

# LAUGHING SICKNESS

By Warwick Deeping

Goldberg had let us down. He was a man of whims, and since he could afford to be whimsical and he would flatter each of us—a comfortable cheque we had nothing serious to complain of. Goldberg's hobby was entomology. He had spent six months in organizing an expedition into Pongoland; he had transported us all to Bimbasa, and then one night after dinner at the Imperial Club—he had suddenly announced that the whole adventure was cancelled. He had given us no reasons; he had said that he was going home.

Mainprice and I stayed on at Bimbasa. We put up at Latta's Hotel. Mainprice, who was a sort of scientific super-man and who flattered himself on his facial resemblance to Huxley, talked of undertaking some research on his own.

"Plenty for me to do here, you know, Vereker. I suppose you will be going back to England."

I did not like Mainprice. He was too complacent, too learned, and too sarcastic. He was a zoologist, and a paleontologist, and also, I thought, a majestic prig. I was just an ordinary doctor-man with some knowledge of bacteriology, but Mainprice treated me as though I were a raw student. There were occasions when I flustered to kick him.

I told him that I was in no hurry to go home.

"Hill suggested I might stop out here. There is an opening, and it is a fine life and a fine climate."

Mainprice looked at me with one of his super-wise smirks.

"I see."

I think we both knew why Bimbasa held us, for we were interested in the same woman. Goldberg had taken us out to visit Geoffrey Hill's house and plantation on Table Keep. Hill was a delightful person, and he had a daughter, a tall, slim, long-limbed young woman, who moved as though life were a dance. The flick of her ankles, and the way she moved her feet had made a boy of me. And I had a right to be a boy, but it had seemed to me that Mainprice had no excuse for being interested in her. Mary Hill was alive; she wasn't an oligo, or a thing to be pinned out and labelled, or to be made love to by this rather simian and superior person.

I made it my business to get in his way. And I must say that he responded. We were always dining up to Table Keep, and sitting in the big white loggia, and trying to make fierce but polite fun of each other while Mary gave us tea.

She was a most vital person. To see her on a horse was a delight. Her brown eyes were both bright and soft like the eyes of a bird. She was charming to both of us in her easy, happy way. She showed no preference, and there was a time when I doubted whether she took either of us very seriously. She was devoted to her father, and he deserved it.

The absurd part of it was that Mainprice and I always rode up together and came away together. People might have taken us for two cronies, but I know now that he hated my cheerful brown face, and I know that I hated his monkey one.

It all happened on the night when Hill asked us to dinner. Mainprice and I met in the lounge of "Latta's," and when he saw that I was dressed his eyes seemed to snap at me.

"Of course!" they said.

At Table Keep we found a tired and raw-boned looking man lying in a long chair in the loggia and talking to the Hills. His name was Bland. He moved heavily and held out a thin hand when we were introduced to him.

"I have heard about you two," he said. "Well, if you came out here to be scientific, I think I could find you a job."

He laughed—but directly he heard his own laughter he seemed to straighten up with a jerk, and his face went all twisted. There was something queer about him. He looked like a man who had been badly frightened.

"I was only joking," he said.

Hill explained, and while her father was speaking, Mary joined us.

"Bland has been shooting and prospecting. Some mandarin down at Bimbasa asked him to try and find out if there is any truth in a wild rumour that has been coming down to us here. The Loma country. A new sort of disease, wiping out whole villages."

We looked at Bland, and it seemed to me that he was keeping his face rigid. It was Mainprice who began to ask questions.

"What sort of disease?"

"The natives call it 'Laughing sickness.'"

"It sounds a merry sort of disease."

"Man, it's a horror. What the thing is I don't know. I suppose it is due to some beast of a bug. You start with a temperature and a slight rash, and then you begin to laugh in bursts and spasms, and you go on laughing till you die."

I don't think Mainprice believed him.

"Is this a yarn, or have you seen it?"

"Man, have I not! A village full of skeletons, laughing in the moonlight. Just like hyenas and the rattling of bones."

We went in to dinner, and I believe that Bland would have preferred to let the subject drop, but Mainprice would not allow it to be dropped. We were sitting opposite to each other, I on Mary's right, he on her left. I could see that Mainprice was annoyed, for she had asked me to take her in to dinner.

He kept looking across at me while he dragged more information out of Bland. His eyes had an ironical hardness, and I began to feel that he had something at the back of his mind.

"The disease is highly infectious, I suppose."

"Well—it has wiped out whole communities."

"Is it confined to the natives?"

"I can't say," and Bland smiled a queer sort of smile—"I did not stay long enough. One wouldn't, unless one was obliged."

Mainprice looked across at me.

