

THE CARRIER'S TALE.

The afternoon sun blazed down on the corrugated iron roof of my office in the heart of West Africa. I stepped outside to get a breath of air, and stared across to the mud-and-thatch police lines, the white-washed prison, and tiny telegraph office which stood out clearly against the background of the tropical verdure beyond the station clearing. A tattered Union Jack waved over my bungalow to the right. What luck would Reuter's telegrams bring us to-night? I cast my eye over the usual gathering of petitioners who daily seek from me redress for innumerable grievances, real or craftily invented: turbaned chief, half-naked villagers, young girls and shrivelled hags, all claiming justice in the shadow of the old flag. Two youths in bright-coloured cloths caught my eye. One of them held out a letter marked O.H.M.S. I read it and beckoned them to come into the office: "So you've come back from the great war in Cameroons," I said. "Tell me all about it."

Alas! I was not to get my information so easily. The brains of these lads torn from their villages in the bush and hurled into the vortex of the struggle was a kaleidoscope of new impressions. Ships and the sea, railway and motor-car, the machinery of warfare and a new country—of all these things they had not even heard previously, and their language was without expression for any of them. By dint of patient questioning and encouragement I got from them a vague outline of their adventures and a conception of the effect of all they had experienced on their minds. Most likely the facts are jumbled and inaccurate, but this is the story of Nwoso, carrier 1,475:—

"We came back one night from our yam farm. The chief called us and handed us over to a Government messenger. I did not know where we were going to, but the chief and the messenger said that the white man had sent for us, and so we must go. After three days we reached the white man's compound. Plenty of others had arrived from other villages far away. The white man wrote our names in a book, tied a brass number ticket round our necks, and gave each man a blanket and food. Then he told us that we were going to the great war to help the King's soldiers, who were preventing the Germans coming to our country and burning it. We left and marched far into the bush. The Government police led the way, and allowed no man to stop behind. Men from other towns joined us as we passed on. We could not speak to them, as they did not understand us. A wire ran along the road we took. It was tied to iron sticks. The messenger said this was a white man's juju for sending news. They have many wonderful things we do not understand. Then we crossed a great swamp, and suddenly came to a very big water such as I have never seen in our country. A big bridge ran into the middle of it, and at its end in the water lay a very large floating house of iron painted black and white and red. It smoked, and we feared it very much. Its long arms moved about with terrible noises, picking things off the beach and lifting them into the air. We wanted to run away, but the police cursed us and drove us over the bridge on to the roof of the house. They called it a 'ship.'

"The next morning the ship roared loudly like some great elephant, and then began to tremble and move. I hid under my blanket: when I dared to look out the great ship had moved into the middle of the water. She passed all small canoes. As she went on the water became wider and wider. You soon could not see trees any more. A cold wind began to blow. A great fear seized us. All said, 'We shall never see our country again.' Then the ship began to rock. You soon saw nothing but water. Our heads began to turn as though we were poisoned. No man could eat. Night came. Strange lights burned on the ship inside bottles. My heart was bitterly sad.

"Next morning you could see land again and great mountains. We reached a creek where there were plenty of other ships and a big town. I cannot tell you its name. We were sent on to a small ship and taken to land. From there we walked out to a big camp in the bush. After seven days we were given heavy loads to carry. There were biscuits inside them. Soldiers went in front, and then the carriers followed into the bush far, very far.

"One day shooting began in front. The white man told us to lie down and wait. The big guns came up and roared over the hills, and plenty of small ones helped. They fire cartridges like a string of beads as fast as a man can beat a drum. We lay and listened. The Germans fired, fired, fired, and then at last they ran away, but our second lieutenant was killed and the white sergeant major badly wounded. Next day we came to a large town full of soldiers. I fell down in the market-place and lay for a long time under a tree. A white man had me carried to a house where there were other sick carriers. We were given medicine and food and water. My side hurt and I could not breathe. Abrome here had stomach complaint. I do not know how long it was that we stayed there. The white doctor said we must be sent home. When we could walk about I saw canoes on wheels that ran about by themselves and carried loads and made strange noises, but not so loud as a ship. The white men's juju is very strong. They also had a great road there built of two very long pieces of big iron. Great boxes ran on the iron. The front box was black and screamed terribly. We ran away from it at first, till we saw that it did not follow us and that it harmed no one.

"At last they put us into one of these boxes, and it started off. It shook you terribly, and ran along past everything very, very fast. Nothing could stop it, but sometimes it did halt and the white man gave it water to drink. A fire burnt inside it. The same night we came to a place where ships were. A white paymaster gave us each three pounds cash money. The ship carried us back to the beach we started from. We rejoiced and sang when we saw it. We went to a great pan house and bought these clothes because we saw others doing the same thing. We feel very fine. We have walked home from station to station with our Government book, and the white men gave us guides to help us to reach home. Now that we have rains and palm oil to eat again we are happy. I am going to my farm. I will give the cash to the father of Alete, as I want to marry her. May the King win the war soon, then all our friends can come home too and our town will make a festival.

I bade the wanderers good-night after seeing to their needs, and strolled to my bungalow. Verily these primitive children of the bush had "done their bit" for the Empire, and when final success crowns the Cameroons campaign let us not forget the sufferings and services of these indispensable allies, without whom a campaign in the African bush would be impossible. No medal will be theirs, no roll of honour will record their names, no monument will mark the graves of those who have perished and tell posterity in what cause they lost their lives.

Requiescant in pace! E. M. F.