

WEIRD

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CARL BURGOS, Editor

IRVING FASS, Art Director

EZRA JACKSON, Art Editor



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■ I awoke with a start. There was blackness all around except for the dull red glow of the camp fire, now almost smothered in white ash. The awful stillness of the veld and that impenetrable darkness told me that it was the hour before dawn. A dreadful hour, and one that always finds me unprepared.

What had awakened me? I lifted my head from my sleeping bag and saw the vague, shadowy forms of my companions stretched in a deathlike stupor in a circle about the smoldering fire. Above was an empty blackness that had extinguished the stars. And, about me, that awful stillness that emphasized the miles of wilderness.

Then, tearing the stillness, came that rumbling laugh, a laugh that began in the depths and cackled to hysterical heights. A black laugh.

It was that which had awakened me.

Again that laugh rose in its crescendo. I twisted my head in the direction of the camp fire round which were grouped our native "boys." A shadow moved. One of the natives was cackling horribly.

"For God's sake, stop that laughing!"

Maxwell, his fair hair all tumbled, had leaped from his sleeping bag and was shrieking his command into the night. "Stop it, I say! Stop it!"

Dead silence followed. The laugh was lost in the stillness. One of the sleeping forms grunted uneasily. That was all.

But I was astounded at the appearance of Maxwell. Standing there in shirt and shorts, he was trembling like a man with a bad attack of malaria. He shook his fist into that empty blackness, and cursed. I half rose from my sleeping bag.

"What's the matter?"

His eyes glinted at me savagely. He did not speak, but walked to the camp fire, kicked some of the ash away, flung some logs into the embers, and then returned to his sleeping bag to sit upon it. He was still shaking as he sat there, all hunched up, as though expecting some terror would launch itself out of the darkness like a leaping leopard.

"That laugh!" he muttered. "You heard it?"

"Yes. One of the Kaffirs. Something funny came into his mind, I suppose. I wish it hadn't. There'll be no more sleep for me."

"Nor for me," groaned Maxwell.

"Man, you're shivering."

"I know. That laugh comes to me like a curse. A black laugh. Ugh!"

As one of the logs in the fire began to crackle and blaze I could see the tense look in the face of Maxwell.

"Well, if you're going to be upset by a laughing Kaffir," I began jocularly, "the sooner you get out of Africa, the better. These Kaffirs are always laughing. They're happy, even though they are carryng the white man's burden."

But Maxwell refused to come out of his serious mood. He stared into the fitful blaze.

"Ever trekked in the Drakensberg district?" he asked suddenly.

I shook my head.

"I know it only vaguely," I replied. "Somewhere on the borders of Natal, eh?"

"That's it," said Maxwell eagerly. He obviously wanted to talk. Men do become communicative round a camp fire, and this hour before the dawn invited confidences.

"I used to know the country round there very well five years ago. Five years ago! I've never been back there since."

There was such intensity in the tone of his voice that I looked up quickly from the filling of my pipe.

"Why?" I asked. "A girl?"

He shook his head slowly.

"No. It was a laugh, a black laugh, that drove me out of the Drakensberg."

I think I must have chuckled.

"Really, Maxwell," I said, "are you serious?"

"Deadly serious."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I can't imagine—" I began.

"Have you ever seen that peculiar kind of kopje that slopes up like a gentle hill for about five hundred feet and then shoots up a straight wall of rock for another five hundred feet?"

"Of course," I nodded. "It's not really peculiar, that kind of kopje. You will find it in different parts of the veld. But I know the kind you mean—rather like a giant sarcophagus on a huge mound, eh?"

"A sarcophagus!" muttered Maxwell. "Yes, at sunset this looked like an enormous coffin. Horrible!"

"Had it a name?"

He turned his eyes towards me. They were lit up by the flicker of a flame. "It was called—Spook Kopje."

There was silence for a moment. The breathing of our companions in their sleeping bags sounded regular and sonorous.

"I was staying in a Boer home-stead, not half a mile from that kopje," went on Maxwell, hesitantly. "I was doing nothing in particular—not even prospecting. I rather enjoyed the quietness, the humdrum life of the farm, the unbounded hospitality of the Boer family with whom I stayed. A real rest."

I nodded.

"A colored girl from the Cape, Olivia, looked after me. Brought the morning tea, prepared my meals, mended my socks, and so on. A good girl, and quite attractive. Something of a beauty for the neighborhood, and courted by all the black farm boys in the vicinity. But she looked down





upon them. 'Dis black trash not good enough for me,' she said decisively. And having said this she would go back to her pots and pans, humming an old missionary tune.

