

The Killing Fields of Kumassi

AND THE

Downfall of Prempeh

BY

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FROM HIS BOOK

TO KUMASSI WITH SCOTT

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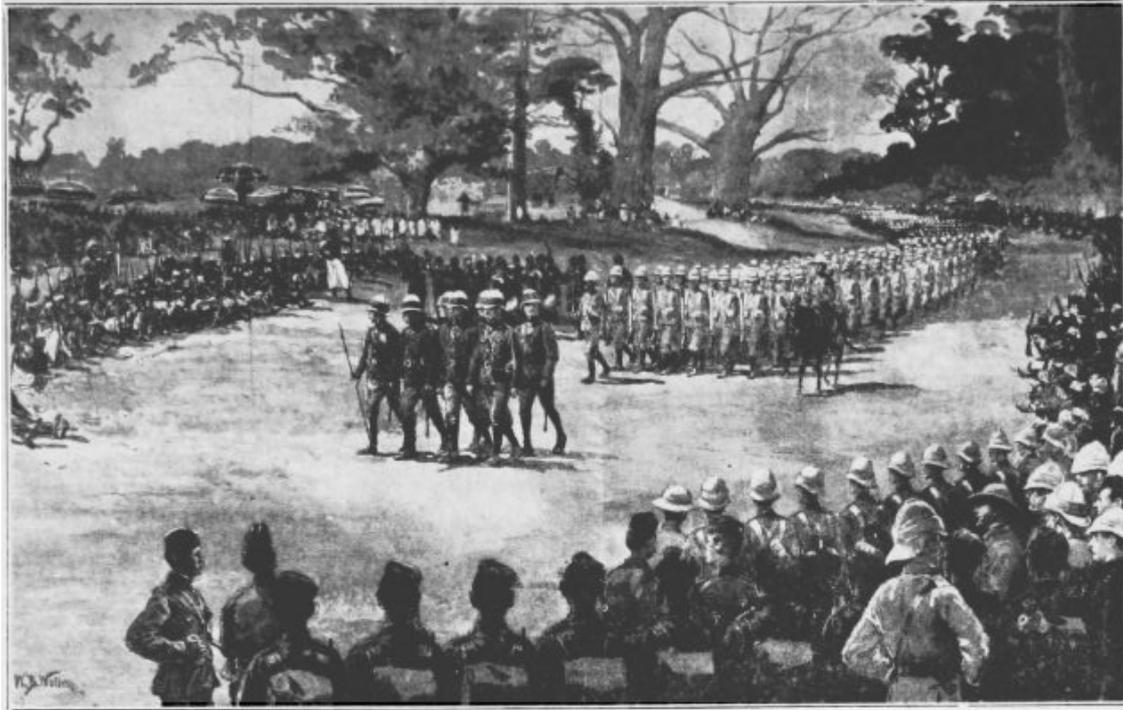
THAT MARCH TO KUMASSI proved to be another fine exhibition of the stamina and national pluck which carries the Britisher through when other nations fail. Heavily equipped, the troops had tramped towards Kumassi; through sweltering heat and dank night fogs, and there was no malingering among them. Early and late the Tommies doggedly pressed on, defying the fever and not giving in till they dropped by the wayside, thoroughly overcome.

Early dawn on January 15th 1896 - Kumassi at last! The proud and dreaded capital of Ashanti! Major Baden Powell's force had worked its way by different paths through the bush, capturing many armed Ashanti spies on the way. The main road into the town was narrow but fairly good, and led through a dense patch of high jungle grass, fringed with medicine heaps. There were also many graves strewn with fetish images, and rotting vultures tied by the neck to the head posts.

