

BAHRAIN

By C. DALRYMPLE BELGRAVE

THE Bahrain archipelago is a group of small islands about seventeen miles off the Arab coast half-way down the Persian Gulf.

The town of Manama, the capital and commercial centre of the principality, is situated at the northern point of an island of the same name. This, the largest of the islands, is about thirty miles long and ten miles wide at the centre. It is separated from Muharrak Island, which contains the second largest town, by a stretch of sea, a mile wide, which becomes dry land, except for a narrow channel, at high tide. There are two smaller islands covered with palm groves and several rocky uninhabited islets.

The names "Manama" and "Muharrak" mean respectively "The place of sleeping" and "The place of burning." It has been suggested that the former island was used as a place for burying and the latter island as a place for cremations either by inhabitants or by people from the mainland many centuries ago. On Manama Island there is an area of many miles covered with thousands of ancient tumuli: some of these burial mounds are over fifty feet high. There has been much controversy about their origin, which has not yet been definitely settled.

The climate of the Persian Gulf is notorious, and much has been written about it; still more is said.

In Bahrain the temperature does not reach the height that it does in Muscat and some of the other Gulf ports, but the maximum humidity is higher than anywhere else in the Gulf. During three months of the summer, July, August, and September, the climate is very disagreeable indeed, very hot and extremely damp. The buildings ooze with moisture. April, May, June, and October are also hot and damp, but relieved by frequent dry spells which occur when the north wind blows. The remaining five months are usually quite pleasant, and during January and February it is often cold enough for fires in the house.

Only a small area of the islands is cultivated, the rest is stony desert. Rainfall never exceeds three inches in the year, but numerous fresh-water springs irrigate the gardens, which consist mostly of date groves. It is thought that the origin of this water supply is in the Arabian highlands 300 miles away. Several of the springs rise from

the bed of the sea. The Arabs dive down to the source with leather skins which they fill with fresh water, close, and carry up through the salt water to the surface. Before Artesian wells were sunk the water from the sea-springs was sold in the bazaars at four annas for each petrol-tin.

There are very few animals on the islands. At one time the Shaikhs used to breed ponies, but motor-cars have superseded horses. A particularly fine strain of white donkeys used to be exported from Bahrain to Zanzibar and the East African ports. They were usually exported on dhows from Muscat, and are therefore known in East Africa as "Muscat donkeys." I have met them as far west as Iringa District in Tanganyika Territory.

The local cows are fed chiefly on dates and dried fish—a peculiar diet, but one that produces good milk.

A few gazelles have been imported by the Shaikh, but there are so few that each one is known almost by name. In some places there are quantities of hares, which the Shaikhs hunt with silugi hounds. The Shaikh is a great breeder of these hounds. The Shaikh's favourite sport is hawking, especially during the season when the lesser bustard are on the islands. The venerable Shaikh Isa Ibn Ali, who is about eighty-five years old, constantly spends a whole day out hawking with his sons, riding most of the time on a donkey.

No census of the population has been taken, but the total is estimated at nearly 150,000, of which about two-thirds are resident in the two chief towns and the remainder in small scattered villages.

The population is made up of Arabs and the original inhabitants of the islands who are known as Baharina. The former are Sunni and the latter are Shias. The Arabs live almost entirely in the two towns; their interests are mainly commercial and connected with the pearl industry. All the cultivation is done by the Baharina. The Government and the ruling family is Sunni.

The population of Manama town is a mixed one, and includes Indians, Baluchis, Iraklis, freed negro slaves, and a small but influential community of wealthy Persian merchants, who migrated from Persia mostly during the last fifty years and have acquired wealth from trading in Bahrain. Most of these are Sunni, and came originally across the Gulf from Persian ports. There is also a large floating population of low class Persian coolies, who work as porters on the docks and in the bazaars.

The Shaikhs of the Khalifa family are the rulers of Bahrain. In 1783 they came over from the neighbourhood of Kuwait on the Arabian coast and conquered the islands which, for a few years in the latter part of that century, had paid tribute to Persia.

The present Shaikh, a direct descendant of the conquerors, is Sir Isa Ibn Ali al Khalifa. In 1923, owing to his advanced age, he

handed over the control of the state to his eldest son, Shaikh Hamed Ibn Isa al Khalifa, who is now a man of between fifty and sixty years of age. The Shaikhs of Bahrain have been in treaty relations with Britain for over a century.

