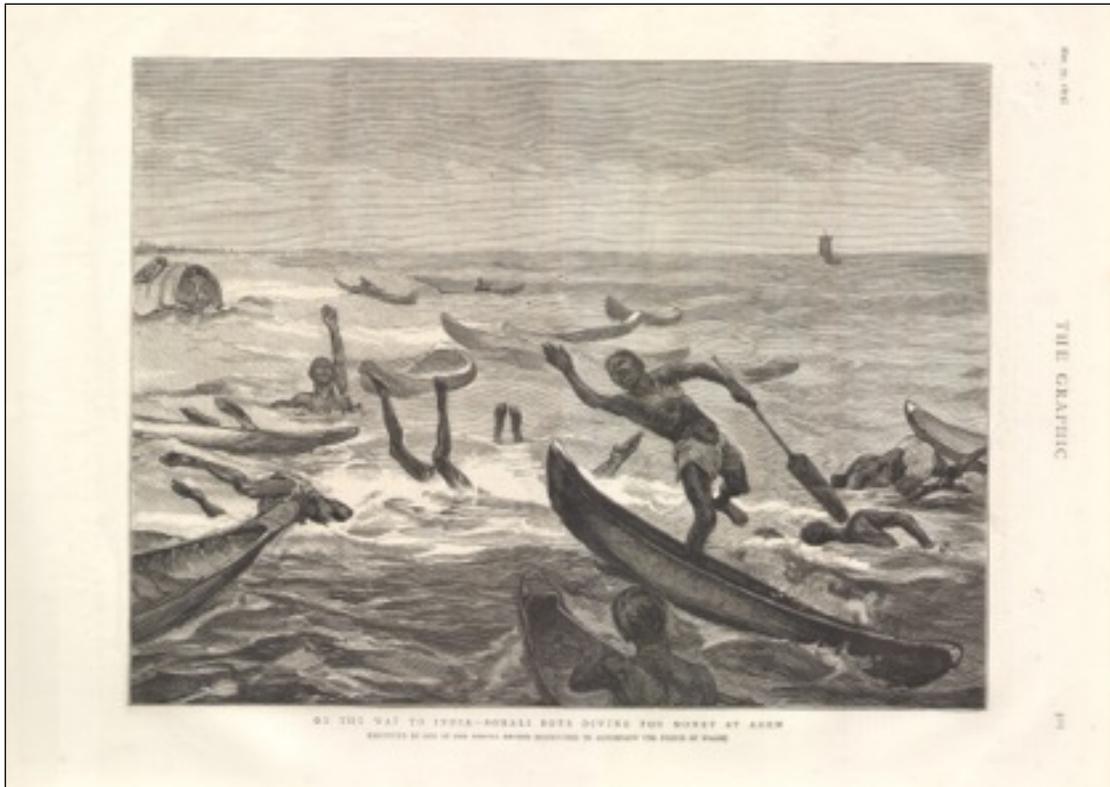

Diving Boys of East Africa

“Famous as the most expert swimmers and divers in the world.”



Introduction

Swimming is universal to all races and cultures. However, in these times we see very few representatives from the indigenous populations of Africa, the Americas or Oceania competing in Aquatics at the Olympic Games. This fact has led some to question the physical capabilities of these people as swimmers. There is no truth to these racist stereotypes. In fact, prior to the destruction of their native aquatic cultures by Western colonization, the indigenous people of what ethnic Europeans called “the uncivilized world,” were universally regarded, by those who saw them, as being **the best swimmers and divers in the world**. The stories of the Boy-Divers of the Red Sea and the Diving Boys of Zanzibar are by no means unique, but were once common sites along the coasts and ports of East Africa and Red Sea.

While the purpose of this series is to educate and inform readers about the universal history of swimming, some readers may find terms and descriptions in the following passages degrading and offensive. What is recounted is a reminder of European racial attitudes in the mid nineteenth century and not the attitude of the publisher of this article.

BOY-DIVERS IN THE RED SEA

HERE we are at last, Mr. Kerr," says the captain, as we cast anchor off the coast of Arabia, a little after sunset, about two-thirds down the Red Sea. "It's too dark to make out much to-night, but you'll see a rare sight when you come on deck to-morrow morning."

When I awake the next morning, I find the captain's promise amply made good. The sun is just rising, and under its golden splendor the broad blue sea stretches westward as far as eye can reach, every ripple tipped with living fire. On the other side extends a sea of another kind the gray, unending level of the great Arabian desert, melting dimly into the warm dreamy sky. In front, the low white wall of a Turkish fort stands out like an ivory carving against the hot brassy yellow of the sand-hills that line the shore; while all around it are the little cabins of mud-plastered wickerwork that compose the Arab village, looking very much like hampers left behind by some monster picnic. Here and there, through the light green of the shallower water along the shore, a flash of dazzling white, keen and narrow as the edge of a sword, marks the presence of the dangerous coral-reefs among which we have been picking our way for the last three days, with the chance of running aground at any moment.

