



## THE MERMAN

A JovE NODS occasionally, so Vernon Brock forgot to wind his alarm clock, and as a result arrived at his office with the slightly giddy feeling that comes of having had no breakfast but a hasty cup of coffee.

He glanced at the apparatus that filled half the scant space in the room, thought, you'll be famous yet if this works, my lad, and sat down at his desk. He thought, being an assistant aquarist isn't such a bad job. Of course there's never enough money or enough room or enough time, but that's probably the case in most lines of work. And the office was really quiet. The chatter and shuffle of the visitors to the New York City Aquarium never penetrated; the only sounds were those of running water, the hum of the pump motors, and the faint ticking of typewriters. And he did love the work. The only thing that he possibly loved better than his fish was Miss Engholm, and for strategic reasons he wasn't telling anybody-least of all the lady-yet.

Then, nothing could have been sweeter than his interview with the boss yesterday. Clyde Sugden had said he was going to retire soon and that he was using his influence to have Brock advanced to his place. Brock had protested without much conviction that, after all, Hempl had been there longer than he, and so ought to have the job.

"No," the head aquarist had said. "The feeling does you credit, Vernon, but Hempl wouldn't do. He's a good subordinate, but has no more initiative than a lamellibranch. And he'd never sit up all night nursing a sick octopus the way you would." And so forth. Well, Brock hoped he really was that good, and that he wouldn't get a swelled head. But, knowing the rarity of direct praise from superiors, he was determined to enjoy that experience to the utmost.

He glanced at his calendar pad. "Labeling": that meant that the labels on the tanks were out of date again. With the constant death of specimens and acquisition of new ones that characterizes aquaria, this condition was chronic. He'd do some label-shifting this evening. "Alligator": a man had phoned and said that he was coming in to present one to the institution. Brock knew what that meant. Some fatheaded tourist had bought a baby 'gator in Florida without the faintest notion of how to keep it properly, and now he would be dumping the skinny little wretch on the Aquarium before it died of starvation and the effects of well-meant ignorance. It happened all the time. "Legislature": what the Devil? Oh, yes, he was going to write to the Florida state legislature in support of a bill to prohibit the export of live alligators by more fatheaded tourists, while there were still some of the unfortunate reptiles left alive in the state.

Then the mail. Somebody wanted to know why her guppies developed white spots and died. Somebody wanted to know what kind of water plants to keep in a home aquarium, and the name of a reliable seller of such plants in Pocatello, Idaho. Somebody wanted to know how to tell a male from a female lobster. Somebody-this was in nearly illegible longhand, at which Brock cursed with mild irritation.

-"Dear Mr. Brock: I heard your lecture last June i8th inst., on how we are



dissended from fish. Now you made a pretty good speech but I think if you will excuse my frankness that you are all wrong. I got a theory that the fish is really dissended from us. - ."

He picked up the telephone and said, "Please send in Miss Engholm." She came in; they said "Good morning" formally, and he dictated letters for an hour. Then he said without changing his tone, "How about dinner tonight?" (Somebody might come in, and he had a mild phobia about letting the office force in on his private affairs.)

"Fine," said the girl. "The usual place?"

"Okay. Only I'll be late; labeling, you know . . ." He thought, foolish man, how surprised she'd be when he asked her to marry him. That would be after his promotion.

He decided to put in a couple of hours on his research before lunch. He tied on his old rubber apron and soon had the bunsen burners going merrily. Motions were perforce acrobatic in the confined space. But he had to put up with that until the famous extension was finished. Then in a couple of years they'd be as cramped as ever again.

Sugden stuck his white thatch in the door. "May we come in?" He introduced a man as Dr. Dumville of the Cornell Medical Center. Brock knew the physiologist by reputation and was only too glad to explain his work.

"You're of course familiar, Doctor," he said, "with the difference between lung tissue and gill tissue. For one thing, gill tissue has no mucus-secreting cells to keep the surfaces moist out of water. Hence the gills dry and harden, and no longer pass oxygen one way and carbon dioxide the other as they should. But the gills of many aquatic organisms can be made to function out of water by keeping them moist artificially. Some of these forms regularly come out of water for considerable periods, like the fiddler crab and the mud skipper, for instance. They're all right as long as they can go back and moisten their gills occasionally.