Suddenly a thunder of drums could be heard, but still the scouts warily advanced. Major Gordon and Captain Williams cut their way through the bush, and entered the town by the Kokofu road on the right flank, and a party of Bekwais forced a passage in the same way on the left. The main advance party consisted of the Political Officer, Captain Stewart, Major Piggott bearing the Union Jack on his Soudan Lance, Major Baden-Powell and Captain Graham with the scouts and levies, Captain Mitchell with a company of Houssas, and their drums and fifes. The levies were followed by a small party of four Engineers; Sergeant Lowe, Corporal Dale, and Sappers Richardson and Rubery, with the reel of cable, which they payed out and fixed as they marched. The wire was in and working at an early hour; a fresh feather in the cap of the smart telegraphists, who had slaved from morn till night in getting the cable laid from the coast.

The drumming increased, and at last King Prempeh, with his chiefs and hundreds of followers, was seen advancing. They made no show of resistance: the King seated himself on his throne, or raised dais, in one corner of the clearing, while the chiefs and followers ranged themselves in dense lines on the two sides of the square. Colonel Stopford's gallant boys heard the thunder of drums in the distance, and mistaking it for firing, eagerly pressed forward. Fatigue and fever were alike forgotten as they broke into a trot, eager for the fray, but the troops were doomed to disappointment when they drew nearer, and the true nature of the sounds was revealed.

The Houssa Band made an attempt to play the troops in, and among other appropriate airs, the strains of "Home, Sweet Home," floated through the trees, as if in irony at the dirty surroundings.



OCCUPATION OF KUMASSI BY BRITISH TROOPS.

From a sketch by Mr. H. C. Seppings Wright, "Illustrated London News."

Near Prempeh, the Kings of the surrounding Ashanti dependencies were placed, with their swords of state and fetish dancers; but little attention beyond a passing glance was paid to these groups, for on the built throne sat Prempeh and all his royal gathering in choice barbaric array. Was that oily, peevish-looking object the monarch whose name alone made the surrounding tribes tremble? It seemed impossible, but it was he, and in a state of ludicrous funk. He was sitting with his back half turned to the square, but now and again he glanced round furtively at the troops formed up there. He wore a black crown, heavily worked with gold, a silken robe and sandals. Suspended from his body and wrists were various fetish charms, while behind him hung a dried lemur as a special fetish. He was seated on an ordinary brass-studded chair, which was placed on the top of the tier of baked clay forming the throne. The fabled stool of solid gold was not to be found, and had been removed to a safe distance, long before the troops entered the capital.

The lower parts of the throne were filled by prime ministers, advisers, sword bearers, executioners, and criers, in every description of barbaric apparel. On the outside of the circle, slaves bearing huge plaited fans, kept a constant current of air directed toward the King. The throne, with its numerous occupants, was sheltered by immense and gaudy umbrellas held aloft by gigantic Swefis, captured in a raid by Samory, or some other manhunter, and sent to slavery in Kumassi.

Grouped in a large circle round the throne were some hundreds of Prempeh's minions, under-executioners, lesser ministers of the household, and slaves. In the centre of the circle, three hideous fetish dwarfs, in little red shirts, capered about, while seated in a group on the right were Prempeh's own personal attendants. These

boys and men were protected by various fetish laws, but as their paramount privilege consisted in being sacrificed on the death of the King, to accompany him to the next world, the honour of such a post was highly enigmatical.

After watching this circus for some time I turned to inspect the city; I say "city" advisedly, but a filth heap and charnel house would have been a better description. It is almost surrounded by a swamp, with many regular and wide streets and wattle built houses on each side; but the very roads were defiled, and the place was a mass of festering pollution. Disgusted with the filthy hole, I turned into quarters in one of the clay bedaubed dwellings. Outside they are substantially built, but once inside, the compound was a quagmire of polluted mud and filth, round which the veranda like chambers opened; and in that state of foul squalor had the Ashantis lived like pigs. Heaps of this accumulated offal had to be carted away before the places were fit for European occupation, and then only with abundant disinfectant was existence possible. Everyone suffered more or less from sore throat, which was due to the vile smell and dampness.

