

West Africa Evolving.

EUROPE IN AFRICA—BUSINESS IN THE BUSH—THE RUBBER AND PALM OIL INDUSTRIES—OUTPOSTS OF COMMERCE—THE "BAGMAN" OF THE BUSH—ANCIENT INDUSTRIES—EUROPE'S FUTURE COTTON-FIELD.

BY FRANK E. VERNEY.

IT is a remarkable fact to any one who knows West Africa and its potentialities as an inexhaustible storehouse of many natural products essential to the requirements of civilisation and as a huge market for the wares of the Mother Country that its affairs obtain such scant public attention.

Seldom it is that the general public has put before it with due prominence the fact that among the millions who have their habitat in West Africa there is a constant and rapidly growing demand for the manufactures of British workshops, varying in nature from a strip of Manchester cotton to a Crewe engine, from a Birmingham tin can to a Clyde steamer, and that under the influence of an increased commercial attention, combined with wise Government administration, West Africa will ultimately become one of the Empire's greatest assets.

Now it is my desire, so far as the limits of this article will allow, to show what the "West Coast" is doing; to indicate the revolution which has already been wrought in a land of which less than a century ago a few intrepid explorers brought back stories which caused the people of England to regard it as a veritable hell on earth, a place of black devils and deadly pestilence.

Our West African colonies are represented by Northern and Southern Nigeria plus the actual coastal areas or littoral territories of Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Ashanti. But, practically speaking, by virtue of extent of area and productive value, British West Africa may be interpreted as Northern and Southern Nigeria.

Nigeria has an area of close on 334,000 square miles, which means that the Brit-

where yelling kroo boys are busy unloading from steamers and surf-boats European goods, and loading palm-oil and rubber, etc., you will find yourself in a busy thoroughfare—not the object of a crowd of admiring niggers, but one of a number, each of whom has his own business to perform, and is performing it. Here you will see a fat, satisfied-looking native, possibly a wealthy merchant, garbed in orthodox frock coat and silk hat, who, if accosted, will probably be able to discuss topical questions with you in French or English. There you will see a bush native, clad in naught but a loin-cloth, his head laden with a load of seventy or eighty pounds of produce, wending his way to market. Across the road, in that smart-looking store, a miniature Whiteley's, will be found several white men and their black assistants busily engaged in supplying the wants of their black customers, taking over the counter coin of the realm in exchange for European commodities. I can go into one of these stores and purchase almost anything, from a Sheffield razor to a Coventry bicycle. Here on the actual fringe of darkest Africa I can buy myself a complete outfit, from mosquito boots to a solar topce. I am asked out to dine either at the mess of the Nigerian Regiment or with a trader, and entertained to a table d'hôte meal which compares favourably with what I could get in London. I am offered a petit verre of Vermouth or sherry, champagne and port are at my disposal, my solids include caviare and pate de foie gras, and I can wind up with a Chartreuse, French coffee, and Havana cigars. I tell this, not as an inducement to Sybaritic individuals to visit West Africa, but by way of emphasising the metamorphosis which savage Africa has undergone in the last few decades.

Lagos has its Government buildings,

There are dusky dentists and doctors, and black barristers; and the latter, in verbose eloquence, can give points to our own K.C.'s. Even the theft of a scraggy fowl will inspire them to great oratorical efforts. However, this childlike vanity does not prevent the educated native, the product of a new civilisation, from being an extremely useful citizen.

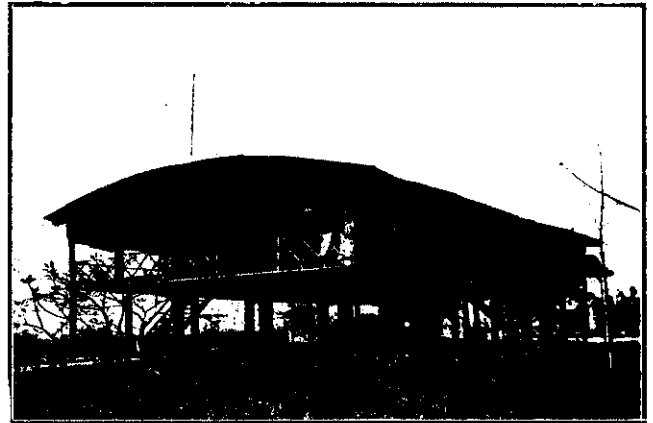
Lagos has a railway which extends inland through the oil and rubber districts (to Badan and Oshogbo a distance of about 190 miles—as far as from London to Liverpool). It is the beginning of a network of lines which will extend from the coast to the Sahara and Lake Chad, tapping territories of titanic wealth, and bringing into close touch with Europe immense virgin markets.

Lagos itself is a great centre for palm oil, palm kernels, rubber, and cotton, etc., and all day long, by canoe along the myriad of creeks and lagoons, through the

of which, particularly the former, are indispensable to the requirements of modern civilisation. Hundreds of thousands of the natives of Southern Nigeria are engaged in collecting palm-oil and palm kernels from the fruit of the oil palm tree, and tapping the latex from the different varieties of rubber trees. Traders and officials have taught them how to do this, and the Department of Agriculture has established plantations in many places to instruct and advise them in the cultivation and care of rubber trees, in order that the huge supply shall not be exhausted, and that the future may see an increase rather than a decrease in the productive areas.

