

On the Great Caravan Road

Sights and Scenes from Tripoli to the Coast

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On the Great Caravan Road

A dusty track winding through the bush, the same now as it has been for hundreds upon hundreds of years; a trade route when London was a cluster of mud huts;—such is one of the oldest of the many wonderful old roads of the world which are one by one becoming doomed under the march of civilization.

Running across Africa, from sea to sea, it starts at Tripoli, through date-palm groves, past Roman monuments and ruins, through deep rocky gorges out into the scorching sand of the Sahara.

Then from the thin bush country north of Lake Tchad, the home of the white oryx, it comes at last to the rich corn-lands and rolling grasses of Kano—a city unheard of by “the man in the street,” yet the great centre of native trade both now and for the last two thousand years. Then on to the south-west it goes again through Zaria, Kontagora, Ilorin, and many towns great and small, dwindling gradually away to end, as a mere bush track, in the fever-haunted swamps of the West Coast.

Passing through the territory of many races and tribes—Aabs, Touaregs, Hansas, Nupes, Pagans, Cannibals—the road belongs to the Hansas—who, unlike any other native African races, are not content to stay in their own villages and cultivate the land, but trade with other races, and are perhaps the greatest travellers of the earth.

Watch the life on the great road, almost kaleidoscopic in its movements and colour. Across the road in a little wayside market, a dozen women are sitting under a shady tree, each with her baskets and dishes of food for sale to passers-by. Wooden bowls full of milk, balls of cooked meat rolled in flour, little scraps of meat in yellow batter and skewered on a slip of cane, limes, bananas, kola-nuts, sugar cane, native sweets, and many other eatables make the show of provisions they sell. A line of tall, forked sticks stands alongside the “market.” In the fork of these the carriers lean one end of their load, resting the other end on the six-foot stick they carry for the purpose. In this way there is no trouble in lifting the heavy loads from the ground on to their heads, and the forked sticks, standing ready for them, induce weary travellers to rest and buy food.

A string of white-clad Hausa traders comes along, each man armed with a sword and carrying a tightly corded basket—

kola-nuts, no doubt—and they have probably been down the niger to the coast to buy them. From the north appears a drove of live stock—little brown goats, tall leggy, black-and-white Hausa sheep with big curly horns, white cattle with black ears; and behind them the Fulani herdsmen—tall, wild-looking men dressed in rags, each carrying a bundle of long spears slung over his left shoulder, the broad points resting in a leather bucket. Behind the drove is the owner, mounted on a scraggy little brown pony, and appearing more like a shapeless bundle of white cloth than a man. His voluminous white turban is down to his eyebrows—one fold of it covering his entire face up to the eyes.

Then comes a mixed drove of pack-donkeys and pack-bulls—the donkeys small but well fed—each with its panniers of raw hide, or baskets of matting. The pack-cattle are huge beasts with long horns and humps like the Indian Brahmin bulls. They are loaded with a heterogeneous collection of merchandise—grain, sleeping-mats, cooking-utensils; and on top of one such load sits a very old man, white haired, white bearded, and shrivelled—almost more like a solemn old monkey than a man.

Then there is a clatter of hoofs and a jingling of chains and bits as a gorgeous party goes by—evidently one of the Emir's chief men and his followers. Ahead of the party run two men carrying black silver-tipped wands and shouting the name and titles of the great man. He himself is dressed in the usual flowing, green-embroidered, white robe and white turban, and wears an outer cloak of dark blue. His horse's trappings are a blaze of colour, adorned with triangles and squares of many-coloured leather, a fringe of jingling little metal plates hanging all over the unfortunate beast's face and eyes, and a broad collar round its neck. The saddle covered with embroidered red leather, has an enormous peak and cantle; and wherever there is room, on saddle or saddle cloth, is embroidery or leather-work. The whole effect is gorgeous.

Behind the great man comes his retinue, clad in all the colours of the rainbow. So the cavalcade disappears in a cloud of dust towards the distant city: the ponies prancing and curveting, urged on by spurs yet restrained by the cruel spiked bits.

The great road runs along to the city whose red clay walls can be dimly seen in the distance; the "Harmattan"—the dry wind from the desert—is blowing, and shrouding the land with a grey silvery haze.

Just outside the gate the place is swarming with donkeys, cattle, sheep, and goats. The packs and loads of the animals are ranged in long lines on the bare ground, with the owners or their slaves keeping watch. The pungent smoke of the cowdung fires gives an extra twinge of pain to eyes already sore and smarting from the dust of the great road.

The walls are falling into ruins; for there being no war in the country, the need to keep them in repair no longer exists. Two or three camels are coming out through the narrow gate, taking up as much of the road as they can—dirty dun-coloured brutes, supercilious and evil looking, well deserving of their name as the most ill-tempered of beasts.

"Unclean! unclean! Pity, in the name of Allah!" Sitting in the niche of the gate and on the shady side of the street within the gate, are the lepers—"the halt, the maimed, and the blind"—showing hands without fingers, legs without feet, turning up dull sightless eyes—all maimed and crippled by leprosy. They sit at the gates of the city asking for alms as they did at the dawn of Christianity, asking and getting.

An old man dressed in rags passes in through the gate, driving a donkey loaded with ears of corn; he pulls out a bundle of ears and drops them into a wooden bowl on the ground before one poor cripple. An old woman, bent and shrivelled, hobbles along bearing a great bundle of firewood: she must have carried it far, and she is old and weak; yet she spares a few sticks for a woman with only one foot. Many of the passers-by have something to give—a piece of sugar-cane, some cooked meal, or some cowrie-shells. It is a pitiful sight.

