

A few words on swimming : with practical hints to beginners / by Ralph Harrington.

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A FEW WORDS ON

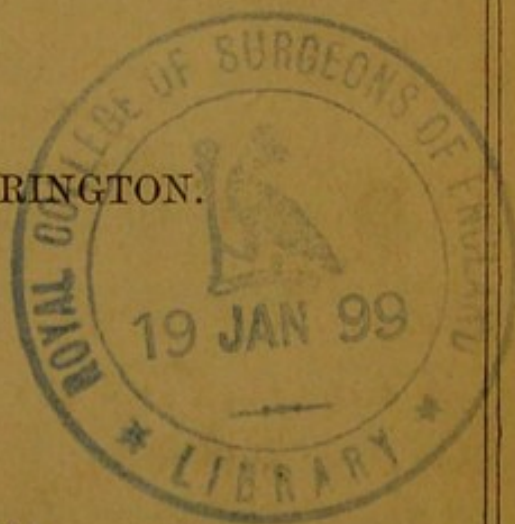
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S W I M M I N G

WITH PRACTICAL HINTS TO BEGINNERS.

BY

RALPH HARRINGTON.

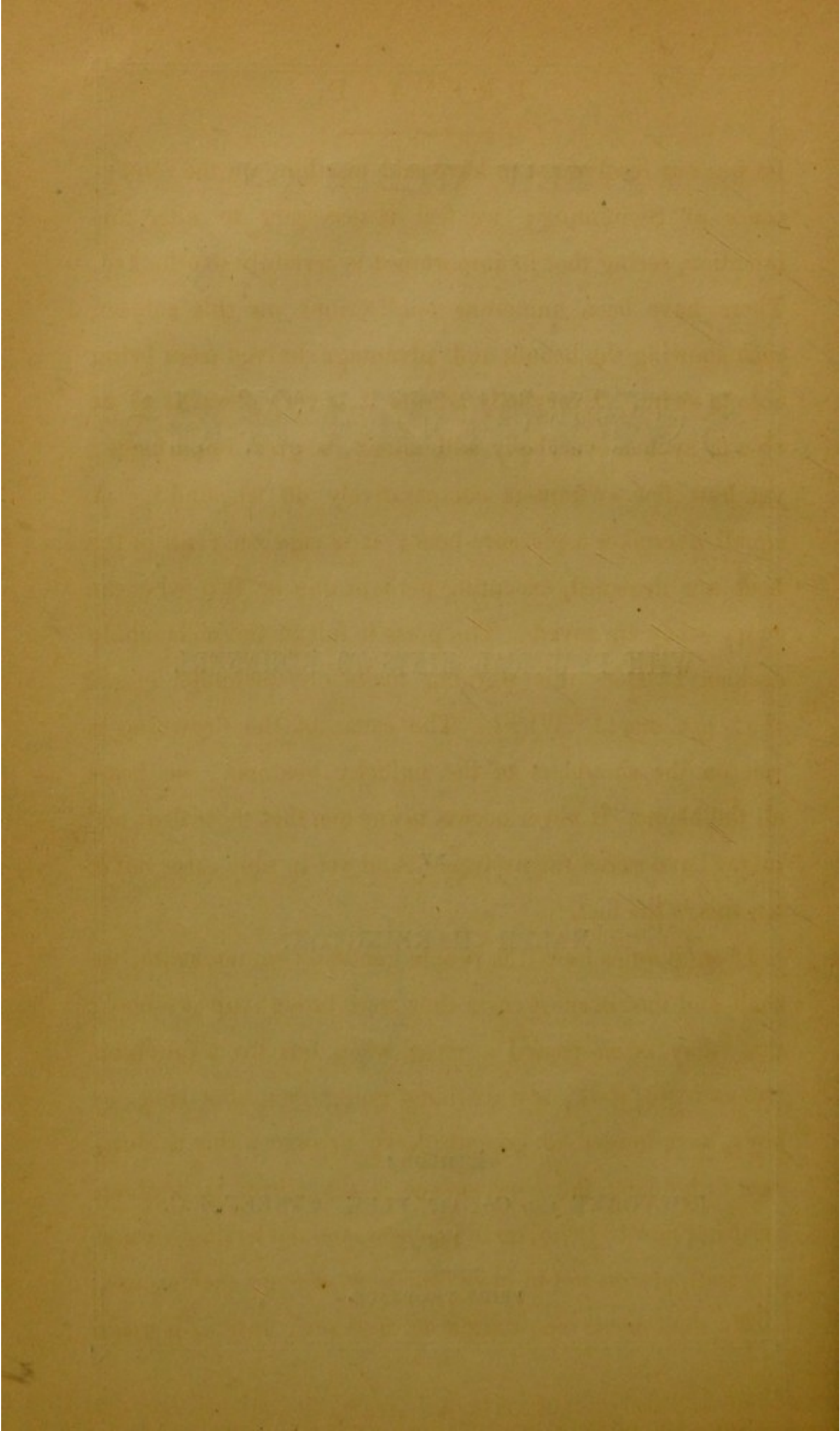


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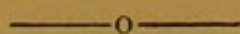
HOLYOAKE AND Co., 147, FLEET STREET, E.C.

1861.

PRICE TWOPENCE.



P R E F A C E.



IT was our resolve not to have said anything on the *importance* of Swimming; we feel it necessary to alter this intention, seeing that its importance is certainly overlooked. There have been numerous publications on this subject, each showing the benefit and advantage derived from being able to swim. Everybody admits it is very pleasant to be able to swim: everybody will admit its great importance: yet how few swimmers comparatively do we find! A squall overtakes a pleasure-boat; it is capsized; all in the boat are drowned, excepting perhaps one or two who can swim—they are saved. The press is full of the melancholy accident! Does this warning make one swimmer more? No! not one!! Why? The cause of the drowning is put on the shoulders of the unlucky boatman: he bears all the blame. It never occurs to any one that those drowned might have saved themselves. And yet in nine cases out of ten this is the fact.

If we inquire how it is people generally cannot swim, we shall find that in most cases they were brought up at school; that they often passed a river when out for a miserable two-and-two walk, saw bathing going on; that they, as boys, have longed to go in to learn to swim; this is however forbidden; the consequence is they grow up without knowing how to swim, go to business, and not having learned at school, profess not to have time now, or some such excuse.

We shall never see swimming universal until it is made

part of the education both of boys and girls at school. Let any one learn at school, and he is sure to keep it up afterwards; but if not, it would matter little, as swimming once learned, is never entirely forgotten. It should be made part of the qualification of a teacher, that he should be able to swim—this would in numberless cases, be even more beneficial to the teacher than the pupil.

Whatever excuse there may be for those in the country, Londoners* can have none, as they have only to walk a short distance to find a bath in whatever part of the metropolis they may be.

