

THE GHOST WALKER

Edgar Wallace

Table of Contents

<u>THE GHOST WALKER</u>	1
<u>Edgar Wallace</u>	1

THE GHOST WALKER

Edgar Wallace

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

DON MURDOCK came to the territories with three guns and a breaking heart. At least he had tried to keep the rifts wedged open and still preserved the similitude of hopeless grief and unconquerable despair. It had been easy enough that night when the New York skyline was falling astern and he had looked over the side of the Berengaria and had seen, almost on the verge of tears, the pilot's hazardous climb to the waiting boat.

This man, thought Donald, swallowing a lump in his throat, was going back to a woman who loved him. A sane, shrewd mother of children, who went to church on Sundays and scoffed at ghosts. He could not imagine Mr. Pilot and Mrs. Pilot facing one another, trembling with fury over the matter of manifestations.

He could not imagine Mrs. Pilot drawing her wedding ring from her finger, flinging it on to the table and saying: "I think we are wasting time, Donald: you cannot understand and never will understand. You are just puffed up with conceit like every other college boy you think people are crazy because you haven't the vision or the enterprise to get outside your own narrow circle . . ."

All that sort of stuff, mostly illogical, but very, very, poignant.

So Donald went tragically to the wilds and made a will before leaving New York, leaving half of his four million dollars to Jane Fellaby and the other half to found a society for the suppression of Spiritualism.

Jane had been bitten very badly. She had sat in at seances and had heard voices and seen trumpets move and heard tambourines play, and had had other spiritual experiences. And she objected to his description of Professor Steelfit as a "fake" and her spiritualistic aunt as a halfwit and here he was sailing for Africa, the home of primitive realities and lions and fever.

Mr. Commissioner Sanders did not like visitors in the Territories. They were a responsibility, and usually he ran them up to Chubiri on the lower river (which is as safe as Bond Street and much safer than Broadway) and sent them back to the ship with a thrilling sense of having faced fearful dangers.

Bones was usually the guide on these occasions.

"On your right, dear old friends, is the village of Goguba, where there was a simply fearful massacre . . . shockin' old bird named N'sumu used to be chief an' the silly old josser got tight an' behaved simply scandalously. On the left, dear young miss, is the island where all these old johnnies are buried . . . over there's where a perfectly ghastly feller named Oofaba drowned his naughty old self . . ."

But the "tourist" with letters of introduction was not really welcome, though he or she had little to complain of in the matter of courtesy and loving-kindness.

"Bones, here's a job for you." Sanders looked up from the letters he was reading at breakfast. "We are getting a 'Cook' for a couple of weeks."

THE GHOST WALKER

Bones sighed audibly.

"Not me, dear old excellency," he begged. "It's Ham's turn."

"He's an American," said Sanders.

Bones was interested.

He knew America. There was scarcely a town in the United States to which he had not written for Folder K, for Lieutenant Tibbetts was a most assiduous reader of magazine advertisements, and his touching faith in the efficacy of correspondence schools had produced his most expensive hobbies.

Sanders might not like visitors, but he had a particularly keen admiration for wholesome youth, and Donald Murdock was one of those shy and diffident boys whose appeal was instant.

He came with the most unusual credentials—a letter from the American Ambassador in London, supported by a request from Whitehall which was a command.

"Yes—you can go as far as you like, Mr. Murdock—which I hope will be as far as I like! The country is quiet and Mr. Tibbetts will look after you."

Youth cleaves to youth: Donald took up his quarters in Bones' hut. Within five hours of their meeting (the visitor arrived by the mail boat in the afternoon) they were swopping love affairs.

". . . not like any other girl, you understand, Bones. If she'd been one of those gosh—awful creatures that take up spiritualism, it wouldn't have mattered."

"I knew a girl once," mused Bones. "She was fearfully fond of me, but she played bridge. I said to her: 'My dear old lady—'"

But Donald Murdock really wasn't interested.

"When a man like me falls in love, Bones, it's for keeps. Spiritualism! Can you beat that? Ghosts and things—you don't believe in that kind of bunk?"

Here Bones hesitated.

"Dear old transatlantic cousin," he said, "you can't live in Africa and not believe, old boy."

Don Murdock stared at him incredulously.

"Spirits?"

Bones nodded.

"Dear old man from Massa—whatever the place is—ghosts? Lord bless my jolly old life, I've seen 'em!"

There were ghosts enough on the river, as these two young men were to learn.

