

AFRICA.

BY GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND.

A SHORT STORY.

“SEE there? That’s Africa!”

Dr. Paul Willard gestured far across the night to where, in the vast dark, a spurt of flame glowed like a blood-ruby, died, then trembled forth again.

“Africa?” the girl questioned vaguely. A nameless awe crept round her heart, in presence of that unseen emptiness looming away to the inverted bowl of sky—a fathomless sky, spattered with great refulgent stars, among which, overhead, the funnels of the Sutherland traced smoky patterns. “Africa?”

“A little corner of it, anyway,” the doctor answered, smiling at her tone. “Cape Roxo light. By two bells of the middle watch we’ll be off the coast of Guinea, running through Bissagos Islands—a bad place at best. I never liked it, and I’ve surgeoned on ‘old Suth’ for more than seven years. Don’t like it now, its reefs and cannibal wreckers and all, even with Captain Lockhart on the bridge.”

The girl made no answer, but she leaned her arms across the rail, swaying as the ship rolled, and gazed out into the unknown. Steadily the Strathglass liner clove the fugitive seas, creaming them astern in surges that hissed away into the black.

He risked a side glance at her.

Never had she seemed quite so beautiful to him as under the lantern light which gleamed upon her heavy yellow braids of hair, her frost-white gown. At sight of her delicate, somewhat pale face, his smile waned. No living man—least of all Willard, in the passion which had obsessed him ever since Ethel Armstrong and her crippled uncle had set foot upon the Sutherland’s deck—could have felt amusement in presence of that gentle, earnest seriousness.

“Somehow, do you know,” she mused at length, “I feel a bit afraid? It’s all so empty! And just to know that Africa is over there.” A gesture rounded out the thought. “I sha’n’t quite like it till we’re at the quay in Cape Town.”

“When you’ll immediately forget the trip, the boat, and—everyone on board?” he led along; but

she ignored the opening. Her mood was far from banter. The doctor, too, repented of his speech, the clumsiness of which jarred upon the majesty and wonder of that tropic night. “Oh, well, you’ll see things differently tomorrow,” he retrieved himself. “Quite differently, when the big red sun rolls up over the coast and splashes gold across the sea.”

“Perhaps,” she half assented. “But tomorrow is so far away. I think I’ll go below. This air stifles me.”

He nodded.

“Yes; I understand. I used to feel it so myself, before I got quite used to it.” His powers of speech had never seemed more pitifully crude.

He helped her down the steep companionway. Then, after a perfunctory good night from her, came up again to the quarterdeck.

“Great guns, what gloom!” he muttered. “Why, India ink is pale beside it. I don’t half like the way these offshore swells are running, either—with Bissagos still ahead of us. Can’t say I’m used to this particular bit of Africa even now. No wonder that she—Ethel—feels so shuddery.”

A moment he pondered in silence.

“That’s an upper-class privilege, anxiety is. A mere proletarian like me has no right to it. No, nor yet to look at an upper-class woman. For such, we aren’t real men—just official objects.”

He leaned upon the railing where her arms had lain, and for a long time stared off across the dark where, on Cape Roxo, winked that dim, retreating eye of flame.

II.

THE doctor found no sleep till long past midnight. Even with his cabin window slid far back, the tepid land breeze choked him, and his thoughts were weft of hot rebellion, longings, and misery. He tossed wide-eyed in his berth, heard the ship’s bell dole out the eternal hours, then the halves, torturing himself with images of Cape Town and the approaching separation, which (only too well he knew) must be forever. Midnight was

long gone, when he lost himself in troublous dreams of distant inaccessible things, never to be reached by him.

Toward early morning something flung him back to consciousness—a grinding, raking craunch that shivered the whole fabric of the ship, and roused him to the knowledge he was struggling on his cabin floor, which slanted dizzily. He clambered up, mazed and wit-struck for a moment, groped for the electric-button, and snapped on the light.

