



Sabi River Story

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H. Ec. Sr.

NADA'S lean body felt numb where the crude pole gouged into his thin back with the finality of a camel's thorn poked through the leathery covering of some wizened African fruit. He concentrated on keeping his uncomfortable position, pinned flat against the side of the pole and dagga hut and resembling a jackal's pelt which has been pegged out to dry.

Ten feet from the dense shadow which concealed Nada, a campfire's jagged flame trembled in the air, like the screaming orange of a tiger lily caught in a sudden windy gust. For the time being, Nada's position was secure, until the fire's encroaching glow traced him out in bas-relief against the dark hut.

It wasn't the pressure along his spine that sent each small shiver rippling through Nada's taut nerves and emaciated body. His anxiety for his little sister Mimina, who had just cried herself to sleep in the hut against which Nada leaned, filled him with misery.

EVEN now she whimpered in a dream-ridden sleep, aware that in twelve hours she would become the wife of old Dondo. Dondo had seen more than fifty harvests when she was betrothed to him nine years ago, and at that time she was but three years old.

Nada's suppressed breathing seemed almost to burst through the thin skin stretched tightly above his bare stomach, and the blood pounding in his head made him dizzy. He felt as if at any moment he would be catapulted into the sordid scene before him.

Though smoke filled his eyes, he was yet able to distinguish Chieza, his father, and the two messengers who had come from Dondo to barter cows in exchange for Mimina.

"We can give no more than forty head of good cows, ten goats, and some chickens. You must accept these."

"But for such a beautiful girl as Mimina you cannot pay so little."

"Forty cows is a great deal. Dondo paid only twenty cows for his first *makadzi*, who is great and fat and does most of the work for all of his wives."

"Dico," answered Chieza in a questioning voice and, with characteristic subterfuge, attempted to throw the messengers off.

"Surely you must know that Dondo promised this sum for Mimina when she was but three years old."

HIS father and the messengers from the suitor for Mimina had reached an impasse in the discussion that, with plenty of beer drinking and ceremony, had worn the week out. Nada knew that they had drunk so much of the beer, made from the rotting corn which lay decayed and gray in the bottom of the largest clay pot, that a decision would be put off again. Every moment of the last few days their decision had lurked like a predatory shadow around Nada and Mimina. Nada felt such a surge of relief sweep him as to leave him almost unconscious. Quietly he slipped away into the night which had fallen African-wise. The atmosphere, softly intimate, clung in a pulsating purple mass that shrouded the camel's thorn in an impenetrable blackness.

Now he left them to the slowly dying fire, sitting on their haunches—the old men whose stooping shoulders, bony knees, ugly thighs, and flapping loin cloths made them look like crows hopping over the ant-infested carcass of a dead beast.

Nada crept in where Mimina slept. Firelight entering the smoke-filled hut through one of its many cracks lay like an uneasy halo around her face, highlighting the dark brown skin and showing the wide, flaring nostrils and the nose, broad at the base. Mimina's soft, childish chin lay relaxed against the rows and rows of copper beads which looked red on her bare chest and reached almost to the loin cloth encircling her rounded hips. Now and again the firelight sparkled on the brass bangles which cut into the flesh on her wrists and ankles. In her ears were the holes pierced many years ago, so that she could wear the great ear rings and other womanly adornments on her wedding day . . . Now two pieces of dried grass, slipped through the holes, kept the membrane open and firm in the soft-moulded lobes.

A GAIN Nada's heart pounded against his ribs, making the same sound as water when it fell at the great leaping falls where Nada and Mimina played every day.

By the fire the implacable voices rising and falling kept up the argument. As was the custom among the Bembas, the suitor for Mimina's hand must send two messengers who would pay the mouth-opening money. Without the mouth-opening money, no self-respecting father would condescend to discuss the *lobola*, or payment, by which Mimina would become the child-wife of Dondo.

Once more Nada crept to his post, both fascinated and repelled by the sight of the great gourd of beer and the half-drunken men, whose angry voices rose and swelled to a crescendo, to burst on some high discordant note.

Occasionally the drunken men mentioned the money, between the wild bouts of sneezing caused by the great pinches of snuff they took, and between the retches of their stomachs swollen by the native *doro*.

Nada felt suffocated by the closeness of the night. He must do something. It was unthinkable that Mimina should marry Dondo. But what could he do when he had lived scarcely thirteen and a half years? Slowly the flames died down; the cracking logs fell apart and changed from living redness to black, inanimate shadows in the pale glow of the moon just waxing over the veldt. Once more the night, always pregnant with its own life, became dominant and filled the air with the far-away cry of a

late jackal or the shriek of a hyena. Chilled by grief, Nada crept out to the dead fire and moved a glowing ember with the toes on his narrow foot. Slowly he sat on his haunches. Disaster, evil and imminent, dogged him like his own small moon-made shadow that sat hunched over beside him. The need to do something pressed hard on his chest and made him feel physically ill. Surrounded as he was by the evil smelling bodies which lay like great mounds of flesh around the campfire, thought was impossible. With a hand which seemed all bones and swollen joints, he pushed a broken gourd to one side and felt the *doro* flow against his hand, coursing a brief track on the ground beside him.

AS SUDDENLY as it had turned night, daylight flooded the sordid scene. Nada rose. His resolution made, only the tightening of the thin greyed lips gave any clue to his decision.

