

# **Dust of Death: The Story of the Great Plague of the Twentieth C**

Fred M. White

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THE front door bell tinkled impatiently; evidently somebody was in a hurry. Alan Hubert answered the call, a thing that even a distinguished physician might do, seeing that it was on the stroke of midnight. The tall, graceful figure of a woman in evening dress stumbled into the hall. The diamonds in her hair shimmered and trembled, her face was full of terror.

"You are Dr. Hubert," she gasped. "I am Mrs. Fillingham, the artist's wife, you know. Will you come with me at once.... My husband. . . I had been dining out. In the studio. . . Oh, please come!"

Hubert asked no unnecessary questions. He knew Fillingham, the great portrait painter, well enough by repute and by sight also, for Fillingham's house and studio were close by. There were many artists in the Devonshire Park district that pretty suburb which was one of the triumphs of the builder's and landscape gardener's art. Ten years ago it had been no more than a swamp; to-day people spoke complacently of the fact that they lived in Devonshire Park.

Hubert walked up the drive and past the trim lawns with Mrs. Fillingham hanging on his arm, and in at the front door. Mrs. Fillingham pointed to a door on the right. She was too exhausted to speak. There were shaded lights gleaming everywhere, on old oak and armour and on a large portrait of a military-looking man propped up on an easel. On a lay figure was a magnificent foreign military uniform.

Hubert caught all this in a quick mental flash. But the vital interest to him was a human figure lying on his back before the fireplace. The clean-shaven, sensitive face of the artist had a ghastly, purple-black tinge, there was a large swelling in the throat.

"He is not dead?" Mrs. Fillingham asked in a frozen whisper.

Hubert was able to satisfy the distracted wife on that head. Fillingham was still breathing. Hubert stripped the shade from a reading lamp and held the electric bulb at the end of its long flex above the sufferer's mouth, contriving to throw the flood of light upon the back of the throat.

"Diphtheria!" he exclaimed. "Label's type unless I am greatly mistaken. Some authorities are disposed to scoff at Dr. Label's discovery. I was an assistant of his for four years and I know better. Fortunately I happen to know what the treatment successful in two cases was."

He hurried from the house and returned a few minutes later breathlessly. He had some strange-looking, needle-like instruments in his hands. He took an electric lamp from its socket and substituted a plug on a flex instead. Then he cleared a table without ceremony and managed to hoist his patient upon it.

"Now please hold that lamp steadily thus," he said. "Bravo, you are a born nurse! I am going to apply these electric needles to the throat."

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Hubert talked on more for the sake of his companion's nerves than anything else. The still figure on the table quivered under his touch, his lungs expanded in a long, shuddering sigh. The heart was beating more or less regularly now. Fillingham opened his eyes and muttered something.

"Now please hold that lamp steadily thus," he said. "Bravo, you are a born nurse! I am going to apply these electric needles to the throat."

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"Ice," Hubert snapped, "have you got any ice in the house?"

It was a well-regulated establishment and there was plenty of ice in the refrigerator. Not until the patient was safe in bed did Hubert's features relax.

"We'll pull him through yet," he said. "I'll send you a competent nurse round in half-an-hour. I'll call first thing in the morning and bring Dr. Label with me. He must not miss this on any account."

Half-an-hour later Hubert was spinning along in a hansom towards Harley Street. It was past one when he reached the house of the great German savant. A dim light was burning in the hall. A big man with an enormous shaggy head and a huge frame attired in the seediest of dress coats welcomed Hubert with a smile.

"So, my young friend," Label said, "your face promises excitement."

"Case of Label's diphtheria," Hubert said crisply. "Fillingham, the artist, who lives close by me. Fortunately they called me in. I have arranged for you to see my patient the first thing in the morning."

The big German's jocular manner vanished. He led Hubert gravely to a chair in his consulting-room and curtly demanded details. He smiled approvingly as Hubert enlarged upon his treatment of the case.

