

Part 1 of a Singular and Diverting Interview

Of course, there was no war then. But I've never been a soldier, so I suppose I view these things with a civilian mind. I'm an international, really."

WE finished turning the letters over. The Professor put on his gloves again and arranged his wrist watch over the gauntlet. A misty, distant look came into his eyes. He tapped his fingers on the cover of the letter-case.

"I do wish I could get a position somewhere, a little position of dignity, just three or four pounds a week, I don't need much, so that I could occupy myself with dignity until such time as I can leave New Zealand. I don't like labouring work, you know." He seemed almost to have forgotten my presence. His heart was far away in some grand palace, among noble people, gold and jewels, and fine things.

But, in a moment, he came back. He took out his wallet, and began to show me clippings and papers mounted on cloth. His own letterhead is unique:

"Under Royal Acknowledgment of—The late King George V of England, King Leopold II of Belgium, Ex-Emperor of Germany, Duchess of Kent, Duke of Gloucester, King George VI of England, Duke of Windsor.

"Professor Allen—The Human Submarine," etc., etc.

Then follow six lines of names, The Professor being under the "distinguished acknowledgment" of these persons; the list reads like the list of Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity on Page 281 of James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

"The late Lord Jellicoe, Lord Bledisloe, Lord Galway, the late Lord Ruthven, Admiral de la Périère, Sir Douglas Mawson, Sir Thomas Sidey, Sir Michael Myers, Professor Brown, Professor Hunter, Professor Shelley, Professor von Zedlitz, Herr von Papen, Herr Bactilius, Count von Luckner, Herr von Haast, Lex Macdonald, J. E. Lovelock, Douglas Fairbanks, Yehudi Menuhin, Shion Chaskassky, Bishop Sprott . . . Mary Pickford, Fraulein Beinhorn, Ella Shields, June Barson."

The reader's attention is called to the careful system of grading employed in this list. The Right Hon. M. J. Savage, in the full original, comes between Bishop Sprott and Mary Pickford.

Down the side of the paper (which is pink, the printing red) are the following epitomes:

Demonstrating Blood Pressure and Breath Control—Submerged Posing Model—Expositions of a weird, supernatural artistic act which is wonderful, amazing, adroit, and supreme—Must be seen to be believed—In the civilised world he now stands alone.

THIS document naturally opened our conversations in Division II of The Professor's interests, topics connected with the water and its denizens, the most remarkable of whom is Professor Allen himself, strange monsters of all kinds notwithstanding.

He showed me clippings from the papers, reports of occasions when he had rescued watches from swimming baths,

given demonstrations of underwater swimming, and so on. One, a short report of a coroner's inquest, referred to "a very sad incident—I went over to Blenheim, you see, and gave a demonstration there, and most unfortunately a young boy afterwards said that he could do what I had done, and tried to imitate me. He met his death trying to do it. That was how I came to go on the air."

The Professor flicked some dust off the table, and leaned back in a pose which he later told me was "The Professor in a mood of nonchalance."

"Yes," he said, "when the boy was drowned, Mr. Savage wrote to me. He asked me to go on the air to warn the people of New Zealand against the dangers of underwater swimming. I went on the air. My number was: 'The Dangers of Underwater Swimming.' I was also on the air later, as Mr. Cecil Sweet Allen and the title of my talk was 'A Diver Amongst Monsters of the Deep.' You see, not only do I eat and drink and smoke under water, but I also do imitations of all the sea-monsters I have seen. . . ."

Professor Allen rolled the names of strange monsters from his tongue. He leaned forward, and looked into the distance beyond my shoulder. His eyes were half-closed, and his mind again was far away from the little room we sat in. It's when this mood comes on him that The Professor is at his best—ordinary existence here and now is transcended,

he is in another world; and the chief characteristic of life in this other world is that nothing told there is a lie. His genius for the fantastical has full play, and you believe, you *must* believe, every word he says. (Later, you readily agree with him when he tells you that he never deceives the public. He may be fantastical, imaginative, he told me later, but he will never speak an untruth).

The names of a dozen weird monsters rolled from his tongue in his cultivated, sonorous voice. "Ah, Professor," I said, "You're going too fast for me." "I'm sorry," he said very dreamily, without so much as a glance at me, "I didn't know you were taking it down." He closed his eyes, and began the list again. This time it was totally different—the baby whale, the sea snake, the devil-fish, the Javanese death-crab, the giant octopus. . . .

"And I also do what I did for the Duke of Gloucester—it's very rare. I do imitations of the sculptures and paintings of the world's greatest artists, under water—I do the poses and give replicas of these great works. I do *The Boyhood of Raleigh*—very pretty under water." And the Professor leapt on to his chair and sat with his arms round his knees, an innocent boyish smile on his lips. In a moment he was facing the other way—he was the Elizabethan sailor, pointing out to sea. He straightened up, and took out his wallet again.

"My agent," he said, "has told me that this act is unique."

He showed me the letterhead of his agent, Dave T. Meekin, who "Annually searches the Universe for strange humans, freaks and novelties."

THEN he found the document "Pose and Mien, by Professor Allen," which is a list of the Great Masters imitated by him under water:

- (1) I awake from Love's Sickness to Fly, by Fraser-Grange, the English painter of the A.R.A. fame.
- (2) A Virgin Worship the Sun, by the Great Dutch Painter, Van Dyck, R.A.
- (4) The Sleeping Beauty, by the world's greatest painter, Michaelangelo, R.A.
- (7) Youth's Golden Hours, by the Austrian Sketch artist, Herr Adolf Hitler. (The artist made two sets, Opus 1, Opus 2).
- (9) The Coward of Form IV, by the Scottish painter, McGuer, R.A.
- (20) Beware of that Woman, by the Great Greek Sculptor, Lastisus.

PROFESSOR ALLEN IS THE ONLY EXHIBITION SWIMMER CAPABLE OF PERFORMING THESE STUDIES UNDER WATER. ANY DEPTH AT ALL.

One was by an unpronounceable Welsh artist. Professor Allen explained that he was also an R.A., "but they took it away from him afterwards; he disgraced himself." The sketch by Hitler, he said, he had got in Hungaria.

—A.A.

An actuality broadcast recorded at the Elephant Bath in the Wellington Zoo by Bryan O'Brien will be heard from 22B in "ZB Gazette" at 9.0 p.m. on Sunday, June 30. The second part of our interview with Professor Allen, with photographs of his underwater act (smoking, eating and dripping against every internal and external pressure) will appear in our next issue.



Professor Allen in expansive mood

Spencer Digby photograph