"But in no case can a lung be used as a gill, to extract oxygen dissolved in water, instead of absorbing it from the air. I've been studying the reasons for this for some years; they're partly mechanical- the difficulty of getting anything as dense as water in and out of the spongy lung structure fast enough-and partly a matter of the different osmotic properties of the breather cells which are each adapted to operate on oxygen of a given concentration dispersed in a medium of given density.

"I've found, however, that the breather cells of lung tissue can be made to react to certain stimuli so as to assume the osmotic properties of gill tissue. It consists mainly of a mixture of halogen-bearing organic compounds. A good dose of the vapor of that stuff in the lungs of one of the young alligators in this tank should enable him to breathe under water, if my theory is correct."

"I'd suggest one thing," said Dumville, who had been giving polite but interested "uh-huh's," "which is that when you hold your alligator under water, his glottal muscles will automatically contract, sealing off his lungs to keep out the water, and he'll suffocate."

"I've thought of that, and I'll paralyze the nerves controlling those muscles first, so he'll have to breathe water whether he wants to or not."

"That's the idea. Say, I want to be in on this. When are you going to try out



your first alligator?"

They talked until Sugden began clearing his throat meaningfully. He said, "There's a lot more to see, Dr. Dumville. You've got to take a look at our new extension. We certainly sweat blood getting the city to put up the money for it." He got Dumville out, and Brock could hear his voice dying away: "... it'll be mostly for new pumping and filtering machinery; we haven't half the sj~ace we need now. There'll be two tanks big enough for the smaller cetaeca, and we'll finally have some direct sunlight. You can't keep most of the amphibia without it. We had to take half the damned old building apart to do it. . ." Brock smiled. The extension was Sugden's monument, and the old boy would never retire until it was officially opened.

Brock turned back to his apparatus. He had just begun to concentrate on it when Sam Baritz stuck his gargoyle's face in. "Say, Vuinon, where ya gonna put the bichir? It gets in tomorrow."

"Mmm-clear the filefish out of 43, and we'll make up a batch of Nile water this afternoon for it. It's too valuable to risk with other species until we know more about it. And-oh, hell, put the filefish in a reserve tank for the present."

That means another new label, he thought as he turned back to his chemicals. What would be a good wording? "Esteemed as food . . ." Yes. "Closely related to fossil forms"? Too indefinite. "Related to fossil forms from which most modern fish and all the higher vertebrates are descended." More like it. Maybe he could work in the words "living fossil" somehow. . .

In his abstraction he hadn't noticed that the flask into which the oily liquid was dripping had been nudged too dose to the edge of the table. The slam of a dropped plank from the extension where construction was still going on made him start nervously, and the flask came loose and smashed on the floor. Brock yelped with dismay and anger. Three weeks' work was spread over the floor. He took his morning paper apart and swept up glass and solution. As he knelt over the wreckage, the fumes made his eyes water. In his annoyance it never occurred to him that a man's lungs aren't so different from an alligator's.

He answered the telephone. It was Halperin, the goldfish man. "I'm making a little trip down south; do you guys want me to pick up some bowfin or gar?" Brock said he'd have to ask Sugden and would call back. "Well, don't take too long, Vuinon, I'm leaving this afternoon. Be seem' ya."

Brock set out on the long semicircular catwalk over the groundfloor tanks that led around to the rear of the building and the entrance to the extension. As an old aquarium man he walked without faltering; he could imagine Dumville's cautious progress, clutching pipes and the edges of reserve tanks while glancing fearfully into the waters below.

Brock's lungs ached queerly. Must have gotten a whiff of that gunk of mine, he thought; that was a fool thing to do. But there couldn't have been enough to do any real harm. He kept on. The ache got worse; there was a strange suffocating sensation. This is serious, he thought. I'd better see a doctor after I deliver Halperin's message to Sugden. He kept on.