As the glare dazzled him, the Sutherland pitched nauseously again; and far below he heard a hideous gnawing and rasping, as of stony Titan jaws devouring steel. Then came sharp cries, oaths, and orders hoarsely bawled, and heavy feet that ran unsteadily along the decks. The pulsing engines suddenly grew still.

“Bissagos Reef! Ethel!” These were his only thoughts.

He leaped into some clothes, snatched his revolver, jerked open the cabin door, and ran out in his shirt-sleeves to the main saloon. It was already filled with grotesque, excited passengers. A babel swelled tumultuously, with high-pitched questions, curses, and screams.

“Steady!” he shouted. “Steady, now! No danger if you all keep cool!”

Hands clutched at him; he staved them off. “Lord!” thought he. “What cattle human beings in a panic are!”

He heard the purser’s voice that reinforced his own—heard other officers—knew that for a moment his presence might be spared.

“I must go!” he told himself; for in the thickening mob he caught no glimpse of Ethel or the invalid.

“I’ve got to find them anyway!”

He shoved by main force, along the up-tilted floor, toward their cabins. From behind him, on the aft staircase, Captain Lockhart’s mellow Scotch voice boomed out: “We’re good for fufteen mennets yet! No danger if ye’ll tak’ it easy—all han’s to th’ boats! *Weemen fairrst!*”

Suddenly he came on Ethel and her palsied uncle. The old man’s halting steps had held her back. A flash of potent admiration lightened through Willard’s soul at the vision of the girl, pale and afraid, yet not startled or hastened from her duty.

She came onward, helping the pitiful, twisted

figure, step by step—a figure doubly grotesque now, in scant, disheveled clothing, with sweat of pain on the knit brow and terror staring from the widened eyes. She looked, the doctor thought, most dignified and noble in her long, loose dressing gown, over which the yellow braids hung to below her girdle. A sort of fine simplicity enshrouded her. And though he had witnessed bold, hard men in peril, he thought that never had he seen so brave a thing as that gently bred girl holding back her steps, timing her pace to the hobbling of the senile creature who now clung to her for safety.

“What is it—tell me! Are we going down?” she cried to him, her voice trembling a little, but quite clear above the uproar of the crowd or the grinding and tearing of the ship. Her look was full of confidence; even in her fear he found no trace of panic. “Are we lost? What’s happened, can you tell me?”

“We’re on Bissagos—probably no danger.” His body shielded her from the stampeding pack that weltered past them, herded by a dozen of the officers and crew. His nerves were ice. He felt nothing save joy and high elation at this chance to save her life, at this thought that Ethel now was looking up to him, trusting him for guidance and deliverance.

“We mayn’t break up—for some time yet!” he shouted, bending toward her. “No danger—lots of boats—the mainland near! Come on, though—there’s no time to lose!”

He stooped and gathered the cripple in his arms, then lurched ahead through the wild mob. Ethel followed; he felt the grasp of her hand upon his shoulder, and strange, mad thoughts seethed up in him.

Thus presently, jostling and buffeted, they won through the panic and the uproar of the open lower deck, which shelved off sickeningly to the very water’s edge.

The night still gloomed impenetrable round the wounded ship. The wind had risen and whipped furiously the wild, green flares which flung sick shadows over the features of the dead.

Momently the waves boiled in spume-vortices over the sunken reef, sweeping the bulwarks, drenching the mad throng. At every heave and slide of the impaled monster a ghastly discord rose—“She’s going! Breaking up!” It mingled with the liner’s sirens and exhaust, which were ripping the sky with diapasons of appeal.

A rocket screeched aloft, and by its glare the doctor saw a slashing, clawing frenzy at the rail—saw the davits rock and shudder as the boats were wrenched outboard and the horde swarmed them, bursting all constraint.

“No chance for us there—with your uncle.” Willard made her understand. “They’d crush him in a second. We’ll have to wait.”

