The Quest of the Pearl.

Continued from page 29.

HIS SPLENDID BODY SHINING WITH GREASE,

with which these divers coat themselves before entering the water, gathering itself for its spring. He carries the inevitable bags, but he needs no weights to sink him, nor does he wear a rope. A flash, and down he goes, head first, graceful as a panther, straight as a die, without a splash, and swims to the bottom. Wonderful swimmers these Arabs are, recklessly daring, and with incredible powers of endurance, but their worth is seriously discounted by their intractability and hatred of discipline. And in this connection it is a curious fact that when under water men will invariably become irritable and extremely bad tempered.

All through the morning the work goes on. Men disappear in the green depths, and reappear, clambering, dripping, up the ladders that swing over the boats' sides; and always, with astonishing rapidity, the piles of shells grow larger. Sharp at noon the superintendent's boat whistles: the last diver is pulled up; dingy sails are spread, and the fleet starts for home. Inshore the boats race, piling themselves up on the beach like a school of stranded fish. The mandaks stagger through the shallows laden with baskets of shells, which, under police guard, they take to the kottus. By this time

PANDEMONIUM REIGNS UPON THE BEACH.

A hundred tongues mingle in the clamour: Arabic, Malay, frantic Chinese chattering, Hindoostanee, profane and exasperated English. A thousand naked mandaks sweat and strain ankle deep through the shifting sand under the heavy baskets; angry guards menace and hustle unruly trouble-makers; merchants and spectators hurry toward the guarded kottus. And always the sun beats down on the shimmering sands with their shifting riot of colour, and on the ocean that glares white-hot, like molten metal; and presently, mingled with the odours of the village, there rises a faint, deadly stench from the million dead shellfish. Faint at first, but, as the hours go by, gaining in power and volume, until by the third or fourth day one's senses are drowned in it. It takes a long time and strong nerves to accept it with equanimity; one wonders how the Government men can stand it as they must. As for the natives, they seem not to mind it in the least.

Now the first stage of the quest is over: the oysters are gathered, and by sundown the eight high kottus, each one containing 25 subdivisions, are filled to the brim.

First the divers receive their shares, to each man going the portion that is decreed to him by the Law of the Fishing. This he carries outside the stockade, and disposes of in small lots of 10, 20, 50, or 100 shells to the swarm of merchants and small buyers who jam and crowd and jostle in the open space before the stockades. Everywhere deals are going on between half naked divers and stately, dirty merchants, whose robes flap about their lean shins as they hury from one man to another and back again, hawk-eyed for bargains, shrieking that Allah must bear witness that they are poor men, and cannot stand such bloody extortion. But none the less, they buy and buy.

Here an old fellow with a beaked nose and fierce, eagle eyes, bearded, and turbaned and villainously dirty, has possessed himself of 30 or 40 fine, large shells. Down he squats, beneath the very feet of the pressing thousands, wrenches open a shell, and pokes with his claw-like fingers into the mass of flesh. In a moment he finds a pearl—not a very good specimen, but into his pouch it goes, while with his free hand he reaches for another shell from his pile. Sometimes rage and disgust inflame his swarthy features; he flings the oyster from him, cursing its fathers and its mothers for four generations back; it has contained no pearl at all. But suddenly, opening a peculiarly large shell, he stops short. Triumph, eagerness, and greed incarnate flash into his face, and are gone, replaced instantly by craft and cunning. He holds a pearl worth more than a prince's ransom, perfect, lustrous, a gracious thing of beauty. He fondles it lovingly in his skinny hands, guessing shrewdly as to its weight. It came from the last shell in his pile; with a swift glance around to see whether his prize has been observed, he drops it carefully into his greasy pouch, and flaps off after more shells, loudly complaining that never—no, never—before did Allah create such an utterly worthless lot of oysters. Pearls—bah! who could expect to get pearls from such swines of oysters?

ALREADY THE PEARL-DRILLERS ARE AT WORK,

their enormous black hands and crude tools manipulating the tiny globules with a marvellous deftness and dexterity. Boats are being repaired, and sails and baskets mended in preparation for the next day's work; fires are starting up here and there, and cooking is going on. The divers are tired and hungry, and must be well fed, since again no food may be taken until the next night; and the thousands of shells in the kottus must be disposed of as rapidly as possible to make room for the morrow's catch. So all the beach hums with activity; the crowd around the kottus seems to increase momently; and through and under all the frenzied racket, one is aware, suddenly, that the tom-toms are throbbing and the reeds are shrilling their barbaric discord, insistent, suggestive, the dominant under-note of the East.

After dinner, at nine o'clock or thereabouts, the bulk of the shells is put up at auction by the Government Agent, who is overlord of the Fisheries and all that pertains thereto. The sale takes place in the courthouse, or other government building, and the shells are put up in lots of a thousand. A merchant holds up both hands, the fingers outspread; his name is put down for ten lots, or ten thousand shells. Not a few of the Indian merchants buy as many as a million. The largest number known to have been offered on a single night is 1,867,600; the smallest, 400,000.

