

THE GRASS GRUB EXTERMINATORS

(By Hugh Ross.)

THEY squat, or to be more exact, prop themselves against small mounds of brown sun-warmed earth while the hot north wind, boisterously ruffling their feathers, sends little dust clouds swirling about their unheeding persons. Contented, comfortable, three parts asleep, they rest after their meal. And they are *very* full! Gorged! Stuffed! Till the wonder is that those distended crops do not burst under the strain of the awe-inspiring loads.

Every morning from nine o'clock onwards they come. Individually, or by twos and threes, they appear, mere white dots against the blue horizon at first, but rapidly growing larger as they sail majestically nearer. By eleven o'clock something less than a hundred black-backed gulls have gathered to the feast. Only one item is on the bill of fare—grass-grubs. (Extra large! extra choice! ... succulent ... in fact, the tit-bit par excellence. Thousands of them! And all served ready to hand.) The "cafe" (so to speak) is a fifty-acre paddock in which the long neat rows of barren drills indicate a fruitless attempt to grow turnips. The grass-grubs are responsible for those bare drills, assisted, I might add, in no meagre degree by battalions of wire-worms. But it is the grass-grubs that have attracted the gulls. For these grubs are enormous specimens of their kind. All the season they have fattened on the turnips intended as winter feed for a thousand sheep. Now, however, the tables are turned. It is the seagulls who wax fat.

Just how the gulls first discovered the grubs I do not know. Shortly after the turnips were sown I noticed an occasional gull walking about the drills. This was in January. One bird in particular seems to be always there. He has a deformed leg and at the start was further conspicuous by a couple of ragged wing-feathers. The extreme tips were missing, and I think this had been caused by a rifle-bullet. Right through the year this gull, along with a gradually increasing number of fellow gulls, has patronised the turnip field, living very well indeed on the big grubs.

Now, in early November, when the scant few turnips are eaten off by stock, I pull down the brake fences. When I lift the rows of stakes lying across the paddock a few days later there are as many as a dozen grubs under every stake. The earth is literally infested with them. When we commence cultivation the paddock is transferred from a happy hunting ground to a positive eldorado for the black-backed gulls. Back and forth they follow the tractor and the deep-biting ten-foot tandem discs, discs that are bringing forth to the sunlight a horde of wriggling, helpless white grubs. This provender the gulls attack with gusto, flying at first, then running awkwardly over the broken earth, pushing and shoving eagerly to the fore, and evidently every bit as eager for a good hard bite at a fellow being as at a grass-grub. When the first burst of speed is over and their hunger is somewhat appeased, they gradually sort themselves out, and settle down to the serious business of obtaining a soul-satisfying meal. Then with enthusiasm fast on the wane and so full that navigation proves difficult, they move slowly here and there, selecting choice tit-bits with the air of connoisseurs. Eventually they give in reluctantly and ease their gorged bodies on the sward, resting in the manner already described. (Incidentally, while they rest, the battle is carried on by starlings, who bear the grubs off to a mile-distant wood to feed their young.)

A full three hours the gulls allow themselves for their siesta, refusing to so much as preen a feather by way of exercise. Sometimes, however, the tractor will be gradually working nearer to them, passing at length within a scant ten feet of a gull. With uneasy shuffling of wings he watches it pass him by ere he again settles down comfortably. Poor bird! He has a few moments' grace, and then the thunderous exhaust of the forty-horse-power engine intermingled with the clattering of tracks heralds the tractor's return. Manifesting more and more symptoms of unease, the seagull, still very reluctant to move, nevertheless gets to its feet. Still vacillating it suddenly beholds