wandered out. Well, he hadn't expected quick results, anyway. Best thing would be to look for possible modes of infection. What could hit an entire city so fast? Water supply?

He ran down to the staff house and changed to his street clothes. His car almost out of gas, he stopped off at a station. When no one answered his persistent honking, he was forced to help himself from the tank. Then he turned north and drove swiftly toward the city. The road was deserted.

The grass in the ditch, Cole noticed, was thicker than usual, heavy-stemmed and dotty like thick stalks of spaghetti. The whole countryside, for that matter, was slowly turning lumpy and grotesque. Trees sported humps and bulges on their boles. Bushes were discolored coral clumps.

And then, to send a chill down his spine, Cole began to notice lumbering forms lurking far in the background. Creatures that had once been humans and animals, but now were savage-looking monsters. Cole pressed his foot down on the accelerator in quick fear and with his free hand felt hastily for the revolver in the side pocket of his car. It made him feel a little better when he had transferred it to his own jacket.

The city streets were even more appalling than the suburbs. The deserted buildings with horrible forms lurking in the shadows ; normal-looking individuals every once in a long while scurrying as if for dear life's sake ; the heaps of smashed-up cars at odd corners that made progress a painful series of detours. It was almost an hour before Cole reached the Department of Water Supply.

Only an old clerk was left in the office. He was an old white-haired man who sat easily in the superintendent's chair and greeted Cole with a toothless smile.

"Too old for it, I am," he said, "that plague likes 'em young and tender like you."

"Never mind that," said Cole angrily. "I'm from Queens County Hospital. I want to know about the water supply."

"What?" asked the clerk. "You got to ask me. I'm the Department now."

"Know anything about infection of the city's water?"

"There ain't been none. They checked all that before they got took sick."

"Sure?"

"Yep."

What next? Cole turned uneasily and thought hard. Food? There might be some officials left at the Health Department. He ran through the ominous streets, looking behind constantly. At last he reached the new Health and Sanitation Building. Irony of ironies, he thought grimly, if they're all stricken. . He ran shouting through the long echoing corridors.

They all were.

BUT in the inspector's office he found a report. He checked hastily. Milk absolutely safe. Three score public markets tested in key positions throughout the city, and all reported negative. Sewage negative. Rivers negative. Where, in God's name, was the infection coming from? From the skies?

Perhaps.

Cole trotted back to his car, thinking desperately. This might be something like cosmic ray infection. A new type of solar radiation or barrage ... something wild. Like

Oh!

He reeled back from a sudden blow, rolled over and glanced up hastily. The Thing he saw made his blood run cold. Long arms and a crocodile skin with talonlike teeth that glittered. Cole pulled his knees back as the Thing dived at him. He kicked savagely, driving his heels into the chest. It grunted, blowing a gust of charnel breath in his face, paused, then plunged at him again.

Cole caught it with one heel and pushed it to the pavement. In another second he had the revolver out and fired point-blank from the hip. The Thing staggered back from the smash of the thirty-eight, gasped hoarsely and plodded toward him again.

Horrified, Cole stepped back and fired once more, carefully at the head. This time it halted, knelt slowly and at last toppled to the ground, a shuddering Thing that had once been a man.

But the shooting had attracted attention. Cole heard sounds and saw shapes looming up from the tight little side streets of City Hall. Panic-stricken, he sprinted for the car. The motor choked and ground but would not take. Cole leaned over and locked both doors. Once more he tried the starter. As the engine turned and hiccupped he heard scratches on the doors. He turned, caught a horrible glimpse of weird faces. Then a fist smashed through the window and at that instant the motor caught. Cole slammed into gear and sped the car off just as claws reached for his throat. The acceleration tumbled his attackers from the running board. He was safe—so far.

CHAPTER II

First Clues

COLE headed up Broadway and tried to soothe his jagged nerves. He'd learned something. The things were almost impossible to kill. He'd have to get plenty of ammunition.

The shambles through which he drove were maddening. He wondered how long it would be before he too succumbed. Perhaps he wouldn't at all, though, he speculated. Evidently a certain percentage of the city had immunity to the mysterious blight. Cole turned on the radio, just in case. He caught the announcer's flash:

"—epidemic the United States has ever known. Aid is being rushed to New York at once, although the Government does not state whether it will arrive in time. New York has not answered any kind of communication for the past twelve hours and there is the terrible possibility that there is no one living. The entire region over a thirty-mile square has been isolated under strict quarantine. This broadcast is being specially directed toward the city from Philadelphia in the hopes that those who are still safe will know that aid will arrive within eight hours—"

Eight hours!

Cole turned East to Madison Avenue, drove swiftly uptown and yanked to a halt before Abercrombie. He headed for the game department, deciding that it was time to supply himself with a heavier revolver and plenty of ammunition. On his way out he was amazed to discover over thirty people, perfectly sane and normal, living in the basement of the store. They had been there since the plague had broken out in its virulent form.

