THE

LAKE REGIONS OF CENTRAL AFRICA

A PICTURE OF EXPLORATION

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"Some to discover islands far away"—Shakespeare

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the Malagarazi, which requires a ferry during the dry season. Cross roads abound in the populous regions. Where they exist not, the jungle is often impassable, except to the elephant and the rhinoceros: a company of pioneers would in some places require a week to cut their way for a single march through the network of thorns and the stockade of rough tree-trunks. The directions issued to travellers about drawing off their parties for safety at night to rising grounds, will not apply to Eastern Africa; it would be far easier to dig for themselves abodes under the surface.

It is commonly asserted in the island of Zanzibar that there are no caravans in these regions. The dictum is true if the term be limited to the hosts of camels and mules that traverse the deserts and the mountains of Arabia and Persia. It is erroneous if applied to a body of men travelling for commercial purposes. From time immemorial the Wanyamwezi have visited the road to the coast; and though wars and blood-feuds may have temporarily closed one line, another necessarily opened itself. Amongst a race so dependent for comfort and pleasure upon trade, commerce, like steam, cannot be compressed beyond a certain point. Until a few years ago, when the extension of traffic induced the country people to enlist as porters, all merchants traversed these regions with servile gangs hired on the coast or island of Zanzibar, a custom still prevailing on the northern and southern routes from the sea-board to the lakes of Nyanza and Nyassa. Porterage, on the long and toilsome journey, is now considered by the Wanyamwezi a test of manliness, as the Englishman deems a pursuit or a profession necessary to clear him from the charge of effeminacy. The children imbibe the desire with their milk, and at six
or seven years old they carry a little tusk on their shoulders—instinctive porters, as pointer-pups are hereditary pointers. By premature toil their shin-bones are sometimes bowed to the front like those of animals too early ridden. "He sits in hut egg-hatching," is their proverbial phrase to express one more elegant—

"Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits."

And they are ever quoting the adage that men who travel not are void of understanding—the African equivalent of what was said by the European sage: "The world is a great book, of which those who never leave home read but a page." Against this traditional tendency reasons of mere hire and rations, though apparently weighty, are found wanting. The porter will bargain over his engagement to the utmost bead, saying that all men are bound to make the best conditions for themselves: yet, after two or three months of hard labour, if he chance upon a caravan returning to his home, a word from a friend, acting upon his innate debility of purpose, will prevail upon him to sacrifice by desertion all the fruits of his toil. On these occasions the porters are carefully watched; open desertion would, it is true, be condemned by the general voice, yet no merchant can so win the affections of his men that some will not at times disappear. Until the gangs have left their homes far behind, their presence seems to hang by a thread; at the least pretext they pack up their goods and vanish in a mass. When approaching their settlements—at the frontier districts of Tura and Mfuto, for instance—their cloth and hire are taken from them, packed in the employer's bales, and guarded by armed slaves, especially at night, and on the line of march. Yet these precautions frequently fail, and, once beyond the camp limits, it is vain to seek the fugitive. In the
act of desertion they show intelligence: they seldom run away when caravans first meet, lest their employer should halt and recover them by main force, and, except where thieves and wild beasts are unknown, they will not fly by night. The porter, however, has one point of honour; he leaves his pack behind him. The slave, on the other hand, certainly robs his employer when he runs away, and this, together with his unwillingness to work and the trouble and annoyance which he causes to his owner, counterbalances his superior dexterity and intelligence.

Caravans, called in Kisawahili safsafi (from the Arab safar, a journey) and by the African rugendo orlugendo, "a going," are rarely wanting on the main trunk-lines. The favourite seasons for the upward-bound are the months in which the greater and the lesser Masika or tropical rains conclude—in June and September, for instance, on the coast—when water and provisions are plentiful. Those who delay till the dry weather has set in must expect hardships on the march; the expense of rations will be doubled and trebled, and the porters will frequently desert. The down-caravans set out in all seasons except the rainy; it is difficult to persuade the people of Unyanyembe to leave their fields between the months of October and May. They will abandon cultivation to the women and children, and merrily take the footpath way if laden with their own ivory, but from the merchant they will demand exorbitant wages, and even then they will hesitate to engage themselves.

