

*A Gruesome Story
Powerfully Written*

THE MAN WHO BANISHED HIMSELF

By FERDINAND BERTHOUD

LITTLE Africa, this is why some men die.

The man sat down and looked over the haze. Looked in a way that didn't seem to be a look at all. Looked nowhere but into the back of his mind. Somehow it appeared in the hazy African mist he saw, unseeing, lost things—mirages. A lost life perhaps, perhaps lost ambition.

You know, Little Africa, when ambition goes the world ends up and is a blank. And in the haze of all the rest of life there are mirages. Things that we could have done—things for good or bad. Good, mostly, Little Africa. All men mean good—unless there come mirages.

The man sat back on the rough three-pole seat under the veranda of the wattle and daub trading store—and just sat. His gray-black shirt was open almost to the waist, his naked feet were crossed and felt each other, and his toes caressed like a baby's little toes and didn't know

“Mouti? What did you eat last? When did you eat last?”

The pitiful Kaffir hag rubbed her

stomach with one hand and her ghastly face bravely tried to smile.

“Some donkey skin, M'Lungu. I dug up a donkey that the police shot for horse sickness a moon ago. I boiled some of the skin.”

“Um?” the man muttered. “And if there was a God I'd give my soul to that God to be able to help you. But there's no longer a God—up here.”

The skeleton woman crouched in trembling hope a few feet from the man. In trusting patience, she dumbly squatted and waited. The man forgot her, forgot her stench, looked to the sizzling haze.

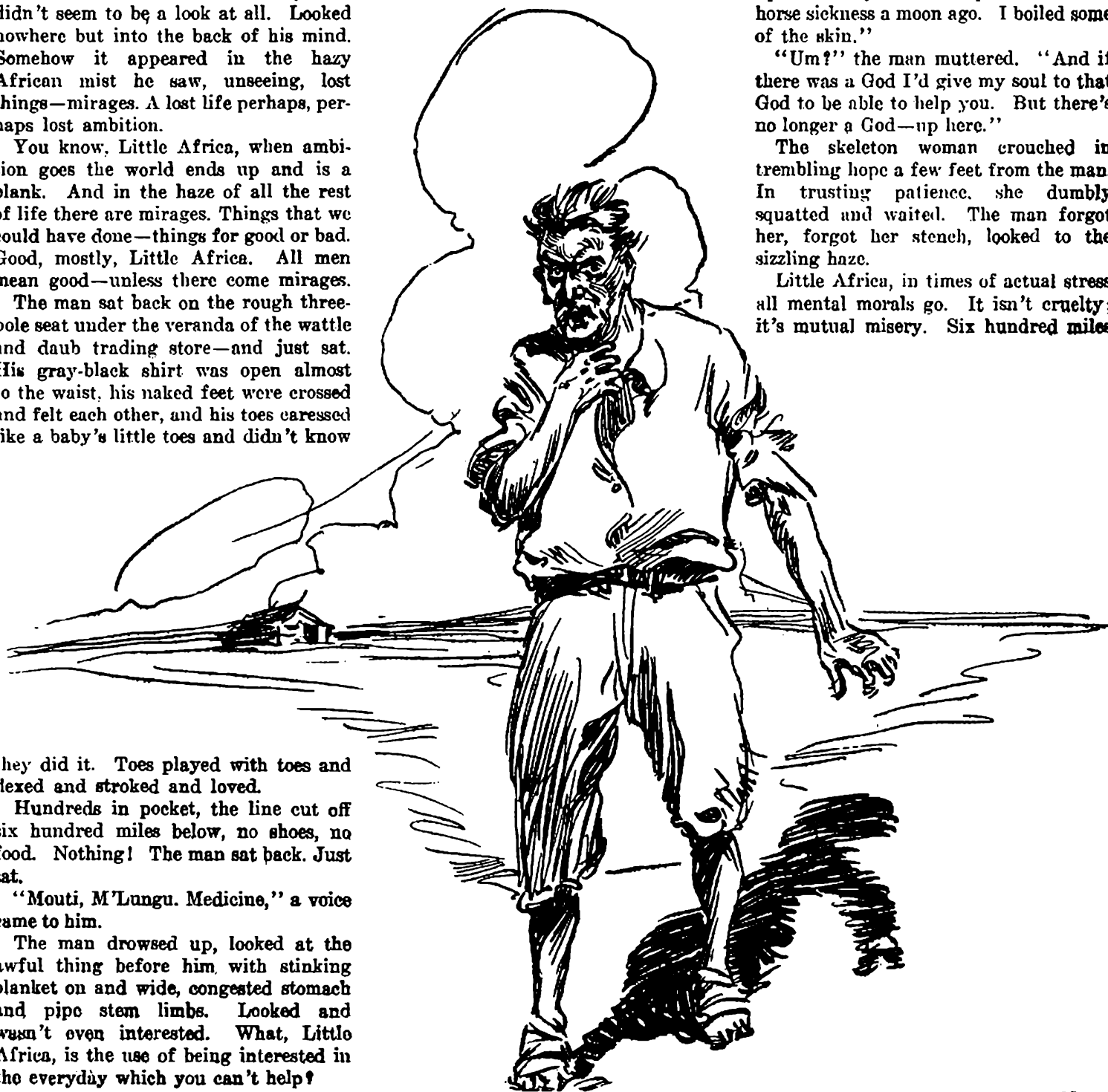
Little Africa, in times of actual stress all mental morals go. It isn't cruelty; it's mutual misery. Six hundred miles

