

CHAPTER XVI

A PEARL DIVER AT HOME

Adan Abdallah and his story—Another story in which I play
a part.

ADAN ABDALLAH was born somewhere in the Soudan, and belongs to the class formed from mixed tribes belonging to that country, and known in North and East Africa as Soudanese. This means that he is Mahomedan, and has severed all connection with his mother tribe, whatever it may have been. Many years ago a rich Arab, making the holy pilgrimage from Khartoum to Mecca, was accompanied by Adan in the capacity of servant. On the return journey the Arab succumbed to smallpox at Jeddah, and Adan, being without a penny in the world, and having had some experience on the large sailing boats of the Nile, shipped as a sailor on a dhow trading between the Arabian coast and Zeila. At Zeila he left the Arab boat and joined a pearler. In the course of time he did so well that he was able to purchase a dhow of his own, marry a Somal girl and make a little home for himself and wife in the town.

That is many years ago, and nowadays there are

ing and fired off their rifles as a sign they were returning to the rescue. Hearing this the Arabs ran for their dhow, but not before they had killed the small boy, and a couple of their own number were lying prostrate in the bottom of the boat.

Adan returned to Djibouti, calling in at Zeila on his way to report the occurrence.

Some time after his arrival at Djibouti the same Arab dhow put in there, and Adan, thinking Allah had delivered the murderers into his hands, went quickly to the French officer and laid a charge against them. He was informed, as the occurrence took place off the British coast, the French authorities could do nothing. Adan felt very sore and was under the impression that his story was not believed.

"All right," said he, using the expression that comes so handy to greater men than he when they are up against a stone wall, "wait and see!"

As the Arabs hung around Djibouti for some time Adan was convinced they were waiting for him to put to sea, in order that they might attack him, and so avenge themselves for the loss of a couple of their number, whom he now learned had died from wounds received at his hands.

Again he repaired to the French authorities to report his suspicions, but they, having no corroborative evidence, would take no action.

"All right," said he again, "wait and see!"

Whether the Arabs were tired of waiting for Adan, or had no actual designs upon him at all, and had finished their business, they, at any rate, put to sea at last. Only a few miles outside the harbour they attacked a French dhow, killing five of the crew of eight. Of the remaining three two were too old to be of any use, so they were run ashore on a small island, with their dhow, and abandoned. The two old men got safely back to Djibouti, where they reported what had happened. The third was carried off to Arabia as a slave.

Then the French Hakim sent for Adan and asked, "What's this story you have been telling concerning these piratical Arabs?"

Said Adan, "As you would not believe me when you had a chance to lay these fellows by the heels, what's the use of troubling me now that they have gone?"

The French Hakim smiled—Adan claims that smile was a graceful admission of the mistake he had made—and pointed out how hard it was for him to act on a vague opinion formed by Adan that some, seemingly harmless, Arabs were going to kill him.

Adan replied that if men in his trade did not take strict heed of what their wits tell them may happen, that thing is sure to happen, as bad men do not

write letters to the people they wish to kill, but just kill them, and when they least expect it. He concluded this piece of wisdom by asking the French Hakim, "What about the fight at Wakderia?"

"Yes, what about it?" said the Hakim, "it took place in British waters, and, in any case, we could take no action on your evidence. Why, you admit yourself, you killed two Arabs."

"If that is the case," said Adan, "I am going back to Zeila, and if ever those Arabs come there I'll have them punished. Should I stay here you'll let them come and kill me before you raise a hand."

And at Zeila he has made his home ever since.

Fitting out from there he proceeded to the Arabian coast, and, at a point between Sheikh Sa'eed and Khor Omeira, the dhow ran short of water. Adan, with half a dozen sailors, put off in a boat for the mainland, and having filled the goat-skins they had brought with them at a well, they were about to look for firewood when a party of Arabs armed with guns appeared, and asked who the devil had given them permission to land there.

"We are getting water and collecting firewood," explained Adan, "and have no intention of staying here or of doing any harm."

"Well, we want to collect something from you," said the Arab Sheikh in charge. "Thirty riales you'll pay us, and a good supply of jowari grain

must be landed for us from yonder dhow ere you ever set foot aboard her again."

"Ya, Sheikh," said poor Adan, "I have only three riales in the world. Here they are. Tie them up in your cloth like a good man, and in the name of God let us go in peace. We can do without the firewood to-day!"

