

A Wenatchee Man Among the Pearl Divers

BY FRED SIMPICH

On board Russian ship "Tigris," of human life. It was of these dan- Bahrain Islands, Persian Gulf. That Matthew Arnold wrote in 4, 1910:

The lustrous pearls that blazed at the breast of the Queen of Sheba, on Cleopatra and a score of other Oriental beauties were fished up from the hot, dangerous depths of the Persian Gulf, about this magic island of Bahrain. Bahrain, itself, bristles with romance as the reputed birthplace of the Phoenicians, and the wonderful island has played a prominent part in the eventful history of the East.

Thousands of years before the flood, Babylonian mythology says Cane—a strange creature, half man and half fish—came up out of these Bahrain pearling waters; from Bahrain, Cane went northwards, teaching culture to the Chaldeans. Aorus was King of Babylon then—432,000 years before the flood—and ever since then the beautiful pearls of the Persian Gulf have adorned the harem favorites in all Arabia. Around the Arabian coast today may be found certain Sheikhs in whose tribes pearls of great price have been handed down for generations. Ishtar, the dissolute Babylonian Princess, is said to have had a necklace of magnificent pearls, so long that even when she stood erect it swept the ground.

Today the fierce, hazardous quest for pearls goes on at Bahrain, as desperately as in the days of Queen Sheba, when King Solomon spent his money on these treasures of the deep.

Over 1500 men have already lost their lives, during 1910, and the season has still some weeks to run. Only yesterday three powerful Abyssinian divers were maimed by the sharks; one great fellow had both legs bitten off. I saw him die, stretched at full length on the yellow beach sands. His brown-skinned Arab wife clung to him, sobbing her heart out, and all around us arose the shrill chorus of wailing women. Every season the sharks, or the dreaded sting ray, which hideous creature grows to tremendous size in these waters, takes a terrible toll

"And dear as the wet diver to the eyes
Of his pale wife who waits and weeps on shore,
By sands of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf,
Plunging all day in the blue waves, at night
Having made up his tale of precious pearls
Rejoins her in their hut upon the shore."

Many of the finest pearls in the "best matched" displays of American jewelers come originally from these wild waters. As many as five million dollars worth have been found in a single year.

Diving for pearls in the Persian Gulf calls for nerve, skill and for strength. The season lasts from June till November, and this year about 5000 pearling boats are busy about Bahrain and along the Arabian coast. I am travelling about the Gulf on a Russian tramp, and whichever way we have turned, since leaving Bassorah, we have plowed thru swarms of long, graceful craft carrying from six to fifteen men each. Every village along the coast sends its quota of divers and boatmen.

The divers work in from five to twenty fathoms of water, though seven fathoms is the average depth. The best pearls come from the deeper waters. The method of diving is simple; a big brown man, stark naked, usually an Abyssinian, puts a forked bone over his nose and wads beeswax into his ears to keep out the water. Then he ties a big stone to his feet to pull him down; about his waist is slung a net basket in which to carry the oysters he finds at the bottom. As he slips overboard and sinks from sight in the sea he carries with him the end of a life-line, held by comrades in the boat. A diver usually remains under water for a minute—probably a little more in some instances. An

Arab writer, Ibn Batutah, said in the fourteenth century that these divers could stay under water for two hours. Times seem to have changed a great deal since then! A lot of divers die each season from loss of blood, brought on by diving too deep or remaining under water too long. I have seen a man come up from a ten fathom dive, bleeding at the nose as if he had been struck with a club. After the pearls have been picked out of the shells, they are sorted by a head man by passing them through a set of brass sieves. There are three sets of different sized holes in the sieve. The pearls that will not go through the largest holes in the brass sieves are called "Ras"; the residue of the second sieve are called "Batin," and the smallest ones, the contents of the last sieve, are called "Dzel." Black pearls of sinister lustre are often found in the Bahrain waters, and many times the tiny, steel-colored "seed pearls" are brot up. The waters of the Gulf about Bahrain now present a scene of great animation. The fleets of pearl boats are everywhere visible, and at Menamch, the principal port of Bahrain, are now anchored more than a thousand of these craft. And a light on the barbaric, tumultuous beach at Bahrain is an experience not easily forgotten. A long row of mud-walled, straw topped coffee shops stretch the length of Menamch's waterfront, and from sunset till gray dawn the revels of the pearl boat crews run their riotous, noisy course.

