
The Plague

Teddy Keller



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THE PLAGUE

By TEDDY KELLER

*Suppose a strictly one hundred per cent American plague showed up....
One that attacked only people within the political borders of the United
States!*

Illustrated by Schoenherr

S

ergeant Major Andrew McCloud ignored the jangling telephones and the excited jabber of a room full of brass, and lit a cigarette. Somebody had to keep his head in this mess. Everybody was about to flip.

Like the telephone. Two days ago Corporal Bettjean Baker had been answering the rare call on the single line—in that friendly, husky voice that gave even generals pause—by saying, "Good morning. Office of the Civil Health and Germ Warfare Protection Co-ordinator." Now there was a switchboard out in the hall with a web of lines running to a dozen girls at a half dozen desks wedged into the outer office. And now the harried girls answered with a hasty, "Germ War Protection."

All the brass hats in Washington had suddenly discovered this office deep in the recesses of the Pentagon. And none of them could quite comprehend what had happened. The situation might have been funny, or at least pathetic, if it hadn't been so desperate. Even so, Andy McCloud's nerves and patience had frayed thin.

"I told you, general," he snapped to the flustered brigadier, "Colonel Patterson was retired ten days ago. I don't know what happened. Maybe this replacement sawbones got strangled in red tape. Anyhow, the brand-new lieutenant hasn't showed up here. As far as I know, I'm in charge."

"But this is incredible," a two-star general wailed. "A mysterious epidemic is sweeping the country, possibly an insidious germ attack timed to precede an all-out invasion, and a noncom is sitting on top of the whole powder keg."

Andy's big hands clenched into fists and he had to wait a moment before he could speak safely. Doggone the freckles and the unruly mop of hair that give him such a boyish look. "May I remind you, general," he said, "that I've been entombed here for two years. My staff and I know what to do. If you'll give us some co-operation and a priority, we'll try to figure this thing out."

"But good heavens," a chicken colonel moaned, "this is all so irregular. A noncom!" He said it like a dirty word.

"Irregular, hell," the brigadier snorted, the message getting through. "There're ways. Gentlemen, I suggest we clear out of here and let the sergeant get to work." He took a step toward the door, and the other officers, protesting and complaining, moved along after him. As they drifted out, he turned and said, "We'll clear your office for top priority." Then dead serious, he added, "Son, a whole nation could panic at any moment. You've got to come through."

Andy didn't waste time standing. He merely nodded to the general, snubbed out his cigarette, and buzzed the intercom. "Bettjean, will you bring me all the latest reports, please?" Then he peeled out of his be-ribboned blouse and rolled up his sleeves. He allowed himself one moment to enjoy the sight of the slim, black-headed corporal who entered his office.

Bettjean crossed briskly to his desk. She gave him a motherly smile as she put down a thick sheaf of papers. "You look beat," she said. "Brass give you much trouble?"

"Not much. We're top priority now." He ran fingers through the thick, brown hair and massaged his scalp, trying to generate stimulation to his wary and confused brain. "What's new?"

"I've gone though some of these," she said. "Tried to save you a little time."

"Thanks. Sit down."

She pulled up a chair and thumbed through the papers. "So far, no fatalities. That's why there's no panic yet, I guess. But it's spreading like ... well, like a plague." Fear flickered deep in her dark eyes.

"Any water reports?" Andy asked.

"Wichita O.K., Indianapolis O.K., Tulsa O.K., Buffalo O.K.,—and a bunch more. No indication there. Except"—she fished out a one-page report—"some little town in Tennessee. Yesterday there was a campaign for everybody to write their congressman about some deal and today they were to vote on a new water system. Hardly anybody showed up at the polls. They've all got it."

Andy shrugged. "You can drink water, but don't vote for it. Oh, that's a big help." He rummaged through the clutter on his desk and came up with a crude chart. "Any trends yet?"

"It's hitting everybody," Bettjean said helplessly. "Not many kids so far, thank heavens. But housewives, businessmen, office workers, teachers, preachers—rich, poor—from Florida to Alaska. Just when you called me in, one of the girls thought she had a trend. The isolated mountain areas of the West and South. But reports are too fragmentary."

"What is it?" he cried suddenly, banging the desk. "People deathly ill, but nobody dying. And doctors can't identify the poison until they have a fatality for an autopsy. People stricken in every part of the country, but the water systems are pure. How does it spread?"

"In food?"

"How? There must be hundreds of canneries and dairies and packing plants over the country. How could they all goof at the same time—even if it was sabotage?"

"On the wind?"

