

Seeing Kashmir From Deck Of Houseboat

*Strange Picturesque People
Crowd Jhelum River Banks
As White Foreigners
Visit Strange Land*

By John Richard Finch

ALTHOUGH I had booked through to Naples, I left the Terekuni Maru at Colombo. Torn between the call of mystic India, and the almost conquering desire to continue the voyage, which I had thus far found unusually pleasant, I hesitated. I had visited India twice before. I had never possessed quite so desirable a stateroom. Large, cool, comfortable, and, wonder of wonders, I had not been given a room mate—I had the place absolutely to myself. I knew that it would be as comfortable as any cabin could be for the Red Sea passage.

Ashore in Colombo, still undecided, I met a Britisher from Srinagar, a fateful meeting at the steamship office. I told him of my cabin, and he touched on the wonders of Kashmir. The following day my chance acquaintance left on the Terekuni Maru in my stateroom, Europe bound; and I for—Kashmir.

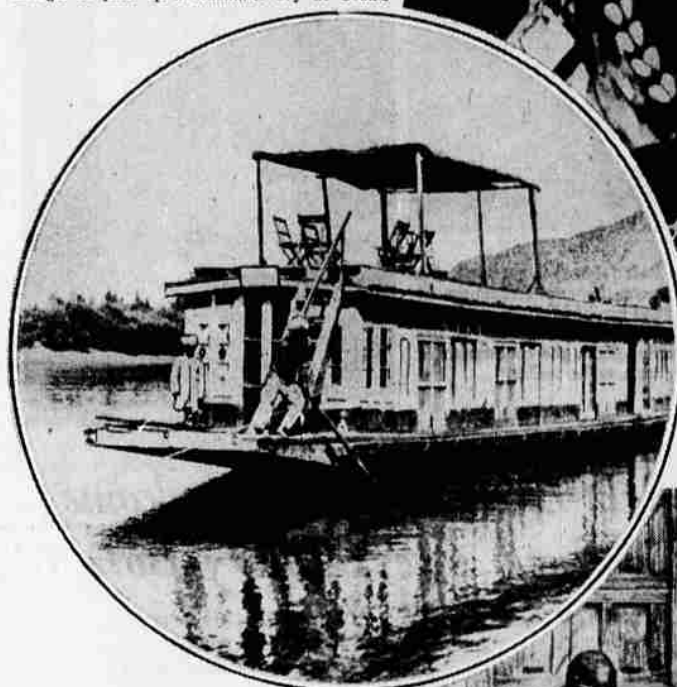
I crossed from Ceylon to India and was lucky enough to pick up a Kashmiri boy at Cook's



A belle of Kashmir. This young lady would scarcely win a beauty contest in America, but in her native land she causes the hearts of young swains to skip more than one beat.



Lama actors of the land of Kashmir in one of their religious plays. Religion plays a strong part in the life of the natives.



This houseboat, typical of those seen on the Jhelum river, affords a slow but comfortable mode of travel.

office in Bombay. He had come down with a party only the day before. We left the same night for the north.

As we approached Rawal Pindi, the railway terminus for Kashmir, the country, which I was viewing for the first time, absorbed my entire attention. We crossed a broad river, which seemed to emerge from the mountains, the great Pir Panjal range, snow-capped and stretching up in many places to a height of 15,000 feet. On the other side of that stupendous mountain range was the Valley of Kashmir. Kashmir! Dreams of romance in fragrant gardens! And this river was the Jhelum, the Hydaspes of classical literature.

FROM KOHALA, the river is paralleled by the Jhelum Valley Road. How interesting is this thin white line, which connects the Punjab with the mountain kingdom—this artery which pulsates with life and transmits its daily freight of passengers, merchandise and varied produce. The road winds in and out of the ranges, with sheer precipices above and below, through ever-changing scenery.

At the frontier of Kashmir customs duties are paid, and crowds of beggars press around for "Bakshish." Then the road follows the course of the Jhelum, crossing the many streams which swell its waters, through towering mountains colored with every shade that nature's brush provides, by the rushing log-strewn river. Gradually the hills grow lower, the road less tortuous, and the last thirty miles run through a great avenue of poplars.

