

“The diving helmet, a most enormous lark”



Image: The *Arcturus* Expedition

William Beebe was keen on close observation of nature, an approach he began with the study of birds, and intensified in the jungles of British Guiana, where he'd map out a small patch of jungle so as to examine and catalog everything he found in it. He had the habit of laying on his stomach on the ground or on a rock to see the tiny details of plant, animal, and insect life most people wouldn't notice or care to understand. Scuba hadn't been invented, and other than glass-bottomed boats, and crude scopes for peering just below the surface, the diving helmet was the best way to bring that kind of observation under the water.

He commissioned several helmets for the 1925 *Arcturus* Expedition. Beebe wrote at length about his dives. But here we focus on the perspective of expedition artist Isabel Cooper, for her unique artist's perspective, so below is mainly her reporting.

Isabel Cooper, expedition scientific artist, described for Charles Mahaffie the singular experience of going down in the diving helmet:

"I should like to hear what you would have to say about my latest amusement, I have been down in the diving helmet, a most enormous lark to my way of thinking, though I was pretty scared the first time. It is a nasty feeling, having the heavy contraption put over your head and weighted all around with about 60 lb. of lead. Then you begin to sink, while a trusty friend on the bank above pumps air and the water level rises slowly on the glass facade of the thing. You get an unpleasant thickish feeling in your ears, as if you were going through a bad tunnel. Also, the air keeps bubbling out around your shoulders. You can't have the thing sealed on, because the most important detail is ducking quickly out when you see a shark and swimming to the surface. Sounds bright, doesn't it. There doesn't seem to be much of anything to prevent the sharks from coming around, except that they haven't yet, and a good safe precedent is being built up.

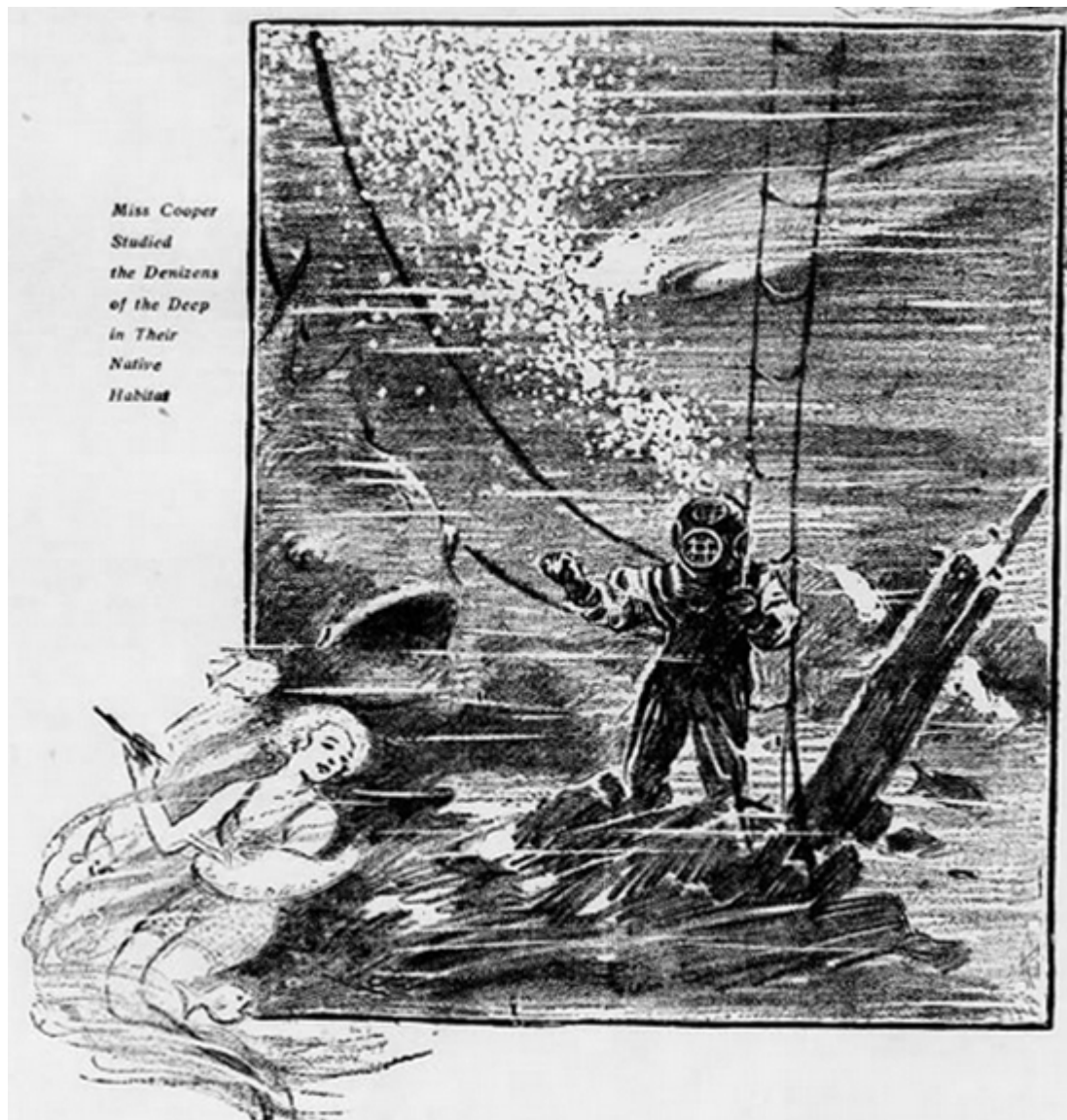
"You feel as foolish as anything under water. After you've been down a bit your feet become very light, and you can't keep them down. They simply waft about in an aimless way, as do the arms of Greek dancers. Also, everything gets distorted. Rock ten feet away looks as if you could touch it. You make a lunge toward it and find yourself flapping around like a jellyfish with an extremely swelled head.