"What about it, Vereker? Isn't the doctor in your interest?"

"Naturally."

"The scientific sleuth on the track of a new disease! What a chance for you to make your name!"

He was an uncomfortable person was Mainprice—and I was wondering what to say to him when Mary interposed.

"It seems to interest you, Mr. Mainprice—this disease."

"Of course it does, Miss Hill. We came out here to explore and to collect, and we have done nothing—absolutely nothing. And here is a problem, one of those problems that a white man feels it his duty to tackle. His eyes were on me, and his sententious heroics were aimed at my head.

I turned to Bland.

"How far up country is the district where laughing sickness originated?"

Bland hesitated, looking at me with kind eyes.

"Oh—about five hundred miles. The Loma country. Scattered villages in the forest country on the edge of the hills."

"Is it easy to get there?"

"Perfectly easy for three hundred miles, and then you would have to take porters and a guide. You might manage with mules or ponies. I don't know."

I heard Mary's voice, and when I glanced at her I found that her eyes were on Mainprice.

"If you are so interested, Mr. Mainprice—"

He took up the challenge and passed it on to me.

"Certainly. I'll go, like a shot. But I am not a doctor, though I am something of a bacteriologist. If Vereker would join me—I think it is up to us, you know."

I felt that he had been playing for this very point, but my decision was obvious.

"Quite. I'm ready to go. I can fit up a little travelling 'lab.' Instead of hunting insects we can hunt out the cause of this beastly disease."

Mainprice smiled at me.

"Good man, Vereker. I knew you were not the sort of chap to hang back."

Hill looked grave, but there was nothing that he could say against the enterprise, though it had originated in his house. After all, we were the very men to attack such a problem, and as Mainprice had said—"It was up to us," Bland sat and gloomed, and Mary said nothing, but before the evening was over she spoke words that I was not likely to forget.

We were standing along at the end of the loggia, watching the moonlight shining upon the Bimbasa valley.

"Jim—must you go?"

I held my breath.

"Of course. It's a point of honor."

"But—"

"I know. That's why—"

We both of us felt someone behind us, and we turned and found Mainprice there. He must have walked like a cat over the matting.

He held out a hand and smiled.

"Good-night, Miss Hill. I will take great care of Vereker."

We went off together, and as we rode out of the gate I caught him looking at me and I knew that he had heard what Mary Hill had said.

From the very beginning of the adventure I knew that Mainprice and I were at war, and that the test between us was to be one of courage and endurance. We were polite to each other; we discussed all the details of the business with scientific thoroughness, but behind this superficial friendliness hatred stood on guard. I have often wondered whether two men have ever started out to tackle a rather desultory enterprise as Mainprice and I set out to explore the terrors of this curious disease. Each was daring the other to drink poison or to hold a hand over the frame of the candle of death.

We took train to Kirodi, and fitted out our little expedition there. Our party consisted of a half-breed Arab interpreter named Ali, whom we christened "Slim," six Logi porters, two Nagra "boys," and half-a-dozen ponies. All knew the Loma country; and we had to bribe him heavily in order to persuade him to go with us, and the bazaar asked for half his pay in advance. The "boys" and the porters were not in the secret, for the fear of "Laughing Sickness" had begun to spread, and rumour is a thing of terror. Our equipment was of the lightest and it included a couple of light tents. Mainprice and I were armed.

During that three weeks trek to the Loma country Mainprice and I kept up the illusion of a mutual interest in our adventure. There were times when the illusion almost ceased to be an illusion, and I think we came near to forgetting our feud in the keenness of our curiosity. Mainprice surprised me. I had thought him an arm-chair man, and incapable of roughing it, but I found that there was more of the healthy savage in him than I had believed. He was hard. Also I discovered in him a touch of brutality. He was ready to use a whip on the Logi men, and Ali had to warn him that the blacks would bolt if he handled them too roughly.

Yet, all the while I was conscious of watching Mainprice, and of being watched by him.

It was evening when we touched the Loma country. We had had an eventful passage, and none of our men seemed to suspect what our purpose was, but they were wiser than we knew. We off-saddled and pitched our camp on some high ground covered with "battered trees. A red sky flamed over what looked to be a wooded plain, very dark and vague under the sunset. The

Logi men were lighting a fire, for one of them had seen the spoor of a lion. Ali and our "boys" were preparing supper.

Mainprice and I sat down under a tree and looked at the swarthy plain below us. It was growing dim and mysterious. The air had a slight tang like the air of an autumn evening in England.

Mainprice spoke, his arms over his knees.

"Noticed anything lately?"

"I had."

"For the last three days we haven't seen anything human."

"Exactly."

