

Told by a Deep Sea Diver

The master diver was turning over some of his old helmets. Long and corrupting acquaintance with salt water had left the timed-over-copper bulbs a rusty, greenish gray.

"Why don't I keep them polished up?" he said. "Because they're a great deal better the way they are. A shiny new helmet is one eternal nuisance; you never get any peace till it's coated over. When I'm wearing one, I always feel as if my head was a sort of trolling-rod; anyhow, most fish regard it that way. And I must say they do certainly seem to be trying their level best to be caught."

"I often think that the majority of sea beasts' life must be one long struggle between a natural wariness and a more than natural curiosity. They've all been brought up to give a wide opening to things they don't understand; but it's bred in their bone, to want to see and keep up with everything that's new. And when it's something that's got a glitter or polish to it, all that their parents and guardians have taught them from the beginning of time isn't going to hold them back."

"And no one has such opportunities to find that out as the diver. At first, when you're being lowered, there's nothing but a flicker of tails disappearing in every direction; but after a while, and very soon if you're wearing a new head-piece, you begin to make out big pairs of goggle eyes staring at you from the under-sea twilight, and they gradually move in closer and closer. In a few minutes probably they'll be making little darts at your fingers and swishing their tails across your face."

"And yet in some cases they may not be at all hesitating about introducing themselves. Down in the West Indies there's a fish of the forward sort. That's the booby. Did you ever see a skate when a fisherman's tied a cord around his neck, bent his silly face forward, and set him up on a table to keep things gay and humorous in the market? Well, a booby looks something like that."

"But with all his amazing ugliness it isn't the booby's looks so much as his overwhelming suddenness that makes him unpopular with deep sea men. A diver goes down, and along with the other fish the booby hears of it. But is he shy and timid about coming forward? The minute he hears of a miraculous stranger in his midst, my, but he does more than 'want to know'! He's not even content to 'wait for the extrys,' as you might say; he's got to rush straight down town and see the bulletins!"

"The first thing the unsuspecting diver knows, he's hit plump in the forehead face-plate, and between his being jarred like a ship in a bow-on collision, and his being given the firm belief that he's had a visit from the very old grinning demon of the under-sea himself, he's ready to put for the surface like a stampeded derrick-hist, and do his recovering slow and at leisure. He's lucky if the booby hasn't tried the thickness of both his side-plates, too, before he's safe over the gunwale!"

"There's another sea-beast that has his own peculiar curiosity, and that's the giant squid; but there's nothing so very humorous about their little prying inquisitiveness. Once in the Mediterranean one gave me a half-hour which I thought would leave me gray-headed; just how near it was to being my last dive I'll never know."

"It happened in the end of the summer, when I'd been on that job near Shanghai, and I was coming home by way of Suez when I got a wire at Port Said from headquarters directing me to take my gear and sidetrack myself direct to Palermo, Sicily. When I got there—and I didn't lose any time making connections—I found that a badly moored liner had pinched a big lighter between herself and the mole—the long stone wharf and breakwater the Palermo are so proud of—and, smashing it ahead, had sent it to the bottom. It was a government lighter, and its cargo was an unusually valuable one—would run forty or fifty thousand dollars in our money—and I was to do what I could towards hoisting a good lot salvage out of it."

"It was simple, easy work. There were two or three hundred medium-sized cases to derrick up, and for me it wasn't much more than shanting the chain-hooks and give the word to haul away."

"In fact, there was only one thing which kept the job from being exactly the kind I like; I couldn't seem to make good tenders of the Italian seamen they'd given me to work with. They would pump steadily enough, but had no heed at all for

moment my other was a prisoner, too. Then the tentacles began to nose about all over me like cats.

"I did not need my eyes to know what it was. I'd heard of the curiosity of the giant rock-squid, and I'd often watched the little ones in the Palermo aquarium. They'll lay hold of something new to them, and paw it over deliberately by the hour, squeezing and pulling it, and never letting go for a minute."

"All this came back to me, and I could judge the size of the squid that had got hold of me by the length of its arms. Its eyes told its bulk, too; for when I'd got my strength again, and my struggling began—to turn its curiosity into anger, they came out phosphorescent in the darkness. They were hideous enough danger-signals, and as I wrenched and heaved they lighted up uglier and uglier. For all I could do the grip on me only tightened."

"But it wasn't the tightness of the grip that was sending the crawling shudders through me; it was the kind of grip it was. For the suckers—and there were two rows of them on every arm—began to 'set' and 'draw.' They glued themselves to me all over, but I felt their mauling worst on my bare hands and wrists."

"Sometimes I would get hold of the end of an arm, and twist it off me, but it only gave and stretched like the elastic it was. I knew that as soon as I had to relax the tension it would spring back again. And every minute or two the brute spat its sepia; I could smell it even through my rubber suit. I fought and yelled like a crazy man, for my nerves had gone; but the thick 'hough' though! the beast makes when its blood is up was all the answer and heed it gave me."

"Yet in that first terror it hadn't rightly come over me what my real danger was. It was only when I had struggled and screamed myself tired and had gasping leisure for clear thinking that I realized what the end of it was likely to be. My first thought was that, after all, I couldn't be choked to death nor my air supply cut off, and it would only be a matter of time till I and the brute would be hauled up together."

"Then of a sudden my mind went back to the aquarium again, and I remembered that whenever the little squids in it caught a fish, or anything else soft enough, they never failed to finish handling it by pushing out that chisel-edged, parrot-beak of theirs, and ripping it up just as a child might a rag doll. Its head had only to let go whatever it was holding to in the galleys, and beak had only to reach the breast of my suit or even to slit up one of my sleeves to drown me as sure as if there weren't a diving-pump within a thousand miles of Palermo."

"I think I went into a kind of delirium then, filling my helmet full of senseless screaming till it rang like a Chinese gong, jerking and writhing in the brute's arms, and flinging my head back and forward in the crazy hope of sending up a signal that way; but I had too much slack, and I knew they'd probably not heed it, anyway."

"All the time the suckers were growing steadily stronger; from the first nip and sting, I felt now a long burning ache. One arm was coiling itself more and more around my neck; I could hear it rub squeaking about my copper collar, and as it tightened I knew it was bringing the head gradually closer."

"The sepias was now as vile as two-year bilge. As I loamed and fought, the eyes stood out like great opals with candles behind them, and the lights in them turned crueler and crueler at every heave I gave. I couldn't think or pray. I could only rave at the Italians up above for letting me be done to death like this."

"Suddenly I felt the hose and line growing taut. The next minute I was off my feet, and there was a terrific tug as the squid's anchorage in the galleys was broken. But we were lifted steadily up, he still gripping to me, and so in one big clump we came to the hatchway. He tried to get a purchase on it as we squeezed through, but he didn't. I was in luck that he had such other things to think of, for they kept his beak off me."

"No, I didn't end up by fainting or anything like that. When they'd unscrewed my face-plate, I just sat on the side of the mole and did a little laughing and crying both at once. I can remember yet the outlandish sounds I made; it was for all the world like the squawking of an old rooster when you've laid his poor neck across the chopping-block."

"It was two days before I could key myself up to putting the armor on again. Even then you could still see the red marks all over my hands and wrists; you can make them for yourself by touching your skin with a scrimmage. The fall stunned him for a time, but he sustained no serious injury beyond a sprained wrist."

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