Porterage varies with every year and in every caravan. It knows but two limits: the interest of the employer to disburse as little as possible by taking every advantage of the necessities of his employé, and
the desire of the employé to extract as much as he can by presuming upon the wants of his employer. In some years there is a glut of porters on the coast; when they are rare quarrels take place between the several settlements, each attempting a monopoly of enlistment to the detriment of its neighbours, and a little blood is sometimes let. When the Wanyamwezi began to carry, they demanded for a journey from the coast to their own country six to nine dollars' worth of domestics, coloured cloths, brass-wires, and the pigeon's-egg bead called sungomaji. The rate of porterage then declined; the increase of traffic, however, has of late years greatly increased it. In 1857 it was 10 dollars, and it afterwards rose to 12 dollars per porter. In this sum rations are not included; the value of these—which by ancient custom are fixed at 1 kubabah (about 1·5 lbs.) of grain per diem, or, that failing, of manioc, sweet potatoes, and similar articles, with the present of a bullock at the frontier—is subject to greater variations, and is even less reducible to an average than the porter's pay. It is needless to say that the down-journey is less expensive than the up-march, as the carriers rely upon a fresh engagement on the coast. The usual hire from Unyanyembe would be nine cloths, payable on arrival at the sea-port, where each is worth 25 cents, or about 1 shilling. The Arabs roughly calculate—the errors balancing one another—that, rations included, the hire of a porter from the coast to the Tanganyika Lake and back amounts to a total of 20 dollars = 4l. 3s. From the coast, Wanyamwezi porters will not engage themselves for a journey westward of their own country; at Unyanyembe they break up, and a fresh gang must be enlisted for a march to the Tanganyika or to the Nyanza Lake.
It is impossible to average the numbers of an East African caravan, which varies from half a dozen to 200 porters, under a single Mundewa or merchant. In dangerous places travellers halt till they form an imposing force; 500 is a frequent figure, and even bodies of 1000 men are not rare. The only limit to the gathering is the incapability of the country to fill more than a certain number of mouths. The larger caravans, however, are slow and cumbrous, and in places they exhaust the provision of water.

Caravans in East Africa are of three kinds. The most novel and characteristic are those composed only of Wanyamwezi; secondly, are the caravans directed and escorted by Wasawahili freemen or fundi (slave fattori), commissioned by their patrons; and, lastly, those commanded by Arabs.

The porter, called pagazi or fagazi—the former is the African, the latter the ridiculous Arabised form of the word—corresponds with the carregador of West Africa. The Wanyamwezi make up large parties of men, some carrying their own goods, others hired by petty proprietors, who for union and strength elect a head Mtongi, Ras Kasilah, or leader. The average number of these parties that annually visit the coast is far greater than those commanded by stranger-merchants. In the Unyamwezi caravan there is no desertion, no discontent, and, except in certain spots, little delay. The porters trudge from sunrise to 10 or 11 A.M., and sometimes, though rarely, they will travel twice a day, resting only during the hours of heat. They work with a will, carrying uncomplainingly huge tusks, some so heavy that they must be lashed to a pole between two men—a contrivance technically called mziga-ziga. Their shoulders are often raw with the weight, their
feet are sore, and they walk half or wholly naked to save their cloth for displays at home. They ignore tent or covering, and sleep on the ground; their only supplies are their country's produce, a few worn-down hoes, intended at times to purchase a little grain or to be given as blackmail for sultans, and small herds of bullocks and heifers that serve for similar purposes if not lost, with characteristic African futility, upon the road. Those who most consult comfort carry, besides their loads and arms, a hide for bedding, an earthen cooking pot, a stool, a kilindo or bark-box containing cloth and beads, and perhaps a small gourd full of ghee. They sometimes suffer severely from exposure to a climate which forbids long and hard work upon short and hard fare. Malignant epidemics, especially small-pox, often attack caravans as they approach the coast; generally, however, though somewhat lean and haggard, the porters appear in better condition than might be expected. The European traveller will repent accompanying these caravans: as was said of a similar race, the Indians of Guiana, "they will not deviate three steps from the regular path."

Porters engaged by Arab Mtajiri or Mundewa—the former is the Kisawahili, the latter is the Inner African term for a merchant or travelling trader—are known by their superior condition; they eat much more, work much less, and give far greater trouble to their commanders. They expend part of the cloth and beads which they have received as hire to procure for themselves occasional comforts; and on the down-journey they take with them a few worn-down hoes to retain the power of desertion without starving. The self-willed wretches demean themselves with the coolest impudence; reply imperiously, lord it over their leaders, regulate the marches