Just as a check, Cole drove past the 42nd Street subway entrance and dropped in to investigate. Here, too, he found hundreds of normal people who had taken the underground as a refuge. They were living there cheerful, unharmed. Perplexed, Cole started the car and sped back to the hospital. This was his first break. He didn't yet know what the blight was or what it meant, but he did know that people who were underground were safe from its dangers. Why? There had to be a reason.

At the hospital, Cole was horrified to discover the gates open and unguarded. He turned up the driveway and inched slowly across the grounds, peering from side to side. No guards? That meant something wrong. He stopped the car and was about to get out when a small geyser of dirt flicked up before him and he heard the rip of a shot from the staff house.

Cole squinted and saw white uniforms leaning from the windows and beckoning at him. Quickly he drove down the length of the grounds and into the small garage behind the house. He darted up the steps. The door opened; and he was yanked into an excited crowd of doctors and nurses.

"No one's safe in the Main Building," came the hasty explanations. "Homicidal mania's spreading like wildfire."

"All of them?" he gasped.

Little Dr. Dunn shouldered forward. Cole was glad to see the pathologist still healthy.

"Not all," answered Dunn. "About twenty per cent."

"What about the rest?"

"Monstrous-looking . . . terrified ... irritable, but no more dangerous than an ordinary mob of humans."

"No more dangerous!" Cole grinned sourly, "You ever hear of lynching?"

There was an uncomfortable shuffle in the group and Cole changed the topic hastily.

"Listen," he said, "I think I've got a little information that might help. Where's Miller?"

Dunn's face fell. "Disappeared," he said at length. "Maybe *it* got him or maybe *they* got him. Can't tell."

"Too bad." Cole paused, thoughtful. He realized what a keen blow Miller's loss would be to them. Then he began briskly: "Anyway, I've discovered that living underground seems to ward off infection. Does that mean anything to any of you?"

NO one answered until a voice grumbled from the background. "Suffering sinus, I'm only a doctor!"

There was enough of a laugh to relieve the tension. They settled down as best they could to exchange information.

"I need statistics," Cole told them. "If you could give me enough facts I might be able to draw up an empirical theory about this crazy business. We've got to do something before the relief gets here or they'll walk smack into slaughter."

No one answered. They had nothing to contribute.

"Simmons? Carmichael? Allen? Doesn't anybody know anything?"

"Er . . . Doctor Cole . . ." She was a plain-looking nurse he didn't know from Eve.

"Well?" he demanded abstractedly.

"Reports were sent in to Director Miller's office, covering every phase of the epidemic."

"Yes?" Cole urged eagerly. "Unfortunately, the report is probably where I last saw it—on Director Miller's desk."

Cole stood up, wrapt in thought, amid the disgruntled exclamations that followed. For the first time in the rapid series of events of the past week he felt the sore need of Miller's driving force and keen executive ability. Miller was an organizer and leader, by nature suited to bring order out of chaos. At last Cole shrugged and looked around.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'll just have to get them their reports." He shook off their protests, inspected his new gun, and prepared to leave. Then Dunn came up and took his arm.

"See here, Lewis," he said, "if you must go, why not minimize the risk? Now I know this much. The harmless variety won't bother you if you don't incite them. The violent ones will tear at anything that remotely resembles a normal individual. Let's get you a disguise."

They dashed through the staff house searching for make-up. Simmons admitted to a love of amateur theatricals and supervised the facial distortions. They mixed flour with water and pasted lumps over Cole's face, stuffed his clothes with lumpy pillows and mottled his skin with paints. When Simmons was done, Cole walked crookedly down to the main building and shuffled inside.

He spent a harrowing hour in Miller's office amidst shambling, screaming monstrosities, literally fighting his way to the desk. It was overturned, the papers scattered all over. Cole felt his position so precarious he was forced to scoop up armfuls of paper and ram them into his shirt, hoping the reports would be included. At last he fought his way outside and ran back to the staff house.

WHILE he showered and had a little supper he told the others about the hospital-shambles. Then they settled down in the library and sifted through the papers. In his haste, Cole had been unable to eliminate the chaff. He found bills for stationary, requests for favors . . . all the tedious business that Miller was accustomed to take in his stride. Then Cole unearthed a receipted bill for raw beef bones—six thousand dollars' worth. He fingered it curiously, wondering what earthly use the director could have had for such material, and then went on with the serious work.

The reports that he and the others examined were critical and laughable by turns. Some were imaginative and spoke of Martians and the red plague. Others were too brief, too tragically succinct. There were hundreds of questions that could be asked, questions that would have to remain unanswered. At last Cole looked at the sorry little list he had gleaned from the mass and arose.

