THE LONG TRAIL

A STORY OF
AFRICAN ADVENTURE

BY

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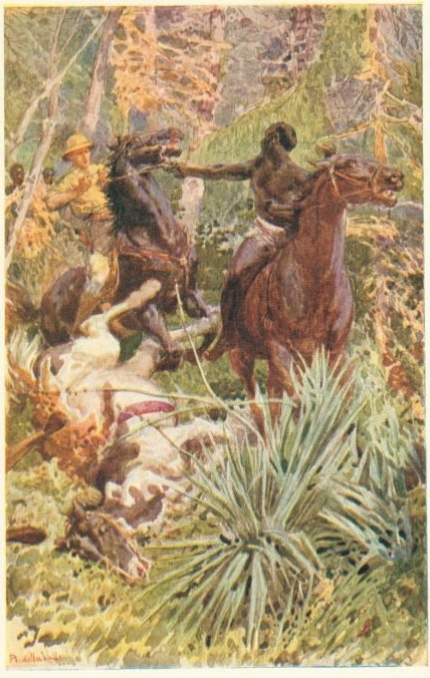
Table of Contents



GORUBA AT BAY. [*See page* 268

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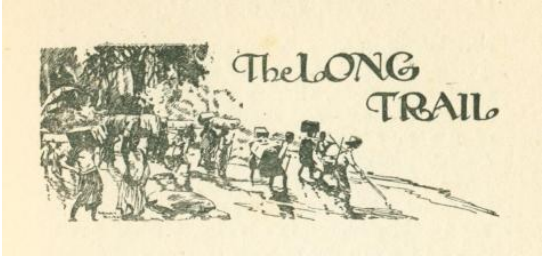
The LONG TRAIL



CHAPTER I
THE RUINED VILLAGE

On the afternoon of a certain day in spring a party of eighteen men was marching through the rocky, bush-covered country near the north-western corner of Lake Chad, in Northern Nigeria. It consisted of two white men, in khaki and sun helmets, and sixteen stalwart Hausas, wearing nothing but their loin-cloths, but carrying on their heads boxes and bundles of all shapes and sizes. The white men and nine of the negroes had rifles slung over their backs.

They were marching wearily. Since early morning, almost without stopping, they had been trudging their toilsome way over parched and barren land, only once discovering a water-hole at which they were able to slake their burning thirst.

For the greater part of the day the sun had beat upon them fiercely; but the sky was now overclouded, and a keen north-east wind had sprung up—the harmattan of the desert—blowing full in their faces, stinging their skins and filling mouths and ears and nostrils with the particles of fine grey dust which it swept along in its desolating course.

The jaded carriers, who were wont to enliven the march with song and chatter, were now silent. The two Englishmen in advance, bending forward to keep the grit out of their eyes, tramped along, side by side, with an air of dejection and fatigue.

"We are down on our luck, old man," said Hugh Royce presently, turning his back upon the wind. "The village can't be far

away, if Drysdale's map is correct; but we can't go on much farther without a long rest."

"It's rank bad luck, as you say," replied Tom Challis. "It's not as if we had been over-marching; we've really taken it pretty easy; but we didn't reckon with sickness. These Hausas look as strong as horses, but I doubt whether half of them will be able to lift their loads to-morrow."

"When we get to the village, we'll let them slack for a day or two, and dose them well. I'll tell John; it will encourage them to stick it a little longer."

He beckoned up a strapping negro, the head-man of the company, upon whom a former employer had bestowed the name John in place of his own—a succession of clicks and gurgles which white men found unpronounceable. Telling him the decision just come to, the leader of the expedition ordered him to acquaint the men with it, and urge them to persevere a little longer.

The weary, willing carriers perked up a little at the prospect of a holiday, and began to talk to one another of how much they would eat. It did not matter, they agreed, if they made themselves ill, for the little balls out of the white men's bottles would soon set them to rights again.

Hugh Royce was one of those hardy persons whom wealth does not spoil. Inheriting, at the age of twenty-three, a large fortune from an uncle, he resolved to realise his dearest ambition—to travel into some little-known region of the world, not for mere sport, but to study its animals and birds, and add something to the general stock of knowledge.