Within the walls is a veritable maze of narrow streets bounded by high mud walls, each man's house or hut being enclosed in its own compound. There are a few trees—paw-paws with their crowns of great leaves on a tall bare stem, the fruit clustering thickly below the crown; fan palms with festoons of great golden fruits; other palms, tall and feathery; limes, and here and there great shady trees under which men find shelter from the burning sun. In the evenings these trees, the palms especially, are the resting-places of innumerable birds. On one beautiful palm will be, perhaps, twenty or thirty vultures—loathsome, dun-coloured birds with bare red necks and evil eyes. The next tree looks from a distance as though covered with snow, for a great flock of white egrets have made it their roosting-place.

From far away can be heard the roar of human voices in the "big market." It is to the market that the great caravan road leads, as also do scores of other roads and paths. By

pushing a way through the crowd one sees how news can travel in Africa. They say that the people in the market often number from thirty to forty thousand, and among them are found travellers from many parts. One big caravan has just crossed the desert from Tripoli; several small ones have arrived from the coast. Ask the traders where they come from, and the names they tell will remind one of the stories read in youthful days: Timbuctoo, Sokoto, Bonny, Brass, Old Calabar; perhaps, even places in the terrible forests and swamps of the Congo.

Get them to talk of life on the great road, and you will hear strange stories of attacks on caravans by the Touareg of the desert, of slave raids in which they themselves took part, of battle, murder, and sudden death. Or, perhaps, they will tell how only a few years ago the people of one small town killed a white man, and how, after the troops had battered down the walls and stormed the town, the Sultan of Sokoto caused every wall and house to be levelled to the ground; the site of the town, the gardens, the crops—everything in fact—to be ploughed up, and sprinkled with salt: finally a curse to be put on it so that no man should ever dwell there again.

The beating of drums near by promises an entertainment of some sort; and, at times, above the sound of the drums, a squeaking noise, which somehow seems familiar, is heard. The crowd parts to let the white men see the fun, and reveals a genuine native Punch-and-Judy show (with Punch's squeak and all complete), but no Dog Toby. Some of the dolls are the ordinary rag variety; but most are past description, for the Hausas like their jokes broad.

Bow now for the stage and players. The "stage" consists of the chief performer's white robe supported on three sticks; underneath this he sits and shows his dolls through the neck-opening of the robe. The players number six in all; one young man alongside the stage carries on comic conversations with the dolls, two other men play most energetically on big drums, two quite good-looking young women squat on the ground singing and beating time on large tin bowls, which also serve to receive contributions of cowries from the spectators.

After a time the principal performer emerges from under the "stage" to make his bow. He is a big splendidly built man, with his mop of hair plaited into about a dozen tails, which stand out all round in the most fantastic fashion. His principal garment is a really fine kilt of fringed and ornamented leather strips, and round his ankles are wound long pieces of chain which jingle as he dances.

Another entertainment is in progress close by. A young man stands in the middle of a circle of amused spectators, playing vigorously on a small drum, which he holds tucked under his left arm. He stands in a crouching attitude, intently watching the crowd. Then some one throws a shell which he catches in his mouth; then another, and others as fast as a man can toss them to him, much to the delight of the crowd. Evidently it is quite a lucrative profession, judging by the contents of the bowl into which he disgorges his takings when his mouth gets inconveniently full.

These Hausas are quite clever weavers, and large quantities of native cloth are on sale in the market. A house near by is a regular factory. In the doorway sit two or three women spinning threads from the raw cotton; inside the hut are the men working at the looms, the shuttles flying to and fro to the accompaniment of a song in the high-pitched falsetto so dear to the African native. Another woman is cleaning raw cotton, making it ready for the spinners; and from the inner courtyard comes the rhythmic thudding of the clothbeaters' wooden mallets.

They are sitting, six of them, in front of a big log of wood over which the cloth is stretched, keeping time with their mallets to the leader's song. The scene shows in an almost startling manner what changes the white men bring with them wherever they go. Several thousand years ago, cloth was being made exactly as these Hausas are making it now; but in a very few years their weaving will be a thing of the past. The railway is coming, and native looms cannot compete with Manchester.

But let us leave the market now, and come out into the great road again, to where the caravans are camping down for the night. The sun is setting in a golden haze of dust, the Harmattan has died away, and the smoke of the cowdung fires rises straight up in the still air. The scene is a busy one; cattle are being rounded up, donkeys picketed in long lines close by the pack saddles and loads, and horses hobbled and tethered—each to his own peg.

Darkness comes over the land, and the busy camp settles down to rest. The cowdung fires glow with a dull red light in the gathering dusk, while here and there a wood-fire flashes and sparkles. The full moon is rising behind the city, glowing crimson through the smoke and the dust, which still linger in the air. Ghostly white-robed figures move silently through the encampment, their bare feet make no sound on the hard smooth earth, as they wend their way among the lines of tethered animals to the place of prayer. Soon the

leader's voice is heard intoning the evening prayer—a high-pitched melancholy chant, followed by a muffled impressive murmur as the white-clad worshippers bow their foreheads to the dust and proclaim that God is Great. Then the worshippers silently disperse, and the business and the duties of the day are finished.

The moon rides high in the sky, her radiance now undimmed; the laughter and talk have ceased, and all is quiet, when savage cries bring the nearest men quickly to their feet. It is nothing unusual, only a stallion who has broken loose, and is attacking another. Biting, kicking, and screaming like four-legged fiends, they are separated with difficulty and peace reigns once more.

Out on the plain a hyena howls mournfully, and is answered by others; nightjars and owls whistle and hoot overhead, and the spirits of the African night hold their sway over the land, until once more the cry of "Allah akhbar!" (God is Great!) announces the dawn—the coming of a new day—and again the unceasing bustle and toil begins on the wonderful great caravan road.