"But who could accurately predict every wind over the entire country—even Alaska and Hawaii—without hitting Canada or Mexico? And why wouldn't everybody get it in a given area?"

Bettjean's smooth brow furrowed and she reached across the desk to grip his icy, sweating hands. "Andy, do ... do you think it's ... well, an enemy?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

For a long moment he sat there, trying to draw strength from her, punishing his brain for the glimmer of an idea. Finally, shaking his head, he pushed back into his chair and reached for the sheaf of papers.

"We've got to find a clue—a trend—an inkling of something." He nodded toward the outer office. "Stop all in-coming calls. Get those girls on lines to hospitals in every city and town in the country. Have them contact individual doctors in rural areas. Then line up another relief crew, and get somebody carting in more coffee and sandwiches. And on those calls, be sure we learn the sex, age, and occupation of the victims. You and I'll start with Washington."

Bettjean snapped to her feet, grinned her encouragement and strode from the room. Andy could hear her crisp instructions to the girls on the phones. Sucking air through his teeth, he reached for his phone and directory.

He dialed until every finger of his right hand was sore. He spoke to worried doctors and frantic hospital administrators and hysterical nurses. His firm, fine penmanship deteriorated to a barely legible scrawl as writer's cramp knotted his hand and arm. His voice burned down to a rasping whisper. But columns climbed up his rough chart and broken lines pointed vaguely to trends.

It was hours later when Bettjean came back into the office with another stack of papers. Andy hung up his phone and reached for a cigarette. At that moment the door banged open. Nerves raw, Bettjean cried out. Andy's cigarette tumbled from his trembling fingers.

"Sergeant," the chicken colonel barked, parading into the office.

Andy swore under his breath and eyed the two young officers who trailed after the colonel. Emotionally exhausted, he had to clamp his jaw against a huge laugh that struggled up in his throat. For just an instant there, the colonel had reminded him of a movie version of General Rommel strutting up and down before his tanks. But it wasn't a swagger stick the colonel had tucked under his arm. It was a folded newspaper. Opening it, the colonel flung it down on Andy's desk.

"RED PLAGUE SWEEPS NATION," the scare headline screamed. Andy's first glance caught such phrases as "alleged Russian plot" and "germ warfare" and "authorities hopelessly baffled."

Snatching the paper, Andy balled it and hurled it from him. "That'll help a lot," he growled hoarsely.

"Well, then, Sergeant." The colonel tried to relax his square face, but tension rode every weathered wrinkle and fear glinted behind the pale gray eyes. "So you finally recognize the gravity of the situation."

Andy's head snapped up, heated words searing towards his lips. Bettjean stepped quickly around the desk and laid a steady hand on his shoulder.

"Colonel," she said levelly, "you should know better than that."

A shocked young captain exploded, "Corporal. Maybe you'd better report to—"

"All right," Andy said sharply.

For a long moment he stared at his clenched fists. Then he exhaled slowly and, to the colonel, flatly and without apology, he said, "You'll have to excuse the people in this office if they overlook some of the G.I. niceties. We've been without sleep for two days, we're surviving on sandwiches and coffee, and we're fighting a war here that makes every other one look like a Sunday School picnic." He felt Bettjean's hand tighten reassuringly on his shoulder and he gave her a tired smile. Then he hunched forward and picked up a report. "So say what you came here to say and let us get back to work."

"Sergeant," the captain said, as if reading from a manual, "insubordination cannot be tolerated, even under emergency conditions. Your conduct here will be noted and—"

"Oh, good heavens!" Bettjean cried, her fingers biting into Andy's shoulder. "Do you have to come in here trying to throw your weight around when this man—"

"That's enough," the colonel snapped. "I had hoped that you two would co-operate, but...." He let the sentence trail off as he swelled up a bit with his own importance. "I have turned Washington upside down to get these two officers from the surgeon general's office. Sergeant. Corporal. You are relieved of your duties as of this moment. You will report to my office at once for suitable disciplinary action."

Bettjean sucked in a strained breath and her hand flew to her mouth. "But you can't—"

"Let's go," Andy said, pushing up from his chair. Ignoring the brass, he turned to her and brushed his lips across hers. "Let them sweat a while. Let 'em have the whole stinking business. Whatever they do to us, at least we can get some sleep."

"But you can't quit now," Bettjean protested. "These brass hats don't know from—"

"Corporal!" the colonel roared.

And from the door, an icy voice said, "Yes, colonel?"

The colonel and his captains wheeled, stared and saluted. "Oh, general," the colonel said. "I was just —"

"I know," the brigadier said, stepping into the room. "I've been listening to you. And I thought I suggested that everybody leave the sergeant and his staff alone."

