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# TROPICAL FISH PROGRESS

By IDA M. MELLEN

THE evolution of the fish is a topic familiar to the biologist, and scores of observers have brought to the public mind a keen realization of the intense interest that lies in the lives of the fishes, their habits and their variations in form and habitat; but the evolution of the "fish fan" is almost too new to be seen clearly in the objective. During the past eighty years since aquaria first were kept in England, and particularly during the past thirty years of their general existence in this country, the forward strides of the aquarist have been rapid indeed when we consider the deliberation of evolutionary processes, whether in nature or in social usages. Already the "fancy" seems so old that I sometimes wonder if it really is true that I have been personally acquainted with the widow of the first American ever to maintain a salt water aquarium in his home, and whose sister owned the first fresh water aquarium in the United States; who was one of the first two men successfully to transport ocean fishes from the tropics to the temperate zone—William Emerson Damon.

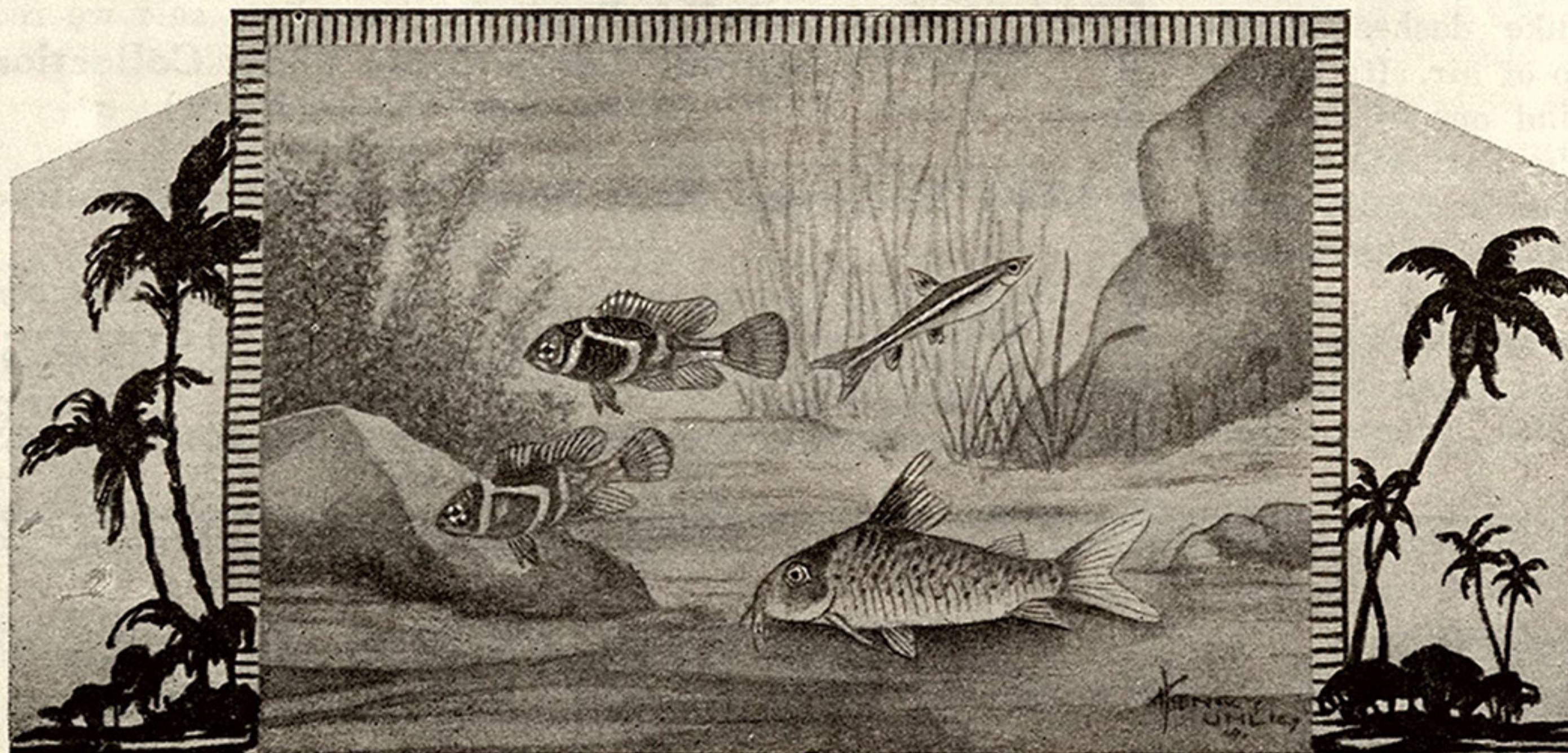
It is well for us not to forget that the greatest of all showmen, Phineas T. Barnum, instigated this feat, Barnum, who, on his acquisition of Aquarial Hall in Boston, engaged Damon, then twenty-four years old, and Albert S. Bickmore, a student of Professor Agassiz at Harvard, to stock the place with marine exhibits. These two young men brought from Bermuda in a fishing smack over six hundred living specimens of tropical fishes—and in 1862 this constituted a miracle of achievement; but it had taken a showman's fine imagination and sure knowledge of human psychology to foresee the popularity and the charm which would attach to tanks of active, brightly colored fishes.

