

DOWN IN, A DIVING BELL

At the Bottom of the Sea,
Where the Little Fishes
Play, and

THE MERMAIDS LOVE TO BE

Plucky Daughter of a Denison Citizen
Tells of Her Experience in Deep
Sea Diving.

To promenade the bottom of the sea is a strange experience for anybody. How it befell me, a woman who cannot swim, is in itself unusual enough to have a place in the story. To be able to write intelligently and convincingly on a subject you know absolutely nothing about requires a glittering imagination. So I thought, when the editor of one of San Francisco's big dailies once asked me to contribute an article on diving. Diving! Why, I didn't know any more about diving at that moment than a pig does about flying. I had experienced a railroad wreck, a shipwreck, and had once gone up in a balloon and come down in the Yukon River, but had never had an adventure such as I was expected to write about. Clearly, the only thing to do was to find a wrecking company and interview some of the divers. With the aid of the city directory I located a salvage company and cheerfully tramped several blocks of the water-front district, through dust, smoke and debris.

I found Capt. Whitelaw himself in his office, and stated the object of my visit. He graciously consented to an interview, and promised to summon as many of the divers as I wished to see.

While he was explaining to me that everything was in readiness, day and night, to answer telephone call in ten minutes, the bell at his elbow rung out sharply. Excusing himself to answer, he immediately touched a button and a man entered to whom he gave a few brief orders.

Turning to me again, he said he had just received a telephone call for a diver to go down and recover an anchor lost from one of the large vessels lying out in San Francisco Bay, and his wrecker, the Rowena, would leave in ten minutes.

I caught my breath. Why not do it?

Here was a rare opportunity. "Captain," I asked, "how long do you think you will be out?"

"From two to three hours."

"Very well that suits me capitally," I inserted, "and with your kind permission, I'm going out with you."

He looked his astonishment in a polite way, and to head off any objection he might entertain to such an arrangement, I hurried on.

"Now, Capt. Whitelaw, please invite me to go on board the Rowena and see the divers at work, and then, if it is not straining your hospitality to the breaking point, perhaps I shall try to induce you to allow me to don a diving suit and explore the depths myself."

The captain gazed and eyed me with suspicion, and I knew I had to talk my hard-st and smile my sweetest or the day was lost. "Now, captain, you have taken no pains to conceal the fact that you do not approve this step—in plain language, you do not want me to go. Surely, it is not such a difficult or unheard-of thing of a woman to do; many have done more daring things. I am sure you cannot refuse when you know I have set my heart upon getting material for this story from actual experience. I promise to obey instructions to the letter."

The confidential manner and smile that accompanied and punctuated my plea were almost more than I was able to sustain; but I had fully decided that I was going out on the Rowena, and was talking to fill in time. I had begun half in jest, but was now very thoroughly in earnest. In

the meantime, I waited for the captain to recover his breath. When he did so, he asked:

"What is the condition of your heart?"

"Good," I laughed, "and in the right place."

"How about the top of your head?" he next demanded.

My head! What in the round world did he mean? I felt of it; it seemed about as usual, but the captain evidently meant to see for himself. Approaching me, he asked permission to feel my head, which, after rumpling my pompadour a good deal, was finally accomplished. I suppose I must have looked unasked questions, for the captain proceeded to explain.

"If the top of the head is flat," he said, "the pressure of the water is too great, and often causes sudden paralysis; but if it is arched, like mine," he added, running a hand through his gray mop of curls, "one can go down in safety on that score. Yet there is danger," he gravely hesitated, "and I shall assume a great responsibility if I agree to what you propose."

"My dear captain," I broke in, "though I fully realize the danger, it will not be the first time in my life that I have faced it, and I have absolutely no fear."

"Well, young lady, your nerve is evidently all right, anyway, so you may come along," he said, with a decision that put a period to that.

Away we went to the wharf and were soon aboard the Rowena, the gang plank in and steaming away up the bay. Presently the two divers came on deck fully equipped for action, looking more like some hideous monsters of the deep than human beings. They gave the man who had charge of the life line and air pump the signals, and a few moments later I stood leaning over the deck rail watching the waves ripple over the spot where they had disappeared.

The captain reminded me that it was time I should make my submarine toilet if I still desired to tempt providence, but again tried to dissuade me. For answer I called back from the door of the cabin assigned to me that I should probably need his assistance, in the absence of my maid, in adjusting that fifty-six-pound leaden belt; as that was somewhat heavier than I was accustomed to wearing. I have made many kinds of toilets to serve a purpose, but for sheer ugliness and discomfort, that waterproof won the championship. According to Kipling, I was only "a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair," but with all due respect to Mr. Kipling, his pleasing definition of woman was, in this instance, at any rate, a misfit. When I finally managed, with the captain's aid to shuffle myself on deck, I didn't feel like two-stepping, weighted with leaden shoes of nineteen pounds each, a belt of fifty-six pounds, an a helmet weighing fifty pounds. The divers had recovered the lost anchor and were just being hauled aboard.

I was already and the last moment had arrived; my heart was pounding away at my side like a sledge hammer. Capt. Whitelaw gave me the code of signals again, handed me the long sheathed knife, such as the divers always carry for protection, and with a last reassuring pressure of the hand I was lowered to the water. For a brief instant Tennyson's lines flashed into my mind.

"And now shake hands across the brink
Of that deep grave to which I go—
I cannot sink so far, far down
But I shall know thy voice
And answer from below."