His lungs seemed to be on fire. Hurry-hurry-Dumville's an M.D.; maybe he could fix me up. Brock couldn't breathe. He wanted water-not, oddly, in his



throat, but in his lungs. The cool depths of the big tank and the end of the semicircle were below him. This tank held the sharks; the other big tank, for groupers and other giants of the bass tribe, was across from it.

His lungs burned agonizingly. He tried to call out, but only made a faint croaking noise. The tangle of pipes seemed to whirl around him. The sound of running water became a roar. He swayed, missed a snatch at the nearest reserve tank, and pitched into the shark tank. There was water in his eyes, in his ears, everywhere. The burning in his lungs was lessening, and in place of it came a cold feeling throughout his chest. The bottom came up and bumped him softly. He righted himself. That was wrong; he should have floated. Then the reason came to him; his lungs were full of water, so that his specific gravity was one point something. He wondered for a confused minute if he was already drowned. He didn't feel drowned, only very wet and very cold inside. In any event he'd better get out of here quickly. He kicked himself to the surface, reached up and grabbed the catwalk, and tried to blow the water out of his lungs. It came, slowly, squirting out of his mouth and nostrils. He tried inhaling some air. He thought he was getting somewhere when the burning sensation returned. In spite of himself he ducked and inhaled water. Then he felt all right.

Everything seemed topsy-turvy. Then he remembered the liquid he'd prepared for the alligator; it must have worked on him! His lungs were functioning as gills. He couldn't quite believe it yet. Experimenting on an alligator is one thing; turning yourself into a fish is another-comic-section stuff. But there it was. If he'd been going to drown he'd have done so by now. He tried a few experimental breaths under water. It was amazingly hard work. You put on the pressure, and your lungs slowly contracted, like a pneumatic tire with a leak. In half a minute or so you were ready to inhale again. The reason was the density of water compared with that of air, of course. But it seemed to work. He released the catwalk and sank to the bottom again. He looked around him. The tank seemed smaller than it should be; that was the effect of the index of refraction of water, no doubt. He walked toward one side, which seemed to recede as he approached it. A fat nurse shark lying on the bottom waved its tail and slid forward out of his way.

The other two nurse sharks were lying indifferently on the bottom across the tank. These brutes were sluggish and utterly harmless. The two sand sharks, the four-footer and the five-footer, had ceased their interminable cruising and had backed into far corners. Their mouths opened and closed slowly, showing their formidable teeth. Their little yellow eyes seemed to say to Brock, "Don't start anything you can't finish, buddy." Brock had no intention of starting anything. He'd had a healthy respect for the species since one of them had bitten him in the gluteus maximus while he was hauling it into a boat.

He looked up. It was like looking up at a wrinkled mirror, with a large circular hole in it directly over his head. Through the hole he could see the reserve tanks, the pipes-everything that he could have seen by sticking his head out of water. But the view was distorted and compressed around the edges, like a photograph taken with a wide-angle lens. One of the aquarium's cats peered down inscrutably at him from the catwalk. Beyond the circle on all sides the



water surface was a mirror that rippled and shivered. Over the two sand sharks were their reflections upside down.

He turned his attention to the glass front of the tank. That reflected things too, as the lamps suspended over the water made the inside brighter than the outside. By putting his head close to the glass he could see the Aquarium's interior concourse. Only he couldn't see much of it for the crowd in front of the tank. They were staring at him; in the dim light they seemed all eyeballs. Now and then their heads moved and their mouths moved, but Brock got only a faint buzz.

This was all very interesting, Brock thought, but what was he to do? He couldn't stay in the tank indefinitely. For one thing, the coldness in his chest was uncomfortable. And God only knew what terrible physiological effect the gas might have had on him. And this breathing water was hard work, complicated by the fact that unless watched carefully his glottis would snap shut, stopping his breath al

together. It was like learning to keep your eyes open under water. He was fortunate in having fallen into a tank of salt water; fresh water is definitely injurious to lung tissue, and so it might have been even to the modified tissue in his lungs.

