

AN IRISHMAN IN COLD WATER

Artist Who Draws In A Diving-Helmet

THE beard you see here and on our cover belongs to

Robert Gibbings, author, artist, publisher, traveler—and, you think the first time you see him, physical giant. After you have been talking to him for a little the impression of size wears off, but if you ask him about it, he will confess to six feet and nineteen stone ("and lately a little more").

And what does he talk about? Birds; fishes; water-bugs; the colour of the sea; nature's tricks in camouflage. For this mountain of a man has spent hours on the bed of the ocean watching, and actually drawing, blue angels and their coral homes. Twenty years ago he established a press for the making of beautiful books, but now prefers to write the books and let someone else make them. He joined the staff of a University because the five-months' vacation appealed to him. But a few years later he found that five months of freedom were not enough. He wanted 12 months, so built a boat and started floating down rivers and writing down his impressions and thoughts.

Then last week—with some assistance from the Department of Internal Affairs—he just walked into our office on his way to Samoa. Of course we gathered round him and began asking questions.



"Five months of freedom were not enough": Robert Gibbings at ease on an English hillside

"TO begin with, how did you draw these?" We pointed to the drawings he did underwater for *Blue Angels and Whales*.

"Oh, I had xylonite sheets, a kind of stuff not unlike celluloid; and I took the lead out of thick sketching pencils and put it in pieces of rubber tubing, because an ordinary pencil would come unstuck of course. That was all. You can draw quite well under water that way."

"About how deep would you be?"

"Twenty-five feet is enough for most people, though William Beebe says 40 feet is possible. I myself found that 25 feet was quite enough, and not to be endured indefinitely."

"It was tiring, then?"

"Yes. But it's a funny thing—I found I worked twice as fast down there. Perhaps it was the excitement, the strangeness of it all, but I seemed to work very much faster altogether. And another thing I found—I drew things in the size of their importance to me, rather than in their actual proportions. I would draw an interesting little fish big, and make a big dull fish small." He showed what he meant in one of the drawings from *Blue Angels and Whales*. A fish that looked quite big and important there was really only a little fellow, a couple of inches or so long.

"They didn't scatter when you appeared?"

They Bite

"No, fish are not afraid of you if you are under the water. They're suspicious of a shadow on the surface, and if you were in a boat, they'd disappear. But when I went below in my helmet and started work I soon had to brush them away from my window—they'd come around to give me a look over! They also come along where you can't see, and try to nibble—it feels rather like a

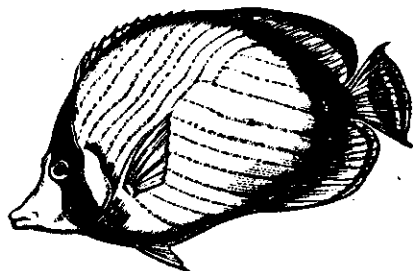
mosquito. It's all right as long as they're at the front, but they get round behind, too!"

"You were not quite at ease down there?"

"No, there's a queer effect under water—things get distorted. You know how it is if you look at an oar in the water. I found it strange. I'd try to catch my rope, and put my hand out, and it wouldn't be there. And when I was moving, I'd go to step over a piece of coral, put my foot out, try again, and find I had quite a few steps to go before I came to it.

"What's it like walking on the bottom?"

"It's rather like being a ping-pong ball! (Lest our readers miss the enjoyment of this remark, we repeat that Mr. Gibbings weighs somewhere round 20 stone). "You see, being overweight, I was overbuoyant. I carried about 60lb. in weights and the helmet weighs about 40lb., but that wasn't enough, so I took extra in the shape of a piece of lead piping, which I simply pinched round my waist over my hips. It had the advantage that in an emergency I could just put my thumbs under it and wedge it off, and then I'd start to rise. It's an extraordinarily eerie feeling—like being a ballet dancer—but very pleasant.



The original drawing for this engraving of a tropical fish was made 25 feet under water

"When they were testing me out with the helmet at first they told me to go into a sandy hole just to see how I got on. I went down and then tried to get up, but I couldn't get any grip on the sides. I got out by using my sheet of xylonite as a fin! Afterwards they told me I needed more weights to hold me on to the bottom."

"How well can you see under water?"

"Just as clearly as in this room, for 25 or 30 feet, then things begin to get blurred. It's as if your world were a sphere, and as you move, it moves with you. Then you get occasional glimpses of a further-away world, when the light comes through.

An Eerie Feeling

"The only trouble is, you never know if there's anything behind. And you can't just turn your head round every now and then to take a look. You have to make a slow turn of the whole body. And then unfortunately, if there was anything there in the first place, it's probably gone round the front by the time you've turned round! So you never really know, and that's an eerie feeling. Because no matter how reassuring the diving experts are to you before you go down, you still have a very vivid imagination.

"Once one of them came down to give me some message that had been forgotten. He simply dived down behind me and I knew nothing until he gripped both my shoulders in his hands! I understand I made a phenomenal jump!

"Another time I began to hear a sound of heavy breathing. It seemed to get louder. I began to imagine walruses, all sorts of things. I was quite frightened. Of course it didn't occur to me that if there was anything actually breathing, I certainly wouldn't hear it. It was my own breathing inside the helmet."

"I believe groper are quite nasty, too. They say a groper will stalk you for a whole day before he takes a bite and goes off with it. And the jaws of a six-foot groper can be enormous."

A Pullover for Warmth!

"Will you be doing this kind of thing when you get to Samoa?" we asked.

"I don't expect they'll have a helmet for me there, but I'll take goggles."

We asked about the temperature under the surface in tropical waters:

"Very cold. In the Red Sea I found there are three distinct levels, and at the third the water was completely chilled. I used to wear a pullover!"

This was not a joke. Mr. Gibbings explained that wearing a pullover was a help in retaining the warmth of the body for as long as possible. If he raised an arm to brush away a fish he would get an icy draught down under his shoulder.

"I got so cold down there that afterwards I sat in the tropical sun and drank whisky, and still it was ages before I felt warm again. It freezes your gizzard. I had to limit myself to a couple of dives in the morning and then give up for the day."

Our own knowledge of the colours of tropical fish was almost wholly derived from copies of the *National Geographic* in dentists' waiting rooms. We asked Mr. Gibbings whether the colours there were true to life.

"Yes, they're pretty good, I think. But the trouble is, the things change colour all the time."

"They change colour if you bring them to the surface, don't they?"

"They change colour any time at all. Quite a number of them develop vertical stripes the moment they come to rest—camouflage effect. I've seen one browsing about in front of me and changing colour as fast as we can blush!"

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