they did it. Toes played with toes and flexed and stroked and loved.

Hundreds in pocket, the line cut off six hundred miles below, no shoes, no food. Nothing! The man sat back. Just sat.

“Mouti, M'Lungu. Medicine,” a voice came to him.

The man drowsed up, looked at the awful thing before him with stinking blanket on and wide, congested stomach and pipe stem limbs. Looked and wasn't even interested. What, Little Africa, is the use of being interested in the everyday which you can't help?



from the railhead, drought, horse sickness, rebellion, famine! A snap of the fingers—Ah! but the fingers were far too dry to even snap.

The man dreamed on and on, stretched out his naked feet, felt the ants bite them, looked stupidly at them and wondered nothing. And the sun came down like crackling indignation. Indignation that it couldn't kill the world. The burned-off veldt, right to the horizon, laughed its black face at being for once immune.

And the scent of burned-off grass and bush came floating over.

The man sniffed his nose, stretched legs which cracked, got up. As a man the jackals are not here to eat them. The suffering hag. Laughed! Then his face came sober.

"And you're a mother?" he said. "And I'm a father. And I can no more help you than you can help me. The store is empty. I have tinned sardines and whisky. That's all. Not even meal. I don't know even if I have the strength to cut the lid from a tin of those same fish."

"M'Lungu. M'Kewa. Chief. White man," the woman said in the trust of despair.

"Oh, don't call me names," the man came back in Kaffir in feeble joke. "Today I'm as you are. Umfazi, woman, we're looking straight at death."

The woman really smiled and showed teeth under a taut, skin-tight jaw.

"I know it, M'Lungu. I stepped over some of them as I came to you. Even the jackals are not here to eat them. The country is empty of all life, and my life is going, too."

Little Africa, this is terrible, but it's the truth. We found him afterwards and most of his message written in his useless cashbox. He'd put the story there for someone in case a human being should ever again in history care to venture up in that forbidding land.

The man staggered on his feet, felt the hot sand, laughed as he'd laughed at many a music hall show, laughed as he'd done at a good turn in Drury Lane or at a dinner in the old Savoy when his own clothes and the clothes of "Her" would have kept a family for a year. Just laughed. The Kaffir hag laughed with him, not knowing why he laughed.

"Come inside," the man said drily. "Come inside. There's sardines and whisky, and you and I and death. And how can man die happier?"

The woman faltered to her feet and threw her heavy blanket aside. Her strength was far too gone to carry it and stand the hope of food and "mouti," the medicine to clear her of the congested

donkey skin. Hope was in her, the want of company in the man. Company in death—not the hunger of carnality.

The man counted out—four tins of sardines left and not an eatable or shootable thing within six hundred miles. No strength to shoot in any case. The end. The man'd die gamely.

TWO tins he opened and gave to the naked woman; one he opened and ate on the blade of his knife. And he gave the woman some of the useless whisky, which meant nothing any more.

And side by side at the counter, with his arm around her, the man who had eaten at the most distinguished clubs in London ate and drank with the most distinguished thing on earth—one who faces certain death and can smile.

The man gave her more whisky, Little Africa, and gave her more and more. Her system was better than his that way and her need was more exceptional. The woman woke, the man woke. Strangely, the man who was going to die kissed the woman who was going to die—a thing he'd have loathed just one short week before and the woman didn't understand. Kaffirs don't kiss.

