

## CHAPTER XV

### PEARLS

Pearl dhows and finance—Methods and materials—"God alone knows"—Pearl divers—A pearl story—Juma Bana, pearl merchant.

PEARLING dhows look romantic enough in all conscience—from a distance—but at close quarters the smell—ugh! They are of all sizes, and the ordinary Zeila pearler may ship a crew of anything from five up to twelve men, under a nachoda or native captain. The equipment required is simple. A small canoe or boat, a paraffin-tin cut in half, with a pane of glass soldered in the bottom, a few pieces of bent iron wire to close the divers' nostrils when they dive. Such comprises the outfit. A very primitive one indeed.

When a dhow wishes to fit out the following is the procedure. The captain—who, like the majority of his class, is generally up to his neck in debt—waits on a pearl buyer to ask for an advance. The latter makes inquiries as to the size of the dhow, the crew, and other particulars. These completed to his satisfaction he issues supplies of rice, dates, and other food, with perhaps a dash in the way of solid cash, and in return the nachoda agrees that the

buyer will participate in the profits of the dhow over a given period. The arrangement is generally thus: to the buyer, or financier, the return of all moneys expended, and after that one third of what remains; the remaining two thirds are divided equally between the captain on the one hand and the crew on the other.

All preliminaries arranged the dhow puts to sea. There are no sleeping quarters provided for the crew, who sleep as best they can. But what does that matter in a climate where man for choice always sleeps in the open air, with the sky for roof. Cooking is done over a wood fire burning in an old barrel filled with mud or sand. When the pearling ground is reached the dhow is anchored from time to time and the canoe lowered. Into it descend a couple of divers armed with their nostril-closing devices, and the paraffin-tin with the glass bottom. One of the men presses this latter about an inch below the surface of the water, keeping his head inside the tin. The glass gives a clear unruffled surface through which he can see the bottom of the sea, on which he keeps a sharp look out for shells, or likely ledges. Should his trained eye sight anything, a motion of his hand to the other man, who is gently paddling, brings the canoe to a standstill. The diver adjusts his nose-iron, stands up and dives. Down, down, down he goes from ten to fifteen times the depth of

water that could be measured between the tips of his fingers—from right hand to left—when the arms are extended at right angles to the body; for it is thus the divers measure depth.

With a knife he quickly severs three pearl oysters from the rock, arranging them one under the left arm, one in the left hand, and one in the right palm, so that it will not interfere with the raising stroke of his arm, as he strikes out for the surface. Then up he comes, bringing with him what one diver graphically described to me as, "God alone knows." He may have found a pearl worth thousands of rupees; he may have two good pearls; he may have three bad ones, or, as often happens, he may have no pearls at all.

When a good patch is found a line is lowered with a basket attached. Into this the divers place the shells they have gathered, sending up a great many at one time to the surface. During such operation some divers descend on the rope by means of a stone weight. When an oyster becomes sensible of the approach or touch of an enemy it closes its shell, should it be open, with a powerful snap. It often happens, therefore, that a diver's fingers are caught, in which case they are badly pinched, and often severely cut.

Of course, there are divers who own their own boats and work independently of the buyers. The

majority of these are Soudanese, who, though clever at their profession, show anything but business-like aptitude in disposing of their spoils. I know of one man who dived for a pearl worth some thousands of rupees, and which he finally disposed of to a wily trader for ten sovereigns, a small canoe, and a wife. When the money had all been spent on clothes for the woman's back she left her husband, who was not in the least perturbed. To Syyed Khudar, the Arab, who remonstrated with him on his folly, he replied, "Never mind, I shall go back and dive for another pearl."

"Just," Syyed remarked, "as if he owned the sea and all the pearls that are in it."