"You were right, captain," say I, as the burly skipper rises and stretches his brawny arms, like a bear awaking from its winter nap. "This is a sight worth seeing, indeed."

"Ah, this ain't what I meant," chuckles the captain; "the best o' the show's to come yet. Look over yonder there, just 'twixt the reef and the shore. D'ye see anything in the water?"

"Well, I think I see something swimming, sharks, I suppose."

"Sharks, eh? Well, landsharks you might call 'em, p'raps. Take my glass and try again."

The first look through the glass works a startling change. In a moment the swarm of round black spots which I have ignorantly taken for the backs of sharks, are turned into faces the faces of Arab children, and (as I perceive with no little amazement) of very young children too, some of the smallest being apparently not more than five or six years old! Our vessel is certainly not less than a mile from the shore, and the water, shallow as it is, is deep enough at any point to drown the very tallest of these adventurous little "water-babies;" yet they are evidently making for the ship, and that, too, at a speed that will soon bring them alongside of her.

"Are they really coining all this way out without resting?" ask I.

"Bless you, that's nothing to an Arab!" laughs the captain; "these little darkies are as much at home in the water as on land. I've heard folks talk a good deal of the way the South Sea Islanders can swim; but I've seen as good swimming here as ever I saw there."

And now, as the Lilliputian swimmers draw nearer, we begin to hear their shrill cries and elfish laughter; and now they are close enough for their little brown faces, and glittering teeth, and beady black eyes, to be easily distinguished; and now one final stroke of their lean sinewy arms carries them alongside, and the blue water swarms with tiny figures, looking up

and waving their hands so eagerly that one might almost expect to hear them call out, "Shine, boss?" and see them produce a brush and a pot of blacking. But instead of that, there is a universal chorus of "Piastre, Howadji!" (a penny, my lord!)

"Chuck 'em a copper, and you'll see something good!" says the captain.

I rummage the few remaining pockets of my tattered white jacket, and at last unearth a Turkish piastre (5 cts.) which I toss into the water. Instantly the smooth bright surface is dappled with a forest of tiny brown toes, all turning upward at once, and down plunge the boy-divers, their supple limbs glancing through the clear water like a shoal of fish.

By this time nearly all the crew are looking over the side, and encouraging the swimmers with lusty shouts; for, used as Jack is to all sorts of queer spectacles, this is one of which he seems never to tire.

"There's one of 'em got it!"

"No, he ain't!"

"Yes, he has I see him a-comin' up with it!"

"And there's the others a-tryin' to take it from him hold tight, Sambo!"

Sure enough, the successful diver is surrounded by three or four piratical comrades, who are doing their best to snatch away the hard-won coin; but he sticks to it like a man, and as he reaches the surface, holds it up to us triumphantly, and then pops it into his mouth the only pocket he has got.

But this is a sad mistake on his part. In a moment a crafty companion swims up behind him, and tickles him under the chin. As his mouth opens, out drops the coin into his assailant's hand, from whom it is instantly snatched by some one else; and a regular bear-fight ensues in the water, which splashes up all around them like a fountain-jet, while their shouts and laughter make the air ring.

"Aren't they afraid of sharks?" ask I of the captain, who has just increased the confusion tenfold by throwing another copper into the very midst of the screaming throng.

"Not they they make too much row for any shark to come near them. Sharks are mighty easy scared, for all they're so savage. You'll never catch 'em coming too near a steamer when she's goin' the flappin' of the screw frightens 'em away. See, there's two of 'em comin' along now, and you'll just see how much the boys'll care for 'em."

And, indeed, the sudden uprising of those gaunt black fins, piercing the smooth water as with an unexpected stab, seems to produce no effect whatever upon these fearless urchins, who paddle about as un-concerned as ever. Moreover, it soon appears that the sharks themselves have other business to attend to. A shoal of flying-fish come driving past, glistening like rainbows in the dazzling sunshine as they leap out of the water and fall back again. Instantly one of the "sea-lawyers" dashes at the rear of the column, while the other, wheeling around its front, heads back the fugitives into his comrade's open jaws; and in this way the two partners contrive to make a very respectable "haul."

But at this moment the garrison-boat is seen putting off from the shore, with one of the Pasha's officers in the stern-sheets. At sight of the well-known official flag, our water-babies

scatter like wild-fowl, and the next moment all the little black heads are seen bobbing over the shining ripples on their way back to the shore.

THE DIVING BOYS OF ZANZIBAR



AS SOON as a passenger-steamer casts anchor in the port of Zanzibar the vessel is surrounded by scores of primitive boats, bearing small and scantily clad Arab boys, shouting vociferously at the passengers, "Ave a dive, master, sixpence, 'ave a dive?"

The antics and equipment of the lads leave no doubt as to their occupation. They are the diving boys - famous as the most expert swimmers and divers in the world. They live in the water with apparently as much ease and enjoyment as on land, and surely with infinitely more profit to themselves.

