

# The Purple Death

by Jack Barnette



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**Y**OUNG Doctor Bernard Grey spent many hours bending over his microscope, studying intently the bits of life that its lens made visible to his eye. Usually his lens was trained on a few of the spiral shaped microbes discovered in 1906 by the German zoologist Schaudinn. Schaudinn named these microbes "Spirocheta Pallida" and proved that they were the cause of that dread social disease that is the reward of sin.

Grey knew that Schaudinn had discovered these pale germs that darted and corkscrewed their way across their little world beneath his lens. He knew of the work of Paul Ehrlich. He had read of Ehrlich's eight years search for something to kill trypanosomes—those wriggling, finned devils, who, if one includes all branches of their family, are the cause of the dread sleeping sickness, nagana and other diseases. He knew of David Bruce's lifetime battle with the trypanosomes and with the *Glossina Morsitans* and *Glossina Palpalis*—tsetse fly carriers of nagana and sleeping sickness.

Grey idolized those men whose life history was recorded in Paul de Kruif's book "Microbe Hunters," which held a prominent place on his desk. He, like the brilliant Ehrlich, dreamed of conquering trypanosomes and the spirochetes that Schaudinn claimed were closely related to them. He had, in his few years of practice, administered many doses of 606, or salversan, which was the fruit of Ehrlich's years of research, and he knew that though salversan saved thousands from death, insanity or worse—it occasionally killed, seemingly without reason.

Ehrlich had searched for a dye that would be harmless to man but would kill the microbes that attack man. Grey, in this day of the ultra-violet ray, sought a light ray that would do the same thing.

"See, see," he would say to his friends. "If I could find a ray that would kill microbes without in any way affecting the human body—I could cure any germ disease. I could cut an artery, insert a curved quartz tube in such a manner that the blood would continue to flow through the artery by way of my tube. Then, while the heart pumped the blood through the tube, my ray—focused on the tube—would in a short time free the blood of microbes. Perhaps the ray would be powerful enough to pass through the body—X-rays do—then I need not cut at all. Just by exposing the patient to the ray, I could free his entire body of microbes.

Grey's laboratory was a maze of apparatus, a hodgepodge of all kinds of lamps and projectors. He tried all kinds of rays on the germ cultures on his microscope slides, and on inoculated white mice and guinea-pigs. He found that two frequencies in the ultraviolet range would kill a few of the weaker microbes, but the infinitely small, thin, curved tubercle bacilli, the spirochetes, the trypanosomes and other of the more hardy and malignant germs, were not in the least disturbed by these rays, and they killed Grey's mice and guinea-pigs.

Grey, however, was not discouraged. He had a good practice that supplied him with money. His rich friend, George Le Brun, an electrical wizard, who spent his time designing and building outlandish apparatus for Grey's experiments and getting hilariously drunk on the contents of a well stocked pre-prohibition cellar, aided and encouraged him.

Grey's day of days was coming—or perhaps it would be better to say his night of nights. Le Brun had put the finishing touches on an odd piece of apparatus intended to permit the variation of the vibratory frequency of the rays given off by a new tube which he had designed, and had that day

received from a company which specialized in making that kind of experimental apparatus. He worked until after midnight installing this new tube, which looked like an X-ray tube that had suffered from convulsions. Grey and Le Brun looked forward to the trial of the tube the next day. Wonderful things were expected of this new apparatus and, though they had often been disappointed, they were very anxious to test the new ray.

Now it chanced that the next day was Friday the thirteenth. All sensibly superstitious people know that Friday is an unlucky day and nothing new should be attempted or started on that day, and when it chances to be that Friday is also the thirteenth—then anything begun on that day is doubly certain to turn out wrong. Perhaps Le Brun and Grey were not sensibly superstitious or maybe they felt that the trial of this new tube was mere routine—just another attempt to find that elusive something for which they had already spent two years searching.

Friday the thirteenth dawned through a sullen, drizzling rain that was to last all day. Nine o'clock found them both in Grey's laboratory. Grey had arranged with a colleague to handle his practice for the next few days; had instructed his secretary that he was not, under any circumstances, to be disturbed and he and Le Brun had locked themselves in the little two-room building in the rear of his house. This building contained Grey's study and laboratory.

**B**OTH the doctor and Le Brun were visibly excited as they stepped into the lead-sheathed X-ray control booth in which the control boards for all the apparatus were located.

A switch clicked—a knob turned beneath Le Brun's fingers and, while Grey and Le Brun watched through the thick

window of the booth, a pale blue halo grew around the tube. Swiftly it changed to a deep purple haze that crept and writhed like smoke in a faint breeze. Le Brun cut off the current and the purple haze died out. Grey left the booth and placed a cage containing some white mice and a guinea-pig directly beneath the "Le Brun tube" where they would be fully exposed to the "El rays." (They had decided to name the tube after Le Brun, who designed it, and its rays after the first letter in his name. El.) Grey then returned to the protection of the control booth—they did not know what effect the rays of the Le Brun tube would have on animal life.