At five o'clock, Sir Francis Scott and all the officers of the Expeditionary Force seated themselves in a semi-circle on the square, while Captain Stewart and his interpreter went to tell the King that the Commander was ready to see him. Some of the chiefs blustered a little after Captain Stewart had gone, but the Ansahs finally persuaded Prempeh to pluck up his failing spirits and comply, which he did with a bad grace. The huge umbrellas began to bob and twist, and drums were beaten as the whole of that vast assemblage got into motion, and came slowly across the square toward the Commander-in-chief. The two Ansahs acted as prompters, going through the motions in dumb show, while the lesser chiefs passed, salaaming with outstretched hand to each officer in succession down the line. These chiefs were succeeded by the more important men and their followers, and finally Prempeh himself, with a large nut in his mouth, as a special fetish charm to guard against the wiles of the white man, was half dragged past between two attendants. He looked remarkably like a fat over-grown youngster, sucking a bull's-eye, but ready for a good cry at being taken to school.

A more abject picture of pusillanimity could never be painted than of that despot as he passed, cringing and trembling, down the line. He afterwards advanced and shook hands with Sir Francis Scott and Major Piggott, who must have both felt overwhelmed by the honour. Sir Francis then addressed a few words to him through the interpreter. When the palaver was over, Prempeh insisted on shaking hands with all; I can feel the grip of that clammy paw again, as I write. A start was then made for the Palace, and the weird appearance of that barbaric state procession by torchlight, baffles description. The musicians marched first, some of the enormous drums being carried between four slaves, and beaten by drummers in rear. Hundreds of torches were lit, while the crowd of nobles, courtiers, captains, citizens, and slaves, went mad with transports of joy, excitement, and rum.

As soon as darkness fell, piquets were stationed in all directions, guarding every approach. Spies from Kumassi had entered the British lines the day before,

and reported that the Ashantis did not want to fight, and would not resist if the English only wanted to establish a Church and a Resident; but if they interfered with Prempeh, soldiers were ready in the bush. Also that plenty of powder had been distributed in the town, and the spies thought they had undermined the Palace and Palaver Square in case of emergency. Ten thousand warriors also had been collected in the capital a few days before our entry.

Strict orders had been issued against looting, and also to respect the sacred fetish temples or hovels, which were all marked by white cards so that no one should unwittingly enter and defile the sanctity of mud and sticks. The town was littered with fetish heaps, shrines, images, clay pans, bottles, and other symbolic fetish tokens, the most sickening being the infamous Fetish Grove called Samanpon, or spirit house. In this grove the decapitated bodies were thrown after sacrifice. Kumassi means literally "the place of bloody death," and well its name described it. This grove stood at the edge of the Palaver Square, on which many a poor slave, both male and female, had been barbarously tortured and executed, the bodies being dragged across and thrown among the trees in the sacred grove, to form food for the hundreds of vultures that circled among the trees, disturbed from their gruesome feast by the approach of any bold spirit who dared to venture into those sacred precincts, and risk the displeasure of the fetish gods of the Ashanti Nation.



THE KUMASSI GOLGOTHA.

This horrible Golgotha is piled with the remains of hundreds of miserable creatures, executed simply to please the Ashanti rulers' insatiable lust for human blood. Huge cotton trees had their buttresses piled with bones and skulls; human remains were littered about in every direction, while the whole of that terrible place reeked with pestilential odours. Every step I took in that rank grass revealed hidden human bones mouldering there, while fat, contented-looking vultures, battered and gorged with human carrion, swarmed the trees above in hundreds.

On Saturday evening, Captain Williams and I were sent to check that the gates and entrances to the King's Palace, which occupies a considerable space in the centre of the town, were secure. The palatial residence destroyed in the last campaign has been replaced by a heterogeneous collection of well-built wattle huts of enormous proportions and barn-like appearance. Large courtyards, alleys, and small quadrangles succeeded each other, with quarters for the numerous attendants and slaves, and storerooms; all built with little design, either architectural or beautiful. In some places the foundations of the old palace were still to be seen. The buildings stood in a large enclosure, surrounded by a fence of tall bamboo, and containing a fetish grove and private place of execution for any person it was thought expedient to decapitate on the quiet. Passing up a broad avenue, the chief entrance to the Palace was reached, a large gateway hung with enormous wooden doors. One door was immediately swung back to admit us, but the dusky janitors nearly dropped with astonishment when two presumptuous white men entered.

