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# THE PURPLE LIGHT



**F**OR five years I had loved Lois Howard. Mine was a quiet, sincere love that never found expression in words, for I, a mere inventor, did not pretend to be a sheik. We spent many delightful evenings together and discussed almost every conceivable subject, except that of love. So I should not have been surprised when Lois eloped with John Leighton, an impetuous, romantic young fellow who had been my chum since boyhood days.

But when the news came to me, I felt so intensely jealous that it almost drove me insane. In the solitude of my room, I walked about for hours, cursing and fighting with myself.

As days passed, I learned to take a sane view of the affair. After all, I could not blame Lois, nor would I be justified in condemning Leighton. My love for Lois was so deep that, after the first hours of blind anger, I felt truly glad that she had married my friend, for I knew she would be far happier with him than she could have been with me. When, a month later, I received an invitation to visit the couple in their new home, I felt sufficiently calm to accept.

The home was one of those ideal places seldom found outside of dreamland—a beautiful cottage, set in the midst of a large, luxurious garden with rolling lawns. In the rear was a small grove of trees. The house was furnished in the elegant style that Leighton's wealth permitted, but every corner of it was

homelike. In short, it was the sort of home I had told myself that Lois and I would occupy some day.

As I watched Lois moving about the house and observed the affection she displayed for her husband, my fine feelings commenced to disappear. The blind madness of those first few hours returned with doubled force. It wasn't right for Leighton—damn the traitor!—to enjoy these things which should have been mine. He had deliberately taken from me the one thing that would have made life bearable for me: marriage to Lois. I looked at Leighton and saw a cynical devil where before I had seen a friend.

I disguised my feelings, and neither Leighton nor his wife suspected the true state of my emotions. It was an evening of soul-tormenting agony for me, and I was glad when it was late enough for me to leave.

I returned to my house, where an ignorant servant was my only companion. The unattractive rooms, foul-smelling with chemicals that I had used in experiments, were a contrast to the home I had just visited.

I did not sleep that night—nor any succeeding night during the following week. I could not concentrate on work for even a few minutes, although I had almost completed a mechanical invention that gave promise of enormous royalties, and in spite of the fact that I had been engaged in conducting chemical experiments that the scientific world awaited with interest.

Many times I tried to read, but, whether I took a light novel or a technical treatise, I threw the book aside after a minute. I tried to find recreation in hunting, but the cold steel of my rifle aroused such thoughts of murder that I did not trust myself. I took long walks, but talked to myself so incessantly and beat my hands so nervously that people whispered to their neighbors, "He has gone crazy."

My face became drawn. Dark circles formed under my eyes, which had acquired a strained, evil expression. My patient servant endured harshness and unreasonableness without complaint. I refused to see any callers. Mail remained unopened, and the telephone rang unanswered.

I lost interest in everything—except revenge. Finally, I sat down and, with paper and pencil, planned various forms of punishment. I did not want to kill Leighton, but intended to devise a plan that would produce the maximum of mental torture and terror.

Some plans were rejected as too common and obvious to suit the scientific side of my nature. Others involved a possibility of detection, which I wanted to be certain of avoiding. Still others were ingenious, but too difficult to carry out.

Eventually, I decided on a plan that pleased me. A load seemed to lift from my mind. For the first time in many brain-racking days, I experienced a sensation of pleasure. Smiling, I sketched a program for the carrying out of my idea.

That day, I invited Leighton to visit me on Sunday, explaining that I wanted to tell him about a new discovery. There was nothing unusual about this, for I always had described freely to him experiments that I would not have confided to any other living being.

AS SOON as Leighton stepped inside my front door, he stepped back in amazement.

"You look terrible, Joe!" he exclaimed.

For a moment, I was disconcerted by the sympathy evident in his voice.

"You look haggard—all worn out."

"Oh, it's nothing," I said, with a wave of the hand. "Just the result of a little night work, and maybe concentrating a little harder than usual. But listen! You would be willing to forget sleep if you were as close as I am to the most remarkable invention of ages! In fact, I have already perfected it, and there are just a few details to finish. Sit down, Leighton, and I'll tell you about it."

Knowing that I am ordinarily very conservative in all my statements, John Leighton watched me with interest. Always he had been the first to hear about my discoveries, and now it was apparent that he expected something tremendously great.

"I have been devoting my attention to electricity," I started. "After considerable research and countless experiments, I have conceived something that has been in the back of my mind since I was a boy. And it works—it works! Its usefulness will be great, and its power for evil will be next to that of the devil himself."