A chance meeting with a friend of his, named Drysdale, who had just returned from a sporting expedition in Nigeria, led him to choose that country as a promising field of discovery.

Being sociably inclined, he wanted a companion. Drysdale himself could not join him, but he happened to mention that traces of tin had recently been found near one of the tributaries of the River Yo. This led Royce to think of his school-fellow, Tom Challis, a mining engineer who was not getting on so fast as he would have liked. He went to Challis and proposed that they should go together, Challis to prospect for tin, while he himself pursued his studies in natural history.

"If things look well," he said, "we'll start a tin mine, and go half-shares."

"That's hardly fair to you, as you're going to stand all expenses," replied Challis. "I shall be satisfied with a quarter."

"You're too modest, Tom. Well, I want your company, so I'll agree to a third, nothing less. So that's settled."

Royce purchased a quantity of tinned goods; medical stores; prints, mirrors, and beads for trading with the natives; rifles and ammunition; a tent and other necessaries; and they left Southampton one February day for the Gold Coast. Here they engaged a staff of experienced Hausa carriers—called "boys," whatever their age might be—and started for the interior.

That was several weeks ago, and they were now approaching the tin-bearing region marked on the map with which Drysdale had provided his friend.

About an hour after the promise of a rest had stimulated the carriers, they were further encouraged by striking a native track, which indicated the proximity of a village. Tired as they were, they quickened their pace, and another half-hour's march brought them to cultivated fields of millet and ground-nuts.

The white men, walking ahead of the party, looked forward eagerly for the conical roofs of the village huts, which they expected to see rising above the crops in the distance, and were surprised to find that nothing of the sort was in sight.

"It must be a bigger place than I thought," said Royce. "A small village wouldn't have such extensive fields. Drysdale marks the people as friendly; I hope we shall find them so."

The narrow track wound through the fields, high stalks growing on either side. A sudden turn brought them in sight of an object which caused them to halt, and struck them with a foreboding of ill.

Lying in a curiously huddled posture across the track was the body of a black man.

Insensibly lightening their tread, they approached it, and found that the man was dead, and bore marks of slashing and defacement.

"There's been bad work here," said Royce in a whisper.

They looked ahead; no one was in sight. They listened; there was not a sound but the chirping of insects in the crops.

Unslinging their rifles, they went slowly on, oppressed with a sense of tragedy; and a few steps more disclosed a scene for which their discovery of the dead man had partly prepared them. The

absence of the well-known conical roofs was explained. The site of what had once been a flourishing village was now desolate, a black waste. Great heaps of ashes marked the spots where the cane huts had stood, and here and there lay bodies stiff in death, from which a number of sated carrion birds rose noisily into the air at the approach of men.

Their hearts sank as they contemplated the pitiful scene. It was a new thing in their experience, though it represented one of the commonest of tragedies in that region. The village had recently been raided by a more powerful neighbour; its men had been killed, its women and children carried off into slavery.

Happily, such raids are becoming less frequent as the Great Powers strengthen their grip on the areas marked on the maps as their spheres of influence. But in the remoter parts of those vast territories, life still proceeds much as it has done for hundreds or thousands of years past.

The horror of the scene, the misery it represented, sank deep into the hearts of the two Englishmen. And mingled with the distress which every humane person must have felt, was their consciousness of the bearing this discovery would have upon their own situation. They had hoped to make this village their resting-place, to give their men time to recover from the sickness which had crept upon them of late, to renew their store of fresh provisions. But it was now late in the afternoon; the next village marked on the map was fifteen or twenty miles away; the fatigue and weakness of the carriers rendered it impossible for the expedition to advance so far.

"We are indeed down on our luck," said Challis gloomily. "This will just about be the finishing stroke for our boys."

"They can't move another step, that's certain," said Royce. "We shall have to camp somewhere about here for the night. Here they are. Look at their faces! I never saw fright so clearly expressed. We must put the best face on it with them."