We stood in a large courtyard just inside, with spacious thatched alcoves opening all round, in which a couple of hundred slaves and attendants lay in silent rows, resting on their mats. Large earthen ewers of water stood in the enclosure, palms occupied the corners, and on a balcony higher than the rest were the huge bloodstained war drums, decorated with ghastly human remains ad lib.

There was another doorway leading to the private apartments of the uxorious King, with two naked daggers hung above on the lintel. This was the entrance to the Royal Harem but we saw no Ashanti beauties as Prempeh's numerous wives had all been safely transferred to the bush. Polygamy is a very distinctive feature among these African tribes, and Prempeh was accredited in the English Press as having 3,333 wives granted him by law. Though there were no means of testing the accuracy of this statement, it must be accepted with the proverbial grain of salt. Any numbers derived from native sources are to be looked on with suspicion; for they have no true idea of numeration, the word "many" being used for all large amounts, and may as equally signify hundreds as thousands. The King could marry whomsoever he pleased, the more the merrier. Certain death fell on any man who looked on one of the King's wives, and instances are also known in which young lovers have been ruthlessly parted for the maiden to be placed in the harem, and afterwards, being discovered secretly renewing their vows, they have both been barbarously tortured and executed.

When Prempeh ascended the throne, he proclaimed, as a punishment to the family, that any man who should cohabit with the sisters of Prince Yao Atchereboanda of Kumassi should be put to death. A few months ago, just before the Ansahs started to England, Kwasi Adjaye, Captain of the Royal Hammockmen, and commanding one thousand guns, was accused of familiarity with one of these sisters, Princess Akosia Bereyna, and he was publicly put to death on this flimsy pretext.

The royal wives were carefully guarded by eunuchs, but were often executed for a fancied offence; if they were *passi*, or had been denounced as unfaithful, by some evil-disposed person, though they had little chance of infidelity, the poor wretch had to undergo the ordeal of poison.

The fetish priest, on being consulted, arrived with an elaborate apparatus of skins, idols, etc., and seated himself in front of the victim, who knew she was innocent, and had perfect confidence in facing the ordeal. The crafty fetish-man then made a poisonous mixture, and poured it down her throat. He shrieked and wailed, while numerous interested spectators chanted a weird chorus. He is a clever conjuror, and manipulated his paraphernalia cleverly, but greeted every movement with a well-feigned astonishment, not lost on the people. Excitement grew to fever pitch as he muttered mysterious incantations; but at last, the poison beginning to act, the poor woman screamed in fearful agony as the pains seized her.

The priest paused in his mummeries to frantically clutch the air as one possessed, while the victim lay writhing in the last throes of mortal agony. When he saw the poison had successfully done its work, he sprang up denouncing the dying woman. Her agony was then speedily ended by the infuriated spectators rushing in, and beating the remaining life from the pulsating body with their clubs. By this means this wonderful fetish priest had consulted the Spirits, and the Gods had devoured the life from the wicked woman whose only offence, most probably, was that her husband was tired of her. This ordeal by poison was not confined to Ashanti alone; but was, and is still, practised in many places in the interior. Another more inquisitorial form of torture was to bury a man to his neck in a colony of white ants, who slowly devoured the flesh off the living body.

In the apparently most civilized districts, all manner of diabolical crimes are committed under the very nose of the authorities; and so superstitious are the people, and so powerful the influence of the fetish priests, that the greatest difficulty is experienced in tracing these acts to their source. In many places the tenth child in every family is slain at birth as an offering. I could not find out for what supposed reason the gods require this sacrifice, but as the offspring of most African women exceeds this number, many hundreds of innocent babes must be yearly killed. Even on the Gold Coast itself, in well-populated districts, the moment the tenth child is born in many families, it is either buried alive or taken to the shore and thrown into the sea.