"Well," he said, "we don't know an awful lot. I've managed to bring back a pile of paper and one picture, the latter included by mistake. The total facts we've been able to gather are: one, that people underground are not affected; two, that although the growths affect humans haphazardly they seem to affect vegetative life uniformly."

"How's that?" someone called.

"When I say uniformly," explained Cole, "I mean that all reports show that only one side of trees and tall brush is affected. The humps protrude the entire length of the bole, but only on one side!"

"Like moss growing on the north side?"

"That's just about it," laughed Cole. "Now in addition to these findings, I made one other that may or may not bear on the case. While I was lurking around the hot houses I happened to look in. *The vegetative growths there were absolutely normal!*"

Dunn whistled in amazement.

"Just what it means, though, I couldn't say," continued Cole.

"Never mind about that for the time being," interrupted Simmons. "I've an idea. Let's assume this epidemic is a result of some radiation form. X-rays can produce something like this. Then the natural question is: where's the source of radiation?"

"Perhaps from overhead. Cosmic, or something—"

"Not when you look at those trees," answered Simmons.

"Right!" snapped Cole. "The rest of you get the idea? Simmons is suggesting that the ulcerated side of the tree points toward the source of radiation."

"So?"

"So we'll do a little research. Suppose we take the principle of the radio direction finder. In other words, let's go out, dig up some accurate compasses, and plot the direction of tumors on trees over a wide stretch. Say as far east as Port Jefferson and west to Sommerville or High Bridge. It'll take some time, but I think it's worth the few hours. We can plot the directions. The radiation source should be pretty close to the intersection of those lines."

CHAPTER III

Station Death

IT was quite dark when seven of the hospital's staff squeezed into the car with Cole. They headed for New York, ferreted out three other cars, and broke into an instrument shop for the necessary equipment. At last they split to cover their assignments.

Cole and Dunn, who had the New York sector, drove in silence, watching the streets cautiously. The occasional normal-looking humans they saw scurrying down the side streets showed them that the infection had not attacked the entire population. The sight of that immunity strengthened their faith in their own. Reflecting on the curious enigma of immunity, Cole questioned his companion.

"I don't know the answer," said Dunn. "There are two factors that might operate. First, the external and internal coatings of the individual furnish mechanical protections against infection. Second, the insusceptible individual contains no receptors for the infection. That is to say, no organic substratum exists upon which the invasion can anchor."

"Seems to me," said Cole, "that our immunity should be a matter of mechanical skin protection, since we suspect ray infection."

"Very likely," Dunn nodded. "Probably all of us have an unknown skin quality in common. Perhaps the answer lies in skin pigmentation. But there's not enough time to find out." He shrugged.

Turning north on Fifth Avenue, the car passed Sherman's statue and sped along the east side of the Park. The hideous shrubbery and monstrous creatures that twisted and stumbled through the broken branches made them shudder. After a pause, Dunn nudged Cole.

"By the way," he asked, "who was in that one picture you found in Miller's office?"

"Miller," was the answer. "Miller and a man by the name of Gurwitsch. Just one of those informal snapshots. Must have been on Miller's desk. Funny I never noticed it before."

"Not *the* Alexander Gurwitsch?"

"The very same. Miller studied with him for three years. I don't suppose you knew our director was a damned fine zoologist before he took over the reins?"

"I didn't," answered Dunn. "But if he worked under Gurwitsch he worked with the best. A. G. has done some remarkable things with abnormal plant growth."

"Abnormal plant growth?" echoed Cole.

"Yep. Report in the *Journal of Zoology*. Look it up in the staff library some time when you get the chance."

They proceeded unmolested to the north end of Central Park and took a dozen careful compass readings. As they turned south again and drove downtown, they were horrified to see a dull red glow on the horizon that could mean only one thing—that the city was in flames.

Central Park South was filled with hordes of hoarse-shouting, gesticulating creatures who were rioting with flaming torches. The two men, watching carefully, saw to their amazement that the mobs were being led by leaders clad in peculiar, white, semi-transparent suits, with hoods that covered their heads.

DISMAYED at the chaotic turn of events, Dunn turned the car toward home and sped rapidly toward the bridge. But at Canal Street Cole suddenly ordered Dunn to stop and, to the latter's bewilderment, vaulted out and disappeared into the darkness. There was the sound of running feet, an exclamation and the *plunk* of a fist meeting a jaw. Presently Cole returned with a piece of glossy material in his hand.

"Saw one of the Boys in White," he explained, "and I wanted to get a look at their uniforms. Here's a hunk. What d'you make of it?"

Dunn took the strip of uniform and fingered it meditatively.

"Feels like a gelatin cloth to me," he said.

"Me, too," answered Cole. "But why gelatin? And why a uniform?"