The carriers had halted at the edge of the village clearing, and stood like images of terror and despair. Royce went up to them.

"This is very bad, John," he said to the head-man. "Keep the boys as cheerful as you can. They had better put down their loads against those palm-trees yonder. Find the village well, and get some water; then the strongest of them must build a zariba for the night. Get up our tent, and then we'll talk things over."

"Boys 'fraid of Tubus, sah."

"Tubus?"

"Yes, sah—Tubus done dat."

"How do you know?"

"Savvy cuts on black fella's face, sah. Tubus' knives done dat."

"Well, they needn't be afraid. The Tubus won't come again; if they did, they wouldn't face our rifles. Fix things up, and then come back. We'll see what can be done."

CHAPTER II
THE FIGHT AT DAWN

Royce knew the Tubus by repute as a fierce and bloodthirsty tribe, living in French territory beyond the River Yo, whose raids across the border were notorious. It was certainly to be hoped that the peaceful objects of his expedition would not be hindered by encounters with those turbulent savages.

The first consideration, however, was the welfare of his boys. They depended for their food on the willingness of the natives to sell. Hitherto there had been no difficulty in this respect; but they carried only enough for a few days' supply, and at present their provisions were exhausted. The crops of this village were not yet ripe; the village itself was absolutely bare; it was of the first importance that food should be obtained at once.

As a result of a consultation with Challis and the headman, Royce decided to push on with John to the next village and buy food there.

"What if that has been raided too?" suggested Challis, as they talked it over.

"We must hope for the best," Royce answered.

"And it's pretty risky, you two going alone through a country recently raided."

"How long ago were the Tubus here, do you think?" Royce asked John.

"Two free days, sah."

"Well, then, it's likely that they've gone back to their own ground. For us it's a choice of two evils, and we must chance it. With good luck, we shall get to the next village before dark. I'll engage carriers there, and we ought to be back here with plenty of grub by to-morrow night."

They set off. Both were in good condition, and they made rapid progress. But the country was trackless, and Royce could only direct his course roughly by Drysdale's map.

The short dusk was falling without their having come on any signs of human dwellings. In another half-hour it would be quite dark, and Royce reluctantly but prudently decided that they must take shelter for the night, for fear of becoming hopelessly lost, and go on in the morning.

The country was bare, consisting of rocky ground sparsely covered with scrub. It offered nothing that gave promise of a comfortable defence against the night cold, and Royce had almost reconciled himself to spending the hours in the open when suddenly he caught sight, on the crest of a low hill about a mile to the left, of what appeared to be the ruins of a small building. Such ruins are to be met with here and there in the remotest depths of the great continent, the relics of ancient civilisations long vanished. There were no signs of life about this building, and Royce resolved to take shelter there.

They struck off to the left, climbed the hill, and, after a careful survey of the neighbourhood, approached the ruin. It turned out to be a dismantled stone fort, overgrown in parts with vegetation, but in a fair state of preservation. The outer wall was complete; inside,

the principal chamber, which had once, no doubt, been the headquarters of a garrison, was roofless, and such timber-work as there had been was either burnt or had been carried away. Some smaller rooms were still covered from the sky, and it was in one of these that Royce determined to repose during the night.

They had brought with them a few biscuits and a small tin of preserved mutton, and they made a meagre supper. John having noticed, as they approached the fort, the runs of ground game among the bushes, set a few snares, in the hope of providing next day's breakfast. He returned with a huge armful of leaves and grasses to spread on the stone floor of the room chosen for their night's lodging.

"It's the first time I've been littered down like a horse," said Royce to himself, with faint amusement. "There's no telling what one may come to!"

"No berry comfy, sah," said John, when he had laid these rough beds in opposite corners. "All can do."

"It will do very well, John," returned Royce. "I suppose we shan't be disturbed by lions or any other unpleasant visitors?"

"No fink so, sah."

"Should we light a fire, do you think?"

"No, sah; no good. Fire make lions 'fraid; oh yes! but no make bad mans 'fraid."