Captain Stewart had intimated to Prempeh that he must tender his submission on Monday, January 20th but on Sunday there was a distant desultory drumming, and Ashantis became more scarce in the town. It was evident that some movement was in the air. On Sunday evening, a palaver was held in the palace, the chiefs being hastily summoned, and it was thought that this was a ruse to get them together to endeavour to slip away in the night, get clear, collect their forces and attempt an attack on Kumassi when most of the troops had been withdrawn. They well knew that the white soldiers would have to leave before the rains set in, and may have thought that eventually they would be left in peace to return to Kumassi, and resume their life, in the old sweet way, as in 1874, when all troops, both white and coloured, were withdrawn.

To guard against arty escape, the jungle was cleared right round the palace, and a cordon of the native levy drawn round after dark. The Palace Garden joined the bush at the back, and a secret footpath led through the swamp beyond. The piquets soon secured many prisoners, who emerged from the palace to reconnoitre on the various roads, only to find each was barred. The palace people grew anxious when the various spies did not return, and one of the Ansahs came out to see what was in the wind, and was found on the secret pathway.

About three o'clock the Queen Mother emerged from the palace with torches, and a long train of attendants, and passed unconsciously right through the outposts, but she was not stopped. She and her people went to her own private residence, which was quietly surrounded as soon as she was domiciled. Several chiefs were also captured during the night, trying to slip away; but Prempeh had either got an inkling of affairs, or did not mean to bolt, as he did not attempt to leave in person. The various prisoners were released at daylight, when everything was in readiness for the final act to take place.

The King had been told to appear at eight o'clock, with all his chiefs, on the palaver ground. The white troops formed up on the square at 7 a.m.; and the Houssas, followed by the long lines of levies, had arrived from their quarters just before. After a weary wait, it seemed that Prempeh did not mean to come, so Captain Stewart and the interpreter went to fetch him. Major Barker also took a company of the Special Service Corps to strengthen the cordon round the palace, making escape impossible. Captain Stewart went in alone and told the King he must come at once, or he would take him by force.

There was a beating of one solitary drum, as the King entered his litter, and with a little delay, the Queen Mother joined the royal procession, which slowly wended its way across the clearing, into the square formed by the troops. Prempeh was accompanied by his chiefs, and followed by a large procession of guards, soldiers, slaves and attendants; but with a quick flank movement the Houssas cut this crowd away from their leaders, and umbrellas and stools, bearers and attendants, were soon flying in every direction. The Queen Mother took a seat on her son's left; the chiefs and a few select servants ranging themselves in a long line facing Governor Maxwell, Sir Francis Scott, and Colonel Kempster. These officers

were seated on an improvised dais of biscuit boxes, surrounded by the remaining officers of the Staff. One chief was still absent, but presently the disobedient old rascal came in sight with his followers, escorted by a body of Houssas, sent to fetch him. These troops moved along at a quick rate; an undignified and unceremonious way for his chief-ship to make his debut, and one which he bitterly resented. He was pushed and jostled by his followers pressed in rear by the gallant little Houssas; and then his attendants were all turned roughly aside, and he had to walk into the square unattended. He turned indignantly to expostulate, but a muscular sergeant added insult to injury, by seizing a stool and squatting him forcibly down upon it. The palaver then commenced.



THE PALAVER.

From a sketch by Mr. H. C. Seppings Wright, Artist Correspondent to "The Illustrated London News."

