

The GREGORY CIRCLE

By WILLIAM FITZGERALD

CHAPTER I

Chain Disaster

On Monday Bud Gregory sat in magnificent idleness before the shed which was his automobile repair-shop in the village of Brandon on the edge of the Great Smokies.

That day something impalpable and invisible descended upon Cincinnati and people began to go to hospitals with their blood undergoing changes over which the doctors threw up their hands.

On Tuesday Bud Gregory meditated doing some work on the four automobiles awaiting repair in his shop, but did not feel like working and went fishing instead....

On that day the Geiger counters in the Bureau of Standards in Washington went uniformly crazy, so that it was impossible to standardize the by-products of the atomic piles turning out nuclear explosive for national defense.

On Wednesday Bud Gregory reluctantly put in half an hour's work. Yawning, he took his pay for the job and went home and took a nap.

That day forty head of cattle on a West Virginia hillside lay down and died and a trout-stream in Georgia was found to be full of dead fish. Four cancer patients in a home for incurables in Frankfort, Kentucky, suddenly took a quite impossible turn for the better. They walked out of the hospital three weeks later and went back to work.

On Thursday Bud Gregory—

That was the way of it at the beginning. Bud Gregory seemed to have no connection with any one of the series of unusual events. The events themselves were simply preposterous. As, for example, the fact that all the foliage in a ten-mile patch of mountain country in Pennsylvania turned vaguely purplish overnight, and then wilted and turned to unwholesome pulp.

Three days later there was not a green leaf or a living blade of grass in thirty-odd square miles. That did not seem to have any rational connection with Bud Gregory or any other event. But the connection was there.

It was Dr. David Murfree of the Bureau of Standards who was the first to add the various items together to a plausible sum. It did not include a backwoods automobile repairman, of course—there was no data for that—but it was a very sound guess just the same.

Murfree was a physicist, not a doctor of medicine and his salary at the Bureau was four thousand two hundred dollars a year with an appropriate Civil Service rating. He added the several odd events together, and they were convincing. But the answer was apparently impossible. He could not get any of his superiors in the Bureau to agree with him on the need for action. He thought the need was very great indeed. So he took a certain amount of accumulated Civil Service leave, drew out five hundred dollars from his bank and drove off in his battered old car to investigate at his own expense.

Tucked in the car were certain items of equipment from the bureau which he had no right to borrow and which would take most of a year's pay to replace if anything should happen to them.

He went to the sere and barren area in Pennsylvania and made certain tests. He drove to Cincinnati and made more tests. He went on to the place in West Virginia where cattle had died and asked questions and did improbable things to other ailing cows and steers. Then he drove back to Washington at the best speed his rattletrap car could make.

He went first to his home and told his wife to pack up. He explained with crisp precision and she looked at him in frightened doubt. He went to the Bureau of Standards—he was still technically on leave—and showed the results of his tests to some of the men who worked with him.

They were still unable to use the Geiger counters in the bureau, but one of his friends was heading for New York to use apparatus at Columbia which had not gone haywire. Murfree got him to take along his samples.

Then he went to a friend who happened to be a meteorologist—and got confirmatory bad news. The weather-maps of the period covering the unexplained phenomena told him just how likely his surmise was and where a search should be made for the primary cause of the disasters.

Then Murfree piled his wife and small daughter in the car, drew out all the rest of the money he had in the bank and headed for the Great Smokies.

It was strictly logical action. Epidemic leukemia in Cincinnati, ruined Geiger counters in Washington, dead cattle in West Virginia, dead trout in Georgia, the sudden cure of cancer patients in Frankfort, Kentucky—and a ten-mile patch of dead vegetation in Pennsylvania.

If Murfree could have gotten someone in authority to listen to him the measures to be taken would have been quicker and much more drastic. But nobody would listen. So Murfree had to work it out on his own.

His car was old but he made Lynchburg the first day. He was not at ease. He got started early on the second day and, by night-fall, was well past Charlotte toward the mountains. He and his family stopped at a small country hotel and, during the evening, Murfree got into talk with a power-line man, who told him worriedly that power-line losses over three counties had gone up to seven times normal in two days in a smooth curve and now were headed down again.

There was no explanation. Murfree fidgeted when he heard it. He made his family sleep with closed windows that night in spite of the stuffiness of their rooms, and they started off again near daybreak.

It was about three in the afternoon when he met Bud Gregory.

Bud Gregory sat in splendid somnolence before the shed which was his repair shop. The village of Brandon was a metropolis of three hundred souls, not far within the Great Smokies. There were mountains in every direction. There was blue sky overhead. There was red clay underfoot.

