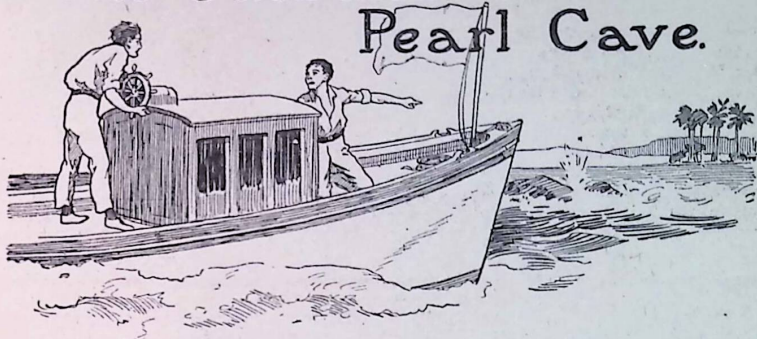


The Guardian of the Pearl Cave.



A Dramatic Story of the Pacific Ocean By EDMUND BURTON

THE FIRST CHAPTER

The Man on the Sand

THE big sea-going motor-boat churned slowly past the low-lying reef, a ripple of sparkling blue water curling from her bows.

A lithe figure, clad in cool white, lolled lazily at the wheel; whilst another, somewhat stouter of build, squatted close to the door of the comfortable little cabin, dreamily fanning himself in the hot air.

Presently the latter shifted his position slightly and pointed to a wide break in the coral wall. The smoother water of a quiet, palm-fringed lagoon showed just beyond.

"She'd easily pass through there. Shall we go in?" he said. "It's infernally warm, and those trees look inviting."

Dick Andrews nodded briefly—it was really too hot even to talk much—and spun the wheel round a couple of points. The motor-launch passed through the gap, entering the "dead" water on the far side.

Andrews and his companion, Bob Ferguson, were in business at Suva, in the Fijis, but both had recently been on the sick list, which neces-

sitated a prolonged holiday in order to recuperate; and, having saved a fair amount, they decided that a lengthy cruise among the many islands scattered about that part of the Pacific would be as good a way to kill time as any other. Thus, the vote being carried without opposition from either party, they had hired this roomy motor-boat, and, as can well be imagined, were enjoying themselves to the full.

Ferguson stood erect as the craft crawled across the lagoon, eagerly scanning the strip of silvery strand for a promising mooring-place. Then he suddenly uttered a surprised exclamation, which caused his companion to look up quickly.

"What's the matter?"

For answer Bob pointed ahead, and Dick's own eyes opened wide. The body of a man—apparently dead—was stretched on the sand, whilst a rough native boat was lying, half in and half out of the water, a few yards away.

They succeeded in mooring their own craft and sprang ashore, hurrying along the beach. The man—an islander—was *not* dead, but plainly in a bad way; for his body, principally

his arms and legs, showed numerous war wounds—nasty, jagged “pecks,” they seemed to be, such as would be inflicted by the beak of some large bird of prey. A European, injured as he was and lying there in that broiling sunshine, could not have survived for long; but the native, born and bred in those latitudes, presently rewarded their ministrations by slowly opening his eyes.

Both had a smattering of many of the Pacific dialects, and gradually obtained some idea of what had taken place. The man was a professional pearl-diver, and had been operating in the neighbourhood, eventually discovering a deep hollow—a kind of cavern—under the lagoon’s bank, where mother-of-

pearl oysters lay spread thickly about the entrance—a great bed, so far untouched by anyone.

Delighted with his find, he had dived several times, until at length attacked without warning by some strange foes—great hairy things, armed with sharp claws, which accounted for his wounds; but the like of which he had never seen before. They had come from the farthestmost recesses of the submerged cave, and he had barely managed to escape with his life. . . . The man shuddered slightly as he pointed to a heap of oysters lying on the sand, where he had evidently cast them ere overcome by his injuries. Some were already opened by the fierce heat of the sun,



Bob pointed ahead, and Dick’s eyes opened wide. The body of a man was stretched on the sand, whilst a native boat was lying a few yards away. (See Chapter 1.)

and most of these contained a magnificent pearl.

The two whites exchanged glances, their adventurous spirits strangely roused by the tale. If the rest of that oyster-bed was as rich as these specimens—well, it meant money, to say nothing of the promise of some excitement.

"Look here!" said Andrews, quick to form a decision. "We'll run this fellow back to Suva, have him properly doctored, and then get him to accompany us here. He'll show us where the spot is, though I'll bet he won't go down again himself. He's had a bad scare."