Every night the same men are on hand—until their limit is reached, or the fishing is over. Every night, too, they are joined by a sprinkling of new arrivals. The game is much of a lottery, since the purchaser cannot tell what percentage of his shells will contain pearls. From the government the buyers purchase the shells; from each other, such pearls as they want, effecting thus a double system of exchange. An Englishman, who perhaps is matching pearls that later will be made into a necklace which his king will give to a royal bride, is a centre of attraction. Hundreds of pearls are brought to him for examination; are weighed and rigorously tested as to colour and sphericity. An agent for one of the big New York jewellers holds equal attention; he is looking for pink pearls for the necklace of an American heiress who will shortly become, if not royal, at least as near it as she can. And here is a saute, dusky gentleman, low-voiced, always courteous, buying for, let us say, the Rajah of Lahore, and outbidding everyone in sight for any gem that takes his fancy, with perfect nonchalance and a credit that is obviously inexhaustible. For the Nourmahal of to-day must have her whims fulfilled; and her latest longing is for an entire robe of pearls—a garment of gauze sewn so thickly with pierced gems that scarcely an inch of it will be seen. Its weight will make it cling close to her slender limbs; its lustre will enhance the dark softness of her beauty and the gleam of her shadowed eyes, and its cost will quite positively and satisfactorily preclude her rivals from having anything in the least like it. And she will get it, too, since her lord and master loves her with sufficient unreason, and since it is for her pleasure alone that the fisheries exist at all, and the oysters in their tens of millions yield up their sluggish spark of life—that yet is vital enough to produce a thing perfect enough to please her wayward fancy.

WHEN THE PEARLS ARE TAKEN FROM THE DEAD FISH,

they are first sorted according to size. This is done by passing them through a set of ten small brass sieves, called baskets, with meshes of varying sizes. Pearls of the first class that are perfect both in sphericity and in lustre are called ani. Those of the second class, that to the average observer seem equally with the great Southern Cross Pearl, which is out flaw, are anitari; and most of the pearls we see in the West and on general sale come under this head. Of the third class, called ma-auku, are those that are somewhat irregular in shape, and a trifle "off" in colour, but that are valuable for use in clusters, and are largely used by Eastern artificers in mountings of various sorts. Kural is the double or twinned pearl, which when of good lustre and sufficiently freakish shape, is sometimes enormously valuable. In this class the most wonderful specimen on record is in reality nine pearls, naturally grown together, and forming a perfect cross an inch and a half long. It was found off the coast of Western Australia in 1874. Many seed pearls and rejections—called vadivu—are generally ground into chunam and used as an ingredient in a favourite sweatmeat. From China also comes a heavy demand for seed pearls, and in India bushels of them, literally, are used in the decoration of idols and sacred images, and of weapons as well.

Pearl oysters are of two varieties—the large white shell, and a smaller black species; but which produces the best pearls is an undecided question. Probably there is little choice. One rule that does seem to hold good, however, is that the deeper the water from which the shell is taken, the larger and finer will be the pearl.

Popular belief long held that the nucleus of the pearl was a grain of sand, or some minute foreign body, that got wedged into the oyster's shell, and, if the inmate were unable to expel it, gradually became coated with the milky, lime-like secretion of the fish. Lately, science has turned its merciless searchlight on this theory, and, as with many others of our old-time, tenderly cherished notions, has rudely disproved it. Even more humble than a grain of sand is the pearl's origin—a lowly Platyelmian parasite that dies within the shell, and is entombed in its wonderful sarcophagus. Out of several hundred pearls decalcified with intent to probe their inner mystery, not more than three or four revealed any other core than the remains of these tiny worms; and in the white as well as the black shells, in coloured pearls as well as orientals, this has been found to be the case.

The fishing may last a month, or two months, and its average value to the government is a million rupees—about £64,000. In Australia, where equally extensive operations are carried on, the average value is £296,000, or 1,438,560 dollars. Singapore is the centre for labour and supplies of the Queensland fisheries, and is one of the largest pearl markets in the world.

Now the fishing is over. The fleet of smelly boats departs; the crowds dwindle and disappear, each unit richer by a pouchful of jewels. And the pearls are gone too—gone to be mounted or strung together as playthings for women the wide world over. The beat of the tom-tom and the plaint of the reeds are no longer heard, and fires on the beach die down; and the ragged little brown village settles down once more into its age-old tranquillity. All the excitement is over—until the next time.

A WONDERFUL MEMORY.

E. C. Laston, who has issued a challenge to the world for the memory championship, although only a young man of 23 years, is a veritable walking encyclopaedia (says "Tit Bits"), for he has memorised 40,000 dates of the principal events in the world's history, since the creation. It was quite by accident that he discovered that he had an exceptional gift of memory. He was being trained as an army officer when an attack of rheumatic fever dispelled his hopes in that direction. At that time he happened to meet the Zancigs in India, who, noting what a remarkable memory he had for dates, advised him to cultivate it. He then purchased a copy of Haydn's "Dictionary of Dates," and sought to commit to memory the dates of the most important events in the world's history by writing 50 to 100 dates on a piece of paper, and re-writing them three or four times until he had fully grasped them, with the result that he has a repertoire of thousands of dates, and can give the correct answers without the slightest hesitation.

BRIDGET THE MOBILE.

Caller: "So your cook has passed away to a better place?"

Hostess: "Yes, but I don't know if she'll stay; poor Bridget was very hard to suit."