

C. S. Forester
The African Queen



RJ

PENGUIN BOOKS
THE AFRICAN QUEEN

C. S. Forester was born in Cairo in 1899, where his father was stationed as a government official. He studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, and after leaving Guy's without a degree he turned to writing as a career. His first success was *Payment Deferred*, a novel written at the age of twenty-four and later dramatized and filmed with Charles Laughton in the leading rôle. In 1932 Forester was offered a Hollywood contract, and from then until 1939 he spent thirteen weeks of every year in America. On the outbreak of war he entered the Ministry of Information, and later he sailed with the Royal Navy to collect the material for *The Ship*. He then made a voyage to the Bering Sea to gather material for a similar book on the United States Navy, and it was during this trip that he was stricken with arteriosclerosis, a disease which left him crippled. However, he continued to write, and in *Captain Hornblower* he created the most renowned sailor in contemporary fiction. He died in 1966.

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C. S. FORESTER

THE AFRICAN QUEEN



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CHAPTER ONE

ALTHOUGH she herself was ill enough to justify being in bed had she been a person weak-minded enough to give up, Rose Sayer could see that her brother, the Reverend Samuel Sayer, was far more ill. He was very, very weak indeed, and when he knelt to offer up the evening prayer the movement was more like an involuntary collapse than a purposed gesture, and the hands which he raised trembled violently. Rose could see, in the moment before she devoutly closed her eyes, how thin and transparent those hands were, and how the bones of the wrists could be seen with almost the definition of a skeleton's.

The damp heat of the African forest seemed to be intensified with the coming of the night, which closed in upon them while they prayed. The hands which Rose clasped together were wet as though dipped in water, and she could feel the streams of sweat running down beneath her clothes as she knelt, and forming two little pools at the backs of her bent knees. It was this sensation which helped most to reconcile Rose's conscience to the absence, in this her approaching middle age, of her corset – a garment without which, so she had always been taught, no woman of the age of fourteen and upwards ever appeared in public. A corset, in fact, was quite an impossibility in Central Africa, although Rose had resolutely put aside, as promptings of the evil one, all the thoughts she had occasionally found forming in her mind of wearing no under-clothing at all beneath her white drill frock.

Under the stress of this wet heat that notion even returned at this solemn moment of prayer, but Rose spurned it away and bent her mind once more with anguished intensity to the prayer which Samuel was offering in his feeble voice and with his halting utterance. Samuel prayed for heavenly guidance in

the ordering of their lives, and for the forgiveness of their sins. Then as he began to utter his customary petition for the blessing of God upon the mission, his voice faltered more and more. The mission, to which they had given their lives, could hardly be said to exist, now that von Hanneken and his troops had descended upon the place and had swept off the entire village, converts and heathen alike, to be soldiers or bearers in the Army of German Central Africa, which he was assembling. Livestock and poultry, pots and pans and food-stuffs, all had been taken, even the portable chapel, leaving only the mission bungalow standing on the edge of the deserted clearing. So the weakness vanished from Samuel's voice as he went on to pray that the awful calamity of war which had descended upon the world would soon pass away, that the slaughter and destruction would cease, and that when they had regained their sanity men would turn from war to universal peace. And with the utterance of the last of his petition Samuel's voice grew stronger yet, as he prayed that the Almighty would bless the arms of England and carry her safely through this the severest of all her trials, and would crown her efforts with victory over the godless militarists who had brought about this disaster. There was a ring of fighting spirit in Samuel's voice as he said this, and an Old Testament flavour in his speech, as another Samuel had once prayed for victory over the Amalekites.

'Amen! Amen! Amen!' sobbed Rose with her head bowed over her clasped hands.

They knelt in silence for a few seconds when the prayer was finished, and then they rose to their feet. There was still just light enough for Rose to see Samuel's white-clad figure and his white face as he stood there swaying. She made no move to light the lamp. Now that German Central Africa was in arms against England no one could tell when next they would be able to obtain oil, or matches. They were cut off from all communication with the world save through hostile territory.