It was spring, and the landscape was a riot of color. Sheets of pale pink almond blossoms covered the hillsides dipping down into broad stretches of brilliant yellow mustard. The tender green of young wheat contrasting with the rich madder-brown of the newly plowed fields. Innumerable willows with orange colored branches and pale yellow-green feathery foliage were massed together in hollows, and away beyond the deep purple of the foothills, with the pure white surface and serrated crest of lofty mountains towering above them, still mantled in winter snow, upon which there appeared a perpetual play of sunshine chasing rainbows. Almond blossoms had sprinkled the turf with petals, and the



The Buddhist abbot and his chelas or pupils in Srinagar. The abbot wields a strong influence over the lives of his followers.

many orchards along the way were lighted up by the snowy-white of flowering apricot trees. There were the pink blossoms of the peach trees, the bright sunshine causing them to stand out with peculiar brilliance against the azure sky. On the banks, and even on the earth covered roofs of the houses, groups of orange-red crown imperial lilies, and clusters of large scarlet tulips introduced another brilliant color touch. Turbanned peasants along the road and in the fields, as colorful as their surroundings, were an indispensable part of the picture. Such was the panorama that greeted me that spring morning on the edge of Kashmir—an alive, interesting beauty that appealed to every sense.

AT LAST we reached Srinagar and its thronging bazaar, in which cows stroll indifferently and unmolested about (for this, too, is a Hindu country), and as my Kashmiri boy and I made our way over the bridge I was accosted by a score or more of natives, each eager to direct—for a consideration—or to recommend his houseboat or warn me against the dishonesty of every Kashmiri but himself. By late afternoon I had selected a houseboat on Dhal Lake, shaded by willows; a trim little boat with five rooms, brightly decked with Kashmiri carpets and curtains, and a roof gay with geraniums.

Attached to every houseboat is the cookboat with its crew—cook, boatman, sweeper and water carrier. In addition there is the Shikhar, a long, low canoe-like boat, used for hunting. It glides over the water with an unbelievable speed. There is an unlimited number of them for hire, and these are brightly canopied and luxuriously filled with cushions; many are fancifully named such

as: "Happy Shikhar, Good Luck," "This Shikhar For Laugh In," "Sweet Love Shikhar," "Happy Nights," and one, "The Snipe," bears the inscription, "By Eating the Meat of Snipes, the Teeths Becomes Golden"—evidently meant as a high recommendation.

Settled and comfortable in my houseboat, I sat on the roof and watched the stream of traffic. Here was a Shikhar full of rich Indians, the women in bright Saris and the men in sober lounge suits with brilliant turbans; here a grimy-looking boat full of stones or earthenware, bound for one of the villages on the lake. They are propelled by means of poles—arduous work, often done by the mother of the children that swarm over the boat, while the father sits proudly holding the youngest born and singing it to sleep. These river folk are of magnificent physique, with fair skin and fine features, but curiously drab in the matter of clothes, wearing black for the most part, the men scantily garbed, and the women in voluminous folds, loaded with silver ear and finger rings and heavy bracelets.

ACROSS the lake come great logs, lashed together in lengths of one to two hundred yards and guided by a man who rushes from end to end dexterously plying a pole of enormous dimensions. Most numerous of all are the boxwallahs who pass up and down the lake with their wares. Pottery, carpets, silks, papier mache, are displayed before one's eyes, which soon become weary by the array, as one's ears are by the incessant, "Only look, Husoor. I am best wood-carver in Kashmir; see my chits," and he displays a formidable pile of grimy testimonials. There is at least one psychologist among them. He says, "Sir, I am the worst wood-carver in Kashmir; will you like to see my rubbish?" Shadings fell on the hills which encircled the lake, bringing out colors which the strong sun-

light had disguised; forms of hills and the old fort which dominates the town took on a new significance; suddenly darkness swooped down, and I waited for the glory of the rising moon, which brings to birth a new world where the reflections in the barely moving waters of the lake are as vivid as their counterparts. Then, as they pass by, the boatmen sing queer minor melodies, and their voices and the splashing of paddles are all that break the silence of the night.

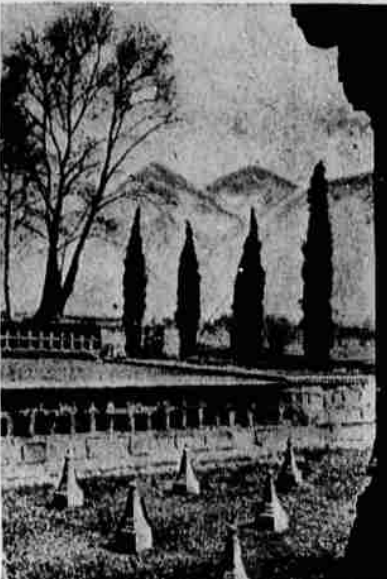
Soon after dawn I went in the Shikhar through the intricate canals to the Jhelum, to move at a leisurely pace up the main thoroughfare of the town under the Seven Bridges. It is here that all the native life of Srinagar is lived, and although the river is said to be the dirtiest in the world, the Kashmiri is hardy. Here is a family bathing, the father waist deep in the water, while one or more of the children scrub his back; the babies are resigned to total immersion at the hands of their mother. Ever and anon folk come down to drink. A woman is washing the family pots of brass, a man vigorously bathing his donkey. Everywhere are parties of men and women washing their clothes; into the murky water goes every kind of garment, rubbed by a stone if stains are obstinate, and then, seemingly grimmer than before, they are laid on the dirty steps to dry.