But he kissed her—for a woman, from Patagonia to the Volga, is a woman—and a man facing the going out would always have one last kiss from any woman, then Heaven is unnecessary. He kissed her just as they stood side by side up against the packing case counter and when she had a handful of sardines in her mouth.

The two went out under the veranda, and side by side white man and Kaffir woman sat. She knew what she was facing—he knew what he was facing. The present for perhaps another day, the uncertain future forever. Company! Against all laws of outside, civilized nature company. And she'd play straight. Just the touch of a starving arm, a starving lip, a starving soul. God! Little Africa, have you seen that?

The Kaffir woman sat, and a Kaffir only squats. She sat like a lady because her day was out forever—and some people know how small life is.

"M'Lungu," she asked. "Why did a big chief like you come into a country where all is unhappiness?"

The big chief turned a neck which creaked.

"I came to escape unhappiness."

And then the Kaffir looked at him with all the knowledge of a million centuries.

"They always let us live till last, don't they?" she said in her own language.

The man put an arm round her and drew the woman to him. To him she

was suddenly sweet. They all know. We all know, don't we?

We know the things we've lost.

And in the Hell of the Awful Forced Last Day it comes back. It never leaves, Little Africa.

The man held her, and somehow it didn't seem right. Held her to him and felt the knifelike ribs at her sides, the bulge of the undigested horror of food in the stomach which a vulture would turn sickly at.

Then the man answered:

"Yes, they let us live."

The liquor in the woman had warmed and she seemed to find her brain.

"The M'Lungu came here for something he didn't want to?" she ventured inquisitively.

In death truth doesn't hurt.

"Yeabo, umfazi. Yes. I came to kill my mind. To escape the woman I loved."

The woman looked at him in a way that means the world.

"In my race there is no mutual love—at least none that we're supposed to recognize. We're bought and sold, but—"

The man hugged the Kaffir woman to him with greater strength.

"But is all life," he said. "Just 'but.' And I loved her better than God loves His children, cleaner than the deer its young, stancher than an elephant its only child. We married. We had just that one child."

The woman looked up knowingly.

"The child die, M'Lungu?"

"No. The woman died—to me."

"You sold her, M'Lungu?"

"No, she sold herself."

"And then you hated her?"

The man's eyes looked into the haze, and through the haze and into a life that might have been. Looked at the woman he'd married and the man who'd stolen her. Looked at the scorn that showed upon her face when he'd tried to get her back, looked at the great disdain when she'd hung upon a man more powerful than he, more able to make life as she thought she was entitled to have had it.

"No, I loved her," the man said quietly. "There are some loves which Hell itself can't kill."

The woman drooped forward.

"There is no single word in Matabele for what you call 'love,'" she said.

"No," the man answered. "Why need there be when there's this?"

Round the corner of the baking mud store came the mother of two little babies—the mother of two little pups. Two little terrier brats. The mother staggered, wobbled on her legs, whined. Turned to her babies and with dry

tongue stroked their burning coats. The babies panted and staggered too. The mother came and looked with dying, trusting eyes into the face of the dying white man.

"M'Lungu. M'kewa," the Kaffir muttered. "There is meat. Why not kill them?"

The woman made a hungry grab and the man stopped her. Suddenly he laughed.

"Why kill them, umfazi? They are my only friends on earth—all that I have left."

In her last day the woman questioned: "Why keep a dog alive?"

"A dog? She had nine pups, umfazi. She caught rats for them and I found her milk. The goats died. The rats died. The country died. The lizards died. The country burned. Then I killed her pups one by one and fed her on them that she might feed the rest and keep me company."

The woman dully moved her eyes and she, too, looked into the haze. Her skeleton hands touched flabby, leathery breasts and she appeared to dream.

"M'Lungu," she breathed, "not only the get of dogs die that way—sometimes."

The man went back into the store and opened the last tin of sardines between him and the question of the Hereafter.

"Eat this," he told the woman. "Somchow it seems to me that you are the incarnation of the woman who turned on me, the spirit of her. It seems that, after all, I have to die with a woman who can't save herself and who I now can't save."

Little Africa, things come back on us. There is a Divinity which sees to everything.

THE woman ate—fell forward.

And the man pulled her away. His strength was gone, his life was gone, all he could do was pull. And he pulled the Kaffir woman as reverently as he'd have done his own sister. Pulled her and staggered over stumps and stones. Pulled her to hide her from the ants and blazing sun. And over her he built a tossed-up cairn of stones.