Bahrain has been famous for many centuries as the centre of the pearl-diving in the Persian Gulf. The welfare and the very existence of the people depend upon the pearls. There are no local industries of any importance except boat-building. Nothing affects the people more than the result of the pearl season. If the season is good, money flows. The big merchants who trade in pearls between Bahrain, Bombay, Paris, and London make large profits. The local merchants who advance money to the boat captains are sure of their interest; the boat captains make money, and even the divers, who invariably come off the worst, receive larger amounts when they are paid their shares of the profits from the boats' catches.

If the season is good, the State revenues are larger. The revenue depends entirely on a five per cent. import tax, and when there is money to spend in the bazaars the imports increase. No tax is levied on the pearls, and anybody is free to dive, as it is the Shaikh's policy to advance the industry in every way. I have often seen it stated that the Shaikh of Bahrain himself receives large sums from the pearls. This is not the case: he has no personal interest in the pearling.

The pearling system is very ancient and very complicated. Merchants on shore lend money to the captains of the pearling dhows, who usually give the merchants first option on their pearls. The profits on the boat's catch is shared proportionately among the captain, the divers, and the pullers. Interest is almost always charged by the merchants on the money which they lend to the captains and by the latter on the money which they lend to the divers at the beginning and end of the diving season, although the charging of interest is strictly forbidden by the Koran. The more sanctimonious merchants quiet their conscience in the following way. They hand over to the captain fifty bags of rice at the beginning of the season on the understanding that he gives them back sixty bags, or the equivalent in cash, at the end of the season. This is not considered to be taking interest.

During the last few years various reforms in the system have been made by the Shaikh. Rates of interest have been settled between divers and captains. At the beginning of each season the Shaikh issues a proclamation laying down the amount to be advanced to a diver. Formerly boat captains used to lend money to young men who showed promise of being good divers, at exorbitant interest, thus binding the borrower to dive for the rest of his life to pay off the debt. The condition of divers was almost that of slaves. The