"She certainly seemed in no hurry to get herself a sweetheart. And a good thing, too, for the Boer, Oom Jannie, and his family. They depended more and more on Olivia. She was undoubtedly a household treasure. But when Johannes came into the district, she changed. Johannes was not the sort of man to let himself go unnoticed."

"And who was Johannes?" I asked, puffing away at my pipe, determined now that Maxwell had launched upon his story, that I would hear all the details.

"Johannes was a young colored man, also from the Cape," explained Maxwell. "He arrived in the Drakensberg district in a checked suit, a red beret, and a monocle stuck in his eye. He lived in Cape Town where he owned three hansom cabs that did a flourishing business after midnight. And he knew how to talk about himself and his hansom cabs, too. He had drifted to these parts for a holiday, apparently."

"He had not been in the district three hours before he discovered Olivia. And he began to court her. Needless to say, Olivia fell blindly for the red beret, the monocle, and the three hansom cabs. At the end of the second day she possessed the red beret. It seemed certain that before another week had passed she would possess the three hansom cabs as well. The black farm boys of the district hated this successful interloper."

I smiled at Maxwell, but his face still had that serious, intent expression.

"But although Olivia was practically conquered from the beginning, she still had a lurking feminine desire to see her cavalier of the red beret perform some doughty deed. Three hansom cabs were worth having, but Olivia also wanted a man. In her days at the Cape she had regularly visited the cinema, and her hero of the screen was Douglas Fairbanks."

"I should think it would be Valentino," I murmured.

"Not with Olivia. She adored the leaping antics of her hero, she thrilled when he flung himself to the top of a wall and crashed down again upon his pursuers. This was a man, and the sort of man that Olivia had decided to marry. Johannes was hardly that. Probably he had never climbed higher than the driver's seat of one of his own hansom cabs. But his talk was dizzying enough, and Olivia's mention of her hero encouraged his boastfulness. 'I can jump, I can swim, I can climb,' he announced to her. 'Why, each Sunday on Table Mountain I have climbed where even der Europeans will not go. *Allemagtig, I—*'

"'Could you climb that?' asked Olivia carelessly. They were out on the veld, walking within a hundred yards of that sinister-looking kopje, Spook Kopje.

"Johannes gave it one glance, and laughed. 'Why, dat is nothing,' he said. 'I climb dat in half an hour. Now, on Table Mountain, I once climbed and—'

"'You certain dat you could climb dat kopje?' persisted Olivia.

"Again Johannes laughed. He was so certain that he did not even turn his head to look at the kopje again. Instead, he gazed boldly into the soft brown eyes of Olivia.

"'In half an hour,' he repeated.

"Olivia looked at him. 'No one has ever climbed dat kopje,' she said quietly. 'No one.'

"'No?' Johannes was not disturbed. 'When I take you back to Cape Town, I—'

"'Will you climb dat kopje for me?' asked Olivia, excitedly.

"Johannes looked at her, and then decided he had better look at this kopje again. He turned his head and regarded it. In the stark sunlight it looked forbidding enough — the gentle slope, and then the granite cliffs climbing straight for the blue silk of the sky.

"'Of course, I will,' he said, carelessly. But he didn't mean it. Olivia did, however. She saw Johannes in a blaze of glory. She was quite right in her assertion that no one had ever climbed that kopje. In the memory of all in the district there had been only three attempts to climb Spook Kopje, and all had failed. One man had



killed himself. Sheep had strayed up the slopes and failed to find their way back again. They had perished miserably from hunger. Since the last fatal attempt, Spook Kopje had been left severely alone.

"'Climb dat kopje, and when you come down I marry you,' said Olivia. And she meant it.

"Again Johannes regarded the kopje. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable about the affair. But somewhere deep down in him, beneath the boastfulness, there was a strain that urged him to live up to the hero-worship of his sweetheart.

"'All right, I do it,' he said.

"'When?' persisted Olivia.

"'When you like.'

"'Tomorrow morning, at ten?'

"'Yes.'

"And so it was settled. Olivia told me the gist of this conversation, excitedly, as she served me my supper. Here was a hero worthy of the films — and of Olivia. 'My man is some man,' she told me definitely. 'Oom Jannie shook his head over this folly. 'Aach! Why do you want him to climb a kopje?' he asked testily. Olivia did not reply, but brought him his huge Bible that he read regularly each evening by candle-light."

Maxwell stopped talking. The night was still dark and sound-

less. He walked over to the fire and kicked another log into the blaze. Then he came back and sat on his sleeping bag again.