He sat down crosslegged on the bottom. Behind him the larger sand shark had resumed its shuttling, keeping well away from him and halting suspiciously every time he moved. Two remoras, attached to the shark by the sucking disks on top of their heads, trailed limply from it. There were six of these original hitchhikers in the tank. He peered at the glass front. He took off his glasses experimentally and found that he could see better without them—a consequence of the different optical properties of water and air. Most of the Aquarium's visitors were now crowded in front of that tank, to watch a youngish man in a black rubber apron, a striped shirt, and the pants of a gray flannel suit sit on the bottom of a tank full of sharks and wonder how in hell he was going to get out of this predicament.

Overhead, there was no sign of anybody. Evidently nobody had heard him fall in. But soon one of the small staff would notice the crowd in front of the tank and investigate. Meanwhile he'd better see just what he could do in this bizarre environment. He tried to speak. But his vocal cords, tuned to operate in a negligibly dense medium, refused to flutter fast enough to emit an audible sound. Well, maybe he could come to the surface long enough to speak and duck under again. He rose to the top and tried it. But he had trouble getting his water-soaked breathing and speaking apparatus dry enough to use for this purpose. All he produced were gurgling noises. And while the air no longer burned his lungs on immediate contact, keeping his head out soon gave him a dizzy, suffocating feeling. He finally gave up and sank to the bottom again.

He shivered with the cold, although the water was at 65° Fahrenheit. He'd better move around to warm up. The apron hampered him, and he tried to untie the knot in back. But the water had swollen the cords so that the knot wouldn't budge. He finally wriggled out of it, rolled it up, stuck his arm out of water, and tossed the apron onto the catwalk. He thought of removing his shoes too, but remembered the sand shark's teeth.





Then he did a bit of leisurely swimming, round and round like the sand sharks. They also went round and round, trying to keep the width of the tank between him and them. The motion warmed him, but he tired surprisingly soon. Evidently the rapid metabolism of a mammal took about all the oxygen that his improvised gills could supply, and they wouldn't carry much overload. He reduced his swimming to an imitation of a seal's, legs trailing and hands flapping at his sides. The crowd, as he passed the front of the tank, was thicker than ever. A little man with a nose that swerved to starboard watched him with peculiar intentness.

A jarring sound came through the water, and presently figures, grotesquely shortened, appeared at the edge of the circle of transparency overhead. They grew rapidly taller, and he recognized Sugden, Dumville, Sam Baritz, and a couple of other members of the staff. They clustered on the catwalk, and their excited voices came to him muffled but intelligible. They knew what had happened to him, all right. He tried by sign language to explain his predicament. They evidently thought he was in a convulsion, for Sugden barked, "Get him out!" Baritz's thick forearm shot down into the water to seize his wrist. But he wrenched loose before they had him clear of the surface, and dove for the bottom.

"Acts like he don't wannm come out," said Baritz, rubbing a kicked shin. Sugden leaned over. "Can you hear me?" he shouted. Brock nodded vigorously. "Can you speak to us?" Brock shook his head.

"Did you do this to yourself on purpose?" A violent shake.

"Accident?"

Brock nodded.

"Do you want to get out?"

Brock nodded and shook his head alternately.

Sugden frowned in perplexity. Then he said, "Do you mean you'd like to but can't because of your condition?"

Brock nodded.

Sugden continued his questions. Brock, growing impatient at this feeble method of communication, made writing motions. Sugden handed down a pencil and a pocket notebook. But the water immediately softened the paper so that the pencil, instead of making marks, tore holes in it. Brock handed them back.

Sugden said: "What he needs is a wax tablet and stylus. Could you get us one, Sam?"

Baritz looked uncomfortable. "Cheez, boss, what place in N'yawk sells those things?"

"That's right, I suppose we'll have to make it ourselves. If we could melt a candle onto a piece of plywood-"

"It'll take all day fa me to get the candle and stuff and do that, and we gotta do something about poor Vuinon. . . ."

Brock noticed that the en-tire staff was now lined up on the catwalk. His beloved was well down the line, almost out of sight around the curve. At that angle the refraction made her look as broad as she was tall. He wondered if she'd look like that naturally after they'd been married a while. He'd known it to happen. No, he meant if they got married. You couldn't expect a girl to marry a man who lived under water.