"But, general, I—"

The general showed the colonel his back and motioned Andy into his chair. He glanced to Bettjean and a smile warmed his wedge face. "Corporal, were you speaking just then as a woman or as a soldier?"

Crimson erupted into Bettjean's face and her tight laugh said many things. She shrugged. "Both I guess."

The general waved her to a chair and, oblivious of the colonel, pulled up a chair for himself. The last trace of humor drained from his face as he leaned elbows on the desk. "Andy, this is even worse than we had feared."

Andy fumbled for a cigarette and Bettjean passed him a match. A captain opened his mouth to speak, but the colonel shushed him.

"I've just come from Intelligence," the general said. "We haven't had a report—nothing from our agents, from the Diplomatic Corps, from the civilian newspapermen—not a word from any Iron Curtain country for a day and half. Everybody's frantic. The last item we had—it was a coded message the Reds'd tried to censor—was an indication of something big in the works."

"A day and half ago," Andy mused. "Just about the time we knew we had an epidemic. And about the time they knew it."

"It could be just propaganda," Bettjean said hopefully, "proving that they could cripple us from within."

The general nodded. "Or it could be the softening up for an all-out effort. Every American base in the world is alerted and every serviceman is being issued live ammunition. If we're wrong, we've still got an epidemic and panic that could touch it off. If we're right ... well, we've got to know. What can you do?"

Andy dropped his haggard face into his hands. His voice came through muffled. "I can sit here and cry." For an eternity he sat there, futility piling on helplessness, aware of Bettjean's hand on his arm. He heard the colonel try to speak and sensed the general's movement that silenced him.

Suddenly he sat upright and slapped a palm down on the desk. "We'll find your answers, sir. All we ask is co-operation."

The general gave both Andy and Bettjean a long, sober look, then launched himself from the chair. Pivoting, he said, "Colonel, you and your captains will be stationed by that switchboard out there. For the duration of this emergency, you will take orders only from the sergeant and the corporal here."

"But, general," the colonel wailed, "a noncom? I'm assigned—"

The general snorted. "Insubordination cannot be tolerated—unless you find a two-star general to outrank me. Now, as I said before, let's get out of here and let these people work."

The brass exited wordlessly. Bettjean sighed noisily. Andy found his cigarette dead and lit another. He fancied a tiny lever in his brain and he shifted gears to direct his thinking back into the proper channel. Abruptly his fatigue began to lift. He picked up the new pile of reports Bettjean had brought in.

She move around the desk and sat, noting the phone book he had used, studying the names he had crossed off. "Did you learn anything?" she asked.

Andy coughed, trying to clear his raw throat. "It's crazy," he said. "From the Senate and House on down, I haven't found a single government worker sick."

"I found a few," she said. "Over in a Virginia hospital."

"But I did find," Andy said, flipping through pages of his own scrawl, "a society matron and her social secretary, a whole flock of office workers—business, not government—and new parents and newly engaged girls and...." He shrugged.

"Did you notice anything significant about those office workers?"

Andy nodded. "I was going to ask you the same, since I was just guessing. I hadn't had time to check it out."

"Well, I checked some. Practically none of my victims came from big offices, either business or industry. They were all out of one and two-girl offices or small businesses."

"That was my guess. And do you know that I didn't find a doctor, dentist or attorney?"

"Nor a single postal worker."

Andy tried to smile. "One thing we do know. It's not a communicable thing. Thank heaven for—"

He broke off as a cute blonde entered and put stacks of reports before both Andy and Bettjean. The girl hesitated, fidgeting, fingers to her teeth. Then, without speaking, she hurried out.

Andy stared at the top sheet and groaned. "This may be something. Half the adult population of Aspen, Colorado, is down."

"What?" Bettjean frowned over the report in her hands. "It's the same thing—only not quite as

severe—in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico."

"Writers?"

"Mostly. Some artists, too, and musicians. And poets are among the hard hit."

"This is insane," Andy muttered. "Doctors and dentists are fine—writers and poets are sick. Make sense out of that."

Bettijean held up a paper and managed a confused smile. "Here's a country doctor in Tennessee. He doesn't even know what it's all about. Nobody's sick in his valley."

"Somebody in our outer office is organized," Andy said, pulling at his cigarette. "Here're reports from a dozen military installations all lumped together."

"What does it show?"

"Black-out. By order of somebody higher up—no medical releases. Must mean they've got it." He scratched the growing stubble on his chin. "If this were a fifth column setup, wouldn't the armed forces be the first hit?"

