

CONTENTS

SEPTEMBER 1954

Page

STARMAN COME HOME	Edmond Hamilton	6
TERWILLIGER & THE WAR MACHINE	Evan Hunter	81
SYMPTOMATICUS MEDICUS	Alan E. Nourse	92
THE CRAZY MAN	R. J. McGregor	104
THE CLUB HOUSE (Feature)	Rog Phillips	112
PERSONALS (Feature)		122
LETTERS (Feature)		124

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SYMPTOMATICUS MEDICUS

By Alan E. Nourse



The plague struck Philadelphia in 1954 leaving the physicians and neophytes at a loss, for the old spells and incantations were losing their power to stem the tide of sickness and death.

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

THE year was 1954. That it was to be a highly significant year was not surprising, for on the Kalendar of Gonwal it had been marked up in illuminated gold for many generations, and thus it was known that the thirteen months of that year were pre-ordained for many curious and wonderful hap-

penings. Many were to remember it as the year when television made its first appearance throughout the world; to others it was significant that this was the year when that first rocketship, with its tiny crew of brave adventurers, made its ill-fated attempt to reach the moon. And still others that year were

thrilled by the curious and frightening findings in the archeological diggings in the depths of the Atlantic.

But above and beyond all else, that year 1954 was to be remembered throughout the world of men as the year of the Great Philadelphia Plague, the fearful rose-spot scourge that had come like the night wind in the black treetops, slinking silently into the streets and alleyways of the aged city, flowing in the black depths of the Schuylkill and the Delaware, breathing death in its wake. It was first recognized at St. Ignatius' Infirmary, but by the time its true nature was realized it had moved in upon the city defying the most powerful forces of Sacred Medicine to check its incredible onslaught.

And from the plague-ridden city, Professor Henry Ireland, Physician-Sacerdos Exemplary of the City of Philadelphia, had flown to Denver-town to attend the quadrennial Congress of Aesculapiads, bringing with him the proposal which was to shake the world of Sacred Medicine for decades to come.

Professor Henry Ireland smoothed the folds of his richly brocaded black gown as he waited, tensely, for the murmuring in the great hall to subside. With trembling fingers he stroked the gold medal-

lion which hung from his neck, the gleaming Cross-and-Serpent that was his badge of office, a symbol of the dark and mysterious powers of a Physician-Sacerdos. His face was pale; there were haggard lines of fatigue and pain about his mouth, but in his eye was a new gleam of hope. The battle against the plague which had engulfed his city had drained his strength and all but killed his hope, but now as he sat waiting to address the assembly of Physicians here, it seemed almost possible that they might hear him, even in the face of Brunnhauser's brutal opposition.

He leaned forward a moment, the better to drink in the spark of excitement that rippled through the great hall. Up on the speaker's platform Professor Brunnhauser was banging ineffectually for order, his fat, sallow face dark with anger. Perhaps even Brunnhauser had risen above his gluttoned self-satisfaction long enough to see the handwriting on the wall during the previous session, for he had been abruptly and soundly defeated when he had tried to force through an antiquated ruling which would have refused Professor Ireland recognition on the floor. The battle against the ruling had been short, and the excited murmur which now rippled up and down the hall, the flushed, eager eyes

turning in his direction now, might possibly mean that Brunnhauser's heavy-handed rule of Sacred Medicine was weakening—

And then, with his heart in his throat, he heard the Chairman's voice booming out, "The Chair recognizes Professor Ireland of Philadelphia!"

He rose, slowly, and stood straight as a ramrod, a figure of dignity and strength. He pinned the microphone to his stiff white collar, and stared out at the Assembly, and when he began to speak his words carried the power of deep inner conviction. "It is a tremendous honor," he said, "to address this assembly of Sacred Medicine, particularly on this occasion, for as you know, we are gathered here to reinforce once again the fearful Pact between the forces of Good and the Prince of Evil which gives us our poor power to fight disease and death. I joined in reaffirming that Pact, yet I did so knowing in my heart that a certain terrible fact was true—that the power of the Pact is no longer enough—"

There was not a sound in the hall, not a breath of sound from the startled multitude. Had the roof suddenly peeled in upon the assembly, it would have gone unheeded, and even the indignant Brunnhauser sat as if transfixed, his chubby face gone chalk white.

