

TOP READERS

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The African Queen

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level
4


mm publications

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CHAPTER 1

IT WAS ANOTHER EXTREMELY HOT NIGHT IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN forest, but the heat was the least of Rose Sayer's concerns. Her brother Samuel lay ill in his bed, and she knew that he was close to death. Rose was sitting at Samuel's bedside, and when he began to softly say his prayers, she lowered her head and clasped her hands together.

Samuel prayed to God to bless the mission he and his sister had spent so many years building. In the decade they had been in Africa, Rose and Samuel had successfully converted hundreds of people to Christianity. Then, World War One broke out and everything changed. The Germans, who were occupying Central Africa at the time, attacked numerous villages and took hundreds of locals with them. These people were then forced to become soldiers or bearers in the German army.

Samuel almost wept when he thought about the day the Germans had attacked his mission and the surrounding village, destroying years of hard work in minutes. The Germans kidnapped men, women and children and took livestock, poultry and food. All they left behind was the Reverend Samuel Sayer, his sister Rose, and their small house.

Samuel continued to pray quietly; he prayed that the war would end soon and he prayed for peace. He also prayed that England would rise up and defeat the Germans.

"Amen! Amen!" said Rose as tears ran down her cheeks.

Then Samuel fell asleep and Rose went to her room. She lay awake for some time, thinking about the mission and her brother. In the early hours of the morning, Rose heard Samuel call out to her. She quickly jumped out of bed and ran to his room.

"Rose..." Samuel murmured when he saw his sister approach him.

"I'm here, Samuel," said Rose.

"Rose..." Samuel gasped. "The mission... The Germans destroyed our mission..."

"I know, Samuel, I know," whispered Rose.



Minutes later, Samuel died. Rose was devastated; she knelt down at her brother's bedside and wept. When she felt that she could cry no more, Rose stood up and walked out on to the veranda. It was a clear, beautiful morning and the sun was beating down on the village surrounding her home. The huts were empty – the happy, smiling people who used to live in them were gone. Suddenly, Rose was full of hatred for the Germans. They were responsible for her brother's death – the destruction of the mission had broken his heart.

Now Rose was all alone in the world. She had dedicated her life to helping her brother build the mission, and she had no idea what she would do next. As Rose wondered about her future, she saw a familiar figure in the distance. It was Charlie Allnutt, the English mechanic who worked at a gold mine further up the river. Samuel had always disapproved of Allnutt because he never went to church, but he was English and a friendly face and Rose waved to him to come nearer.

Allnutt approached the house with caution. "Where is everyone, miss?" he asked.

"Gone," said Rose. "The Germans took them."

Allnutt shook his head. "The same thing happened at the mine," he said. "I took the boat to Limbasi to get food and supplies and by the time I got back everyone had disappeared."

"You have a boat?" said Rose.

"Yes, miss," replied Allnutt. "The African Queen. She's tied up nearby."

"I see," said Rose.

"Where's the Reverend, miss? Your brother?" asked Allnutt.

Rose paused. "He's...he's inside," she said. "He's...dead."

Allnutt gasped. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, miss."

Rose nodded. She could feel tears in her eyes, but refused to start crying.

"Are you all right, miss?" asked the mechanic.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," said Rose. "Why don't you come inside?"

Allnutt removed his hat and followed Rose into the house. He mumbled his condolences when he saw her brother's body.

"How long has he been dead, miss?" he asked.

"About two hours," said Rose.



"We should bury him," said Allnutt. "I'll do it, don't you worry yourself, miss. And I can do the service, if you want."

"I have my prayer book," said Rose, "I'll read the service."

"All right, miss," said Allnutt. "But we'd better hurry, in case the Germans come back."

Once Samuel had been buried, Rose stood quietly beside the grave, while Allnutt nervously looked around for Germans.

"We really should go now, miss," said Allnutt. "It's not safe for you here. You should come to the river with me."

Rose realised she didn't have any choice. She did not wish to stay at the house alone, so she quickly packed her possessions and followed the mechanic down the steep path that led to the river.

An hour later, Allnutt's boat finally came into view. The African Queen was a nine-metre long, flat-bottomed steamboat. Allnutt explained to Rose that the boat was powered by a steam engine, which included a boiler and a furnace. In order for the boat to move, the furnace had to be regularly filled with wood. The heat from the burning fuel then turned the water in the boiler into steam, and the steam made the engine work.

Once Allnutt had helped Rose into the boat, he removed a container of hot ashes from the furnace and filled it with fresh wood. The engine quickly sprang to life. Allnutt pulled up the anchor, then took hold of the tiller and steered the boat through the brown waters of the Ulanga River.

"You know, miss," said Allnutt, "this river is full of channels and small islands. We should find a safe place to hide, perhaps a backwater somewhere, where we can talk about what to do next."

"Yes," Rose agreed, "that sounds like a good idea."

About a kilometre up the river, Allnutt asked Rose to take hold of the tiller while he filled the furnace with fuel. Rose grasped the iron rod tightly; it was so hot from the sun it almost burnt her fingers, but she held on. Rose had never steered a boat before, and the experience was both exciting and terrifying.

"Steady, miss! Steady!" Allnutt called out.

A short while later, Rose and Allnutt found a suitable spot to drop anchor and the African Queen stopped moving.