If parents before putting their children to school would inquire whether there is a place for them to learn to swim in, it would be very beneficial, because it would bring swimming to the notice of schoolmasters—and *schoolmistresses*. According to the old custom, we had almost forgotten the Ladies, who decidedly ought to learn, as it is more important that they should be swimmers than men! What mother would be a swimmer herself and not teach her children, who should be taught almost before they can walk!

We beg the ladies who may chance to be our readers, to excuse our not mentioning them through this pamphlet, but if they should think proper, in their own copies they can prefix “s” to “he,” and at once transform this into a “Ladies’ Swimming Manual.”

* There are baths open in almost every large town now the greater part of the year.

A FEW WORDS ON SWIMMING.

ON looking for the derivation of the word "swim," we find it is of Anglo-Saxon origin. That it was also spelled "swimm;" the action is described as "a smooth gliding motion;" "to float on the water;" "move in do;" "be borne along by do;" "not to sink."

The above definitions are not, technically speaking, correct. For instance, to "float on the water" is not swimming. To swim is to do something, to be active; consequently a body does not swim if not in motion.* Again, to "be borne along by the water" is not to swim, but to be propelled; otherwise a passive body in the water when borne along by the current would swim.

To describe the word swim accurately is not easy; but it is still more difficult to give a comprehensive idea of the movements requisite to enable a person to swim. In fact our idea will not be to attempt to teach swimming by simply describing the motions, but to give some hints necessary to beginners, and also to bring to notice a few of the various styles.

Swimming is in reality a very difficult art, more especially if not learned when young. This accounts for the anxiety of the learner to be *seen*—he has learned with a good deal of trouble, and is very proud of the little he can do. We do not wish him to suppress this pride, but he must not let it retard him. We are aware that what is

* But a vessel, though moving, cannot be said "to swim." "Swimming is the act of maintaining the body in the water and moving in it."—WATSON: Cyclo.

learned too easily is hardly worth knowing. But a swimmer who does nothing but "show off" will never learn much.