"Then who'll go down? We know nothing about diving—"

"You may not, but I do!" cut in the other. "Back home, I was pretty thick with a diver who was employed locally, and he showed me the ropes. I was down two or three times myself on the quiet, as a matter of fact, and it's not so difficult when you once get used to it—especially in moderately shallow water, such as this near the lagoon's rim. We'll get a diving-suit and pump at Suva; you'll be able to work the pump all right when I show you how—and—and— Well, I guess it's too good a chance to be missed. Are you game?"

Bob hesitated, but finally nodded assent.

"All right!" he said. "If you're satisfied that you can manage, I suppose I should be. But what about those—those— Oh, whatever beastly things attacked this chap? They'll—"

"My good fellow," interrupted Andrews, "you forget that 'this chap' was attired only in his bare skin, whereas I'll be toggged up in a rough rubber diving-suit. What's more, I know now what to look out for—he didn't."

It is wonderful how barriers can be broken down when one is bent upon attaining a certain object. The run back to Suva was accomplished in record time, and the pearl-diver properly attended to; but though grateful to them for their assistance, the man, as Dick had more than half-expected, flatly refused to go down again himself into the lagoon, no matter what riches lay there. But he agreed, on promise of a substantial share of whatever profits might accrue, to accom-

pany them back and point out the exact spot where he had originally dived.

During the time the native was recovering sufficiently to make the second trip, a reliable diving-suit was obtained and the necessary pump fitted into the motor-boat. The prolonged holiday was at last drawing to a close, and both whites were somewhat on tenter-hooks, fearing that there would not be time to carry out the project in view, but at length all was ready. They put to sea again, accompanied this time by a more cheerful being than the semi-conscious wreck of humanity they had found stretched on the coral strand, and eventually anchored the launch at a certain point in the lagoon which the islander indicated.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Mystery Eyes

THE thick circular glass was screwed home in front of the helmet, and Bob Ferguson slowly turned the pump-crank, the native paying out life-line and air-tube as Dick sank over the side. The water was not too deep, and consequently he was able to see his way quite easily, aided by the strong sunlight which filtered through from overhead.

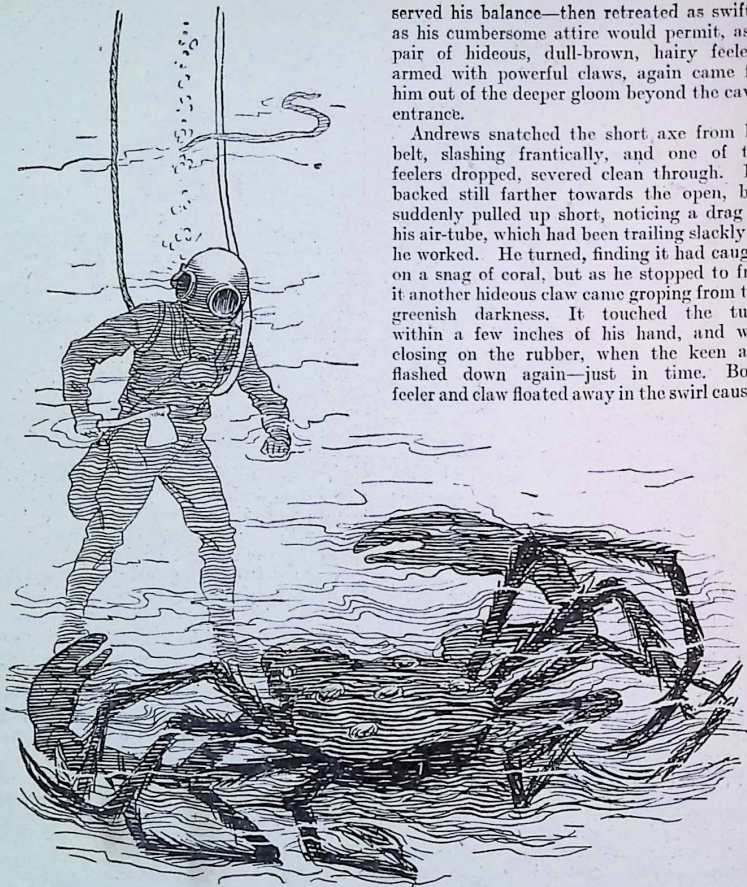
He took a few steps, quickly becoming used to his new element, and pushed forward towards the rim of the lagoon, which just here shelved very steeply and was mainly coral rock.

