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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter XIII. On the arabian sea

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE ARABIAN SEA.

Good-bye to Aden—Life at Sea—The Yankee Sea Serpent—Flying Fish and Porpoises—Muscat—The Streets and Bazaars—The Sultan's Palace—His Body Guard—An Unenvied King—Under English Protection—Novel Auction Sale—The Naval Squadron—Assisted by English Gunboats—Near View of the Forts—"Ormus and Ind"—Bundar Abbas—Lingeh—Reception of the Hadji, Abdul Assiz—He Safely Lands his Lu-lu—The Pearl Fisheries—How they are Managed—A Valuable Fruit—Lingeh to Bushire—The "Land of Roses, Poets, and Nightingales."



WE are not sorry when the "Gunga" leaves behind her these desolate peaks, and turns her prow to the north-east, for a long stretch of thirteen hundred miles across the Arabian Sea towards Muscat. The monotony of our life at sea is unvaried by storm or rough weather. All day we watch the flying fish, or peer through the glass at a faint line of smoke far away on the horizon, which betokens a

passing steamer. One morning the captain called our attention to a "Yankee sea serpent." Crossing our bow, half a mile off, was a long procession of benetas, a large black fish. At regular intervals, they leaped a few feet above the water in graceful curves, which might easily be mistaken for the long folds of that fabulous sea monster.

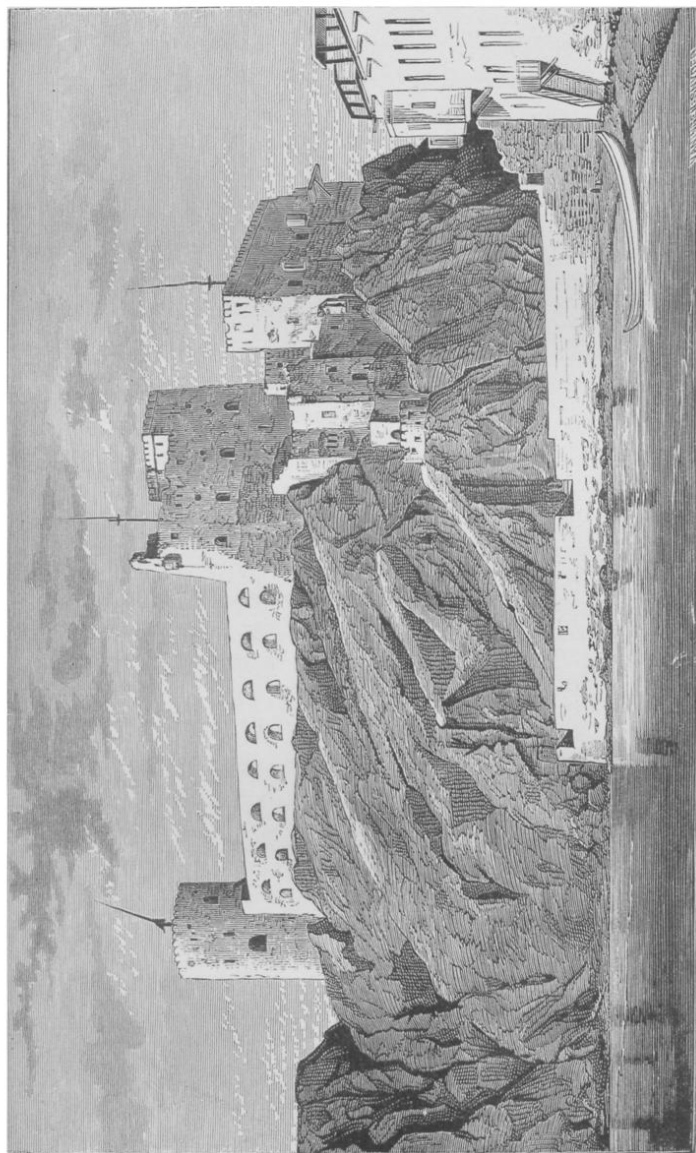
At night we lean for hours over the rail, watching the schools of porpoises that sport around us, darting through the phosphorescent sea like streaks of silver.