While Sugden and Baritz still bickered, he had an idea. But how to communicate it? Then he saw a remora lying below him. He splashed to attract the attention of those above and sank down slowly. He grabbed the fish in both hands and kicked himself over to the glass. The remora's nose-or, to be exact, its undershot lower jaw -made a visible streak on the pane. He rolled over on his back and saw that he was understood; Sugden was calling for someone to go down to the floor and read his message.

His attempt at writing was hampered by the fish's vigorous efforts to escape. But he finally got scrawled on the glass in large wobbly capitals: "2 WEIGHTED STEPLADDERS-i WEIGHTED PLANK-i DRY TOWEL."

While they were getting these, he was reminded by his stomach that he'd had no solid food for eighteen hours or thereabouts. He glanced at his wristwatch, which, not being waterproof, had stopped. He handed it up, hoping that somebody would have the sense to dry it out and take it to a jeweler.

The stepladders were lowered into the tank. Brock set them a few feet apart and placed the plank across their tops. Then he lay on his back on the plank, his face a few inches below the surface. He dried his hands on the towel, and by cocking one leg up he could hold a pad out of water against his knee and write on it.

He explained tersely about the accident and his subsequent seizure and told what had happened chemically to his lung tissues. Then he wrote: "As this is first experiment on living organism, don't know when effect will pass if ever. Want lunch."

Baritz called to him: "Don't you want us to take the shoks out fuist?" Brock shook his head. The claims of his stomach were imperious, and he had a vague hope of solving his problem without disturbing the fish. Then too, though he'd have hated to admit it, he knew that everybody knew that the sharks weren't man-eaters, and he didn't want to seem afraid of them. Even a sensible man like Vernon Brock will succumb to a touch of bravado in the presence of his woman, actual or potential.

He relaxed, thinking. Sugden was ordering the staff back to its work. Dumville had to leave, but promised to be back. By and by the faithful Baritz appeared with what Brock hoped was food. Brock's position struck him as an uncomfortable one for eating, so he rolled off the plank and stood on the bottom of the tank. Then he couldn't reach the surface with his hand. Baritz thrust a lamb chop on the end of a stick down to him. He reached for it-and was knocked aside by a glancing blow from something heavy and sandpapery. The lamb chop was gone-or not quite gone; the larger shark had it over in a corner. The shark's jaws worked, and the bone sank slowly to the bottom, minus its meat.

Baritz looked helplessly at Sugden. "We betta not try meat again- those shok can smell it, and they might get dangerous if we got them wuiked up."

"Guess we'll have to get the net and haul them out," said Sugden. "I don't see how he could eat mashed potatoes under water."

Brock swam up and went through the motions of peeling and eating a banana. After Baritz had made a trip for bananas Brock satisfied his hunger, though he found that swallowing food without getting a stomachful of salt water



required a bit of practice.

The crowd in front of the tank was larger, if anything. The little man with the wry nose was still there. His scrutiny made Brock vaguely uneasy. He'd always wondered what a fish on exhibit felt like, and now, by George, he knew.

If he could get out and do a few months' research, he might be able to find how to counteract the effect of the lung gas. But how could he perform experiments from where he was? Maybe he could give directions and have somebody else carry them out. That would be awkward, but he didn't want to spend the rest of his life as an exhibit, loyal as he was to the Aquarium. A better idea might be to rig up some sort of diver's helmet to wear out of water with the water inside-if he could find a way of oxygenating the water.

Baritz appeared again and put his head down close to the water. "Hey, Vuinon!" he said, "God's coming down here!"

Brock was interested, though not by the theological aspects of the statement God, better known as J. Roosevelt 'Whitney, was the president of the New York Zoological Society, and the boss of Minnegerode, the director of the Aquarium (in Bermuda at the moment). Minnegerode was Sugden's boss. God, the head of this hierarchy, owned among other things a bank and a half, ~1% of a railroad, and the finest walrus mustache in Greater New York.

Baritz put on his child-frightening grin. "Say, Vuinon, I just thought. We can advise you as the only mermaid in captivity!"