And the man knelt down and prayed—prayed as he'd never done since those years before in London when help meant a matter of standing at a door and whistling and pleasure and comfort were only a minute off.

"God," he asked, "help me to be bad. I've prayed to be good in my own way and I've wanted to be good, but you've not heard me. Help me now my last day to be bad. Let me be bad. Let me have one last fling. I'm going. I have to

face it. Give me the strength to do one devilish thing."

The man stood up, knelt down and kissed the pile of stones in crazy reverence. Then moved away.

The earth was burning, the sand a mass of fire, the man stepped over skeletons and over bones of many things. With naked feet kicked heads from necks and ribs from whitened frames. *Pah!* what were burned human beings, what starved and tortured ones? What? And tomorrow he'd be one. The man laughed squeakily, and each laugh shook his flickering life.

Little Africa, in death there's less than any think. Death is nothing—only the end of something.

The man laughed, sobbed, kicked at the dried-up carcasses. Touched them. Poked at them. Picked up dried bones and threw them like a boomerang. Talked to them. Talked till his lips went cracked and sound was almost past forever. Then the man stooped a weary back and picked a head from a much more shriveled body. And in his craziness he looked at it and saw that the sunken cheeks were simply whole dry flesh.

Little Africa, this isn't pretty, but the truth sometimes is hard to hear. The man took that head home to the place he might yet live in for one more night and for a while gloated over it. A human head, a head like his, a skull! That which we all must go to, and he—he had to go. The end of everyone, and he to follow just as surely as the sun would rise next day.

The man fingered the head, felt it, caressed it, smelt the dry flesh and laughed at it. Turned to his starving dog and let her smell it.

And with trembling limbs he found a ladder to fix the skull above his store that death might be above and death within.

The man put the skull on the peak of the grass roof, and came down and stared queerly up at it. Looked at it and saw himself as he would be in but two days or less.

Little Africa, do you ever see that you are but the living, throbbing thing outside a skeleton?

The man looked up, walked in the store, staggered. Looked at the useless whisky and the empty shelves which should hold food. Stroked his feet and twiddled his toes as a man who must do something. The man counted the whisky bottles—counted them seventy-two—dry eyed, counted them eighty-five—dead eyed, counted them ninety-six—dry mouthed, cracked-lipped, tried to see the humor of them. A hundred and five

in the shade, no food again forever, whisky which boiled and steamed in the bottles!

And the man stroked the bottles and saw, through burning eyes, the days in the old Savoy and the same old Pavilion and the same old times when the crook of a finger meant instant attention. Stupidly, he stood away and awkwardly made the same old motions and mumbled to himself.

"There's no harm in being a fool on the day you die, Little Africa, is there?"

The exertion tired, and the man sloped back onto the stretcher in the end of the store. The stretcher burned like living fire, but he was too far gone to worry. Just lay and looked, dry eyed, up at the dry tarantulas hanging listless above him.

The man half died, and in his death he heard the little mother dog call to him. Still looking at the roof, he told her of his helplessness. The little woman hadn't the strength to rise on her hind legs to lick his hand: hadn't the moisture on her tongue to lick at all.

"Girlie," the man said feebly, "we're all going out, but you won't suffer. Wait just a while till I have a rest and get the strength to pull a trigger. You and your babies will go out with me."

THE dog looked up at her God and whimpered, then saw the man was almost out and, with the intuition of a woman, left him. Her puppies, in the awful heat, lay as they'd have lain forever if she hadn't gone numbly to mother them.

The man hazed off, and in his haze was once more back with the crowd. Was at Kempton Park at the races and playing billiards and watching the Oxford and Cambridge boat race and doing Monte Carlo all in a congested, overlapping muddle. Thinking sixteen things at once and thinking nothing. And Mabel and the Carlton and the Cecil and Goodwood and Her.

And Him.

Five years married and all the world to make a happy stage of. And him! His boy! His son! His earth! His Heaven!

And then the other him! And the shame he'd rushed away from.

Little Africa, the strange twists of life are not in books; they really happen. We can't make them or unmake them. It isn't destiny or fate, or anything else. Twists are twists and we can't evade them.

And I don't think that our great God would want them different. It's just the way it is.

In his haze the man heard the suffering mother dog whimper, heard a curious bumping, thumping, rumbling. And the man with a half gone wriggle turned to one side.

