

the TRUCIAL COAST of OMAN



They saw a stretch of desert which was arid, flat and bare, Which was barren, drear and ugly, with a death or glory air, And they said "The very limit. We shall build a station there." So they built one, and they laughed and called it Sharjah.

*

THE TRUCIAL Coast of Oman, on the south-east shore of the Persian Gulf, was called up to seventy or eighty years ago the Pirate Coast of Arabia, and it can still be found on old maps under that name. It was from here that large bands of pirates used to harry the East Indiamen. The capital or the pirates' headquarters was Umm ul Qwain, the present sheik of which is a staunch friend of the British.

I was stationed for approximately nine months at Sharjah, about seventy miles south of Umm ul Qwain. On the outskirts of Sharjah was Dubai, a town of about seventy thousand inhabitants, probably one of the chief pearling ports in the Persian Gulf. From time immemorial the sheiks of Dubai and Sharjah have been enemies, and it is only a few years since the present sheiks were at war with each other. British Overseas Airways had established a base at Dubai, and a temporary truce while the flying-boats were landing and taking off was part of the agreement under which the airways were operating.

About this time the sheik of Dubai had an old but very good cannon. He used to wheel this up periodically near the

sheik of Sharjah's palace and fire off three or four balls, the number depending on the amount of scrap iron available. When night came he would send out foraging parties to collect the spent balls for the next day's war.

It so happened that the two sheiks went off on a visit to India at the same time, and while they were away the son of the sheik of Dubai sold the cannon for a large sum to Sharjah. When the two sheiks returned, Dubai declared war on Sharjah to get the cannon back. But the war to-day is not the bloodthirsty business it was a hundred years ago. If the casualties amount to twenty or thirty, it's considered pretty good going.

The Trucial Coast owes no allegiance to King Ibn Saud, Supreme Ruler in Arabia, nor do the British exert any influence over the administration, which is entirely in the hands of the sheiks of the various townships, the largest of which is probably Abu Dhabi. Many years ago the British authorities from the naval base at Hormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, visited the coastal sheiks and suggested a truce amongst all of them for a short period. The sheiks agreed that gun-running and free-booting and slave-trading and piracy on the high seas should cease, and the British in return agreed not to interfere with anything done on land. This truce was extended to a year, then to five years, and then for