"I think the radio might give us the answer. The gentle Boys in White seem to be doing all right when it comes to inciting to riot. Probably a nice little organization!" Dunn reached down and switched on the radio.

"—in this time of chaos. Citizens of New York, our homes, our country, our lives and the lives of those we love are in the highest danger. New York has been attacked. The time has come to declare that a most critical emergency exists. The existing government is inadequate to handle the situation. In such emergency, when the same peril may attack all our other cities at any moment, I appeal to you to join my Army of Health. Support me and I pledge that normality will be restored and the country healed. Seek out any man you see in white uniform and say you want to aid the Healer. The Healer is the only man who can save the country—"

"Pretty, isn't it?" Dunn clicked off the set and sneered. "The cleverest technique for setting up a dictatorship I've heard of in a long time. From healing the country it'll be just one short step to taking over the country."

"Yes, but why gelatin uniforms?" persisted Cole.

"Simple. Kills two birds with one stone. Probably this Healer has started all the trouble. Probably manufactured and sent out the uniforms to his men in advance. They must immunize the wearers."

"Perhaps—" mused Cole. He was silent for the rest of the trip home.

The other explorers had not yet returned when they reached the staff house. Cole ran up to the library, got a few books, and locked himself in his room with instructions that he be called when all had arrived.

The long hours of the night dragged interminably while the besieged staff kept close watch and listened to the mad sounds that echoed across the grounds from the hospital buildings. At last a car drove up to the house, followed by a second and later a third. The excited searchers called Cole and all crowded into the dining room for another conference.

"While Dunn is plotting the radiation lines on the map," said Cole, "let me tell you what we've learned. We find that the source of infection is a radiation. How? From a series of clues.

"First: I've checked almost every possible mechanical means of contamination and found all negative.

"Second: there is the all important evidence of the tree and shrub infections. I don't think anyone will deny that evidence points to a radiation flowing from a definite quarter ..." He paused and looked around. Simmons came up grinning and placed a map in his hand.

"Moreover," continued Cole, "there's other evidence. Why were the plants in the hot-house unaffected? Why are people living underground unharmed? Obviously, they are protected from the harmful exposure."

WHAT'S this mysterious exposure?" demanded a score of voices.

"I don't know," answered Cole, "but I can tell you a simple story that will explain a lot. Biologists at the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine at Moscow have been experimenting with the reproduction rate of living tissue. They noticed that cell division frequently followed a definite rhythm and concluded that it might originate in neighboring cells.

"They set up an experiment. Taking young slender roots, they placed one so that its tip pointed directly at a side of a second. The first they called the biological cannon, the second the detector. They permitted the two roots to remain in this position for three hours. Then the detector was sectioned and the number of cell divisions on both sides of the root were counted. In the exposed area about one-fourth more divisions were discovered. Apparently, the biological gun made a difference.

"The experiment was tried more than a hundred times, and each time the results were the same. It was tried but with a thin sheet of quartz interposed and again the results were the same. But when a thin sheet of glass was used, or when the quartz was coated with gelatin, the effect ceased. Now, you all know that quartz is transparent to ultra-violet rays—while glass and gelatin are opaque—" He paused meaningly.

The others stirred amazedly and stared at the young scientist.

"From all these considerations," continued Cole, "they concluded that the influence might be an ultra-violet radiation generated by the cells of the sender. Since it was the increasing rate of mitosis that had betrayed the emissions, they were named mitogenetic rays. Gentlemen, I'm of the opinion that our city is being bombarded with some new and extremely powerful form of these mitogenetic rays. All the evidence points to it . . ."

"How about the hot-houses?" called Dunn.

"That, too. Queens Hospital happens to have plain glass hot-houses. Ordinary glass, like gelatin, blocks off mitogenetic rays. Those men, the organizers of the man who calls himself the Healer, wear gelatin uniforms ... obviously to protect themselves from these mitogenetic rays. Last of all, our search has shown that these rays emanate from a common focal point." He held up the map. "A point at Black Tor, some twenty miles above New York on the Hudson. I don't know what the Healer is using for his murderous work, but one thing is self-evident. We've got to get up there and destroy it!"

There followed a chaotic half hour while men were selected and the little arms and ammunition they possessed were distributed. At last sixteen in all assembled in the dining room for a last word before setting out.

"We've got to get through," Cole told them. "The Healer is broadcasting death and destruction from Black Tor. If we can smash him, the entire campaign will collapse. Remember that we'll accomplish more

if we're cautious. Stop off in New York and pick up all the weapons you can use. If you get the chance to hijack a man's uniform, do it."

"Why not manufacture our own out of gelatin before we go up there?" asked Simmons.

"Not enough time, in the first place. In the second, this may be a special gelatin-fabric that may take too long to duplicate."

"But why get suits at all?"

