

IN THE ABYSS

By H. G. Wells



IT WAS a strange, vertebrated animal. Its dark purple head was dimly suggestive of a chameleon, but it had such a high forehead and such a brain-case as no reptile ever displayed before; the vertical pitch of its face gave it a most extraordinary resemblance to a human being.

Two large and protruding eyes, projected from sockets in chameleon fashion, and it had a broad reptilian mouth, with horny lips beneath its little nostrils. In the position of the ears were two huge gill covers, and out of these floated a branching tree of coralline filaments, almost like the treelike gills that very young rays and sharks possess.

But the humanity of the face was not the most extraordinary thing about the creature. It was a biped, its almost globular body was poised on a tripod of two froglike legs and a long, thick tail, and its fore limbs, which grotesquely caricatured the human hand, much as a frog's do, carried a long shaft of bone, tipped with copper. The color of the creature was variegated; its head, hands, and legs were purple; but its skin, which hung loosely upon it, even as clothes might do, was a phosphorescent gray. And it stood there, blinded by the light.

At last the unknown creature of the abyss blinked its eyes open, and, shading them with its disengaged hand, opened its mouth and gave vent to a shouting noise, articulate almost as speech might be, that penetrated even the steel case and padded jacket of the sphere. How a shouting may be accomplished without lungs Elstead does not profess to explain. It then moved sideways out of the glare into the mystery of shadow that bordered it on either side, and Elstead felt rather than saw that it was coming toward him. Fancying the light had attracted it, he turned the switch that cut off the current. In another moment something soft dabbed upon the steel, and the globe swayed.

Then the shouting was repeated, and it seemed to him that a distant echo answered it. The dabbing recurred, and the globe swayed and ground against the spindle over which the wire was rolled.

Presently he saw very faint and remote, other phosphorescent quasi-human forms hurrying toward him.

Hardly knowing what he did, he felt about in his swaying prison for the stud of the exterior electric light, and came by accident against his own small glow lamp in its padded recess. The sphere twisted, and then threw him down; he heard shouts like shouts of surprise, and when he rose to his feet he saw two pairs of stalked eyes peering into the lower window and reflecting his light.

In another moment hands were dabbing vigorously at his steel casing, and there was a sound, horrible enough in his position, of the metal protection of the clockwork being vigorously hammered. That, indeed, sent his heart into his mouth, for if these strange creatures succeeded in stopping that, his release would never occur. Scarcely had he thought as much when he felt the sphere sway violently, and the floor of it press hard against his feet. He turned off the small glow lamp that lit the interior, and sent the ray of the large light in the separate compartment out into the water. The sea floor and the manlike creatures had disappeared, and a couple of fish chasing each other dropped suddenly by the window.

He thought at once that these strange denizens of the deep sea had broken the wire rope, and that he had escaped. He drove up faster and faster, and then stopped with a jerk that sent him flying against the padded roof of his prison.

For half a minute perhaps he was too astonished to think.

Then he felt that the sphere was spinning slowly, and rocking, and it seemed to him that it was also being drawn through the water. It occurred to him that he would see more if he turned the lamp off and allowed his eyes to grow accustomed to the profound obscurity.

In this he was wise. After some minutes the velvety blackness became a translucent blackness, and then far away, and as faint as the zodiacal light of an English summer evening, he saw shapes moving below. He judged these creatures had detached his cable and were towing him along the sea bottom.

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And then he saw something faint and remote across the undulations of the submarine plain, a broad horizon of pale luminosity that extended this way and that way as far as the range of his little window permitted him to see. To this he was being towed, as a balloon might be towed by men out of the open country into a town. He approached it very slowly, and very slowly the dim irradiation was gathered together into more definite shapes.

It was nearly 5 o'clock before he came over this luminous area, and by that time he could make out an arrangement suggestive of streets and houses grouped about a vast roofless erection that was grotesquely suggestive of a ruined abbey. It was spread out like a map below him. The houses were all roofless inclosures of walls, and their substance being, as he afterward saw, of phosphorescent bones, gave the place an appearance as if it were built of drowned moonshine.

Among the inner caves of the place waving trees of crinoid stretched their tentacles, and tall, slender, glassy sponges shot like shining minarets and lilies of filmy light out of the general glow of the city. In the open spaces of the place he could see a stirring movement as of crowds of people.

Then slowly they pulled him down, and as they did so the details of the place crept slowly upon his apprehension. His

saw that the courses of the cloudy buildings were marked out with beaded lines of round objects, and then he perceived that at several points below him in broad open spaces were forms like the incrustated shapes of ships.

Slowly and surely he was drawn down, and the forms below him became brighter, clearer, were more distinct. He was being pulled down, he perceived, toward the large building in the center of the town, and he could catch a glimpse ever and again of the multitudinous forms that were lugging at his cord. Then the walls of the great building rose about him.

And such walls they were, of water-logged wood, and twisted wire rope and iron spars, and copper, and the bones and skulls of dead men.

The skulls ran in curious zigzag lines and spirals and fantastic curves over the building; and in and out of their eye-sockets, and over the whole surface of the place, lurked and played a multitude of silvery little fishes.

And now he was at such a level that he could see these strange people of the abyss plainly once more. To his astonishment, he perceived that they were prostrating themselves before him, all save one, dressed as it seemed in a robe of placid scales, and covered with a luminous diadem, who stood with his reptilian mouth opening and shutting as though he led the chanting of the worshippers.

They continued worshipping him, without rest or intermission, for the space of three hours.

