

SEEING KUWEIT

With REV. GERRIT J. PENNINGS



Boats used by the Pearl-divers.

BOARD OF FOREIGN MISSIONS OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA
25 East Twenty-second Street, New York

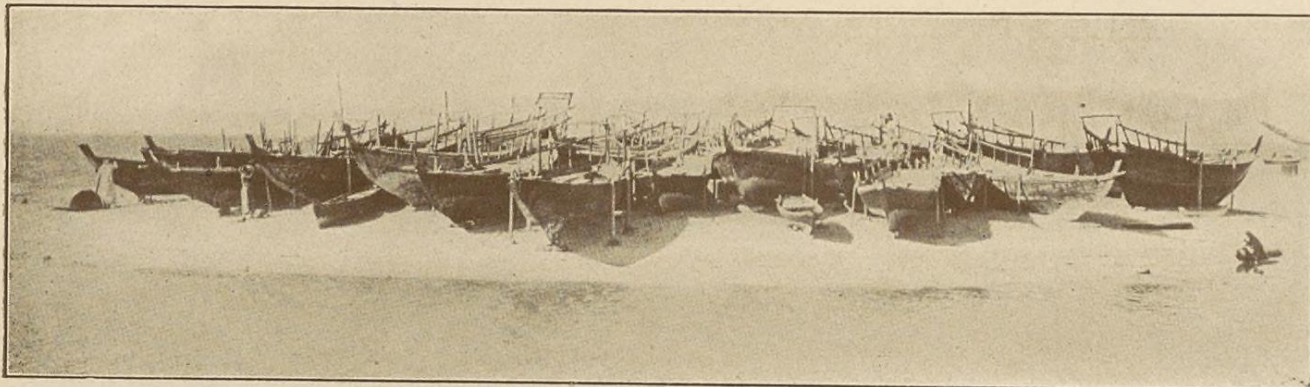
A FOREWORD

Since this article was written, Kuwait has been occupied as a permanent station by our Arabian Mission. A hospital and a missionary residence have been erected on a desirable site just outside the city walls and beside the sea.

The Rev. Edwin E. Calverley and Mrs. Edwin E. Calverley, M.D., and Dr. and Mrs. C. Stanley G. Mylrea are in charge of our evangelistic and medical work there.

Kuwait is a growing city of rapidly increasing commercial importance. The Sheikh, though nominally a vassal of the Sultan and flying the Turkish flag, is practically an independent ruler, and is in a sense under British protection.

It seems altogether probable that Kuwait will be chosen as the terminus of the proposed railroad, which passing through Bagdad will connect eastern Europe with the Persian Gulf. This will render it a port of great political significance. Our mission has been placed there, not only in view of its present need, but of its future importance, as well. It is a strategic point.

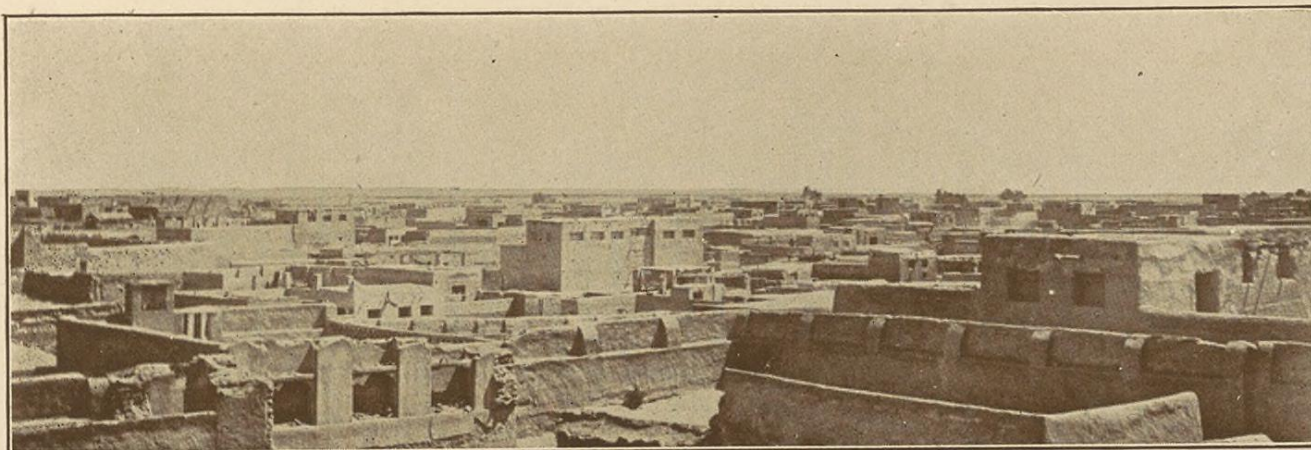


Pearling Boats on the Beach.