For two hours the sinister, creeping, purple haze crawled over the surface of the Le Brun tube and its rays poured down upon the guinea-pig and mice as they sat blinking at the strange light.

Grey and Le Brun carefully examined the mice and guinea-pig but they seemed to be absolutely unaffected by the El-rays. Satisfied that the rays were harmless to animal life, and therefore to themselves, they began to turn the rays upon germ cultures.

The day passed quickly and neither Le Brun nor Grey thought of lunch. Their ray was killing germs. The longer the exposure the more germs it killed. The blood of a guinea-pig which Grey had inoculated with tubercle bacilli some weeks before—showed only dead microbes after the guinea-pig had been exposed to the purple light for two hours. Watching germ cultures through the lens of their microscopes, Le Brun and Grey could see a sudden cessation of activity among the wee creatures. They would fade and die. Only the hardy, wriggling trypanosomes and their virulent cousins, the spirochetes, continued their activity, stubbornly refusing to pay any attention to the rays from the Le Brun tube.

Grey and Le Brun stopped to eat about half past seven that Friday evening, but

were back at work in an hour. It was about eleven o'clock, just as they were about to stop for a little well-earned rest, that Grey—watching a germ culture of spirochetes through his microscope—picked up a tiny ultra-violet ray projector and directed its beam, scarcely as large as a pencil, at the slide on the stage of his microscope.

As he watched through the microscope, the microbes and slide disappeared. Grey, tired and sleepy, annoyed because he thought his lens were out of focus, swore softly. A glance, however, showed that the slide was gone, that half of the stage and the substage condenser were also missing. Grey swore again—this time in sheer amazement. The ultra-violet ray projector in his hand was sending its invisible ray at the slate top of his laboratory table. Grey glanced at it and then pointed it at a tiny test tube of water. The test tube and its contents vanished. Grey pointed the projector at the wall and a black line marked the course of the beam as it moved across it. By this time Grey was far too amazed to swear.

Le Brun—at another table—was unaware of what was happening. Grey switched off the projector and stood thinking. He had used that ray projector a hundred times before and it had never caused any such extraordinary occurrences as these. Must have been the combination of the two rays. Perhaps it only made things invisible. He moved his hand through the space where the test tube had been, but touched nothing. He walked across to the wall and examined the gash that the beam of ultra-violet light had left in it—a clean cut through the composition wall board to the hollow tile of which the wall was made. Returning to the table, he placed a cage containing a white mouse on the slate top of the table; pointed the ultra-violet ray projector at the slate top, switched it on and moved it in an arc that crossed the cage and the head of the mouse.

The cage was cut in twain as if by an invisible knife. The head of the mouse vanished and its quivering body lay bleeding on one side of the cage. A few more passes of the little ultra-violet ray projector and both mouse and cage had vanished as if under the influence of a magician's wand.

Going to the control boom, Grey shut off the Le Brun tube, turning to watch it as the purple glow faded. Then he went into his study and brought out some white mice that were in there. He placed one of the mice on the slate table-top and turned the ultra-violet ray projector on it. The mouse scurried around, wrinkling his nose at his surroundings, quite unharmed by the ultra-violet rays. Shutting off the projector he put the Le Brun tube into operation again, then directed the rays of the little projector at the mouse. The mouse vanished instantly.

Gone were all thoughts of microbes. Grey was like a child with a new and wonderful toy.

"Look, George," he called to Le Brun, who was tinkering with some apparatus.

"In a minute—soon as I get this vibrator adjusted."

"Damn your vibrators and coils! Man, I have just made the greatest discovery of the century."

Le Brun dropped his tools and hastened to Grey. Under the rays from his tube and the little ultra-violet ray projector he watched Grey send more mice and a couple of guinea-pigs into nothingness. A steel bar was instantly severed, then by passing the ray along the bar, Grey caused it to follow the mice and guinea-pigs.

"Just think!" he said to Le Brun. "Imagine what a step forward this will be in surgery—in mechanics. I can amputate a limb instantly. Compared to this an oxy-acetylene cutting torch is as slow as a cold chisel and hammer would be compared to the torch."

“Imagine it in warfare—a beam of the El-rays from your tube and a beam of ultra-violet rays sending an army into eternity. An invisible knife that would cut airplanes or battleships in twain as if they were made of cheese. So far, slate and clay are the only things that I have found to be impervious to it.”

“It’s wonderful, amazing, unimaginable. But I can’t understand it, Grey. Why does the ultra-violet ray cut only when in combination with the El-rays? Where do the mice and guinea-pigs go? They leave no smoke, visible gas or any odor, so they do not burn. They simply vanish. It must instantaneously reduce them to atoms, perhaps to the protons and electrons of which the atom is composed according to Bohr.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Let’s go to bed. My head is in a whirl. To-morrow I must experiment to find how I may use this discovery for surgical operations.”