Brock throttled an impulse to pull his helper into the tank, and motioned for his pad. He wrote: "The male of 'mermaid' is 'merman,' you ape!"

"Okay, a merman, unless the gas changed more than your lungs. Oh, good afternoon, Mista Whitney. Here he is in this tank. Anything I can do, Mista Whitney?"

The famous mustache floated above the water like a diving seagull. "How are you, my dear boy? Are you making out all right? Don't you think we'd better get the sharks out right away? They're perfectly harmless, of course, of course, but you might accidentally jostle one and get nipped, ha-ha."

Brock, who at thirty-two was pleased rather than irked at being called "my boy," nodded. J. R. started to get to his feet not noticing that one foot was planted on Brock's rolled-up apron, while the toe of the other was caught in it. Brock received a tremendous impact of sound and current and through the sudden cloud of bubbles saw J. R.'s massive rear descending on him. He caught the man and shoved him up. As the shiny pink head cleared the surface, he heard a terrified scream of "Glugg-blubb-Oh God, get me out! The sharks! Get me out, I say!" Brock boosted and Baritz and Sugden heaved. The dripping deity receded down the catwalk, to Brock's distorted vision broadening to something like a Daily Worker cartoon of Capital. He wished he knew whether J. R. would be angry or whether he'd be grateful for the boost. If he inquired about the apron it might be embarrassing.

The cold was biting Brock's innards, and the bananas seemed to have turned into billiard balls in his stomach. The little man with the nose was still there, although it was nearly closing time. Brock climbed onto his plank and wrote directions: "Raise temperature of feed water slowly. Get me thermometer. Will signal when temperature is right.





Should be about ~ $60^{\circ}$  F. Run more air lines into tank to make up for lowering oxygen saturation point. Put sharks in reserve tank for present; warmth might harm them, and I need all oxygen in tank."

By 9 P.M. all was done. The tearful Miss Engholm had been shooed away. Baritz volunteered to spend the night, which proved the most uncomfortable of Brock's experience. He couldn't sleep because of the constant muscular effort required to work his lungs. He tried to think his way out of the mess, but his thoughts became more and more confused. He began to imagine things: that the little man with the nose had been there for no good, for instance. Just what, he couldn't think, but he was sure it was something. Again and again he wondered what time it was. At first he aroused Baritz to tell him at intervals, but toward 2 o'clock Sam went to sleep on the catwalk, and Brock hadn't the heart to awaken him.

God, would the night never end? Well, what if it did? Would he be any better off? He doubted it. He looked at his hands, at the skin of his fingers swollen and wrinkled by soaking. A crazy idea grew on him with the force of an obsession. His hands would turn into fins. He'd grow scales.

It was getting light. Then all these people would come back to torment him. Yes, and the little man with the nose. The little man would put a worm on a hook and catch him and eat him for supper. .

Under sufficiently strange circumstances the human mind is often thrown out of gear and spins ineffectually without definite relationship to external things. Perhaps that is because of a weakness in the structure of the mind, or perhaps it is a provision by nature to disconnect it to avoid stripped gears when the load is too heavy.

People were coming in; it must be after 9 o'clock. People on the catwalk overhead were talking, but he couldn't understand them. His lungs weren't working right. Or rather his gill. But that was wrong. He was a fish, wasn't he? Then what could be wrong with them? All these people who had it in for him must have turned off the oxygen. No, the air lines were still shooting their streams of tiny bubbles into the tank. Then why this suffocating feeling? He knew; that wasn't air in the air lines; it was pure nitrogen or helium or something. They were trying to fool him. Oh God, if he could only breathe! Maybe he had the fish's equivalent of asthma. Fish came to the surface and gulped sometimes; he'd try that. But he couldn't; his experiences of the preceding day had given him a conditioned reflex against sticking his head out, which his shattered reason was unable to overcome.

Was he going to die? Too bad, when he had been going to marry Miss Engholm and all. But he couldn't have married her anyway. He was a fish. The female fish lays her eggs, and then the male fish comes along and . . . His face twisted in an insane grin at the grotesque thought that struck him.

