

IN WILD AFRICA

*ADVENTURES OF TWO YOUTHS IN A
JOURNEY THROUGH THE SAHARA DESSERT*

BY

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CHAPTER XVII.

A TOWN IN MOTION — STORY FROM THE NIGER.

AFTER the caravan had crossed the river, another day was consumed in arranging everything, as the baggage, during the transit of the stream, had become very much mixed up. There was a disturbance in camp that night, caused by lions prowling in the vicinity. Several of the horses broke their halters, and the rest tried very hard to do the same; fortunately, those that managed to free themselves were so frightened that they refused to leave their companions and so remained within the camp. If they had been less alarmed than they were, it is probable that they would have run away.

The whole camp was aroused, and our friends came out with their rifles, with the hope of being able to lay their disturbers low, but the night was so dark that it was impossible to see anything more than a few yards away. The chief camel driver thought that if the doctor and the youths would go outside the camp and hunt around they might be able to find the lions, but, as far as could be observed, the trio did not show an inclination to go out upon that hunt. The doctor suggested that the camel driver accompany them and show the way; whereupon that individual discovered an imperative necessity for his remaining with his animals.

In the hope of scaring away whatever carnivorous beasts might be in the neighborhood, our friends fired several shots in the air, which evidently had the desired effect, as the horses and camels became quiet after awhile, and our friends went back to their tent and to bed again. Soon after sunrise in the morning the caravan was under way, and the river was left behind.

About the middle of the forenoon the party met the most picturesque caravan they had yet seen on the road. We will turn to Ned's journal for a description of it:—

“I couldn't find out,” said Ned, “exactly what it all meant, but it seemed like a village or town on the move. Altogether there must have been two hundred camels, and more than that number of horses, donkeys, and pack-oxen. As for the people, I don't believe there were fewer than seven or eight hundred, and they were of all ages, classes, and I could almost say colors; certainly there were two or three shades of black on their faces, and as many shades of red, none of them being at all light. The men were mostly mounted on horses or camels, and the women and children either rode on donkeys or oxen or walked by their sides.

“Nearly every beast of burden in the caravan carried something in addition to his rider or riders, and their burdens were mostly household goods and provisions, the balance consisting of merchandise, which was probably cheaper at their starting point than at their destination, and was intended for sale at a profit. The chief of the party was a venerable old man, and he led the way, walking like a young man at the head of the procession, and in

front of his camel, which he held by the nose-cord. Many of the people not only carried household goods, but the houses themselves; perhaps I ought to explain that the houses were not made of solid walls and roofs, but were simply grass huts, such as one sees all through Africa.

“We turned out of the road and halted while this motley procession went past us. First there was a string of camels led by the chief, as already stated; then a herd of cattle, probably the shiekh’s property; then a group of men on horses, closely followed by some women and children on donkeys; then more camels, more donkeys, more horses, and so on to the end. There were flocks of sheep and goats, and in one group we saw about twenty milch goats, unaccompanied by their kids. Colts and young camels were playing about in different parts of the caravan, sometimes getting among the cattle and sheep, and sometimes becoming mixed up with the laden camels and horses; altogether it was a strange and interesting sight. Harry thought it would be fun to go back and watch these people crossing the river; I thought so, too, but we did not suggest it to the doctor.”

The day after meeting the strange-looking caravan our friends found themselves in a region where elephants abounded, and several times they came across the tracks of these huge beasts. They also saw the track of a rhinoceros, at least, the Arabs and natives said that it was made by one of these animals, and Renaud remarked that it would be interesting if they could happen upon an elephant and rhinoceros together.

“Why so?” queried Harry.

“There would certainly be a fight,” said Renaud; “and a fight to the death. All over Africa the elephant and rhinoceros have a mortal hatred of each other, and whenever two of them meet it is absolutely certain that there will be a battle ending in the death of one, and not infrequently of both.”

“Did you ever see a fight of that kind?” queried Ned.

“I never saw two of these creatures fighting,” said Renaud; “but I know of people who have seen them, and I, myself, have seen a rhinoceros and an elephant lying locked together, each having killed the other. The elephant uses his tusks, plunging them, if possible, into the sides of his adversary, at the same time giving terrible blows with his trunk. The fighting weapon of the rhinoceros is his horn; a very solid one, which is strongly mounted on his nose. If he can manage to insert this horn in the elephant’s belly he inflicts an enormous wound which is nearly always fatal. The great strength of both animals is brought into play, and so fierce are they in assaulting one another that the battle never lasts long; they tear up the ground and push down trees of considerable size in their struggles, and as the fight is going on they give vent to loud trumpeting and bellowings, so that they can be heard for a long distance. It is said—but I don’t know how truthful it is—that lions, panthers, and other animals sometimes come to look on at this battle, but never interfere.”