That night Grey dreamed of performing all kinds of surgical operations on the inside of the body without making any incisions. He awoke with a vague memory of using the two rays in the form of tiny beams to perform those dream operations. He understood how he could remove—say an appendix—by causing the two rays to cross each other just at the appendix, but he could not remember how, in his dreams, he had been able to see the rays inside the body, or how he had completed the operations after removing the offending organs.

Outside the sky was heavily overcast but the rain had stopped. It was half past eight and the housekeeper had breakfast ready. Grey woke Le Brun and they snatched a light breakfast and hurried across the yard to the laboratory.

**I**N the laboratory, a few more mice and guinea-pigs passed away beneath the combination of rays. A cat and a dog lost

their tails. Under the rays went metals, wood, liquids, paper, bakelite, everything that Grey could lay his hands on, and all, except a bit of concrete, articles made of clay and the slate of Grey’s table-top, vanished.

About noon the clouds broke away and the sun shone brightly. The first intimation that Grey and Le Brun had that all was not well was given by a strong draft of air and a crash of glass and wood as a part of the window and its framework disappeared and the rest fell into the laboratory.

Grey, failing to comprehend what was happening, rushed to the window. The sunlight streaming through the hole where the window had been made a large square of light on the concrete floor of the laboratory. Into this square of sunlight Grey rushed; tried to stop and turn, at the same time shrieking to Le Brun:

“Shut off the tube—ultra-violet rays in sunli—Ahhh!”

Even as Le Brun looked, Grey’s legs, bathed in sunlight from the knees down, vanished, and the upper portion of his body, turning away from the window under the impulse of the effort made as he stepped into the square of sunlight, fell into the sunlight that entered the window at an angle from above, and it, too, disappeared. Vanished—with the lower portion always going first, so that Le Brun’s last glimpse of his friend was of his head, face contorted in agony and amaze, falling toward the floor, yet vanishing before it touched. Hurling into nothingness, just as the mice and guinea-pigs had been, by the rays from the Le Brun tube and ultra-violet rays; ultra-violet rays from that greatest of all ultra-violet ray generators—the sun.

Rushing to the control booth, Le Brun shut off the tube that bore his name. Then, as full realization of the tragedy came to him, he fled from the laboratory.

Perhaps it would be best to say that he

started to flee from the laboratory, for as he rushed from the little building into the sunlight, he, too, was hurled into eternity even as Grey had been. Mandy, Grey's colored housekeeper, who was coming across the yard to call them to lunch, vowed ever afterward that:

"Mistuh Le Brun's ghost rushed out ob de do' and vanished right befo' mah naked eyes."

What Grey and Le Brun had failed to learn was that the rays from their new tube caused some intangible change in matter that made it susceptible to dissolution by the ultra-violet rays for an indefinite period, and not, as they believed, only while under the combined influence of both rays. Grey died because he failed to remember that the sun radiated ultra-violet rays.

Mandy's version of Le Brun's death gave the little building a reputation of being haunted. The experience of the hard-boiled but surprisingly superstitious policeman, who, while investigating the disappearance of Grey and Le Brun, found Grey's notebook and stepped into the sunlight to read it—only to have it vanish from between his fingers—served to add credence to wild rumors concerning the place. Further corroboration was given by the hair-raising experience of the four workmen hired by Grey's sister to remove the furnishings from the laboratory and study.

These men, filled with forebodings by the tales told about the laboratory, were rather shaky at first, but regained their confidence as they removed Grey's desk, couch, hooks, chairs and other effects from the study. Joking as they entered the laboratory, they removed the Le Brun tube apparatus—a mass of tubes, coils, meters and other electrical equipment, mounted on a

huge bakelite panel. This apparatus weighted well over a quarter of a ton and taxed the combined strength of the four of them to carry it out through the study they staggered with their unwieldy burden; out on the sidewalk and into the sunlight. Then a moment of awed silence—the mass of apparatus had disappeared, leaving them empty handed. The four men stood regarding the empty space between them for a second or two, then with one accord they turned and fled incontinently, humping into other pedestrians who turned to hurl curses after them.

This ended all attempts to remove the contents of the laboratory. The place was shunned except for the occasional venturesome fellow who, with his scalp tingling and with cold chills chasing each other up and down his spine, would creep into the study just to impress an awe-stricken audience with his bravery. Members of Mandy's highly emotional and superstitious race when passing this haunt of ghosts felt of the left hind-foot of a graveyard rabbit, or whatever charm against supernatural evils that their pockets contained, and felt strangely comforted.

The summer sun—shining into the laboratory through the gaping holes that had once been the windows in the east, south and west walls—guttered the walls opposite the windows, dissolved any pieces of apparatus that its rays chanced to fall on and, with the aid of its elemental allies, the wind and rain, soon turned Grey's once well-kept laboratory into a shambles and then into a ruin.

Heavy storms ripped the slates from the roof and today only a ruin of crumbling walls remains as a shunned and desolate monument to Grey and Le Brun and to their strange discovery.