'I think, sister,' said Samuel, faintly, 'that I shall retire now.'

Rose did not help him to undress – they were brother and sister and strictly brought up and it would have been impossible to her unless he had been quite incapable of helping himself – but she crept in in the dark after he was in bed to see that his mosquito curtains were properly closed round him.

‘Good night, sister,’ said Samuel. Even in that sweltering heat his teeth were chattering.

She herself went back to her own room and lay on her string bed in a torment of heat, although she wore only her thin nightdress. Outside she could hear the noise of the African night, the howling of the monkeys, the shriek of some beast of prey and the bellow of crocodiles down by the river, with, as an accompaniment to it all – so familiar that she did not notice it – the continuous high-pitched whine of the cloud of mosquitoes outside her curtains.

It may have been midnight before she fell asleep, moving uneasily in the heat, but it was almost dawn when she awoke. Samuel must have been calling to her. Barefooted, she hurried out of her bedroom and across the living-room into Samuel’s room. But if Samuel had been sufficiently conscious to call to her he was not so now. Most of what he was saying seemed unintelligible. For a moment it appeared as if he was explaining the failure of his life to the tribunal before which he was so soon to appear.

‘The poor Mission,’ he said, and – ‘It was the Germans, the Germans.’

He died very soon after that, while Rose wept at his bedside. When her paroxysm of grief passed away she slowly got to her feet. The morning sun was pouring down upon the forest and lighting the deserted clearing, and she was all alone.

The fear which followed her grief did not last long. Rose Sayer had not lived to the age of thirty-three, had not spent ten years in the Central African forest, without acquiring a capable self-reliance to add to the simple faith of her religion. It was not long before a wild resentment against Germany and the Germans began to inflame her as she stood in the

quiet bungalow with the dead man. She told herself that Samuel would not have died if his heart had not been broken by the catastrophe of von Hanneken's requisitions. It was that which had killed Samuel, the sight of the labours of ten years being swept away in an hour.

Rose told herself that the Germans had worse than Samuel's death upon their souls. They had injured the work of God; Rose had no illusion how much Christianity would be left to the converts after a campaign in the forest in the ranks of a native army of which ninety-nine men out of a hundred would be rank heathen.

Rose knew the forest. In a vague way she could picture a war fought over a hundred thousand square miles of it. Even if any of the mission converts were to survive they would never make their way back to the mission – and even if they should, Samuel was dead.

Rose tried to persuade herself that this damage done to the holy cause was a worse sin than being instrumental in Samuel's death, but she could not succeed in doing so. From childhood she had been taught to love and admire her brother. When she was only a girl he had attained the wonderful, almost mystic distinction of the ministry, and was invested in her eyes with all the superiority which that implied. Her very father and mother, hard devout Christians that they were, who had never spared the rod in the upbringing of their children, deferred to him then, and heard his words with respect. It was solely due to him that she had risen in the social scale over the immeasurable gap between being a small tradesman's daughter and a minister's sister. She had been his housekeeper and the most devoted of his admirers, his most faithful disciple and his most trusted helper for a dozen years. There is small wonder at her feeling an un-Christian rancour against the nation who had caused his death.

And naturally she could not see the other side of the question. Von Hanneken, with no more than five hundred white men in a colony peopled by a million Negroes of whom not

more than a few thousand even knew they were subjects of the German flag, had to face the task of defending German Central Africa against the attacks of the overwhelming forces which would instantly be directed upon him. It was his duty to fight to the bitter end, to keep occupied as many of the enemy as possible for as long as possible, and to die in the last ditch if necessary while the real decision was being fought out in France. Thanks to the British command of the sea he could expect no help whatever from outside; he must depend on his own resources entirely, while there was no limit to the reinforcements which might reach the enemy. It was only natural, then, that with German military thoroughness he should have called up every man and woman and child within reach, as bearers or soldiers, and that he should have swept away every atom of food or material he could lay his hands on.