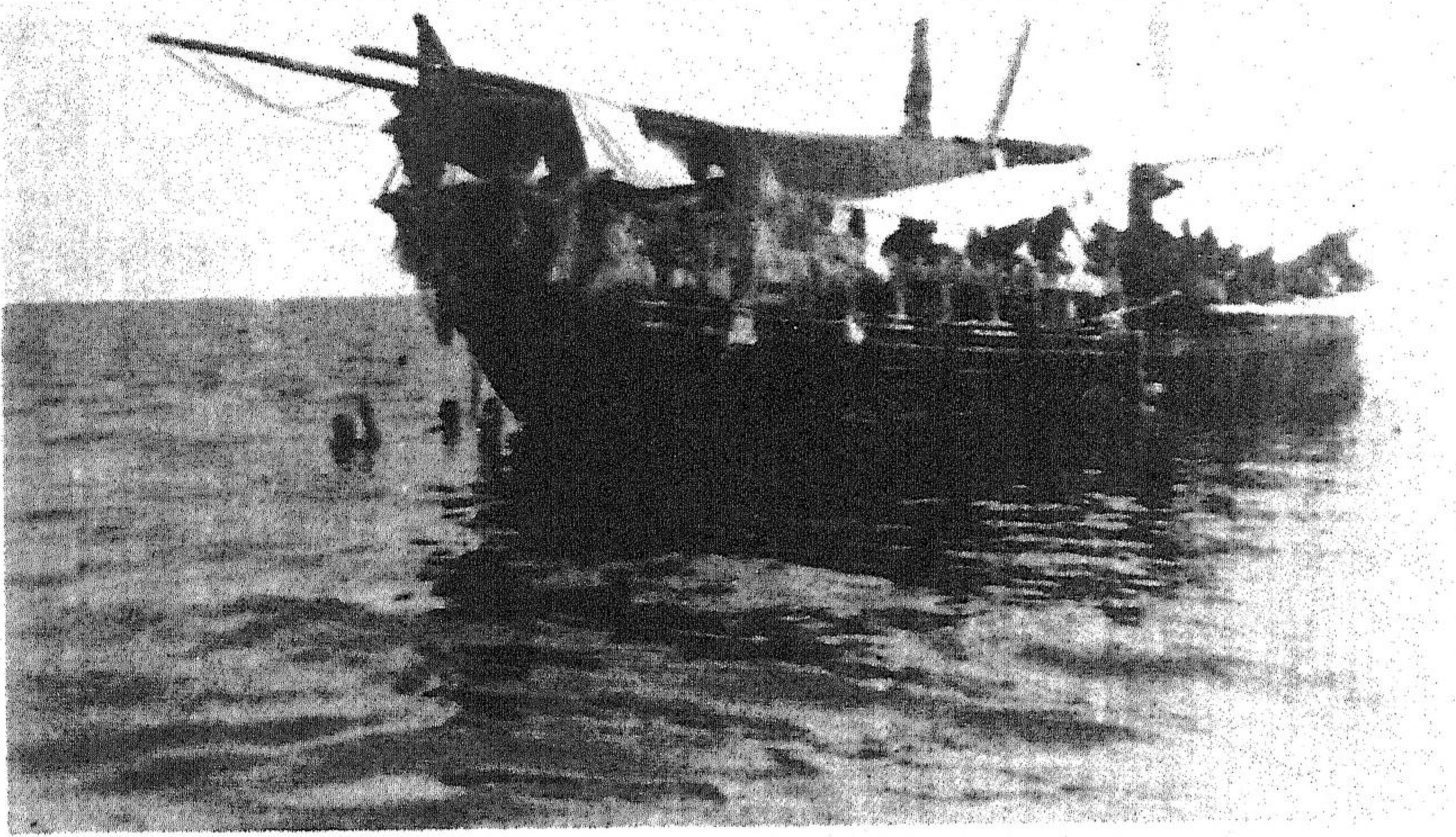




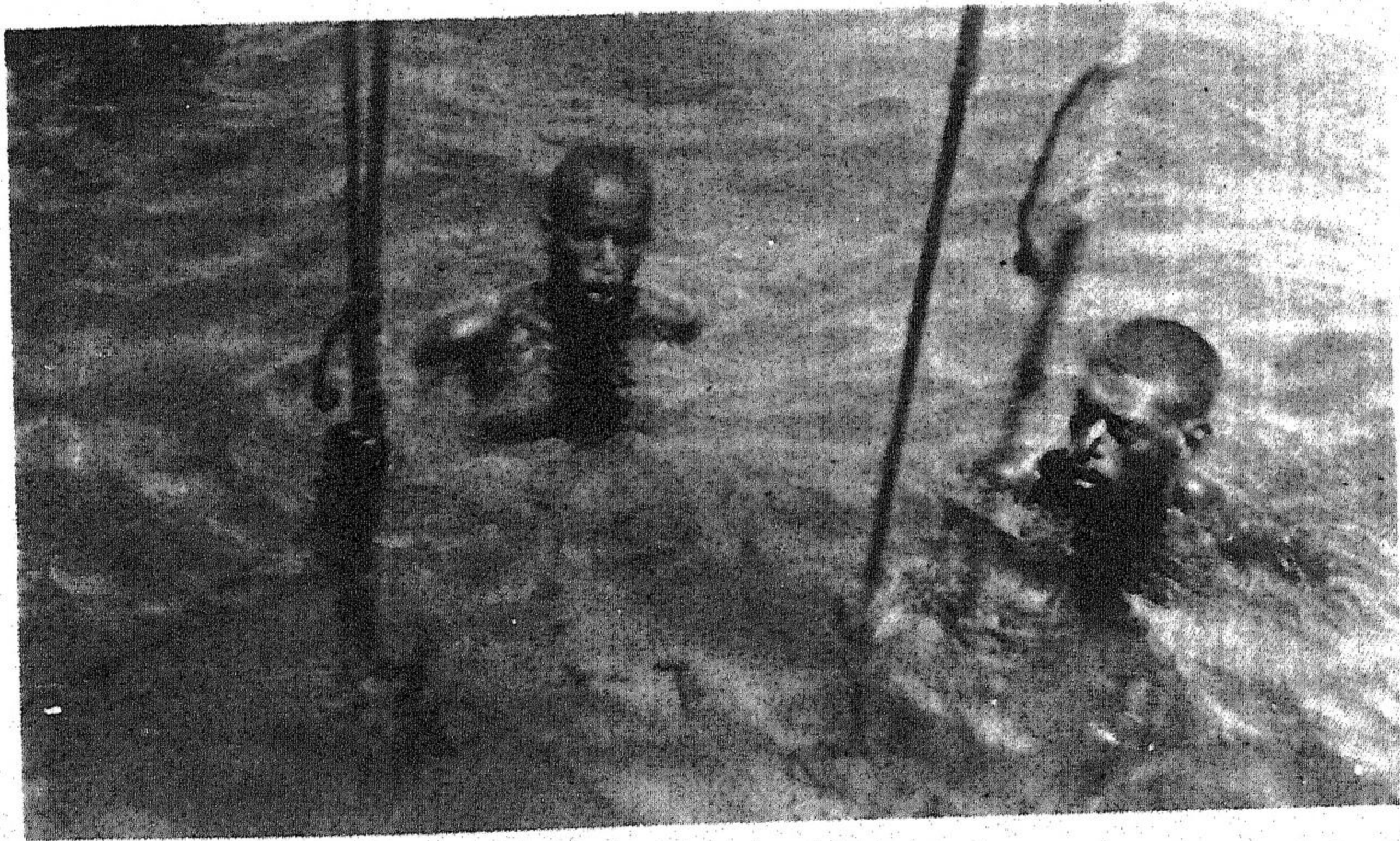
H.E. SHEIKH HAMED WITH HIS FAVOURITE HAWK.