SEEING KUWEIT

As our vessel entered the ample harbor of Kuwait, we saw a number of small boats awaiting our arrival. And as soon as we appeared, they hoisted their sails and directed their course toward us. In a moment we were surrounded by fifty or sixty of them. What noise and confusion! Everyone is shouting. By ladders and ropes, the boatmen soon gain the decks, and solicit our patronage. Our ship comes to anchor about two miles from shore, and we select a boatman to take us to the wharf. After much bargaining we come to an agreement as to his charges, and though we pay him but half the sum he demands, we are doubtless giving him twice as much as one of his fellow Arabs would have done. After getting our baggage down into the boat, to the accompaniment of much shouting and ado, we also descend. Our sail is soon set and we leave the ship, with all its noises and confusion, behind.

Before us lies the city, stretched some two miles along the shore. It is typically oriental, a collection of monotonous light-gray compactly-built houses. No tree, in fact, not a blade of grass, is in sight anywhere. As we draw nearer, we are surprised to find hundreds of sail-boats drawn high up on the beach, for Kuwait is the centre of the pearl-diving industry.



A Part of Kuwait.

When we reach the wharf, we find it crowded with men engaged in discharging parcels from the cargo-boats. As Kuwait is but little visited by foreigners, our European clothes and big sun-hats make us the objects of curiosity and comment. In the whole city there is not a foot of sidewalk and many of the streets are so narrow that one can reach from wall to wall. To meet a heavily loaded donkey or camel in such a thoroughfare is a serious matter. The houses are so irregularly placed that the streets sometimes form a maze through which a stranger can find his way only with great difficulty.

The dwelling houses, mostly one-storied, are all of the same general shape and style of architecture. They are built mostly of sun-baked clay, the better ones being veneered with a kind of cement. Externally, such a house appears to be simply a high, walled enclosure, for there are no windows that open on the street. A door admits to an inner court, and upon it all the living rooms of the house open. Such a house is a man's castle in a very real sense, for by bolting the heavy outer door, he can keep out all comers except those who are able to scale the wall. By this style of building, the Mohammedan can perfectly seclude his wives. For into the inner court, where the women do their work, no stranger may enter. That a

man should wish to introduce his wife to his acquaintances is to a Mohammedan something quite inconceivable. As a rule, the living rooms have no windows even toward the inner court. All light and air must enter by the door. Consequently the rooms are dark and ill-ventilated and insufferably hot in summer.

All the women and older girls whom we meet upon the street are heavily veiled, and when they see us approaching, they draw their veils still closer or turn their faces toward the wall. This bashful behavior on the part of the women the Mohammedan considers an imperative duty as well as a precious virtue. A man who desired one of our doctors to operate on his blind sister said, "The fact that she is blind is of small moment, for she is only a woman. But her blindness prevents her seeing the approach of strange men, so that she neglects to draw her veil over her face. And this is likely to disgrace the entire family." This custom of veiling affords a significant hint as to the Mohammedan's estimate of woman. She is disgraced if a stranger sees her face. For she is conceived of as belonging body and soul to her husband, and existing for him alone.

If the resident streets show mainly blank walls, the business streets are full of interest, and the bazaars well worth a visit. The merchants of Kuwait are men of leisure. In summer, their shops are open only from 8 to 11 in the morning and in the afternoon few are open until after prayers, that is, about 3 o'clock, and they are closed again at sun-down. However, during business hours the streets are crowded with people. Hundreds of small shops are arranged side by side, each about seven feet broad. The whole front is open to the street during business hours, and closed at night with heavy wooden doors. Many of the dry-goods shops are hardly larger than a good size cupboard. The shop-keeper squats on the floor in the midst of his wares so that he can reach any article without the inconvenience of getting up.