Rose saw no excuse for him at all. She remembered she had always disliked the Germans. She remembered how on her first arrival in the colony with her brother German officialdom had plagued them with inquisitions and restrictions, had treated them with scorn and contempt, and with the suspicion which German officials would naturally evince at the intrusion of a British missionary in a German colony. She found she hated their manners, their morals, their laws, and their ideals – in fact Rose was carried away in the wave of international hatred which engulfed the rest of the world in August 1914.

Had not her martyred brother prayed for the success of British arms and the defeat of the Germans? She looked down at the dead man, and into her mind there flowed a river of jagged Old Testament texts which he might have employed to suit the occasion. She yearned to strike a blow for England, to smite the Amalekites, the Philistines, the Midianites. Yet even as the hot wave of fervour swept over her she pulled herself up with scorn of herself for day-dreaming. Here she was alone in the Central African forest, alone with a dead man. There was no possible chance of her achieving anything.

It was at this very moment that Rose looked out across the

veranda of the bungalow and saw Opportunity peering cautiously at her from the edge of the clearing. She did not recognize it as Opportunity; she had no idea that the man who had appeared there would be the instrument she would employ to strike her blow for England. All she recognized at the moment was that it was Allnutt, the Cockney engineer employed by the Belgian gold-mining company two hundred miles up the river – a man her brother had been inclined to set his face sternly against as an un-Christian example.

But it was an English face, and a friendly one, and the sight of it made her more appreciative of the horrors of solitude in the forest. She hurried on to the veranda and waved a welcome to Allnutt.

CHAPTER TWO

ALLNUTT was still apprehensive. He looked round him cautiously as he picked his way through the native gardens towards her.

'Where's everybody, miss?' he asked as he came up to her.

'They've all gone,' said Rose.

'Where's the Reverend – your brother?'

'He's in there – He's dead,' said Rose.

Her lips began to tremble a little as they stood there in the blazing sunlight, but she would not allow herself to show weakness. She shut her mouth like a trap into its usual hard line.

'Dead, is 'e? That's bad, miss,' said Allnutt – but it was clear that for the moment his sympathy was purely perfunctory. Allnutt's apprehension was such that he could only think about one subject at a time. He had to go on asking questions.

'Ave the Germans been 'ere, miss?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Rose. 'Look.'

The wave of her hand indicated the bare central circle of the village. Had it not been for von Hanneken this would have been thronged with a native market, full of chattering, smiling Negroes with chickens and eggs and a hundred other things for barter, and there would have been naked pot-bellied children running about, and a few cows in sight, and women working in the gardens, and perhaps a group of men coming up from the direction of the river laden with fish. As it was there was nothing, only the bare earth and the ring of deserted huts, and the silent forest hemming them in.

'It's like 'ell, isn't it, miss?' said Allnutt. 'Up at the mine I found it just the sime when I got back from Limbasi. Clean

sweep of everything. What they've done with the Belgians God only knows. And God 'elp 'em, too. I wouldn't like to be a prisoner in the forest of that long chap with the glass eye - 'Anneken's 'is nime, isn't it, miss? Not a thing stirring at the mine until a nigger who'd esciped showed up. My niggers just bolted for the woods when they 'eard the news. Don't know if they were afride of me or the Germans. Just skipped in the night and left me with the launch.'

'The launch?' said Rose, sharply.

'Yerss, miss. The *African Queen*. I'd been up the river to Limbası with the launch for stores. Up there they'd 'eard about this war, but they didn't think von 'Anneken would fight. Just 'anded the stuff over to me and let me go agine. I fort all the time it wouldn't be as easy as they said. Bet they're sorry now. Bet von 'Anneken done the sime to them as 'e done at the mine. But 'e 'asn't got the launch, nor yet what's in 'er, which 'e'd be glad to 'ave, I dare say.'

'And what's that?' demanded Rose.