"Dunn and I have agreed that our immunity results from some unknown skin quality which affords mechanical protection to the mitogenetic rays. But as we approach the source of the emanations they'll grow tremendously stronger—remember the law of inverse squares—strong enough perhaps to break through our normal skin protection. We can't even take that chance. All right, now! No more discussion. Take any route north you like . . . but be at Chanceville, just below Black Tor, by five o'clock!"

CHAPTER IV

Men in White

IT was four-thirty when Cole reached Chanceville, and two of the other cars were already waiting on the turnpike. The trip up had been horrible, for the closer they approached the source of the barrage, the more horrible the distortions of men and growths had become.

"Hey—look at the Tor!" Dunn pointed excitedly as the black peak loomed up in the distance. A thin, almost imperceptible radiance played in a halo around the tip, a radiance of subtle pastels. It flickered and swayed like dancing fire imps. For long minutes the two men stared, fascinated. At last Cole snapped his fingers.

"Five o'clock," he said. "Can't wait any longer. Let's get on."

In single file the twelve men paced noiselessly down the road. A hundred yards beyond the cars they came to a turn and presently sighted the outlying homes of the town. It was getting light quite rapidly and there was an urgent need to get past the barracks before they were seen.

They were almost past the big town hall that Simmons pointed out as the barracks when the interruption came. Three white-clad sentinels rounded a corner and started at the sight of men but a few feet away. One cried: "Halt !" and fumbled at a holster. The others darted forward, yanking at their belts.

Cole swung up the rifle he was carrying and swung it butt-foremost in a mighty arc that cracked sickeningly against the head of the leader. He went down with a coughing grunt and rolled against the legs of the second who tripped and fell. The remaining man let out a frightened howl and fired his revolver blindly before a shot from behind Cole dropped him in his tracks.

But at that instant the barracks disgorged a thin stream of uniformed men who closed in on them.

"This way!" yelled Cole. He turned and sprinted into a narrow lane between two houses. The others followed. Behind him Cole heard blows and struggling bodies. Then he was in a backyard. Lithely, he vaulted a high board fence. He dropped down on the other side and waited until he was followed by another figure in white, Dunn. "Where're the others?" he whispered.

DUNN motioned with his head to ward the barracks. They set off at a low crouching run until they were clear of the town and then straightened to take the steep road that led to the mountain top. The half-light of the dawn brightened rapidly and high above them loomed Black Tor. Through the trees they could make out the glint of metal, the outlines of a giant structure poised at the tip of the peak. Still they tore up the jagged, twisted mountain until at last they sighted a high barbed-wire fence. It was close-meshed, heavy and over ten feet high, braced with rough steel stanchions set in concrete piers. A hundred yards above the fence, masked by wild bushes, was a high-towered stone mansion that looked like a medieval observatory. At the top was an all too modern turret of twentieth century metal. There was only one gate to the fence in view, at the head of the road, and that was guarded by a squad of ten men.

"How in blazes are we going to get through?" muttered Cole. "We can't take any chances. Want to bluff?"

"I can get you in," answered Dunn. "Listen—"

They held a whispered conference, then Dunn took the rifle and crept into the forest alongside the road. In a few minutes a shot rang out as he began a miniature war with the guards before the gate. Taking advantage of the excitement, Cole dashed up to the fence. He listened to the excited reports of the guards, peered in the direction of the unknown assailant, then nodded and dashed up the slope toward the tower as if running for aid. He yanked open the heavy oak door and slammed it shut behind him, breathing deeply in pretended relief.

As he looked around the small anteroom in which he found himself, he heard a step. An officer thrust aside a curtain and entered.

"What the hell's the trouble out there?" snapped the officer.

"There's an attack on the tower, sir." The officer started and turned to bark a command to the guards in the room behind him. Cole took a quick step and jabbed the muzzle of his revolver into the officer's back.

"All right," he said tersely, "tell them to back up against the walls." The officer hesitated and felt the gun prod him fiercely. He gave the command. Cole shoved the man before him and stepped quickly across the guard room until he reached the closed door at the far side. He swung the officer around, reached for the knob and opened it a fraction. Then he yanked open the door, darted through swiftly and banged it shut behind him.

To the right he saw a flight of stone steps. He darted up them. Behind him the door burst open and a shot cracked out as the officer dashed after him. Cole reached the turn in the stairs and pelted on up until he was at the first landing. Below him came the trample of pursuit. He half stumbled up the remaining flight to the first floor as the others came around the turn.

Another shot and a cry from below, then he was through a door and had slammed it behind him. There was no key in the lock. He turned to see a bewildered man in uniform arise from a radio control board and snatch a pair of ear-phones off his head.

"Trouble!" cried Cole hoarsely. He nodded his head toward the door. "You've got to hold them off for awhile. I'm going up to report."

