

Arthur and Opio

Arthur drank greedily from an old plastic container which leaked over his torn shirt, soaking through to his vest. The cool liquid seemed to wash away the hard day's work, as medicine to a fever. He didn't care about the women waiting to fill their jars; it was his turn at the water pump and he worked furiously at the lever to fill his container for a third time.

Ignoring the mutterings and murmurs from the impatient queue, Arthur swung his shovel over his shoulder and set off for home. Stepping out from the shade of the ancient tree made him squint and, for a moment, he thought he saw a cloud the colour of rain on the horizon. Excitedly, he shaded his eyes and peered into the distance, only to see it was nothing but birds flocking together to chase the bright sun from its hazy pink sky.

"One hundred shillings" demanded a small voice. Arthur looked down to the side of the dusty path; it had come from a small boy no older than ten. He wore tattered blue shorts, no top and no shoes.

Arthur raised his eyebrows "What is your name?" he asked politely, instantly taking pity on the small boy.

"Opio" replied the boy, "You will give me one hundred shillings for beating you to the bridge!"

"And if I win?" teased Arthur.

"Cassava!" shouted the boy, holding up a large white root towards Arthur with a huge grin on his face. It looked as if he'd already been chewing on it.

Now Arthur had grown up in this district and knew the shortest route from the borehole to the bridge; he could easily outrun this young boy. His hands and arms were tired from mixing cement all day, but his legs still had enough strength in them to run. A nice bit of cassava would make his journey home more pleasant, and he would tip the boy five shillings anyway, for being so cheeky.

"Okay. Go!" Arthur shouted and left the boy standing in a cloud of dust as he sprinted off towards the river.

Arthur laughed to himself as he hurtled around the last few bushes, shovel gripped tight and panting for breath. He hadn't ran this fast in a long time and it made him feel so alive! He bounded up to the bridge and slowed down a little to check behind him, although there was no sign of little Opio. When he turned back however, his heart nearly stopped.

There, sitting on the bridge, legs swinging high over the tiny stream down below, was little Opio. He hardly looked out of breath! He just sat there and smiled at Arthur, chewing on his cassava wearing his tatty blue shorts and a cheeky grin. Unbelievable. Arthur felt so ashamed that he'd lost half a day's wages because of his pride. As he solemnly handed the money over to Opio, the little boy handed him what was left of the cassava saying "Here's a tip!"

Arthur stumbled wearily back to his hut, dragging his shovel in the dust behind him, still bewildered over his defeat.

Cassava: Cassava is a nutty-flavoured, starchy root vegetable.