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opening extract from

Sophie and the Albino Camel

written by

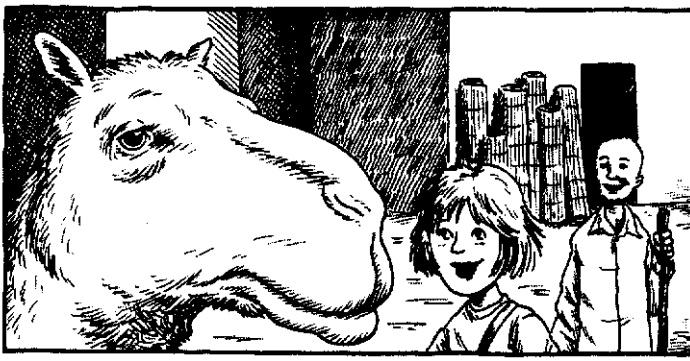
Stephen Davies

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Chapter 1

'Seventy-five francs,' said the fat woman. 'These are the sweetest bananas in Africa.'

Sophie screwed up her face as if she had just swallowed a Saharan sand-slug. 'Forty,' she said.

'Sixty,' said the woman, 'and not a franc less.'

Sophie delved in her pocket and brought out a fifty-franc piece. When she held it up, the small coin gleamed in the dazzling midday sun.

The woman clicked her tongue in disgust. 'Sixty,' she said.

Sophie smiled sweetly at her and began to walk away. One step, two steps, three steps...

'All right!' called the woman. 'Fifty francs, and may God have mercy on you.'

Sophie bought the bunch of bananas, and headed for the charmer's stall. She knew her way around Gorom-Gorom market easily by now. She and her dad had lived in Gorom-Gorom for two years, and she could speak Fulfulde almost as well as the locals.

There was a crowd of people at the charmer's stall and Sophie had to push her way to the front. The charmer, Salif dan Bari, was in full flow. Wrapped around his head was a long green turban, and wrapped around his arm was a long green snake. The snake glared at Sophie with its narrow yellow eyes. Its forked tongue flickered towards her and it hissed. Sophie grinned back at it. She had seen this act too many times to be afraid.

'Meet Mamadou the rope,' said Salif dan Bari, 'the deadliest creature in Africa.'

No one here called a snake a snake. People thought that if you said the word 'snake', the nearest snake would think you were calling it and would come looking for you. So they always said 'rope' instead.

'One bite from Mamadou and you would be dead within three minutes,' said the charmer.

'*Oooh*,' said the crowd, stepping back.

Right on cue the snake reared up and bit Salif dan Bari on the nose. '*Aargh*!' he yelled.

'*Oooh*,' said the crowd again, enjoying themselves immensely.

'*Zorki!*' cried the charmer. 'I've been bitten on the nose by a deadly green rope! What shall I do?'

'Take a Salif rope pill!' yelled a small girl. Sophie recognised the girl from school, but she was not a particular friend of hers. In fact, Sophie did not have any real friends in Gorom-Gorom. Even though she could now speak Fulfulde well, the children at school still kept their distance from her. She knew why, of course. The local children had all grown up together and knew everything about each other. She was a stranger here; she was the weird and wonderful white girl

who spoke with a funny accent and drank filtered water from a plastic bottle. Dad was no help; he was always telling her to make some friends, but it was easier said than done.

'A Salif rope pill,' continued the charmer, holding up a tiny blue tablet. 'Good idea.' He began to sing:

'A rope has nipped you on the nose?
One Salif rope pill will end your woes.
An angry rope attacked your wife?
One Salif rope pill could save her life.'

Salif dan Bari popped the blue tablet into his mouth and sighed. 'Mmmm, I feel better already,' he said.

'Maybe that is because Mamadou the rope has no poison fangs,' shouted someone at the back of the crowd, and everyone laughed.

It was true and they all knew it – Mamadou the rope was fangless and the charmer was a conman. The people of Gorom-Gorom bought Salif rope pills not because they thought the pills were any good but because they enjoyed Salif's show.

*

Sophie continued walking. She enjoyed drinking in the sights and sounds of the market – the brightly coloured robes and headscarves of the women, the baskets of guavas and pawpaws, the huge white pyramids of grain, the cries of tradesmen and children, and the clatter of donkey carts.