"I should not need to recall to this assembly the history of that Pact," the Professor continued. "I need not remind you that it was with the Pact that the Church succeeded in its Holy Opposition to the Black Plague in Paris in 1615, thus saving untold millions from death at the mercy of that pestilence. How much that Holy Opposition turned the course of history we can only guess, but we do know that the writing of the Pact, and the Church's blessing of it, was unprecedented. The Pact was acceptable only in the hope that far greater evil, the evil of a sweeping, killing horror, could be stopped." The Professor paused, his eyes seeking the faces of the Assembly. "We have all read the Kalendar, relating how those ancient Physicians witnessed the materialization of the Demon Gonwal, the Controller of the Pestilence, saw him bow to the will of the Dark Master and work on the side of men, by virtue of the Pact. They gazed in horror at Gonwal's face, and they saw Gonwal draw the plague from the blackened corpses of men and transfer it to the rats of the alleys and streets; they watched as Gonwal's rats did their furious dances of death on the streets—and the Plague was stopped. Indeed, in those days the League with Gonwal was strong,

the very foundation of our modern art of medical sorcery. And it isn't strange that those Physicians used their spells and incantations without question, in complete faith. It isn't strange that those same magical methods have been handed down from Physician to Neophyte, in the dark halls of the Infirmarys, even as they are today. And yet we fight a new Plague in my city to-day which cannot be checked by the mightiest magical powers we know." His eyes blazed down at them, and his voice was hard and bitter. "Our magic is failing, our spells grow weaker by the day, and we are helpless to know why, helpless to reinforce them. Who knows the nature of the diseases that plague us? Do any of you? We are like blind men, working in a darkness we do not begin to understand . . . yet we are held helpless to try to learn by those very men who are supposed to be leading us. All of us, even as Neophytes, have grown from bits of seaweed and the entrails of rats the potently foaming broths which, when quaffed in strong faith, have done their curious work, vanquishing the fever from the brows of children, rebalancing the humors and fighting back the jaundices. We have all seen the grey-green sporulating growth which arises from dead mice and oily rags when they

are placed together with the proper incantation and prayers—but who knows what quality there is in such a growth to heal the most morbid inflammation, even in the hands of the youngest Neophyte? Not even our good colleague Brunnhauser knows that, yet he forbids any study of those potions to determine what magic lies in them—*And not one of us knows the nature of our own magic—*"

There was an angry roar from the platform as Professor Brunnhauser, his face livid, sprang to his feet. "Did you hear him?" he screamed. "Sacrilege! The effrontery and blasphemy of this man! These are the words of an unbeliever—you heard him! He would cast aside the very foundation of our medical powers. What could he seek to find in his studies? The secrets of life and death? What he says is impudence and heresy!" He paused, his face black. "No, indeed, we have nothing we can learn, it is not for us to look farther than the League with Gonwal has already led us. We have the ultimate in medical sorceries now at our command; who cares why the poultices cure, why the humors rebalance? Enough that they do, unless the victim is a sinner, and worthy only for death anyway. And if this man's city is stricken, perhaps we can conclude that that plague is only just reward

for his evil thoughts—”

There were tired lines on Professor Ireland's face as he stood waiting, eyes closed, for the other to stop. But at the last sentence his eyes opened wide with anger. “A fitting reply for one who is too fat and corrupt to dare let new ideas creep in,” he cried bitterly. “So all who die are evil anyway! A comfortable policy indeed, to go about in the midst of suffering with a ruddy face and an expanding paunch, muttering benign, platitudes, and doing nothing but blame the devil for what your powers cannot do! I say experiment, study new sorceries, try new potions, seek out the true secrets of the old spells. I say throw out the old, fat, lazy men, and seek out the new knowledge they fear so much—” He turned his eyes to Brunnhauser, eyes cold and full of contempt. “You say the Plague in my city is a curse I have brought upon myself, and you refuse to give me freedom to try fighting the plague my own way. Then I challenge you. Let the city be divided in half, with one half in *your* care, with all the ancient power of Gonwal behind you—and give me a free hand in the other half to study, and experiment, and try new sorceries. And then we shall see what magic can *really* do!

Brunnhauser glared at him for

a long moment, then threw his gavel down with a crash, and stalked grimly off the platform. And Professor Ireland sank down in his seat, breathing a silent prayer, unaware and oblivious of the pandemonium breaking loose on all sides of him.

Even with the radio and television coverage of the plague-stricken area, it was difficult for anyone who had not actually been there to comprehend the ferocity of the pestilence that lay over the city of Philadelphia. In a wintry blanket of fog and drizzle, the great city lay like a corpse as the special transport came in for a landing with Professor Ireland returning from the Congress. The yellow lights from the airport were unattended, and as the limousine crept through the night streets toward St. Ignatius' Infirmary, the death-like fog breathed an air of indescribable gloom. It was not that the disease had not been seen before—indeed, it had been reported far and wide throughout the land for many years, but never before had it appeared in such virulent form, nor in such epidemic proportions.