THE LARGEST PEARL OF THE 1927 SEASON,
WORTH ABOUT £5,000.



A DIVING DHOW ON THE PEARL BANKS.



TWO DIVERS IN THE SEA WEARING NOSE CLIPS.

of it, but the majority disapprove of any change. The social and hygienic state of women is the same as it was many centuries ago.

One of the things that strike one most on first seeing the people is the badness of their teeth and eyes, especially among the Baharina. About half the men seem to have unsound eyes. One family of four brothers have five sound eyes between them.

The people of Bahrain like to consider that it is the most important port between Basra and Karachi. This is partly because most of the imports to the mainland are shipped through Bahrain. During the last two or three years there has been a remarkable increase in the variety of European goods which are stocked in the bazaar.

On a really hot day the bazaars are the coolest places in the town. The lanes are roofed over with matting and spread weekly with clean sand. Compared to most Eastern bazaars, they are remarkably clean and free from unpleasant smells, except when one passes the place where they sell dried fish. There are not many native goods worth buying; brass and copper coffee-pots are made, and one can buy Persian carpets, but they are better and cheaper if purchased elsewhere. The unbecoming fashion of natives wearing European clothes has not yet reached Bahrain, except in the case of a few foreigners—Indians, Persians, and Iraklis. The Shaikh and the Arabs do not approve of it. Once the son of the leading Kadi returned from a visit to Paris wearing a French suit. Urgent messages were sent to him on the boat forbidding him to set foot upon the island until he had changed his clothes.

The Shaikh himself is a man of simple habits. He has three residences, one in each of the two towns and one out on the desert in the middle of the island. He prefers living in his country-house among his hawks and his horses and his hounds. His palace in Manama is furnished in European fashion, but in his other houses he lives in Arab style. He does not care for show except on State occasions, and then he appears in gorgeous embroidered robes, carrying his sword in a golden scabbard, surrounded by his brilliantly dressed sons and retainers, and escorted by a detachment of the State police and a picturesque bodyguard of local Arabs. In person, he is a tall, distinguished-looking man, with a square black beard and a dignified manner. Although he has travelled in India and in England, he speaks no language but his own.

Taken as a whole, Bahrain is not a beautiful place; but what it lacks in beauty it makes up for in interest. The best parts of Manama town are very like some of the suburbs of Alexandria, except for the curious wind towers, which are a feature of the houses inhabited by Persians. The inland desert country is arid and ugly, terribly hot in the summer days, but cooler than the coast during the nights. Owing to the intense heat at night, which is the most

trying feature of the Bahrain climate, many of the town people motor out to the desert after sunset and spend the night in tents or straw houses.

Some of the gardens are very attractive, especially where there are fresh-water springs, overshadowed by date-palms and drooping tamarinds, in whose translucent depths one sees tortoises and big carp. In the summer evenings it is the fashion of the Arabs to drive out to Idari, the biggest of the springs near the town, for bathing. Sometimes there are as many as twenty cars parked alongside the spring, and groups of Arabs sit on carpets round the banks drinking coffee and watching the bathers. Very often the Shaikh himself goes out there with his sons.

Although Bahrain lies between Iraq and India—and in these days more and more people travel home by the overland route—the fast mail from Basra to India does not call. Few people, therefore, except those who have official or commercial interest in the islands, visit Bahrain.