Swimming once acquired, we are more than rewarded for the labour it has cost us.

This is perhaps the best place to give a few hints and directions that, we hope, will be useful to our readers.

If it should happen to be your misfortune not to have learned when young, and you have not yet acquired the art: learn at once. No time can be better employed. At the very outset you must be determined to do your utmost. With this determination and practice every day, you will soon be a good swimmer. Having acquired the art of keeping yourself up in the water, do not stop here. This is the greatest fault we have to find with swimmers at present. They go into the water, make a splashing, and after dawdling about for a season or two, manage to keep themselves up in some way or other, not even swimming with a regular stroke. At this point the tyro fancies it is high time to "show off," he consequently goes into the water puffed with an idea that he is a good swimmer, and if he attracts the attention of one person this is sufficient for him.

This above all things should be avoided—it retards the swimmer more than anything, for the reason already given. If you want to be a good swimmer, it is absolutely necessary to make up your mind to learn something fresh, or improve what you already know, every time you go into the water. With this determination, and perseveringly watching yourself, to see that you are taking the strokes in a proper way and not carelessly, you will soon acquire a tolerable degree of proficiency. Again, we say the learner must guard himself against thinking he knows everything in doing the little he can.

Having obtained a certain degree of confidence in the

water, it should now be the endeavour to *see* good swimming as much as possible, and always to catch at the good points of a swimmer to improve yourself by this observation.*

Without observation no one can possibly be a good swimmer. It is the soul of swimming. A person may learn a good deal by seeing his teacher make the different strokes. But let him go into the water and slowly go through the different movements, so that the pupil can see them, by observing the teacher he will learn twice as fast, and get the right stroke almost by instinct. In fact, the more a pupil *sees* his teacher swim the better.†

* It may be objected by those who have as yet totally disregarded swimming, that it is not so easy to see good swimming as we infer. A frequenter of the London Baths can hardly fail to see good swimming now and then, besides which he can take every opportunity of seeing club or any other races that are going on, especially the races of clubs which have done so much good in promoting swimming by giving medals and prizes. This we think however, has a tendency to make those who are already proficient still more so, rather than to encourage those who cannot swim, to learn. While on the subject of swimming clubs, we may as well say a few words more. What is the use of a club? Oh! (the answer is) you can be taught by our professional—besides, you can try for the prizes. This would be very well if the professional really did teach, but in most clubs this is a sham. The clubs will not be of much use to swimmers until they can erect large and commodious baths of their own, with a professional engaged solely to teach members—he giving illustrative lectures on certain days in the week—this would give a zest to swimming, besides raising the office of the professional teachers. Of course we are aware that a large capital would be required, and that at present there is not a body of men sufficient or willing to consult their own convenience and health by establishing them. This plan executed would give the members of the present clubs a proper place for their races, and would add greatly to their numbers if it were possible to carry it out. The position would require to be central, which is another drawback.

† If the learner wishes to be TAUGHT, let him at once obtain the aid of a professional who is accustomed to teaching, and is consequently almost sure to have a knowledge of what is the best method for the pupil (and if he is intelligent, what will be the faults most requiring correction). A professional will also give his time to the pupil while about it better than a friend who is occupied with himself. If, however, the beginner has a desire to learn by himself (having, of course, already seen some swimming), we should recommend him to go to some pool by the sea-side (sea-water having so much more substance than fresh it serves as a sustainer), where it is not deep. He can here, with his hands on the ground, practise the stroke with his legs, and when tolerably perfect, he can kneel and practise with the arms—learning one after the other, he will soon be able to get along. This way is also beneficial, inasmuch as it accustoms him to use the arms and then the legs, which is the usual method of swimming on the chest. He will no doubt, find it more difficult when he comes to fresh water, but having acquired the stroke, he soon gets used to it. This is just the contrary with one who has

OF THE DIFFERENT METHODS OF SWIMMING.*

We do not pretend to give all the different methods or styles of swimming; indeed, it would be next to impossible, as almost every one varies a little. Still it will no doubt be acceptable to have some enumerations, for although the reader may know a good many, he may not know all.