But it had crept into the city, spreading down from the north and west into the suburbs, then catching like a wild blaze to spread

to all portions of the metropolis. The first danger signs were the rose-colored spots on the abdomen of the victim; soon he would be engulfed in a burning fever which lasted for days and weeks while he grew thin, unable to eat, wasting away until his skeleton showed through, and he could no longer drag himself from his bed. His breath would come in great gasps, and then, after many days of agony, the agony would be ended, and the victim would go to join the many others who also fell before the onslaught. Whole families fell, and though the medical workers fought with their most powerful spells, the pestilence continued to grow with each day's reports.

On all sides the Professor had heard the wondering cries, the piteous prayers. What caused it, why did it happen? He did not know, and the knowledge that he did not know cut him to the quick. It might have been caused by over-exposure to the wind, or by eating raw onions, or even from bathing in the Schuylkill River in the dark of the moon, for all he knew, and he had little time to speculate, with the mounting number of dead and dying.

The ravaging effects of the plague on the staid old city were harder still for anyone to imagine

who had not walked the death-haunted streets. The television 'copters hovered in the grey sky like grim vultures, but their pictures were incomplete, they did not tell the full story of misery lying below them. Death was everywhere, walking the cobblestone streets, haunting the narrow alleys, flying in grim silence over the slate rooftops. Early in the morning the clop-clop of the horsedrawn carts could be heard, the street-cleaning wagons long beloved by the natives of that city even in that mechanized age, now carrying their ghastly burdens out to the public burying grounds to the west of the city. The city had been transformed to a huge infirmary; the subway tunnels and underground passageways in the heart of the city housed thousands of the sick and dying; beds of every type and description filled the historic City Hall, and lined Market Street for blocks, covered over with poor canvas to keep out the continual, gloomy rain. And among the rows of cots the occasional figure of nurse or Physician was seen, moving from victim to victim, sleep-drugged, hardly able to murmur the incantations and spells once so powerful.

Professor Ireland met his workers in a special conference in the torch-lit Chamber of Medicine at

the Infirmary. Sadly he took the sheaf of reports, of dead, of dying, of new cases; then he put them aside, and looked up at the tired group of Physicians before him. "We have a chance," he murmured. "Brunnhausner had to accept the challenge, of course. He and his men are taking the western and southern portions of the city; we will take Center city, and the north. We have no time to dally. And I think you understand our plan—"

All the heads nodded, and Professor Ireland smiled tiredly. "Somewhere, there is something in common, some common denominator in all the victims dying of the plague. No one here in the Infirmary has been stricken yet, at least none living here and eating here, and none of us have had time for protective Rites, whether they be antiquarian hog-wash or not. But people all around us have fallen. Our job is to search for anything, everything which might be a cause for the deaths. Perhaps some ghostly spirit walks among us, touching some, not touching others—if so, we must find him. And having found him, we must strike him dead—" His voice trailed off, and his face went pale as he groped for his chair. One of the Physicians cried out in alarm, moving forward to help him. "It is nothing," said

the Professor weakly. "Nothing. I'm weak from the trip, that's all —"

"You're sure? You haven't seen the spots?"

"No, it's not the fever—I'd tell you if it were. I'm just tired." He looked up feebly, his eyes burning. "There's no time to lose, so go now." Then he turned his attention once more to the reports.

It came and went, quickly, cruelly. Sometimes the Professor would be caught in the middle of a sentence, and double up in convulsive agony; sometimes he managed to hide the attacks until he could reach privacy to wait, gritting his teeth until they were over. Sometimes he almost imagined he saw hallucinations in the course of an attack—visions of men and women in strange dress, visions of tall buildings, brief glimpses of shiny palaces of Medicine, where everyone wore white clothes, and bottles of potions and shiny bright instruments sat on shelves, spotless clean. But as quickly as the picture would flit through his mind the seizure would disappear, and he would sit panting and weak, hoping against another. And the surer he became that it was *not* the Plague attacking, the more certain he became of the true sources of the seizures.

Early one morning a worker

came in, face flushed, and thrust the daily reports before the Professor in his study. "Look," he said angrily. "Look at what that monster is doing!"

It was a map of the city, pin-pointing the spots where dead had been found, the normal distribution he had been seeing morning after morning. And then he looked closer, and his face set in harder lines. "Right along the dividing line," he murmured. "I knew Brunnhauser was a dishonest man. But I never thought he'd stoop so low—"

"We caught them," the worker said softly. "A crew of men spotted them last night, carrying dozens of bodies across the line, dumping them in the streets on our side."