He saw her nod. “Talk about women being cowards!” flashed the thought through his mind.

Drawing her back into the shelter of a bulk, he put the cripple gently down. The old man, stunned, said nothing, but crouched low, with blinking eyes. Willard and the girl leaned up against the wall, bracing their feet upon the deck, which every moment settled at a steeper pitch.

Now they could look down on the hideous fight. They saw the captain’s huge frame overtopping all, dominant as his voice that blared out in command. They caught a gleam of pistol steel in his hand—a spike of flame—and someone pitched across the rail.

“*Bairns and th’ weemen fairrst!*” his brave old sea cry rang. Then, like lightning, a sudden something smote the captain’s head, and he was seen no more. Hell burst its bounds; panic reaped its certain due.

III.

“DON’T look! You mustn’t!” Willard cried, shielding from her the tragedy of the long-boat as a tackle jammed and spilled two-score clutching, yelling creatures in the swirl. The boat flailed—a giant pendulum—and shaking loose the few that clung to thwarts or gunwales, splintered to fragments on the liner’s iron skin.

An instant, black, fighting things were sown broadcast upon the roaring sea—things that shrieked, went down bubbling, rose, then, with crisped fingers, disappeared forever.

“There’s been an accident—don’t look!”

“I’m not afraid,” he heard her answer, but the hand that grasped his arm trembled. He loved her for the very fear she knew so well to hold in leash.

A shudder ran through the wreck—a roar that boomed above the sirens’ bellowing—then, where the bows had been, gaped a vast black emptiness, with death-screams choked by upswirling brine. A third of the whole ship had broken free and, with its fearful toll, had foundered like a plummet.

The Sutherland, eased by this loss, ground back upon the reef more firmly than before, and settled at a safer pitch, but her survivors deemed their end was now upon them, and fought each other starkly at the boats. All but one of the green flares had burned away, and by this ghastly dim virescence Willard saw men trampled and women hurled aside.

“Safer aboard than anywhere with madmen!” he cried in the girl’s ear. “Don’t move! Stay where you are!”

He drove down into the wolf-pack—his duty called him there—and smote with hard fists that came back reddened from his blows, striving to scatter the crazed brutes. But in the dark and tumult he could compass nothing. A blow clipped his temple; he felt the blood run hot, but he only dashed it from his eyes and struck the harder, striving to wedge through and split the mob.

He saw foul knife-play, heard the first mate grunt and double up, got sights of hands that strangled and glimpsed blind primitive anarchy as a second boat was launched.

It foundered straightway, from gross overcrowding. Amid the drowning wretches, breaking off their hand-grasps, a third boat was got away with only five oars, her gunwales shipping water at each sea. Then went the life-raft. He helped fling it overboard, aided some to jump in safety, and vainly tried to hold back others who leaped out at random—who missed and sank, with never a human hand held out to them for salvage.

“Better stay here! Safer on the ship!” he shouted to the lessening fugitives, but no one heeded him. When at last they all were gone—some to death, some to uncertain struggles with the night and the sea—when all had disappeared save a few limp figures rolling in the scuppers, he climbed back, bleeding, up the slippery deck to Ethel.

He found her in the bulkhead corner, kneeling in the gloom over a prostrate something that neither stirred nor spoke.

“What! Can I help?” he cried.

She shook her head, raising her hand silently, and he forbore. He understood. The old man’s heart had lashed itself to bursting with the panic and the stress. Now, out of all the throng, only one woman and one man were left.

The doctor’s wisdom kept his lips from platitudes. He turned, and left Ethel to herself a moment, gazing off landward. The ship was utterly

dark now, for the last flare had burned to ash, the dynamos had stopped, and all the lights were dead. The steam-pipes' roar had dwindled to a sibilant murmur, drowned by the lash and crumble of the surges on the reef. Under the great passionless stars the wreck lay spent and weary, crushed to death, unmoved by even the heaviest seas.

