

Wonderful Boy Swimmers of New York



GANG OF SWIMMERS AT AN EAST RIVER PIER.

(Copyright, 1904, by T. C. McClure.)

HY, JIMMY! Betcher you can't swim out to de spar buoy!"

The spar buoy, red and flashing, is straining in the glare of the sun on the East river half a mile off shore in the wickedest tide that ever raced from a fitly named Hell Gate to the sea.

With that ebb tide, eager to profit by its rush, the daily wonder of fleet comes driving down—broad railroad floats loaded with whole trains, with a bow wave cascading ahead of them whose roar can be heard clear in shore; tugs, single and tandem, tearing down with wallowing lighters and schooners, sometimes fastened five and six abreast, sometimes strung out in single file for a quarter of a mile; steamships, barges, sail and steam and gasoline and car—all pouring through the water gate of New York to the sea.

And out into this plunging, clustered argosy, into the heavy waves that always toss in the strait and are made ten times more violent by the rending and beating of paddle wheels and screws, darts a tiny, brown thing, four feet long, lean shanked, ribs showing under a brown skin—Jimmy, heading through a world's hurrying commerce to swim to the spar buoy on a dare.

And Jimmy does it. A few Jimmies get drowned every year, but the drowners are only a tiny percentage of the 10,000 swimmers whose round heads bob all around New York from dawn to night and even at night from the first warm sun of May to the last days of September.

"I have seen the negro boys diving for coins in the clear, blue waters off Key West and in the lapus lazuli sea off St. Thomas. I've seen the famous Port Said swimming boys around the ships and I've seen the Hawaiian surf swimmers, and I think that the New York dock rat is the best swimmer of them all," said a ship's captain to me one day in the West Indies, while we watched the handsome black Fortune Island men swimming around a raft that they were building. "The Hawaiian is the only one who equals him, and even he swims in seas that are high, but regular and slow, whereas the New York boy swims in a regular boll of waters, cut criss-cross by tides and eddies and whirls."

Jimmy of the river front deserves the compliment.

His swimming hole is from thirty to fifty feet deep and from three-quarters to a mile wide, without a shoal spot in it. That mad strait known as East river is a pot that is a-boll all the time.

Its waves do not roll. They tumble. Its currents carry steam-craft along like toys, unless they head straight into the pull of the tidal flow.

There isn't a shelving beach or a foot of natural shore of any kind left along the sides of this East river. It runs between banks fifteen and more feet high made of wooden spiles, iron and concrete, and standing straight in water thirty feet deep.

The tenement house boy can learn to swim in two ways. He can go into the floating baths moored at various piers, which is a refuge of paltry souls, or he can walk boldly out to the end of a pier where, within a few moments, somebody will come to the rescue of his possible hesitation by heaving him far out into the racing river.

Around him will be three or four lean boys. But they will not heed his despairing goggle eyes or his blubbery gasps for help. They are firmly convinced that nobody can drown unless he comes up twice and goes down for the third time. So they wait for that third time religiously.

If he hasn't learned to keep himself afloat then they will snatch at him and haul him to the surface and there, in the deep, open river, in the grip of a current that carries them all along like chips, the novice gets his swimming lesson.

It being mostly a case of "swim or drown," the novice usually learns to swim before he gets ashore. And the next day he will burn with noble impatience to lure some other friend who cannot swim to undergo the same glorious experience.

Owing to the heights of the piers above the surface of the rivers, the tenement house boys become fine divers. The boy who cannot take a clean-cut header is viewed with open scorn, and kind hands are ever ready to seize him, hold him out over the brink by his feet and drop him in head first, thus teaching him in boisterous, but explicit, fashion how to dive.

They can't dive for coins like the boys of the sub-tropics, for the water of the North and East rivers is black-green, and no coin could be seen a foot below the surface. Also, the bottom being of the inkiest of black mud, the poor coin would be swallowed in forty feet of ooze the moment it reached there. But throw a white oyster shell or any similar bright object that is not heavy enough to sink in the mud, and the average New York river-front boy will bring it up every time from water thirty feet deep.

He can catch most objects before they reach bottom. But if he has to get clear down into the marine night and grope around in the swirling mud, he will do it. And if you hold a stop-watch on him the second hand will make a good journey before the water gives him up again.

When the heat blasts the rookeries and fills the dirty streets of the poor districts with sodden vapor and stench and the lamentation of wailing babies, the boys practically live in the river.

It is nothing uncommon for boys to dive into the stream at 8 in the morning and not to climb out again till noon.

Thin, shivering, with teeth chattering, they still manage to escape cramps and all the other terrors of the water. And in the hours that they spend in the river they get no rest other than that to be obtained by clinging now and then, snail-like to the slippery, slimy spiles.

They do everything that a fish does. They can swim under water as well as on top. They catch each other by the feet and pull each other under. They struggle with arms locked around necks, deep below the surface till there isn't a breath left in their tough little bodies. They play tag, prisoner's base and even ball in the river. They will, on proper occasion, engage in a regular fight with all the rules, pummeling one another with as much attention to detail as if they were on dry land.

The plutocrats among them wear those apologies for fig leaves that are known as tights. The more rugged citizens wear their skin alone.

The perfection to which they have brought the art of dressing and undressing is worth a chapter in the history of clothes. Arrived at the end of the pier, the tenement house boy gives himself a shake and a wriggle. The shake sheds the trousers. The wriggle sends the shirt into the air. The next instant he is overboard.

