
The Unwilling Owner

My name is Albert Fleming, but you can call me Al. Not that you have any interest in my name. You didn't come here to learn about my name. No, you want to know about the house. I see you are looking at the library. Quite a collection, isn't it? Before we proceed, let me first explain I spent most of my early life in small mining camp tents and boarding houses. I've never owned my own house; that is until now. I'd always dreamed of owning my own house. But I spent my life in west Texas, punching cattle and playing cards ... and I was terrible at playing cards. It might also be fair to say most of the cattle I was punching belonged to other people. If I was lucky on any given day I make enough cash to pay for the next day. Some people have a run of bad luck, well let me tell you, mine was worse. I seemed destined for the noose or a bullet in the back. As you might imagine, I had little chance of owning my own place. Until the day the letter arrived.

It was from some South African law firm, Pickney and somebody ... I don't recall who. The gist of it was I had inherited a house from an old German uncle I didn't know I had. He inherited the house during the Boer Wars, a happier time as he described it. Inside the envelope was a one-way ticket to some place called Dar es Salaam. Turns out that's in German East Africa, and no, I'd never heard of such a place either. To get the house, according to the letter, all I had to do was take possession. The lawyers figured the value of the house at sixteen million Marks, or about twenty million Dollars. I never imagined having that much money. Having no desire to live in Africa, I set my mind to going there, selling the house and returning to the states to live like J. P. Morgan.

I suppose I should tell you a little about the house. You'll want to know that. A bit of its history. If you're still interested ... the house is yours. Free and clear, I'll give it to you. And maybe, if you have a mind to, you'll advance me the cost of a ticket back to Texas. I'll wire you the money once I get back to the states and get a job.

Never one to turn down a free lunch ... or a house, I mounted up at once and rode for Galveston. I didn't leave a letter of resignation. I didn't even tell anyone I was leaving; it wasn't that kind of a job you see. I made my way down to the coast and sold my horse for a new jacket and a clean shirt. Figure I'd tidy up a bit for the trip. The ship made sail for New Orleans and on to East Africa. The trip took three months, but it was in a first-class cabin, so I didn't mind. I could have stayed on that ship for the rest of my life, with the free food and all, But I had a hankering for my twenty million dollars you understand.

When I arrived in Dar es Salaam, I was met by one of the lawyer's agents, who gave me a train ticket. The train ride was the opposite of my journey so far. The heat was stifling and when the sun wasn't baking you, the rain was coming down in buckets. Warm and miserable. The tracks were surrounded by a swamp as far as the eye could see; and the smell. I'd attended outhouses with a finer fragrance. I couldn't imagine anything in this country worth a plug nickel, let alone millions, But I pressed on.

The station, if you could call it that, was an abandoned shack next to a mildew covered platform that was about as steady as a tree blowing in the wind. There were no roads, just a sort of winding cow path through thorn scrub nastier than any barbwire fence I'd ever laid eyes on. I learned there were no

horses to be had. I can't abide no place that doesn't have at least one horse. It doesn't seem right somehow. So, I walked ... or rather waded considering how much rain was coming down. After about six or seven days, I finally got to a village. I showed the letter to a man who looked like a tribal chief, but he couldn't read.

"Ah," he remarked in broken English, "you Masai House," He smiled. He took my hand and tried to scrub the skin off, as if looking for something else beneath my light skin. "You strange man. House no like white man."

I didn't understand what he meant, but it would become clear later. I figured him for a primitive savage. I asked for directions to the house and he shrugged. I started to mosey off. I heard him say: "You go north till rain stops. Then go north some more. You find house." I turned north.

Usually I'm a good judge of character, but on this day, I couldn't have been more wrong. My first impression of this fellow was he was crazier than a Bed Bug, but as it turns out he was probably the sanest man I've met in all Africa. As hard to believe as it is, the farther north I went, the worse it got. Piles of dead cattle bones lined the route like cairns. Clouds of mosquitoes obscured everything, like giant black fog banks, even in the rain. The sound of the wind itself was drowned out by the drone of their wings beating. By the time I got to the fence line, my boots were gone, sucked irretrievably into the endless mud. My clothes hung off me in rags. But once I got past the fence line, everything changed.