OVER the bridges pass bullock carts and madly dashing Tongas to and from the streets on either side—streets narrow and indescribably filthy, lined with shops and crowded with pariah dogs, saffron-robed Sadhus, with their begging bowls, and men, women and children—all leisurely, nearly all beautiful, and begrimed with the dirt of ages.

The houses which line the river lean and totter in all directions, but the Kashmiri only shrugs and says, "Yes, but so they did in my father's time." The roofs of the houses are also the gardens; in season they are clothed with iris, and at other times with a heavy crop of grass for fodder. Quaint-shaped Hindu temples, their towers covered with flattened kerosene tins, catch the sunlight, and here and there is a sober mosque.

It is here that most of the Boxwallahs conduct their business, and you may enter some dingy doorway and climb a precarious and evil-smelling stairway to a veritable museum of lovely articles, old and new, lavishly strewn about floors and tables. Frequently cups of tea are pressed upon the visitors, and if it is suspected that they may buy something of real value, they may be regaled with a 30-course luncheon, which is indeed a very worthy affair. Course follows course on the same plate, now sweet, now savory, now both; mutton and jam rolled into balls with aromatic leaves, apricots hollowed to receive hard-boiled eggs, which in turn are stuffed with spices; crystallized apples served in gravy. It all sounds like a cook's nightmare, but so delicately are the flavors blended that each dish is only more delicious than the last, and it will be hard for anyone to rise and depart from one of these famous luncheons without ordering at least a suite of furniture.

Centuries ago on the shores of the Kashmir lakes the Mogul Emperors built their gardens, including the famous Shalimar, and thither today flock all Srinagar's population to enjoy the for-



Shalimar Bagh. On festive occasions sparkling water cascades over the rows of niches which are filled with bright flowers. A charming effect is added by the graceful sprays of the fountains seen in the foreground.

mal beauty of the gardens with their splashing fountains and riot of color. Half an hour by boat across the blue waters of the lake, going eastward, one enters an ancient canal, bordered by chinar trees and leading straight to the entrance of the Shalimar Bagh, "The Abode or Hall of Love," laid out by the Emperor in 1619. This garden owes much of its charm to its situation. In the background rises Mt. Mahadeo, with snow-capped peak and pine-clad slopes.

THE main design of the garden is Persian—a succession of terraces with a broad central watercourse passing under graceful pillared pavilions, the water falling in cascades into square pools lined with ornate stonework and dotted with fountains. The largest pavilion is on the highest terrace. This spacious building has walls and pillars of black marble, highly polished, as are also the elegant brackets which support the roof. As I watched the groups of Kashmiri Hindu women, brilliantly clad in turquoise blue, in orange, scarlet, violet, deep purple or pale green, sometimes in clusters, sometimes breaking up and scattering over the velvety lawns, it seemed to me that they imparted just that touch of color and oriental interest which is needed to give the maximum effect of exquisite beauty. I could almost imagine myself back in the seventeenth century and looking on as the ladies of Jahangir's or Shah Jahan's court wandered about lovely Shalimar in the cool shade.

An Indian crowd is curiously decorous, and as they passed quietly up and down the terraces they blended with the atmosphere of the famous dream garden, where ghosts of long dead emperors and their queens surely must still walk. No need to wait for nightfall for the fairies; one could easily imagine that the groups of little folks in their bright soft silks, playing under the trees to the accompaniment of delicately tinkling bangles and ankle chains, have slipped in from fairyland. Terrace after terrace unfolds up the hillside and hovering in the distance the majestic snow-capped mountains which tower over Kashmir guarding her beauty.

Six weeks I lingered on my houseboat, lost in the tranquil and astonishing beauty of Kashmir. Then a day came that found me once more at the railway station at Rawal Pindi, gazing back over the road to Srinagar, wishing that I might stay on forever.

At Colombo I found to my great elation that I was in time to catch the Yasukuni Maru, a sister ship of the Terekuni. Could I get a stateroom identical with the one I had had? I could. I did.

The night we slipped out of the harbor at Colombo, I leaned on the rail gazing shoreward at the long concrete breakwater. It seemed only yesterday that I had sailed into the harbor past that very spot. My trip to Kashmir could have been a dream—in many ways it was like a dream. Perhaps it was, I thought—a very wonderful one.

(Copyright, 1936)