

The Black Grippe

By Edgar Wallace

Dr Hereford Bevan was looking thoughtfully at a small Cape rabbit; the rabbit took not the slightest notice of Dr Hereford Bevan. It crouched on a narrow bench, nibbling at a mess of crushed mealies and seemed perfectly content with its lot, in spite of the fact that the bench was situated in the experimental laboratory of the Jackson Institute of Tropical Medicines.

In the young principal's hand was a long porcelain rod with which from time to time he menaced the unconscious feeder, without, however, producing so much as a single shiver of apprehension. With his long ears pricked, his sensitive nostrils quivering—he was used to the man-smell of Hereford Bevan by now—and his big black eyes staring unwinkingly ahead, there was little in the appearance of the rabbit to suggest abnormal condition.

For the third time in a quarter of an hour Bevan raised the rod as though to strike the animal across the nose, and for the third time lowered the rod again. Then with a sigh he lifted the little beast by the ears and carried him, struggling and squirming, to a small hutch, put him in very gently, and closed the wire-netted door.

He stood staring at the tiny inmate and fetched a long sigh. Then he left the laboratory and walked down to the staff study.

Stuart Gold, his assistant, sat at a big desk, pipe in mouth, checking some calculations. He looked up as Bevan came in.

'Well,' he said, 'what has Bunny done?'

'Bunny is feeding like a pig,' said Bevan, irritably.

'No change?'

Bevan shook his head and looked at his watch.

'What time—' he began.

'The boat train was in ten minutes ago,' said Stuart Gold. 'I have been on the 'phone to Waterloo. He may be here at any minute now.'

Bevan walked up and down the apartment, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, his chin on his breast.

Presently he walked to the window and looked out at the busy street. Motor-buses were rumbling past in an endless procession. The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians, for this was the busiest thoroughfare in the West End of London and it was the hour of the day when the offices were absorbing their slaves.

As he looked, a taxi drew up opposite the door and a man sprang out with all the agility of youth, though the iron-grey whiskers about his chin and the seamed red face placed him amongst the sixties.

'It is he!' cried Hereford Bevan, and dashed from the room to welcome the visitor, taking the portmanteau from his hand.

'It is awfully good of you to come, professor,' he said, shaking the traveller warmly by the hand. 'Ever since I telegraphed I have been scared sick for fear I brought you on a fool's errand.'

'Nonsense,' said the elder man, sharply; 'I was coming to Europe anyway, and I merely advanced my date of sailing. I'd sooner come by the *Mauretania* than the slow packet by which I had booked. How are you? You are looking bright.'

Hereford Bevan led the newcomer to the study and introduced him to Gold.

Professor Van der Bergh was one of those elderly men who never grow old. His blue eye was as clear as it had been on his twentieth birthday, his sensitive mouth was as ready to smile as ever it had been in the flower of his youth. A professor of pathology, a great anatomist, and one of the foremost bacteriologists in the United States, Bevan's doubts and apprehensions were perhaps justified, though he was relieved in mind to discover that he had merely accelerated the great man's departure from New York and was not wholly responsible for a trip which might end in disappointment.

'Now,' said Van der Bergh, spreading his coat-tails and drawing his chair to the little fire, 'just give me a second to light my pipe and tell me all your troubles.'

He puffed away for a few seconds, blew out the match carefully and threw it into the grate, then before Bevan could speak he said:

'I presume that the epidemic of January has scared you?'

Hereford Bevan nodded.

'Well,' said the professor, reflectively, 'I don't wonder. The 1918 epidemic was bad enough. I am not calling it influenza, because I think very few of us are satisfied to affix that wild label to a devastating disease which appeared in the most mysterious fashion, took its toll, and disappeared as rapidly and mysteriously.'

He scratched his beard, staring out of the window.

'I haven't heard any theory about that epidemic which has wholly satisfied me,' he said. 'People talk glibly of "carriers" of "infection", but who infected the wild tribes in the centre of Africa on the very day that whole communities of Eskimos were laid low in parts of the Arctic regions which were absolutely isolated from the rest of the world?'

Bevan shook his head.