Ireland nodded. "And statistics will be the proof, of course. Crude, unbelievably crude. But there are other things he is doing that are not so crude." He motioned to the other. "I want to give you something, John. My job will be yours, if something happens to me, and I fear something is happening to me. But we have a clue, a possible solution to this terrible plague."

"You mean you've found what it is, how it spreads?" John's eyes goggled.

"We *may* have found how it spreads."

"And how do you think—?"

The Professor looked at him closely. "By water," he said.

The other blinked, not comprehending. "You mean—something about bathing—?"

"Drinking. Oh, I know — it sounds incredible that *water*, however brackish, could conceivably be connected with this plague. Yet we have drunk clean Artesian well water here, and have all been spared, while those in the cities—" He shrugged. "We don't know. If it's right the workers will know soon, and we may see a way to control the disease. But I fear we may not get a chance—"

The other looked at him closely. "You've been ill," he said, horrified.

"Not ill," said Ireland, weakly. "Something worse than illness, I fear. Brunnhauser must win this challenge. He knows he must win it, or Sacred Medicine, as he knows it and leads it, will never survive. If he loses, there will be changes that will leave him a ridiculed and broken man. So he calls other forces than Gonwal to help him — blacker forces—"

The man called John stared. "The punishment for *that* kind of Pact is too grave—" he exclaimed.

"And yet I have heard whisperings about our friend. I have heard that he has cursed other men who stood in his way. I have heard

curious tales, tales about black and magical sorceries which have shifted men completely out of the worlds they knew, into horrible parallel worlds where histories have been different. Just tales, of course, but I fear that Brunnhauser knows black magic, and if he is losing his magical fight against the Plague, he may in desperation attack me with the blacker kind—”

“But is there nothing you can do?”

Professor Ireland's eyes flashed angrily. “I could fight him back with the same—but that would be stooping to his level. No, I have a job here, and I must do it. And it must be done, in spite of Brunnhauser and his powers.” He shook his head, as though disgusted with the idea, and walked weakly out for his daily round of the wards.

The work was almost overpowering, but slowly it progressed. The Plague found its way across the river to the out-lying towns and cities, and continued its killing pace, but slowly, very slowly, the effects of Professor Ireland's directions began to appear. The daily roster of new cases began to fall off, at first almost imperceptibly, then faster. The battle was far from won, but for the first time since the beginning, it seemed that his ridiculous water-theory might

possibly be right.

But as the work looked more and more hopeful, the Professor looked worse and worse. Carefully he transferred all his records, all his observations and directions, to those who worked with him, charged them to carry on the work no matter what happened to him. They urged him to stop work, to go into hiding, but he steadfastly refused even to take the simplest protective Rites. There was no doubt that he was suffering some dreadful affliction; daily his face grew more gaunt, and his eyes were large and haunted. His seizures became more and more frequent, and more violent; more than once he was seen to let out a cry and grasp desperately at some solidly anchored object, as if some invisible force were trying to snatch him away, and once he was heard to mutter deliriously about being “transferred”, but the seizures always passed, leaving him whiter and weaker every time.

And then, one night, he could stand it no longer. John, the Physician who had worked closest with him, found the Professor dressing carefully in his full cabalistic garb, complete with richly brocaded surplice with the Cross-and-Serpent blazoned on the front, and the little square berretta of the Physician-Sacerdos Exemplary. Gravely

John went into the Chamber of Medicine and laid out the chalk lines, the candles and the books, the cabinet of ingredients, and all the symbolic formulae necessary for the Physician's Solemn Rites of Protection. And then the Professor motioned him to wait outside the Chamber, his face gaunt. "I didn't want to do this," he told the younger man. "I still don't know if its protective power can hold me. But the forces striking at me are too great, I can no longer hold out myself. It's like a terrible, frightening rush of wind, and if the Rites will not help me, nothing will—" He left his final orders for the direction of the fight against the Plague, and started with slow steps for the center of the Chamber.

But he never reached the center of the room, and he never learned whether the protective rites would have helped him or not. Quite suddenly the Chamber was filled with a howl of cold wind, swirling the Professor's gown like a myriad grasping fingers; the Professor let out a hoarse cry, almost a groan of despair. And then, in a crackle of blue-white light, he disappeared as completely as if he had never been there—

Dr. Martin Dressler, Chief of Psychiatry of the Bellefont Mem-

orial Sanatorium, glanced across the consulting room at the strange black-robed figure sitting there. He returned his eyes to the heavy sheaf of onion-skin he had been reading on the desk before him; then once again he picked up the enclosed letter, bearing the City Psychiatric Hospital letterhead.