After six days steadily steaming, with no land in sight, we approached the coast of Muscat. This is a province in Arabia, ruled by an independent Sultan or King, and extending several hundred miles along the coast, and inland an indefinite distance, depending upon the ability of the Sultan to enforce his authority over the wild and restless tribes of the interior. Under the late Sultan, Zanzibar and Muscat were united in one kingdom, but at his death, the two elder sons divided these provinces between them. Our young prince, Sayd Hammoud, is their brother. The city of Muscat has about sixty thousand inhabitants, and presents a very picturesque appearance when approached from the sea. The coast line is bold and rocky. We sail close in shore, passing several lofty headlands,—on one of which is a dilapidated fort,—and suddenly the town opens to view at the bottom of a deep cove, the houses built along the beach, with a background of precipitous rocks, and so close to the water, that the sea washes against them at high tide. In front of the town the shipping lies at anchor, and on every peak and crag, are formidable-looking forts, mounting iron guns of small calibre, over which flies the red flag of Muscat.

The Portugese held this place for one hundred and fifty years, and their commerce made it a very important port. They built these fortifications—some of them perched upon the summit of almost inaccessible cliffs—according to the best military experience of their day. But in 1648 they were expelled from all their possessions in Arabia, by a simultaneous revolution among the Arabs.

As our stay here will be short, we hasten to go on shore and see the town. The boats are long and narrow, shaped

like an Indian canoe, and almost as easily upset. We sit flat on the bottom, and, holding on to the sides with both hands, are quickly propelled by paddles shaped like mustard spoons, to the landing place. Here we find a native guide who speaks a little English, and we follow him through narrow crooked streets to the British Consulate, where I post a letter for home. It must travel over ten thousand miles, and be two months on the way; and I feel somewhat doubtful whether it will ever reach its destination. He then leads us through the bazaars, unpaved, very crooked and dirty, that remind me of a Chinese city. They are scarcely four feet wide, and the shops are crowded with all sorts of merchandise, among which I recognize articles of Yankee manufacture. Muscat is the only port in this part of the world, that has any trade with America. Three or four sailing ships come here every year, touching at Zanzibar, and return laden with coffee, dates, ivory, and gums. In front of the market place is the Sultan's palace, and we step inside the gate, where a magnificent African lion is pacing up and down his wooden cage. Lounging around the court yard, we see about a hundred soldiers—and such soldiers!—no attempt at uniform, some armed with matchlocks, some with single or double barreled shot guns, and others with long spears. Hanging against the palace walls, are round, antique looking bucklers or shields, which are carried upon the left arm. The Sultan, though nominally an independent prince, with whom England and other European countries have treaties, is in reality but a dependent of Great Britain, and protected by that power. Two English gunboats are now in port, having just returned from an expedition down the coast, some fifty miles, where, at his request, they knocked to pieces a strong fort held by some of his rebellious subjects, whom he was unable to subdue. Political matters are just now in a very



FORT AT ENTRANCE OF HARBOR OF MUSCAT.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

unsettled condition in Muscat, and the lives and property of the natives are so insecure, that trade is deserting the place. To assassinate a Grand Vizier is no uncommon occurrence, and everybody seems armed. Even the fruit seller of whom we bought some dates, wore in his belt an ugly looking, crooked sword called a *creese*. We saw lounging through the streets, many dark skinned, wild looking Arabs, with fierce, restless eyes, long black hair, and armed with swords and matchlocks. Their lithe forms and savage looks, reminded me of a tiger, who would be a far less dangerous animal to meet alone in the desert. These are Bedouins belonging to the wild tribes in the interior. We are told, that the Sultan rarely dares show himself outside the palace walls, for fear of being assas-



SWORD AUCTIONEER AT MUSCAT.

sinated. Uneasy must rest the head that wears the crown of Muscat.

While in the bazaar, we witnessed a novel auction sale. A man came along singing at the top of his voice the praises of an old, but very handsome sword, the scabbard and hilt richly ornamented with silver and gold. It was a curious and valuable relic, and I wanted very much to add it to my collection of weapons. The highest bid so far was sixty-four rupees—about thirty dollars. The auctioneer will carry it around in this way for three days, and our guide said it would probably sell for one hundred rupees. These Eastern people are very fond of showy weapons, and great sums are lavished on swords and daggers, which are ostentatiously worn, not so much for use as ornament, and as marks of rank and distinction. They are handed down as heirlooms, and will only be parted with in case of urgent necessity.

On our way back to the landing we passed one of the forts which looked so formidable at a distance. A nearer view showed it to be much dilapidated, and the guns old and rusty. Workmen were busy patching up the holes made by shot at a recent bombardment. There is a Portuguese inscription over the inner gate, and the date 1588. Not wishing to tarry after dark within the town, we called our boatman and were quickly paddled back to the steamer, passing close to an old thirty-six gun frigate, and some armed *bugalahs*, which comprise the Muscat squadron.