THE radio operator nodded and pointed through the control room. Cole dashed on to a narrow spiraling sweep of iron steps and went clanging up their twisting heights. He heard the dim repercussions of splintering wood down there and savage shouting. Then bullets were whamming and whining through the metal girder-work.

Cole thought his heart was going to burst with the strain of plunging up those incredibly steep stairs. Then he had reached a small platform beyond which were two curtained doors. He paused for a moment in indecision, wondering whether to dart in or continue his flight up the twining stairs toward the tower's top. But many feet were crashing on the metal and he was sure they might wing him before he reached the top.

Cole turned to the right and jumped through the door into a large room, lined with windows on one side. He darted over for a look down and saw he was high above the ground. He looked around wildly. This was some kind of biological lab. No place to hide here.

He continued through two other rooms and then found himself in another laboratory. Long tables were laden with microscopes and a huge condenser glittered in the bright morning sunshine. The uproar of the pursuit was swelling behind him and before him, until he felt he was surrounded with sound. The door at the far end was locked. He turned the key carefully and peered out. Then his heart sank as he realized something abruptly. The tower was round, of course. He had sped around the periphery of rooms and come back to the same iron landing!

The stairs were covered with guards, crowded together, talking and gesticulating. Fresh men were squirming up the stairs from below, asking questions, telling about the skirmish outside, hearing about the crazy guy within. Behind him Cole heard the pursuers dashing through the laboratory. He took a breath, opened the door softly and slipped through, the key still in his hand.

He stood, back to door, and fumbled desperately to press the key home and twist it. After a

moment's work he caught the key in the slot. As steps ran forward inside, he twisted it and felt the door quiver under an onslaught of knocks.

"It's locked, sir," he called.

"I know that, you blasted fool!" came the officer's voice. Other guards crowded up behind him to listen. He slipped the key out again and tucked it up the sleeve of his uniform.

"What shall we do, sir?" asked Cole. "There's no key out here."

"I know that, too," snapped the officer impatiently. "Some of you come inside to search. He must be here. The rest watch those steps."

Cole turned and looked at the other guards. They shrugged and sauntered lazily through the open door.

"Hey," a voice called — a familiar voice. "We ought to watch the top of them stairs, huh?" Cole stared and almost fainted from the shock.

"Right!" he managed to call. "Come with me. We'll go above."

They pushed through the crush and took stations a few yards up the spiral staircase. Cole trembled with anxiety until they were a little beyond earshot.

"For heaven's sake," he whispered from the corner of his mouth, "how did you do it?"

"Simple," answered Dunn. "You sent out scouts. I pretended I was one, too. I hunted around for myself for awhile and then reported back to the gate. Then we all heard the trouble inside and I came on up. One nice thing about a uniform. If you've got it on your best enemy won't know you."

"I'm glad to see you," whispered Cole fervently. "Come on, let's sneak aloft. There's not much time."

Carefully they backed up the stairs, a step at a time, until they were concealed by the mesh and intermesh of iron grid-work. Then they turned and ran swiftly up until they reached the head where a guard already stood before a heavy metal panel.

"Guard change," said Cole. The man saluted, started down. They waited until he disappeared and then tried the panel. It slid aside weightily. They passed through into a small hatchway. Barring the door, they mounted the hatch and came up to a broad open floor of polished glass, covered with apparatus.

"This," gasped Dunn, "must be it! The machine that's responsible for the plague!"

CHAPTER V

The Healer

SUDDENLY they were aware of the thundering drone and the crackling discharges. The tower head, almost twenty feet in diameter, was filled with what appeared to be a giant gun or electrode. It reared up from the floor, from a welter of smaller mechanical adjustments, coils and wires, like a mechanical imitation of a prehistoric mastodon. The insulated masonry supports were like great haunches. A nightmare of contacts, switchpoints and tube dischargers, it resembled a barrel-like body, and an ovate steel head lengthened to a short ugly muzzle.

The thing was pointing south, and it shook and trembled in the droning roar of its power. They could see serried ranks of Coolidge tubes discharging and glowing, hear the whispered force of the muzzle emanation, smell the overpowering odor of ionization.

"God!" breathed Cole, "what a thing!" He stepped forward instinctively, followed by Dunn. Suddenly a voice behind them cried out:

"Stop, you blasted idiots!"

A huge man, in uniform, stood at a small archway behind them.

"How many times do I have to warn you?" he shouted angrily. "You can't go within ten feet of that projector unless you want to fry. And what the hell are you doing up here?"

"Can't tell you in this noise, sir," called Cole.

"All right, come into the workshop." The man stood to one side, a massive figure in the bulky hooded uniform, while they passed into a small work-lab. Then he slammed shut the thick door and faced them.

"Well," he demanded sharply, "what do you want? I gave orders I was not to be disturbed."