"Undoubtedly your diagnosis was correct," he said, puffing furiously at a long china pipe. "You have not forgotten what I told you of it. The swelling — which is caused by violent blood poisoning — yielded to the electric treatment. I took the virus from the cases in the north and I tried them on scores of animals. And they all died.

"I find it is the virus of what is practically a new disease, one of the worst in the wide world. I say it recurs again, and it does. So I practise, and practise to find a cure. And electricity is the cure. I inoculate five dogs with the virus and I save two by the electric current. You follow my plans and you go the first stage of the way to cure Fillingham. Did you bring any of that mucous here?"

Hubert produced it in a tiny glass tube. For a little time Label examined it under his microscope. He wanted to make assurance doubly sure.

"It is the same thing," he said presently. "I knew that it was bound to recur again. Why, it is planted all over our big cities. And electricity is the only way to get rid of it. It was the best method of dealing with sewage, only corporations found it too expensive. Wires in the earth charged to say 10,000 volts. Apply this and you destroy the virus that lies buried under hundreds of houses in London. They laughed at me when I suggested it years ago."

"Underground," Hubert asked vaguely.

"Ach, underground, yes. Don't you recollect that in certain parts of England cancer is more common than in other places? The germs have been turned up in fields. I, myself, have proved their existence. In a little time, perhaps. I shall open the eyes of your complacent Londoners. You live in a paradise, ach Gott! And what was that paradise like ten years ago? Dreary pools and deserted brickfields. And how do you fill it up and level it to build houses upon?"

"By the carting of hundreds of thousands of loads of refuse, of course."

"Ach, I will presently show you what that refuse was and is. Now go home to bed."

\* \* \* \* \* Mrs. Fillingham remained in the studio with Hubert whilst Label was making his examination overhead. The patient had had a bad night; his symptoms were very grave indeed. Hubert listened more or less vaguely; his mind had gone beyond the solitary case. He was dreading what might happen in the future.

"Your husband has a fine constitution," he said soothingly.

"He has overtried it lately," Mrs. Fillingham replied. "At present he is painting a portrait of the Emperor of Asturia. His Majesty was to have sat to-day; he spent the morning here yesterday."

But Hubert was paying no attention.

The heavy tread of Label was heard as he floundered down the stairs. His big voice was booming. What

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mattered all the portraits in the world so long as the verdict hung on the German doctor's lips!

"Oh, there is a chance," Label exclaimed. "Just a chance. Everything possible is being done. This is not so much diphtheria as a new disease. Diphtheria family, no doubt, but the blood poisoning makes a difficult thing of it."

Label presently dragged Hubert away after parting with Mrs. Fillingham. He wanted to find a spot where building or draining was going on.

They found some men presently engaged in connecting a new house with the main drainage — a deep cutting some forty yards long by seven or eight feet deep. There was the usual crust of asphalt on the road, followed by broken bricks and the like, and a more or less regular stratum of blue-black rubbish, soft, wet, and clinging, and emitting an odour that caused Hubert to throw up his head.

"You must have broken into a drain somewhere here," he said.

"We ain't, sir," the foreman of the gang replied. "It's nout but rubbidge as they made up the road with here ten years ago. Lord knows where it came from, but it do smell fearful in weather like this."

The odour indeed was stifling. All imaginable kinds of rubbish and refuse lay under the external beauties of Devonshire Park in strata ranging from five to forty feet deep. It was little wonder that trees and flowers flourished here. And here — wet, and dark, and festering — was a veritable hotbed of disease. Contaminated rags, torn paper, road siftings, decayed vegetable matter, diseased food, fish and bones all were represented here.

"Every ounce of this ought to have gone through the destructor," Label snorted. "But no, it is used for the foundations of a suburban paradise. My word, we shall see what your paradise will be like presently. Come along."

Label picked up a square slab of the blue stratum, put it in a tin, and the tin in his pocket. He was snorting and puffing with contempt.

"Now come to Harley Street with me and I will show you things," he said.