"Sure," Bettijean brightened, then sobered. "Maybe not. The brass could keep it secret if an epidemic hit an army camp. And they could slap a control condition on any military area. But the panic will come from the general public."

"Here's another batch," Andy said. "Small college towns under twenty-five thousand population. All hard hit."

"Well, it's not split intellectually. Small colleges and small offices and writers get it. Doctors don't and dentists don't. But we can't tell who's got it on the military bases."

"And it's not geographical. Look, remember those two reports from Tennessee? That place where they voted on water bonds or something, everybody had it. But the country doctor in another section hadn't even heard of it." Andy could only shake his head.

Bettijean heaved herself up from the chair and trudged back to the outer office. She returned momentarily with a tray of food. Putting a paper cup of coffee and a sandwich in front of Andy, she sat down and nibbled at her snack like an exhausted chipmunk.

Andy banged a fist at his desk again. Coffee splashed over the rim of his cup onto the clutter of papers. "It's here," he said angrily. "It's here somewhere, but we can't find it."

"The answer?"

"Of course. What is it that girls in small offices do or eat or drink or wear that girls in large offices don't do or eat or drink or wear? What do writers and doctors do differently? Or poets and dentists? What are we missing? What—"

In the outer office a girl cried out. A body thumped against a desk, then a chair, then to the floor. Two girls screamed.

Andy bolted up from his chair. Racing to the door, he shouted back to Bettijean, "Get a staff doctor and a chemist from the lab."

It was the girl who had been so nervous in his office earlier. Now she lay in a pathetic little heap between her desk and chair, whimpering, shivering, eyes wide with horror. The other girls clustered at the hall door, plainly ready to stampede.

"It's not contagious," Andy growled. "Find some blankets or coats to cover her. And get a glass of water."

The other girls, glad for the excuse, dashed away. Andy scooped up the fallen girl and put her down gently on the close-jammed desks. He used a chair cushion for a pillow. By then the other girls were back with a blanket and the glass of water. He covered the girl, gave her a sip of water and heard somebody murmur, "Poor Janis."

"Now," Andy said brightly, "how's that, Janis?"

She mustered a smile, and breathed, "Better. I ... I was so scared. Fever and dizzy ... symptoms like the epidemic."

"Now you know there's nothing to be afraid of," Andy said, feeling suddenly and ridiculously like a

pill roller with a practiced bedside manner. "You know you may feel pretty miserable, but nobody's conked out with this stuff yet."

Janis breathed out and her taut body relaxed.

"Don't hurry," Andy said, "but I want you to tell me everything that you did—everything you ate or drank—in the last ... oh, twelve hours." He felt a pressure behind him and swiveled his head to see Bettijean standing there. He tried to smile.

"What time is it?" Janis asked weakly.

Andy glanced to a wall clock, then gave it a double take.

One of the girls said, "It's three o'clock in the morning." She edged nearer Andy, obviously eager to replace Janis as the center of attention. Andy ignored her.

"I ... I've been here since ... golly, yesterday morning at nine," Janis said. "I came to work as usual and...."

Slowly, haltingly, she recited the routine of a routine work day, then told about the quick snack that sufficed for supper and about staying on her phone and typewriter for another five hours. "It was about eleven when the relief crew came in."

"What did you do then?" Andy asked.

"I ... I took a break and...." Her ivory skin reddened, the color spreading into the roots of her fluffy curls, and she turned her face away from Andy. "And I had a sandwich and some coffee and got a little nap in the ladies' lounge and ... and that's all."

"And that's not all," Andy prompted. "What else?"

"Nothing," Janis said too quickly.

Andy shook his head. "Tell it all and maybe it'll help."

"But ... but...."

"Was it something against regulations?"

"I ... I don't know. I think...."

"I'll vouch for your job in this office."

"Well...." She seemed on the verge of tears and her pleading glance sought out Andy, then Bettijean, then her co-workers. Finally, resigned, she said, "I ... I wrote a letter to my mother."

Andy swallowed against his groan of disappointment. "And you told her about what we were doing here."

Janis nodded, and tears welled into her wide eyes.

"Did you mail it?"

"Y ... yes."

"You didn't use a government envelope to save a stamp?"

"Oh, no. I always carry a few stamps with me." She choked down a sob. "Did I do wrong?"

"No, I don't think so," Andy said, patting her shoulder. "There's certainly nothing secret about this epidemic. Now you just take it easy and—. Oh, here's a doctor now."