"I see—it might drive off beasts, but attract men? Very well. I don't suppose I shall sleep much, anyway."

Royce had often admired the negro's ability to sleep anywhere and at any time, and to awake to full alertness and activity in a moment. Like a dog, he seems to have no need of the preliminary yawnings and stretchings to which a civilised man has accustomed himself. John fell asleep as soon as he had curled himself up on his grass bed. His master lay awake for a long time, listening to the rustle of the wind in the foliage that clothed the ruins, fancying that he heard the grunt of a lion and the bark of a jackal far away, thinking of Challis in his camp, and of the terrible scene of desolation in the ruined village.

A more experienced traveller would have taken that matter philosophically; Royce was greatly perturbed. He pictured in his mind the barbarians swooping upon the village, the massacre and pillage, the driving of women and children into slavery; and he shuddered at the misery which had fallen upon simple and inoffensive people.

He felt anxiety, too, about the future of his own little company. The region of which he was in search was apparently situated near the lands of the Tubus, the raiding tribe whose name was dreaded by his boys; and the prospect of coming into conflict with them made him uneasy. Not that he was a coward, or shrank from the possible necessity of fighting; but his object was peaceable, and he wished with all his heart that it might be attained without offence to the native peoples, without the shedding of blood. Yet his indignation burnt so fiercely within him, that he knew he would not be able to refrain from striking a blow for any hapless villagers who might be threatened with disaster at the hands of a savage enemy.

Turning over these things in his mind, and envying John, whose loud breathing proclaimed that no anxieties disturbed his repose, he lay wakeful for several hours, until he, too, fell asleep. He slept very heavily, as might have been expected of a man tired out by exhausting marches under a hot sun. The night was cool, the atmosphere was pure, and the young Englishman's rest was as peaceful as though there were no wild beast or savage man in the world.

When he awoke, the ghostly light of dawn was glimmering in the open doorway of the room. Like his countrymen everywhere, he turned over on his back, stretched himself, rubbed his eyes, and sat up. Where was John? The heap of grass in the opposite corner was vacant.

"He's gone to examine his snares, I suppose," he said to himself. "I wonder if there's a stream where I can take a dip."

He rose, stretched himself again, feeling a little stiff, walked through the doorway, and entered one of the passages that led to the outside. He was just turning a corner when, with a suddenness that took him all aback, he came face to face with a negro, a man of huge stature, topping him by several inches.

The white man and the black were equally surprised. Both came to a halt, and stood eyeing each other for a moment in silence.

The passage was open to the sky, but the light of morning was as yet so faint that neither could see very clearly.

All at once the negro, with a roar like that of a wild beast, whipped a curved sword out of a belt about his waist, and,

springing forward, delivered a furious sweeping cut which, if it had taken effect, must have severed Royce's head from his shoulders.

Fortunately for him, however, he was quick of eye and wit, and nimble in his movements. At school he had had no match in boxing and fencing. Being absolutely unarmed, he had no means of parrying the stroke; but he dropped on one knee, and the scimitar whistled within an inch of his crown, striking with a crashing stroke the wall on his right hand.

While the negro was still bent forward with the force of his blow, Royce sprang low at his knees, and, tugging them towards him, brought the man with a thud to the floor. The sword fell from his hand and clashed on the stone flags, and Royce reached down to get hold of it. But the negro sprang to his feet with agility amazing in so huge a man, and hurled himself upon the Englishman.

Royce had just time to straighten himself and prevent himself from being thrown down; the next moment the negro's arms were about him; he felt hot breath upon his face, and saw the gleaming teeth and infuriated eyes of a man from whom he knew he could expect no mercy.

He was well acquainted with the styles of wrestling in vogue in England—the Cumberland, the Devon, the Lancashire; but he was instantly aware that the negro's method was none of these. It was, in fact, a form of wrestling like that which had been practised ages ago in the Olympic games, and had no doubt been introduced into Northern Africa by the Romans in the days of Cæsar and Pompey. It resembled the catch-as-catch-can style of Lancashire more nearly than the lighter styles with which Royce was familiar.