

My Diving-Dress.

BY ONE WHO HAS DONE WITH IT.



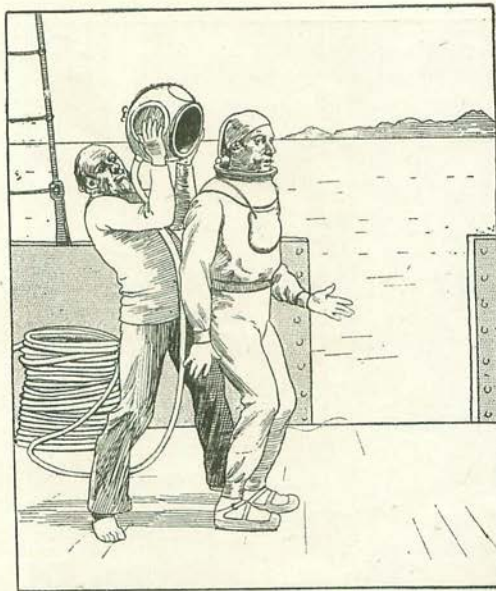
LARGE part of my life has been spent in seeking and experiencing novel sensations. Precisely what quality of mind it is that urges me to try experiments with myself and other things I do not know positively; but I firmly believe it to be dauntless intrepidity. My fond mother, in early days, used to call it a noble thirst for information, and predicted for me a life of scientific eminence; other people have been so ill-natured as to call it abject imbecility, and to predict an early grave from a broken neck or a dynamite explosion, or something equally sensational and decided. Never mind what it is. In boyhood's days it led me once up the chimney, once on a river in a wash-tub, once down a gravel-pit with a broken head, and frequently across my father's knee, with a pain in another place. Since I have arrived at years of discretion (or greater indiscretion—just as you please), it has taken me up in a balloon, out to sea in a torpedo-boat, up the Matterhorn (with no guide but a very general map of Europe, having the height of the mountain marked on it in very plain figures), along Cheapside on a bicycle at mid-day, to a football match in the capacity of referee, and lastly, and most recently, down under water in a diving-dress. Many of these experiences were sharp enough while they lasted, and the diving was as disturbing as most; but, still, I believe nothing was quite so uncomfortable as the football refereeship.

But, just now, I am concerned only with the diving. I

have been now and again to Whitstable, where, I believe by some remarkable process of Nature, every third male person is born a diver. Anyway, Whitstable is the place where divers mostly grow, and where I caught the temptation to go a-diving myself. I should feel grateful to any obliging Anarchist who would blow up Whitstable to-morrow.

I mentioned my desire to one or two old divers who had permitted me to make their acquaintance in consideration of a suitable succession of drinks, but met with jeers and suspicion. I believe they were afraid of opposition in the business. But Whitstable never produced a diver that could put me off. I took the royal road. I bought a diving-dress for myself—how much I paid I shall not say here, for why should an unsympathetic world measure my lunacy by pounds, shillings, and pence?—especially as that would make rather a long measurement of it. Never mind what I paid. I got the dress, and I also got permission to go down and amuse myself on a sunken coasting vessel lying off Shoeburyness.

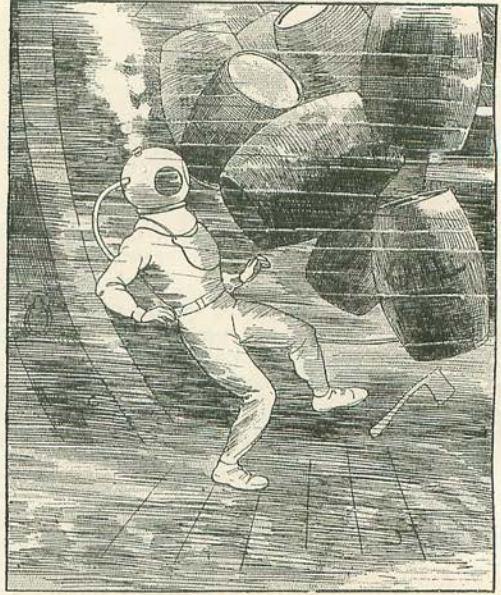
It was a very noble diving-suit, and the new india-rubber squeaked musically as I moved, and smelt very refreshing. There was a shield-shaped plate, rather like a label on a decanter, hanging on my chest, that would have looked more complete with "Whisky," or some similar inscription, on it. There was a noble metal collar—about thirty-two, the size would have been, on the usual scale. I had also a very fetching red night-cap,



