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Bathing and Boating Accidents.

BY ✓

IRVING C. ROSSE, A.M., M.D.,
OF WASHINGTON, D. C.

PROFESSOR OF NERVOUS DISEASES, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY.

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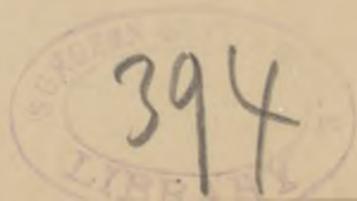


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BATHING AND BOATING ACCIDENTS.

I am not sure that I could have selected a more appropriate time and place to bring to the notice of the profession some of the accidents that occur in bathing and boating. Even here in lovely Newport, where I have spent many happy days, sad cases of drowning occur every season, and it is safe to say that most of them arise from inexperience in swimming and are consequently preventable. As a physician and practical athlete, I may show more than ordinary enthusiasm in making a plea for the educational, hygienic and curative advantages of an exercise that I have practiced at many different places over the world from the tropics to the Arctic Ocean, and in such places as mountain lakes, the mid-Atlantic, and even in a volcanic crater some 2,000 feet deep.

The frequent accounts of drowning that one reads constantly in the daily papers at this season, aside from those occurring in the late floods, instead of dampening rather rekindle an ardor to which is added a tinge of regret consequent upon the reflection that most of these accidents arise from inability to swim; for with only a moderate knowledge of this easily acquired art, many lives may be saved and much bereavement prevented. Philanthropic motives, if no other, would therefore prompt one to give the matter more than passing notice. In view of the surprising great number of deaths from drowning, it is lamentable in this practical age that the useful art of swimming takes



such small part in the training of youth. Young minds are crammed with all sorts of useless information to the neglect of what is essential to the preservation of personal health and the saving of life. Legislators vote large sums of money for doubtful jobs, yet refuse to countenance the establishment of swimming baths in our cities. The police regulations of most of our large towns, conceived in the interests of extreme prudery, virtually tend to make swimming one of the lost arts. Those of the District of Columbia, for instance, were evidently framed in the same spirit of protest which caused a former Governor of Maryland to object to midshipmen swimming from a certain wharf in the Naval Academy because the ladies could see them with their opera glasses.

That people do not fully realize the importance of swimming is a trite observation, but a truth none the worse for frequent repetition, and allowing it to lie fallow will never bring about the desired reformation. Long personal experience with swimming so convinces me of its usefulness that, if it came to a choice between knowing the higher mathematics or how to swim, I should choose the latter every time. At many of the larger schools in England lads are obliged to pass in swimming before they are allowed to go out in boats. This rule, established at Eton in 1840, has been effectual there in the prevention of drowning, only one case having occurred since that time, although the swamping of boats has been frequent. A yearly average of 150 boys learn to swim and pass the test. It is, of course, possible to enforce such a rule in schools and among bodies of individuals where discipline obtains, yet this manly and invigorating accomplishment is neglected both in educational establishments and in the Army. Swimming is taught at our Naval Academy, but

at West Point it is not, and most of the cadets are lamentably deficient in this respect. The statistical exhibits of our late war show the strongest reason why a soldier should know how to swim. The aggregation of killed in action is shown to be 67,058, while there were drowned 106 officers and 4,838 men. The small regular Army lost 5 officers and 89 men from this cause; the U. S. colored troops 6 officers and 289 men; and the volunteers furnished a large contingent, the State of Ohio alone having lost 14 officers and 770 men from drowning. Just think of a number amounting to five regiments perishing from an easily preventable cause—for the majority of these men were drowned in such circumstances as fording a stream, crossing narrow rivers, or by the upsetting of small boats when a few strokes would have sufficed to save life.

But the best swimmers are often drowned, say the cynical wiseacres. True, a good swimmer sometimes meets with that misfortune, but the occurrence is so rare that for that very reason a vivid effect is produced on the imagination and memory of unthinking persons who, accustomed to make *post hoc* conclusions, never for a moment consider the greater number who are saved by knowing how to swim.

Among other prevailing and groundless objections to swimming are the production of colds, the danger of heart failure and the risk of being bitten by sharks. As to colds and the effects of the cold immersion in the water, I should say that the danger therefrom is greatly exaggerated, if my own experience is any guide, for I have never had a cold from swimming in icy water, even under the Arctic Circle. On the contrary, one of the severest colds I ever had was contracted in Washington some years since with the ther-

mometer high in the nineties, which necessitated a visit to the seashore, where after two swims the cold disappeared as if by magic.

There are, of course, many weak people whose chest organs are in such condition that they should not venture to swim; but I am convinced that the neglect to learn swimming in childhood and the absence of this eminently hygienic exercise are responsible for many flabby hearts, weak lungs and torpid minds.