There was a king of the N'gombi who had seven sons and the youngest of these was a weakling who had never been heard to utter a word until he was twelve, though there were tales told by huntsmen who had seen him in the

THE GHOST WALKER

forest, where he loved to prowl, of a ghost with whom he spoke at great length.

They had spied on him on nights of moon, and had heard him talk to one whom their eyes could not see, though they were trained to find the twigs which the big cat leopard had broken with his velvet paw.

Now the brothers of this boy would have put him away because of his madness, for this is the law of the N'gombi, that the mad are dead minds which are chained to the earth. But the king of the N'gombi (who was a very sick man) liked his son, who was the child of his best-loved wife, and to those who sat in family palaver on this matter of life and death he spoke with a certain ominous meaning.

"The day B'lala dies, which of you shall live?" he asked. "For if I say 'kill' a hundred spears will go against any man even if he be the king's son."

B'lala began talking at large when he was thirteen. He talked of ghosts and ju-jus and strange things that only ghosts see. Such as elephants with long hairy skin and curved tusks, and crocodiles that flew from one great tree to another, and strange beasts with enormous necks and silly spade-shaped heads. Once he said that he had lived in the world when it was quivering, boiling mud and there was nothing to be seen, no sky or stars or sun, because of the thick steam that enveloped all things.

N'kema, the eldest son of the king, on the pretext of fishing, drew his brethren to a secret conference on one of the little islands.

"It is clear to me that our father will soon die and that the madness of B'lala is his madness also. Now all men know that I shall sit in his place and be king of the N'gombi. Yet when Sandi came at the third moon to gather our taxes, he spoke evilly to me because of some girl that I stole from the Ochori folk. Now I saw with these two eyes" he covered them both with his palms in the conventional manner "that whilst Sandi spoke to me, B'lala stood near to him and bewitched him with his magic. Now when our father dies, let us take B'lala into the forest and put out his eyes and leave him to the beasts."

And all the brothers agreed except one who loved the boy, and even he said "Wa," keeping his objection secret.

Mr. Commissioner Sanders, in his great white house by the river's end, heard these stories and was interested. He had an overwhelming weakness for sanity, but mad folk did not irk him unless they held high posts and could in their craziness call their spears to a killing.

"It is very queer" he puffed thoughtfully at a long cheroot "I must take a peep at this boy on my next visit."

Captain Hamilton of the King's Houssas grinned.

"That corner of the N'gombi is rotten with madness," he said. "They had sleepy sickness badly last year "

Sanders' headshake interrupted him.

"It isn't that kind of madness," he said. "B'lala's visions are of the world in the course of its creation and development. His talk is scientifically sound; he has even described the reptilia

The mammoth herds and the lizard birds,

and that isn't right. In other words, he seems to have the extraordinary power of projecting his mentality back to prehistoric times. I can see you are on the point of saying 'rubbish' don't! I had a go of fever last night and my temper is short."

THE GHOST WALKER

Hamilton's nose wrinkled derisively.

"Sorry, sir. Ask Bones for a solution he's nearly imbecile himself he may be able to interpret his brother halfwit."

He raised himself in his chair and hailed a distant figure.

"Bones!" he yelled.

Lieutenant Tibbetts, of the King's Houssas, changed direction and came stalking across the drill ground. He took the three steps of the veranda in his stride and saluted formally.

"Do you wish to see me on any regimental matter, dear old officer?" he demanded stiffly. "Personal affairs I am not prepared to discuss, but I hope, dear old sir, that I know enough about King's Regulations to be respectful, dear old tyrant "

"Shut up," snapped Hamilton. "Anyway, you did pinch my toothpaste."

"I may have borrowed it, sir an' captain," said Bones gently, "thinkin' that you had no use for it "

"You did take it," growled Hamilton. "I wouldn't have made a fuss about that, but you brought back a tube of brown shoe polish, and the first thing I knew ugh!"

Bones inclined his head.

"Accidents will happen, dear old sir." He was offensively respectful. "I said to our jolly old North American friend "

Sanders had an idea.

"Bones, take the Wiggle up to the N'gombi country we've got to give Murdock some sort of trip, and the country is quiet just now I'd like you to see B'lala, the son of Ufumbi the king . . ." He explained at length his interest in the boy.

* * *

"Anyway, he's crazy," said Donald gloomily. "Mr. Sanders says he's crazy you can't see ghosts any other way."