"MY DIVING-DRESS."

while my helmet was a terror to all beholders. I don't mind confessing to a certain amount of discomfort while they were building me up in this dress—partly due to a vivid imagination. The helmet made me think of the people in the story who put hot-pots on the heads of strangers, and I seemed stifling at once. What if I were unpacked at last from this smelly integument—a corpse? But this was unmanly and undiverlike. There wasn't much comfort to be got out of the leaden shoes—try a pair for yourself and see—but when all was ready I made a shift to get overboard and down the ladder provided. It was not a great deal of the outer world that I could see through my windows, and I hung on to that ladder with something of a desperate clutch. When at last the water stretched away level around my windows, then, I confess, I hesitated for a moment. But I made the next step with a certain involuntary blink, and I was under water. All the heaviness—or most of it—had gone out of my feet, and all my movements partook of a curiously easy yet slowish character. It looked rather dark below me, and I tried to remember the specific gravity of the human body in figures by way of keeping jolly. At the top of my helmet the air-escape-valve bubbled genially, and I tried to think of myself as rather a fine figure of a monster among the fish, with a plume of bubbles waving over my head. You do think of trivial things on certain cheerful occasions. Remember Fagin in the dock, for instance.

It was not as long as it seemed before I was on the wreck, and down below in the nearest hold. Regular professionals had already been at work, and access to different parts of the ship had been made easy. Now, in this big hold was an immense number of barrels, stood on end and packed tightly together—barrels of oil, to judge from externals. I tried to move one, but plainly they were all jammed

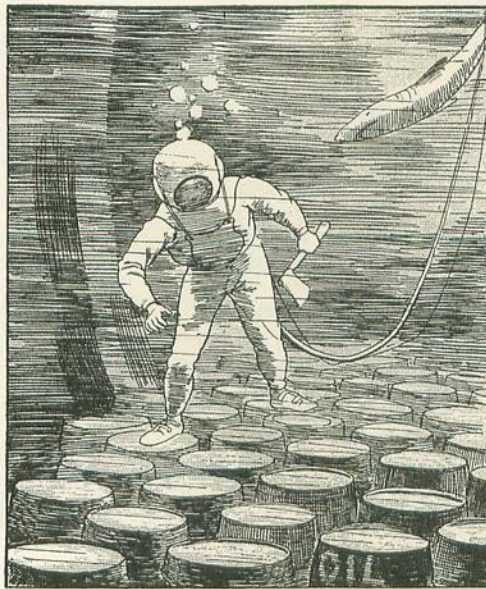


"I WAS ENGULFED IN AN AWFUL CONVULSION."

tightly together, and not one would shift. I took the light axe with which I had furnished myself, using it alternately as wedge and lever, and at last felt the barrel move. I had certainly loosened it, and pulled up the axe with the intention of trying to lift the barrel, when I was suddenly engulfed in an awful convulsion as of many earthquakes in a free fight. The world was

a mob of bouncing oil-barrels, which hit me everywhere as I floundered in intricate somersaults, and finally found myself staggering at the bottom of the hold, and staring at the roof, whereunto all the barrels were sticking like balloons, absolutely blocking up the hatchway above me.

What was this? Some demoniac practical joke of fiends inhabiting this awful green sea about me? Were they grinning at me from corners of the hold? or had some vast revolution in the ways



"IN THE HOLD WERE AN IMMENSE NUMBER OF BARRELS."

of Nature taken place in a second, and the law of gravity been reversed? It was not at all warm down there, but I perspired violently. Then a notion flashed upon me. Those barrels must have been empty. Jammed together, they stayed below, of course, but once the jam was loosened they would fly at once towards the surface. Then I thought more. I had been an ass. Of course, those barrels would do as they had done, even were they full of oil. Oil floats on water, as anybody should know. They might be either full or empty, it didn't matter a bit. I had forgotten that I was moving in a different element from the air I was used to, where barrels of oil did *not* incontinently fly up into space without warning. Obviously, I had made a fool of myself, but I had some comfort in the reflection that there was nobody about to see it. Then it came upon me suddenly that I would rather have someone there after all, for I was helpless! Those horrible barrels were having another jam in the hatchway now, and my retreat was cut off entirely. Here I was like a rat in a cage, boxed in on every side. My communication-cord and my air-pipe led up between the barrels, to outer safety; but what of that? I perspired again. What would happen to me now? Why did I ever make a submarine Guy Fawkes of myself, and thus go fooling about, where I had no business, at the end of a flexible gas-pipe? If I could have dated myself back an hour at that moment, I believe I should have changed my mind about going in for this amusement. At this, I began thinking about trivial things again—how, paraphrasing a certain definition of angling, diving might be described as matter of a pipe with a pump at one end and something rather worse than a fool at the other. I determined, if ever I got out alive, to fire off that epigram at the earliest possible moment—so here it is.