The islander's instructions had been explicit—so clear, indeed, that Andrews soon discovered a dark opening just ahead, round the entrance of which, and apparently continuing inside, thousands of promising pearl oysters lay spread like a carpet of shell.

He gathered several, placing them in a bag he carried at his waist; but as he progressed he noticed that the better-nourished ones seemed to lie right inside the cave itself.

He stepped gingerly forward, the native's story prompting him to use caution, despite his anxiety to gather the best specimens, but nothing disturbed the still water save the slight swirl made by his own movements.

Here, stooping, he added to his store, securing several fine bivalves, and was about to return in order to unload his bag when,



served his balance—then retreated as swiftly as his cumbersome attire would permit, as a pair of hideous, dull-brown, hairy feelers, armed with powerful claws, again came for him out of the deeper gloom beyond the cave-entrance.

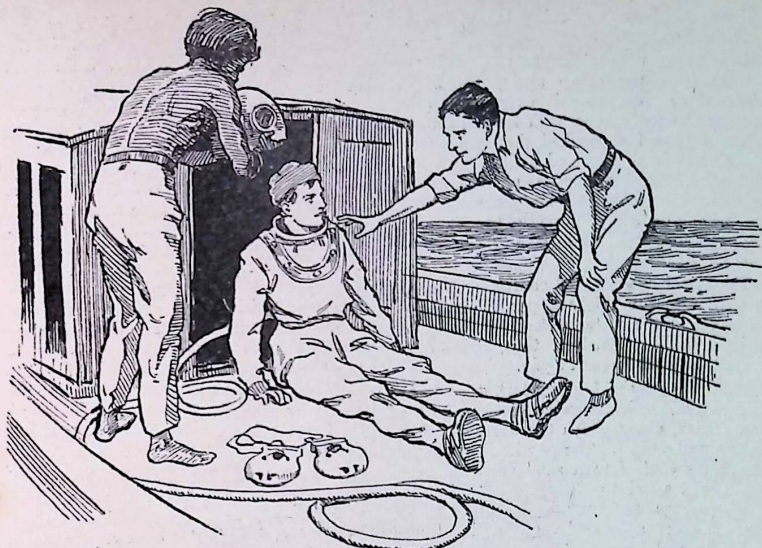
Andrews snatched the short axe from his belt, slashing frantically, and one of the feelers dropped, severed clean through. He backed still farther towards the open, but suddenly pulled up short, noticing a drag at his air-tube, which had been trailing slackly as he worked. He turned, finding it had caught on a snag of coral, but as he stopped to free it another hideous claw came groping from the greenish darkness. It touched the tube within a few inches of his hand, and was closing on the rubber, when the keen axe flashed down again—just in time. Both feeler and claw floated away in the swirl caused

Dick Andrews snatched the short axe from his belt, slashing frantically, and one of the feelers dropped, severed clean through! (See this page.)

without any warning, he felt something tug sharply at the tough rubber with which his legs were covered. He moved quickly, stumbled sideways, but fortunately pre-

by the swift passage of the blade, and whatever had possessed them drew back into the deepest recesses of the cavern.

Then, the perspiration pouring down his



"You're looking a bit white about the gills, old man," said Bob, when the heavy copper dome was removed. "Did you find anything queer?" (See this page.)

face despite the cool element he was immersed in, Dick freed the air-pipe and tugged hard at his life-line. A few minutes later he was aboard the motor-boat, with the native unscrewing his helmet.

"You're looking a bit white about the gills, old man," said Bob, when the heavy copper dome was removed. "Did you find anything queer?"

Andrews unhitched the bag of oysters, and emptied it on the floor-boards.

"I found these," he replied, "and other things. I guess we'll have to try 'the cure.'"

"The cure" was a small square water-tight box, to which a coil of insulated wire was attached. It had been included in the outfit at the last moment—an afterthought of Dick's.

"You—you're not going down again, are you?" asked Ferguson. "You saw some-

thing more than pearl oysters, I'll swear, from the look of you just now. You got a scare?"

Andrews was swiftly uncoiling the long wire, the free end of which he presently attached to a small square of wood containing a single push-button. He looked up with a confident grin.

"If I did, I'm over it now," he said, "and I jolly well *am* going down again! There's to much good stuff there to leave behind!"

"But what else did you see, man? What was it attacked this chap—?"

"I dunno exactly, except that they possessed very nasty feelers and infernally useful claws—ugh!—but that's all I could see of 'em. However, *this* should do the trick. Put on my hat for me, 'Cherry Blossom,' and Bob, keep your big feet off that push-button till I give three jerks on the line, or it's only odd bits of us they'll be picking up in Suva!"

he added grimly, motioning the native to replace his helmet.