“I don’t suppose,” said Ned, as Renaud paused, “that any creature with the least particle of good judgment about him would interfere in such a matter. If he did he

would be pretty sure to get the worst of it, as he would run the risk of being crushed to death between the two opponents. I wonder if the lion and the elephant are friendly to each other?"

"I don't think they're at all friendly in the full meaning of that word," said Renaud; "but they are not such enemies as the elephant and rhinoceros. You never heard of elephants and lions being together, but on the other hand I don't think I've ever heard of their fighting; if they ever get into a quarrel it is probably through an accident. If an elephant, walking in the vicinity of a lion, were suddenly struck by an arrow or spear from the hands of a native concealed in the top of a tree, the great brute might think that it was thrown by the lion. If that idea entered his head he would be likely to charge the blow to the lion, and immediately charge upon him; but of course this is not likely to be a frequent occurrence. As to the other animals of the forest, they don't appear to be on bad terms with one another. Africa is very large, and there's room enough in it for all."

One day our friends were obliged to turn aside while a large caravan laden almost entirely with salt went past them. Salt is one of the principal commodities of African commerce so far as the interior is concerned; it is found in some districts, but not in others, and there is a constant movement of the article from the former to the latter. Bornoo has a very scanty supply of salt within its boundaries, and a great amount of this article is brought from Sokoto for the use of the inhabitants. Salt is obtained principally from salt springs, some of which

throw off a quantity of water of almost briny strength. This water is placed in large troughs; the heat of the sun dries away the liquid and leaves the salt in a solid mass. Just as the brine reaches the point of crystallization it is poured into moulds, in which the drying is completed; the salt thus being formed into cakes of suitable size for handling and transporting.

Caravans going from Morocco to Timbuctoo generally carry cargoes of salt, which is obtained from an oasis where there are extensive salt mines. In these mines the salt is found in layers about a foot thick and as clear as crystal. The layers are usually separated from one another and cut into blocks for transportation. These blocks of salt are exchanged for slaves when the caravan reaches Timbuctoo, and the ordinary price of a slave is the largest amount of salt he can stand upon and cover with his feet. Ned suggested, when he heard this, that it was probably on account of this mode of trading that the negro had large feet, and he asked Renaud if that view of the matter was correct. Renaud failed to see the point of the joke, and seriously answered that when the merchants of Timbuctoo were trading slaves for salt they selected those whose feet were the longest and widest.

The travelers crossed the boundary of Sokoto, and in a few days reached the city of Kano, which is the largest place that our friends had yet seen in the interior of Africa. Its population is variously estimated at from thirty to forty thousand. The doctor had sent in advance the letter which he received from the sheikh of Kukawa, and on reaching the walls of the city he found an officer

of the governor's staff waiting to receive him. The officer was mounted on a showy horse that pranced around very proudly, and evidently wanted to show how fast he could run. As for the officer, he was less attractive than the steed he bestrode; his dress consisted of a bournous, with a shirt under it, and a somewhat dilapidated turban. His weapon of authority, as well as of defence and offence, was a sword, which he carried under a strap over his saddle, a way in which the sword is frequently carried in this part of the world; his features showed him to be of Arab blood, but his skin was as dark as that of the negro, or very nearly so.

The officer received our friends with a great deal of dignity, and conducted them to a house inside the walls. Their baggage and merchandise were unloaded from the camels and placed in some rooms opening upon a courtyard; then the camels and all the horses not needed for immediate use were sent outside the city to a grove of palm trees, where a camp was formed and the animals were supplied with food. There was no good grazing ground within several miles of the city, and quite a business was carried on by the natives in supplying grass for the camels, horses, and other herbivorous animals; and the tents had not been pitched an hour before Renaud was importuned by several applicants for the contract to supply him with green food. He made what he considered an advantageous bargain, but found, in a few hours, that the enterprising contractor had taken advantage of his ignorance to demand and receive an exorbitant price. So he cancelled the engagement at once, and made another on far more favorable terms.