'That is the mystery that I have never solved,' he said, 'and never hope to.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said the professor, shaking his head. 'I am always hoping to get on the track of first causes, however baffling they may be. Anyway, I am not satisfied to describe that outbreak as influenza, and it really does not matter what label we give to it for the moment. You might as truly call it the Plague or the Scourge. Now let's get down to the epidemic of this year. I should like to compare notes with you because I have always found that the reports of this Institute are above suspicion. I suppose it has been suggested to you,' he went on, 'that the investigation of this particular disease is outside the province of tropical medicines?'

Stuart Gold laughed.

'We are reminded of that every day,' he said, dryly.

'Now just tell me what happened in January of this year,' said the professor.

Dr Bevan seated himself at the table, pulled open a drawer, and took out a black-covered exercise book.

'I'll tell you briefly,' he said, 'and without attempting to produce statistics. On the 18th January, as near three o'clock in the afternoon as makes no difference, the second manifestation of this disease attacked this country, and, so far as can be ascertained, the whole of the Continent.'

The professor nodded.

'What were the symptoms?' he asked.

'People began to cry—that is to say, their eyes filled with water and they felt extremely uncomfortable for about a quarter of an hour. So far as I can discover the crying period did not last much more than a quarter of an hour, in some cases a much shorter time.'

Again the professor nodded.

‘That is what happened in New York,’ he said, ‘and this symptom was followed about six hours later by a slight rise of temperature, shivering, and a desire for sleep.’

‘Just the same sort of thing happened here,’ said Bevan, ‘and in the morning everybody was as well as they had been the previous morning, and the fact that it had occurred might have been overlooked but for the observation made in various hospitals. Gold and I were both stricken at the same time. We both took blood and succeeded in isolating the germs.’

The professor jumped up.

‘Then you are the only people who have it,’ he said, ‘nobody else in the world seems to have taken that precaution.’

Stuart Gold lifted a big bell-shaped glass cover from a microscope, took from a locked case a thin microscopic slide, and inserted it in the holder. He adjusted the lens, switched on a shaded light behind the instrument, and beckoned the professor forward.

‘Here it is, sir,’ he said.

Professor Van der Bergh glued his eye to the instrument and looked for a long time.

‘Perfect,’ he said. ‘I have never seen this fellow before. It looks rather like a trypanosome.’

‘That’s what I told Bevan,’ said Stuart Gold.

The professor was still looking.

‘It is like and it is unlike,’ he said. ‘Of course, it is absurd to suggest that you’ve all had an attack of sleeping sickness, which you undoubtedly would have had if this had been a trypanosome, but surely this bug is a new one to me!’

He walked back to his chair, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe.

‘What did you do?’

‘I made a culture,’ said Bevan, ‘and infected six South African rabbits. In an hour they developed the first symptoms. Their eyes watered for the prescribed time, their temperature rose six hours later, and in the morning they were all well.’

‘Why South African rabbits?’ asked Van der Bergh, curiously. ‘Because they develop secondary symptoms of any disease at twice the rate of a human being—at least that has been my experience,’ explained Bevan. ‘I found it by accident whilst I was in Grahamstown, in South Africa, and it has been a very useful piece of knowledge to me. When I wired to you I had no idea there were going to be any further developments. I merely wanted to make you acquainted with the bug—’

The professor looked up sharply.

‘Have there been further developments?’ he asked, and Bevan nodded.

‘Five days ago,’ he said, speaking slowly, ‘the second symptom appeared. I will show you.’

He led the way back to the laboratory, went to the little hutch, and lifted the twisting, struggling rabbit to the bench under a blaze of electric light. The professor felt the animal gingerly.

‘He has no temperature,’ he said, ‘and looks perfectly normal. What is the matter with him?’

Bevan lifted the little beast and held his head toward the light.

‘Do you notice anything?’ he asked. ‘Good heavens!’ said Van der Bergh; ‘he’s blind!’ Bevan nodded.

‘He’s been blind for five days,’ he said.

‘But—’ Van der Bergh stared at him. ‘Do you mean—’

Bevan nodded.

‘I mean, that when the secondary symptom comes, and it should come in a fortnight from today

He stopped.

