

THE BLACK GRIPPE

By EDGAR WALLACE



DR. HEREFORD BEVAN was looking thoughtfully at a small Cape rabbit; the rabbit took not the slightest notice of Dr. Hereford Bevan. It crouched on a narrow bench, nibbling at a mess of crushed mealies and seemed perfectly content with its lot, in spite of the fact that the bench was situated in the experimental laboratory of the Jackson Institute of Tropical Medicines.

In the young principal's hand was a long porcelain rod with which from time to time he menaced the unconscious feeder, without, however, producing so much as a single shiver of apprehension. With his long ears pricked, his sensitive nostrils quivering—he was used to the man-smell of Hereford Bevan by now—and his big black eyes staring unwinkingly ahead, there was little in the appearance of the rabbit to suggest abnormal condition.

For the third time in a quarter of an hour Bevan raised the rod as though to strike the animal across the nose, and for the third time lowered the rod again. Then with a sigh he lifted the little beast by the ears and carried him, struggling and squirming, to a small hutch, put him in very gently and closed the wire-netted door.

He stood staring at the tiny inmate and fetched a long sigh. Then he left the laboratory and walked down to the staff study.

Stuart Gold, his assistant, sat at a big desk, pipe in mouth, checking some calculations. He looked up as Bevan came in.

"Well," he said, "what has Bunny done?"

"Bunny is feeding like a pig," said Bevan, irritably.

"No change?"

Bevan shook his head and looked at his watch.

"What time—" he began.

"The boat train was in ten minutes ago," said Stuart Gold. "I have been on the 'phone to Waterloo. He may be here at any minute now."

Bevan walked up and down the apartment, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, his chin on his breast.

Presently he walked to the window and looked out at the busy street. Motor-buses were rumbling past in an endless procession. The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians, for this was the busiest thoroughfare in the West End of London and it was the hour of the day when the offices were absorbing their slaves.

As he looked, a taxi drew up opposite the door and a man sprang out with all the agility of youth, though the iron-grey whiskers about his chin and the seamed red face placed him amongst the sixties.

"It is he!" cried Hereford Bevan, and dashed from the room to welcome the visitor, taking the port-manteau from his hand.

"It is awfully good of you to come, professor," he said, shaking the traveller warmly by the hand. "Ever since I telegraphed I have been scared sick for fear I brought you on a fool's errand."

"Nonsense," said the elder man, sharply; "I was coming to Europe anyway, and I merely advanced my date of sailing. I'd sooner come by the *Mauretania* than the slow packet by which I had booked. How are you? You are looking bright."

Hereford Bevan led the newcomer to the study and introduced him to Gold.

Professor Van der Bergh was one of those elderly men who never grow old. His blue eye was as clear as it has been on his twentieth birthday, his sensitive mouth was as ready to smile as ever it had been in the flower of his youth. A professor of pathology, a great anatomist and one of the foremost bacteriologists in the United States, Bevan's doubts and apprehensions were perhaps justified, though he was relieved in mind to discover that he had merely accelerated the great man's departure from New York, and was not wholly responsible for a trip which might end in disappointment.

"Now," said Van der Bergh, spreading his coat-tails and drawing his chair to the little fire, "just give me a second to light my pipe and tell me all your troubles."

He puffed away for a few seconds, blew out the match carefully and threw it into the grate, then

before Bevan could speak he said:

"I presume that the epidemic of January has scared you?"

Hereford Bevan nodded.

"Well," said the professor, reflectively, "I don't wonder. The 1918 epidemic was bad enough. I am not calling it influenza, because I think very few of us are satisfied to affix that wild label to a devastating disease which appeared in the most mysterious fashion, took its toll, and disappeared as rapidly and mysteriously."

He scratched his head, staring out of the window.

"I haven't heard any theory about that epidemic which has wholly satisfied me," he said. "People talk glibly of 'carriers,' of 'infection,' but who infected the wild tribes in the centre of Africa on the very day that whole communities of Eskimos were laid low in parts of the Arctic regions which were absolutely isolated from the rest of the world?"

Bevan shook his head.

"That is the mystery that I have never solved," he said, "and never hope to."