It is also next to useless to give much space to the accurate description of motions in swimming; nothing but practice and practical observation will teach them properly.

The most known and practised method of swimming in England is on the chest. The origin of this method is not known. On consideration, it certainly does not seem the most natural, as one would suppose that a human being going into the water, would be most likely to adopt some way resembling that of walking or running—*i.e.*, standing upright in the water. This method is much adopted in some parts of the continent† — in England it is called “treading water,”—and enables the swimmer to go a great distance with comparative ease. To return however to chest swimming. The action generally employed is that of striking out with the arms and legs, taking care to keep the fingers close together—the practised swimmer in this manner can keep on for an almost incredible time—great speed can also be acquired—to aid which it is important that the

learned in a bath. The water being generally less than six feet deep, has very little sustaining power, consequently, a person who has learned in a bath will find it easier to swim in the sea. Yet he will find it more difficult in a lake of fresh water or a river, in consequence of the greater resistance offered, although there is greater sustaining power. With regard to corks, bladders, &c., we repudiate their use altogether as being injurious, giving a false confidence. A rope might be allowed in some cases, but generally nothing is best.

* We may as well observe that the beginner is not supposed to be able to learn all the different methods given, merely from our description, because, as we have already remarked, it is impossible to learn from description only, however good; our chief object is to bring them to notice. Independently of the pleasure of being able to execute different methods, they develop the muscular system more fully and equally than constantly swimming in one way.

† See “Every Boy’s Book,” by George Forrest.—Routledge & Co.

loins and legs should be kept as near the surface of the water as possible, without splashing; a good swimmer never splashes unless intentionally. There are innumerable modifications of chest-swimming that are useful to practise; for example, swimming without the hands, or without the legs. The latter is easy if the hands are kept down near the loins, working them with a fin-like motion, the body being slanting. Then with one hand and one leg only; holding the other leg with the hand not being used, &c. Perhaps we must class swimming without hands or feet as chest-swimming.

Then comes swimming backwards on the chest. To do this will require practice, on account of the peculiar movement. The arms must be thrown out well in front, the hands moving so as to repel the water, keeping the arms as immoveable as possible; the legs must be straight out, moving up and down, which must come as much as possible from the knee-joint and not from the hips.

By slightly altering the movement the swimmer can go sideways or backwards at will.

After learning to swim on the chest, it is usual to learn to swim on the back. The different evolutions to be performed are quite as varied as those on the chest. The easiest swimming is on the back, employing the legs only. The manner of striking out with the legs is the same as on the chest. The fastest way, however, is to use them as in side swimming. The hands can be used either as paddles on both sides, or by moving the arms upwards above the head either out of or on the surface of the water, and bringing them down in a semicircular movement to the loins—moving them, of course, alternately with the legs. Swimming in this method—keeping the arms underneath on the surface of the water—is a very lasting way. To swim without the

legs, the hands must be kept near the loins, and used as fins, keeping the arms as still as possible, with the head well immersed. The great fault in beginners is their anxiety to look at their toes, which raises their head and makes the swimming more difficult. By slightly altering the motion of the hands the swimmer can go forwards, backwards, or sideways at will—a good strong arm is required, which practice will give. As a variation one leg may be put upright out of the water. There is another method of swimming without the legs. It is to put the arms over the head (underneath on the surface of the water) and use the hands so as to propel the body feet foremost, the toes out of the water. This is a very showy style, and rather difficult, as the swimmer must be able to float to execute it. There is also a way of swimming legs first on the back, employing only the legs, which must move one after the other from the knee-joint—the leg is put straight out and brought underneath the body with a sharp motion. Doing what is called the “steamer” is a very showy style. It consists in striking the water violently with the foot, raising each leg alternately out of the water to do so. In fresh water to play the “steamer” well it is necessary to use the hands as fins near the loins to keep the body up—in the same way as when swimming on the back without the legs. This need not be done in salt water on account of its buoyancy. The “steamer” must be learned gradually, only throwing the water a few feet at first, until practice enables the swimmer to throw it ten or fifteen feet.

Having enumerated a few of the methods of swimming on the chest and back, we now come to side swimming.*

* In our opinion it would be very desirable to give the peculiar stroke as at present employed in side swimming, some distinctive name. Why not call it after the inventor or introducer's name, the “Pewters Stroke?” George Pewters having the credit of first bringing it out. See a useful book entitled “Swimming and Swimmers,” 1861.