The divers are fearless, stout-hearted fellows, and be there, to their certain knowledge, ever so many shark's in the vicinity, once they have located shell down they go. For their temerity they may have to pay with their lives, but no such thought deters them. "Who knows but that this dive I am going to make will make my fortune or end my life. If either way it has already been written in the book of fate, so be it," is the diver's philosophy. But more lives are lost than fortunes are found by the men who dive. When the gods smile upon them, and their pockets are lined with rupees, they fritter their money away without a thought. Sanguine in the extreme, by very virtue of their calling, they

give no thought to the future. Deep in their hearts is an invincible belief that they are bound to strike lucky again.

A pearl from our waters may change hands many times ere at last it adorns the neck of some fair lady in Europe, or a darker sister in Bombay. What stories some pearls could tell if they could only speak of the cut-throats and "*sharks*" in whose pockets and waist bands they have travelled. Many a story of treachery and blood letting, too, I warrant, that would disturb the dreams not a little of their gentle owners. Even in dealing with the stones there is as much excitement as in diving for them. The tale goes that once upon a time a diver entered a cloth-dealer's shop in Aden, the proprietor of which was absent. He approached a young Indian assistant, and drawing a pearl from the folds of his waist-cloth offered it for sale. The Indian was so struck by the size and beauty of the stone that, although he knew nothing whatever of pearls, he agreed to purchase it for five hundred rupees. But how to pay for it? He had not a penny in the world. Ah, his master's safe was full of rupees. He helped himself, paid for the stone and repaired hurriedly to the house of a dealer whom he knew, where he offered the stone for sale, hoping to make at least a hundred rupees clear profit for himself, and to replace his master's money.

The buyer examined the stone and said: "I shall give you two thousand rupees for it."

The Indian thought the other was having a little joke at his expense and said, "Ah, my friend, do not laugh at me."

The buyer thought he had to do with a man who knew a little about pearls and said, "Very well, I'll give you three thousand rupees for it."

"Come, come, be serious!" said the Indian, "and do not waste my time with your jokes."

"Very well," replied the other, "I shall give you four thousand rupees for the stone."

The Indian, at last perceiving the dealer was in earnest, and very excited, wisely stood out for more. He sold for seven thousand rupees. Drawing five hundred rupees on account he raced back to the shop in time to replace the money he had extracted from the safe before its disappearance had been discovered. He considered he had done a very good day's work, and set up a shop of his own. The pearl was re-sold in Bombay for twenty-four thousand rupees!

Nowadays Zeila pearls, or most of them, are supposed to find their way into the hands of the only buyer, an Indian, who finances the divers on a large scale. But when the dhows are working they remain out for days, with the result that the shells open in the sun. The result is that many a

stone is extracted and hidden away, the buyer's share thus being not so large. Of course, for every stone so concealed, one third its value is practically stolen from the buyer, but, apart from the ethics of such action it is very bad policy on the part of the diver. Stones so kept back are always sold to rogues who give only about one-third their real local value. Thus, all the thieves gain out of it is a bad conscience and a doubtful reputation.

Juma Bana, the Indian merchant I speak of, has always a little assortment of stones, wrapped up according to quality, in small pieces of red or white cloth. He is by way of being the local expert, and, by aid of his magnifying glass, will pick out the better grade stones from the inferior, telling you what is wrong with the latter as he does so. To please Juma a stone must be perfectly round, of a good colour, and without flaw. An almost microscopic scratch or spot constitutes a flaw. And yet it is Juma's misshapen collection of pearls that I love best to examine, even though he assures me that they are of no value at all. To my mind their very irregularity accentuates the beauty of their delicate indescribable lights. What happens to them I know not, but one can buy dozens of the smaller kinds for a song. Poor stones!

The pearl shells are worthy homes for the stones.

144      SUN, SAND AND SOMALS

They are very beautiful. It is as if they were lined with dissolved pearl to provide tiny baths for the fairies. They are, however, used for less romantic purposes, being made into buttons and ornaments for every day mortals. But no ornament could possibly be more beautiful than a plain mother-o'-pearl shell with its cool, pure lining of ice-white, bordered with delicate and deep greens, as the colour of the tropical sea in certain changing lights.