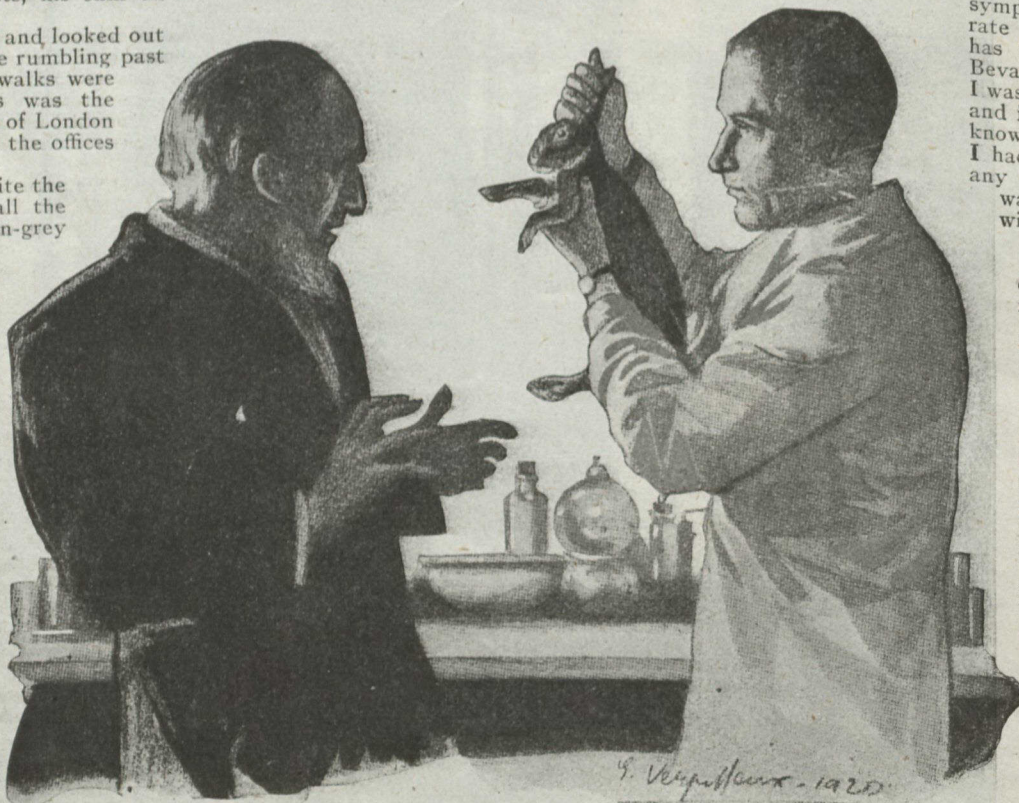
"I wouldn't say that," said the professor, shaking his head. "I am always hoping to get on the track of first causes, however baffling they may be. Anyway, I am not satisfied to describe that outbreak as influenza and it really does not matter what label we give it for the moment. You may as truly call it the 'Plague' or the 'Scourge.' Now let's get down to the epidemic of this year. I should like to compare notes with you because I have always found that the reports of this Institute are above suspicion. I suppose it has been suggested to you," he went on, "that the investigation of this particular disease is outside the province of tropical medicines?"

Stuart Gold laughed.

"We are reminded of that every day," he said dryly.

"Now just tell me what happened in January of this year," said the professor.

Dr. Bevan seated himself at the table, pulled open



"Do you notice anything," he asked.

"Good heavens!" said Van der Bergh; "he's blind!"

a drawer and took out a black-covered exercise book.

"I'll tell you briefly," he said, "and without attempting to produce statistics. On the 18th of January, as near three o'clock in the afternoon as makes no difference, the second manifestation of this disease attacked this country, and, so far as can be ascertained, the whole of the Continent."

The professor nodded.

"What were the symptoms?" he asked.

"People began to cry—that is to say, their eyes filled with water and they felt extremely uncomfortable for about a quarter of an hour. So far as I can

discover the crying period did not last much more than a quarter of an hour in some cases a much shorter time."

Again the professor nodded.

"That is what happened in New York," he said, "and this symptom was followed about six hours later by a slight rise of temperature, shivering, and a desire for sleep."

"Just the same sort of thing happened here," said Bevan, "and in the morning everybody was as well as they had been the previous morning, and the fact that it has occurred might have been overlooked but for the observation made in various hospitals. Gold and I were both stricken at the same time. We both took blood and succeeded in isolating the germs."

The professor jumped up.

"Then you are the only people who have it," he said, "nobody else in the world seems to have taken that precaution."

Stuart Gold lifted a big, bell-shaped glass cover from a microscope, took from a locked case a thin microscopic slide and inserted it in the holder. He adjusted the lens, switched on a shaded light behind the instrument, and beckoned the professor forward.

"Here it is, sir," he said.

Professor Van der Bergh glued his eye to the instrument and looked for a long time.

"Perfect," he said. "I have never seen this fellow before. It looks rather like a trypanosome."

"That's what I told Bevan," said Stuart Gold.

The professor was still looking.

"It is like and it is unlike," he said. "Of course, it is absurd to suggest that you've all had an attack of sleeping sickness, which you undoubtedly would have had if this had been a trypanosome, but surely this bug is a new one to me!"

He walked back to his chair, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe.

"What did you do?"

"I made a culture," said Bevan, "and infected six South African rabbits. In an hour they developed the first symptoms. Their eyes watered for the prescribed time, their temperature rose six hours later, and in the morning they were all well."

"Why South African rabbits?" asked Van der Berg, curiously.

"Because they develop secondary symptoms of any disease at twice the rate of a human being—at least that has been my experience," explained Bevan. "I found it by accident whilst I was in Grahamstown, in South Africa, and it has been a very useful piece of knowledge to me. When I wired to you I had no idea there were going to be any further developments. I merely wanted to make you acquainted with the bug—"

The professor looked up sharply. "Have there been further developments?" he asked, and Bevan nodded.

"Five days ago," he said, speaking slowly, "the second symptoms appeared. I will show you."

HE LED the way back to the laboratory, went to the little hutch and lifted the twisting, struggling rabbit to the bench under a blaze of electric light. The professor felt the animal gingerly.

"He has no temperature," he said, "and looks perfectly normal. What is the matter with him?"

Bevan lifted the little beast and held his head toward the light.

"Do you notice anything?" he asked.

"Good heavens!" said Van der Bergh, "he's blind!"

Bevan nodded.

"He's been blind for five days," he said.

"But—" Van der Bergh stared at him. "Do you mean—"

Bevan nodded.

"I mean that when the secondary symptoms come, and it should come in a fortnight from to-day—"

He stopped.

He had replaced the animal upon the bench and had put out his hand to stroke his ears when suddenly the rabbit groped back from him. Again he reached out his hand and again the animal made a frantic attempt to escape.

"He sees now," said the professor.

"Wait," said Bevan.

He took down a board to which a paper was pinned, looked at his watch and jotted a note.

"Thank God for that," he said; "the blindness

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