

The Free Press' Short Story

GERM PROOF

By ALLISON IND

A SUDDEN wave of apprehension and horror rendered Bugs Wells inanimate for one long instant; then he leaped. He was too late.

He had been standing in the main bacteriology laboratory of Centre Medical College, listening intently so that he should not miss a single word coming from the lips of one of science's greatest bacteriologists, Doctor Hartley Rock-Nestor, his chief. Unusually Bugs' eyes had flashed now and then in the direction of the new Russian transfer student, Revelsky. Revelsky, always a slovenly worker, had been careless to-day.

To-day, of all days, the class was working with the deadly germs of anthrax, or cattle blacking.

"You know, Wells, lad, they're all wrong on their guess about this new sickle fever," Doctor Rock-Nestor was saying. The dean of laboratory workers was talking, he who had spent most of his life discovering death-producing germs, and the rest of it in developing serums by which doctors could beat germs at their own deadly work.

"Sickle fever's new, and it's pumking," he went on. "And because it's hit the country so suddenly, we've gone a bit panicky."

Bugs nodded. What is more terrifying than a disease that emerges out of the darkness and strikes men down before they recognize it or have a chance to fight back?

"Yes," he agreed. "That and the fact that the patient looks so bad with those queer sickle-shaped marks all over the body—high fever and alternate periods of coma and delirium."

Bugs was grave. This sudden onset of sickle fever, as mysterious and demoralizing as the recent outbreak of sleeping sickness, was making whole communities nervous, was filling emergency hospital wards and, alas, too frequently was taking the father from his tasks forever, the mother from her home and the child from his crib. Household pets, too, were its victims. No serums had been developed yet to protect anyone from the terrible disease.

In the realm of science, workers new and veteran peered through their microscopes, scanned rows of glass test tubes in which were growing countless millions of germs, and studied with knitted brows men and beasts ill with the disease. Laboratory workers, too, became ill. Some died, their bodies showing the terrifying mark of the purple sickle.

"I tell you we are not going to find the organism by trying to grow it in test tubes," declared Doctor Rock-Nestor. "It is spread from insect to man, not from man to man. We must find the insect!"

Bugs cast another quick glance at Revelsky. How many times had he been shown the proper laboratory method of working with bacteria! The fellow simply would not learn!

"I understand that your old friend, Doctor Petroch, is going to try to prove before the Bacteriology Association convention here next week that the organism is a tiny rod-shaped germ," he said nervously.

"He's wrong!" snapped Doctor Rock-Nestor. "Petroch and I have engaged in many scientific battles. Sometimes he's won, sometimes I have, but this time I shall stake my reputation on my conviction."

"At the convention?" demanded Bugs. He had not heard of this. The very thought of that gathering of the nation's foremost bacteriologists brought a stab of pain to Bugs. Endless days and nights of painstaking research in the laboratory to prove his point regarding the typhoid bacillus; then something had gone wrong with the experiment. Frankly he had worked whatever was wrong stayed wrong—and thoughts of the Shilling Research Fellowship went glimmering in a sickening haze of defeat. No more funds. Already he was in debt. He could not remain in school longer. He blinked his serious gray eyes rapidly. His lips tightened.

Suddenly his breath stopped. "Revelsky!" Bugs leaped, but the damage was done.

Revelsky was staggering backward and his eyes fascinated by a bright focus in the end of which was buried deep in his thumb. The forceps had been used to handle parts of glass slides on which living germs were placed for examination under the microscope.

"Was that forceps contaminated with anthrax?" demanded Bugs.

Dully Revelsky stared, then dully he nodded. Against all rules he had failed to sterilize the instrument after using it. Now it was buried in his thumb.

Bugs seized Revelsky's wrist. A quick motion and the forceps was extracted. "Make it bleed!" barked Doctor Rock-Nestor. "Come. The hospital. They must have protective serum there to kill the anthrax germs he has introduced into his own blood stream. Come!"

