

Nimba, the Cave Girl

By R. T. M. Scott

MANY thousands of years ago, when the poles of the earth were its pleasant spots and when the tropics were too hot for human life, Nimba grew to her full height and was still a maid.

Many had been her suitors, but, from the time she had pulled down her first wild animal, she had lived much apart from others of her kind and had become known as a mighty traveler and hunter. She could run a hundred miles in one day over the worst kind of country, and she had matched her brains successfully against the most wonderful of animal cunning. Unaided, she could support herself, and she did not want a mate—at least, not yet.

Somewhere, not far south of what is now called James Bay, is a beautiful lake lying between steep-sloping, wood-covered hills. At one end of this lake a great boulder once stood, heaving its huge mass a full hundred feet above the water. At its back the steep hillside gave access to its summit. At its front the water rippled or dashed against one hundred feet of straight wall.

Yet not quite perfect was this wall. In its very center, and slightly overhanging the lake, was a tiny cave, an irregular cavity large enough to shelter two or three people. Fifty feet above the water and fifty feet below the top of the great rock, this natural shelter against rain or enemy seemed inaccessible to anything without wings. But the skin of a long-haired animal was stretched to dry against the back of this little cave—pegged to the cracks and crannies by means of great thorns. Scattered here and there were bleached bones—relics of past meals eaten by Nimba.

IT WAS a hot afternoon, and the sun was beating the earth in its usual relentless fury. To the south the great cloud-masses of steam were rising and tumbling upon themselves in rain, only to revaporize and rise again.

The air was still with a breathless quiet, which presaged continued fine weather and little danger of the hot humidity of the south, being blown northward. On the eastern horizon a mighty mountain belched its head off and sent a column of fire into the sky that rivaled the glare of the sun.

Suddenly the bushes parted behind the great rock-sentinel of the lake. Nimba sprang out and ran to the highest vantage point. There she stood, motionless, gazing at the burning mountain. Fire did not frighten her as it did the creatures which ran on four legs; rather it attracted her.

She stood long, viewing the new magnificence of the eastern horizon, her coppery-tanned skin glistening in the sun and her firm young breasts rising and falling as if they, too, saw and wondered in dreamy contemplation. Lithe were her legs and arms, and slender her waist, with hips full big but boy-like in their taper. Her hair was bound with little tendrils into a cue that reached below her waist and then was doubled to keep it off the ground. Sunburned, its hue was a golden glory. A deep scar marked her face, but this only added to its barbaric beauty.

Of a sudden, she bent as in the act of listening and then leaped back into the bushes, only to return with a small animal she had killed, and dragging behind her a stout creeper of great length. Fastening one end of the creeper to a jutting rock, she threw the other

end over the face of the great boulder and, holding with one hand the animal's leg, lowered herself to the cave in the wall with all the agility of a monkey.

Scarcely had she entered her tiny abode before she noticed that her creeper ladder was being violently agitated from above. She leaned far out from her cove in a perilous manner and saw descending toward her a long pair of hairy legs followed by the rest of a man.

Picking up a stout club from the back of Her cave, Nimba waited until the legs came within reach and then caught the man a blow on his thigh that caused him to yell lustily and to ascend a few feet with great rapidity.

He did not entirely retreat, however, but, turning around like a caterpillar on a thread, again descended, this time head first in order to keep a bright outlook.

NIMBA now saw the man's face, and she disliked it more than his legs. Her small features convulsed with rage, and she spat at him and beat the wall with her club in a frenzy. She knew him well.

He was Oomba, one of the strong and cruel men of her tribe. When he was fifteen he had killed his grandfather for a stoneheaded club. He had caught the old man unawares, which act of caution had been construed as timidity so that he had few friends until he became too strong to withstand.

When Oomba had descended until his face was within twelve inches beyond the reach of the girl's club, he hung there, gloating over her with greedy, lustful eyes. For half an hour he hung, face downward, sensuously intoning to the infuriated girl.

"With me hunt! With me eat! With me sleep!"

At the end of half an hour Nimba was still spitting at him and still club-being the wall with unabated energy.