"Tell me what it is," Leighton exclaimed impatiently, his curiosity thoroughly aroused.

"I have developed a light—it happens to be purple—which will automatically dissolve anything on which it is turned."

I almost whispered the words.

Leighton, never quick-witted, did not seem to understand. He stared at me.

I repeated the statement, and added, "The power of the light is so great that it will destroy any metal,

body, wood—anything on which it is turned. I suppose I should say that it burns these objects, but the heat is so far beyond any that has formerly been obtained that the word 'heat' gives an exceedingly poor conception of the strength of the purple light. I am proud to say that it is so far beyond any means of destruction yet conceived by man, that there are no words in our language to describe its power properly."

"Why, why, think of the harm it could do!" my ex-friend blurted, understanding at last.

"At present, it is rather unwieldy," I continued, as if I had not been interrupted. "This is necessary, now, because production of the light involves certain chemical reactions at the identical moment when electrical phenomena occur. This must be aided by mechanical means. The resulting contraption occupies almost half my laboratory. But there is nothing to prevent my making the machine compact and portable to the extent that it may be operated anywhere where electricity is obtainable."

"With a few of those machines," Leighton mused, his mind dwelling on the dangerous features, "a handful of men could defy the world. If another war should start, and each side were to obtain the secret of your machine, whole battle lines would be wiped out."

"Not yet," I cautioned. "The machine is still in experimental stages. It will not destroy at a distance greater than six feet, and the surface it can cover is small. However, I have the principles right, and it is just a matter of hours before I can give the light a scope of many miles."

"You mean to say it would be possible to set up the machine a mile from a city and destroy that city in a few hours?" he questioned.

"Not in a few hours, but in less time than it takes me to say this."

"My God! But surely you are joking. That would be impossible. I grant that you may have produced an ultra-powerful light, but one such as you describe would be—well, just impossible."

"Wait!" I said quietly.

I stepped into the laboratory, and a minute later walked out with a few ashes on a piece of transparent glass.

"Yesterday at this time," I explained while Leighton examined the ashes, "that which you see on the glass was a living, breathing animal—a cat. I tied it a foot from the purple light. For an instant, I allowed the light to play on the cat's tail. In that instant, there was a queer puff much like an electrical spark explosion and—the cat was no more! The mere playing of the light on a portion of the animal's tail was sufficient to break up the component parts of its body."

The man I hated had been turning whiter and whiter. Now he handed me the glass weakly and sank back into a chair. He covered his face with his hands and shivered.

As I stood and watched Leighton scornfully, my mind reverted to boyhood incidents. There arose a picture of the time when Johnnie Leighton had fainted at the sight of blood coming from a wound in a stranger's leg. Once, young Johnnie had run screaming from the classroom when our teacher read a gruesome description of a murder. These and other incidents had earned for him the nickname "Sissy," and I had taken upon myself the duty of protecting him. From this had grown our friendship.

Leighton, a man now, but as feminine and excitable as ever, looked up.

"Joe, I suppose I ought to congratulate you, but, somehow, I can't. The whole thing is too gruesome. I—I just want to get out—and think about it."

"You'll come back tomorrow night?"

"Yes," my enemy answered, willing to promise anything in order to get away.

I stood at the front window and watched Leighton leave. He walked down the path toward the street. Several times he stopped, shook his head and seemed about to return. Arriving at the street, he sat on the curb, with his hands over his eyes, for several minutes. I knew that his mind was picturing horrible things that my invention would be capable of accomplishing.

WHEN Leighton called the following evening, my left arm had a handkerchief bandage around it. He immediately expressed concern about this, and wanted to know the nature of my injury.

Jerking off the handkerchief, I bared a horrible burnt spot, several inches square.

Leighton drew in his breath sharply, and tears started to his eyes.

"It's nothing!" I exclaimed laughingly. "The soreness is worth what it taught me. First, I have learned that my purple light does not dissolve a chemically-treated glass of special manufacture. Second, I have learned that, under certain circumstances, it can reflect its power dangerously. You see, this burn was caused by a mere reflection. The portion of heat reflected was almost nothing, so that explains why I am alive today."

I waited for my listener to answer. He had fainted! A little of the proper chemicals placed below his nose quickly revived him.

"Forgive me, Joe," he said weakly, "but you know how I am. Can't stand anything like that. But I must train myself to be different. Go ahead—tell me more about it. I promise you I won't make a fool of myself."

"Sorry I frightened you," I apologized. "There isn't much more to tell. I have added, already, a dozen

improvements, and the machine is 50 per cent better. I'll show you what I did today."

