

THE DEADLY DUST

By WILLIAM FITZGERALD

CHAPTER I

Where Is Bud Gregory?

A sturdy, small fishing-boat wallowed and rolled and heaved and pitched in the huge slow swells of mid-Pacific. It looked very much like any other fishing-boat and remarkably like those tuna-boats that put out from the West Coast of the United States and pursue their prey for as many thousands of miles as may be necessary.

It was just a little over a hundred feet long and was powered obviously by a Diesel engine. There was just one thing odd about the boat and one oddity about its crew and one about the object it towed and one about its wake.

The odd thing about the boat was that something remarkably like a radar antenna was fitted atop its pilot-house. The oddity about its crew was that every man wore heavy protective clothing of a sort usually found only among workers about atomic piles.

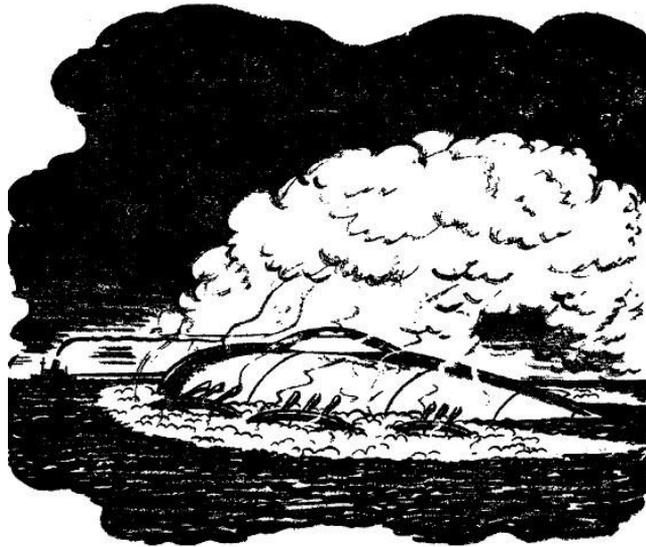
The oddity about the object it towed was that aside from the supporting pontoons that kept it afloat it was made of lead. It was a torpedo-shaped object some forty feet long and no more than eight or ten feet in diameter, kept from sinking by sheet-metal floats on either side.

The oddity of the wake was that it was quite clear for a few miles and then—miles and miles behind—dead fish lay on the water. It was possible to back-track the tuna-boat for a long, long way by dead fish lying on the surface. Of course, perhaps

fifty miles astern the dead fish had been scattered by the waves and the trail had been thinned out and was not so clear.

But the fishy corpses made a trail for a hundred miles beyond that if you looked for them. Curiously, the trail was equally dense along its whole length, as if a certain poisonousness only had been towed through the water and did not spread afterward.

There was an oddity in the behavior, too, of the small craft after a while. The radar-antenna turned and flickered here and there, restlessly. It searched the horizon exhaustively. Then, suddenly, an oily liquid came out of the torpedo-shaped leaden object. It bubbled to the surface and spread out. It evaporated very quickly, though. The vapor was blown to the eastward by the wind.



An oily liquid came out of the torpedo-shaped object, bubbled to the surface and spread out.

The seeming tuna-boat forged ahead sturdily, towing that odd object, which now gushed out a volatile liquid which evaporated quickly and whose fumes were blown away. It went on for miles and miles and miles, its radar-antenna flickering nervously about the horizon while the transient film of oily stuff trailed behind it.

And there was another peculiarity. The trail of dead fish grew much thicker after the liquid spread out to dry up and blow away to eastward. Instead of forty or fifty fish per mile there were hundreds. In one place, where a school of some finny sort

had swum beneath the temporary layer of oil, the ocean was almost carpeted with scaly, belly-up corpses....

On August 8th the background-count of all the standard Geiger-Miller tubes on the Pacific Coast, from Oregon to Southern California, went up from 1-3 to 3-5 per minute per square centimeter of tube surface.

On the same day Bud Gregory found a new home for his family. And Bud Gregory was—though the fact made him extremely unhappy—the most important man in the United States, perhaps the most important man in the world. He was in hiding because of it.

He was so much more than a mere genius that there is no possible way to describe him, and therefore he drove furtively by back roads up through Northern California and across Oregon and finally found a home for his family fronting on one of the minor inlets opening off Puget Sound.

The house was an abandoned shack, built of shakes—slabs cut off logs to square them for a sawmill—and it was in the last stages of dilapidation. But Bud Gregory viewed it with vast satisfaction.