He had replaced the animal upon the bench and had put out his hand to stroke his ears when suddenly the rabbit groped back from him. Again he reached out his hand and again the animal made a frantic attempt to escape.

‘He sees now,’ said the professor.

‘Wait,’ said Bevan.

He took down a board to which a paper was pinned, looked at his watch, and jotted a note.

‘Thank God for that,’ he said; ‘the blindness lasts for exactly one hundred and twenty hours.’

‘But do you mean,’ asked Van der Bergh, with an anxious little frown, ‘that the whole world is going blind for five days?’

‘That is my theory,’ replied the other.

‘Phew!’ said the professor, and mopped his face with a large and gaudy handkerchief.

They went back without another word to the study and Van der Bergh began his technical test. For his information sheet after sheet of data were placed before him. Records of temperature, of diet and the like were scanned and compared, whilst Bevan made his way to another laboratory to examine the remaining rabbits.

He returned as the professor finished.

‘They can all see,’ he said; ‘I inspected them this morning and they were as blind as bats.’

Presently the professor finished.

‘I am going down to our Embassy,’ he said, ‘and the best thing you boys can do is to see some representative of your Government. Let me see, Sir Douglas Sexton is your big man, isn’t he?’

Bevan made a wry face.

‘He is the medical gentleman who has the ear of the Government,’ he said, ‘but he is rather an impossible person. He’s one of the old school—’

‘I know that school,’ said the professor, grimly, ‘it’s a school where you learn nothing and forget nothing. Still, it’s your duty to warn him.’

Bevan nodded and turned to Stuart Gold.

‘Will you cancel my lecture, Gold?’ he said; ‘let Cartwright take the men through that demonstration I gave yesterday. I’ll go down and see Sexton though he wither me!’

Sir Douglas Sexton had a large house in a very large square. He was so well-off that he could afford a shabby butler. That shrunken man shook his head when Dr Bevan made his enquiry.

‘I don’t think Sir Douglas will see you, sir,’ he said. ‘He has a consultation in half an hour’s time and he is in his library, with orders that he is not to be disturbed in any circumstances.’

‘This is a very vital matter and I simply must see Sir Douglas,’ said Bevan, firmly.

The butler was gone for some time and presently returned to usher the caller into a large and gloomy room, where Sir Douglas sat surrounded by open books.

He greeted Bevan with a scowl, for the younger school were not popular with the Sextonians.

‘Really, it is most inconvenient, doctor, for you to see me at this moment,’ he complained, ‘I suppose you want to ask about the Government grant to the Jackson Institute. I was speaking to the Prime Minister yesterday and he did not seem at all inclined to agree to spend the country’s money

‘I haven’t come about the grant, Sir Douglas,’ replied Bevan, ‘but a matter of much greater importance.’

In as few words as possible he gave the result of his experiment, and on the face of Sir Douglas Sexton was undisguised incredulity.

‘Come, come,’ he said, when Dr Bevan had finished, and permitted his heavy features to relax into a smile. ‘Now, that sort of stuff is all very well for the Press if you want to make a sensation and advertise your name, but surely you are not coming to me, a medical man, and a medical man., moreover, in the confidence of the Government and the Ministry of Health, with a story of that kind! Of course, there was some sort of epidemic, I admit, on the 18th. I myself suffered a little inconvenience, but I think that phenomena could be explained by the sudden change of wind from the southwest to the north-east and the corresponding drop in temperature. You may have noticed that the temperature dropped six degrees that morning.’

‘I am not bothering about the cause of the epidemic,’ said Bevan, patiently. ‘I am merely giving you, Sir Douglas, a rough account of what form the second epidemic will take.’

Sir Douglas smiled.

‘And do you expect me,’ he asked with acerbity, ‘to go to the Prime Minister of England and tell him that in fourteen days the whole of the world is going blind? My dear good man, if you published that sort of story you would scare the people to death and set back the practice of medicine a hundred years! Why, we should all be discredited!’

‘Do you think that if I saw the Prime Minister—’ began Bevan, and Sir Douglas stiffened.

‘If you know the Prime Minister or have any friends who could introduce you,’ he said, shortly, ‘I have not the slightest objection to your seeing him. I can only warn you that the Prime Minister is certain to send for me and that I should give an opinion which would be directly contrary to yours. I think you have made a very grave error, Dr Bevan, and if you were to take the trouble to kill one of your precious rabbits and dissect it you would discover another cause for this blindness.’