As our steamer came up to her anchorage in the roadstead, a short distance from the sultan's palace in Zanzibar, scores of small boats of every description started from shore, to meet her. There were dories, skiffs, rowboats, feluccas, and every imaginable kind of quaint craft engaged in the race to reach the steamer first. Several of the small vessels collided and spilled their zealous crew into the water, but the

others gave no heed to these mishaps. The first boats to reach the steamer were tiny dugouts, barely six feet long, manned by dark-skinned boys, who sat in the bottom of their craft and propelled them, canoe fashion, with long, thin boards. It was amusing to watch the little fellows bending forward to dip their improvised paddles, first on one side of their boats and then on the other, meanwhile glancing anxiously over their shoulders to watch the progress of their closest competitors.

One of the boys in the lead watched his pursuers too long, and collided with another boat. He was thrown out into the water, and his dugout was turned keel upward. In a moment the lad had righted it,





bailed out the water, and with a quick, dextrous leap, resumed his seat. So quickly was this done that he lost only about ten yards of his headway over the others. When they came within a short distance of the steamer, the boys stood up in the nervous little dugouts, still going forward, and began shouting, with a semi cockney accent, "Ave a dive, master, sixpence, 'ave a dive?"

Shortly afterward the other small boats came up, and then ensued a shouting competition in which the diving boys were pitted against all the other boatmen, who were guides for the city or hawkers of souvenirs, diamonds and live hazels. But far above the cries of "Master, I sell you Indian shawl!" "I take you to find hotel" and "I sell you table-cloth cheap, master!" could be heard the shrill calls of the diving boys, and these secured the undivided attention of the passengers crowding at the deck-rail.

Many passengers produced silver coins and at the sight of them the boys poised themselves in the dugouts, ready to plunge into the clear water and catch the coin before it could reach the sandy bottom.

After a coin was dropped into the water, the boys waited a moment, in order that the passenger might have "the worth of his money" in seeing them dive to a considerable depth, the water being so clear that the eyes could distinctly follow a coin from the time it reached the surface until it reached the bed of the bay. When the coin had sunk about ten feet from the surface the boys shouted, "Look! Look!" and plunged into the shark-infested water.

Down, down their bronzed bodies sand, their legs uppermost working like steam piston-rods, until they reached such a depth that they assumed a curious greenish color, and looked for all the world like huge frogs. When the boys reached the sandy bottom they lay on their backs for a moment, and in a spirit of playfulness wriggled their arms and legs, which, by reason of the water, became multiplied into an infinite number of limbs, so that the passengers seemed to see some strange dwellers of the sea instead of diving boys. Then with long, slow strokes of their arms, they rose to the surface, and with short, quick gasps and motions of the head, expelled the air from their lungs. One of them, balancing himself upright in the water, took the coin from his mouth and proudly exhibited it to the passengers. All the boys then crumbled into their primitive boats and waited for other coins to be thrown into the sea.

Diving for coins is the least of the accomplishments of the Zanzibar boys. When the passengers have become surfeited with that particular method of entertainment, the boys offer to dive under the ship from one side to the other. The youngsters, having an eye to their own interests, have formed a sort of monopoly of their business, and will not dive for any coin worth less than a sixpence - twelve cents - or go under the boat for less than a rupee - almost thirty cents.

The steamer lay low in the water, but the boy who was paid for diving under the vessel accomplished the feat in precisely forty-six seconds. Another feat more remarkable than any of the others, and attempted only by the older and stronger boys, was diving from stem to stern under the vessel, which was two hundred and seventy-five feet in length.

The boy who was chosen to perform the feat jumped from his dugout at the anchor chain, and entered the water a short distance in front of the cutwater of the vessel. Some of the passengers stationed themselves at different points along the deck of the steamer, and watched the water line to see that no deception was practiced by the diver. Many of the passengers held their timepieces, and when the diver reappeared a yard behind the propeller of the ship, two minutes and three seconds had elapsed. The diver was nearly exhausted, to be sure, but the coins he reaped proved ample balm.

The diving boys are useful as well as entertaining. Professional divers who go the bottom in divers' armor, with air-pipe attachments, are unknown in Zanzibar, and many an Arab merchant in Zanzibar got his start in business with the capital he made in diving for the passengers of steamers in the port.

One young Arab, whose left leg was said to have been bitten off by a shark six years before, was pointed out as the owner of several houses, which he had purchased with the money he earned by diving. Being the only cripple in the business, he had naturally received the sympathy, and incidentally the money, of the passengers, and had become wealthy as the result of his misfortune.

The Aden boys are not so shrewd as those at Zanzibar, and as they are not organized for the purpose of upholding rates, they reap a far less bounteous harvest. There is keen competition among them, and for a five-anna coin they will dive from the bridge of a steamer, whereas the Zanzibar boys will not perform the same feat for less than twenty-five times that amount. The Aden boys have competitors, too, in youthful Somali natives, who come over from their African homes in little feluccas to sell ameba and dive for the entertainment of travelers.

The ports in Madeiras, the Canaries and the West Indies have many diving boys, but the expertness and wonderful ability to remain under water the boys of Zanzibar and Aden are without peers.