Quite suddenly the doctor noticed a little speck of light far in the gloom, then another—many specks, that lay where he half guessed the shore must be. Puzzled, he knit his brows.

"It can't be that any have reached land yet. Those can't be fires. Never knew campfires to crawl that way."

Dully he watched the sparks creep, come together, then separate. They almost seemed to be advancing toward the ship.

Then the truth hit him, and he stumbled back.

"Merciful Heaven! the Guinea blacks—the wreckers of Bissagos!"

IV.

HE stooped to Ethel tenderly. "Listen," said he. "We must get away from here. It's death to stay!"

She clung to him. He drew her up—away. She was only a blur in the night, but intuition told him that her face was wet with tears.

"Death?" she asked. "The wreck won't last till morning?"

"It's not that. There's something—something else. You'd better know at once. See there—off there to shoreward?"

"Those lights, you mean?"

"Lights, yes. They're torches—in canoes. They're coming. They mustn't find us here, or—"

"I understand. But can we go, and leave the—the—"

"Nobody must be left. There couldn't be a finer burial than the sea! I'll take you into the saloon, then come back here and do what must be done."

She understood, and yielded nobly. He led her off along the steep deck, after a silent moment by her uncle's body. He brought her safely to the main saloon, struck a match and found his bearings.

"All you need do is sit quite still in here. I won't be gone five minutes." Then he left her.

The work was harder than he had expected, for there was a lantern to be found and lighted, and—there were other difficulties. After a while the task was done.

When he came back to her, his pockets crammed with provisions and cartridges, a bandolier of canvas supporting revolvers and two magazine-rifles, she greeted him with a pale, thin smile. By the lantern light that glimmered sickly through the mocking splendor of the place, he saw her eyes brimming with tears, but she was calm and full of courage.

"We've got to find and launch a boat, or something, right away."

"Come, then, let's be about it," she replied. "There can't be many boats left, can there?"

"Hardly two or three. The port-side's stripped. We'll soon find out."

He helped her up across the saloon floor, which slanted like a house roof, and they issued out upon the larboard side. The wind could not strike here; and the waves, too, thirty-odd feet below, broke with less furious lashings.

Willard held the lantern high with his right hand. His left clutched the rail. Ethel steadied herself on him. Thus they worked their way slowly aft, stumbling over twisted cordage, litter, flotsam and jetsam of the tragedy.

As they neared the first boat Willard's heart died within him. What he might have guessed was true—the careening of the ship had swung the boats far inboard against their davits, so that nothing short of half a dozen men could now have got them over the rail, even had not the falls been twisted into knots and tangles.

He knew at once the prime futility of an attempt. Even to have got a life-raft over they must have rigged tackles, and time was now so short. A real fear shuddered through his veins. Too well he knew what manner of men the Guinea wreckers were. His hand slid, as by instinct, to the butt of his revolver. Before a single black should come nigh her he knew a better way.

"Impossible?" asked Ethel almost coolly. "Perhaps there's something better at the stern."

They forced a way, sliding, slipping, and clinging to whatever handholds offered. Under the counter they heard the waves run hissing. The wind whipped them as they worked out from the shelter of the after-cabin; it blew the lantern out. And as they stopped, breathing heavily in the dark, they saw once more the dancing fire sparks, heaving and tossing with the waves, and drawing very nigh. They could even see that the sparks were torches, harried by the wind; and once, in a lull, they heard

a wild-pitched, minor chant that wailed and mourned across the vacant reaches of the night, with throbbings of many cadent drums.

The woman trembled at this sound, and Willard drew her close to him.

"Don't be afraid," he soothed her. "They shall never get you."

"Swear to that."

"I needn't. You know how true it is."

"No time, now?"

"No time. We'll have to hold the fort. They probably don't know we're here, so it'll be a fine surprise party. Lots of arms on board. You can shoot?"