‘The opinion of Dr Van der Bergh,’ began Bevan, and Sir Douglas snorted.

‘I really cannot allow an American person to teach me my business,’ he said. ‘I have nothing to say against American medicines or American surgery, and there are some very charming people in America—I am sure this must be the case. And now, doctor, if you will excuse—’

He turned pointedly to his books and Bevan went out.

For seven days three men worked most earnestly to enlist the attention of the authorities. They might have given the story to the Press and created a sensation, but neither Bevan nor Van der Bergh favoured this method. Eminent doctors who were consulted took views which were extraordinarily different. Some came to the laboratories to examine the records. Others ‘pooh-poohed’ the whole idea.

‘Have you any doubt on the matter yourself?’ asked the professor, and Bevan hesitated.

‘The only doubt I have, sir,’ he said, ‘is whether my calculations as to the time are accurate. I have noticed in previous experiments with these rabbits the disease develops about twice as fast as in the human body, but I am far from satisfied that this rule is invariable.’

Van der Bergh nodded.

‘My Embassy has wired the particulars to Washington,’ he said, ‘and Washington takes a very serious view of your discovery. They are making whatever preparations they can.’

He went back to his hotel, promising to call on the morrow. Bevan worked all that day testing the blood of his little subjects, working out tables of reaction, and it was nearly four o’clock when he went to bed.

He slept that night in his room at the Institute. He was a good sleeper, and after winding the clock and drawing down the blind he jumped into bed and in less than five minutes was sound asleep. He awoke with the subconscious feeling that he had slept his usual allowance and was

curiously alive and awake. The room was in pitch darkness and he remembered with a frown that he had not gone to bed until four o'clock in the morning. He could not have slept two hours.

He put out his hand and switched on the light to discover the time. Apparently the light was not working.

On his bedside table was a box of matches, his cigarette holder, and his cigarettes. He took the box, struck a light, but nothing happened. He threw away the match and struck another—still nothing happened.

He held the faithless match in his hand and suddenly felt a strange warmth at his fingertips. Then with a cry he dropped the match—it had burnt his fingers!

Slowly he put his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up, groping his way to the window and releasing the spring-blind. The darkness was still complete. He strained his eyes but could not even see the silhouette of the window-frame against the night. Then a church-bell struck the hour. . . nine, ten, eleven, twelve!

Twelve o'clock! It was impossible that it could be twelve o'clock at night. He gasped. Twelve midday and dark!

He searched for his clothes and began to dress. His window was open, yet from outside came no sound of traffic. London was silent—as silent as the grave.

His window looked out upon the busy thoroughfare in which the Jackson Institute was situated, but there was not so much as the clink of a wheel or the sound of a pedestrian's foot.

He dressed awkwardly, slipping on his boots and lacing them quickly, then groped his way to the door and opened it. A voice outside greeted him. It was the voice of Gold.

'Is that you, Bevan?'

'Yes, it is I, what the dickens—' and then the realization of the catastrophe which had fallen upon the world came to him.

'Blind!' he whispered. 'We're all blind!'

Gold had been shell-shocked in the war and was subject to nerve-storms. Presently Bevan heard his voice whimpering hysterically.

'Blind!' he repeated. 'What a horrible thing!'

'Steady yourself!' said Bevan, sternly. 'It has come! But it's only for five days, Gold. Now don't lose your nerve!'

'Oh, I sha'n't lose my nerve!' said Gold, in a shaky voice. 'Only it is rather awful, isn't it? Awful, awful! My God! It's awful!'

'Come down to the study!' said Bevan. 'Don't forget the two steps leading down to the landing. There are twenty-four stairs, Gold. Count 'em!'

He was half-way down the stairs when he heard somebody sobbing at the foot and recognized the voice of the old housekeeper who attended to the resident staff. She was whimpering and wailing.

'Shut up!' he said, savagely. 'What are you making that infernal row about?'

'Oh, sir,' she moaned. 'I can't see! I can't see!'