Nada walked quietly among the unconscious men who would not awake until far into the morning, when the sun would cook their skins, sending small rivulets of sweat pouring down.

He looked briefly at Mimina, who still stirred restlessly in her sleep. With head thrown high and chest out, he walked proudly in the morning air; his filthy loin cloths spanked his naked thighs and all but fell from his waist. Almost gaily he ran to the great Sabi's edge where the water gushed and whirled in a great torrent before leaping over the high rock cliff, higher than the highest msasa tree Nada had ever seen. Below the falls, the mass of water writhed and turned on itself like some huge serpent, flexing and reflexing its great coils and spraying its whole body with a white foam. Later on, the Sabi straightened out, and on its sandy banks crocodiles lazily flapped at inquisitive ravens who pecked their tails. Still further down was the quiet, sun-warmed pool, where Nada and Mimina, their black skins scintillating in the lighter water, played more gracefully than the monkeys in the nearby trees.

NADA felt so happy he could hardly breathe because today he would become a man, and he would by his action please all the *mudzimu*, or guardian spirits of his family. He was in a hurry now, but he must act slowly, not frighten Mimina and cause his father's wives to become suspicious.

Slowly he walked back to the hard clearing around which stood his father's huts and those of his wives. The scent of

fouly kept native cows came from the kraal, which was made of thorns to keep the lions out. Already the louse-ridden chickens walked idly among the drunken men, picking up here and there the yellow mealies.

Nada picked up the largest iron kettle and put it on the triangle of rocks over the cold fire. It would be a good idea to tell everyone that he and Mimina would watch the baboons in the field down by the falls today. However it would make a good impression to begin to prepare the morning *sadza*, so he and Mimina could get away before Chieza and the other old men woke up.

Nada went in to wake Mimina. A spasm of repugnance and elation coursed through him as he touched her slender arm. Together they went outside to help the old women prepare the morning meal. Sitting on his haunches and eating great mouthfuls of cornmeal, Nada almost savored his last hours. . . . Last hours pounded in his brain over and over, and his eyes filled as he watched Mimina. Depressed and silent, she picked her way among the gourds flung from the drunken men's hands.

SOON it would be time. Nada showed no emotion but sat silently. A ragged white chicken walked across his dusty foot and left a mark like the brand on a white man's cow. His mind was made up. His plan was worked out. In an hour it would be time for them to hide in the small grass shelter, and when the baboons came down to rob the corn they would shout and throw stones. It was time to go now.

"Mother, Mimina and I will go to the field to watch for baboons—Come, Mimina."

He grasped her hand, which seemed small and delicate. He must be natural; he must not frighten her. The sun behind a wandering cloud left the earth grey and lifeless. The dried veldt, tortured under the blistering sun a moment before, lay dull and inanimate. Only the Sabi flowed relentlessly between banks where ferns grew, dragging their fronds in the sullied water.

Now they arrived at the river's edge, and clinging together, walked slowly down to the falls, which was screened from the kraal by a lace of msasa branches. Nada's whole body felt stiff. His joints ached, and the pounding in his ears did not come from the roar of the Sabi. He dared not look at Mimina, whose soft shoulders rubbed his own. He understood and knew her love

of the veldt, the brawling Sabi, the pitiless burning sun, the night wind in the msasa, and the charm of water caressing their bare bodies. . . . In Mimina's eyes the same camp fires reflected in twin points as they sat close together listening to the endless tales of Chief Tambara. He knew her years had flowed swiftly like some passionate veldt song. . . . Today . . . but he must not think of the present, of now. The water would be cold, not like that in their own pool. . . . Slowly he edged nearer the falls and felt spray cover her body. Mimina strained against him as the water foamed at his feet, beckoning and inevitable. Nada felt Mimina's body slipping swiftly into the current; and then he felt the water swirl around him and throw his body with mighty force against Mimina's. . . . Overhead, blueness had returned to the sky; and the Sabi, secretive and omnipotent, home of the water spirits and his own *mudzimu*, wandered back and forth across the arid land, guarding forever its own secrets.



Books and Cokes---1941

(These are brief condensations of the ten books that students reviewed on the Sketch-sponsored Books and Cokes program this fall. Teachers were barred from the meetings—it was entirely student-organized. The reviews are in chronological order, written by the reviewer. The last two books, *Now in November* and *While Rome Burns*, will be given in December on Thursdays. Don't miss them.)

Read **OF HUMAN BONDAGE** by W. Somerset Maugham. It's a story of Philip Carey, a shy, club-footed Englishman, his life and loves. As he grows up, he tries his hand at various professions, that of an artist, an accountant, and finally a doctor. He has a long, disgusting love affair with a slut named Mildred, she of the pale-green complexion. He starves, lusts, learns, lives.

Strangely enough, the book is mostly true. Philip Carey is Somerset Maugham. The characters are well done because they are drawn from real life. It is an outstanding example of "autobiographical fiction."

Read the book first of all to relax. Read it secondly to learn to live your own life, by knowing about another's.—*Robert E. Lee*

Read **LOOK HOMEWARD ANGEL** by Thomas Wolfe because in this book Wolfe comes close to being what he had it in him to be—the greatest novelist America has ever produced.