Little Africa, some things are nasty. The man's dry eyes cracked as they opened, wondered, burned and maddened.

For the skull had fallen off the roof and the hunger-crazed dog and her pups were worrying at it.

The man tried to hurry up and his legs refused. He tried to shout and his lips refused. He tried to pray and his Gods were mixed.

And he clasped his head and his hair seemed to fire his hands.

And the man felt—*felt!* Felt for he knew not what. Just felt. And he found it and rolled off the stretcher.

I've done it myself, Little Africa, but not that way. He rolled because death was near. And he crawled and pulled himself along—pulled with a desperate wish to do one thing. Crawled and dragged his body half groveling on the ground. Slumped his stomach and lifted it, tore a cheek on the rough ground and didn't feel it. Ripped a hand.

"Girlie," he said to the dog as he got to her, "you and your babies mustn't do that. All's fair in love and war and in death and for the sake of babies. But you mustn't do that."

The dog tried to lick his cheek with

the tongue that had chewed the dry head and the man couldn't hold her off.

"Keep away," he said in a silly sort of command, and flicked at her with the strength of a fly.

The pups kept worrying at the head, and the man rolled on his back. Stupid as a calf, he didn't seem to know what he was doing, yet meant to do it. And he got the head.

The man held the horrid thing a moment, and the weak pups couldn't jump high enough to touch it. The man looked at the torn, dried skin and the horror of it—looked at the white teeth and the ghastliness. Looked at a woman and the life that might have been and the ghastliness that was. Laughed!

Then the man felt again for the thing he'd carried and dropped.

With muzzle almost to body, he shot—shot, Little Africa, and killed the mother and the pups.

And he lay on his back, Little Africa, and clasped the skull to his breast. Clasped it and hugged it and spoke to it words of love. Called it a name that was as dear that day as it had been years ago. Loved it and petted it—the skull of a dead, dead woman. Caressed it and fondled it and spoke secrets into a dried-up ear. Held it away and looked at it enamoured—drew it back to him and kissed it. Put it inside his shirt and clasped his left arm round it. Lay back exhausted from the violence of his stored-up love.

And the man's right hand searched for the revolver, found it, lifted it, waveringly aimed it. The hand went limp, the revolver rolled from off his chest. The coma of death had come.

THE special coach carrying its own provisions drew up at the front of the store. Four persons hastily alighted. Capeboy driver and Kaffir jumped down and attended the mules.

The four hurried over to the veranda of the store and stood round the prostrate man. One man knelt down.

"Dead?" one asked. "Too late?"

The kneeling man shook his head dubiously.

"Practically the same thing as dead," he announced.

The man worked over the prone body for a moment, injected something, poured something into the mouth, then signed to the rest to help. Together they carried the senseless bag of bones into the store and laid it on the stretcher. And for two long anxious days and nights one or other of the four watched it and fondly attended it. And on the third day there came sunrise.

The insensible man's dry eyes slowly opened. Half crazy they stared up. And the man knew that he was dead and he knew that he was in Heaven.

For the dry, half crazy eyes looked into the eyes of a woman.

Of a woman who, deep in her heart of hearts, had never once ceased to love.

Table of Contents

The contents of *Weird Tales* is fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All communications should be addressed to the publishers main office at 854 North Clark St., Chicago, Ill.

THE ABYSMAL HORROR	3
B. WALLIS	
BLACK SORCERY	13
PAUL ANNIXTER	
THE HAND OF FATMA	21
HARRY ANABLE KNIFFIN	
THE MAN WHO BANISHED HIMSELF	25
FERDINAND BERTHOUD	
A GAME OF CHANCE	29
HENRY LIEFERANT AND SYLVIA B. SALTZBERG	
THE OPEN WINDOW	33
FRANK OWEN	
THE CAT CALLED CARLOS	37
H. F. LESLIE	
THE PICTURE IN THE HOUSE	40
H. P. LOVECRAFT	
DRACONDA	43
JOHN MARTIN LEAHY	
THE HOOK OF DEATH	56
MRS. HARRY PUGH SMITH	
THE MONSTROSITY	64
GEORGE W. CRANE	
THE COBRA LILY	69
LEDYARD M. BAILEY	
WEIRD CRIMES	78
SEABURY QUINN	
THE BLACK CAT	83
EDGAR ALLAN POE	
THE EYRIE	86
THE EDITOR	

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