Bud Gregory dozed contentedly. There were three cars awaiting his attention. Each of them had been brought to him solely because he was the best mechanic in seven states. Actually, he was much more than that—so much more that there is no word for what he was.

Each car had been brought reluctantly, because he would repair them only when he felt like it or needed money, and then would do in minutes a job anybody else would need hours or days to do. At the moment he did not feel like working and he did not need money. So he dozed.

Flies buzzed about him. Insects made noises off in the distance. Somewhere chickens cackled feebly and somewhere a wagon with a squeaky wheel moved sedately away from Brandon.

Murfree's car was plainly in trouble when Bud Gregory first heard it. Not many cars came through Brandon. The local highways were traversable by very light vehicles and they could be traveled by tractors, but mules were surest. This car was away off the main track.

It came on, booming, and Bud Gregory awoke. It climbed rather desperately over a red-clay hill and came into Brandon. It was heavily loaded. Murfree drove. There were a woman and a little girl in the back. The rest was luggage—bags and parcels of every possible shape and size and outward appearance.

But Bud Gregory looked at the car. Murfree saw his sign and steered the car toward it. He stopped it—but the motor continued to run. Murfree plainly turned off the ignition. The motor boomed on. Murfree got out and called to Bud above the noise of the engine.

"It won't stop."

Bud rose, slouched to the car and threw up the hood. He reached in. There were thunderous racketing explosions. The motor stopped dead. Then it made frying, cooking noises.

"Y'lucky," Bud drawled. "Didn't burn out no bearin's yet." Then he drawled again. "Pump-shaft broke, huh?"

"Yes," Murfree said bitterly. "I kept going in hope of coming on a repair shop. Can you fix it? Will the motor freeze up?"

Bud spoke negligently, looking at the car and all the parcels.

"Uh-huh. Oil's all burnt up in the cylinders. When she cools she freezes. But if you pour water in 'er now you'll bust the cylinder-block."

Murfree clamped his jaws. His hands clenched.

He wasn't far enough into the Smokies for his needs and that power-line-loss business meant that he had to hurry.

"Any chance of getting another car?" he asked desperately.

Buying another car would put an impossible dent in his resources but he felt that the matter was urgent enough to justify such a step. He had two possible courses of action—this, and flight to the farthest possible part of the West. He'd chosen this because it meant a fight against the danger he foresaw.

"This here's a pretty good car," Bud Gregory drawled. "Fix 'er up an' she'll be all right."

"But it'll take days!" said Murfree bitterly. "You've got to take the motor practically apart!"

Bud Gregory spat with vast precision at a cluster of flies about a previous splash of tobacco-juice.

"She'll take a coupla hours to cool," he said drily. "That's all. No bearin's burnt. Ain't never yet seen a car I couldn't fix. I got a kinda knack for it."

"But you've got to take off the cylinder-head!" protested Murfree. "And replace the rings and fix the valves and take the pump apart and get a new shaft! No garage in the world would undertake the job in less than four days!"

"I'll do it," said Bud Gregory, "in two hours an' a half. An' two hours'll be waitin' for it to cool."

He grinned. He wasn't boasting. He was showing off a little, perhaps. But he was saying something he knew with absolute knowledge.

Murfree threw up his hands.

"Do that," he said bitterly, "and I'll believe in miracles!"

He got his wife and small daughter out of the car. He led them down to the general store of Brandon, which sold fertilizer, dry-goods, harness, perfumery, canned goods, farm machinery and general supplies. He bought the materials for a picnic lunch and he and his family came back. They sat in the car, with the doors open for coolness, and ate.

But Murfree was uneasy. Bud Gregory dozed. Time passed. The crackling, frying sounds of the overheated motor dwindled and ceased.

Presently Murfree got out and paced up and down beside the car, restlessly.

After a time he went to the back and took out a small, heavy parcel. He opened it and there was a freakish-looking metal-lined glass tube with electrical connections plainly showing it to be akin to radio tubes, but of a completely different shape.

Murfree threw a tiny switch, and from somewhere inside the box a "click" sounded. A moment later, there was another. Then two clicks close together, and a pause, and another.

Murfree watched it, worried. It clicked briskly but unrhythmically.

There was no order in the sequence of tiny sounds.

Bud Gregory sat somnolently in the shade. He turned his eyes and regarded Murfree and the box.

"What good does that do?" Murfree's wife said.

"None at all," Murfree said wretchedly. "It only tells me nothing's happened to us yet."