Hardly had he uttered the word when a sound came up to us from the darkening country below, laughter, queer solitary laughter like the barking of a solitary jackal. A tremor went through me.

"Hear that?"

He gave me a strange look.

"Rattled—? Listen—"

For that solitary laughter had provoked a weird outburst of false merriment. It was like the spasmodic coughing of a crowd of "gassed" men during the war, but far more terrible because of the mockery of its mirth.

I glanced over my shoulder. The chatter about the camp fire had ceased, and I saw our men standing like so many polished black marble statues. The whites of their eyes gleamed. There was fear in them.

Mainprice was smiling.

"We are in luck. Tumbled right on it."

His smirk annoyed me, for he seemed less scared than I felt.

"Just look over your shoulder," I said.

He looked and saw the blacks.

"If we are not careful we shan't have a 'boy' within twenty miles of us tomorrow morning."

He pretended to be patronising.

"Don't get windy, Vereker. I'll get Ali to tell the fellows that they can sit tight here, and that we shall not expect them to go any further."

I was feeling hot about the ears.

"After supper," I said, "we might go down—there. A full moon. I expect there is a village."

He nodded his head at me.

"Right you are. I'm game."

We went, after cautioning Ali to keep an eye on the men and to allay any alarm that might have developed in their thick heads. A full moon was swimming up over a silent world, silent so far as men were concerned, for the night cries of the wild creatures were beginning. And then, half way down the slope of the hill, we heard laughter, sudden and weird, and a whole chorus of it broke out upon us.

We came to the village. It had a ditch and a hedge of thorns, but we found one of the rude gates open. We stood there looking in. There was a square space between the huts, and the full moon showed us the figures of men and women. Some lay flat; others were sitting up; others had their heads on their crossed arms and bent knees, and when we first came to the gate they were silent. Suddenly one of the seated figures threw up his head and began to laugh, wild spasmodic laughter, and it seemed to provoke the same spasm in the others. Some writhed on the ground and laughed; others, supporting themselves on their arms, laughed at the face of the moon. I think it was the most unearthly sound I had ever heard, the laughter of these doomed people who had dragged themselves out into the open to die.

Mainprice exasperated.

"Good lord," he said; "I suppose the ones who could run bolted into the bush—and left these—! It will come to the same thing."

His fear was edged with disgust. He looked me full in the eyes. We were each feared to show fear before the other.

afraid, but we fought our fear, because "Like to take their temperatures, Vereker?"

The ironical beast in him sneered.

"I'll do it in the morning. Daylight."

"Quite so. We'll investigate by daylight."

We retraced our steps towards our camp fire. It looked like a flame-coloured flower, and the flames were the petals. Our two white tents showed up dimly as we approached, and we were within twenty yards of them when we became aware of a sort of emptiness. Not a figure moved. We shouted to Ali, and when the silence gave back no answering voice we realised what had happened.

Our blacks had bolted.

We made a rush for the fire. Four of the six ponies were still tethered under a tree. Pack-saddles, cases, and sacks lay around. We turned them over, searching like men who knew the urgency of the issue.

"The damned fools!" said Mainprice, but with a gulp of relief.

They had left us food. My two medical panniers were untouched. We had our tents and our rifles. Even in their terror the blacks had shown a sense of sportsmanship.

Mainprice and I looked at each other.

"Well—we are for it, Vereker. Are we going to see it through?"

I saw that ironical smirk of his.

"I'm game," I said.

He laughed, and then checked himself.

"Well, perhaps one of us will go back. It will depend—"

He gave a shrug.

"It will depend, my dear Vereker, upon who begins laughing first, like one of those poor brutes down yonder."

I think we accepted that chance tacitly and with obstinate enmity. If one of us were to break into that deadly laughter, then the other was to be considered free to take two of the ponies and try his luck in a lone attempt to reach Kirodi.

For seven days we worked and watched each other. Our hatred was such that we did not spare ourselves, but went about among those poor, dying, laughing blacks, doing what we could for them, and trying to get some notion of the nature of the disease. One would have thought that the work would have brought us together, but

instead of that it set us further apart. I had my moments of fear and of horror, but I beat them back. I tried to think steadily of Mary Hill and of all the charm and wholesomeness of the house on Table Keep. I worked as I had worked sometimes during the war, smoking innumerable pipes, and eating like a savage. Mainprice was a pretty good microscopist, and we spent hours making blood films and staining them, and examining them in my tent. We tested the sick people's secretions searched the huts and clothing, examined the water, kept alert eyes on every sort of fly and insect.

Mainprice would have it that the disease was fly-borne.

"It can't be in the food or the water—or it would have happened long ago. Some particular insect has developed a sudden taste for man, and the germ of the disease must be planted by the bite."

