

Fighting Death

Under the Sea

Only a Quick Turn of Fate Saved the Life of Girl When She Was Attacked by a Fierce Barracuda

By WILLIAM HORNE

*For I saw that funny goblin flying in the abyss untrod,
And I knew there could be laughter on the hidden face of God—*

THUS G. K. Chesterton rhymes about a fish he had seen at sea by night. And there are creatures much queerer than anything imaginable in our land-world. Creatures so bizarre and so unbelievably grotesque that they seem like cosmic jokes tossed off in some idle moment of creation by a deity that knows how to chuckle grimly.

In all his wild moments of fantastic thought Jules Verne could never have imagined the odd and strange beings that have been brought to light from the ocean's depths since his creation of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," that immortal narrative that has entertained us through the years.

Now and then there comes to us the strange, doubtful story of some monstrosity coming to the surface of one of the seven seas in a remote corner of the globe. Superstitious sailors have been known to refuse to go to sea because of the untimely appearance of some grotesque sea-dweller.

Death Lurks in Quiet Depths

IN the South Seas, where sinister dorsal fins of man-eating sharks cut the mirror-like surfaces of quiet lagoons, there lurks death in the blue depths beneath. Giant octopuses, gigantic sea snakes, the mighty conger eel, that will snap off a man's wrist at a single bite, and other formidable creatures that guard their domain so jealously against the encroachment of man.

But not only in the phosphorescent waters of the South Seas do these guardians of the deep haunt tropic waters. As near as the Florida Keys we find many species of undersea creatures just as ferocious as any octopus or conger eel or South Sea shark. And, indeed, more dangerous to man than either of them—the barracuda.

Of all inhabitants of North America's tropical waters this fellow is the worst. He is, we might say, the pike of warm salt waters. But nasty tempered. Deadly.

Since he sometimes reaches the unbelievable length of 8½ feet, we can readily imagine the havoc he would cause should he suddenly choose to run amuck among the hundreds of bathers at a crowded resort.

Florida Species the Worst

STRANGE, but the barracuda of the Pacific Coast is not nearly so voracious or so pugnacious as the Florida species. Nor does he grow so large.

The latter is indeed a fearful antagonist when encountered, and more than



one instance has been recorded when fishermen, bathers and divers have lost their lives to these bloodthirsty killers.

During the past several months among the Florida Keys and on up the coast past Miami it has become quite a fad to study marine life with the aid of portable, compact diving apparatus.

Scientists and students of marine life have organized special classes for the purpose. Students are enrolled and furnished the necessary diving equipment and taught how to use them. They are taken just off the shore on launches and let down beneath the surface of the crystal-clear waters, several fathoms deep, where they carefully study plant and animal life existing on the ocean's floor.

Professor Charles Farris has such a school at Miami. He is equipped with a dozen or more lightweight diving apparatuses and a sixteen-foot launch. Fifteen coeds are enrolled on his books for a course of six months. This course consists of two submersions weekly for each student, the classes divided seven in one and eight in the other.

Six Fathoms Down

So far there have been none to suffer as victims of accidents excepting a student by the name of Myrlin Defore, whose home is in Cincinnati. Miss Defore, who was spending some months in Miami with an aunt, enrolled in the marine school for a course in undersea study.

"It was a lark," she declared, "as well as educational. That is, it was a lark until that day the barracuda attacked me." And here's how it happened.

It was 10 o'clock in the morning. The class was visiting just off Key West to study some new plant life that had been discovered there. Not a cloud marred Florida's sky, and the rays of the morning's sun shone perfectly through the crystal-clear waters. An ideal day for underwater observations.

The surface was glassy. Like a lagoon against Africa's low shore line. No ripple broke the placid waters. Only the gentle swells; the soft lap of the wash against the launch's sides.

Miss Defore was a few minutes late

As she stumbled into a hole, her spear was thrust upward into the mouth of the barracuda, and he immediately made off with the weapon imbedded in his mouth

getting into her diving gear. Professor Farris had already gone overboard with his brood of seven young women to the classroom on the ocean's floor six fathoms beneath the launch when the tardy student donned her equipment and stepped boldly down the rope ladder that dangled in the water from the low rail.

Her equipment merely consisted of a one-piece bathing suit, a pair of leaded-sole tennis slippers, a lightweight diving helmet, a sheathed knife fastened onto a light web belt and a pointed bamboo spear five feet long.

"Once a beautiful sea snake wriggled slowly toward me. Curiosity, I suppose. I drew back in alarm, for I've never liked snakes of any kind, out of water or in the water. For a full minute I crouched unmoving, waiting for it to go on about its business. Finally it seemed quite satisfied, turned and moved leisurely away. I sighed with relief as I watched it go.

"It was just as I now turned and started to resume my way toward Professor Farris that I first had a warning of the nearness of danger. A dark, streaking shadow flashed near me. I could feel the tug of water against me by the movement of something. I turned to look behind me, and I think I screamed at what I saw.

"It was a six-foot barracuda, and when I first saw it the thing was just passing me like a long, black, swiftly moving shadow. Now, Professor Farris had already explained to us about this murderer. I knew that it was just about the nastiest tempered, meanest thing that lived down there. Somebody had caught one once for us to study. Oh, I recognized it all right. And I knew that it would, according to what had been taught me about it, soon be back to attack me.

"I was terror-stricken, trying to move fast and couldn't. Like a hideous dream, trying to run from a goblin with a pair of anvils for shoes that dragged my feet back. That's the way water holds you back under the surface, even at a shallow distance down, and I was at six fathoms, which is thirty-six feet, remember.

"I never did fully regain my feet after I stumbled in the hole before the barracuda attacked me again. I was half leaning on my spear, point upward, when I chanced to glance back and up through my helmet port. And what I saw just took my breath. I'll never forget it.

"Two rows of sharp, jagged teeth in an open mouth ten inches across, and coming right toward me. I don't remember raising my spear. All I do remember clearly is that within a moment after I saw the thing coming, it was there almost at my face. I felt the spear shaft jerked from my hands, and again I stumbled into the hole from which I hadn't fully escaped.

A Lucky Jab

"I fell back slowly, like a man in a slow-motion movie, and that barracuda was as swift as lightning compared to my movements. Before I felt the stubble of growth at my back as I sank down on bottom, the thing was making off in the other direction, turning over and over, and the shaft of my spear was sticking out from its mouth. In some manner I must have raised my spear unconsciously as it attacked, and I guess the open mouth was so big I couldn't miss it with the spear point. It had dived right onto the point and rammed it down its throat. That was a lucky jab for me.

"As far as I could see it writhed in agony, the bamboo shaft sticking from its mouth. And blood streaked behind it and clouded the water.

"Next thing I knew Professor Farris was leaning over me and helping me to my feet. He signaled with the line to haul us up and motioned to the rest of the girls to follow. Classes were through for the day. And for every other day, so far as I'm concerned. I'll get mine from books, hereafter."