"'Did Johannes climb the kopje?'" I asked at last.

"Maxwell nodded.

"'Yes, he did. Incredible. But it took him more than half an hour. Five hours, in fact. One has to admire the achievement. The Lord knows how he did it. But there, in the late afternoon, we could see him on the top of that granite wall waving the red beret which Olivia had given him as a talisman. We grouped ourselves to watch him—Oom Jannie and his family, two neighboring farmers, three black farm hands, and myself. And among us strutted Olivia, proud of her hero, proud of his achievement, and not a little proud of herself. We waved back to the hero with the red beret.'

Again silence.

"'Well? Did they live happily ever after?'" I asked.

Maxwell turned his brooding gaze upon me.

"'Johannes never came back,'" he said briefly.

"'But if he climbed to the top,'" I said, "surely he could—"

"'He never came back,'" repeated Maxwell, monotonously. "Olivia waited for him, we all waited for



him to give him the welcome he deserved. But he did not come."

"But you could see him," I persisted.

Maxwell nodded.

"We watched that red blob of a beret trying to find a way down those granite cliffs for the rest of the afternoon. We watched until a saffron glow in the sky silhouetted Spook Kopje and made it once again a long black coffin. The glow changed swiftly into night, and still Johannes had not returned. Obviously, he had not found it as easy to descend as to climb. He may have missed his way or, what is more likely, lost his nerve. But he did not return that night although Olivia sat whimpering with a lighted candle, waiting for him until the dawn.

"In the early morning we watched the mist smoking away

from the kopje. Again the granite cliffs were lit up by the stark sunlight. We searched anxiously. It was Oom Jannie, old as he was, who saw him first. He pointed a gnarled forefinger at the kopje.

"*Daar is hij!*" he muttered.

"We followed his pointed finger. At last I saw him. The red blob of a beret. Johannes had clung to that throughout the night. He was still on the heights, still on the sinister summit of that kopje. But he had traversed the top from one end to the other. He was still seeking a route to descend.

"At this glimpse of him we shouted and waved. Olivia shrieked and screamed. 'My man, my hero!' she yelled. But the figure with the red beret took no notice. Not at first. But, as the sun climbed higher he saw us. He waved in reply; waved the red beret. But it was a tired gesture; the last

panache. He was dispirited and anxious. For the rest of the time he held the red beret limply in his hand.

"Olivia completely abandoned her pots and pans. She stood in the doorway of the farmhouse, staring into the sunshine at that restless red blob on the kopje. We tried to comfort her with assurances. 'He'll be down for dinner, the young fool,' grunted Oom Jannie in her hearing. It helped her a little, that remark. But she refused to leave her post in the doorway.

"All through the afternoon, with my field glasses, I watched Johannes trailing desperately about the kopje. Yes, I could see he had become desperate. The owner of the three hansom cabs at the Cape had to get down or he would die of hunger and exposure. At first, I let Olivia watch him through the field glasses, but as the man became more and more desperate in his efforts to find a way down to earth I kept them to myself. Olivia began to weep. But she was not weeping, she was crooning those missionary hymns to herself. 'Lord, bring him back to me,' I heard her saying, over and over again. There was no use trying to comfort her, and, disheartened, I went inside.

"Late that afternoon, I went myself up the slopes of that cursed kopje in the hope that I might help Johannes in some way. I toiled with two farm boys to the food of those granite cliffs that went sheer into the sky. I marvelled that the colored youth from the Cape had found a foothold of any kind. I traversed those cliffs from end to end, on each side of the kopje, but retired baffled again and again to the slopes. I tried three crevices, but each led to more sheer rock. I nearly broke my neck twice on that expedition. I returned in the darkness to the farmhouse and the weeping Olivia."

A log fell noisily into the fire. Sparks shot upwards to the black sky.

"How long did this last?" I asked.

Maxwell shivered again.

"I think it must have been the third night that Johannes went

crazy. I was awakened in the silence of the night by a horrible yelling laugh that resounded again and again across the empty veld. I never heard such a blood-curdling laugh, coming from the depths and ending in a scream. A black laugh! The laugh that wakened me half an hour ago. Ghastly!"

Maxwell covered his face with his hands. It was some moments before he could continue.

"When I first heard that mad laugh I rushed out of the house on to the veld. Instinctively I looked towards Spook Kopje. Moonlight bathed it, so that the granite cliffs looked black and slimy. But there, on the top, was a prancing figure, a figure that laughed and yelled, and danced. It was Johannes. He was mad, and half naked, but still clinging to the red beret. I heard a stifled scream at my side. It was Olivia. She also had heard that black laugh, and realized at once the full horror of it all.