From this place our course is to the entrance of the Persian Gulf, through a narrow strait, and past many high rocky islands, on one of which is the grave of Captain Baffin, the English navigator, who gave his name to a bay in the North Atlantic. We pass the island of Ormus, just as the sun is setting behind its rocky hills, lighting them up with a glow of gold and sapphire.

This is the "Ormus and Ind," whose wealth was once proverbial. In olden times a very rich and populous city

stood upon the plain between the hills and the sea. It commanded the richest commerce of the world, from India up the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates. The ruins of a strong Portuguese fort, and a population of four hundred fishermen, living in mat huts, are all that remain to mark the spot.

We approached the town of Bundar Abbas by moonlight, and signaled with rockets for boats to take off the native passengers and freight. This place was once of great commercial importance, and the remains of large European warehouses are yet to be seen. It is defended by a wall with towers at regular intervals, and has now a population of about twelve thousand. The only foreign resident is the agent of the "British India Company," to whom our steamer is consigned. He seemed heartily glad to meet English faces; to him the only connecting link with the civilized world.

The next day, we anchor off the town of Lingeh, one of the most flourishing places on the Persian coast. Its appearance from the sea is very pleasant, the houses being built of white stone, and surrounded by date trees. From a high building in the center of the town, the residence of the governor, the flag of the Shah of Persia, the "lion and the sun," is flying, and at the masthead of a native *bugalah* we see the favorite banner of the Persians, —the two-bladed sword of Ali, on a white ground with a dark green border. Here we land sixty more of our pilgrims. The greeting to the new-comers is quite affectionate. Dark, black-bearded men kiss each other on both cheeks, and the pilgrims are addressed with the honorary title of "*Hadji*" prefixed to their names, which they ever after retain. Bands of music and processions wait at the landing to escort them to their homes. They have been absent on the pilgrimage over four months, and if called

upon to thank their friends and neighbors for this kind reception, they can truly say that this is the proudest and happiest moment of their lives. The pearl merchant leaves us here, and his four ladies, closely wrapped from head to foot, are safely deposited in the boat. So carefully has he watched over his precious charge, that not one of the passengers or officers has been able to catch the slightest glimpse of their faces, during the two weeks of their sojourn behind the green curtain. Abdul at times has been quite sociable. In the moonlight evenings, he would sometimes bring on deck his elegant *chibouk* with an amber mouth-piece of immense size, and pass it around for our delectation. His servant would keep it filled with delicious "tumbak," and under its tranquilizing influence he would for a while forget his dread responsibilities as a family man, and tell us about the pearl fisheries, in which he is largely interested. He is the Sheik of the Island of Gais, near Lingeh, which is the most important place for pearls on the Persian Gulf. He has fifty boats and several hundred divers, whose pay, he says, is the dates they eat and the clothes they wear, while a few rich men enjoy the proceeds of their dangerous calling. They are dropped down with ropes under their arms and weights tied to their feet, in water from thirty to fifty feet deep, collect an armful of the oysters and are drawn up to the boats. Long practice enables the diver to remain under water from a minute to a minute and a half, and while on the bottom he must stir round lively. They are armed with knives, and sometimes have desperate encounters with the sharks that guard, like fabled genii, the treasures of the deep. The oysters, which are as large as ordinary breakfast plates, are carried on shore at night and delivered to the Sheik. At sunset all assemble for evening prayers, the Sheik especially praying to Allah for a lucky haul. At daylight

the next morning the oysters are opened and the pearls carefully collected. They vary in size, from a pin's head to a large pea, and the result of a day's fishing is very uncertain.

The shells, as mother of pearl, are worth in Europe about twenty dollars per hundred weight, and the pearls are packed in an envelope of dark red cloth, the parcel being made the exact size and shape of a pomegranate. A bit of red sealing wax secures the end, and the valuable fruit is forwarded to Bombay, where it will sometimes bring twenty-five thousand rupees.

Abdul had no pearls with him, but had taken quite a valuable stock when he started on the pilgrimage, and combining business with piety, had disposed of them to good advantage in Mecca. If the rumors were true, he had invested a part of the proceeds in a beautiful young Circassian—one of the four just now safely landed at Lingeh. As he stepped into his own boat and pushed away from the ship, he waved to us on deck a parting salute, and his one eye seemed to gleam with an expression of joy and triumph. We imagined him humming the popular air,—

"Lu-lu is my darling pride—Lu-lu bright! Lu-lu gay!"

From Lingeh it was two days' sail to Bushire, the principal seaport of Persia, and the largest city on the gulf. But my impressions of the territory of the Shah must be given in another chapter.