Doctor Rock-Nestor's big car flew over the pavement, starting, always starting, before him, sat Revelsky, holding the infected thumb straight out.

"The serum was his one hope, wasn't it?" Yes, the University hospital had a fresh stock. The quick pain of a hypodermic needle.

"You go back to the laboratory. I'll stay," was Doctor Rock-Nestor's order. Bugs walked back with her nerves tender and jumpy.

The class had been dismissed by the Junior assistant and the laboratory was in exact order except for Revelsky's instruments and apparatus. Methodically sterilizing every article except the growing cultures of anthrax, Bugs stowed the articles. Through the thin glass Petri dish in which organisms were grown by means of a special, transparent jellylike food, Bugs stared at the thin filamentous colonies of living germs.

He shook his head, for scattered through out these filamentous growths were others—colonies that did not belong there. Revelsky's careless workmanship had allowed contaminations to slip in—wads growing with the grain, Unclean dishes or instruments might do that.

That night Bugs worked late in the laboratory, trying as ever to solve the puzzle of his persistent experiment failure. Too late he worked without anything to eat, for he went home with that old pain gnawing in his stomach. He was not feeding himself well enough, that was all.

The next day he was too dazed to report for work. That day he heard of Revelsky. Old Hollis, the dispenser, told him.

"He's developed sickle fever!"

A lightning-like thrill shot through Bugs.

Bugs could not get his mind off Revelsky. Ever since that evening he went to see him. The picture was not pleasant. Doctor Rock-Nestor, haggard and weary, was constantly at the Russian's side. Bugs went back to the laboratory. Poor Revelsky! The serum had protected him against the anthrax in his own Petri dish; but not the sickle fever.

Anthrax in the dish—sickle fever—anthrax—sickle fever—The thought crashed through his mind. He leaped up, his pulse racing. Of course! From the refrigerator storage shelf he seized Revelsky's contaminated anthrax Petri dish. Marks remained in the jelly where Revelsky's instruments had prodded the anthrax colony to obtain germs for study.

The instrument, under Revelsky's expert guidance, had pushed right on through the anthrax colony into another colony, so thin and waterlike that he never would have seen it without special light. Whatever foreign germ was growing there had gotten on his instrument along with the anthrax. Probably both kinds of germs were on that forceps!

Now began to operate that uncompromising drive for truth that made Bugs stand out as one of the most promising of all Rock-Nestor's proteges. Nothing could stop him.

Swiftly he worked. His head ached. He must go home. In the hall he met Hollis. The old man was drooping.

"Why, Hollis! Why are you here so late?" Bugs asked anxiously.

The old man shook his head slowly. "It's King—you know—my dog," he muttered sadly. "Sickle fever."

"You mean—dead?"

Hollis nodded, blinking fast. The dog had been his only companion.

"Where is he?"

Bugs patted the old dispenser's hand kindly; then turned to go. He raced off upstairs.

All the rest of the night he worked. Dawn found him sure, absolutely sure! From the dog dead of sickle fever Bugs had recovered certain germs—tiny spheres, cocci, bacteriologists called them—that moved furiously exactly as had those from Revelsky's culture. Certain other tests he would have to perform before science would accept his claims, but in his own heart he was sure. He had discovered the true germ of the baffling and dreaded sickle fever! That was one of the first steps in controlling any

disease, identifying the germ that caused it.

Now he must make a preventive serum. Something that could be given folk so that they would be protected against the disease. Just like the preventive for smallpox, diphtheria, typhoid fever! Sure. That was the next step. End dreadful epidemics before they got started.

Bugs snatched three hours' sleep on the hard laboratory floor; then at it again. He knew the method. He had made smallpox vaccine. All day he worked, and all that night, too.