'Nobody can see or will see for five days!' said Bevan. 'Keep your nerve, Mrs Moreland.'

He found his way to the study. He had scarcely reached the room before he heard a thumping on the door which led from the street to the staff quarters. Carefully he manœuvred his way into the hall again, came to the door, and unlocked it.

'Halloa,' said a cheery voice outside, 'is this the Jackson Institute?'

'Thank God you're safe, professor. You took a risk in coming round.'

The professor came in with slow, halting footsteps, and Bevan shut the door behind him.

‘You know your way, I’ll put my hand on your shoulder if you don’t mind,’ said Van der Bergh. ‘Luckily I took the trouble to remember the route. I’ve been two hours getting here. Ouch!’

‘Are you hurt?’ asked Bevan.

‘I ran against an infernal motor-bus in the middle of the street. It had been left stranded,’ said the professor. ‘I think the blindness is general.’

Stuart had stumbled into the room soon after them, had found a chair and sat down upon it.

‘Now,’ said Van der Bergh, briskly, ‘you’ve got to find your way to your Government offices and interview somebody in authority. There’s going to be hell in the world for the next five days. I hope your calculations are not wrong in that respect, Bevan!’

Hereford Bevan said nothing.

‘It is very awkward!’ it was Gold’s quivering voice that spoke, ‘but, of course, it’ll be all right in a day or two.’

‘I hope so,’ said the professor’s grim voice. ‘If it’s for five days little harm will be done, but— but if it’s for ten days!’

Bevan’s heart sank at the doubt in the old man’s voice.

‘If it’s for ten days?’ he repeated.

‘The whole world will be dead,’ said the professor, solemnly, and there was a deep silence.

‘Dead?’ whispered Gold and Van der Bergh swung round toward the voice.

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Shell-shock,’ muttered Bevan under his breath, and the old man’s voice took on a softer note.

‘Not all of us, perhaps,’ he said, ‘but the least intelligent. Don’t you realize what has happened and what will happen? The world is going to starve. We are a blind world, and how shall we find food?’

A thrill of horror crept up Bevan’s spine as he realized for the first time just what world-blindness meant.

‘All the trains have stopped,’ the professor went on; ‘I’ve been figuring it out in my room this morning just what it means. There are blind men in the signal-boxes and blind men on the engines. All transport has come to a standstill. How are you going to get the food to the people? In a day’s time the shops, if the people can reach them, will be sold out and it will be impossible to replenish the local stores. You can neither milk nor reap. All the great power-stations are at a standstill. There is no coal being got out of the mines. Wait, where is your telephone?’

Bevan fumbled for the instrument and passed it in the direction of the professor’s voice. A pause, then:

‘Take it back,’ said the professor, ‘of course, that will not be working. The exchange cannot see!’

Bevan heard a methodical puff-puff and the scent of tobacco came to him, and somehow this brought him comfort. The professor was smoking.

He rose unsteadily to his feet.

‘Put your hand on my shoulder, professor, and, Gold, take hold of the professor’s coat or something.’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Van der Bergh.

‘To the kitchen,’ said Bevan; ‘there’s some food there and I’m starving.’

The meal consisted in the main of dry bread, biscuits, and cheese, washed down by water. Then Hereford Bevan began his remarkable pilgrimage.

He left the house, and keeping touch with the railings on his right, reached first Cockspur Street and then Whitehall. Half-way along the latter thoroughfare he thumped into a man and, putting out his hand, felt embossed buttons.

‘Halloa,’ he said, ‘a policeman?’

‘That’s right, sir,’ said a voice; ‘I’ve been here since the morning. You’re in Whitehall. What has happened, sir? Do you know?’

‘It is a temporary blindness which has come upon everybody,’ said Bevan, speaking quickly. ‘I am a doctor. Now, constable, you are to tell your friends if you meet them and everybody you do meet that it is only temporary.’

‘I’m not likely to meet anybody,’ said the constable. ‘I’ve been standing here hardly daring to move since it came.’

‘What time did it happen?’

‘About ten o’clock, as near as I can remember,’ said the policeman.

‘How far from here is Downing Street?’

The constable hesitated.

‘I don’t know where we are,’ he said, ‘but it can’t be very far.’

