Benin

Reginald Bacon (1897)

Extracts

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Early next morning, I was sent with a strong party of Houssas, and the *Thesus* sailors and marines, to burn Ochudi’s compound the village belonging to the general who guarded the Ologbo and Sapobar Road. This was easily done, resulting in the capture of one parrot. This compound consisted of about one hundred houses, whose roofs made a good blaze. Behind the buildings there was a huge garden, which we never had time to explore, but it must have been quite a hundred acres, surrounded by a high red wall. It is not unlikely that it was the walking place of the king, and formed part of his compound, which the juju men prevents him ever leaving.

That afternoon began the demolition of houses near the king’s house, so as to make that portion of town defensible by the Houssas after we had left. The destruction of those mud house was a matter of some difficulty, gunpowder could not be used except in small quantities, when the difficulty of tamping rendered the charge useless; the danger of firing the thatch from large charges was a risk not to be run. It was wearisome work, the red dust from the hard mud irritating the nose and throat to an amazing extent.

The same afternoon, a large party under Captain Campbell proceeded to the Queen Mother’s House and destroyed it, so burning one more of the head-centres of vice in the city. The water party in the morning brought back an old Benin woman who had been captured on the way to the water by Lieutenant Fyler. Her information was not much, she described the rockets entering the king’s compound and the panic of the people. So after being told that any Beni who wished to settle down quietly and peacefully in the town could do so, she returned to her own home.

*Sunday, 21st.* The usual demolitions were proceeded with, and a great deal of work done. It was our last day in Benin, and none of us were sorry, except for the Protectorate officers who were to remain with the Houssas to settle the country. The early part of the day was quite uneventful, and we were preparing for a grand parade at four o’clock, when the colours were to be hoisted and three cheers given for the Queen, when an alarm of fire was raised, and sure enough smoke, evidently from the thatch of a roof, could be seen from about three hundred yards off. The Admiral took in the position at a glance; there was nothing that could be done but save all we could, prevent panic and let the fire burn itself out. Captain Campbell undertook looking after the saving of the sick from the Palaver house which was luckily roofed with zinc and not thatch, and therefore gave more chance to the rescuers. Mr Moorshead, the commissariat officer saved as many of his provision boxes as possible, and we had our twenty-five kegs of powder to be carted away before the fire got close to them; with the assistance of Lieutenant Pears and our sailors, these were taken well clear of the compound.

Wildfire is the only name for describing the flames. The first uprush of heated air caused a miniature whirlwind which fanned the flame and carried blazing brands to roof after roof. The air was filled with a thin black smoke which gusts of wind swept in every direction, curling and wreathing it in fantastic shapes. Soon everything seemed in a blaze, brands swept by the wind missed whole compounds and lighted some roof two hundred yards away. The heat was great, due to the volume of the flame caused by the dryness of the thatch, and the smoke, full of finely-divided ash, irritated the eyes and throat. The gust of this impromptu cyclone swept through the carrier and Houssa compounds, fanning the smouldering camp-fires into a blaze, and setting fire to the clothes and food that the carriers had left behind them in their flight, till, looking through the sweeping haze of smoke, it seemed as if the ground itself had caught fire and was burning. There was a dim grandeur about it all, and also there seemed to be a fate. Here was this head-centre of iniquity, spared by us from its suitable end of burning for the sake of holding the new seat of justice where barbarism had held sway, given into our hands with the brand of blood soaked into every corner and relic; fire only could purge it, and here on our last day we were to see its legitimate fate overtake it, and see this, the centre of bloodshed, burn before our eyes in retribution for the millions of lives that had been wilfully sacrificed.

The smoke from the smouldering roofs gradually cleared, and the whole place seemed fresher and more healthy for its purging. We had now to assess our losses. A large quantity of provisions and water, and nearly all our personal effects were among the most important. Personally, I lost everything except what I stood in and my blanket, which consisted of four holes joined together by very little material.

Things were a bit bad for a short time. The march to start on the morrow, short of provisions, no clothing, some of the men having nothing but a flannel and boots, socks, and trousers left to them; waterproof sheets, and everything else destroyed, and four nights in the bush before us – not a candle available to light up, when the darkness came on, except by opening our precious provision boxes.

The first thing was to send out a water party, as only an hour remained before dark. This was organised and sent as soon as possible. They had only been gone a short time when in marched Lieutenant Harrold and a train of carriers with provision, under escort of a party of men from the *forte.* It seemed as if plenty had suddenly dropped from the sky to replace our losses. It appears that these provisions had been sent from Agagi for us on the way down, but, being short of water, Harrold had pushed on to Benin, and welcome indeed he was. Nor was this the end of good fortune to some of us, for with him came Mr. Seppings Wright, the special artist of the *Illustrated London News*, with three months’ provision for himself. As, however, the campaign was practically over, he insisted on feeding us with his stock. Now Englishmen are not generally greedy, that is when there is plenty, but after the short commons we had been on, to see and handle a bottle of pickles, to dive down for that chili hidden behind the label, to see jam, strawberry jam – once more, to find there was whisky, yes, and claret, and all such trivialities of every-day life at home – to find them suddenly showered in that land of want was, I must confess, very exciting. The zest with which we dined that night was not greed, nor was it hunger, it was something between the two, and, believe me, something very pleasant, and it left a feeling that in years to come there was nothing we would not do for the donor of all this bounty. I now thoroughly know and appreciate the feelings of a child at a school-feast, and in future shall look at these jam scrambles through perfectly different eyes and with more sympathetic feelings. Nor did the good deeds of this marvellous man of many things end here. A chair for one to sleep in, a cork mattress for another, a blanket for a third, till you went to sleep dreaming of him as a mixture of first-class conjuror and a modern Santa Clause.

The rafters were still glowing and we were all prepared for the roof falling in, but everything seemed alright - we had dined well.

*Monday, 22nd*. In the early morning, we had our last breakfast at Benin. Mr. Wright was taken round, shown all the principal places of interest, which he sketched, and at 8.30, the long line of sailors, marines, and carriers, was formed, and marched off cheering the Houssa officers and men, who returned it heartily. Glad we were to leave Benin, but sorry enough to say good-bye to the friends we had so recently made, and whose friendship the expedition had so speedily cemented – good luck go with them, and may England always have such men to hold her rights in any part of the world where sudden trouble may arise!

**Glossary:**

Grandeur: Splendour and impressiveness, especially of appearance or style.

Houssas: People of a mythical city which existed in the imagination of European explorers (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houssa>). All records show that it was British officers who were left behind to find the king and his chiefs.

Juju men: The king’s team of personal body guards and palace priests. They go everywhere with him and advise him on every matter.

Palaver house: A kind of town hall where matters of state were discussed by the chiefs. It was also used for official meetings by the various age groups involved in the running of the kingdom and Benin City.

Purge: To rid of whatever is impure or undesirable.