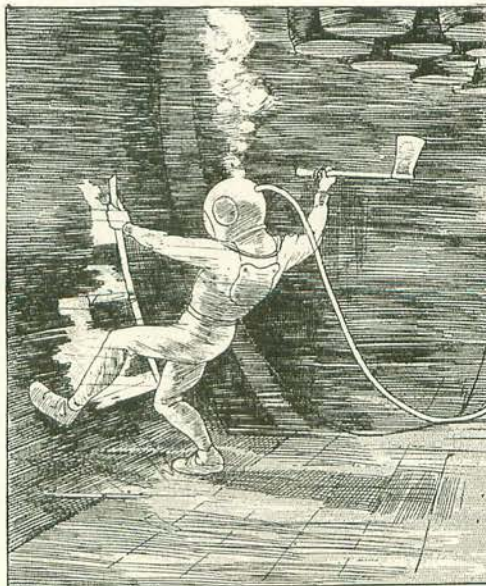
I made an effort, pulled myself to-

gether, and determined on heroic measures. My axe lay near, and, with a little groping, I found it. I would hew my way out of this difficulty through the side of the vessel. I turned on the inoffensive timbers at my side and hacked away viciously—with, I really fancy, a certain touch of that wild, stern, unholy joy that anyone feels who is smashing somebody else's property with no prospect of having to pay for it. Every boy with a catapult, who lives near an empty house, will understand the feeling I mean—especially if the empty house has a large conservatory.

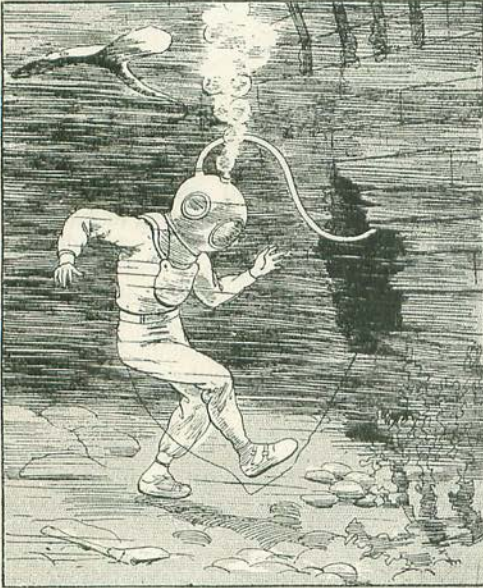
The timbers were certainly stout. The work was a bit curious to the senses—the axe feeling to work with a deal more dash and go than the arm that directed it. At any rate, the exercise was pretty hard. Any millionaire in want of an excellent, healthy, and expensive exercise should try chopping his way through the sides of ships—it will do him a world of good, and will be as expensive as anybody could possibly desire. After a while I found I had well started a plank, and, once through, chopping away round the hole was not so difficult. Still, when I had a hole big enough to get through, I did not feel by any means as fresh as I had done when first that horrible copper pot was screwed down over my head.

I squeezed through the hole, and at the first step I had ever made on the real seabottom, I fell a savage and complicated cropper over my communication-cord. I got up, but, as I stepped clear of the cord, a

frightful conviction seized my mind that I was a bigger fool than I had ever given myself credit for being. What in the world was the good of getting out through the side of the vessel when that communication-cord—my only means of signalling—and that air-pipe—my only means of submarine life—led up through the boat itself and among those execrated oil-barrels? Awful! Awful! I sat down helplessly on a broken rock and stared blankly through my windows. To weep



"I HACKED AWAY VICIOUSLY."