Two hours’ diligent search, two hours of groping and of stumbling, two hours of discussing with frantic men and women whom he met on the way, brought him to Downing Street.

That journey along Whitehall would remain in his mind a horrible memory for all his days. He heard oaths and sobbings. He heard the wild jabberings of somebody—whether it was man or woman he could not say—who had gone mad under the stress of the calamity, and he came to Downing Street as the clock struck three.

He might have passed the Prime Minister’s house but he heard voices and recognized one as that of Sexton.

The great man was moaning his trouble to somebody who spoke in a quiet unemotional voice.

‘Halloa, Sexton!’

Bevan stumbled toward, and collided with the great physician.

‘Who is it?’ said Sexton.

‘It is Hereford Bevan.’

‘It’s the man, Prime Minister, the doctor I spoke to you about.’

A cool hand took Bevan’s.

‘Come this way,’ said the voice; ‘you had better stay, Sexton, you’ll never find your way back.’

Bevan found himself led through what he judged to be a large hall and then suddenly his feet struck a heavy carpet.

‘I think there’s a chair behind you,’ said the new voice, ‘sit down and tell me all about it.’

Dr Bevan spoke for ten minutes, his host merely interjecting a question here and there.

‘It can only last for five days,’ said the voice, with a quiver of emotion, ‘and we can only last out that five days. You know, of course, that the food supply has stopped. There is no way of averting this terrible tragedy. Can you make a suggestion?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Bevan. ‘There are a number of blind institutes throughout the country. Get in touch with them and let their trained men organize the business of industry. I think it could be done.’

There was a pause.

‘It might be done,’ said the voice. ‘Happily the telegraphs are working satisfactorily, as messages can be taken by sound. The wireless is also working and your suggestion shall be carried out.’

The days that followed were days of nightmare, days when men groped and stumbled in an unknown world, shrieking for food. On the evening of the second day the water supply failed. The pumping stations had ceased to work. Happily it rained and people were able to collect water in their mackintosh coats.

Dr Bevan made several excursions a day and in one of these he met another bold adventurer who told him that part of the Strand was on fire. Somebody had upset a lamp without noticing the fact. The doctor made his way toward the Strand but was forced to turn back by the clouds of pungent smoke which met him.

He and his informant (he was a butcher from Smithfield) locked arms and made their way back to the Institute. By some mischance they took a wrong turning and might have been irretrievably lost but they found a guardian angel in the shape of a woman against whom they blundered.

‘The Jackson Institute?’ she said. ‘Oh yes, I can lead you there.’

She walked with unfaltering footsteps and with such decision that the doctor thought she had been spared the supreme affliction. He asked her this and she laughed.

‘Oh, no,’ she said, cheerfully. ‘You see, I’ve been blind all my life. The Government has put us on point duty at various places to help people who have lost their way.’

She told them that, according to her information, big fires were raging in half-a-dozen parts of London. She had heard of no railway collisions and the Prime Minister told her—

‘Told you?’ said Bevan in surprise, and again she laughed.

‘I’ve met him before, you see,’ she said. ‘I am Lord Selbury’s daughter, Lillian Selbury.’

Bevan remembered the name. It is curious that he had pictured her, for all the beauty of her voice, as a sad, middle-aged woman. She took his hand in hers and they walked slowly toward his house.

‘You’ll think I’m horrid if I say I am enjoying this,’ she said, ‘and yet I am. It’s so lovely to be able to pity others! Of course, it is very dreadful and it is beginning to frighten me a little, and then there’s nobody to tell me how pretty I am, because nobody can see. That is rather a drawback, isn’t it?’ and she laughed again.

‘What does the Government think about this?’

‘They are terribly upset,’ she said, in a graver tone; ‘you see, they cannot get at the people—they are so used to depending on the newspapers, but there are no newspapers now, and if there were nobody could read them. They have just stopped—You step down from the kerb here and walk twenty-five paces and step up again. We are crossing Whitehall Gardens. They have wonderful faith in this Dr Bevan.’

Hereford Bevan felt himself going red.

‘I hope their faith is justified,’ he said, grimly; ‘I happen to be the wonderful doctor.’

