

# SYNOPSIS



## The pearl fishers

### ACT I

Ceylon (Sri Lanka), ancient times.

On a desolate seashore, with the ruins of a Hindu temple in the background.

The pearl fishers are dancing and feasting (“Sur la grève en feu”). They choose Zurga as their chief, promising him absolute obedience. Nadir, a former fellow diver who has spent some years hunting, is welcomed by Zurga as a long-lost friend. Left alone, they remember a trip they had made to a temple in Kandy, where their friendship was nearly destroyed by their mutual love of a young priestess whose beauty they had glimpsed briefly (“Au fond du temple saint”). They renew a vow they made at the time, not to let this love come between them, and swear to remain friends until death.

A boat arrives bearing an unknown veiled woman who has been chosen by the elders to pray for the success of the pearl harvest and the safety of the divers. Although neither of them recognises her, she is Leila, the woman from Kandy with whom Nadir and Zurga had been in love. The villagers welcome her and Zurga reminds her that her task is to pray alone on a steep and inaccessible cliff above the beach. If she is faithful to her task she will be given the best pearl they find, but if she fails, death is the penalty. As Zurga is explaining her duties, she recognises Nadir: although disturbed by the sight of Nadir, she swears to remain always veiled and alone and is led away by Nourabad, the high priest.

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Zurga and the fishermen go down to the sea. Nadir is troubled by the sound of Leila's voice, but convinces himself that it is an illusion, such as he has often experienced since, false to his oath to Zurga, he had sought out Leila, the priestess from Kandy, and love had blossomed between them ("Je crois entendre encore"). When Leila begins her incantations to the gods, Nadir wakes and recognizes her voice. Leila briefly draws her veil aside and the pair declare their renewed passion. On the beach, the fishermen pray her to continue singing ("O Dieu Brahma").

## ACT II

In the temple, Nourabad tells Leila that her task is over for the night as the boats have returned safely. Leila expresses fear at being left alone, but he assures her that she will be safe as long as she keeps her promise. She tells him of the courage she displayed when she was only a child, keeping her word and remaining steadfast in the face of death when she saved a man who was pursued by enemies by hiding him in her family hut and keeping silent when questioned. ("J'étais encore enfant"). The fugitive had rewarded her with a necklace that he asked her always to wear.

On the priest's departure, Leila quietly muses on the former times when she and Nadir would meet together secretly ("Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombre"). But when Nadir scales the cliff and appears beside her, she is terrified, because he risks death if discovered. Leila begs him to leave, but he remains and the two declare their love in a passionate duet ("Léïla! Dieu puissant!"). She persuades him to leave, promising that they will meet the next night; but they are discovered by Nourabad, who rouses the village. A storm breaks out and the villagers blame Leila and Nadir for sacrilegiously provoking the wrath of the gods. Zurga intervenes as they are about to be sacrificed, and orders the villagers to spare them, but when Nourabad tears off Leila's veil, Zurga finally recognizes Leila and realizes that Nadir has betrayed their oath. He angrily demands death for the guilty couple. The storm erupts and the fishermen unite in singing a hymn to Brahma ("Brahma, divin Brahma!").



### ACT III

Scene I. In his tent on the beach, Zurga reflects that the storm has abated, as has his rage; he is grieved that he has condemned to death his friend (“L’orage s’est calmé”). Leila is brought in by two divers. Ready to die herself, she begs for mercy for Nadir, but her declaration of love for Nadir only inflames Zurga, who refuses to spare him (“Je suis jaloux”). As she is taken away, Leila gives a necklace to one of the divers, asking that it be given to her mother when she is dead. Zurga notices the necklace and leaves after them.

Scene II. The villagers are waiting for sunrise, when they will sacrifice Leila and Nadir (“Dès que le soleil”). A red glow appears, but Zurga runs in to warn them that it is not the dawn, but their huts which are burning. As they run off to rescue their children, he frees Leila and Nadir, telling them that he lit the fire himself. He returns the necklace to Leila, and reveals that he is the man she saved when she was a child. Nourabad witnesses Zurga’s freeing of the prisoners and denounces him to the fishermen: Leila and Nadir flee, singing of the life of love that awaits them, while Zurga faces death to protect their escape.