I stepped into my laboratory and returned with a mass of metal.

"This metal," I explained, "consists of twelve silver dollars, melted. I arranged for a streak of the light to shoot a few feet. Then I stood above the machine and dropped these dollars. The time during which they passed through the streak of light—considerably less than a hundredth of an inch in width—was sufficient to melt them beyond recognition. The machine was operating under very limited capacity, which explains why the silver was not entirely destroyed. Had I used every feature, the twelve silver dollars would have become so many specks of ash."

"That's certainly remarkable," Leighton managed to say. "I wouldn't believe all this if I didn't see it with my own eyes. How do you explain it?"

"There's no use trying to explain it," I said frankly. "You wouldn't understand. But why is it so remarkable? Aren't you familiar with the almost incredible power of a few grains of radium? Don't you know how quickly a man dies in an electric chair, with comparatively little indication of burning? Don't you know of several chemicals that eat through metals and destroy human skins? I have taken some features of each, and have added devices of my own, the results of years of atomic research. There is nothing miraculous about it. I have merely succeeded in developing an ultra-powerful acid-light, which produces something beyond our accepted conceptions of heat."

"You are never surprised about anything," Leighton said, trying to laugh. "I believe that if you discovered an artificial way of making gold you would be as calm as an iceberg. But, seriously, Joe, I've been thinking about this thing of yours—

this purple light. I really think that you ought to smash up the thing at once. It might do some good—though I don't see how—but it's certain to result in a lot of wholesale killing and vandalism when it falls into the hands of the wrong people. You owe it to the world to forget about it. It's—it's diabolical, and mere Christian decency requires that you destroy it."

I laughed at the nervous man's fears, and switched the conversation to other subjects.

Just before Leighton departed, I invited him to step into my laboratory and view my invention. He refused, shuddering, as I knew he would. I extracted from him a promise that he would call again on Sunday.

When Leighton called on the following Sabbath, he was as much of a wreck as I had been. His eyes were bloodshot with sleeplessness, and his expression indicated the excessive worrying to which he was so susceptible.

As soon as he stepped inside, the man pleaded, "I must ask you not to mention that thing of yours—the light. I can't bear to think about the damned thing!"

"All right," I agreed readily enough.

We went out into the garden, and sat on a bench, discussing old times.

Suddenly, Leighton said, "Joe, I need some nerve, and I'll never have it as long as I permit-myself to be a coward. I'm ashamed of myself for asking you to say nothing about your wonderful invention. Tell me all about it—about what you've done with it since I saw you last."

"Step inside and I'll show you an interesting experiment," I invited.

The man on whom I had sworn revenge waited in the library while I spent five minutes in the laboratory.

"I have accomplished what I told you I could do," I explained when I returned. "I have succeeded in focusing the purple light accurately and

in casting it great distances. Step over here and watch the purple light have its effect on Pan's Tombstone. You can watch from this window while I go into the laboratory and operate the machine."

Pan's Tombstone was a rock, weighing several tons, that stuck up in an empty field a half-mile away.

Less than five minutes after I returned to the laboratory there was a deafening roar and Pan's Tombstone flew into a thousand pieces.

I stepped back into the library, and found Leighton, breathing heavily, clutching the walls for support.

"I played the light less than a thousandth of a second, and not at full force," I remarked casually. "Otherwise the rock would have crumbled into nothing. I wanted to make it interesting for you."

Color slowly returning to his face, Leighton rushed up to me and shook me.

"Joe!" he screamed. "You must, you must destroy that thing! Tell me you will!"

"Of course not," I said quietly.

Without looking at me again, Leighton grabbed his hat and rushed out, running down the path as if the devil were after him.

**DURING** all that week I was happy. My plans had worked perfectly, and now I was ready. Yes, ready for the revenge that would be worthy of a great scientist! My hate had not lessened in the least, and I looked forward to the occasion with anticipations that thrilled me.

On the following Sunday night, I telephoned to John Leighton.

"Yes!" he snapped, his voice far from cordial.

"I want you to come over this evening."

"Not for a million dollars! You're welcome to come over here, Joe, but I simply can't stand being near that

purple light of yours, and seeing the things it does."

"Oh, forget it!" I laughed. "If that's the trouble, I promise faithfully that I won't mention it, or show you any of its handiwork."

"No, I'm sorry, but I won't come."

"Please come," I pleaded. "I'm lonesome, and, now that you're happily married, surely you owe your best friend that much."

"Oh, well, if you put it that way—I'll come."

