

# FOR THE SIGHTSEER IN NEW YORK: "THERE'S THE AQUARIUM"

By Adriana Spaldoni.

If you have anything else to do on Sunday afternoon you do not go to the Aquarium. You appreciate the Aquarium. You are proud of it. When you are listing the free attractions of New York to a lonely stranger you add the Aquarium with sudden emphasis—because, being a native, you had almost forgotten it. "AND there's the Aquarium," you say in a tone of now-you-can-never-be-lonely-any-more.

But you personally do not go. You are befogged by the idea that the Aquarium is a place to see fish. The Aquarium is a place to see people and to let the fish see you, lonely people for the most part, killing time, among equally lonely fish, shut up within sound of the washing river, in a steam heated building swept by the winds of the sea.

Dead as a fish? Cold as a fish? Nonsense. A fish is a philosopher, self-sufficient, poised. With its goggle eyes it surveys the human world beyond its glass tank and finds it rather foolish. Of course there are degrees of philosophy among the fish, as many as there are kinds. At one end of the scale are the sea horses, brisk, busy, painfully efficient little things. At the other are the great, flat, effortless creatures that lie sprawled at the bottom of the tiled pools. These have reached the Nirvana of the fish and strive no more. Other fish dart about above them, come to rest upon them, swim hither and thither with apparently some fixed ideas in their flat heads. But the great still things below see clearly the walls through the water of their pool and lie quiet.

It is well that the sea horses are at the far end of the building. It would surely drive those busy creatures mad to see such calm indifference. The sea horse is a Socialist, a suffragist, and anything else that is the latest in the most advanced social work of fishdom. No Nirvana inertia, no aimless darting about for him. When a sea horse starts out it is for a purpose. Any one can tell that by the businesslike cock of his small, equine head. Apparently it is only to get as far as possible from his starting point. But he does it in the quickest possible time.

If he stops to rest for a moment, his tail twisted firmly about a twig of the diminutive tree at the bottom of his pool, his little body rigid, a tiny sea colt is sure to dart up with a message. Like a whirring clock spring the tail untwists, and off goes the busy person to see about the matter. He believes in the equality of the sexes, the division of labor, and like all unfortunates ahead of his time, has to suffer the ridicule of the mob.

The fat, goggle-eyed conservative a few tanks away no doubt scorns the domestic arrangement of the sea horse, but the latter believes in his theories and lives up to them. It is he who carries the baby sea horses. It says so in an illuminated sign near the tank. It must be very hu-

## Some Interesting Features, Human and Piscine, to Be Found at the Battery Park Establishment on a Sunday Afternoon.

millating to be tagged with this single qualification, as if he were a freak. Then it draws such silly people, like the woman who stood ten minutes "to see him do it," and went away angry, declaring she didn't believe it was true. Because a man believes in dividing household labor, is that any reason for a crowd to collect outside his house to watch him heat the baby's milk? Some day those sea horses are going to resent it. They will hold a meeting and appoint a committee to attend to the matter. They are much too efficient to attend to it individually.

A thousand miles from the sea horse with his social betterment theories is the artist, the spotted moray, the lyric soprano of the tanks. A long, slim creature, clothed in skin tight gown of green with silver spots, she looks out languidly from her dressing room under the split log and surveys the crowd gathered before her with impersonal indifference. If it is small, she retires to her room. If large enough to make it worth her while, slowly, gracefully she unwinds her length, opens her mouth, half closes her eyes, and bursts into soundless song. Higher and higher she reaches, physically and vocally. Soon she is lost completely in her joy. Writhing, twisting her own accompaniment, she sings into the clear, green water. Then, suddenly, she opens one eye. The crowd is ten deep before her. It is time for the supreme effort.

Uncurled to her full length she attacks the final aria. With mouth wide she stands poised, the notes rippling along her smooth body. With an emotional shudder, a final writhe, she reaches high A. The end begins. With little darts forward, sudden retreats, all the tricks of the stage, this silent soprano finally gets herself back into her dressing room.

The crowd waits a moment and passes on. A fussy little moray swims anxiously up to the dressing room door and pokes in his head. It is evidently the manager. Signorina Moray comes to the opening, glances at the dwindling crowd, and sends the fussy little manager swimming about his business. When another crowd of sufficient size has collected she will sing again, but she grants no encores.

She is a very great artist, and not to be ordered about. There isn't the least doubt that she would feel perfectly free to refuse the fat dowager cod if the latter asked her services. She might even snub this bulging eyed social leader. Small blame to her if she did, for of all the self-satisfied monuments of conventionality it is the cod. She swims about in a supercilious way, followed by her fat husband and her stupid daughters, casting annoyed glances toward the watching group as if wondering whether

they were "just the right people" she would care to have see her. When she has looked once or twice directly at you you naturally slink away.

After the busy sea horse and the artistic moray and the social cod, the angel fish is a rest and a delight. Calm, peaceful, content with its own beauty, it swims aimlessly about, with no ambition to climb above the less beautiful of its kind, or to turn the glory of its rainbow coloring to commercial use. Pure beauty, living for itself, sufficient excuse for being. At its own caprice it swims or dives or floats, with no intention of showing off, quite indifferent whether you watch it or not; not the least bit offended when a loud snort sends every one of its admirers hurrying to the seal's pool.