"I've seen ghosts, dear old septic," said Bones stiffly.

"You mean sceptic," corrected the melancholy Donald. "What sort of education do they give you in your high schools?"

"A jolly sight better than they give you in your public schools," said Bones hotly, and was nearer the truth than he imagined.

They were sitting on the foredeck of the Wiggle, that stout launch, and the low-lying shores of the Isisi country were moving slowly past them. It was the third day of the voyage, and hot hotter than anything Donald had ever experienced, though as a loyalist he praised New York on a sweltering summer day as having it beaten. At Lapori, where he stopped, Bones had news that nearly sent him to the right-about.

THE GHOST WALKER

"Lord, in the dark. hours there came a lokali message from the N'gombi," said the old headman. "The king has died of the sickness mingo, and his son is in his place. Also fishermen who came down the river have seen N'gombi war canoes and spears, and it is a saying on the river that when the N'gombi goes on the water, there are new graves on the little island."

Bones scratched his chin thoughtfully. In a moment of mental aberration he had forgotten to bring his carrier pigeons.

"This is a bad palaver," he said. "Get me a fast canoe, with strong young paddlers, and I will send a book¹ to my lord Sandi."

1 Letter.

In the ordinary relationships of life Bones was as inconstant as an English spring day. But Bones, faced with real trouble and real responsibility was a being transfigured. He counted heads, and found himself with five effective fighting men besides himself and Donald. Fortunately the Wiggle carried one very desirable 'spare' in the shape of a machine gun, and this he had unpacked and erected on the foredeck. Mr. Donald Murdock was intensely interested.

"Dear old thing," said Bones, "you can paddle downstream in the canoe, or you can risk the fearfully hazardous dangers of war. I realize, dear old Massachuter, that you're a friendly nation, but if you like to come in you'll be fearfully welcome. If there's any last message you'd like to send to jolly old Jane, now's your chance."

Donald elected for war. An hour later the Wiggle pushed her sharp nose against the black waters of the river and began her laborious 'climb' against the six-knot current to the river city of the N'gombi.

Power is a potent wine that is liable to turn the heads of the strongest. N'kema, the eldest son, did many foolish things. The breath was scarcely out of the body of his father who died with suspicious suddenness than he sat himself on the stool of chieftainship and summoned all headmen and petty chiefs to a great palaver of the land. Worse than this, he conveyed to the Little Leopards his desire for their support, and no king in his senses would invoke the aid of that secret society.

It was the time when the Little Leopards flourished; no longer were their mutilated victims found, but they had their strange rites, their dances, and, if the truth be told, their secret killings.

When one of the brothers expostulated, the new king cut him short.

"Must I not bring all magic and power to keep me where I am?" he asked. "Does not Sandi hate me? Now, if he sees my strength, and knows that all men are for me, he will let me sit quietly, and one day will come and put on my neck the medal which my father wore."

"What of B'lala?" asked one, and the king made a significant sign.

That night two of his brothers led the ghost walker into the deepest part of the forest, where slinking cat shapes move by night and round green moons of eyes look hungrily through the cover of the scrub; and there they left him. He did not complain, except to say, just before they went away:

"You would not have done this, but my ghost is gone from me tonight."

"Where is your ghost?" mocked one.

THE GHOST WALKER

"In all the stars," was the answer. "Go quickly before he returns."

And in terror they fled.

The new king sat in his big hut, an eager listener to all the stories which came to him. Some said that the Ochori were arming against the N'gombi, and that Bosambo the king was gathering his regiments for a great slaughter. Another whispered of Sandi and his soldiers. Yet another spoke of plots made by his own brothers to put him down. So it came about that the maimers of B'lala had scarcely returned to the city before they were seized and hurried away and no man saw them again.

The new king sat and listened, and with every fresh tale his fear grew.

His city was an armed camp. Spearmen answered the frantic summons of the lokali and came flocking through the forests and the swamps to join the army that was assembling.

"Lord, with whom do we war?" asked an old counsellor.

"All the world," said the shivering king.

Some sycophant whispered that the counsellor was an enemy or why should he ask this question, and that night the old man was killed in his hut.

Just before the dawn the king was awakened, and came out of his hut to find a sweating messenger. The king listened, his teeth chattering; and a frightened man is a terribly dangerous man. He sent for his familiars and gave them brief instructions.

"Tibbetti, the son of Sandi is coming with his soldiers. Let all the men go to the forest with their spears, and he who is seen by Tibbetti I will surely kill!"