He was as good as his word. Placed under a microscope, a minute portion of the subsoil from Devonshire Park proved to be a mass of living matter. There were at least four kinds of bacillus here that Hubert had never seen before. With his superior knowledge Label pointed out the fact that they all existed in the mucous taken from Fillingham on the previous evening.

"There you are!" he cried excitedly. "You get all that wet sodden refuse of London and you dump it down here in a heap. You mix with it a heap of vegetable matter so that fermentation shall have every chance. Then you cover it over with some soil, and you let it boil, boil, boil. Then, when millions upon millions of death-dealing microbes are bred and bred till their virility is beyond the scope of science, you build good houses on the top of it. For years I have been prophesying an outbreak of some new disease — or some awful form of an old one — and here it comes. They called me a crank because I asked for high electric voltage to kill the plague — to destroy it by lightning. A couple of high tension wires run into the earth and there you are. See here.

He took his cube of the reeking earth and applied the battery to it. The mass showed no outward change. But once under the microscope a fragment of it demonstrated that there was not the slightest trace of organic life.

"There!" Label cried. "Behold the remedy. I don't claim that it will cure in every case, because we hardly touch the diphtheretic side of the trouble. When there has been a large loss of life we shall learn the perfect remedy by experience. But this thing is coming, and your London is going to get a pretty bad scare. You have laid it down like port wine, and now that the thing is ripe you are going to suffer from the consequence. I have written articles in the Lancet, I have warned people, but they take not the slightest heed."

Hubert went back home thoughtfully. He found the nurse who had Fillingham's case in hand waiting for him in his consulting-room.

"I am just back from my walk," she said. "I wish you would call at Dr. Walker's at Elm Crescent. He has two cases exactly like Mr. Fillingham's, and he is utterly puzzled."

Hubert snatched his hat and his electric needles, and hurried away at once. He found his colleague impatiently waiting for him. There were two children this time in one of the best appointed houses in Devonshire Park, suffering precisely as Fillingham had done. In each instance the electric treatment gave the desired result. Hubert hastily explained the whole matter to Walker.

"It's an awful business," the latter said, "Personally, I have a great respect for Label, and I feel convinced that he is right. If this thing spreads, property in Devonshire Park won't be worth the price of slum lodgings." By

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mid-day nineteen cases of the so-called diphtheria had been notified within the three miles area known as Devonshire Park. Evidently some recent excavations had liberated the deadly microbe. But there was no scare as yet. Label came down again hotfoot with as many assistants as he could get, and took up his quarters with Hubert. They were going to have a busy time.

It was after two before Hubert managed to run across to Fillingham's again. He stood in the studio waiting for Mrs. Fillingham. His mind was preoccupied and uneasy, yet he seemed to miss something from the studio. It was strange, considering that he had only been in the room twice before.

"Are you looking for anything?" Mrs. Fillingham asked.

"I don't know," Hubert exclaimed. "I seem to miss something. I've got it — the absence of the uniform."

"They sent for it," Mrs. Fillingham said vaguely. She was dazed for want of sleep. "The Emperor had to go to some function, and that was the only uniform of the kind he happened to have. He was to have gone away in it after his sitting to-day. My husband persuaded him to leave it when it was here yesterday, and —"

Hubert had cried out suddenly as if in pain.

"He was here yesterday — here, with your husband, and your husband with the diphtheria on him?"

Then the weary wife understood.

"Good heavens—"

But Hubert was already out of the room. He blundered on until he came to a hansom cab creeping along in the sunshine.

"Buckingham Palace," he gasped. "Drive like mad. A five-pound note for you if you get me there by three o'clock!"

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Already Devonshire Park was beginning to be talked about. It was wonderful how the daily press got to the root of things. Hubert caught sight of more than one contents bill as he drove home that alluded to the strange epidemic.

Dr. Label joined Hubert presently in Mrs. Fillingham's home, rubbing his huge hands together. He knew nothing of the new dramatic developments. He asked where Hubert had been spending his time.

"Trying to save the life of your friend, the Emperor of Asturia," Hubert said. "He was here yesterday with Fillingham, and, though he seems well enough at present, he may have the disease on him now. What do you think of that?"

