

OUR SATANIC SHAG

HIS AMERICAN COUSIN'S ECONOMIC EMINENCE

By "A Keen Angler."

Thence up he flew, and on the tree of life,
The middle tree and highest there that grew,
Sat like a cormorant.

IN quoting these lines from "Paradise Lost" one need not follow the immortal John Milton's symbolism, or ponder too deeply the suggestion that the cormorant on the tree of life was Satan. It is sufficient to know that Milton knew cormorants, called in New Zealand shags. He knew their choice of the highest trees to nest in, and of high points to rest on. He knew his cormorants far better than he knew his Satan.

A shag on the topmost point of a dead river-side tree appears to be an aloof creature. Such aloofness may have been useful to the bird in the days of bows and arrows, but is little protection for it against modern small arms of long range and great accuracy. Back in the mountain gorges of various New Zealand streams are tree-top colonies of shags' nests, and thither go the murder gangs of sportsmen armed with their little deadly rifles. Sitting birds are shot through the nest, till the mother head bows and the long neck collapses down the side of the rude structure which serves as home and nursery. The birds who thus die at their post generally stop there, and give the slayer no token whereby he may collect blood-money from the Acclimatisation Society. But other shot birds crash down from great heights, so that the cash transaction can be completed.

The cormorant—or at any rate some species of it—is not really an aloof bird. It is aloof only when hunted—sometimes not even then. It is easily tamed, and trained to catch fish for its keeper. In England the master of the cormorants was one of the officers of the Royal Household. The Chinese still use cormorants to catch fish in shallow rivers. A strap is fastened round the bird's neck and so, without impeding its breath, hinders it from swallowing its capture. "The activity the bird displays under water is almost incredible." That is its only Satanic feature.

THE NOW PROTECTED GUANAY.

Th's almost obsolete industrial use of the cormorant is not its only industrial use. Ex-

cept in a few countries, the cormorant no longer supplies fish for the breakfast table, but it still feeds the pastures and crops of the fields. In the face of all competition from modern competing manures guano remains a colossal industry, and the cormorant of the Peruvian coast—a relative of the New Zealand spotted shag—is claimed to be the greatest revenue-producing bird in the world.

Surely it is no small thing to say that the bird to which, in a cash sense, the industry of the world owes most, is one of these despised shags or cormorants. Yet Robert Cushman Murphy, in the "National Geographic Magazine," sets out to prove that the Peruvian cormorant or guanay is "figuring in dollars and cents, and with reference to effect upon human life and geography . . . king among avian benefactors."

The guanay is a cormorant species related to our sub-Antarctic shags—that is, to New Zealand shags—but the existence of a cool current (the Humboldt current) off the Peruvian coast has enabled this representative of an Antarctic group to live within six degrees of the Equator. Its life has become localised to the Humboldt current and to the strip of South American coast the current washes. The guanays are present literally in millions because the current also contains millions of myriads of small fishes. From the crop and gullet of a dead guanay the remains of no less than 76 anchovies, four or five inches in length, have been taken. If millions of guanay can be carrying each 50 to 100 small fish at a given time, with no exhaustion of fish supply, how many fishes must there be? The fish move in immense shoals, with almost equally immense "rafts" of guanays over them, and with preying fish underneath.

If a shag is to be shot in New Zealand because its crop contains two trout, what slaughter should be inflicted on these guanay fish-murderers in South America?

As a matter of fact, the South Americans allowed the guanays to be made war upon