1, HIS EXCELLENCY GOVERNOR MAXWELL. 2, SIR FRANCIS SCOTT. 3, COLONEL KEMPSTER. 4, LIEUT.-COL. DELFIELD. 5, SURG.-COL. TAYLOR. 6, COL. WARD. 7, MAJOR PIGGOTT. 8, PRINCE CHRISTIAN. 9, CAPT. DONALD STEWART. 10, MR. HADDON SMITH. 11, SURG.-COL. HENDERSON. 12, MR. BENNETT BURLEIGH. 13, CAPT. LARKYMORE. 14, SURG.-MAJ. HUGHES. 15, CANON TAYLOR SMITH. 16, LIEUT. FABER, P.E. 17, LIEUT. PRITCHARD, R.E. 18, MR. GWYNNE (Reuter's). 19, FATHER WADE. 20, MR. VROOM (Native Commissioner). 21, KING PREMPEH. 22, QUEEN MOTHER. 24, STATE UMBRELLAS

Mr. Vroom, the Native Commissioner, acted as interpreter, and through him the conditions of the treaty were given to the Ashantis; but it had to be again repeated by the royal linguist to Prempeh, who could not bemean himself by listening to the stranger's voice. Governor Maxwell reminded the King of his direct refusal to the ultimatums dispatched to him; further, that he sent Envoys to England, in direct opposition to orders; for they were told that all negotiations must be made to the Governor on the coast.

His Excellency went on to say that no article of our last treaty with Ashanti had been kept. They had made no attempt to pay the war indemnity, and it was still owing. Human sacrifices were to have been abolished, but they had still gone on. No

road had been kept clear through the bush to the coast, which was another express stipulation of that treaty. However, the British Government had no wish to depose Prempeh if he would agree to the following conditions: He must make his submission in native fashion; and pay an indemnity of 50,000 ounces of gold dust. On this basis, His Excellency was now ready to receive the submission of the King and the Queen Mother. Prempeh hesitated. It was a terrible blow to the prestige of that haughty despot, to whom "all the princes of the earth bowed down," to thus humiliate himself in the presence of those white men and his own people. He looked sheepish, toying with his fetish ornaments, and ready to cry with mortification. Albert Ansa stepped up and held a whispered consultation with him. Then, quietly slipping off his sandals, the King arose, removed his circlet, and he and the Queen Mother reluctantly walked over to prostrate themselves before the Governor, and embrace his feet.

The scene was a most striking one. The heavy masses of foliage, that solid square of red coats and glistening bayonets, the Artillery drawn up ready for any emergency, the black bodies of the native levies, resting on their long guns in the background, while inside the square the Ashantis sat as if turned to stone, as Mother and Son, whose word was a matter of life and death, and whose slightest move constituted a command which all obeyed, were thus forced to humble themselves in sight of the assembled thousands.

It was indeed a fall to the pride of that plenipotent monarch and his royal mother, to whom many a tortured victim had pleaded in vain for life, and at whose feet the very chiefs had to prostrate themselves, before they dared speak. A perfect hush fell on the assembled multitude, and even the irrepressible natives were silenced as the King and his royal mother knelt, and tendered their submission; then rose to their feet, thoroughly humiliated and confounded, and returned to their people. Prempeh collected himself, and being prompted by the Ansahs, again rose, exclaiming in a clear voice, "I now claim the protection of the Queen of England." The chiefs seconded this remark with a resonant cry of "Yeo! Yeo! Yeo!" i.e., "Good! Good! Good!"

The Governor reminded him that only one of the conditions had been fulfilled. He was now ready to receive the indemnity which had been promised. Oh, yes! The King knew that quite well and he would be most pleased to pay it. Unfortunately, the treasury was not full just then, so he would pay 340 bendas, i.e., 680 ounces of gold, and pay the rest by instalments.

The Governor replied: "It is absurd to think that a man able to send envoys to England, has only that small amount in his treasury. Ashanti shall have British protection, but first British demands must be complied with. The King has been told that he must pay the indemnity, and he must provide the whole or a large part of the amount at once. The Ashantis have proved that their word cannot be trusted, and they have repeatedly promised to pay the last indemnity, but had never fulfilled that promise. The King must this time give me ample security. Prempeh, with a deprecatory gesture, said he would pay in time."

The Governor rejoined: "In that case, The King, the Queen Mother, the King's father, the two War Chiefs, and the Kings of Mampon, Ejesu, and Ofesu, will be taken as prisoners to the Coast. They will be treated with due respect."