Hubert waited to see the great man stagger before the blow. Label smiled and nodded as he proceeded to light a cigarette.

"Good job too," he said. "I am honorary physician to the court of Asturia. I go back, there, as you know, when I finish my great work here. The Emperor I have brought through four or five illnesses, and if anything is wrong he always sends for me."

"But he might get the awful form of diphtheria!"

"Very likely," Label said coolly. "All these things are in the hands of Providence. I know that man's constitution to a hair, and if he gets the disease I shall pull him through for certain. I should like him to have it."

"In the name of all that is practical, why?"

"To startle the public," Label cried. He was mounted on his hobby now. He paced up and down the room in a whirl of tobacco smoke. "It would bring the matter home to everybody. Then perhaps something will be done. I preach and preach in vain. Only the Lancet backs me up at all. Many times I have asked for a quarter of a million of money, so that I can found a school for the electrical treatment of germ diseases. I want to destroy all malaria. All dirt in bulk, every bit of refuse that is likely to breed fever and the like, should be treated by electricity. I would take huge masses of deadly scourge and mountains of garbage, and render them innocent by the electric current. But no; that costs money, and your poverty-stricken Government cannot afford it. Given a current of 10,000 volts a year or two ago, and I could have rendered this one of the healthiest places in England. You only wanted to run those high voltage wires into the earth here and there, and behold the millions are slain, wiped out, gone for ever. Perhaps I will get it now."

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London was beginning to get uneasy. There had been outbreaks before, but they were of the normal type. People, for instance, are not so frightened of smallpox as they used to be. Modern science has learnt to grapple

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with the fell disease and rob it of half its terrors. But this new and virulent form of diphtheria was another matter.

Hubert sat over his dinner that night, making mental calculations. There were nearly a thousand houses of varying sizes in Devonshire Park. Would it be necessary to abandon these? He took down a large scale map of London, and hastily marked in blue pencil those areas which had developed rapidly of recent years. In nearly all of these a vast amount of artificial ground had been necessary. Hubert was appalled as he calculated the number of jerry-built erections in these districts.

A servant came in and laid *The Evening Wire* upon the table. Hubert glanced at it. Nothing had been lost in the way of sensation. The story of the Emperor's visit to the district had been given great prominence. An inquiry at Buckingham Palace had elicited the fact that the story was true.

Well, perhaps no harm would come of it. Hubert finished a cigar and prepared to go out. As he flung the paper aside a paragraph in the stop press column — a solitary paragraph like an inky island in a sea of white — caught his eye.

"No alarm need be experienced as to the danger encountered by the Emperor of Asturia, but we are informed that His Majesty is prevented from dining at Marlborough House to-night owing to a slight cold and sore throat caught, it is stated, in the draughts at Charing Cross Station. The Emperor will go down to Cowes as arranged to-morrow."

Hubert shook his head doubtfully. The slight cold and sore throat were ominous. His mind dwelt upon the shadow of trouble as he made his way to the hospital. There had been two fresh cases during the evening and the medical staff were looking anxious and worried. They wanted assistance badly, and Hubert gave his to the full.

It was nearly eleven before Hubert staggered home. In the main business street of the suburb a news-shop was still open.

A flaming placard attracted the doctor's attention. It struck him like a blow.

"Alarming illness of the Asturian Emperor. His Majesty stricken down by the new disease. Latest bulletin from Buckingham Palace."

Almost mechanically Hubert bought a paper. There was not much beyond the curt information that the Emperor was dangerously ill.

Arrived home Hubert found a telegram awaiting him. He tore it open. The message was brief but to the point.

"Have been called in to Buckingham Palace, Label's diphtheria certain. Shall try and see you to-morrow morning. Label."

London was touched deeply and sincerely. A great sovereign had come over here in the most friendly fashion to show his good feeling for a kindred race. On the very start of a round of pleasure he had been stricken down like this.