The doctor, a white-headed Air Force major, bustled into the room. A lab technician in a white smock was close behind. Andy could only shrug and indicate the girl.

Turning away, lighting a cigarette, he tried to focus on the tangle of thoughts that spun through his head. Doctors, writers, society matrons, office workers—Aspen, Taos and college towns—thousands of people sick—but none in that valley in Tennessee—and few government workers—just one girl in his office—and she was sicker and more frightened about a letter—and....

"Hey, wait!" Andy yelled.

Everyone in the room froze as Andy spun around, dashed to Bettijean's desk and yanked out the wide, top drawer. He pawed through it, straightened, then leaped across to the desk Janis had used. He snatched open drawer after drawer. In a bottom one he found her purse. Ripping it open, he dumped the contents on the desk and clawed through the pile until he found what he wanted.

Handing it to the lab technician, he said, "Get me a report. Fast."

The technician darted out.

Andy wheeled to Bettjean. "Get the brass in here. And call the general first." To the doctor, he said, "Give that girl the best of everything."

Then he ducked back to his own office and to the pile of reports. He was still poring over them when the general arrived. Half a dozen other brass hats, none of whom had been to bed, were close behind. The lab technician arrived a minute later. He shook his head as he handed his hastily scribbled report to Andy.

It was Bettjean who squeezed into the office and broke the brittle silence. "Andy, for heaven's sake, what is it?" Then she moved around the desk to stand behind him as he faced the officers.

"Have you got something?" the brigadier asked. "Some girl outside was babbling about writers and doctors, and dentists and college students, and little secretaries and big secretaries. Have you established a trend?"

Andy glanced at the lab report and his smile was as relieved as it was weary. "Our problem," he said, "was in figuring out what a writer does that a doctor doesn't—why girls from small offices were sick—and why senators and postal workers weren't—why college students caught the bug and people in a Tennessee community didn't.

"The lab report isn't complete. They haven't had time to isolate the poison and prescribe medication. But"—he held up a four-cent stamp—"here's the villain, gentlemen."

The big brass stood stunned and shocked. Mouths flapped open and eyes bugged at Andy, at the stamp.

Bettjean said, "Sure. College kids and engaged girls and new parents and especially writers and artists and poets—they'd all lick lots of stamps. Professional men have secretaries. Big offices have postage-meter machines. And government offices have free franking. And"—she threw her arms around the sergeant's neck—"Andy, you're wonderful."

"The old American ingenuity," the colonel said, reaching for Andy's phone. "I knew we could lick it. Now all we have to do—"

"At ease, colonel," the brigadier said sharply. He waited until the colonel had retreated, then addressed Andy. "It's your show. What do you suggest?"

"Get somebody—maybe even the President—on all radio and TV networks. Explain frankly about the four-centers and warn against licking any stamps. Then—"

He broke off as his phone rang. Answering, he listened for a moment, then hung up and said, "But before the big announcement, get somebody checking on the security clearances at whatever plant it is where they print stamps. This's a big deal. Somebody may've been planted years ago for this operation. It shouldn't be too hard.

"But there's no evidence it was a plot yet. Could be pure accident—some chemical in the stickum spoiled. Do they keep the stickum in barrels? Find out who had access. And ... oh, the phone call. That was the lab. The antidote's simple and the cure should be quick. They can phone or broadcast the medical information to doctors. The man on the phone said they could start emptying hospitals in six hours. And maybe we should release some propaganda. "United States whips mystery virus," or something like that. And we could send the Kremlin a stamp collection and.... Aw, you take it, sir. I'm pooped."

The general wheeled to fire a salvo of commands. Officers poured into the corridor. Only the brigadier remained, a puzzled frown crinkling his granite brow.

"But you said that postal workers weren't getting sick."

Andy chuckled. "That's right. Did you ever see a post office clerk lick a stamp? They always use a sponge."

The general looked to Bettjean, to Andy, to the stamp. He grinned and the grin became a rumbling laugh. "How would you two like a thirty-day furlough to rest up—or to get better acquainted?"

Bettjean squealed. Andy reached for her hand.

"And while you're gone," the general continued, "I'll see what strings I can pull. If I can't wangle you a couple of battlefield commissions, I'll zip you both through O.C.S. so fast you won't even have time to pin on the bars."

But neither Andy nor Bettjean had heard a word after the mention of furlough. Like a pair of puppy-lovers, they were sinking into the depths of each other's eyes.

And the general was still chuckling as he picked up the lone four-cent stamp in his left hand, made a gun of his right hand, and marched the stamp out of the office under guard.

THE END

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