Presently, whilst Ferguson turned his attention to the pump again, his friend once more disappeared over the side, bearing the square box with him. In a few minutes Dick had reached the cave-mouth, but this time he ventured a little farther in and deposited his burden on the sandy bottom. Then he beat a hasty retreat, until he was practically beneath the keel of the motor-launch, and gave three sharp tugs on his life-line.

The sound of a muffled concussion seemed to penetrate the thick copper of Andrews' helmet, and the water some yards in front became suddenly clouded; then, as it slowly cleared, he went forward again.

Hundreds of the best oysters, torn from their rich bed inside, were scattered round the cave-mouth, about which the water was still violently disturbed. The gap itself had been practically choked with sand and shattered rock, yet a fair-sized passage still remained; and even as Dick looked, an uncanny object floated sluggishly out, gradually sinking to the bottom, where it lay motionless—a thing whose dull-brown, hairy body, and long legs, two of which possessed claws like huge pincers at the end, might have delighted the heart of a naturalist—but nobody else!

"A spider crab!" breathed Andrews to himself. "But what a size! Ugh! It's no wonder that chap above was badly hacked!"

He turned away with a shudder, passing round the body of the thing, and waited for a little while, but no more came from the gap.

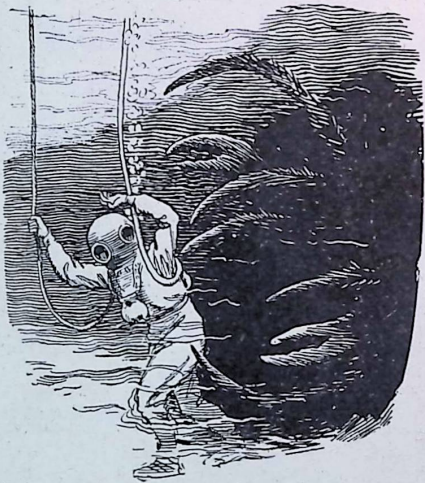
Then he started to gather the oysters, making several journeys to and from the motor-launch, until quite a rich cargo lay heaped on the floor-boards. But finally, the anchor was hauled up and the homeward cruise commenced, the native squatting contentedly on a small mountain of mother-of-pearl.

Andrews and his chum are not in business at Suva now; they are globe-trotting elsewhere, and their holiday is likely to be prolonged indefinitely. For when the proceeds of the expedition came to be realised it was found that it would no longer be necessary for them to work for their living.

But even now Dick Andrews detests the bare mention of a spider crab—especially a large one!

As for "Cherry Blossom," who made the discovery of the pearls—and had first encountered the guardian of the cave—he remained with the chums. Money was no good to him, and judging by his expressions he could not have bought anything which would make him more contented than he was as Dick and Bob's servant, refusing payment even for that service.

THE END.



An uncanny object floated out of the cave, gradually sinking to the bottom. "A spider crab!" breathed Andrews. "But what a size!" (See this page.)

MY DANCING PARTNERS

by

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY



I DANCED with Gwunday at the Ball
(I wish I'd nevah danced at all!)
For Gwunday is a clumsy fellah—
Twod on my toes, an' made me bellah!
I told the chump, in language plain,
I'd nevah dance with him again!

I then enjoyed a dance with Mewwy,
He is a gwaceful dancah—vewy!
But soon he played a foolish antic
Which made me absolutely fwantic!
He whirled me wound at such a pace
That I pitched forward on my face!

Then, foolishly, I danced with Twimble,
A youth who's anythin' but nimble,
He tumbled here, he stumbled there,
Chargin' an' bargin' evewywhere!
An' when he twod on my pet corn
I left him, lonely an' forlorn!

With Fatty Wynn I twied to waltz,
His movements, though, were full of faults.
You've heard of bulls in china shops?
Well, that's how Wynn behaves at "hops."
He left me sitting on the floor;
I stwuggled up, an' danced with Gore.

Gore simply gwabbed me wound the waist,
An' off we went, in feahful haste.
With Blake an' Digby we collided,
An' all the lookahs-on dewided.
"Go easy, Gussy!" they exclaimed.
My noble cheeks with fuvwy flamed.

I danced with Cardew an' with Clive
(A wondah I am still alive!)
'Twas such a bustle and a hustle,
I'm stiff an' sore in evewy muscle!
Next time they hold a Ball or Fête,
I'll dance alone, in solemn state!