"I went down first in a beautiful deep rock pool. Very outlandish. It gave me the creeps. Dorothy [Putnam] pumped the air for me. Everything looked spooky. Green and marvelously clear, with droves of fish sliding past. The silence is the most uncanny part. Also [the] fact that you can't realize wetness. Funny-when your face is dry and you are out of touch with air you don't seem to be able to feel water. Perhaps this is because the warm tropical water is just body temperature. But it seems merely like some strange dull flowing element, with broken light rays all through it, and a sort of molten silver mirror for its upper surface.

"Second time I went down they were trying to get moving pictures and kept poking me to signal about my next footstep etc. Also they got an idea that if they eased up on the pump there would be fewer distorting bubbles, whereupon the water in the helmet rose over my nose. Rather disturbing for a bit. Made me glad I had the end of the lifeline handy.

"...Dorothy went down. Don't think she liked the idea at all, but of course she was a sport, as usual, and did it anyway. The pumping is a real job. You begin to realize just what concentration is. If you get absent-minded for a few

seconds, the diver chokes.¹



Fanciful view of Isabel in a diving suit, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 18, 1925

And in a newspaper profile, Isabel wrote:

“I wonder what a fish would think of us, if he could think, and could be fitted out with an invention that would keep his own beloved element flowing comfortably through his gills, and could manage somehow to flop about among our trees and meadows and hills. I wonder whether he would consider our natural backgrounds artistic, if slightly antique, and our expressions unnecessarily cheerful, and our motions unaccountably jerky and sudden, considering how much less pressure we have to contend with in the space about us. He would probably be most interested in the racket we make. A fish is one of the few creatures in the world who do not feel obliged to express themselves with any kind of

noise.ⁱⁱ”

William Beebe too reflected, at length, on the fresh, humbling perspective he got using the helmet several times: “If I were asked to prescribe for the worst case of sophisticated world weariness imaginable, I would without hesitation write ‘One diving helmet.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Letter, IC to CDM, April 18, 1925.

ⁱⁱ Isabel Cooper, “Artist at Large,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1926, p. 93.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Love, or Life of Adventure?,” *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*,” February 21, 1926.