So did his family. His tow-headed children regarded the brush that went back to the hills with lively anticipation. It was cut-over land with only a seed-tree standing here and there. The older boys inspected the water in view with enthusiasm.

Bud Gregory's wife noted that the stove, left behind when the shack was abandoned, could be patched with flattened tin cans or sheet-iron to serve admirably, and that there was a spring

only a hundred yards from the house. She learned that there was a very small town only four or five miles away. She was content.

So Bud Gregory's family unloaded pots, pans, bedding, two hound dogs, certain folding cots and assorted gunnysacks of provisions and canned goods from the car. They moved in. There were berries and woods-greens for the girls to pick nearby, there were rabbits to snare and fish to catch for the boys and nobody was likely to try to make anybody go to school. Bud Gregory's family was happy.

As the sun went down, with the ancient and decrepit jalopy standing forlornly beside the really quite unspeakable shack, Bud Gregory sat comfortably on the sagging doorstep and leaned back against the rotting side-wall. He reflected complacently that nobody was likely to bother him here for a long time to come. He could sit in the sun and not be bothered.

In a very real sense he was the greatest physicist yet known on earth. He had the greatest command over subatomic particles of any human being so far born. His profession was the repair of hopelessly disarranged automobiles but his occupation, his avocation and his only desire was simply to sit and do nothing. Sometimes, though, he liked to drink a little beer.

On August 9th, the background-count of standard Geiger-Miller tubes was up to 3-5 per minute per square centimeter as far east as St. Louis. On the Coast it was up to 5-7. On August 10th, the count was 3-5 in the Atlantic States, 5-7 in the center of the country and 7-9 on the Pacific Coast....

There was another small fishing-boat ploughing its way through the long slow mid-Pacific swells, towing an odd object which was supported by floats. There had been another one before it and another before that.

Like its fellows which had made these strange patrols, towing lead-sheathed torpedo-shaped objects, this fishing-boat also never seemed to fish—Not even when there were very plain evidences of tuna in profitable quantities all about.

The boat forged ahead, its radar flickering about the horizon. Suddenly the movement of the radar-antenna ceased. It remained fixed in one position and one position only. Then, as suddenly, men ran about the boat's deck.

They hastily assembled machine-guns at the stern. There were sharp, tearing noises above the droning hum of the Diesel engine. Tiny puffs of smoke were torn away from the muzzles of the machine-guns by the wind which blew to the east.

Bullets ripped and tore the sheet-steel floats. Great gashes appeared in the plating. Water poured into the supporting pontoons. A protective-suit-clad sailor swung an axe and the tow-rope parted. The lead object settled and sank swiftly.

Seconds after it was out of sight the only crew-members who appeared on deck wore commonplace working clothes. When a four-motored transpacific flying clipper droned out of the mistiness of the horizon there was nothing out of the ordinary in view. The radar-antenna was invisible. It had been unshipped. And of course the thing that had been towed was far, far below the surface....

The Geiger-Miller tube background-count did not rise on August 11th or 12th but on the 13th—when it was 7-9 in the Eastern and Central states—it made another jump. It went up to 8-10 on the Coast. The matter began to look serious.

Bud Gregory and his family, however, paid no heed. The older boys had explored their immediate surroundings very happily. The family dined on woodcock—out of season—rabbits, fish and corn bread. The oldest boy of all, aged fourteen, trudged all the way to the nearby small town and reported that there was a movie theatre there which showed films twice a week.

Beer was to be had. There were two stores and a post office and a consolidated school, a small bowling-alley, a sawmill and a hospital out of all proportion to the town itself. He was not impressed. He went fishing.

On August 14th the background-count on the West Coast was 9-11. On the 15th it was 10-12 and on the 16th it was 12-15. In the rest of the country the count climbed steadily. In Washington, D. C., standard counters clicked at the 10-12 rate and Doctor David Murfree became convinced that something was very, very wrong.

The background-count for standardized Geiger-Miller tubes is a measure of the normal everyday radioactivity of the earth as a whole. When a tube of given dimensions, with given pressure and given voltage applied, indicates that stray subatomic particles have passed through it at the rate of from one to three per minute for each square centimeter of its surface, the cosmos is normal.

But when the rate goes up over the entire United States, so that one has to assume that the radioactivity of the whole nation's surface has multiplied itself at least four times, it is upsetting.