The Wiggle came to a peaceable landing beach, where women were dipping their babies in the river and others were beating their clothes upon flat stones. There was no sign of warlike preparation when Bones stepped ashore; indeed, the atmosphere was favourable as N'kema the king came hurrying down to meet his visitor.

"Lord Tibbetti," he said, his eyes roving the deck for the soldiers, "you come at a good time, for my father is dead, and all the people with one voice have called me to sit in his seat. Now I will make a great dance for you and for your brother."

He was puzzled by Donald, a stranger, and found the most likely explanation for his presence.

"There will be no dances, N'kema," said Bones curtly. "And as to who shall sit in the king's chair, that is for Sandi. I come now to see B'lala, the king's son."

There was a dead silence. The chief's discomfort was all too apparent.

"Lord," he said, "this boy has gone a long journey, for he was sick, and on the edge of the Isisi."

"He shall be here by tomorrow," said Bones. "The palaver is finished."

He walked through the village and was relieved to find none of the evidence of feverish activity which invariably marked a change of kingship. As for Mr. Murdock, he was frankly disappointed.

THE GHOST WALKER

"Where's your old war?" he demanded truculently.

"Dear old sir," shuddered Bones, "don't talk about it."

That afternoon, as they sat on the deck under a double canvas shade, there came an emissary of the king to offer again the honour of a great dance, and this time Bones accepted.

"Shall we see any ghosts?" asked Donald hopefully.

"You don't see our kind of ghosts, old boy," replied Bones testily, "you feel 'em!"

Again he spoke prophetically.

The dance passed without incident, and the two loaded automatics in Bones' pocket seemed to be a superfluous precaution. They made their way back in the dark to the ship's side, and for the moment Donald Murdock was so entranced by the queer gyrations he had witnessed that he forgot that there was such a fake in the world as spiritualism.

They had said goodnight when from the darkness of the bank came a sibilant whisper. Bones craned his head forward and listened.

"Tell him to come into my little ship," he ordered, and they brought into his tiny cabin the second younger son of the old king, he who had demurred at the destruction of his brother; and the story he had to tell struck all the boredom from Lieutenant Tibbetts' face.

"Lord, if the king knows I have been, he will kill me as he has slain my brother," said the man fearfully. "But I tell you this because I love Sandi, and because, when he comes to make a chief, he will not forget a son of the king who has helped him."

"Where did they take B'lala?" asked Bones, and the man told him.

"But, lord, if you go through the woods behind the city, they will kill you," urged the man, "for there are more warriors than trees, and each man is strong for my brother."

Bones did not hesitate. He had a short consultation with Murdock.

"You'll stay here, my dear old New Yorker," he said. "This naughty old feller won't do anything tonight "

"I'm coming along with you," said Donald recklessly, and in the end his insistence prevailed.

They dropped into a small canoe, paddled softly down the river for a mile and, landing at a convenient place (here Donald nearly fell into the water) followed their guide for two hours through the dense woods which had hidden murders from time immemorial. Once green eyes glared at them ahead; once Donald heard the scream of a monkey in the grip of an invisible enemy.

It was midnight by the illuminated dial on Murdock's wrist when they came to a little clearing and saw a figure in the moonlight, reclining against a big, lightning-blasted tree.

"O B'lala," said Bones softly, "I am Tibbetti; the son of Sandi, and I have come to take you away to my fine ship."

He saw the thick lips of the child twist in a smile guessed rather than saw the horror of his eyes.

THE GHOST WALKER

"Lord, I go to a better place than your fine ship," he said faintly, "for this night I shall walk among the stars with my new ghost. Do I speak truth?"

At first Bones thought he was addressing him, but saw the head turn slightly to the left and heard the delighted chuckle of the dying boy.

"Lord," he said, "I speak truth. Now I tell you, Tibbetti, that there is death in this wood, for this my ghost has told me; also I saw you coming I who have no eyes! You came in a little boat with my brother, and as you landed, the white man who is with you stumbled and fell."

Donald felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"Who told you this?" he said in English, and, to Bones' amazement, this boy, who had never spoken any language but his own, answered:

"He who is by you!"

Again he turned his head.

"Lord Ghost, stay with Tibbetti and his friend, and be strong for them."

He waited, his head bent, as though he were listening. Bones saw him nod and again heard the delighted chuckle. Then he turned his head.