"You pay us thirty riales, oh, sailor," said the Sheikh, "and you land the grain, or you die, together with these men who accompany you."

Well, Adan had no grain aboard his dhow, and would have been only too glad to get out of the position he found himself in by paying thirty riales had he had them.

"I was explaining this," he told me, "to the Sheikh, a very quick-tempered man, when without a word of warning, CHAP! he fired off his gun and flit me in the leg with the pieces of iron he'd loaded it with. I fell to the ground and lay like a log whilst my men took to their heels and made a run for the boat, with the Arab party hot on their tracks." Thinking I was dead the Sheikh paid no further attention to me. Aboard the dhow we had some Gras rifles, with which the sailors, who had not come ashore, opened fire, and easily drove off the Arabs, who were armed with old-muzzle loaders. In the excitement that ensued I crawled the short distance to the beach, and the sailors seeing me,

sent off a boat and I got away. But when I came back to Zeila the doctor cut off my leg, and Gyyed the carpenter made me this wooden one, which I can get about on quite comfortably. Thank God, I can still dive!"

"Do you mean to tell me," I exclaimed in astonishment, "that you still dive?"

"What else do you think I could do?" replied Adan. "It is my bread and butter."

I should say Adan is a very shrewd man and knows how to look after his money, even though he no longer possesses a dhow of his own.

A few days since I had an opportunity of observing that his wife and children were as well dressed as any in the town.

As next-door neighbour he has a blind Arab, who lodged a complaint that Adan made a door through his compound. There was a lengthy argument in the court, which, in spite of the fact that of the two disputants one was blind and the other was minus a leg, led me to fear, unless the matter was settled, it might develop into something serious. I told both men to go away and keep quiet until the evening, when I should come myself to their houses and see for myself what was the matter. On arriving there later I found that these two men lived in houses of the same size, built side by side and so close together that I could neither walk nor

see between them. In front, as well as behind, was a street. From the centre of the Arab's house a grass and wood fence ran onto the street fence, dividing the space between the two houses and the street into two compounds. When Adan walked out of his door he was in a compound, one side of which was walled in by his own house and half the Arab's house. The width of the Arab's compound on the other side was only equal to half that of his own house, obviously a very unfair arrangement. Opening out of Adan's compound onto the street was a wooden door.

I was inclined to decide against Adan, but he pointed out that on the other side of the houses the arrangement was reversed, and that half his house-back was in the Arab's compound. This I found to be the case, and, pointing out to the Arab that what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander, said that he could not have matters changed on one side of the houses to suit his convenience, unless he conformed to similar changes on the other.

The old man did not like this idea, and then the true cause of complaint was revealed. He loves his afternoon nap, but is unfortunately a very light sleeper. Just at the time when his head touches the pillow it appears to be the busiest time of the day for Adan's thirteen children, who seem to be perpetually passing through that wooden gate.

Like all gates in Zeila it is latched on the inside, and every time a youngster comes to it from the outside he bangs it with a stick, until someone from the inside opens. Now, as bad luck will have it, the gate is in front of the Arab's half of the house that is in Adan's compound, and very near to the old man's head. So that, with the everlasting procession of kiddies—sheitans he calls them, which means devils—passing to and fro, plus the banging of the gate, an afternoon siesta is out of the question. It was all right until Adan, but two weeks before, had bought the unlucky wooden door.

“But now,” said the old man, pounding viciously on the ground with his long stick, “it is all wrong.”

Adan agreed it was trying. He had noticed the nuisance himself, and if the old man had told him before, he would have had it remedied. He was quite prepared to have a muster now, and thirteen young imps of mischief—they were all there every mother's son and daughter of them—were paraded and informed that, between the hours of two and four p.m. daily, the wooden door on side number one was barred to all children under pain of being flayed alive, cut to pieces, or sent to jail, or all three. There was a grass door on side number two, which no one could bang, and which was at their service. By which order and threats, I am sure, Adan made the wooden door near the old Arab's

head, when he is lying down, the most irresistible spot in the world to bang. There'll be more to come of it. "Wait and see!"

What with Arab pirates, Arab robbers, truculent Arab neighbours, a livelihood that requires diving for with only one leg—not to speak of sharks, and thirteen young sheitans requiring a strong right arm to keep them in order—I shall surely not be accused of exaggeration when I describe the life of Adan, Abdallah, the ~~S~~udanese, as being an eventful one.