

A GOLD COAST DETECTIVE

THIS is a true story of a theft, and of a native device for detecting the thief, nearly thirty years ago, when I was Chief Justice of the Gold Coast Colony.

The Englishman who was chiefly concerned in it has long since "gone West"; I will call him Denman, but he will be recognised at once by any one who knew the Coast in the 'eighties or 'nineties. He was a kindly, alert, healthy Roman Catholic, who had been over twenty years on the Coast, first as a trader, then in the Government service as a clerk, officer in the Customs, the Treasury, the Police, the legal department; and at that time, by virtue of his well-deserved reputation for industry and probity and gift for resisting the malarial microbe, had attained the post of First Assistant Colonial Secretary—whether as a pukka or an acting appointment I do not remember. He flattered himself with some truth that he knew the native well, having had dealings with him for so long in so many capacities. On the day that the late Sir Alexander Ashmore came out to act for a few months as Colonial Secretary I walked with him from Christiansborg Castle to the Secretariat, and on the road we met Denman; I introduced them, and in the course of our talk I told Ashmore that Denman would be his right-hand man and could put him up to all the ropes, having acted in every office in the country, except that he had, to the best of my belief, never acted either as Bishop or Chief Medical Officer. Denman assented, but added, "That is so; I have never been a medical officer, but I once delivered a native woman of twins." This illustrates the opportunities which were open in those days to a really handy man.

The Secretariat was an extensive block of buildings, half-way between Accra and Christiansborg, less than a mile from each town; in it were many offices, and on the first floor there were quarters in which lived the Colonial Secretary and his

European staff, amongst them being Denman and two other men whom I will call Burton and Thompson.

It was the custom that all official salaries were paid by the Treasurer on the last day of each month, and as there was then no bank in the Colony they were paid in cash. You sent down your trusted "boy" to the Treasury in the morning; he brought back your bag of silver (gold was rarely seen); you took out as much as you wanted for the current expenses of next month and sent down the rest to one of the European merchants, who was glad to give you in exchange for it a cheque or bill of exchange on a London bank or mercantile house.

One pay-day Denman received his bag of silver, probably about £60, and put it in his box in his bedroom. He thought he would go himself to Accra in the evening and get a bill such as he wanted; being a man who took care of the pence, he would doubtless try more than one merchant and see who would give him the best terms. But when he went to take out his bag he found that the box had been opened and the bag was gone; and gone also were some other things, including a gold cross which he believed had belonged to St. Francis of Assisi and which he, as a devout Catholic, highly revered.

There were always some police at the Secretariat, and they were at once called in to investigate; every "boy" in the building, perhaps thirty or forty of them, was arrested and searched and all their rooms and boxes were searched there and then; but no clue was found—except one: a handkerchief was found behind Denman's box, and evidence was given that it belonged to a carpenter from Christiansborg who had been doing some repairs in the building that day. The carpenter was arrested and he and his house were searched; but nothing incriminating was found, and he denied that the handkerchief was his. As there was no evidence against any one else, he was brought before the Court of the District Commissioner and in due course was committed for trial at the Assizes. And, following the bad practice of those days, bail was refused as a matter of course, in the hope that if the man was guilty, which was assumed until the contrary was proved, some further evidence might be found which he might be able to prevent if he was let out; and it was rare for an ignorant native to

apply to a higher Court for bail. So the unfortunate carpenter remained in gaol awaiting his trial.

The evidence, however, being hardly strong enough, Denman bethought himself of getting further light thrown on the affair by the following somewhat irregular device. He was a man in authority, accustomed to having his orders obeyed by native officers without question; but I suspect that, before carrying out his plan, he tried to make himself safe by privately sounding the Governor, who had a very effective intelligence department and would be certain to hear of the matter at once and might strongly object to it; but he was also a man who would perhaps enjoy it (unofficially), and if he was sounded, he probably gave no assent, but treated the matter as one that did not concern him. For my part, when I heard of what had been done, remembering that

Wisely has the poet sung,
A man may hold all sorts of posts
If he'll only hold his tongue,

I asked no questions.

A famous fetish man had come from up-country on a visit to Christiansborg and was reputed to have done wonderful things; in particular he could smell out a criminal more unerringly than any ordinary detective. One morning my head boy Kujo asked me for leave to go and see him; and he went, with a crowd of people whom I saw pass my house. On his return he told me what he had seen. It appeared that Denman had got the prison authorities at Accra to take the carpenter down to Christiansborg; and every boy in the Secretariat was also sent there. The fetish man was there with his attendants and paraphernalia, surrounded by a crowd of people, including the carpenter and the boys; and after the usual tomtoms and dancing and other ceremonies he laid down on the open ground two short pointed sticks at an angle, with their points touching, and covered them with a large calabash; then every suspect was to advance in turn and lift the calabash; and it was understood that when the guilty one lifted it the points of the sticks would rise towards him. So it fell out; the other boys lifted it, and the sticks did not move; but when the carpenter lifted it they rose and pointed at him. No need of any further palaver; "In my country," said Kujo, who had

been brought up in Kumassi, "they would cut off his right hand *one time*"; and that was, in his opinion, the right thing to do. There could be no doubt now; all Accra and Christiansborg knew that the carpenter was the thief.

Kujo's recommendation, however, was not acted upon. The day of the Assizes drew near.

But soon a wonder came to light
That showed the rogues they lied.

Burton was going home on leave. His steamer was signalled; he had packed up and was ready to start. So was his boy Kwamin, who was going for a holiday to his bush village at the same time as his master went away. But one of the other boys, in the service of Thompson, had his eye on Kwamin and charged him with being in possession of a garment belonging to Thompson; Kwamin said that Thompson had given it to him; Thompson was called and denied this and charged Kwamin with stealing the garment; Kwamin was promptly arrested, his box was searched, and in it were found Denman's bag of money and holy cross and other stolen articles. He was brought before the Court and committed for trial on the same charge and at the same assizes as the carpenter; he confessed his theft, and that he had put the handkerchief behind the box for the purpose of throwing suspicion on the carpenter, and that he had taken the stolen things and hidden them in the bush immediately after the theft, and that when the steamer was coming in he thought he was quite safe and brought them back and put them in his box, and in another hour he would have got away with them. So everything ended triumphantly for the carpenter, and Kwamin had a good long spell of hard labour.

I often chaffed Kujo about his fetish detective and the lucky escape of the carpenter's hand. He was an honest and faithful boy; he used to look puzzled and sad about the business; I believe that he thought that the fetish man's god was a god of the hill country and was less powerful in the plain, where some rival god was stronger. But in his religion, as in others, faith can ignore all adverse evidence, and I do not think that his faith was shaken.

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