It continues to swim gracefully about, admiring its own beauty of pale saffron and rose and faintest blue, in the glass sides of its prison. If the stupid seal considers it of enough moment to snort and prance about to win the passing admiration of a crowd that two minutes after will be watching the crocodile with equal interest, let the seal snort and prance and tire itself out. The angel fish swims on.

The seal is the small boy of the Aquarium. He simply cannot live without attracting attention. When usual movements do not gather the crowd quickly enough, he adopts unusual ones. As a preliminary he trumpets with unholy sounds his intentions of beginning. "Lock, look, look at me," he bellows. "You can't do this. Watch me."

Well, he knows his audience. In a second they are ushering one another in their eagerness to see this self-advertised exhibition. With a rush the seal propels his huge body up the inclined board, maintains his balance for a moment and flops down on the other side. A most aimless proceeding from the beginning. The crowd is delighted. In pretended retreat under two inches of water the seal hides until he gets his curtain call, a hissing

noise equal to "Aw, go on, do it again," to which he never fails to respond.

He swims upon his back, on his stomach, sidewise. He flirts his tail, dabbles his fins, waggles his head. There is no trick too clumsy, too childish for him to perform. Perhaps there was a time when all this sprang from a sheer joy in life. When it was fun to wriggle and dive and snort. There is a small seal in another tank that fairly laughs up at you from the bottom of his pool. But the love of admiration grew and now the big, flopping creature cannot do without it. It may even be that he despises those whom he entertains so easily. But still he must go on, trumpeting his audience together, going through the same series of stunts when they have gathered.

And they are always there on Sunday afternoon, the motley crowd of time-killers, not always absolutely alone, but nearly always lonely. Perhaps it is the location of the place, far down at the end of things, away from other pleasure routes, at least in winter. No one deliberately starts out to go to the Aquarium on a winter Sunday afternoon. When the sun shines and cold winds blow through the brick canons, when it is too bright to stay and too cold to walk forever, then one "drops into" the Aquarium.

There are grandparents, whose own Aquarium days are over, with the small boys that have been left for the day in their charge; they look rather tired as they are dragged from case to case and almost have nervous prostration above the tank of the crocodile. Still on the whole they are the least lonely of all, for they have something definite to do for one else. It is among the others that one feels it most, the weary ache of killing time.

There are the servant girls, foreigners drawn together only by the loneliness in a strange country. They have a few hours off and the place is warm and free. There are the men with no ties, boarders in cheap lodging houses, wishing it were Monday again to be claimed by the familiar routine work, bored to death by the effort to find cheap things "to do on Sunday." Immigrant women with shawls over their heads, unable to read the signs above the tanks, interested in some specially bright spot of color, pleased to get the warmth and light and movement for nothing. There is the stray person in a silk hat and frock coat, as if he had started out to attend a reception, got grouchy, decided not to go, was too mad to go home and change his things, and took the car for the most unlikely spot to meet any one he knew. He stalks

about, paying no attention, attracting none.

There are the girls in twos and threes. They pass idly from tank to tank, reading the names listlessly, wishing they had something more exciting to do. In short, wishing that some men friends had asked them to do something, anything—even look at the fish. Then it would be different.

There are the men, in twos, the type that are a little ashamed to ask girls to go to a free place, but who do not want to spend any money. A few women quite alone, glad to escape from their small rooms, glad of the mere feeling of other people round them. Many men equally alone, equally glad to be jostled and pushed by their kind.

If you want to know how really lonely a man or woman is, just watch him or her, when a small boy, sticky with popcorn, pushes his way close to the tank, clutching any garments that come in his way. If that child is shooed and frowned upon, then the shooer or the frowner has several degrees of loneliness to travel yet. When he steps aside without complaint, then he has almost reached the bottom. When he smiles and says, "Oh, that's all right," then has he drunken the very dregs of loneliness.

He may be an American born, but he is not one bit less lonely than the immigrant asleep on the bench, an old, gray-haired man, with the rings of Southern Italy in his ears, his horny hands hanging heavily before him. He has come down close to the sea and dropped to sleep dreaming of the tide washing softly thousands of miles away. On the same bench, staring down into the floor, sits a big, strong, fair young man from the North. He, too, wears an immigrant cap and clumsy shoes. But he will not wear them long. He was not made to slink down and out. He is the kind to write articles, ten years from now, on "How I Did It."

Upstairs a young Irish girl and her sweetheart lean dejectedly against the railing, looking down into the crowd. They have seen all the fish, upstairs and downstairs, twice, and to begin with they didn't want to see the fish at all. The Aquarium is not the nicest place for lovers, but there is nowhere else, warm and free and near. They do not need the others, these two, and the man grows cross and tired, as if he wondered whether anything could be worth all the crowding and pinching in the end. The girl feels his mood and her hand slips along the railing to his. He takes it quickly and—it is all worth while. They smile at each other and go off hand in hand.

So they wander around, all these human beings, looking at the fish, because they need one another. They may hear only strange tongues on every side and see faces they do not know, but for a few hours they are close to their kind, have something definite to do. It is a terrible thing to be quite alone among millions, with nothing at all to do.

And the fish look out calmly from their glass tanks and think.