"Try me."

Thus, on the instant, their campaign took form.

V.

"THEY'LL board us midships on the port side," Willard planned. "They're after loot, and—and—well—edibles. Now we, I take it—"

"Can barricade the stern here?"

"Yes—rake 'em down by dozens. Except for knives and assegais, they're probably not armed."

"How many do you make them?"

"A good thousand. See, there must be more than fifty of those big sea-going *barracas*. But what are a thousand naked blacks against magazine rifles? They can't rush us all at once. Come, though," he added hastily, "this won't do. We've to get things ready for 'em—quick, at that."

He dragged up cordage, with her help; piled sail-cloth, debris, chains, anything that fell to hand in the port and starboard gangways. And thus they built a strong, entrenched position, whence they could sweep unmercifully the narrow approaches. By the vague light of the stars they toiled, and saw their work was good.

"We'll lie low now," panted the doctor. "If they don't see us, well and good. Otherwise a finish fight. In case they drive us, there's the aft companion to the upper deck. We can make a mighty fine killing from up there before they ever get us."

Without another word he drew from his pockets box on box of cartridges, broke the seals, and poured them out upon the deck. He set to loading all his arsenal, then laid part at the starboard barricade, the rest to port. Then, where some sail-cloth touched the wooden cabin, he drenched the

place with lantern oil.

"Now, let the guests arrive," said he. "Refreshment's ready."

"They're almost here," she whispered presently. "See there?"

Cautiously they peeked over the solid iron bulwark, and started with surprise. The Guinea men had loomed up almost in a moment from the night. The bulks of their long canoes were adumbrated by the guttering torches at each prow, surging upward, dipping, sliding over the hungry, lapping tongues of sea. Swarming they came. Everywhere flicked a swash of paddle-blades, everywhere swung innumerable black bodies in rhythm with the crooning plunder-song. The drums were silent, all save one that pulsed incessantly.

With a flesh-tingling wail of dissonance, the Guinea blacks teemed up about the Sutherland. A hum and murmur of barbaric voices filled the night. The acrid smoke from the torches stung the watchers' nostrils as they crouched, gripping their rifles.

"See," whispered Willard. "They're boarding now."

A sullen glow blurred up behind the port-rail midships. Then a blotch of flame wounded the shadows, and by this raw, wind-lashed beacon they saw the wreckers scramble in herds across the rail, their black, muscular bodies gleaming with sweat. Lights glinted from steel blades and spearheads.

"Armed for bloody work!" thought Willard, but he held his peace.

They clotted in a shifting mass, with cries like beasts; cracked, wild laughter; gibberish. And still they came, and came, and came.

"Heavens, what an onslaught!" Willard groaned. "It seems a shame to wait."

"Maybe they'll never think of coming aft?" breathed the girl.

"Heaven knows! They're in the saloon now. Hark! They're plundering—looking for the dead!"

Lights gleamed from the windows; noises rose within. The ship swarmed like a gigantic anthill, with this fetid crew. And now the watchers saw numberless black fellows crowding to the rail with loot, tossing it to waiting canoe-men. The whole scene blent and ran together like a nightmare. Ethel shut her eyes to it, bowed her head and waited.

"Ready!"

The doctor's hissed command aroused her. With sudden paralyzing dread she looked. A mob of the

cursed ghouls were scouting toward them up the gangway.

Blair-faced and hideous they came, peering with brandished torches for what they might find. Ethel saw their little evil eyes; their red-dyed teeth as they grinned, jabbering; their shovel-headed spears.

"Now!" yelled the doctor. Night split wide-open with the fire from their rifles; crackling echoes smashed back from the cabin. Ethel looked.

She saw a struggling, screaming ruck that fled, a tangled heap jammed in the gangway—a heap that quivered.

There was no time for looking. Into her hands the doctor thrust another rifle.