The lot of the policemen assigned to duty at the piers is one of heartrending humor. If one is sighted heading down the pier, and there is time the spiles are alive at the warning signal with boys, who flit up the smooth, wet wood like lizards, fall wildly on the tangled mess of clothes, hurl themselves headfirst into any old garment and snatching what is left, race away.



READY TO DIVE FROM THE BOWSPRIT OF A SHIP.

If there isn't time to do this, the boys on the pier grab the clothes and rush away to hiding places or around to the next pier, while the swimmers, resting contentedly in the water, make shrill remarks to the policeman that are calculated with deep cunning to affect his holiest private feelings.

August 1 is the fete day of the New York water boys. On that day whoever ventures near the edge of a pier is more than likely to be hurled into the water. It is a sacred rite whose origin is lost in the past. "Launching Day" they call it, and many a silk-hatted, frock-coated stranger, visiting a pier in the tenement districts on business, has learned about it suddenly by finding himself struggling in the river, while a crowd of elaborately innocent loungers watch the kindly but strangely clumsy efforts of the swimmers around trying to save him.

Most tenement house boys whose timidity has kept them from learning to swim until that day, are impelled to the piers by the same irresistible impulse that used to lead persons to throw themselves under the car of old Juggernaut. Down they wander, with palpitating hearts, and over they go, to scramble ashore presently as full-fledged swimmers or else to be grappled for and brought up as corpses, which is something that happens on occasions.

"Launching Day" isn't the ferocious feast of riot that it used to be on the river fronts years ago when absolutely everybody who ventured on a pier went overboard as soon as someone could get behind him to administer the shove. Nowadays strangers generally are left alone. But it is just as well to remain away from piers if one does not wish to be "launched."

Among the boys it remains the same wild ceremony that it has been; and he is a singularly fortunate boy who escapes a ducking.

The way in which a sputtering, water-blinded, terrified victim is handled by the boys who wait for him in the river is a liberal education in the art of saving life. The boy swimmers of New York handle a drowning lad as easily as the athletes in a swimming tank handle the ball in water polo. They dive for the sinking one, drag him upward by the hair, hold him up till he has his breath, roll him under again, pass him from hand to hand, join hands and dance in a ring around him in the water, and altogether do everything that mischief and recklessness can lead him to do.

A favorite feat of these wonderful little swimmers is to dive from high places; and there are high places enough and to spare for the purpose. No boy is considered as worth real consideration and applause unless he can dive straight and true from the lower spars of a vessel. And during a day's observation at almost any pier the student of swimming will be sure to see boys who can dive clean from the upper spars of a full-rigged ship.

These daring ones, strange to say, are the ones who meet with the least amount of disaster, although every season a few kill themselves either by striking headfirst on an anchor hanging overboard or by diving so deeply into the bottom that they go smother in the black mud. But the biggest proportion of drowning accidents come to the boys who actually jump into the river without being able to swim a stroke,

expecting that the rest will hold them up and teach them to swim; and the way most of these drown is that the other boys don't see them go over and never know anything about it till the cry is set up on the pier by small brothers and sisters:

"Hey, fellers, Jimmy has just went down, and he ain't come up agin!"

Then all hands dive and grope around, swim incredible distances under water, wriggle into deadly spaces between timbers deep in the dark swirls of tide to search for Jimmy. Generally they get him; but generally Jimmy is a dead Jimmy.

Yet day after day in the summer other boys, totally innocent of swimming a stroke, jump over bravely and trust to luck.

Almost all the river pirates are graduates of the free swimming school of the open river. As a result, they take to the water as quickly and as freely as a water rat when they are hard pressed.

Many a time the harbor police, coming down on a boat full of stolen goods in mid-stream, close in on it only to find it without men aboard.

The pirates have slipped silently into the river and are swimming with long, noiseless strokes for shore, three-quarters of a mile away. They swim almost submerged, showing barely the tops of their heads above the surface, and turning at long intervals to get a breath.

So swift are the currents that they may be carried two or three miles up or down stream before they can reach a pier, and then they must hang to it with only their noses above the surface till they are sure the coast is clear before they dare to clamber up.

The harbor police report in such cases that the pirates are supposed to have been drowned. But they know better. They have too many cases in their records of river pirates, with a bullet or two in them for extra cargo, going down in sixty feet of water before their eyes, only to appear in some hospital next day to have the bullet wounds treated. A. L. HAZARD.

Rogue and His Money

A man from Buffalo who had been made to believe that with \$5,000 he could win a large sum of money from certain persons in New York went to that city for the purpose of doing so. In the game that ensued he lost his \$5,000, as was intended. Thereupon he assaulted the man who had induced him to embark in the enterprise and who took part in the game and had him arrested. The magistrate discharged the prisoner, remarking to the prosecutor that he had come to New York for the purpose of "beating" some one else and he must abide by the consequences. The man who parts with his money to the "green goods" man does it with the expectation of getting counterfeit money to pass upon other people. The innocent and unsophisticated Reuben from the country, when he gets cheated in town, usually is cheated in the expectation of cheating some one else or of getting something for nothing. After he has lost his money in these enterprises he should at least have the decency to accept the inevitable result with some degree of composure.—Baltimore Sun.