"My man! Johannes! I so sorry," she whimpered, and then crumpled into a faint at my feet.

"Oom Jannie, too, looking like a stern ghost in his old night-shirt, had wandered out of the house.

"This is terrible . . . terrible!" he muttered. He stared at the kopje in the moonlight. "Something must be done," he muttered again.

"The next day five of us, all white men, made a desperate assault on the kopje. We tried again and again to scale those damnable cliffs, and again and again we failed. Baffled and dispirited we returned to the plains in the evening. And the mad, naked figure on the kopje kept up its yelling and screaming and dancing throughout. We all hoped that, mercifully, in this mad state Johannes would pitch down the cliffs and kill himself. But the man seemed to be possessed of an amazing amount of endurance. He lived, and kept up his black laughter throughout the night.

Of course, every farm in the vicinity was terrorized by that horrible laugh at night. It kept us all awake, and the women folk were hysterical. Olivia had not slept since Johannes climbed the

kopje. We were all waiting for the poor devil to die, and he refused to die. The madness seemed to have given him a new lease of life.

"At last, Oom Jannie called the other farmers to a conference in the *eetkamer* of his farmhouse. I will not weary you with the discussion that took place there. But a terrible decision was made. We all emerged from the *eetkamer* with rifles under our arms. All except Oom Jannie. He carried a Prayer Book. Outside the door of the *eetkamer* crouched Olivia. She gazed at us dumbly. Her sad dark eyes traveled from our faces to the guns under our arms. At once she understood the terrible thing we were about to do. With a shriek she flung herself at the feet of Oom Jannie. He gazed down at her with a stern face, but tears were in his rheumy eyes. 'God's will be done,' he muttered, and gently thrust her aside.

"We all proceeded to the foot of that kopje with its mad, naked figure in a red beret still shrieking defiance of death and dancing hysterically on the edge of those granite cliffs. Slowly and deliberately we toiled up the slope, and at last we came to the sheer granite. Oom Jannie sat himself on a boulder. The others took up their positions. I sprawled on the ground and rested my cheek against the stock of my rifle.

"Sight. Three hundred yards," I muttered mechanically to myself.

"The mad, prancing figure of Johannes was an easy mark. The red beret which still covered his head helped. I groped for cartridges in my pocket. I heard the 'click—click' as the others slipped the cartridges into the magazines of the rifles which were being trained on the mad, laughing man.

"Sitting on the boulder, Oom Jannie deliberately opened his Prayer Book. We had to wait while he adjusted his spectacles. He could never read without his spectacles. Then in a firm and reverent voice he began slowly to read burial service in Dutch.

"*Daar het de almachtige God, de Heer van leven en dood, behaagd heeft de geest van onze ontslapen broeder te doen weder keren tot God. . . .*"

"You know how it goes in English: 'As it has pleased the almighty God, the Lord of living and dead, to let the spirit of our deceased brother return to God. . . .'"

"Crack! The first rifle had spoken.

"*. . . die hem gegeven heeft, en die gesproken heeft. . .*" continued Oom Jannie deliberately.

"Crack! Crack!" Two more rifles spoke.

"The naked figure in the red beret continued to dance and shriek madly.

"*Allemagtig!* My hand shakes,' cursed one Boer.

"I sighted on the red beret. 'Crack!' I had missed.

"*. . . stoft zyt gy, en tot zult gy wederken. . .*"

"Crack! Crack!"

"And so it continued in the stark sunlight. We must each have fired five rounds before the end came. We saw the figure in the red beret stagger, and then pitch down.

"*. . . bevonded moogt worden in vrede,*" concluded Oom Jannie softly, and closed the Prayer Book.

"Half an hour later we were back in the homestead."

A long silence followed. The camp fire blazed merrily. The sky was paling. Dawn had come. Maxwell sat hunched on his sleeping bag. Neither of us spoke for some time.

"And you never went back there again?" I asked.

Maxwell shook his head.

"Never. I left the next day."

"And Olivia?"

"I heard she went back to her pots and pans. She is now a silent, moody woman. She will never marry. Each evening she walks to that kopje and stares at the heights where lie the bones of the man she loved. And they do say," added Maxwell, "that a mad laugh is often heard coming from those strange heights of Spook Kopje. And that laugh portends evil."

I heard a deep chuckle behind me. Startled, I turned. The black face of my Kaffir servant grinned at me.

"Good morning, baas!" he said. "Coffee!"

The sleepers began to awake. ●