He stood watching the box, in which nothing moved at all, but from which clickings came at brief intervals.

Chickens cackled. Somewhere a horse cropped at grass and the sound of its jaws was audible. Insects hummed and buzzed and stridulated.

The box clicked.

Bud Gregory got up and came over curiously. He regarded the box with an interested intentness. It was not an informed look, as of someone looking at a familiar object. It wasn't even a puzzled look, as of someone trying to solve the meaning of something strange.

He wore exactly the absorbed expression of a man who picks up an unfamiliar book and reads it and finds it fascinating.

"What's—uh—what's this here thing do?" asked Bud, drawling.

"It's a Geiger counter," said Murfree. He had no idea what Bud was. Nobody had. Not even Bud. But Murfree said, "It counts cosmic-ray impacts and neutrons. It's a detector for cosmic rays and radioactivity."

Bud's face remained uncomprehending.

"Don't mean nothing to me," he drawled. "Kinda funny, though, how it works. Somethin' hits, an' current goes through, an' then it cuts off till somethin' else hits. What you want it for?"

CHAPTER II

Miracle

It was genuine curiosity. But an ordinary man, looking at a Geiger counter, does not understand that a tiny particle at high velocity—so small that it passes through a glass tube and a metal lining without hindrance—makes a Geiger tube temporarily conductive. Murfree stared blankly at Bud Gregory.

"How the heck—" Then he said curiously, "It was invented to detect radiations that come from nobody knows where. And it's used in the plants that make atom bombs, to tell when there's too much radioactivity—too much for safety."

"I heard about atom bombs," Bud Gregory drawled. "Never knew how they worked."

Murfree, still curious, spoke in words as near to one syllable as he could. This man had said he could make an impossible repair and had the air of knowing what he was talking about.

He looked at a Geiger counter and he knew how it worked and had not the least idea what it was used for. Murfree gave him a necessarily elementary account of atomic fission. He was appalled at the inadequacy of his explanation even as he finished it. But Bud Gregory drawled:

"Oh, that—mmm—I get it. Them little things that knock that ura—ura—uranium stuff to flinders are the same kinda things that make this dinkus work. They kinda knock a little bit of air apart when

they hit it. I bet they change one kinda stuff to another kind, too, if enough of 'em hit. Huh?"

Murfree jumped a foot. This lanky and ignorant backwoods repairman had absorbed highly abstruse theory, put into a form so simplified that it practically ceased to have any meaning at all, and had immediately deduced the fact of ionization of gases by neutron collision. And the transmutation of elements! He not only understood but could use his understanding.

"Right interestin'," said Bud Gregory and yawned. "I reckon your motor's cool enough to work on."

He put his hand on the cylinder-block. It was definitely hot, but not hot enough to scorch his fingers.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll fix the pumpshaft first."

He went languidly to a well beside the repair shed. He drew a bucket of water. He poured it into the radiator. There was a very minor hissing, which ceased immediately. He filled the radiator, reached down and worked at the pumpshaft with his fingers and with a speculative, distant look in his eyes, then straightened up.

He shambled into the shed and came out, trailing a long, flexible cable behind him. Up to the very edge of the Smokies and for a varying distance into them, there is no village so small or so remote that it does not have electric power. He put a round wooden cheesebox on the running-board of the car and drew out two shorter cables with clips on their ends. He adjusted them.

Murfree saw an untidy tangle of wires and crude hand-wound coils in the box. There were three cheap radio tubes. Bud Gregory

turned on a switch and leaned against the mud-guard, waiting with infinite leisureliness.

"What's that?" asked Murfree, indicating the cheesebox.

"Ain't got any name," said Bud Gregory. "Somethin' I fixed up to weld stuff with. It's weldin' your shaft." He looked absently into the distance. "It saves a lotta work," he added without interest.

"But—but you can't weld a shaft without taking it out!" protested Murfree. "It'd short!"

Bud Gregory yawned.

"This don't. It's some kinda stuff them tubes make. It don't go through iron. It just kinda bounces around. Where there's a break, it heats up an' welds. When it's all welded it just bounces around."

Murfree swallowed. He walked around the car and looked at the apparatus in the cheesebox. He traced leads with his eyes. His mouth opened and closed.

"But that can't do anything!" he protested. "The current will just go around and around!"

"All right," said Bud Gregory. "Just as y'please."

He waited patiently. Presently there was a faint humming noise. Bud Gregory turned off the switch and reached down. He removed the connecting clamps and meditatively fumbled with the water pump.

