

“Goldfish”

(from *Not That It Matters* by A. A. Milne; the whole book of essays can be found at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5803/pg5803-images.html>)

Let us talk about—well, anything you will. Goldfish, for instance.

Goldfish are a symbol of old-world tranquility or mid-Victorian futility according to their position in the home. Outside the home, in that wild state from which civilization has dragged them, they may have stood for dare-devil courage or constancy or devotion; I cannot tell. I may only speak of them now as I find them, which is in the garden or in the drawing-room. In their lily-leaved pool, sunk deep in the old flagged terrace, upon whose borders the blackbird whistles his early-morning song, they remind me of sundials and lavender and old delightful things. But in their cheap glass bowl upon the three-legged table, above which the cloth-covered canary maintains a stolid silence, they remind me of antimacassars and horsehair sofas and all that is depressing. It is hard that the goldfish himself should have so little choice in the matter. Goldfish look pretty in the terrace pond, yet I doubt if it was the need for prettiness which brought them there. Rather the need for some thing to throw things to. No one of the initiate can sit in front of Nature's most wonderful effect, the sea, without wishing to throw stones into it, the physical pleasure of the effort and the aesthetic pleasure of the splash combining to produce perfect contentment. So by the margin of the pool the same desires stir within one, and because ants' eggs do not splash, and look untidy on the surface of the water, there must be a gleam of gold and silver to put the crown upon one's pleasure.

Perhaps when you have been feeding the goldfish you have not thought of it like that. But at least you must have wondered why, of all diets, they should prefer ants' eggs. Ants' eggs are, I should say, the very last thing which one would take to without argument. It must be an acquired taste, and, this being so, one naturally asks oneself how goldfish came to acquire it.

I suppose (but I am lamentably ignorant on these as on all other matters) that there was a time when goldfish lived a wild free life of their own. They roamed the sea or the river, or whatever it was, fighting for existence, and Nature showed them, as she always does, the food which suited them. Now I have often come across ants' nests in my travels, but never when swimming. In seas and rivers, pools and lakes, I have wandered, but Nature has never put ants' eggs in my way. No doubt—it would be only right—the goldfish has a keener eye than I have for these things, but if they had been there, should I have missed them so completely? I think not, for if they had been there, they must have been there in great quantities. I can imagine a goldfish slowly acquiring the taste for them through the centuries, but only if other food were denied to him, only if, wherever he went, ants' eggs, ants' eggs, ants' eggs drifted down the stream to him.

Yet, since it would seem that he has acquired the taste, it can only be that the taste has come to him with captivity—has been forced upon him, I should have said. The old wild goldfish (this is my theory) was a more terrible beast than we think. Given his proper diet, he could not have been kept within the limits of the terrace pool. He would have been unsuited to domestic life; he would have dragged in the shrieking child as she leant to feed him. As the result of many experiments ants' eggs were given him to keep him thin (you can see for yourself what a bloodless diet it is), ants' eggs were given him to

quell his spirit; and just as a man, if he has sufficient colds, can get up a passion even for ammoniated quinine, so the goldfish has grown in captivity to welcome the once-hated omelette.

Let us consider now the case of the goldfish in the house. His diet is the same, but how different his surroundings! If his bowl is placed on a table in the middle of the floor, he has but to flash his tail once and he has been all round the drawing-room. The drawing-room may not seem much to you, but to him this impressionist picture through the curved glass must be amazing. Let not the outdoor goldfish boast of his freedom. What does he, in his little world of water-lily roots, know of the vista upon vista which opens to his more happy brother as he passes jauntily from china dog to ottoman and from ottoman to Henry's father? Ah, here is life! It may be that in the course of years he will get used to it, even bored by it; indeed, for that reason I always advocate giving him a glance at the dining-room or the bedrooms on Wednesdays and Saturdays; but his first day in the bowl must be the opening of an undreamt of heaven to him.

Again, what an adventurous life is his. At any moment a cat may climb up and fetch him out, a child may upset him, grown-ups may neglect to feed him or to change his water. The temptation to take him up and massage him must be irresistible to outsiders. All these dangers the goldfish in the pond avoids; he lives a sheltered and unexciting life, and when he wants to die he dies unnoticed, unregretted, but for his brother the tears and the solemn funeral.

Yes; now that I have thought it out, I can see that I was wrong in calling the indoor goldfish a symbol of mid-Victorian futility. An article of this sort is no good if it does not teach the writer something as well as his readers. I recognize him now as the symbol of enterprise and endurance, of restlessness and Post-Impressionism. He is not mid-Victorian, he is Fifth Georgian.

Which is all I want to say about goldfish.