"AWFUL!"

would have been mere bravado, with so much salt water already about me. I tried to signal with the communication-cord, but it was caught somewhere in that congregation of oil-barrels. It seemed to be all up, except myself, who was all down, with no prospect of ever rising in the world again. Shadowy forms came and went in the water about me, and I speculated desperately in how long or how short a time these sea-creatures would be having a dinner-party, with *me* as the chief attraction. I wondered, casually, whether the india-rubber would agree with them, and hoped that it would not. Then I wondered what they would take for the indigestion, and I thought they would probably take each other—it's their way, I believe. I was wandering on in this way, and had just feebly recollected that there was four pounds eight and something in my pockets above, which was a pity, because I might have spent it first, and that I owed my landlady fifteen-and-six, which was a good job, because it would compensate for that claret she said the cat drank, when an inspiration seized me—a great inspiration. I should probably have called out "Eureka!" as did the venerable discoverer of that principle of specific gravity that had lately (literally) taken a rise out of me, if I had thought of it, but I didn't, which was fortunate, because it is rather a chestnut after all.

This was my notion—a desperate one, but

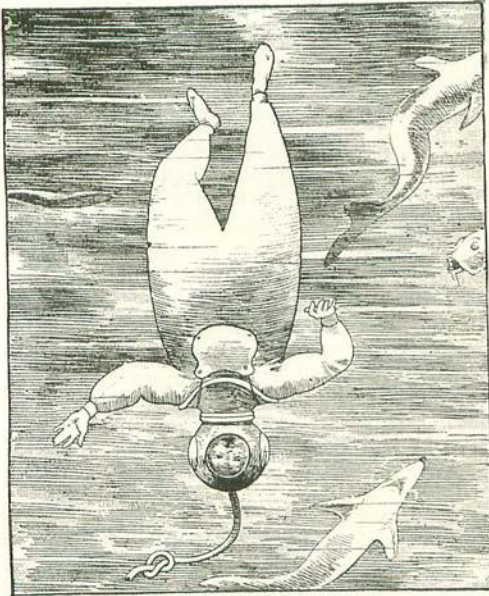
still one with hope in it. I would shut off the air-escape valve on my helmet, so that the air being pumped in would inflate my india-rubber dress like a bladder. Then I would cut my air-pipe and communication cord, stuffing the pipe and tying it as best I might, take off my leaden shoes and rise to the surface triumphantly, like an air-cushion, or, say, an oil barrel. Specific gravity having taken a rise—all the rise—out of me, I would proceed to take a rise out of specific gravity; a great, glorious, and effective rise to the upper world. No office-boy on promotion ever looked forward to his rise with more hope than I to mine. It was a desperate expedient certainly, but what else to do?

I took off one leaden shoe and loosened the other, ready to kick away. I shut the escape-valve. I cut the cord with my axe on the rock I had been sitting on, and then, when the air had blown out my dress to most corpulent proportions, I took the decisive stroke. I chopped through the air-pipe. I stuffed it as well as possible and tied it in some sort of a knot—it was *very* stiff—in a great hurry, and then—I kicked off the leaden shoe.



"I TOOK OFF ONE LEADEN SHOE."

Never, never, never—even if I live on Jupiter after this planet is blown to shivers—shall I forget the result of my forlorn-hope dodge. I kicked off the shoe, as I have said, and, in an instant, the whole universe of waters turned upside down and swirled away beyond my head. In sober fact, *I* had turned upside down—as I might have known



" I HAD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN."

I should do, if only I hadn't been a bigger fool than ever.

Of course, the moment my leaden shoes went, *down* came my copper head-pot, being my heaviest part, and up went my feet. I had a pretty quick rise, certainly, but I prefer not to recall my feelings during the rush. I can quite understand now why a rise in the world makes some people giddy. All that I had before

felt of amazement and horror, I now felt multiplied by fifty and squeezed into about two seconds, so that they felt like ten hours. Up through that awful water and those moving shadows I went, feeling that I was in reality held still, like a man in a nightmare. When at last I stopped, I felt that it was but a matter of moments, and the air would leak away through that cut tube, and I should go down again, still head under, for the last time, to die in that grisly combination of mackintosh and copper kettle; also I felt choking, stifling, when—something had me roughly by the ankle, and I was dragged, a wretched rag of misplaced ambition, into a boat. The appearance of my legs sticking out above water had, it seemed, caused intense amusement among the boat's crew—a circumstance which probably ought to have gratified me, although it didn't.

I have little more to add, except that I shudder, to this day, whenever I see an acrobat standing on his head, because it is so graphically remindful. But, if anybody is thinking of going in for diving by way of placid enjoyment, I shall be delighted to treat with him for the sale and purchase of a most desirable diving-dress in unsoiled condition, cut in the most fashionable style, with a fascinating copper helmet and commodious collar, and a neat label for the chest. The shoes will not be included in the bargain, having been inadvertently left in a damp place.