"Oomba go! Oomba go! Me you will

not touch!" she screamed at intervals. Finally Oomba climbed back to the top of the rock—but he did not give up. He pulled the great creeper up after him. He would trap the little spiccat, he thought, and so tame her. But he did not know Nimba. As soon as the object of her hatred became lost to sight Nimba calmed herself. When she saw her rope of escape withdrawn she waited for some time in silence. Then she stepped to the edge of her cave home—and her body flashed forward through the sunlit air like a gleam of gold. For fifty feet the gleam curved, then struck the water silently like a knife. Fifteen yards from where she struck, Nimba's face appeared above the surface glancing upward toward the top of the rock.

Oomba peering over the rock, witnessed Nimba's mighty dive. For a moment he scowled at her before dashing into the bushes just as Nimba swam into shallow water.

NIMBA rose near the shore, her club dripping in her hand. She bounded along the rough shore line, keeping at least ankle deep in the water. Rounding a small, wooded point, she came to an overhanging bough upon which she climbed.

Here she broke two or three small branches and sped on into the next tree and the next, throwing herself from limb to limb and breaking small branches in her flight. Finally she broke a very small branch and leaped into a densely foliaged tree without so much as crushing a leaf. And here she ensconced herself from sight.

Her trap was laid. She clung to a limb as silent and watchful as any animal of prey, her lone club between her young body and the bark on which she lay.

The minutes passed while Nimba's dark eyes kept constant watch through the green leaves that formed her mask. Abruptly, as she watched, a young man stepped out and

stood beneath her tree. Strong and straight was he. His eyes were bright and the hair on his face was short and soft. Not a leaf rustled as Nimba watched with growing interest. Below her the man stood quietly scenting the air.

Suddenly a twig snapped, and the young man turned like a flash, only to receive Oomba's mighty club full on the head. So silently had Oomba approached that the listening Nimba had not detected the slightest sound. Now he stood looking down at his victim and contemptuously turning the bleeding head from side to side with his foot, quite unconscious of any lurking danger.

Clinging only by her feet from the bough upon which she had been lying, Nimba readied down and swung her club with vicious force upon the side of Oomba's head. Beside his own victim he fell, while Nimba dropped lightly to the ground, turning in the air like a cat and landing upon her feet.

Quickly she dragged Oomba to one side, where two rocks abutted, and wedged his head vice-like between them. Then she beat it with her club until it had no shape at all and the leaves and little green things nearby were spattered with blood. There was no doubt about it: Oomba was dead.

GREAT satisfaction showed on Nimba's face when her bloody task was done.

She washed the blood from her body in the lake and returned to examine the young man who had first been struck down. Apparently satisfied with his condition, she picked him up and, trailing her bloody club, returned to her great rock at the head of the lake. Here she found the creeper where Oomba had left it and experienced little difficulty in climbing down to the privacy of her cave with the senseless man under one arm.

Two trips she made for water, which was carried in a gourd and stored in a hollow in the cave floor. This done, Nimba washed the young man's face, wet his hair and propped him in a corner to recover his senses.

Her work of mercy finished, Nimba turned her attention to the animal which she had killed earlier in the day. Dragging it from its corner, she placed both feet upon the body while she tore off a leg with one furious wrench. As the sun was setting and the deep purple of the hills became bordered with gold, Nimba commenced the one meal of the day to which she was accustomed. It would soon be time to sleep.

Almost as the last shaft of sunlight shot over the distant hills consciousness returned to the young man as he sat propped in the corner of the cave. Slowly he looked about him. He rose to his feet and walked to the edge of the cave, where he gazed down at the lake and examined the dangling creeper down which he had been carried.

Finally the young man approached Nimba, who had stopped eating and was silently watching him. Her mouth bloody from her raw repast. He dragged the animal from her side and shoved her into a corner, where a jagged stone cut her shoulder, causing the blood to flow. Having eaten his fill, the man lay down to sleep.

The great moon rose and silvered the sleeping lake. A night-bird screeched as it swept by the entrance to the cave and Nimba crept from her corner. Still bleeding, she stretched herself beside the sleeping man. Her body touched his and some blood from her shoulder mingled with his in a tiny pool.

Below them, in the water, a reptile splashed its way among the reeds. Nimba and her master slept.

Nimba had taken her mate.