"Lord Tibbetti," he said, "my ghost has spoken, and he will be with you till you come to your journey's end, and he will be strong for you."

They waited for a long time, and when he did not speak Bones stooped and laid the figure gently on the ground.

"Humph!" he said, and got up, for he knew that B'lala, the friend of ghosts, was walking amongst the stars.

They buried him as best they could and trekked back to the river. Bones knew that there was only one hope, and that was to cast off the boat at once, risk shoals and sandbanks, and steam through the night to meet Sanders. A night in the native mind was an eternity. Perhaps N'kema would strike before dawn.

He struck earlier, as it proved. They were within half a mile of the village when a hoarse voice challenged them.

"Stand for the Little Leopard, white man!"

"Shoot!" snarled Bones, and whipped out his automatic.

The forest rang with the staccato crash of shots. Bones went down under three N'gombi warriors and waited expectantly for the end. Something struck him on the head

It was the consciousness of pain which revived him. The sun was up, and he was sitting with his back to a slim tree, his arms most painfully drawn back, and knotted on the tree's other side; and within a few feet of him sat Mr. Donald Murdock, naked to the waist and bearing marks of battle.

"Hullo, you alive? . . . I thought they'd bumped you off," he said cheerfully. "What are they going to do?"

THE GHOST WALKER

Bones turned his aching head left and right. They were entirely surrounded by spearmen; and sitting on his stool of chieftainship immediately before them, was N'kema the king.

"O Tibbetti, I see you!" he mocked. "Where is the great ghost of my little mad brother? Is he not by you and will not his strong arm be against me and my young men?"

Bones was puzzled: how did the king know of the meeting in the forest and all that the dying boy had said?

And then his eyes fell on something brown and still that lay in the long grass . . . a wisp of smoke curled up near by . . . the brother of the king, who had led him to B'lala, had told before he too found in death a pleasant relief.

"I see you, N'kema," he said hoarsely, for his throat was parched; "and as to madmen and ghosts, are you not mad to do this evil thing, and will not your ghost go weeping on the mountains when Sandi comes? Yet I will speak well for you and leave a book for Sandi, if you let this young man go." He nodded towards the uncomprehending Murdock, for Bones was speaking in the dialect of the N'gombi. "For he belongs to a strange people and has no part in this palaver."

N'kema grinned fearfully.

"O ko! That is the talk of a fool. Now let me see your ghost, Tibbetti. And if he is strong he shall hold the arm of my slayer."

He spat left and right and lifted his hand to his eyes. It was the signal to the lithe warrior who squatted at his feet, bending the supple execution knife in his hands. Up to his feet he rose and came swiftly before Bones.

"Speak well for me to all ghosts and devils," he muttered conventionally, and swung back his arm.

Bones glared up at him and did not flinch. The curved knife glittered in the sunlight, and then

Bones heard a little thud, saw the knife drop from the man's hand, as he gripped a bloody elbow with a shriek of pain.

N'kema was on his feet, grey-brown.

"O ko!" he gasped. "This ghost . . . !"

And then he saw Sanders.

The Commissioner was standing on the edge of the clearing, and on each side of him knelt six tarboshed Houssas, their rifles levelled. Slowly Sanders walked across the open and the armed throng flowed back noiselessly, each man seeking the kindly obscurity of the forest.

"I see you, N'kema."

Sanders' voice was low, almost caressing. And then he pointed to a tree, and Sergeant Abiboo, who walked behind him, flung the rope he carried, so deftly that the noose slipped down over the smooth branch almost to the level of N'kema's neck.

* * *

THE GHOST WALKER

"Ghosts phew!" Donald wiped his brow. "Did you see . . . just as this bird was going to strike . . . something stopped him . . . that beats everything."

Bones coughed. He had seen the new silencers on the Houssas' rifles.

"We've got a pretty bright brand of bogies, dear old thing," he said.

Murdock shook his head.

"I've got a new slant on this spiritualistic business. There was something there I'll swear it . . . Gosh! it was more awful than being carved up!"

"A common phenomenon, dear old Atlantist," murmured Bones.

"I'm going to cable Jane and say I'm strong for spiritualism if you get the right brand."

As it happened, it was unnecessary. The Eurasian operator handed him a cablegram as he arrived at headquarters:

You are right. Spooks are bunk. Experts found professor's fingermarks on tin trumpet. Come home. JANE.

Donald shook his head.

"I've got to convince that girl," he said.