Doctor David Murfree's title was a science doctorate. Because of the raised background-count he went to his superiors in Washington and asked for leave. He had a hunch that he had better find Bud Gregory and ask some questions about the matter.

It was not a pleasant interview. For a Civil Service employee to ask some special concession from his superiors is always unpleasant and Murfree was not in the good graces of his bosses. By his rating he drew a salary of forty-seven hundred dollars a year and by his seniority he could not be fired without formal charges and a hearing. But his superiors disapproved of him.

When an atomic pile started up of itself in the Great Smokies, Murfree to be sure, had managed to get it stopped on his own initiative and had presented to the United States the greatest known store of artificial radioactive material on earth. But Bud Gregory, who was responsible for that gigantic pile, had got away into the anonymity of tramp motordom.^[1]

And again when there was good prospect of an atomic war, with the United States on the receiving end of a well-organized attack, Murfree had managed to find Bud Gregory and, according to his own report, had prevented that attack, too. But again Bud Gregory had slipped away and Murfree could bring back nothing but a smashed and inoperative device he declared was responsible for the safety of the United States.^[2]

True, three dead men were found where Murfree had said they would be and they had been killed by bullets from guns they held in their hands and the bullets had gone in backward. Which made Murfree's otherwise improbable story rather plausible.

But his immediate superior did not approve of him because he had brought back neither Bud Gregory nor a painstaking report with math and diagrams which could be issued as essentially the product of the organizing genius of the administrative officers of the Bureau.

So, on August 17th, while Bud Gregory sat peacefully in the sunshine and his children picked berries, Dr. David Murfree sat in the office of his section's administrative officer and argued.

"But there's nothing else to do! I have to take some leave!"

The administrative officer was displeased.

"I don't think Gregory's responsible," explained Murfree patiently. "He knows better, now. All he wants is to be left alone to loaf and drink beer. He won't do anything to draw attention to himself—more's the shame and pity—and anything that would increase basic radioactivity would decidedly be on the show-off side. But he's the only man who could possibly solve the problem!"

The administrative officer scowled darkly.

"It isn't the whole earth, remember," said Murfree as patiently as before. "Only the United States. That means something quite preposterous. It's not dangerous yet but it isn't right! I've got to

take some leave to see if I can find Gregory and get an explanation!"

The administrative officer was no scientist. He pointed out that Murfree was asking for leave when everyone else in the Bureau wanted his vacation. If Murfree left his duty it would be considered that he had resigned.

Murfree clamped his jaw.

"Oh, the deuce!" he said angrily. "In that case I've resigned. I'm going! I've got to!"

The small fleet of seeming tuna-boats had developed a regular routine. One or more lay at a dock where a shed jutted out over the water and could easily hide two or three lead-sheathed objects to be towed. At least one ploughed sturdily across the ocean, its radar flickering incessantly in every direction, to detect and warn of any other ship or any aircraft which might presently come into sight.

If the radar reported another ship—however far away—the tuna-boat and its tow changed course to avoid a meeting. If a meeting could not be avoided the tow could be sunk and of course on the tuna-boat there wasn't anything peculiar which couldn't be thrown overboard if it became necessary to prove its utter innocence.

The island which was the small fleet's base was small itself and very seldom visited. If anybody did come its entire population of perhaps seventy souls was united. Personnel had been chosen and trained to distract the attention of any possible

visitor from the things that were the real background of the ships' activities.

It should not be difficult. After all, atomic piles are not so large and they can be built and hidden underground and the necessary shielding can be made to look like perfectly natural parts of an island landscape.

The fishing-boats went about their routine. They were very busy. But they didn't catch any fish. They didn't try....

On August 22nd the acceptance of Murfree's unwritten resignation came through. He scowled at the slip and then cleaned out his desk and went home. On that day the background-count in the East was 25-28. On the Pacific Coast it was 32-35.

This meant that in two weeks the radioactivity of the surface-soil of the United States had multiplied itself ten times. If it doubled itself just six times more there wouldn't be any United States. There might not be any world.

But out in the state of Washington, looking out over Puget Sound from his happily somnolent seat before the shack of moldering shakes, Bud Gregory decided that he would like to have some beer.

He counted up his money and sent his oldest to the town four miles away to bring back half a dozen bottles. For speed he let the fourteen-year-old boy use the antique automobile in which the family had wandered across the continent.

The boy cranked up the jalopy and drove away. It was very fortunate that he did so. Murfree heard about it and therefore was able to locate Bud Gregory.