I found some letters that Leighton had written me when we were boys. After he arrived, I read them to him. We laughed for hours at the amusing incidents and queer phraseology. I found the old regard for my chum returning, but smothered the feeling.

I excused myself, saying that I wanted to get a drink of water. Out of Leighton's sight, I rushed to the back porch and pulled the switch, putting the house in darkness. While there, I placed an object in my pocket.

When I returned, Leighton, from his comfortable chair in the corner, said, "Funny the way the lights went out so suddenly, wasn't it?"

"Funny, eh?" I snarled, releasing the pent-up hatred of weeks. "I suppose you thought it was funny when you married the girl I love, too, didn't you? Thought you were putting one over on me! Well, Mr. Leighton, your friend Joseph happens to be just a little too smart for you."

A queer little laugh came from the dark corner.

"Joe, another of your pranks! Stop your fooling and turn on the light."

"I'm not fooling," I said evenly. "I always loved, and still love, Lois. All those things I invented—everything I did—was for her. Then you, a wolf in sheep's clothing, came, and you took her away."

"I've thought it all over," I continued, secretly glad that my voice was hard and firm. "I hate you.

Therefore I'm going to punish you. It won't be wrong, because no wrong could equal the wrong you have done me—the agony you have caused me—the remorse—"

When Leighton interrupted, I was surprised at the tone of courage in his voice.

"Joe, I didn't know that you loved her. You have been, always, more than a brother to me, and your happiness means more to me than my own. If Lois loves you, pal, I'll gladly step out of the picture. I mean it. If you had only told me—"

For a moment, my anger cooled. How typical of Johnnie Leighton this was—this fine self-sacrifice. I knew, deep in my heart, that he meant every word of it—that he would have died for me. But I gave myself a mental shaking, the moment of saneness was gone, and anger dimmed my brain again.

"You liar!" I screamed. "You hypocrite! You thief! God, how I hate you! You've ruined my life, and now I'm going to take yours in payment. It won't be hard on you—I'm that generous—and there won't be any evidence. Just you, and a purple light, and then only the purple light."

"No! No!" Leighton shouted in trembling tones.

He placed his hands on the arms of his chair and started to get up, but fright had weakened him so that he could not move.

My heart leaped with joy. I could see him dimly, for we were now used to the blackness of the room.

"Yes, just a little purple light," I sneered.

Every word had the effect of the turning of a dagger in a wound, and Leighton was suffering. "A pretty light it is, too. Watch it closely, because it will be the last thing you will see on this earth."

In the gloom I could see that Leighton was staring at me in open-



mouthed terror. I feared that he would faint and so spoil the sweetness of my revenge.

At that moment, I snapped the object I had been holding. A ray of purple light framed Leighton's face—a picture I shall never forget. There was one terrifying scream, and then he fell back, his face distorted in a horrible grimace.

FOR several minutes I stood, stupidly staring at the corner. Then I walked slowly over to the figure in the chair. I shook Leighton, but there was no response—no breathing, no heartbeat. My God, he was dead! Tears streaming down my cheeks, and crying like a bereaved mother, I fell on my knees before the chair and grasped my chum's hands.

"It was just an ordinary searchlight, with a purple lens!" I cried, raising my voice as if I could pierce his deaf ears if I shouted loud enough.

"I fooled you! I was jealous, and a little mad, and I wanted to make you suffer. Johnnie, Johnnie, I didn't want to kill you! Listen to me!

"I never had any purple light machine! I just took some ashes from the fire and told you they had been a cat. I melted some metal in a hot furnace and told you the purple light had done it. I had my servant dyna-

mite the rock at just the right minute. I burned my arm with a sun glass!"

All through the never-ending night, I sobbed at the feet of my friend. Again and again, I explained—as if explanations would bring him back to life!

At dawn, passersby heard my moans, and called the police. They found me praying at his feet, murmuring: "It was only an ordinary purple light—just a searchlight."

There was an investigation, but I was not convicted. The coroner's verdict was that John Leighton had died as the result of heart failure, occasioned by fright. How could I be convicted for frightening a man?

I presented the entire story to the court in its worst angles. I definitely asked for conviction, feeling that I must suffer for my sin. But how could the court find me a murderer? I was "not guilty."

"Not guilty!" Yes, in the eyes of the law, but in the brighter eyes of my soul I am a murderer—the murderer of the best friend that any man ever had.

My days are torments. My nights are nightmares, with always a twisted face in a purple light.

I can't stand it! I can't stand it! Must I take the law into my own hands and . . .