The great, shapely Abyssinians, perfect prototypes of our own southern Sambos, appear in their flaming colors, play on rude stringed instruments, beat their tom-toms and frolic about for all the world like a crowd of negro merry-makers in the United States. There are theatres, too, where dusky Arab maidens, all bracelets, spangles and tattoo work, wriggle through the sinuous dances of the sensuous East. And all about sit the cross-legged crowd of Hindus, Jews and Parsees who have come to buy the pearls. They sip coffee, pull softly at their bubbling water pipes, and glance once in a while at the dark-skinned dancing girls but their minds are not on the dance and their words are all of pearls. These buyers come from London, from Ceylon and Bombay each season; often they advance money to the Arabs who wish to build a pearl boat or hire a crew. Many of the big, black divers are held as slaves by the Arab pearl merchants. Slavery is illegal in the Gulf, but it is said few of the Abyssinians would accept freedom if it were offered them. The value of a good, strong African is about seven hundred dollars. Slave running on a big scale is now seldom met with, though I am informed that only a year or two ago the American missionaries at Bahrain rescued a boatload of black boys who had been smuggled up the Gulf from Africa, for sale to the Arabs. One Sheikh I met showed me a magnificent specimen of black manhood whom he had held in bondage for years. "I gave him a horse, gun and wife; now he's happy and would not desert me if he had the chance," said the Sheikh. In watching the familiar negro antics performed by these African pearl-divers, who never heard of their lost brethren in America, I have often thought what a sensation it would create if a party of these blacks of Bahrain might be suddenly set down in the midst of a negro gathering in Missouri or Alabama! Exactly alike in face and physique, but with no common language and no previous knowledge of each other, it would be at least interesting to observe the process of social coalition. And what a possibility for the discovery of long lost relatives, even if many generations removed.

Bahrain, which means the "Two Seas," is also the name of the largest island in the group. Just who owns these valuable pearling grounds is not plain. The islands are ruled by an Arab Sheikh; this latter has a treaty with the British, allowing to them a consul at Bahrain. In return for protection from pirates and other enemies the Sheikh has also promised the British that he will not grant lands nor pearling privileges to any other foreigners, without the consent of Britain. For a long time Persia claimed the islands. Of late years, however, Turkey has asserted her ownership on the grounds that they lie so near the shores of her Arabian provinces. The American missionaries, some twenty in number, who live and labor among the Moslem islanders are under the protection of the American Consul at Bagdad. The enormous annual yield of the pearling grounds make it plain why these otherwise undesirable and desolate islands are so much prized. Imitation pearls, made in Paris, are already being imported into Bahrain by sleek Orientals who realize the possibilities of the French fakirs. Among the Arabs, who are naturally a sentimental and romantic people, a peculiar legend is current as to the origin of pearls. Some say that pearls are formed from

mermaid's tears, which have fallen into the oyster while it was open. All sorts of superstitious beliefs are also prevalent, regarding these prizes of the salt water depths. It is a common practice—among the rich needless to say—to powder a pearl and swallow it, either as a tonic for failing vigor, or to ward off impending bad luck. A maiden may rub her eyes with a pearl, and thereafter she may gaze on any man and by her mere glance make him her slave. Black pearls, however, are to be avoided, for Arabs see in them some sinister manifestation of the powers of darkness. Wealthy Arabs have chains of pearls, or "prayer beads" such as are carried by pious Moslems. I saw one such string worth a tidy fortune.