CHAPTER II

"What's in It for Me?"

Murfree had a very bad conscience. Now, when his wife had set her heart upon a vacation at the seashore with their little daughter—Washington is an oven in the summer—he had joined the ranks of the unemployed. But Murfree knew that he had to hunt for Bud Gregory. He had to!

"Somebody's got to do it," he told his wife defensively. "And after all, I'm the only person he'll work with."

His wife waited.

"It's lunatic," said Murfree, "but what can I do? The whole country is getting more radioactive. The normal count has gone up ten times! It goes up in waves which start on the Pacific Coast and move east. There's no rise in Europe, Asia, South America or anywhere else. It isn't dangerous yet but it's heading that way. Somebody's got to find out about it!"

"Why must it be you?" asked his wife.

"Because nobody else will!" he told her vexedly. "There is a certain amount of radiation which is normal. There is a certain amount which is safe. The amount all over the United States is away above normal. It's still safe but it's heading for the point where it won't be!"

"Well?" his wife said.

"A certain amount more," said Murfree, "and there'll be a terrific increase in the number of abnormal babies. Freaks, mutations, monsters. A little beyond that, there'll be no babies! The rest of the living world would follow.

"A little more and plants will begin to throw sports. More yet and plants will become sterile. Seeds will cease to grow. A little more radiation than that and we'll all tend to develop cancer, and still more and we'll begin to run fevers and die of radiation-burns."

"And you're the only person who sees it," said his wife bitterly. "So you have to spend your money trying to find this Gregory and bribe him to do something!"

"But," said Murfree again, "nobody else will!"

Which was true. Twice before he'd spent his own savings for the safety of his family while all other families got their safety free. His conscience bothered him. But there wasn't anything else to do. Rather guiltily he called a friend who made microchemical analyses for the F.B.I.

He asked if he could be notified if any events took place of the sort—he described it specifically—which would mean Bud Gregory was involved. Then he doggedly made ready to take his family to the seashore. Employed or not, his daughter needed fresh air and sunshine and the sea after a year in Washington.

Two days later he had them settled at the beach. He'd packed up the one personally-owned souvenir of his encounters with Bud Gregory. He went to the largest privately-owned power-

generating station in the United States. He demonstrated the gadget. He left it installed. Then he called back to Washington on long distance.

He had a certain amount of money by this time—a fee for the experimental use of Bud Gregory's gadget—and within limits he could travel. There was news. His friend in the F.B.I. told him of a happening which sounded as if Bud Gregory was involved. So Murfree headed for the Pacific Coast by air.

A very decrepit vessel cast anchor off the small island of the tuna-boats. It made cryptic signals and the population of the island came rejoicing to the dock to greet its crew. Of course the people of the island did not use radios for communication. Radio messages can be intercepted and, if sent in code, arouse curiosity.

The decrepit vessel, therefore, brought news. It was good. The news consisted of background-count measurements made in different cities of the United States over some weeks past. The men who had made the measurements were passengers on the ship which brought them.

They were highly elated. They were taken to see the atomic piles which had produced the measurements. They bowed profoundly before the atomic engines which silently produced death for a nation.

And that night there was celebration on the island. But the tuna-boat due to leave went out on schedule despite the festivities. It towed a torpedo-shaped lead object behind it....

On the 29th of August the background-count of standard Geiger-Miller tubes on the West Coast was 56-58 and still going up. The radioactivity-constant of the United States had risen to something like twenty-five times normal. It showed no tendency to stop.

Bud Gregory's boy was in trouble. The event itself was not important but it enabled Murfree to find Bud Gregory. The happening occurred within half an hour after Bud sent his son to town for some beer.

The fourteen-year old boy chuffed away from the shack into which his family had moved. The car in which Bud Gregory had taken his tribe across the continent was an ancient and dilapidated rattletrap. By any normal standard it should have wheezed its last mile years before.

It had a cloth top, a cracked windshield and, when it was running exclusively on its motor, it made noises like a broken-down coffee grinder working on a protesting cat. It should have groaned at any grade and balked at any really perceptible incline. Its absolute maximum of speed should have been twenty miles an hour downhill.

But Bud Gregory was something very much more than a genius. He had made a gadget for his car. It was a radio tube and a coil or two, the windings being made in a fashion nobody else could understand and Bud Gregory could not explain. When the gadget was turned on and attached to any bit of metal things happened.

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