"Dear Dr. Dressler," (the letter read). "I am referring this patient to you somewhat in the spirit of desperation, with the enclosed complete transcript of his case history, which I trust you will study with great care. You have undoubtedly read of the case already in the local press. According to the most reliable reports, the man appeared, quite suddenly, out of nowhere, in the middle of rush-hour traffic in downtown Philadelphia, claiming loudly that he had been the victim of some sort of medieval sorcery.

At the time, he was wearing the long black robe with the gold-embroidered symbol on the breast, and the odd little box-like hat—he will probably still be wearing them, for he steadfastly refuses to remove them. The police took him in for vagrancy and disturbing the peace, and sent him here to us, still loudly insisting that he was a 'doctor' who had been propelled here by magical means from the heart of a 'plague' in the middle of Philadelphia. This part of his story was

most confusing; however, plague or no plague, he was discovered in the routine medical check to be the most dangerous typhoid fever carrier to be spotted in Pennsylvania for years. (Needless to say, every precaution was taken to clear *that* up with adequate antibiotic therapy before we proceeded with the psychiatric study.)

"The man claims he comes from an alternate world, where medical knowledge is three centuries behind times, and plagues are controlled by black magic, with the help of some sort of gentlemen's agreement with the Devil—the patient's delusion is remarkably detailed and fixed, and he refuses to alter his story in any way, as you will see. Indeed, he followed his own medical processing with the most peculiar mixture of excitement and amazement, as though he had never seen a syringe and needle before. But most upsetting was his effect on the other psychiatric patients here. The man seemed to regard our treatment of psychiatric cases with a high degree of ill-concealed amusement, and even offered to supplement our work with his own cabalistic attempts. Finally, he was discovered one evening with five of our most hopeless patients, placing them in a hexagon, chanting spells at them, and calling on his diabolical helper, whom he calls

'Gonwal' to 'drive the evil spirits from them.' (Curiously, all five of the patients seem to have improved remarkably after what must have been a severely traumatic experience—doubtless some regressive response to the witch-doctor mumbo-jumbo he was handing them.)

"In my opinion, the patient should have careful specialized study, and I am sending him to you in hopes you will have better luck than I—"

The psychiatrist tossed the letter on the desk, and stared at the black-robed old man. After a long moment he said, "What *were* you trying to do with those patients?"

Professor Henry Ireland spread his hands tiredly. "I am a Physician," he said. "Those people obviously were possessed of evil spirits—"

The psychiatrist nodded. "—and you were naturally just practicing your skill." He paused for a moment, regarding the strange figure closely. "They call you a witch-doctor—" He held up his hand when he saw the Professor's face darken. "No offense," he said gently. "We've been similarly accused ourselves." He stared at the old man for a long time, then shook his head. "It's incredible," he murmured. "Still fighting typhoid plagues—driving out spirits—"

Professor Ireland leaned for-

ward, his eyes pleading. "But it is *true!*" he whispered. "There are alternate worlds—yours and mine—it's true! I was thrust here by blackest rites, by a man who would doom our world to eternal plagues to retain his power over Sacred Medicine. I know what you are thinking, but it's not true, I am not sick in mind. I *couldn't* be. We have plagues, yes, horrible plagues that decimate cities, even with the powers of Gonwal to help us—but there has been no sickness of the mind in my world for *three hundred years*—"

The psychiatrist stared at the old man's earnest face. A chill went up his back, and he felt a strange pounding in his throat. "If it *were* true—" he said softly—"this devil's helper of yours this Gonwal—must he help you when you call him, *no matter where you are?*"

"We command him by the Cross and Serpent, through all eternity—no matter where we are."

The psychiatrist stood up sharply, walked to the window, stared out at the long ward buildings of the sanatorium, his mind racing. Then he turned to face the Pro-

fessor. "You want to go back, don't you?"

Professor Ireland's eyes blazed. "I *must* go back. There are many ways that it might be possible—it would take time, nothing more. But you have magic in this world of fight plagues—powerful magic. If you could teach me, in sacred trust—teach me the magic of your silver needle—there would be no more plagues in my world, there would be an end to the fat tyrants of Sacred Medicine—"

The psychiatrist nodded slowly. "I could teach you much of our magic. I might even help you find a way back."

Professor Ireland's eyes narrowed. "And in return for your generosity—?"

The psychiatrist glanced fearfully at the door, and when he spoke, his voice was very low. "You could teach me *your* magic," he whispered. "Perhaps we—you and I—and Gonwal—perhaps we could reach an agreement."

Professor Ireland sat back in his chair, and for the first time a ghost of a smile played at his lips. "I feel sure we can," he said.

THE END