Had a thunderbolt burst in their midst, the Ashantis could not have been more amazed. Consternation was depicted on every countenance, and all sat transfixed for a moment, then leaping to their feet, the chiefs begged that Prempeh should not be taken from them.

Kokofuku, pointing to the Ansahs, who stood by, looking half amused, half astonished, shouted angrily, "And what about those men, who have brought this trouble upon our heads?" The Governor replied: "The Ansahs will be arrested as criminals and taken to the coast on a charge of forgery."

The signal was instantly given; Captain Donovan of the Colonial Service stepped out and handcuffed the two Princes; several officers and warrant officers, previously appointed, drew their swords and formed up as escort to the Ashanti King and Chiefs. The denouement was startling and complete, and one almost expected to see the curtain fall on that dramatic scene, amid the plaudits of the audience and hammering from the gods.

The captives were marched, shortly after, to a house prepared for their reception, and two companies of the West Yorkshire Regiment, under Captain Walker, immediately took possession of the Palace. The cordon had not been withdrawn, so no one could leave. All the doors were barred, however, on the inside, and there was a hum of many voices to be heard as the troops approached. One company, therefore, formed round to strengthen the cordon of levies, while the others, under the guidance of Major Baden-Powell, proceeded to make an entrance by a side door. Owing to the rumour that the Palace was undermined, the main entrance was not selected. The side door was burst in, and opened into a large deserted courtyard. Another painted door was then broken down, and the troops dashed in among some hundreds of natives. No resistance, however, was offered, and they were taken prisoners, disarmed, and placed under escort outside.

The work of collecting the valuables in the palace was next proceeded with. Looting the palace of a king of great reputed opulence was tempting work; but though a great many valuables were seized, there was no fabulous wealth discovered as in the palaces looted in India and China. The treasure collected, only consisted of the richly worked head-dress of the King, also rings, gold trinkets and charms, gold hilted swords, etc., etc., with hundreds of articles of small value.

The celebrated Golden Stool of Ashanti, the solid gold crown, and many other almost historical relics of great intrinsic worth, had been previously removed to a place of safety, and secretly hidden where, perhaps, no eye will ever penetrate. An Ashanti custom was to bury the treasure in the bush in time of war, the slaves occupied in the task being then beheaded. From reports, this had been done just before the troops invested this capital of mud and murder. The seized spoil was deposited in a heap outside Headquarters, and soon formed a large pile, a great portion of the articles being of the most common-place description. Gorgeous State

umbrellas, enormous kinkassies or wardrums, brass-studded chairs, beautifully carved stools, European and native swords, native spears, Ashanti daggers and knives, executioners' blades and torture instruments, brass studded cases, leather fetish caps, silken and cotton cloths, execution stools with recent blood stains, valuable old English chinaware, common table knives, large glass vases, carved wooden sandals, silk and gingham pillows of down and soft cotton, a few tusks, ivory pieces for playing "po" and drafts, a few bottles of brandy, common blunderbusses, old flint locks, a few Sniders, and so on ad infinitum.

Fetish was represented by hundreds of charms of every size, shape, and description, from the common slaves' ju-ju of plaited straw to the elaborately worked charms of chased gold or leopard and lion skin, with human blood on the sacred inscription inside as a fancied panacea, of far-reaching power, to cure every disease, destroy an enemy, and grant the wearer a perfect immunity from any ills the flesh or spirit is heir to.

Among the loot were some horrible remnants including a huge heap of women's robes, saturated with blood, and other evidences of very recent sacrifices. This proved to be the final legacy of the evil Prempeh, lending testimony to the rumour that, only days before we had entered Kumassi, he had caused a public execution of four hundred young virgins, their blood being used for the stucco on the Palace walls. Even if the numbers are exaggerated, the information is probably true in the main, as virgin's blood is supposed to contain very sacred properties, and much of the Juju or fetish medicine of the West Africans must be obtained from different parts of a young girl immediately after slaughter.