Today the successful transportation of live fishes from India to New York, from Samoa to San Francisco, or

from Australia to Chicago, is an incident that is made but passing reference to in the course of conversation. We take so much for granted now.

Long before the successful voyaging of marine fishes in American shipping tanks, fresh-water varieties particularly of the carp family, had been looked upon in the Orient and Europe as easy prey; but well we know that it is only slightly more than a quarter century since a handful of pioneers introduced the toy tropical into the United States. We should not permit ourselves to forget their names. They were Herman Rabenau, the first to import tropicals for commercial purposes and therefore the first to place them within reach of the general public (his business began in 1907); August Obermuller, the most successful breeder of tropicals in those early days

of the "fancy"; C. J. Heede who, in 1911, was writing informative articles about Gambusia, Paradise fishes and others, and so arousing popular interest; and Richard Dorn whose work with tropicals and whose enthusiastic advocacy of them



helped to spread the movement of aquarists toward the small fish with brilliant colors.

The war with Germany suddenly stopped tropical fish importations from Europe in 1918, and, as with many foreign articles of trade, Americans simply had to learn how to produce them themselves.

From the window display of a quart bowl with a goldfish nosing its tail in cramped and endless circles, to a marble palace for fishes on the shore of Lake Michigan, is a long, long jump in the progress of aquarium keeping. And when any man or any woman passes from the possession of one circumscribed goldfish to the proud ownership of capacious, numerous and perhaps costly tanks occupied by aristocrats in the world of tropical toy fishes

from Asia, South America, the Indies, many new to science, and with the privilege of learning as much about them as any trained biologist or ichthyologist, it's a long, long jump in the evolution of the amateur aquarist.

Certain it is that "every dog has his day," but the cat is constant, the canary is constant, and the toy fish has come to stay, even though at times it seems that many species of the last named, like dogs, reign their little day and pass from the limelight to make room for newer and more alluring rivals. With aquarists there still is so much to be learned that it not infrequently is a case of "off with the old love and on with the new."

When one can visit a middle-class home, as this writer once did—a home where there are five children and the father's pay envelope has been attenuated by a fifty percent reduction in the "long greens," and note that the youngsters playing on the floor with last year's toys are careful, even to the baby, not to jog the corner table where the aquarium stands; when the mother explains that there were no new dolls this Christmas and hard times had compelled them to introduce a few "scrub scalars" from the "Five and Ten" but her husband could not consider dispensing with the aquarium, it had become so necessary a part of the family life, we are made to realize how important a factor in the social life of the nation and the development of the child mind is the advent of the tropical fish aquarium in the average home. We still are a little too close to the phenomenon to gain a perfect perspective, but we know the ultimate results will be benign. We feel under obligation no longer to explain to the uninitiated how portentous an institution is the aquarium in the home.

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**WHAT TO DO**

Light your tank from ABOVE and FRONT—look AT your fish—not THROUGH them!

—o—

When you buy a fish pay a fair price for it—a good thing is worth a good price—you can't expect fine babies from poor parents.

—o—

Don't feed too many white worms to Bettas and other Labyrinth fish, as the worms induce dropsy (they are high in carbohydrates) but they are great for other fish!

—o—

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the feet of experts and learn from them.

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