I was inclined to agree with him.

We had begun to notice a peculiar species of hover-fly with a blotch of red on its body, and peculiarly iridescent wings, and one evening while we were sitting outside the tents I heard Mainprice utter an exclamation and strike the flat of one hand against the back of the other.

"Damn! I've been bitten."

He had killed the fly, and while he searched for it in the grass I sat and wondered.

"One of those flies we have noticed."

His voice was casual, but I knew that he was afraid. And so was I. That night in my tent I rubbed myself with carbolic oil. If the smell of it would keep the particular, deadly fly at a distance—well, I might live to see—

Three tense days followed. Mainprice was worried about the bite of that fly, and he grew more irritable and suspicious; I felt him watching me; at night he was restless, and I could hear him moving in his tent. We took turns at keeping the fire burning, and as though he grudged my sleep he would make a great noise over throwing on fresh wood, but it may have been that noise soothed the fear in him.

On the fourth day I thought he looked flushed, and his eyes were injected, but he said nothing, and carried on with the work.

At ten that day I happened to slop some boiling water from the kettle on to my trousers. It hurt me, and I swore, and Mainprice began to laugh. It seemed a silly sort of joke to me, but it amused him.

"Oh, shut up," I said.

But Mainprice went on laughing. I stared at him; I felt like throwing the kettle at his head, and then—suddenly—I understood. Mainprice could not stop making that absurd noise; Laughing Sickness had him.

Presently, the spasm passed. He sat gasping, looking at me with turgid eyes that were full of indescribable things.

"I've got it. It must have been that damned fly. Well—that's that."

He grinned.

"Suppose you will be making tracks for home. That was the understanding—eh?"

I felt grim. For I had begun to realise that whatever my hatred of Mainprice might be I could not leave the fellow alone to die.

"I'm staying," I said.

And then he cursed me.

"You silly schoolboy storybook hero. Do you think I want your slobbering magnanimity. Get out. I'm not afraid of dying."

"I am," I said, "but I am going to stay."

With the horror of the thing on me I went down to the village, where the silence had deepened day by day.

I sat down on a tree stump near the gate.

What was I going to do?

Run away, or stick by the man I hated?

Mainprice would despise me if I ran away. And if Mary Hill were to know, she too would think me a cur.

No, I had to get to stay and see it through.

The sun was setting when I began to re-climb the hill towards the two white tents and the fire. An intense melancholy had attacked me, and I was trying to fight it off. I was not thinking of Mainprice but of Table Keep—

Crack!

My hat flew in the air, and something scorched my scalp. My arms went up, and then I threw myself forward and lay still. Up there I had had a vision of Mainprice lying prone, a smirk on his face, the rifle to his shoulder.

I did not move. I was wondering whether he would feel sure that he had got me, or whether he would come down the hill. I had my revolver, and if he came I mean to use it.

I heard the second report, but no bullet came my way. The sound had seemed duller, muffled.

But I lay still. The sun went down, and presently I began to crawl up towards the fire. I should have Mainprice at a disadvantage, for if he stayed by the fire when the darkness fell I should be able to see him, while he would not see me.

Again I waited.

It was very dark now, and I crawled on. There was no sound, and raising my head and holding my revolver ready, I took a steady look.

Something lay near the fire, a shape, and a moment later I understood. That second shot had not been for me.

I buried Mainprice that night, and when the dawn came I fled, leaving the tents and the equipment, and taking food and two ponies. I wandered for a month, and it was a month of horror, for every moment of the day I was listening for the sound of my own laughter.

It was on the morning of the thirty-second day that I met the first native. I could not speak his lingo, and he had no English.

"Kirodi."

I kept repeating the name of the place, and making signs to him. I showed him money, and he understood. I was within thirty miles of Kirodi and did not know it. The black took me there.

There was an English doctor at

Kirodi. I stayed outside the place and sent for him, and when he came I told him the whole tale.

"I don't know the incubation period of this damned disease, but I have been free for over a month. But you had better quarantine me."

He did. For a month, I lived in a tent on a hill above Kirodi, with a couple of black police patrolling the neighbourhood. At the end of the month the doctor brought up the Local Commissioner, and I had to make a statement. I showed him the hole in my sun hat.

"If you send out a search party," I said, "you will find Mainprice buried, with the top of his head blown off. He must have put the muzzle of his gun into his mouth. But is it necessary? Can't the dead be left—to sleep—untroubled?"

The Commissioner was a white man. "My dear chap—I'll think it over."

The doctor had wired to the Hills. I was wondering when I should see them, and what I should say to Mary. But it was Mary who came to me.

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