

# The Quality of Mercy

by "SUNDOWNER"

IT is a pleasant change to find someone making money by protecting birds instead of shooting them; to see enthusiasm creating a sanctuary and discovering that people will pay to enter it. I came on something like this near the border of Queensland and New South Wales, and I was sorry that I was not able to stay a week or two there to see what it looked like on longer acquaintance.

AUGUST 24

But it left a very pleasant impression in one afternoon. The sanctuary was not large—a few acres of bush with a timber-covered mountain a mile or two away on one side and a river on the other. It did not look like an area which birds could not resist. In any case, it was not different from hundreds of areas along the coast, but thousands of birds knew about it, and brought all their friends to tea. I don't know where the honey came from that was one of the daily attractions, since many of the birds were honey eaters, and many more eaters of bees. If the owner of the sanctuary had his own hives, his bees must have led an adventurous life; unless they had a better understanding with their enemies than Banfield's bees on Dunk Island. But there was honey every day for those birds that liked it, and some to sell to the visitors who came to see them eating it. There were cakes for those who drank tea, and dishes of crumbs for the grain and grub eaters. There was half a chain circle in the centre of the tea garden which only the owner entered, and he had not to whistle or rattle or call to bring the birds down on his head and arms. I think the birds of Australia are less timid than our birds, and more easily tamed. They mobbed him as soon as he entered the ring.

fluttered in his face, clung to his hat, sleeves, coat and collar, and when he held out a dish of food he had to brace his muscles to prevent the birds from bearing it to the ground. For they were not small birds like our fantails, waxeyes and warblers. They started about the level of our tufts, and went on to the size of magpies and pigeons, with splashes of colour such as we never see. All I saw myself were parrots, parakeets, rainbow birds, shrikes, and peewees waiting for three-thirty, since we had to drive on at three. But I saw photographs of the three-thirty occasions, and wondered as I looked at them why such a novel, pleasant and wholly beneficent way of earning a livelihood has not been tried more often. I am not at all worried by the mixture of commercialism and sentiment. I don't recall that St. Francis commercialised his birds. They have, however, worked hard for his faith and his Church ever since, and I see no harm in mixed emotions if we don't lose sight of the ingredients.

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HERE is something I saw today in a city of half a million people: a night-soil contractor at work in a main street at midday. The

AUGUST 25 tumbrel was in the middle of the road,

with a man loading and unloading on each side. When I asked an old resident if this was the custom she asked me how I expected the men to do all the houses by night.

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I WAS uneasy last night, and more than a little ashamed, when I listened to a BBC broadcast about rabbits and myxomatosis. In itself it was good news

that the disease was killing rabbits faster than farmers could bury them, but when I made as much allowance as I dared make for the sentimentality of the English to animals, so much more marked than their sentimentality to children, allowed as much as I could for the limited knowledge of the interviewers

and interviewees, I could not escape the feeling that the

SEPTMBER 3 "mercy squads" reported to be searching for and killing the affected animals could not be called together in Australia and New Zealand for other than mercenary reasons. I have never believed, and I do not believe now, that we are less humane than the stock from which we have come, or that the conditions of life in Australia and New Zealand have made people callous, thoughtless and brutal. There are national, as there are individual, blind and insensitive spots in all of us. It enrages an Englishman to see a New Zealand shepherd starving his dogs to make them eager workers. It ought to enrage him. But it enraged me when I went to England and saw a bullock tethered all day in a dark shed to "top him off" for the butcher, and turkeys packed all day on narrow platforms to fatten quickly for the market. I am against all these abominations whoever commits them, and I have not discovered that the capacity to commit them varies much in the old world and the new. The English are the grossest offenders in the Western world in perpetuating blood sports; but to find as callous killers of domestic animals as we are in Australia and New Zealand, and as ruthless destroyers of farm pests, it might be necessary to go to South America.

Why, then, did it worry me to hear of these volunteer mercy squads in the English cornfields? It worried me because it made me more conscious of the fact that most country boys in New

Zealand think no more about killing a rabbit than about flicking the head off a thistle, worry no more about a sick rabbit than about a wilted dock, and think no more about the sufferings of a rabbit that leaves a leg in a trap or runs off with a bullet in its bowels than the average fisherman in any part of the world thinks about the suffering (if any) of the fish that breaks his line. I am as guilty as anyone can be who goes on using traps and guns knowing that a proportion of the victims will escape to live or die miserably. But I don't think the proportion of guilty men is as high in Britain as it is here—partly because a smaller proportion of young people grow up in these fields of slaughter, and partly because a larger proportion are taught that it is wrong to shoot when you have not a 90 per cent chance of killing, and unpardonable to wound and not follow up.

(To be continued)

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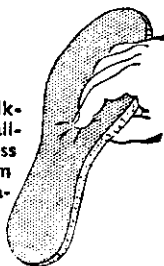
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