As the water crept up around my body, my heart seemed to quiver and stand still. I felt as one might who was being interred alive and could hear the clods of earth as they fell upon the coffin lid. Lower and still lower I sank, the water reached my breast, then my throat; another moment and I could see it creeping over the windows of my helmet; then it had closed over my head. A wave of unutterable helplessness swept over me. What insignificant atoms we are that go to make up God's great

plan! The frail rubber line attached to my helmet had only to snap, or the oxygen coming through it, which supplied me with life, cease for one minute, and I should have solved the old problem that has laughed at us since the beginning of time: "Life—what is it, from whence does it come, and whither does it go?"

An ice-cold hand seemed clutching at my throat and strange voices were murmuring in my ears their weird tales of the deep. Down, down, until I felt my feet touch something soft and yielding and then I knew I had reached the bottom. But, oh horrors! Surely it was not moss beneath my feet; it quivered and squirmed, and in my mad haste to drag myself and 200 pounds of surplus weight away to a safer distance, I nearly fell upon it. I remembered the divers had told me to crawl on my hands and knees so as to avoid the possibility of falling into a hole or crevice; but not for me was that mode of travel intended.

I looked down at the spot I had precipitately vacated, and cold chills raced up and down my spinal column, for there, still quivering, its tail beating the sea moss in its dying agony, lay a hideous, slimy, green reptile, about three feet long, with a broad, flat head and body, and its huge mouth surrounded by long feelers that writhed and twisted like human fingers. But my weight had crushed it, and my fear gave place to a weird fascination as I watched it. When it had ceased to move I began slowly and cautiously to feel my way about, hastily changing my course if I detected an unusual pliancy beneath my feet. I found what appeared to be a nice comfortable-looking rock, but poking it with my long knife to satisfy myself that it was not alive, I breathed a sigh of relief and sat down to take an inventory of my surroundings.

It was a realized dream of fairyland; no landscape artist ever painted a scene more wonderful. And the silent, prophetic mystery hanging over all! Still as the grave! Not a sound or motion of the water, save that made by the waving mosses and seaweed, some of which towered far above me out of sight and others lying low and waving like beautiful iridescent plumes. Clinging to the soft tendrils of many were tiny shells of varied shapes and colors that gave the mosses the appearance of being studded with jewels. Looking closely, I observed that all marine life at the bottom of the bay took on the color of its surroundings, for hiding and clinging to the shelter of rocks and shells, were tiny fish and sea urchins of all descriptions, exactly corresponding in color.

The same rule applied to all sea life among the mosses and seaweeds. Nature had wisely provided this protection from natural foes, for once they ventured from their shelter, they were quickly devoured. From the tiny, floating animalcules to the great scaly things that flashed by me, each in its turn fell the prey to something stronger; might was right, and many fierce, silent battles disturbed the harmony of that calm, beautiful, lower world.

Alone with all this splendor, mine the only eyes to behold it! I despaired of ever being able to paint a word picture which could convey the beauty and charm of the scene. It was a palace of enchantment. I forgot the world—it seemed a vague, far-off dream. In fancy I saw Neptune sitting on his great throne, filling the sea halls with his voice of power, and high above somewhere the plaintive witchery of Loreli's voice singing to "the bold merry merman, who had wooed her and won her, in the purple twilights under the sea."

A sudden gleam of white recalled my wandering fancy. Another white object flashed into view, and I sat spell-bound, watching the struggle for supremacy between two large pelagic monsters. I wondered at the finesse displayed by those silent, determined combatants, that meant victory for only one and death to the other. The end was not long delayed—a few minutes, perhaps, though it seemed much longer, before one received a vicious thrust that turned him on his side. The champion suddenly discovered my presence and evidently resented it, for he swam around and round me curiously; at last he no doubt reached the conclusion that he had never encountered such a queer-looking water animal before, and that discretion was the better part of valor. He suddenly disappeared as swiftly and silently as he had come.

I breathed freely once more, and arose to continue my explorations, but I had gone only a few paces when a great, gleaming object passed just over my head, almost touching my helmet; then he began circling round and round above me, and settled lower and lower, until his great, glistening eyes were on a level with my own I was thoroughly frightened. I cried out, but my voice rang back from the massive copper helmet with hollow mockery. My hand intuitively sought the life line and signalled "Pull up, quickly," and then the "purple twilights" deepened into gloom. I was growing faint. By a

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supreme effort I recovered myself and signalled again and again. Would they never respond? Had something happened to the line that they were unable to get the signal?

I unsheathed the long knife I carried in my hand and waited. To my intense relief, at that moment I was lifted off my feet and drawn slowly upward. The monster, however, darted above me and began swimming in circles again, each time coming nearer. Fear lent me strength, and as he passed just above my head I raised both arms with a quick motion and held the long bladed knife against the thing, while he passed nearly his whole length over it, leaving a dull, red stream behind.

Still holding the knife, I was pulled abroad the Rowena, when I was at once the center of an eager, curious crowd. In answer to a question from Capt. Whielaw, I replied in a wobbly little voice:

"Well, I'm here to tell the tale, but you came precious near to having to get out a search warrant to find me" and pointing to the knife he had picked up from the deck and was regarding with a curious expression I told them of my adventure and begged the captain to give the knife to me as a souvenir of my first last

and only experience in diving, for I promised myself it should be my last, which he readily granted after cutting his name and date upon the handle. Bessie Bayne-Avant.

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