

threw it over a hedge. I then forgot about it till bedtime, and when I brought it in there was a mantis egg-case firmly cemented to one sleeve. It would be a reflection on two people instead of one—on our soap powder, our eyes, and our

MARCH 17

ironing — to think that the mantis did not complete its work in one day, but it surprises me that it did and could. Where do these cases come from? If they are secreted, how does even a big mantis keep the secretion going? If they are chewed and salivated cellulose, could a mantis complete its task in six or seven hours? I am taking a risk in asking such questions but it is better to admit ignorance than to pretend.

Fortunately for two reputations, mantises are clever cattle. They are also historical hypocrites. They humbugged the ancient Greeks into allowing them powers of divination. They bluffed the Turks and Arabs into believing that they turned to Mecca when they prayed. They made such fools of the Hottentots that mantis-worship, or something like it, exists among them to this day. And now perhaps one has fooled me into assuming that it made a capsule as big as a bean (three-fifths of an inch long by three-tenths wide) and cemented it to my shirt sleeve when my back was turned for half a day.

I know how dangerous they can be when they look most innocent, and why, for all their praying, someone has called them "not the saints but the tigers of the insect world." Flies and small spiders are of course easy meat to them, but one Sunday morning I saw a bee seized suddenly from behind, held at arm's length till it gave up trying to turn and sting, and then slowly eaten through. Some mantises, I have read, can even change colour when it suits them, becoming as inconspicuous on the flower as they were a little earlier on the leaf. I am thankful that they don't grow big enough in New Zealand, as they apparently do in some countries—tropical South America, for example—to attack birds and frogs.

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It made no difference to the enjoyment of my breakfast this morning that we had not grown the mushrooms, bought them, or had them given to us. Perhaps it made a slight difference. Perhaps I missed the titillations of vanity that come with the thought of ownership and home production. Perhaps there was a little worm at work in my brain box reminding me that I

MARCH 20

was a thief. But I was not conscious of these troubles, and if I had been the mushrooms would still have been sweet in my mouth.

I have almost lost the distinction between mine and thine with mushrooms. They are mine when they grow on the side of the road. They are not mine when they appear through the fence. But whose are they if no one else sees them, or is likely to see them, before the maggots get them? Who has done anything to make them grow? Sheep, cows, and horses, and the wind. Perhaps my sheep and cows. In any case God's wind. Is it a crime or a sin or a piece of impudence to take what nobody has sown or cultivated and only the finder knows to exist?

I try to think that it is none of these things, but find it easier to believe that it is all three. If I were the landowner and someone else the trespasser—but then I am a selfish man, and a sinner from my mother's womb; a land grabber;

a socialist who can't see socialism working for another two thousand years; a renegade Christian who thinks that Christianity may come in ten thousand years. What the wicked do or say is not a guide for the righteous. There are, too, forms of property that must stay at home to be owned: bees, for example. If they wander, they are wild, and the finder may safely keep them. Can Jim prove that his mushrooms are not wild?

But I am sorry that it was Jim. If he had not been away from home I might not have seen his mushrooms, or convinced myself so easily that they would perish before he returned. But a passing motorist told me about them, and the Devil did the rest: the wicked serpent who knows that I have for years urged Jim to place a private property notice at the entrance to his wild orchard, to give up being soft with picknickers, and to give the police the names of those found with his walnuts and pears.

(To be continued)

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