'Blasting gelatine, miss. Eight boxes of it. An' tinned grub. An' cylinders of oxygen and hydrogen for that weldin' job on the crusher. 'Eaps of things. Old von 'Anneken'd find a use for it all. Trust 'im for that.'

They were inside the bungalow now, and Allnutt took off his battered sun-hat as he realized he was in the presence of death. He bowed his head and lapsed into unintelligibility. Garrulous as he might be when talking of war or of his own experiences, he was a poor hand at formal condolences. But there was one obvious thing to say.

'Scuse me, miss, but 'ow long 'as 'e been dead?'

'He died this morning,' said Rose. The same thought came into her mind as was already in Allnutt's. In the tropics a dead man must be buried within six hours, and Allnutt was further obsessed with his desire to get away quickly, to retire again to his sanctuary in the river backwaters far from German observation.

'I'll bury 'im, miss,' said Allnutt. 'Don't you worry

yourself, miss. I'll do it all right. I know some of the service. I've 'eard it often enough.'

'I have my prayer book here. I can read the service,' she said, keeping her voice from trembling.

Allnutt came out on the veranda again. His shifty gaze swept the edge of the forest for Germans, before it was directed upon the clearing to find a site for a grave.

'Just there'd be the best place,' he said. 'The ground'll be light there and 'e'd like to be in the shade, I expect. Where can I find a spide, miss?'

The pressing importance of outside affairs was of such magnitude in Allnutt's mind that he could not help but say, in the midst of the grisly business -

'We'd better be quick, miss, in case the Germans come back agine.'

And when it was all over and Rose stood in sorrow beside the grave with its makeshift cross. Allnutt moved restlessly beside her.

'Come on darn to the river, miss,' he urged. 'Let's get awye from 'ere.'

Down through the forest towards the river ran a steep path; where it reached the marshy flats it degenerated into something worse than a track. Sometimes they were up to their knees in mud. They slipped and staggered, sweating under the scanty load of Rose's possessions. Sometimes tree-roots gave them momentary foothold. At every step the rank marigold smell of the river grew stronger in their nostrils. Then they emerged from the dense vegetation into blinding sunlight again. The launch swung at anchor, bow upstream, close to the water's edge. The rushing brown water made a noisy ripple round anchor chain and bows.

'Careful now, miss,' said Allnutt. 'Put your foot on that stump. That's right.'

Rose sat in the launch which was to be so terribly important to her and looked about her. The launch hardly seemed worthy of her grandiloquent name of *African Queen*. She was squat,

flat-bottomed, and thirty feet long. Her paint was peeling off her, and she reeked of decay. A tattered awning roofed in six feet of the stern; amidships stood the engine and boiler, with the stumpy funnel reaching up just higher than the awning. Rose could feel the heat from the thing where she sat, as an addition to the heat of the sun.

‘Excuse me, miss,’ said Allnutt. He knelt in the bottom of the boat and addressed himself to the engine. He hauled out a panful of hot ashes and dumped them over-side with a sizzle and a splutter. He filled the furnace with fresh wood from the pile beside him, and soon smoke appeared from the funnel and Rose could hear the roar of the draught. The engine began to sigh and splutter – Rose was later to come to know the sequence of sounds so well – and then began to leak grey pencils of steam. In fact the most noticeable point about the appearance of the engine was the presence of those leaks of steam, which poured out here, there, and everywhere from it. Allnutt peered at his gauges, thrust some more wood into the furnace, and then leaped forward round the engine. With grunts and heaves at the small windlass he proceeded to haul in the anchor, the sweat pouring from him in rivers. As the anchor came clear and the rushing current began to sweep the boat in to the bank he came dashing aft again to the engine. There was a clanking noise, and Rose felt the propeller begin to vibrate beneath her. Allnutt thrust mightily at the muddy bank with a long pole, snatched the latter on board again, and then came rushing aft to the tiller.