Her next stop was the animal park, an area of sand by the lake where people parked their animals. There were clusters of donkeys and a long row of camels, all waiting patiently for their owners to return. Sophie liked the way the donkeys stood in twos, resting their heads on each other's backs. None of *them* was lonely, she thought.

The camels were kneeling in a row, facing the sun. Some of them seemed to be dozing. The animal park attendant was sitting nearby and he also seemed to be dozing.

'Wake up,' cried a short man in a glittery robe, kicking the attendant in the ribs. 'There have been six camels stolen in this area in the last month, and you sit there snoring your head off.'

'I was *pretending* to be asleep,' said the attendant indignantly. 'Lulls the thieves into a false sense of security.'

Then Sophie saw it. At the end of the row was a camel which was white from head to hump to hooves. There were lots of normal brownish camels but then this beautiful white one. She looked at its face. Usually camels look like they are smirking, but this one didn't. It looked serious, maybe even a little sad. It turned its big brown eyes towards Sophie and gazed at her from under half-closed eyelids. Its eyelashes were very long.

'*Salam alaykum*,' said a voice behind her.

Sophie spun round and saw a small boy. He was wearing baggy trousers with patches on both knees, and a yellow shirt with sleeves far too long for him. He was leaning on a long staff and grinning at her.

'*Alaykum asalam*,' said Sophie.

'Ugly, isn't he?' said the boy.

'No, I think he's beautiful,' said Sophie. 'I've never seen a white camel before.'

'And he's never seen a white girl before,' said

the boy. The boy's head was shaved completely bald and his front teeth stuck out a little. He looked friendly.

'What is his name?' asked Sophie.

'Chobbal,' said the boy. Chobbal was a kind of African food – a spicy rice pudding which Sophie did not like very much.

'I've never seen you at Gorom-Gorom school,' said Sophie.

'I don't go. I am a griot.'

Sophie had heard of griots but never met one. Griots were professional storytellers so they knew thousands of stories, riddles and songs. They were experts in African history, too – a good griot could remember the names and adventures of all the warriors and chiefs of his region during the past five hundred years. Whenever there was an important party, a baby's naming ceremony for example, the host of the party would hire a griot to come and sing for the guests. On these occasions the griot's songs were usually about how brave and wise and good-looking the host's ancestors all were.

'Do you want to hear my *tarik*?' said the boy.

'Okay,' said Sophie, not understanding the word.

The boy raised his arms and took a deep breath in, until his whole body seemed to swell up. Then he started to sing in a high-pitched wail:

'Hail, my name is Gidaado the Fourth
Gidaado the son of Alu
Alu son of Hamadou
Hamadou son of Yero
Yero son of Tijani
Tijani son of—'

'Okay,' said Sophie. 'That's enough I think.'

' – Haroun son of Gidaado the Third
Gidaado the Third son of Salif
Salif son of Ali
Ali son of Gorko Bobo—'

'Stop,' said Sophie.

'Gorko Bobo son of Adama
Adama son of Hussein the Tall

Hussein the Tall son of Gid – OUCH!'

'Sorry,' said Sophie, letting go of Gidaado the Fourth's ear.

Gidaado rubbed his ear and scowled. 'What's your name?' he said.

'Sophie,' said Sophie.

'Nice to meet you,' said Gidaado. 'I think.'

'Likewise,' said Sophie.

There was a sound of snoring from behind them. The animal park attendant had fallen asleep again.

'I should be heading back to my village,' said Gidaado.

'Okay,' said Sophie.

'Tell me something, Sofa,' said Gidaado, his face slowly breaking into a grin. 'Would you like a ride on Chobbal?'

Sophie looked at the beautiful white camel and then at Gidaado. Say 'no' to strangers, her dad had always told her. But hadn't he also told her to try and make some friends?

'All right,' said Sophie.



Chapter 2

Chobbal the camel swayed back and forth as he walked, and Sophie held onto the reins tightly. She had sat on a camel before but never gone as far as this. They were out of Gorom-Gorom now, and all around them were the flat sands of the Sahara, dotted here and there with little acacia bushes.

Sophie was worried. She was on the edge of one of the biggest deserts in the world and in her