He was dying. He had to get oxygen. Why not go through the glass? But no, any intelligent fish knew better than to try to make holes in the glass. Then he saw the little man with the nose, standing and staring as he had yesterday. He thought, you'll never catch me on a hook and eat me for supper; you piscicide; I'm going to get you first. He fished out his jackknife and attacked the pane. A long scratch appeared on it, then another, and another. The glass sang softly. The



people behind the little man were moving back nervously, but the little man still stood there. The song of the glass rose up-up-up. . .

The glass, with a final ping, gave and several tons of green water flung themselves into the concourse. For a fleeting second Brock, knife in hand, seemed to be flying toward the little man. Then the iron railing in front of the tank came up and hit his head.

He had a vague sense of lying on a wet floor, while a foot from his ringing head a stranded remora flopped helplessly. .

He was lying in bed, and Sugden was sitting beside him smoking. The old man said: "Lucky you didn't get a fractured skull. But maybe it was a good thing. It put you out during the critical period when your lungs were changing back to normal. They'd have had to dope you anyway, out of your head as you were."

"I'll say I was out of my head! Wait till I see your friend Dumville; I'll be able to describe a brand-new psychosis to him."

"He's a physiologist," replied Sugden, "not a psychologist. But he'll want to see you just the same."

"The doctor tells me you'll be out tomorrow, so I guess you're well enough to talk business. J. R. didn't mind the ducking, even after the exhibition he made of himself. But there's something more serious. Perhaps you noticed a small man with a crooked nose in front of the tank while you were there?"

"Did I notice him!"

"Well, you nearly drowned him when you let the water out of the tank. And he's going to sue us for damages-way up in five or six figures. You know what that means."

Brock nodded glumly. "I'll say I do. It means that I don't get your job when you retire next winter. And then I can't get ma- Never mind. Who is this little guy? A professional accident faker?"

"No; we investigated him. He was a trapeze artist in a circus until recently; he says he was getting too old for that work, but he didn't know any other. Then he hurt his back in a fall, and he's been on relief since. He just came in to watch you because he had nothing else to do."

"I see." Brock thought. "Say, I have an idea. Nurse! Hey, NURSE! My clothes! I'm going out!"

"No, you're not," said Sugden firmly. "Not till the doc says you can. That'll only be tomorrow, and then you can try out your idea. And I hope," he added grimly, "that it's better than the last one."

Two days later Brock knocked on Sugden's door. He knew that Sugden and J. R. were in there, and he could guess what they were talking about. But he had no fears.

"Morning, Mr. Whitney," he said.

"Oh-ah-yes, my deah boy. We were just talking about this most unfortunate-ah-"

"If you mean the suit, that's off."

"What?"

"Sure, I fixed it. Mr. Oscar Daly, the plaintiff, and I are going into a kind of partnership."

"Partners?"



"Yes, to exploit my discovery of lung conversion. I supply the technique so that he can exhibit himself in circuses as Oscar the Merman. He dopes himself with my gas and parks in a tank. Our only problem is the period when the effect of the gas wears off and the lungs return to normal. That, I think, can be licked by the use of any of several anesthetic drugs that slow down the metabolism. So, when the human fish begins to feel funny, he injects himself and passes out peacefully, while his assistants fish him out and wring the water out of his lungs. There are a few technical details to work out on my alligators yet, but that'll be all right. I'll wear a gas mask. Of course," he added virtuously, "any monetary returns from the use of the process will go to the Zoological Society. Oscar says to send your lawyer over any time and he'll sign a release."

"Why, that's fine," said Whitney, "that's splendid, my boy. It makes a big difference." He looked significantly at Sugden.

"Thanks," said Brock. "And now, if you'll excuse me, Sam and I have some fish to shift. So long, cheerio, and I hope you drop in often, Mr. Whitney." He went out, whistling.

"Oh, Vernon!" the head aquarist called after him. "Tomorrow's Sunday, and I'm driving my family out to Jones Beach. Like to come along for a swim?"

Brock stuck his grinning head back in. "Thanks a lot, Clyde, but I'm afraid I might carelessly take a deep breath under water. To be honest, the mere idea gives me the horrors. I've had enough swimming to last me the rest of my natural life!"