‘Excuse me, miss,’ said Allnutt again. He swept her aside unceremoniously as he put the tiller over just in time to save the boat from running into the bank. They headed, grinding and clattering, out into the racing brown water.

‘I fort, miss,’ said Allnutt, ‘ow we might find somewhere quiet be’ind a island where we couldn’t be seen. Then we could talk about what we could do.’

‘I should think that would be best,’ said Rose.

The river Ulanga at this point of its course has a rather

indefinite channel. It loops and it winds, and its banks are marshy, and it is studded with islands – so frequent indeed are the islands that in some reaches the river appears to be more like a score of different channels winding their way tortuously through clumps of vegetation. The *African Queen* churned her slow way against the current, quartering across the broad arm in which they had started. Half a mile up on the other bank half a dozen channels offered themselves, and Allnutt swung the boat's nose towards the midmost of them.

'Would you mind 'olding this tiller, miss, just as it is now?' asked Allnutt.

Rose silently took hold of the iron rod; it was so hot that it seemed to burn her hand. She held it resolutely, with almost a thrill at feeling the *African Queen* waver obediently in her course as she shifted the tiller ever so little. Allnutt was violently active once more. He had pulled open the furnace door and thrust in a few more sticks of fuel, and then he scrambled up into the bows and stood balanced on the cargo, peering up the channel for snags and shoals.

'Port a little, miss,' he called. 'Pull it over this side, I mean. That's it! Steady!'

The boat crawled up into a narrow tunnel formed by the meeting of the foliage overhead. Allnutt came leaping back over the cargo, and shut off the engine so that the propeller ceased to vibrate. Then he dashed into the bows once more, and just as the trees at Rose's side began apparently to move forward again as the current overcame the boat's way, he let go the anchor with a crash and rattle, and almost without a jerk the *African Queen* came to a standstill in the green-lighted channel. As the noise of the anchor chain died away a great silence seemed to close in upon them, the silence of a tropical river at noon. There was only to be heard the rush and gurgle of the water, and the sighing and spluttering of the engine. The green coolness might almost have been paradise. And then with a rush came the insects from the island thickets. They came in clouds, stinging mercilessly.

Allnutt came back into the sternsheets. A cigarette hung from his upper lip; Rose had not the faintest idea when he had lighted it, but that dangling cigarette was the finishing touch to Allnutt's portrait. Without it he looked incomplete. In later years Rose could never picture Allnutt to herself without a cigarette – generally allowed to go out – stuck to his upper lip half-way between the centre and the left corner of his mouth. A thin straggling beard, only a few score black hairs in all, was beginning to sprout on his lean cheeks. He still seemed restless and unnerved, as he battled with the flies, but now that they were away from the dangerous mainland he was better able to master his jumpiness, or at least to attempt to conceal it under an appearance of jocularly.

'Well, 'ere we are, miss,' he said. 'Safe. *And* sound, as you might say. The question is, wot next?'

Rose was slow of speech and of decision. She remained silent while Allnutt's nervousness betrayed itself in further volubility.

'We've got 'eaps of grub 'ere, miss, so we're all right as far as that goes. Two thousand fags. Two cases of gin. We can stay 'ere for months, if we want to. Question is, do we? 'Ow long d'you fink this war'll last, miss?'

Rose could only look at him in silence. The implication of his speech was obvious – he was suggesting that they should remain here in this marshy backwater until the war should be over and they could emerge in safety. And it was equally obvious that he thought it easily the best thing to do, provided that their stores were sufficient. He had not the remotest idea of striking a blow for England. Rose's astonishment kept her from replying, and allowed free rein to Allnutt's garrulity.

'Trouble is,' said Allnutt, 'we don't know which way 'elp'll come. I s'pose they're going to fight. Old von 'Anneken doesn't seem to be in two minds about it, does 'e? If our lot comes from the sea they'd fight their way up the railway to Limbasi, I s'pose. But that wouldn't be much 'elp, when all is said an' done. If they was to, though, we could stay 'ere an'