The public knew all the details from the progress of that fateful uniform to the thrilling eight o'clock bulletin when the life of Rudolph III was declared to be in great danger. They knew that Dr. Label had been sent for post haste. The big German was no longer looked upon as a clever crank, but the one man who might be able to save London from a terrible scourge. And from lip to lip went the news that over two hundred cases of the new disease had now broken out in Devonshire Park.

People knew pretty well what it was and what was the cause now. Label's warning had come home with a force that nobody had expected. He had stolen away quite late for half-an-hour to his own house and there had been quite free with the pressmen. He extenuated nothing. The thing was bad, and it was going to be worse. So far as he could see, something of this kind was inevitable. If Londoners were so blind as to build houses on teeming heaps of filth, why, London must be prepared to take the consequences.

Hubert knew nothing of this. He had fallen back utterly exhausted in his chair with the idea of taking a short rest — for nearly three hours he had been fast asleep. Somebody was shaking him roughly. He struggled back to the consciousness that Label was bending over him.

"Well, you are a nice fellow," the German grumbled.

"I was dead beat and worn out," Hubert said apologetically. "How is the Emperor?"

"His Majesty is doing as well as I can expect. It is a very bad case, however. I have left him in competent hands, so that I could run down here. They were asking for you at the hospital, presuming that you were busy somewhere. The place is full, and so are four houses in the nearest terrace."

"Spreading like that?" Hubert exclaimed.

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"Spreading like that! By this time tomorrow we shall have a thousand cases on our hands. The authorities are doing everything they can to help us, fresh doctors and nurses and stores are coming in all the time."

"You turn people out of their houses to make way then?"

Label smiled grimly. He laid his hand on Hubert's shoulder, and piloted him into the roadway. The place seemed to be alive with cabs and vehicles of all kinds. It was as if all the inhabitants of Devonshire Park were going away for their summer holidays simultaneously. The electric arcs shone down on white and frightened faces where joyous gaiety should have been. Here and there a child slept peacefully, but on the whole it was a sorry exodus.

"There you are," Label said grimly. "It is a night flight from the plague. It has been going on for hours. It would have been finished now but for the difficulty in getting conveyances. Most of the cabmen are avoiding the place as if it were accursed. But money can command everything, hence the scene that you see before you."

Hubert stood silently watching the procession. There was very little luggage on any of the cabs or conveyances. Families were going wholesale. Devonshire Park for the most part was an exceedingly prosperous district, so that the difficulties of emigration were not great. In their panic the people were abandoning everything in the wild flight for life and safety.

Then he went in again to rest before the unknown labours of to-morrow. Next morning he anxiously opened his morning paper.

It was not particularly pleasant reading beyond the information that the health of the Emperor of Asturia was mentioned, and that he had passed a satisfactory night. As to the rest, the plague was spreading. There were two hundred and fifty cases in Devonshire Park. Label's sayings had come true at last; it was a fearful vindication of his prophecy. And the worst of it was that no man could possibly say where it was going to end.

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Strange as it may seem, London's anxiety as to the welfare of one man blinded all to the great common danger. For the moment Devonshire Park was forgotten. The one centre of vivid interest was Buckingham Palace.

For three days crowds collected there until at length Label and his colleagues were in a position to issue a bulletin that gave something more than hope. The Emperor of Asturia was going to recover. Label was not the kind of man to say so unless he was pretty sure of his ground.

It was not till this fact had soaked itself into the public mind that attention was fully turned to the danger that threatened London. Devonshire Park was practically in quarantine. All those who could get away had done so, and those who had remained were confined to their own particular district, and provisioned on a system. The new plague was spreading fast.

In more than one quarter the suggestion was made that all houses in certain localities should be destroyed, and the ground thoroughly cleansed and disinfected. It would mean a loss of millions of money, but in the scare of the moment London cared nothing for that.

At the end of a week there were seven thousand cases of the new form of diphtheria under treatment. Over one thousand cases a day came in. Devonshire Park was practically deserted save for the poorer quarters, whence the victims came. It seemed strange to see fine houses abandoned to the first comer who had the hardihood to enter. Devonshire Park was a stricken kingdom within itself, and the Commune of terror reigned.