This method is not only the fastest and most difficult to acquire, but also the most elegant. It by no means follows that the fastest swimmer will be the most elegant, nor that he will have that easy gliding motion that is peculiar to some. This method also requires a good long wind, as in consequence of the exertion required from both arms and legs, it is more exhausting than running. But when once acquired, nothing looks more beautiful in the water than good swimming in this style. The ease and speed acquired are perfectly astonishing to those who cannot swim. There are slight variations in this stroke; some swimming quite on their side, others nearly on the chest, besides being almost totally under the water all the time they are swimming. But on account of the difficulty of breathing in this manner, it is not so lasting as that on the side. Some can swim alternately on either side; this is very useful in enabling a racer to see his opponent. That side is best which each finds the easiest. We recommend the left side to swim on, so as to get a good strong pull with the right arm and right leg. In side swimming the arms and legs are not moved alternately as in chest swimming, but if on the left side, the left arm is thrust out and the right arm and legs take the stroke together. The legs do not kick out as in chest-swimming, but seem to push the water away. It is very important to acquire a good wide stroke, as the speed greatly depends on the width and vigour of the stroke with the legs. A little aching and stretching will have to be gone through before the legs will have sufficient spread for a good broad stroke. When the stroke has been taken the legs should not be allowed to straggle, but be kept perfectly straight, so as not to impede the progress until the next stroke. The body itself must be kept as still as possible. The best way to practise the leg-stroke is to hold on to the steps

of the bath, and keep on giving the stroke until tired, taking great care that you are doing it properly, keeping the legs as near the surface of the water as possible without splashing, and always making them work well in a line, and not let one leg be near the surface and the other straggling a foot or two below. The stroke can be varied a little by moving the right hand out of the water at each stroke (if on the left side) passing it beyond the head and bringing it back to the loins. This is very fatiguing.

Some beginners have a habit of turning their head round, and looking in front at every stroke, this is useless and very ugly.

Hand-over-hand swimming is a very showy style. The stroke with the legs should approach as nearly as possible to the side stroke, the arms move one after the other in a circle, one arm being in the water while the other is out.*

There is another method of hand-over-hand swimming, in which the swimmer turns his body round at each stroke. This is very elegant when properly done, and more showy than the above.

We now come to that passive operation, "Floating." The principle of floating is that of a balance. Suppose a plank across another, if one end weighs more than the other, down goes the heaviest. So with floating; if the legs are heaviest down they go; this is therefore counteracted by putting the arms over the head, thereby keeping up the balance. The practical difficulty is to keep the body straight and stiff. Floating is perhaps not more difficult than many of the methods of swimming we have described. But it is

* This is a very fatiguing style, the reason being that part of the body has to be supported out of the water, by the strength of the rest. This applies to all modes of swimming when part of the body is out of the water. It is much harder to swim on the back with the head out of the water than in. The swimmer should never be afraid of wetting his head, the more it is in the water the easier he will find swimming.

decidedly less practised. The swimmer places himself upon his back, keeps there we will say, for about two minutes, long enough for the legs to sink; he then feels the water round his face, fancies he is sinking entirely, and then gets up with the idea that he is too heavy in the legs to float, or some such equally bad excuse.

Lie quietly on your back, the arms stretched out over the head, for about two minutes—you will then have sunk until almost upright—now separate the legs as much as possible, they will rise a little, stretch the arms well over the head again; now your head sinks;* never mind, stay there, you find yourself gradually rising—your head is out—now take a breath and make a slight effort to keep your body and legs straight, throw your head back until your eyes are under the water. On repeating this for about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour every day for some days you will soon be able to float.

As regards the management of the breath, it is the general practise to blow through the nose before taking in a breath, more especially after having been under the water.† It is no use going to the sea to learn to float, as you cannot help floating there. The best place is some good deep water with no current. A bath floater can float anywhere.‡ When you can once float so as to keep the toes out of the water and

* Generally the learner, directly he finds his head sinking, thinks he is going to the bottom. He then gets up in a flurry. This destroys all previous efforts. Let him stop under as long as he can, and he will be sure to come to the top without turning over to swim at all. The reason for sinking is that the abdominal muscles are not strong enough to pull the legs up, so to speak, consequently they must be strengthened by practice. The learner should choose a time when the water is smooth, it then being less likely to wash over him.