He felt her fingers grip him in an uncontrollable spasm of surprise.

‘Are you really?’ she said, with a new note of interest. ‘Listen!’

They stopped, and he heard the tinkle of a bell.

‘That is one of our people from St Mildreds,’ she said; ‘the Government is initiating a system of town-criers. It is the only way we can get news to the people.’

Bevan listened and heard the sing-song voice of the crier but could not distinguish what he said. The girl led him to his house and there left him. He felt her hand running down his right arm and wondered why until she took his hand and shook it.

Old Professor Van der Bergh roared a greeting as he came into the room.

‘Is that you, Bevan?’ he asked. ‘I’ve got a knuckle of cold ham here, but be careful how you cut it, otherwise you’re going to slice your fingers.’

He and Stuart Gold had spent the day feeding the various specimens in the laboratory. The fourth day dawned and in the afternoon came a knock at the door. It was the girl.

‘I’ve been ordered to place myself at your disposal, Dr Bevan,’ she said; ‘the Government may need you.’

He spent that day wandering through the deserted streets with the girl at his side and as the hundred and twentieth hour approached he found himself looking forward not so much to the end of the tragic experience which he shared with the world, but to seeing with his own eyes the face of this guide of his. He had slept the clock round and just before ten struck he made his way to the street. He heard Big Ben boom the hour and waited for light, but no light came. Another hour passed and yet another, and his soul was seized with blind panic. Suppose sight never returned, suppose his experiments were altogether wrong and that what happened in the case of the rabbits did not happen to Man! Suppose the blindness was permanent! He groaned at the thought.

The girl was with him, her arm in his, throughout that day. His nerves were breaking, and somehow she sensed this fact and comforted him as a mother might comfort a child. She led him into the park with sure footsteps and walked him up and down, trying to distract his mind from the horror with which it was oppressed.

In the afternoon he was sent for to the Cabinet Council and again told the story of his experiments.

‘The hundred and twenty hours are passed, are they not, doctor?’ said the Premier’s voice.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Bevan in a low voice, ‘but it is humanly impossible to be sure that that is the exact time.’

No other question was asked him but the terror of his audience came back to him like an aura and shrivelled his very heart.

He did not lie down as was his wont that night, but wandered out alone into the streets of London. It must have been two o’clock in the morning when he came back to find the girl standing on the step talking with Van der Bergh.

She came toward him at the sound of his voice.

‘There is another Cabinet meeting, doctor,’ she said, ‘will you come with me?’

‘I hope I haven’t kept you long,’ he said, brokenly. His voice was husky and so unlike his own that she was startled.

‘You’re not to take this to heart, Dr Bevan,’ she said, severely, as they began their pilgrimage to Whitehall. ‘There’s a terrible task waiting for the world which has to be faced.’

‘Wait, wait!’ he said, hoarsely, and gripped the rail with one hand and her arm with the other.

Was it imagination? It was still dark, a fine drizzle of rain was falling, but the blackness was dappled with tones of less blackness. There was a dark, straight thing before him, something that seemed to hang in the centre of his eye, and a purple shape beyond, and he knew that he was looking at a London street, at a London lamppost, with eyes that saw. Black London, London devoid of light, London whose streets were packed with motionless vehicles that stood just where they had stopped on the day the darkness fell, London with groping figures half mad with joy, shrieking and sobbing their relief—he drew a long breath.

‘What is it? What is it?’ said the girl in a frightened voice.

‘I can see! I can see!’ said Bevan in a whisper.

‘Can you?’ she said, wistfully. ‘I—I am so glad. And now—’

He was near to tears and his arms went about her. He fumbled in his pocket for a match and struck a light. That blessed light he saw, and saw, too, the pale spiritual face turned up to his.

‘I can see you,’ he whispered again. ‘My God! You’re the most beautiful thing I have ever seen!’

London slept from sheer force of habit and woke with the grey dawn to see—to look out upon a world that had been lost for five and a half days, but in the night all the forces of the law and the Crown had been working at feverish pace, railways had dragged their drivers from their beds, carriers and stokers had been collected by the police, and slowly the wheels of life were turning again, and a humble world, grateful for the restoration of its greatest gift, hungered in patience and was happy.