Yes, Petroch was wrong; but just as surely as Bugs had proved him wrong he proved his beloved Doctor Rock-Nestor wrong. Rock-Nestor was going to stake his reputation on his belief that the bite of infected insects was responsible for the disease in man. Bugs had found it different. Right here on the eve of his retirement from a career as beneficial to suffering humanity as it had been eventful and brilliant, Doctor Rock-Nestor was to be humiliated before an association of which he had once been president, by a young upstart, a student.

He was to be disproved instead of supported by the same chap he had loaned money to in pinched times, and had taken into his home, his laboratory, and in his gruff, but deeply sincere way, had looked on as a son.

Bugs buried his head in his hands. He had completed the sort of report that unquestionably would land any young worker the Shilling Fellowship. It would land it for him, and several years of advanced work, all expenses paid, would be his. He had done the work honestly. The results were in his hands, but that was not all—so was Doctor Rock-Nestor's reputation.

Wearily Bugs got up. Still more wearily he went home. He did not eat. He barely could sleep.

As he went back to the laboratory in the pale morning light, his face was gray and grim. Bugs was going to place Revelsky's Petri dish on Doctor Rock-Nestor's work table. The old scientist was sure to investigate these colonies. Slowly he went across the hall. His key let him into the private laboratory of Doctor Rock-Nestor. He placed the Petri dish on the spotless work table and returned to his own laboratory.

The fire of research that had burned within him would not be quenched. Slowly, but with increasing energy, as the fire burned brighter again, he went to work to make a vaccine for sickle fever.

The fire leaped up, now. He ignored all else, particularly the elaborate preparations being made to receive the convention. Deliberately he remained away from Doctor Rock-Nestor's laboratory.

The convention met, its hundreds of bacteriologists from all over the country listening to reports, criticizing, approving, refusing. Bugs did not attend the sessions. He felt that he could not.

He had another reason, though. He felt sick; really sick. It was the first afternoon of the convention that he sat languidly staring at the test tubes in which he had prepared his vaccine. He felt sure it was good; but to prove it he would have to test it on an animal exposed to the disease. If, after receiving a portion of the preventive, then exposed to the disease, the animal refused to become sick he would know it was all right. Doctors could administer it.

His head ached so. His bones ached. He had a shooting pain up the back of his neck. "I won't be down to-morrow," was all Bugs said to old Hollis when he left the laboratory that evening, nor did he report the next day. He felt too weak. He felt better in bed—if only—the bed would remain still.

To-day was the day Doctor Rock-Nestor would be telling the convention all about the real causes of those purple sickles on the skin on his own arm they were. See them there? That was queer, too. Some one must have put them there. It got too dark to see them. It was night.

The next day he saw them, though. Queer! Silly things. Why look at them? Just lie back in the funny bed, cool—quiet.

Really it was not quiet now. He could hear voices. Doctor Rock-Nestor was telling Petroch and others about sickle fever. Yes, sir. Telling all about it. Right there beside his silly, flailing bed.

Why did not Rock-Nestor leave him alone? Pinching his arm like that

everyone was gone. It was dark again. Daylight came. Bugs' eyes blinked. The bed was quiet. The light was strong.

"Why—Doctor Rock-Nestor. You are here?" Bugs muttered.

The old scientist whirled on him. "Two other men were there. They crowded close."

"Look!" cried Doctor Rock-Nestor. "It's rational again. Getting better every second!" barked one of the others.

"It's proven!" thundered Doctor Rock-Nestor. "The vaccine against sickle fever is found. Do you hear, Petroch? It not only is protective, but actually kills the already established infection in humans!"

The stocky individual gripped Rock-Nestor's lean hands. "You win, sir. Proud to acknowledge it. You've saved him. Now go save others."

Once more Bugs had failed. If he had not been taken sick, at least he might have developed the vaccine completely.

The expression of supreme joy on Doctor Rock-Nestor's face fascinated him. In spite of himself, Bugs smiled feebly.