The gray sky broke open to reveal a bright blue canopy. The water seemed to disappear. And the sound, the ever-present buzzing of insects was at last gone. Not a beetle, fly or chigger to be seen. It took me three more days to walk to the house. At least I think it did, I was pretty delirious at the time. The native servants took me in. I don't know how long I languished in a bed, but after a time I came to my senses. I put on some new clothes I found in a closet and looked around. The house was enormous, surrounded on all sides by a large roof covered porch. The inside was even more fabulous. Teak paneling throughout, magnificent carpets and the walls ... the walls were covered in hunting trophies. More antelope horns than one could count. Lion heads, giraffe, and a huge assortment of stuffed birds. The library, as you can see, is probably the best in all Africa. Which is, no doubt, a good thing for one's sanity as none of the servants here speak English. But I can tell you, the food the locals serve is fantastic, better than the finest restaurants in New York. You must stay for dinner.

After all, the painting in the dining room is most unusual, aside from it being the only one in the house. It depicts a native village, perhaps one existed on this spot before the house was built. It smells as though it was freshly painted, but the surface is always dry to the touch. It depicts a number of villagers, although I can't tell you how many. That's what makes it unusual, for each time you see the painting the natives will be in different places. Sometimes there are more, sometimes there are less. Ah, I can see the disbelief in your eyes. That's to be expected. But you'll see the painting at dinner, you'll understand.

By now you've noticed the cool air in the house, compared to the oppressive heat outside. It's always that way, day and night. Always the same temperature inside. And I dare say the nights are quite chilly.

Back to my story. Once I was lucid, the headman of the house handed me a note from the lawyer's office. It confirmed me as the owner, but with the proviso that I could never sell the property. Truth be told, I wasn't too disappointed. The garments in the house were all fine silk, light and airy. There were

plenty of sandals about the house, but nothing substantial. It was clear that, in my current state, I would never survive the journey back to the railway.

After a time, the quality of the food diminished. The air itself seemed stale and the rooms darker somehow. The natives became sullen and worn out. Until we had our first visitor. A British explorer, I forget his name. In any case, his arrival was heralded by the return of the house to its cheerful state. He joined us for dinner and I must say, things were definitely back to the flavorful cuisine I remembered upon my first arrival. After sundown, he retired to the guest bedroom. Oh, the bed in there, one of the softest I've ever felt.

In the morning he didn't appear, nor in the afternoon. That night, I when to his room. Now you'll notice in the whole house you'll not see even a single ant. But when I arrived in the guest bedroom, the man was covered in *Glossinidae glossina*, the tse-tse fly.

I looked about the library until I seized upon the leather-bound volume for which I was hunting: "Ah, there it is," I announced, "Dr. Smallwood's Treatise on African Entomology. I must have read this a dozen times by now. I highly recommend it, it has some valuable tips on identifying the local insect population."

"Where was I? Oh, yes..." They fled as we entered the room, but it was clear they had passed their deadly blood parasite to the explorer. The creatures, *Dracunculus medinensis*, release larval parasites into the digestive tract to grow inside the intestinal walls. Only a few millimeters wide they can grow to lengths of over a meter. The females painfully burrow their way out of the host, erupting through the skin to lay their eggs. This can take months or even years, but our guest showed evidence of the creatures exits in only a few days.

They are quite insidious, you know. Our guest lay helpless, a wrenching mass, on the bed as they escaped. Alas they are nearly impossible to remove as they tend to break. The broken worms led to sepsis and an even more gruesome death. Needless to say, we didn't have to wait long, only a few weeks, before the wretched man passed away. The flies, beetles and centipedes took care of the remnants, so nothing remained. Those worms would make quite the assassins tools if more knew about them, leaving no trace or evidence to allow for a conviction.

The house would be happy for a few weeks and it would grow sour again. Fortunately, the foul environment on the plateau drove many explorers to the house's gates. And they were always as pleased to find it as I once was, I can tell you. Certainly, as pleased as the house was to receive them as guests. In the fall of 1914, the house was nearly in a state of bliss. With the war on, German troops, having no internment camps, sent their prisoners here. He entertained Belgians, Portuguese, Punjabi, Boers and, of course more Englishmen. It was like a now stop party. Later, we set up a field of crosses in the back, although there are no bodies to be found below them. I felt it was important to honor the memory of so many brave soldiers.

You see, I've come to believe the house is, in reality, a living entity. I feeds, as we all do, but exclusively on Europeans ... house owners excluded of course. You look pale. We have some excellent whiskey here. Made locally. Let me pour you a glass, that'll fix you right up. I wouldn't want you to be feeling under the weather. Can't have you missing dinner, now can I?