Enterprising journalists penetrated the barred area and wrote articles about it. One of the fraternity bolder than the rest passed a day and night in one of these deserted palatial residences, and gave his sensations to the Press. Within a few hours most of the villas were inhabited again! There were scores of men and women in the slums who have not the slightest fear of disease — they are too familiar with it for that — and they came creeping westward in search of shelter. The smiling paradise had become a kind of Tom Tiddlers ground, a huge estate in Chancery.

Nobody had troubled, the tenants were busy finding pure quarters elsewhere, the owners of the property were fighting public opinion to save what in many cases was their sole source of income. If Devonshire Park had to be razed to the ground many a wealthy man would be ruined.

It was nearly the end of the first week before this abnormal state of affairs was fully brought home to Hubert. He had been harassed and worried and worn by want of sleep, but tired as he was he did not fail to notice the number of poorer patients who dribbled regularly into the terrace of houses that now formed the hospital. There was something about them that suggested any district rather than Devonshire Park.



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"What does it mean, Walker? " he asked one of his doctors.

Walker had just come in from his hour's exercise, heated and excited.

"It's a perfect scandal," he cried. "The police are fighting shy of us altogether. I've just been up to the station and they tell me it is a difficult matter to keep competent of officers in the district. All along Frinton Hill and Eversley Gardens the houses are crowded with outcasts. They have drifted here from the East End and are making some of those splendid residences impossible."

Hubert struggled into his hat and coat, and went out. It was exactly as Walker had said. Here was a fine residence with stables and greenhouses and the like, actually occupied by Whitechapel at its worst. A group of dingy children played on the lawn, and a woman with the accumulated grime of weeks on her face was hanging something that passed for washing out of an upper window. The flower beds were trampled down, a couple of attenuated donkeys browsed on the lawn.

Hubert strolled up to the house fuming. Two men were sprawling on a couple of morocco chairs smoking filthy pipes. They looked up at the newcomer with languid curiosity. They appeared quite to appreciate the fact that they were absolutely masters of the situation.

"What are you doing here?" Hubert demanded.

"If you're the owner well and good," was the reply. "If not, you take an 'look it. We know which side our bread's buttered."

There was nothing for it but to accept this philosophical suggestion. Hubert swallowed his rising indignation and departed. There were other evidences of the ragged invasion as he went down the road. Here and there a house was closed and the blinds down; but it was an exception rather than the rule.

Hubert walked away till he could find a cab, and was driven off to Scotland Yard in a state of indignation. The view of the matter rather startled the officials there.

"We have been so busy," the Chief Inspector said; "but the matter shall be attended to. Dr. Label was here yesterday, and at his suggestion we are having the whole force electrically treated — a kind of electrical hardening of the throat. The doctor claims that his recent treatment is as efficacious against the diphtheria as vaccination is against smallpox. It is in all the papers to-day. All London will be going mad over the new remedy to-morrow."

Hubert nodded thoughtfully. The electric treatment seemed the right thing. Label had shown him what an effect the application of the current had had on the teeming mass of matter taken from the road cutting. He thought it over until he fell asleep in his cab on the way back to his weary labours.

\* \* \* \* \*

London raged for the new remedy. The electric treatment for throat troubles is no new thing. In this case it was simple and painless, and it had been guaranteed by one of the popular heroes of the hour. A week before Label had been regarded as a crank and a faddist; now people were ready to swear by him. Had he not prophesied this vile disease for years, and was he not the only man who had a remedy? And the Emperor of Asturia was mending rapidly.

Had Label bidden the people to stand on their heads for an hour a day as a sovereign specific they would have done so gladly. Every private doctor and every public institution was worked to death. At the end of ten days practically all London had been treated. There was nothing for it now but to wait patiently for the result.

Another week passed and then suddenly the inrush of cases began to drop. The average at the end of the second week was down to eighty per day. On the seventeenth and eighteenth days there were only four cases altogether and in each instance they proved to be patients who had not submitted themselves to the treatment.