The customer does not enter the shop, but remains standing in the street. After an article has been purchased, the shop-keeper stretches out his hand for your money and not until he has carefully counted it and examined it, will he hand over

the goods. And since there is much bad money in circulation and many unscrupulous customers, such precautions are not without good reason. Small purchases the merchant deftly ties in a corner of the customer's robe or head-cloth.

We are naturally curious to learn the origin of the stock-in-trade of these shops. We discover that these oriental stores are stocked almost exclusively with



A Scene on the Business Street.

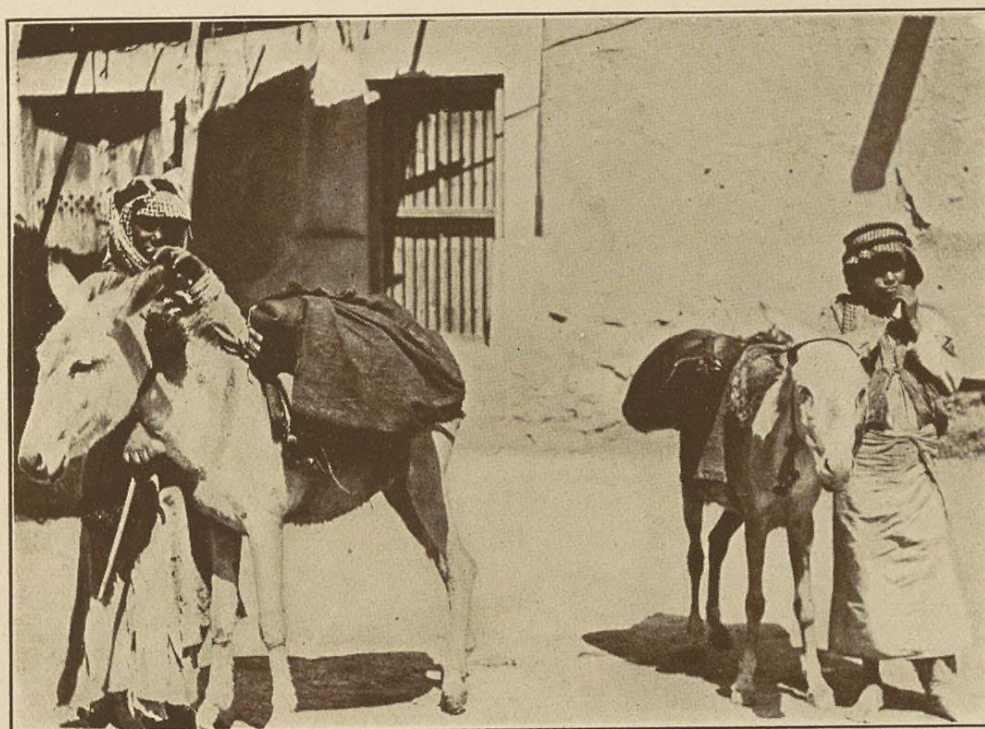
occidental goods. A few articles of leather or wool or copper are of local manufacture but for the rest, everything is imported. Here is coffee from South America, sugar from Austria and Germany, fabrics from England. As Americans, we are interested to see upon hundreds of tin pans the familiar legend "Standard Oil Company of New York" and are surprised to learn that the oil is sold as cheap here

as at home. We also discover large bolts of unbleached cotton cloth from America. This is highly prized by the Bedouins because it is extra strong. It is said that a Bedouin dons a garment but once, after which he wears it until it drops from his body in tatters.

Our Bible Shop in the heart of Kuwait affords a good point from which to observe the passing stream of humanity. Like the other shops, it is small and entirely open to the street. Dilapidated when we first rented it, we have improved its appearance and comfort by putting in a cement floor and a couple of windows. In the motley crowd that throngs past the shop, we see representatives of every national type and social station in this part of Arabia. Each is distinguished by his dress. The red fez marks the Turk, the tall felt hat the Persian; but nearly everyone wears the distinctive head-dress of the Arab. This consists of a checkered red cloth, called the "kefeeah," which is held in place by a band of braided goat's hair or wool. The rest of the costume, in summer consists of a long loose cotton robe reaching the ankles and loose trousers of the same material. In colder weather, a woolen outer garment called the "abba" is worn.