"That's okay," he finally said. "Try it if y'like."

He poked in the cheesebox, changing connections apparently at random. Murfree reached down and fingered the water pump. He had made certain of the trouble with his car and he knew exactly how the broken shaft felt. Now it was perfect, exactly as if it had been taken out, welded, smoothed, trued and replaced.

"It feels all right!" said Murfree incredulously.

"Yeah," said Bud Gregory. "It is. Y'car's froze, now, though. Take the handle an' try it."

Murfree got out the starting-handle from the tool-box. He inserted it and strained. The motor was frozen solid. It could not be stirred. Murfree felt sick.

"Wait a minute," said Bud Gregory, "an' try again."

He put a single one of the clamps on the motor and tucked the other away in the cheesebox. He turned on the switch.

"Heave now," he suggested.

Murfree heaved—and almost fell over. There was no resistance to the movement of the motor except compression which was infinitely springy. There was no friction whatever. It moved with an incredible, fluid ease. It had never moved so effortlessly—though the compression remained as perfect as it had ever been. Murfree stared. Bud Gregory took off the clamp.

"Try again," he said, grinning.

With all his strength, Murfree could not move the motor. Overheated, it was frozen tight with all the oil burned from the inner surface of the cylinders. Yet an instant before—

"Yeah," said Bud Gregory, drily.

He threw on the ignition switch, got into the driver's seat, and stepped on the starter. The motor fairly bounced into life. It ran smoothly. He adjusted it to a comfortable idling speed and got out.

"We'll run 'er for ten-fifteen minutes," he said casually, "to get fresh oil spread around. Then you' all fixed."

Murfree simply goggled.

"How does that work?" he said blankly.

Bud Gregory shrugged.

"Steel is little hunks of stuff stickin' together. These tubes make a kinda stuff that makes the outside ones slide easy on each other. I fixed up this dinkus to help loosen nuts that was too tight an' for workin' on axles an' so on. That'll be five dollars. Okay?"

"Y-yes—my word!" said Murfree. He fumbled out his wallet and turned over a five-dollar bill. "Listen! You eliminated friction! Completely! There wasn't any friction! Where'd you get the idea for that thing?"

Bud Gregory yawned.

"It just come to me. I gotta knack for fixin' things."

"It should be patented!" said Murfree feverishly. "What'll you make one of these for me for?"

Bud Gregory grinned lazily.

"Too much trouble. Took me a day an' a half to put it together an' get it workin'. I don't like that kinda work."

"A hundred dollars? Five hundred? And royalties?"

Bud Gregory shrugged.

"Too much trouble," he said. "I get along. Don't aim to work myself to death. You can go along now. Your car's all right."

He shambled over to his chair. He seated himself with an air of infinite relaxation and leaned back against the corner of the shed. As Murfree drove away he raised one hand in utterly lazy farewell.

But Murfree drove down the red-clay road, marveling. There had been only a two-hour delay instead of the four to seven days that any other garage in the world would have needed. Murfree drove to what he believed would be either the only safe place within a thousand miles—that or the place where he and his family would definitely be killed. But for a while he did not think of that.

He was facing the slowly-realized fact that Bud Gregory was something that there isn't yet a word for. He could not yet realize the full significance of the discovery, but it was startling enough to knock out of his head—for the moment—even the deadly danger implied by leukemia in Cincinnati and dead grass in Pennsylvania and dead trout in Georgia and Geiger counters gone crazy in Washington.

Murfree still didn't connect Bud Gregory with the danger.

CHAPTER III

Hidden Connection

Death fell out of a rain cloud in Kansas. A driving summer rainstorm swept across the wheatfields of the plains and where it fell the growing wheat died. The occupants of every farmhouse on which the rainstorm beat died too in a matter of days.

The Mississippi River became a stinking broth of dead and rotting fish above St. Louis and the noisesomeness floated down-stream to poison the water all the way to the Gulf—and beyond.

Dead birds fell from the skies over a dozen states and where they fell the earth went barren in little round spaces about them. A patch of the Gulf Stream turned white with dead fish. A game-preserve in Alabama became depopulated.

There were three hundred deaths in one night in Louisville. There were sixty in Chicago. The Tennessee Valley power-generating plant blew out every dynamo in five hectic minutes, during which sheet-lightning hurtled all about the interior of the generator-buildings.

Then death struck Akron, Ohio. Everybody knows about that—twelve thousand people in three days, and a whole section of the city roped off and nobody allowed to enter it, and the dogs and cats and even the sparrows writhing feebly on the streets before they too died.

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