† The reason is this. Being under water the nostrils are filled; if the mouth is opened, the water rushes through the nose into the mouth, which is prevented by first blowing through the nostrils.

‡ The water in the bath being so shallow, there is hardly any support given to the body; this of course gives the muscles more work, thereby strengthening them.

body straight, the various positions or variations are easily learned.

There is a way of floating (body well together, legs straight) and turning over and over like a revolving cylinder, which looks very curious. To begin, lift one arm imperceptibly round a little; the body at once follows the impetus thus given: velocity is only acquired by practise. In floating on the chest, the great difficulty is to keep the mouth out of the water to breathe; it is more difficult than floating on the back.

The swimmer who can go through the evolutions we have described, will find learning anything afterwards comparatively easy.

Turning overhead-and-heels* for instance, which some can do twelve or even fifteen times without taking breath. Turning somersaults is a little more difficult. There is a way of bringing the knees to the chin, and with the aid of the hands, spinning round, great velocity will be acquired, and this is very curious. These however are only a few of the innumerable evolutions a practised swimmer can perform.

We have hitherto said nothing of plunging—not that we do not think it useful; indeed, it is essential to constitute a good swimmer. But perhaps the most important part of the plunge is its healthfulness; head first being the most healthy way of entering the water. A good plunger should hardly make any splash at all, but—if we may be allowed the expression—make a hole in the water. It is very pleasing to see a good plunge.†

* Sometimes called the “water wheel.”

† It is not our intention to chronicle the feats that have been performed in plunging, diving, or fast swimming. But it is surprising the perfection that can be attained by practise. From the book we have already quoted, “Swimming and Swimmers,” (we could not, perhaps, have a better opportunity of expressing a wish that such a book will be published annually, with an account of the year’s races—it being very important for swimmers to know the latest feats accomplished), we learn that Drake could plunge fifty feet with ease, the height from which he plunged is not mentioned. This is about twenty feet more than an ordinary plunger will go! We should like to see more prizes given for plunging.

There are various plunges, as the "Eaton plunge," which consists in plunging and immediately coming on the surface. To execute this properly the plunger should not go more than two feet deep. It is a great help to have hoops to dive through, as they teach the learner to keep his legs out straight. If the swimmer plunge and begin to swim directly, this is diving. Diving is exceedingly useful, and it is very pleasant to be able to explore the bed of any river you may be in. But those who dive too much, generally find they have injured themselves in some way or other. We recommend diving to be learned, but seldom resorted to.*

The push off can only be learned in the bath. To push off well requires great practice; it is invaluable to a bath racer, he must not wait until the impetus given is exhausted, but strike out almost directly. Expert swimmers can push off and go thirty feet or even more. Directly after the push off, the endeavour should be to keep the body perfectly straight. The head in a direct line with the arms, and the legs kept stiff and not straggling, even the fingers must not be loose, as the slightest thing impedes progress.

In pushing off on the back do not keep at the top, but about a foot underneath the water.†

When the swimmer is master of the different ways pointed out, he will soon be able to invent others for himself. In fact, no one should be content with just copying what they have seen others do, but should constantly be on the look out for anything novel that presents itself to the mind. If you think of something, practise hard to attain it, do not just try and then give up with "Oh! that's impossible," or "It's absurd." Many things, after a little practice, will be easy which at first seemed impossible.

* See "Swimming and Swimmers," page 12, 1861.

† A Plunger will go further if he is under water, nearly all the way. The same thing applies to a push off. There being less resistance when entirely immersed than when half so.

When going into the water it will be well to recollect the following :—

Enter the water with a determination either to learn something fresh, or to improve what you already know.

When you begin, do so calmly and not in a flurry.

If you find yourself sinking never mind, but keep on as long as you can hold your breath.

In conclusion we may add, that if this little pamphlet makes one swimmer, benefits any who could already swim, or is useful in the smallest degree, our labour will be amply rewarded.

We are not ignorant of the fact that many things have been omitted; it being impossible to treat of everything fully in so small a space. Nevertheless, we hope the little we have said will stimulate some one better able to do justice to the art, to take up the pen, and give a more concise and enlarged treatise.

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