Petroch, splendid loser, noted the look, too. "Rock-Nestor," he said. "I've heard it said that you'd rather have one of your students succeed than to succeed yourself. I can believe that now."

"Tosh!" barked the master. "Good work is good work. And who's to say that he didn't do a fine job in finding the germ and developing the vaccine?"

Bugs blinked stupidly. Were they talking about him? "I f-f-found it—?"

"Certainly, lad. Who else? Hollis told us you were sick. We came and found you here." He shook his head, greatly moved by his own success.

"That back in your laboratory, we found that vaccine you'd been making. I read your notes, lad. I found the whole story. You'd found that germ, but you'd gone farther. You'd developed a vaccine!"

"B-but the vaccine never has been tested. The convention never would accept it as proved," he whispered.

Rock-Nestor glowered. "Is that what you snappet? It's your own vaccine. And I used it to save your life. You were your own test animal. And your germ proof now. That's proof, isn't it, young man?"

Bugs was laughing silently now. Doctor Petroch approached. "You wouldn't care to work in my laboratory when you're recovered, would you?"

"Get on with your, sir!" growled Rock-Nestor. "The Shilling fellow works right here in my own laboratory." The scientist fixed Bugs with his eagle eyes.

"Don't let it be cracked."

"A-a-address correct, sir," acknowledged Bugs.

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SLATS' DIARY

OLIVER M. WARRIS
Sunday: The m. newspaper and 300 as 44 million paper rode on trains the 1st 1/2 of 19 & 27 & not I got kill. As I figure it if they had of rode on airplanes 200 million of them wood of tride to nock down a mountain. & failed to get away with it.

Monday: I took Jane home from church last evening & sed to her do she ever think seriously of getting married. She sed she have & disided in the negative. So now I wander do that mean ya or nia? I sat Ellsters & he were to dum to no.

Tuesday: Ma sed she dosent like to see yung paper sed so doot together in office and etc. Pa replide they dont sat as doot as they sat to in a hammock he sat to no. Ma look like she wanted to say sum thing more. But she held her tung. For onct.

Wednesday: A new kid showed up at school this a.m. & when the teacher sat him his name he sed it are Bain. She sed he him are that all, he sed no the rest of it is Muel. All the kids snickered & left out loud & etc. With I suppose they shudent of as the teacher was to blame.

Thursday: Jake visited over the weak end out at his uncles in the country. & when his unkel sed that cow witch he pointed at fell in a well 100 ft. deep when she were a little caff. Jake wanted to no if it kill her. Jake told me his unkel sed it didden & seemed to think it were a dum queschen.

Friday: Mistress Gillem cum over to are house & was a complaining about her husband a talking in his sleep & she talked nikel fast fallen about it. Well sed nikel then wheif do ya expect him to talk it look like she thot that a dirty crack but the indtent past peccerley.

Saturday I were a usher at the sixt grade inter tament last evening & when Ellsters old made ant cum in I patly sed her how fur down do she wish I red. She flang me a skornie look & sed all the way down, sturny. I dont think she like me none to well no bow as I onct slung a muddy rock & hit a pink garment of hern on the close line. What good is it to be sorrie.

THE THOUGHTFUL CHILD

Uncle George had jfath died, and his small nephew had watched the funeral leave the house.

When he went to bed that night he wouldn't say his prayers. His mother asked why, and he explained: "Well, you see, I don't think I'll bother God to-night. He'll be so busy unpacking Uncle George."

Orange Pekoe Blend

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Hollywood Beauty Has Double Escort



From the (above) photograph it is difficult to figure which of the two very presentable young men are escorting lovely Dorothy Lamour to the premiere showing of "Hurricane" at Hollywood. If "Casanova" McCarthy is escorting Miss Lamour then we can readily see why Edgar Bergen is along, for without him the dummy would be speechless. However, if Mr. Bergen is doing the honors, then apparently McCarthy is being a "gooseberry." Anyway you look at it, both the gentlemen are lucky indeed.

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