Among those who pass, we notice a porter carrying upon his back a bag of rice weighing perhaps 250 pounds. In a city like Kuwait, where drays are unknown and the streets are narrow, the distribution of almost all merchandise is dependent upon these sturdy porters. Another distinctive street figure is the coffee-seller. In his right hand he holds three or four small metal cups and in his left a coffee pot. He serves his customers small portions of strong, black coffee as they stand in the street. Our attention is caught by a man carrying wares and shouting as he goes along "Three and a half—four, less a fourth, etc!" He is an auctioneer seeking customers in the streets. He takes your bid, as he passes, and if he cannot get a higher one, he comes back to you with the article. We notice next a blind woman led by a little girl who, in front of each shop stops a moment to say: "Give me of God's goods." Those who are unwilling to give merely say: "God will give it to you." Then she continues on her way.

Thus the procession of human beings goes by: little girls with baskets on their heads, heavily veiled women with infants in their arms, little boys playing with sparrows tied to a string, religious beggars, too proud to work, seeking their living from others.



Bedouin Boys Selling Water.

A visit to the Bedouin market on the edge of the city is always an occasion of interest. On the way, one passes a large number of tobacco-shops, for the Arab loves to smoke, and innumerable stores where rice, the staple food of the people, is sold. Thousands of bags of it are brought annually to the city for the pearl-divers and the Bedouins. At the point where the street merges into the market place, we meet Bedouin lads with water for sale. The water, which is in skin bags, has been brought in on the backs of diminutive donkeys, hardly more than 3 feet tall, from

wells in the desert. It is too salty for drinking purposes and can be purchased at a cent a skin-full, delivered at the door. Drinking water is brought to the city in ships, from a river sixty miles distant, and when delivered at one's house costs ordinarily about half a cent a gallon. But if the water ships fail to arrive on time its price may suddenly advance.

The Bedouin market occupies a triangular space between the city and the desert and is pervaded by an atmosphere that suggests the free barbarous life of these children of the desert. Here are herds of camels, some lying down, others just arriving from long journeys in the interior. About them in confusion are



The Arab Market.

piles of pack saddles and fodder and such desert products as wool, and skins, and butter-fat, which the Bedouins hope to exchange for sugar and coffee and rice and cloth. Along one side of the market Bedouin women are selling sour milk from jars or skins, either in bulk or so much per drink.

A large part of the market is occupied by the peculiar big-tailed sheep and long-eared goats of the orient, and by the donkeys which are only less essential than

the camels to Bedouin life. About them are groups of eager buyers, and many sharp bargains are being driven. At the western end of the market small articles are sold. The merchant simply spreads his wares out upon the ground or on a piece of gunny sack. Two or three eggs, a spool of yarn, a box of matches, or a few handfuls of peanuts are sufficient excuse for a Bedouin to spread a mat and enter into business. The impression received from a visit to this market is that the inhabitant of the desert is very poor indeed. His life is one long struggle to keep the wolf from the door. In summer he is baked by the merciless desert sun; in winter he shivers in the chilling wind of the open plain. His flocks are his only property, and of their possession he is uncertain. Thieves abound. Drought spells ruin to him, and an exceptionally cold winter may play havoc with his flock.

Our attention is caught by a group of people standing in a circle about an open space in which four men to the accompaniment of a tambourine are singing songs celebrating the glories of Mohammed. Their clothing indicates that they are from far-away Yeman. A piece of cloth spread upon the ground catches such copper coins as the auditors may be disposed to give them.

On re-entering the city, we come upon a group of shops in which groceries and vegetables and grains are sold, the latter lying in little piles upon the ground. Attracted by the loud sound of their hammers, we enter the shops where the copper-smiths are at work. Their chief products are the everywhere used coffee pots and caldrons. In the latter the Bedouins cook their food. They set the caldron on three stones, make a fire underneath and their stove is ready for use. Some of these caldrons are of enormous size. An inland sheikh is said to have one large enough to boil two camels in at once and one of our missionaries has seen Arabs use such a caldron to ferry themselves across a river.

The baker's street adjoins that of the coppersmith and here we see the native process of bread making. Since the flour is made of the whole wheat, it is brown in color. After the dough has been kneaded and flattened by the hands into the shape of a pancake, it is placed in the barrel-shaped clay ovens. These are heated