"At the thick of 'em!" he shouted, and again death spouted from the barricade. Up to the sky shrilled a chorus of mad fear, so poignant, so unspeakable that they knew the rout was utter.

The wreckers made no stand. They lunged off in ripe clusters from the rail, swam for their dear black lives, and lost full many. Some reached their fellows in the boats; cries, howls, demoniac execrations dwindled as the *barracas* foamed away.

The doctor wiped his face with a torn sleeve and stood erect.

"They'll be back soon," said he. "Stay here; I'm going to investigate. If I whistle, look alive for orders."

He pressed a revolver into her hand, clambered the barricade and was gone. The darkness swallowed him.

She crouched behind the barricade, waiting, wondering, thrilling with the first imperative command which ever, as a woman, had been given her. The mastery of it steadied her, and was sweet. It almost made her forget the aching shoulder where the rifle-butt had plunged, and the dizzy swimming of her head.

The moments lagged eternal. What if some evil chance should fall and he should never come? She trembled at the thought. Suddenly and for the first time in her whole life she realized what manner of thing the comradeship of man may be, how very needful, very dear.

"Come back! Come back!" her lips formed the words there in the night—words which she dared not bring to utterance.

She heard a sudden wild noise on the sea. "They're coming back!" she shuddered.

Then, all at once, sounded a clear, low whistle on the starboard side.

"Drop a line here, and make it fast!" a voice rose up to her.

Not understanding, just obeying with a strange, new happiness in her fear, she tugged a rope from the tangled barricade, cross-looped it firmly on a chock, and flung it overboard. She heard it swish and strike the water—felt it tauten. The voice rose again: "First-rate, so far. I'm coming up!"

She peered across the rail. From the wreckers' fleet a nearing tumult wafted. The torches now were blazing not five hundred fathoms off.

"Hurry!" she cried. "Hurry, or it will be too late!"

Staring down into the dark, she could just see a dim mass toiling up the rope. Then, quite suddenly, the doctor swarmed to the rail—was over it.

"We've got to rush!" he panted. "Found a mighty handy craft banging at the end of a liana-cord—obliging of 'em to have left it! By dropping off to starboard, they may never know we're gone; at least, not till we've made a start. You gather up the cartridges. We're apt to need 'em. I'll take the guns."

She filled her bosom with the leaden deaths, while he, with his knife, slit out a square of tarpaulin, wrapped the guns in it, and lashed them with a cord. He made a loop and slung the bundle over his head.

Then a match r-r-rasped, and eager little flames licked at the barricade, fingering the oil-soaked cabin wall.

"Good-by, old Suth!" the doctor whispered hoarsely to himself.

A moment there was silence—then the doctor faced her.

"Come!" said he. "Come, now! Are you afraid?"

"Afraid—with you?"

VI.

AND it befell that, just before the breaking of the day, a man and woman, all disheveled, weary, black with powder-grime, resting on their paddles in a huge, uncouth *barraca*, turned and gazed back over the heaving ocean-breast to the distant tower of flame that bloodied the horizon.

Neither spoke. There was no need of words as the swift dawn flared up the sky. The sea

crimsoned; fantom blues and opals spread abroad; luminous greens rimmed the far crescent of the western heaven as the last few watchful stars faded in the glory of another day.

"See?" said the man, pointing ahead.

The woman from her place in the bow looked far across the painted waters where a thin-drawn blur of smoke trailed slowly landward.

"See there? Two hours more and we'll be with—well, people again. Two hours more, and this will all be over, all be at an end for me—

everything. I know how it will be! Just as I said last night, things will seem different to you—by the light of day. It is useless for me to hope otherwise."

"No, no," she answered, while her paddle dragged. "Not Africa—not you!"

As the full broad circle of the sun kissed the sea suddenly to gold, a song rose to the man's brave, eager lips. Strongly he plunged his paddle, urging the long *barraca* northward up the coast of Africa, over the bosom of the morning sea.