

## CHAPTER IX.

### SOMETHING ABOUT DHOWS

Timber—Navigation—The dhow and the slave trade—Dhow captains.

THERE is no good timber on the Somaliland coast. The wood from which our dhows are built is imported. By far the best comes from the famous forests of Witu and Malindi on the British East African coast. This latter, called Bamba Kofi by the natives of Witu and Lamu, is nowadays very rare and worth its weight in gold. The work put into the dhows is rough and good. There is never any hurry or rush in their construction, and the only tools used are the adze, the brace and bit, the saw and hammer. The boats are painted with the brightest colours procurable, but at a pinch porpoise fat and lime make a passable substitute for paint.

We have no monster craft like the Basra dhow, carrying two thousand packages of dates, such as was wrecked off Berbera some years ago. The biggest boat we have, and we are indeed proud of her, barely carries her three hundred sacks of rice,

and boasts no compass. Her captain does not require one; he knows the fourteen stars of the hot season and the fourteen stars of the cold season, each of which he will tell you is seen for thirteen days or nights only. As for NUT and THURAYA in the cool season, AKIL, KALEH, SHOLE, SUOD, and SUHAIL; though they be of the twenty-eight stars used by dhow-men to steer by when they are in the heavens, beware! High winds may be expected. "And if it is so dark that you cannot see the stars?" I once asked a dhow captain. "Unless we are dangerously near to the shore, or there are reefs about, we just go on. One can't get lost in the Gulf of Aden."

But often dhows do get lost in the Gulf of Aden; and I mean it in the literal sense. A few years ago the Zeila dhow, *Sahalla*, in charge of an Arab named Mahomed Hussain, bound from Berbera to Zeila with mail, a cargo of one hundred bags of jowari and thirteen passengers from Bulhar, capsized about four miles out to sea at half-past three of an August afternoon. Three men and one woman were drowned, and several persons clinging to a mast were in the sea for three days. A small boy seized the tail of a sheep and clung on until the animal dragged him ashore. As a rule sheep are poor swimmers, but luckily for the youngster, who could not swim, this beast was an exception.



A NAKHODA (CAPTAIN) AND HIS FAMILY.

In years gone by Zeila dhows saw exciting service in the slave trade, but the old dhow captains are naturally reticent concerning any part they may have taken in it. Even the ex-slaves, all of whom profess to be devout Mahomedans, prefer to keep secret, if possible, the story of their adventures and release. According to the jail-master, who is one of the latter, he was nothing but the adopted son of a slave-master, who spent much of his time in teaching his protégé the intricacies and mysteries of the true faith. He holds such a good position nowadays, does our jail-master, that people are charitable enough to forget that he was once "only a slave and a heretic." Human nature is like that.

In the old records, which I am never tired of reading, there is a copy of a statement, made on oath, twenty-five years ago by two slaves who made their escape from an Assab pearling dhow working on the Arabian coast. In the dead of night they slipped away with the dhow's one and only boat, and were lost for days. In the last extremity of thirst and hunger they made Perim. From thence a kindly British Resident sent them on to Zeila, where they told a tale of such brutal ill-treatment at the hands of their late masters, that it called forth the practical sympathy of the officer-in-charge, who helped them in every possible way. One of these men is dead, and the other has become one of our

leading petty traders. It would be considered by this latter to be the height of bad form to rake up the old story concerning his past. He likes to think that the older generation has almost forgotten his humble origin, and that the younger may in time come to believe that his children are descended from one of the old Arab sheikhs, to whom all respectable Zeilawis are related. I wonder if they are?

The dhow captains are ever ready for an adventure, and, until recently, many came their way. Towards the end of 1916 a number of German secret service men, who had been endeavouring to stir up trouble for the allies by interfering in the politics of the ex-King of Abyssinia, Lij Yassu, and even of the Mad Mullah, determined to leave Africa, as fate was against them. One of these men walked from Abyssinia, and keeping to the French and British Somaliland border approached the coast, where he had arranged with the captain of a dhow to pick him up and take him to Arabia. But the Zeila and Djibouti police were on the look out, and acting on "information received" the dhow was arrested. Shortly afterwards the despondent German was only too glad to give himself up at Djibouti. His chance of escaping to Arabia was hopeless, and he was a lucky man to have reached the coast alive. Others of his ilk did not succeed in doing so, and it is on record

that one of them perished miserably of thirst in the bush.

Nowadays, thanks to the British Navy, slave-running and gun-running are "industries" of the past, and the dhow captains, whose hearts are still unchanged, confine their activities, in the illegitimate line, to landing a parcel of silk or cloth at night when the coast is clear. A party of conservancy sweepers has even been known to find, hidden in the garbage that strews our beach, a parcel of firearms landed by some fire-eater who is now repenting his venture in Berbera jail. The dhow men unanimously agree that life is becoming decidedly dull. That it is still sweet is sometimes brought home to them as they fight their open craft through the sudden storms that often take them unawares in these waters; or when, as has been known to happen, a dhow laden with live stock has a hole knocked through her bottom by a restless bullock. The hole has been stopped with the clothes torn from the backs of the crew, and the water that found its way in, and threatened to send all hands to the bottom, bailed out by desperate men armed with bowls, scoops, cups, and any other utensil that came to hand. For, be it known, our Arab and Somal sailormen never dream of danger, and when danger comes it always finds them unprepared, but full of fight, whilst they consider there is

a chance. When they realise they must face the worst no vain regrets are wasted on might-have-beens. They humbly bow the neck to fate, and, like their fathers of old, comfort themselves with the thought that what is to be will be—"Inshallah."