In Bahrain's tumultuous past many famous pirates, princes and potentates have prowled her pearling grounds. Sinbad's treasure island, Hormuz, lies but a short voyage to the southeast. Down the coast is picturesque old Maskat, so long the haunt of the Portuguese buccanner, Albuquerque. Nebuchadnezzar, whose famous realm lay just to the north, was no doubt a collector of Bahrain pearls, for it is known that he maintained a regular service of high pooped "baggalows" between Babylon and the Persian gulf. All over Bahrain are found the ruins of a perished civilization, of a later date than that of the Phoenicians, who are thought to have come, originally, from this pearl island. Scientific excavation of these old ruins may reveal a wealth of knowledge to archaeologists. A strange natural phenomenon is the existence, some miles out at sea from Bahrain, of numerous springs of fresh water. Natives take a waterskin, dive from the pearling boats in the region where these springs abound, and fill their goatskins with pure, fresh water, fathoms below the sea's surface.

The people of Bahrain are a mixed lot, attracted from all over the East by the peculiarly hazardous, but often extremely profitable pearling industry. The Shia sect of Mohammedans, usually a fanatical lot and averse to business relations with foreigners, is probably in the majority. But because ever man's mind is on pearls in Bahrain, no time is found for argument over religious questions. These Shias, many of them dressed up dandies from Teheran and Maskat, are eager bidders against the wily Hindus and the astute Parsees, who also flock to this island bazaar.

Much inland trade for the little-known Arabian provinces of Haza and Nejd passes through Bahrain, en route to the mainland. From Kow-eit on the coast—where the Germans still hope to end their famous Bagdad railway—camel caravans go inland, over the great trackless wastes of the interland.

Warfare is often waged among the different Arab Sheikhs along the pearl coast, and often the British gunboat that patrols the Gulf takes a hand and helps to settle the dispute. Over forty Arab "dhows" were sunk near Bahrain a few years ago by one little gunboat when the coast Arabs invaded Bahrain. Several of the Sheikhs own small steam vessels, usually the gift of some foreign power. The contrast of ancient and modern is most striking. Think of an aged patriarch sacrificing a sheep, a la Father Abraham, and smearing its blood over the door to seal a vow; then, five minutes later, sitting cross-legged beside his kneeling camel and listening to the raucous voice of a graphophone, made in New Jersey! I saw this incident at Mohommereh, on the Persian coast.

Tragedies and crimes, very often strange and mysterious, spring from the hunt for pearls. Near Menamch while opening oysters, a slave was seen to put his hand into his mouth. He denied having swallowed a find, but in an instant the Arab "Tiajall" (foreman) was upon him, knife in hand. The Abyssinian protested his innocence when ordered to disgorge the pearl. A fight ensued, the diver was killed; in an instant, almost, the warm body was cut open, and a pearl of unusual size removed. One common superstition is that after a lucky season, the crew must throw one of the pearls back into the sea, that next year's finds may also be valuable. It is not on record, however, that this practise is strictly observed.

A tale is told at Howel of a marvelous pearl of supernatural power, owned by a man of mystery who lives in a mud hut all to himself, on the outskirts of this wild Arab town. With this stone he locates lost treasure, works love charms, brings bad luck on one's enemies, etc., all for a price. Once, the story goes, he rented the charm pearl to an Arab whose young wife had run away with another man. The fleeing pair had escaped from Kow-eit on two swift Oman dromedaries, and had a start of some days on the pursuing husband. But with the magic aid of the charm pearl he found their trail, and kept it. Each dawn he would hold

the prophetic pearl toward the rising sun and in it he would see a tiny picture of the fleeing couple showing just their location on the rolling desert ahead of him. As the distance grew shorter the picture in the picture in the pearl grew more realistic, till the injured husband could make out the very features of his unfaithful spouse. On the evening

of the tenth day he overtook the fugitives, who were sleeping a happy siesta in their tent of goat-hair. He shot the lover and cut the throat of his runaway wife, which is the law of the desert.

When we see pearls in the show windows of jewelers, safely displayed behind steel bars and guarded by private watchmen, we forget that for

every fine stone found at least one diver's life was lost. Even in the Philippines, where a few Americans now sail the Sulu sea and seek these lustrous jewels, the quest is not without its tragedies. And highly profitable as pearl fishing may be, when luck abounds, many a fortune has been lost by those who found only oysters in the shells brought up,

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