In addition to being generally tonic and bracing, the effect of swimming considered in itself is to develop the muscular system and to exert a favorable influence on the great bodily functions, as the digestion, nutrition, respiration, circulation and innervation. No other exercise with which I am familiar gets the heart and lungs in better working order, and none is better for getting one in what sporting men call "condition." After two weeks' daily swim in salt water I have run a measured mile on a beach with very little more embarrassment to circulation and respiration than if I had walked the same distance.

Aside from the physical, another advantage of a high order accrues in the way of happy moral influence. Boxing, sword-play and several other manly pastimes will do much to develop courage, prudence and cleverness; but the cold-blooded quiet and presence of mind which aid us to avoid danger or to conquer it, or to lend ourselves to an act of devotion, are best cultivated by the exercise of swimming. What, for instance, is a more brilliant and commendable act of devotion than that of a dauntless swimmer who, regardless of self, plunges overboard at the risk of his own life to save a fellow-being from drowning?

As a curative means, swimming also comes in for praise. In this respect it is superior in many

conditions to the so-called "tent cure," to massage, electricity, or drugs, and may be employed with benefit in scrofula, chlorosis, convalescence, insomnia and many other nervous diseases, as chorea and hysteria. The latter malady especially, I have known to be cured after a course in the swimming baths of Alameda, Cal.; and my experience as a neurologist leads me to recommend swimming as one of the best adjuvants in the treatment of nervous diseases.

The danger to be apprehended from sharks is more a figment of the mind than a reality. I have no personal knowledge of shark bites, although I have done much swimming in such infested places as the Gulf of Mexico, the harbor of Cadiz, the Azore Islands, Bermuda, Tybee, the mid-Atlantic and other places where these voracious animals are reputed to gobble up such small bait as a man at a single mouthful. For years I have made it a point to question sailors and fishermen in various parts of the world as to their actual and personal knowledge of shark bites, and though the inquiry has called forth some remarkable fish stories, I have met but two people with any personal knowledge of the matter. Admiral Porter tells me of an instance in which he saw a man attacked; the other person, a pilot at Bermuda, knew of a man that had his hand bitten by a shark just as he was pulling in a hooked fish from the water into his boat. Sharks often collect around the carcass of a whale while it is being "cut in," and men sometimes slip overboard among them, yet after a long residence in New Bedford and a somewhat extended experience with the Pacific Arctic whaling fleet, I have never met a whaleman who could tell me of a man that had been bitten. My friend, Mr. Truxton Beale, of Washington, a short time since, when a passen-

ger on the Pacific Mail, showed his unbelief in shark stories by swimming across the shark-infested harbor of Acapulco, although warned by the captain of the ship that he would be eaten up before he got a hundred yards away.

Traditional accounts of the rapacity of sharks are as extravagant as the records of some of the old writers who tell of dead sharks cast upon the shores of the Mediterranean of such size that men walked into the mouth and down the throat in order to inspect the stomach. Even Rondelet, in his *History of Fishes*, speaks of these animals as having swallowed men in entire suits of armor.

Documentary evidence as to shark bites is also very scanty. During the last fifty years, soldiers by the tens of thousands have swam at Fort Monroe, Va., yet there is no record of one having been bitten by a shark, nor have I been able to ascertain that any accident of the kind has occurred at Malta or Gibraltar. There does not appear to be a record of any one ever having been bitten by a shark off the British Isles. I have been unable to ascertain that a single bite of the kind is reported among the medical records of our War or Navy Departments or those of the Marine-Hospital. In a book about the West Indies, Mr. Charles Ives says it is singular that so few facts are reported which indicate the danger from Bahama sharks, and that the divers continue to be so numerous and bold. He has heard of but one instance in which a Nassau shark has dined upon a negro, and the report in that case is not well authenticated.

The *New York Herald*, a few years ago, gave an account of a boy who was bitten while swimming in East River, and afterwards died at Bellevue Hospital.

Medical literature has but few reports of shark bites. After ten years' diligent search I have

found but seven references, the earliest in the *London Medical Gazette*, 1823, and the latest in the *London Lancet*, 1886. The bites occurred in Australia, South Africa and India. The Hooghley and Ganges Rivers are the worst places in the world for sharks and alligators. A particular kind of shark, the *Carcharras Gangeticus*, which is very fierce and bold, sometimes dashes among the crowds at the bathing ghats, and has been known to bite a boy in two feet of water. All persons bitten at these places generally die from the bite, for the reason that the shark, living on carrion portions of which stick between the teeth, carries infection to those whom it may afterwards bite. The former habit of throwing the dead in the river is supposed to account for the boldness of these particular sharks in attacking the human species.

Even admitting the occasional accident of shark bites, the danger therefrom is almost infinitesimal compared with railway travel or even accidents from horses; and neither this unimportant drawback, nor any other that I have mentioned, should have the least weight in preventing the cultivation and spread of an accomplishment that every one should countenance with a view, not to the renewal of the legendary exploits of Leander and Byron, but as a step in that branch of social evolution which better physical development and improved health tend to promote.