In 1906 the exports in these products from Nigeria amounted to the following: Rubber, £307,977; palm-oil and kernels, £2,038,248.

From the coastal regions of Southern Nigeria, with the products of its mighty



THE MONASTERY AT IOKOJA.

forests on the heads of the natives, and down from the hinterlands by rail, come these products en route for the factories of Europe.

The trade of Lagos and its hinterlands has been steadily increasing year by year, and now, in 1906, the value of it amounts to more than £2,000,000, divided fairly equally between exports and imports. Verily an eloquent testimony in favour of the "idle" native and his much-maligned country.

In these African cities, of which Lagos is a type, every one is busy. Everywhere is the mark of progress and pregnant signs of development to come; and the vital spring of the whole is Trade, Trade with a capital T.

BUSINESS IN THE BUSH.

But to obtain a proper insight into Africa's industrial and commercial system you must come with me a few hundred miles further along the coast to the centre of the Niger delta, a huge steamy area of swamp, creek, river, and forest, forming the greatest lathouse in the world.

At Sapele and Benin we find tremendous quantities of hardwood, mahogany, and ebony, etc., which, cut from the surrounding forests, is lying awaiting shipment.

It has been obtained either by hired native labour under the supervision of white traders employed by Liverpool merchants, or by native chiefs whose followers cut down the trees and roll them to the nearest creek, from whence they float the logs down to one of the timber ports and sell to a trader.

There are great possibilities in timber alone as the huge forests of the delta abound in it. There are millions of pounds' worth of valuable hardwoods waiting to be cut, but until roads and railways are extended the major portion of this wealth must remain locked in its natural fastness. Imagine the difficulty of dragging a log through the forests when a passage has to be cut through dense undergrowth and trailing vines which bind together the masses of vegetation with the tenacity of steel cables.

Yet, in spite of such difficulties, which will be overcome as development proceeds, £1,000,000 worth of timber has been exported to England during the last few years.

THE RUBBER AND PALM-OIL INDUSTRIES.

Two other great African industries of which the Niger delta may be regarded as the centre are rubber and palm-oil both

forests, we will go up the Niger. Down from the north, through the centre of Nigeria to the sea, flows the great river. Twelve times the size of the Thames, and fed by countless creeks, it forms a vast circulation system connecting the country's wealthy forests and fruitful plains with the outer world. Along its muddy waters come craft of all kinds from the native "dug-out" to a 2000-ton steamer laden with native produce going to the markets of Europe and European goods coming into the heart of Africa.

OUTPOSTS OF COMMERCE.

On its banks at intervals are native towns, each one with its several British stores, or "factories," as they are called in coast parlance—staffed by one or more white men and their black assistants.

Attached to each of these factories, which are generally erections of pine scantlings and galvanised roofs, with wide verandahs, are large enclosures, stocked with produce awaiting the arrival of a branch steamer to convey it to the coast. Out in the bush or up the numerous creeks are other branch factories, all ramifications of one or other of the big merchant firms of Liverpool. These factories form the tentacles of the civilising octopus of progress and commerce, really synonymous terms—which is advancing its grip on Africa. They are all engaged in tapping the wealth of the colony, in feeding great British industries and making new markets for the manufactures of British workmen.

The trader, with his factory, often opens up to trade a district in which no white foot but his own has trod. He does not follow the sword. If the sword comes at all, it generally comes after, to enforce some newly imposed law which has travestied an ancient native right, and caused resentment.

THE "BAGMAN" OF THE BUSH.

The trader's prime assistant in Nigeria's commercial system is the Hausa "middleman," who may be described as the "bagman" of the bush. He is the direct descendant of the men who, centuries ago, working in conjunction with the Arab trading caravans which came across the Sahara from Tripoli, laden with silks, cottons, and arms, bartered with the forest and coastal tribes for ivory and gold dust. Trading is bred in him, and the major portion of the country's trade comes through his hands.

From the factory he obtains on trust, or purchases for cash or kind, a consider-



LOKOJA WHARF.

ish Isles, France, and half a dozen Hollanders would easily be accommodated within its frontiers.

EUROPE IN AFRICA.

For administrative purposes it is split into two provinces, each with its own Governor and civil staff. On the north it is bordered by the Great Sahara and Lake Chad, and on the south by the Gulf of Guinea.

With this brief geographical description I will ask you to accompany me into Lagos, the metropolis of Southern Nigeria. Here is a town which fares upon one with deep conviction the fact that West Africa has both a present and a future in the trade of the world. Instead of a medley of mud huts fringed by shrieking savages, is a well-ordered town of straight streets and large squares. Leaving the wharves,

schools, post offices, railway, and a telegraph system, all partly staffed by black assistants.

Strolling into one of the schools, you will see an intelligent-looking black teacher, probably the son of a simple savage whose sole law was that of might, and whose world was limited to his wives and his cooking-pot, instructing a crowd of young African hopefuls in Euclid and algebra.

Many of the minor clerical positions in the Government offices are held by natives, who are as facile with the pen as their fathers were with a machete. Indeed, some of these dusky civil servants are in receipt of salaries of as much as three hundred pounds a year, and, in their own estimation at least, are as invaluable to the Government as is the Governor himself.