Cole stood silent for a breath, his fingers trembling on the butt of his revolver. Then he sighed quite

audibly and looked up.

"Oh worshipful Healer," he said bitterly, "I'm the bearer of evil tidings. On second thought, Mr. Miller, you'd better remove the mask!"

The world seemed to stand still. They heard the rumble of the projector through the heavy door, and Miller drew in several sharp breaths. Then, with the violence of a volcanic eruption, he went into action. His arms flung out and seized little Dunn by arm and shoulder and half threw him into Cole's body.

As the two men reeled back he turned and yanked at the heavy work-lab door. He was halfway through before Cole managed to disentangle himself and leap in pursuit.

Cole caught up with Miller beyond the archway and threw himself at the latter's flying legs. His shoulder clipped against the calves, bringing the big man down with a crash. Cole scrambled forward on hands and knees and clinched with Miller, and the two, clawing and pummeling, strained to their feet. They stood, feet planted, trading punches savagely for almost a minute. Then there was a flicker of white at Cole's side and a whirl of arms.

MILLER cried out and staggered back. He teetered for an instant and staggered back another few feet.

The projector roared up suddenly and his body stiffened like a puppet jerked by a string.

There came a series of crackling discharges and a violet aura played around Miller's body while his limbs danced and twitched in a mad jig. Slowly he began to crumble and brown, and his body sank to the polished floor.

The reek of roasting flesh filled the chamber. The two men turned sickly and ran back into the lab.

"What did you do?" asked Cole at last.

"What I had to." Dunn shook his head. "While you were punching him I sneaked around and cracked his skull open with the rifle."

Cole nodded and sat for awhile. "How'd you know it was Miller?" Dunn queried after awhile.

"Tell you later." Cole pulled himself together. "Right now we've got to destroy that machine completely. Otherwise they might be able to get it back into action in a few hours."

"Well?"

Cole paced around the laboratory and thought desperately. He picked up a few reagent bottles, read their labels and smiled slowly.

"Did you know," he began absently, "I was almost busted out of Columbia for—"

"For what?"

"Never mind now." Cole hunted around the room for equipment with revitalized energy. "I've got a tough job for you, Dunn. Go below and bring me a guard. If you can't get the guard, at least get a uniform. An extra uniform, get it?"

Dunn was out of the lab in a flash and tumbling down the hatchway. He slid aside the outer panel and peered down the stairs. Through the crosshatch he was able to discern a solitary guard mounted at the lower landing where the search for Cole was still in disgruntled progress. Evidently most of the men had already been sent below.

He tiptoed down until he was a few yards distant, then gradually craned over the edge of the balustrade, swinging his rifle by the muzzle at the end of his arm. The butt hung a few feet behind the guard's head. Dunn flexed his wrist fiercely and swished the heavy pendulum forward. The guard crumpled with a clash of equipment to the steps. Instantly, Dunn leaped down the last few yards, heaved the inert body to his shoulder, picked up the rifle, and tottered back up the stairs.

In the hatchway he threw down the unconscious man and ripped off his uniform. He slung the body outside the panel, slammed the door and dashed back up to the laboratory, carrying the rifle and the heavy folds of gelatinous material.

"Rip off the zippers and snaps," said Cole, busied over retorts, "and macerate the material for me, will you?"

In a few moments it was ready. Cole placed the heavy stuff in a large beaker and boiled it gently until it was quite liquid. He set it to cool and turned back to his own work of gently spraying a colorless fluid

into a small vat of fuming cloudy substance. Dunn sniffed the acrid bite of nitric acid.

AS Cole poured the contents of the vat into the beaker, they heard the clang of steps on the stair below, steps receding into the distance.

"Guard's come to," breathed Dunn. "How much longer, Lewis? We haven't much time."

"Give me ten minutes."

With frantic fingers, Cole yanked cartridges from his belt and pried the bullet-heads from the shells. He dumped out the bound stalks of cordite, split open the bundles and began to lay a long string of individual stalks across the smooth floor of the projector room. Dunn pitched in, and together they laid a long train weaving in and out around the sides of the tower.

When they returned to the laboratory, the mass in the beaker had set into a huge lump of yellowish gelatin. "Careful, now!" gasped Cole. He lifted up the beaker and carried it gently outside, placed it on the floor with open mouth adjacent to the end of the train.

"Mercury fulminate," he called to Dunn. "You'll find the powder in a watch crystal on the table."

Cole took the powder and heaped it in a pile just touching the gelatin and train. Then he arose painfully and bit his lip.

"Let's go," he said. He bent over again and applied a match to the far end of the train. The cordite flared and burned rapidly along its length. Dunn scooped up the rifles and together they dashed down the hatchway, and out on the stairs. They galloped down, three at a jump. As they reached the landing Dunn called:

"Stand by, Lewis, trouble ahead!" The officer and guards were assembled on the landing with an excited, uniformless man. They glanced at Cole and Dunn and raised their rifles. Before a shot was fired, the two scientists had smashed into them, sending them reeling. They darted down the lower stairs. A volley roared after them, missed.