The scourge was over. Two days elapsed and there were no fresh cases whatever. Some time before a strong posse of police had swamped down upon Devonshire Park and cleared all the slum people out of their luxurious quarters. One or two of the bolder dwellers in that once favoured locality began to creep back. Now that they were inoculated there seemed little to fear.

But Label had something to say about that. He felt that he was free to act now, he had his royal patient practically off his hands. A strong Royal Commission had been appointed by Parliament to go at once thoroughly into the matter.

"And I am the first witness called," he chuckled to Hubert as the latter sat with the great German smoking a well-earned cigar. "I shall be able to tell a few things."

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He shook his big head and smiled. The exertion of the last few weeks did not seem to have told upon him in the slightest.

"I also have been summoned," Hubert said. "But you don't suggest that those fine houses should be destroyed?"

"I don't suggest anything. I am going to confine myself to facts. One of your patent medicine advertisements says that electricity is life. Never was a truer word spoken. What has saved London from a great scourge? Electricity. What kills this new disease and renders it powerless? Electricity. And what is the great agent to fight dirt and filth with whenever it exists in great quantities? Always electricity. It has not been done before on the ground of expense, and look at the consequences I In one way and another it will cost London £2,000,000 to settle this matter. It was only a little over a third of that I asked for. Wait till you hear me talk! "

\* \* \* \* \*

Naturally the greatest interest was taken in the early sittings of the Commission. A somewhat pompous chairman was prepared to exploit Label for his own gratification and self-glory. But the big German would have none of it. From the very first he dominated the Committee, he would give his evidence in his own way, he would speak of facts as he found them. And, after all, he was the only man there who had any practical knowledge of the subject of the inquiry.

"You would destroy the houses?" an interested member asked.

"Nothing of the kind," Label growled. "Not so much as a single pig-sty. If you ask me what electricity is I cannot tell you. It is a force in nature that as yet we don't understand. Originally it was employed as a destroyer of sewage, but it was abandoned as too expensive. You are the richest country in the world, and one of the most densely populated. Yet you are covering the land with jerry-built houses, the drainages of which will frequently want looking to. And your only way of discovering this is when a bad epidemic breaks out. Everything is too expensive. You will be a jerry-built people in a jerry-built empire. And your local authorities adopt some cheap system and then smile at the ratepayers and call for applause. Electricity will save all danger. It is dear at first, but it is far cheaper in the long run."

"If you will be so good as to get to the point," the chairman suggested.

Label smiled pityingly. He was like a schoolmaster addressing a form of little boys.

"The remedy is simple," he said. "I propose to have a couple of 10,000 volts wires discharging their current into the ground here and there over the affected area. Inoculation against the trouble is all very well, but it is not permanent and there is always danger whilst the source of it remains. I propose to remove the evil. Don't ask me what the process is, don't ask me what wonderful action takes place. All I know is that some marvellous agency gets to work and that a huge mound of live disease is rendered safe and innocent as pure water. And I want these things now, I don't want long sittings and reports and discussions. Let me work the cure and you can have all the talking and sittings you like afterwards."

Label got his own way, he would have got anything he liked at that moment. London was quiet and humble and in a mood to be generous.

\* \* \* \* \*

Label stood over the cutting whence he had procured the original specimen of all the mischief. He was a little quiet and subdued, but his eyes shone and his hand was a trifle unsteady. His fingers trembled as he took up a fragment of the blue grey stratum and broke it up.

"Marvellous mystery," he cried. "We placed the wires in the earth and that great, silent, powerful servant has done the rest. Underground the current radiates, and, as it radiates, the source of the disease grows less and less until it ceases to be altogether. Only try this in the tainted areas of all towns and in a short time disease of all kinds would cease for ever."

"You are sure that stuff is wholesome, now?" Hubert asked.

"My future on it," Label cried. "Wait till we get it under the microscope. I am absolutely confident that I am correct."

And he was.