Most circumstantial was Elstead's account of this astounding city and its people, these people of perpetual night, who have never seen sun or moon or stars, green vegetation, nor any living air-breathing creatures, who know nothing of fire, nor any light but the phosphorescent light of living things.

Startling as is his story, it is yet more startling to find that scientific men, of such eminence as Adams and Jenkins, find nothing incredible in it. They tell me they see no reason why intelligent, water-breathing, vertebrate creatures, inured to a low temperature and enormous pres-

sure, and of such a heavy structure that neither alive nor dead would they float, might not live upon the bottom of the deep sea, and quite unsuspected by us, descendants like ourselves of the great Theriomorpha of the new red sandstone age.

We should be known to them, however, as strange meteoric creatures' wont to fall catastrophically dead out of the mysterious blackness of their watery sky. And not only we ourselves, but our ships, our metals, our appliances, would come raining down out of the night. Sometimes sinking things would smite down and crush them, as if it were the judgment of some unseen power above; and sometimes would come things of the utmost rarity or utility or shapes of inspiring suggestion. One can understand, perhaps, something of their behavior at the descent of a living man, if one thinks what a barbaric people might do, to whom an ensouled shining creature came suddenly out of the sky.

At one time or another Elstead probably told the officers of the Ptarmigan every detail of his strange twelve hours in the abyss. That he also intended to write them down is certain, but he never did; and so unhappily we have to piece together the discrepant fragments of his story from the reminiscences of Commander Simmons, Weybridge, Stevens, Lindley and the others.

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We see the thing darkly in fragmentary glimpses—the huge ghostly building, the howling, chanting people, with their dark, chameleonlike heads and faintly luminous forms, and Elstead, with his light turned on again, vainly trying to convey to their minds that the cord by which the sphere was held was to be severed. Minute after minute slipped away, and Elstead, looking at his watch, was horrified to find that he had oxygen only for four hours more. But the chant in his honor kept on as remorselessly as if it was the marching song of his approaching death.

The manner of his release he does not understand, but to judge by the end of cord that hung from the sphere, it had been cut through by rubbing against the edge of the altar. Abruptly the sphere rolled over, and he swept up, out of their world, as an ethereal creature clothed in a vacuum would sweep through our own atmosphere back to its native ether again. He must have torn out of their sight as a hydrogen bubble hastens upward from our air. A strange ascension it must have seemed to them.

The sphere rushed up with even greater velocity than, when weighed with the lead sinkers, it had rushed down. It became exceedingly hot. It drove up with the windows uppermost, and he remembers the torrent of bubbles frothing against the glass. Every moment he expected this to fly. Then suddenly something like a huge wheel seemed to be released in his head, the padded compartment began spinning about him, and he fainted. His next recollection was of his cabin, and of the doctor's voice.

But that is the substance of the extraordinary story that Elstead related in fragments to the officers of the Ptarmigan. He promised to write it all down at a later date. His mind was chiefly occupied with the improvement of his apparatus, which was effected at Rio.

It remains only to tell that on Feb. 2, 1894, he made his second descent into the ocean abyss, with the improvements his first experience suggested. What happened we shall probably never know. He never returned. The Ptarmigan beat about over the point of his submersion, seeking him in vain for thirteen days. Then she returned to Rio, and the news was telegraphed to his friends. So the matter remains for the present. But it is hardly probable that any further attempt will be made to verify his strange story of these hitherto unsuspected cliffs of the deep sea.

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The Girl Spy

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the soap with which I had rubbed them, though scarcely perceptible to sight, having retained the marks in a manner not to be mistaken. I was staggered. Some one had touched them, but how and when?

Again and again, with the keenest anxiety, I examined these faint traces—faint indeed, almost shadowy—but still unmistakable evidences that my footsteps were dogged, that a spy was tracking me.

From every point of view I looked at those marks. Could they have been made by my own hand? No, the impressions left on those covers had been made by a different and larger hand than mine. The large and powerful fingers had been those of a man. To convince myself of this fact I held the fourth book in the same position. The difference was unmistakable.

It was puzzling, but I would not now harass my mind by trying to solve how these books had been got at. It sufficed to have ascertained the fact that they had been touched.

No doubt could remain in my mind that I was watched.

To seek to escape from such surveillance would be, I was convinced, hopeless. The greatest safety would be in daring the danger. From one other peril, however, that I foresaw, I would be guarded against.

Once more, therefore, I sought an interview with the powerful official who had already received me.

"Can you procure for me," I said succinctly, "powerful antidotes against poi-

sons, and also provide me with safe yet speedy soporifics, in case I should need them?"

"I understand," he answered with equal brevity. "Be so kind as to wait or to return here in one hour, and all you require will be ready for you. Excuse my troubling you, but into no hand but your own can they be intrusted."

I returned at the expiration of the hour and found with the official Dr. R—, a man whose peculiar talent as an analytical chemist is of world-wide celebrity. In his hand was a small case, containing various packets of powders and tiny bottles of drugs.

The directions he gave me were minute. I listened with earnest attention, being well aware that my own safety, perhaps also the lives of others, depended upon the care with which I obeyed them.

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"I must impress upon you," said the famous chemist in conclusion, "the necessity of extreme caution. There is nothing absolutely inimical to life in the drugs with which I provide you, but the reckless and incautious use of them would be attended with serious, even dangerous, results. So powerful indeed are they that but for the very exceptional circumstances with which my friend here has made me acquainted would I have intrusted them to any but a member of my own profession."

I murmured a few words of acknowledgment, took the precious packet and withdrew.

(To be continued next week)