Far up the tower the shots continued to belch out. Then they had reached the bottom and were tearing through the radio room. The operator sprang to his feet. Cole sprinted past Dunn, swung up his rifle, and sent the man smashing back into his control board. They panted through the door, reached the head of the broad staircase, and there Dunn twisted his ankle. He collapsed like a deflated balloon, reeled and tottered forward down the broad expanse of steps like a rag doll.

Cole almost fell himself as he burst down with all the speed he could manage. Dunn was semi-conscious when he reached him. He tried to rise and slipped back again.

"Go ahead, Lewis," he grinned. "No Merriwell stuff!"

Cole cursed and picked up the light man and eased him over his shoulder. Feet were trampling down the staircase as he tugged open the guard room door and burst into the astonished group of men loitering there.

"Sick," he yelled. "I'm getting him below." He crossed the room in three giant steps and was through the curtain before they could answer.

HE must hurry. Time was precious. He managed to pull open the heavy outer door and was out in the open. The train wasn't too long. It was due any moment now. He lurched across the grounds, gasping with split lungs. The fence was a hundred yards distant. Would it be far enough?

Could he reach it before— A hundred yards. It seemed like a hundred miles. He heard men shouting behind him and suddenly the gate loomed up and he was surrounded by alert men with poised rifles. He sagged against the wire mesh, eyes popping with the strain.

And at that moment the tower blew up.

It seemed to shake itself loose from Black Tor and spray out against the bright morning sky. There was a titanic explosion and a hideous fountain of flames ripped down the length of the stone and masonry. It stopped and showed sudden space where solid brick had been a moment before. Then the concussion threw them to the ground and Cole lay amid the whistling fragments that rained down.

He thought he must have lost consciousness for a long time, for it seemed hours later when at last he arose and looked about. The tower was entirely demolished. Only a few fragments of the foundation still

stood. The entire peak of the Tor was littered with chunks of broken stone and here and there he could see bewildered guards in torn uniforms struggling to their feet. But, curiously, the explosions still went on. He stared at the little craters of earth that blasted up over the peak.

"Give me a hand up, Lewis."

Startled, Cole saw that Dunn was apparently unharmed, although his left shoulder looked bloody and twisted. He raised him gently, then the two crouched back and wondered at the reason for the explosions. At last Dunn snapped his fingers.

"National Guard," he said, and tried a grin. "Isn't it just like them to get here too late? They're shelling the peak from below with a Stokes mortar. Probably they took that look around this morning and got the story from the boys below."

Cole nodded and, as if by common consent, they turned and hurried down the road away from the well meant destruction. A hundred yards below they paused to rip off the gelatin uniforms and stare down at the little town. They could see brown uniforms bustling about and the glitter of bayonets. For some time they walked in silence and at last Dunn grunted and asked: "How'd you do it, Lewis?"

"Blasting gelatin," answered Cole. "That's why I was almost busted out of Columbia. Learned how to make it at school. Explosives always were a hobby of mine."

"I see." Dunn sighed and tried to adjust his smashed shoulder a little. "Tell me, Lewis. How did you know it was Miller?"

"Oh, that! Well, you gave me the clue yourself. Remember the photograph of Miller and Gurwitsch? You mentioned at the time that Gurwitsch had done remarkable things with abnormal plant growth and told me to look it up in the *Journal of Zoology*. I did, and discovered it was Gurwitsch who had done the initial work on mitogenetic rays at the Moscow Institute."

"But just because Miller studied with him—" objected Dunn.

"Naturally that's not conclusive proof," interrupted Cole. "But there was another matter that seemed to clinch it. Among Miller's papers at the hospital I found a curious item. A bill for six thousand dollars' worth of raw beef bones. Know what you make from bones? Gelatin. Yes! Miller had been preparing this coup for years. Manufactured his own special gelatin fabric for the uniforms in secret. He organized everything without a clue. Probably conceived the plan back in Moscow. Evidently he learned more than biology back there. He had the will to lead and direct, the love of authority and domination."

"I see," repeated Dunn. He gazed around at the cool morning with something of relief in his pain-stricken face, "I suppose this finishes it."

"Not quite," answered Cole slowly. "We've smashed the projector and its inventor, and the army's taking care of the Boys in White down there, but—" His eyes took in the stricken land and he pointed toward the distorted things. "No, our work's just beginning, Dunn. We must bring health and sanity back." Suddenly he noticed the revolver still clenched in his fist. He tossed it into the crackling brush with a shiver of unconcealed relief.

"Thank God," he said, "I've no more use for that. I'm a doctor—not a destroyer."