

KASHMIR—BEAUTIFUL KASHMIR

A sail on the Dhal lake and after

BY A. M. BURKE.

THE beautiful Dhal lake—or the lake of Romances—has got to be seen by every visitor to Srinagar. We new-comers were told so much about it that we were determined to pay more than one visit to it and we did. The river Jhelum runs into Srinagar and the villages and many tiny houses are built on either banks. There are many bridges scattered about and are very useful. Usually near these bridges are stationed the men with their “Shikara” and the bridge nearest our place was not far away, so a little brisk walk in the cold afternoon air was most enjoyable. Our walk was through beautiful scenery. We arrive at the bridge—standing around us are Kashmerian shoe-makers, tailors, fur sellers, jewellers, all offering us cards. We tell them we have come out for amusement and not shopping—nothing daunts them—“Never mind, madam, only take our cards and come some other day!” We accept—they are pleased, and we make a move to the water’s edge. The first “Shikara” to greet us is the “Handley Page,” into this the four of us sit comfortably. They are comfortable little boats and well padded. There is plenty of room for the rowers and the servants, for our outing is really an afternoon picnic. We are now on the Jhelum and a fair hour’s rowing from our lake of “Romances”. The Kashmerian boatman is very pleased at a fare as it means backsheesh for him at the end. He laughs—and makes his peculiar “hun hun” sound which means he is at last working and using his energy. It is hard work rowing in the river. We cross through what is called the “Kashmir Gate,” a picturesque piece of work and then opens out to view the many villages. The houses seem to be built anyhow. Crooked, low, small ones, near larger ones; to me there seemed to be no real roads in the villages and those that were paths had everything imaginable lying about them. For instance in the narrow pathway would be seen bundles of grass, wood, etc., and the passersby would just push these aside and make their way. It looks as if the poor Kashmerian does not build his house for comfort, but for huddling. It is indeed cold in the winter months in Kashmir. These were glimpses as we passed down the river. Pretty Kashmerian girls were seen frequently at the water’s edge filling their vessels. Sometimes we met a Shikara or small boat being rowed entirely and alone by a woman and we marvelled at her pluck. They row for long distances to fetch a few things from the town such as vegetables, etc.,

The scenery is just grand. The various tints thrown out by nature and the scenery are indeed a feast for the eyes of the town dweller. The men and women wear long gowns loose-sleeved like the present day night gowns, dark in colour which always look dirty. (These are the working class. A lady doctor once told me, that it is supposed to be only

women of ill-fame who wear clean and spotless clothes ; rather a queer way of thinking don't you think ! Her patients generally change when in her private dispensary and then go back to their homes in the ordinary clothes. There is no doubt that like the wild Pathan you can smell some of the labourers (Kashmerian) from a great distance. We passed many small villages before we reached the Dhal lake. To be on this lake in calm weather is indeed beautiful, weeds are thick in it and the lotus simply covers the water in certain months of the year, but I was not fortunate to see these flowers in bloom on the lake. The eternal snows on the hills nearby with the bright sun showing them off, gave a dazzling and splendid appearance to them. Eventually the Shikara is drawn to the bank which has now become shallow. For we have rowed through the Dhal lake to get to our destination, the Shellim bagh, and we have to walk a certain distance to reach it. It is enclosed by a high wall and one enters through a gate. Within the gate, the garden is huge—big space of green and the grand and shady chenar tree to be seen at regular distances. Fountains were many but they play only once a week, I am told on Sundays. There were many others out besides ourselves pic-nicing. In Kashmir one feels energetic and it was nice to see so many out enjoying themselves. The lawn was a carpet of daisies. We were pestered by people offering us button-holes of pansies. We accepted and tipped them, but there was no end to the new comers offering the same, so we cried "enough" and told them to go. The flowers, they crept out from everywhere and were of many colours. One felt one could remain here and feast one's eyes forever on the beauties of nature, but the sting thrown out by the cold air warned us it was time for "home" and away we went back by Shikara.

On the Dhal lake is to be seen the queer custom of spearing the fish. I watched with much interest a lonely Kashmerian in his boat digging amongst the weeds with his spear and so successfully landing his fish. He must have done it for years to be so expert.

My first visit to this lake was in April. In the mornings till about 10 A.M., the temperature used to be about 41 to 52° and in the evenings again there was a drop. I believe rather bad storms are encountered on the Dhal lake sometimes, I pity anyone if the boat overturns, as the weeds in parts are very thick. There are beautiful drives, nice golf links and every chance of fun and amusement for visitors to Srinagar.

There is a Nursing Home for Europeans under the Minto Sisters, also a State Women's Hospital, a large and well kept Mission Hospital and a Maternity Hospital also I am told worked by the Mission. I came to know some of the Mission workers and Sister Smith kindly took me around the large Mission Hospital. Every bed was filled, which speaks well for the energetic workers ; and all the patients seemed so cheery and bright. The climate of Srinagar is ideal and the scenery just perfect.