

THE CALL OF THE WILD

"YES," he said, "they'll start today—March 23." "Everywhere in Canterbury?"

"Everywhere in New Zealand. They always start at the equinox."

"But surely the weather has something to do with it?"

"Nothing at all. It's the calendar. On the 23rd of March the day and the night are equal. That night the stags begin to roar."

APRIL 11

"Rain, snow, or hail?"

"It's all the same. Mind you, the weather affects them once they begin."

"But the calendar starts them?"

"Every year."

"Have you heard one this year?"

"No. I haven't been out yet. But I'll hear one tomorrow."

"If you had gone out yesterday what would have happened?"

"I'd have heard one tonight."

"Not last night?"

"No. You must wait for the 23rd."

It would have been churlish to tell him that they were roaring near Rotorua a week before I met him. And a waste of time. He would have known better.

But the laugh is on me today. He is out there listening still, while I am sitting here at my window wondering if I will ever hear them again. One of the drawbacks of a house with a view is that looking is so often longing.

The sun had, something to do with it. It lingered so long on the mountains tonight that I remembered what day it was. But it was not the redeemed sinner who remembered. It was the lost pagan waiting with a rifle for a roaring stag to come into clearer view. I am sure there is one roaring as I write this note, and that the sound, if it could reach me, would stir me as no other sound has done since I first heard it 50 years ago. I have not heard the bugling of a moose or the bellowing of a wapiti, but I have never been surprised by the

roar of a red stag without a momentary relapse into barbarism. It is one of those reactions I can't control and can't understand—fear, surprise, excitement, delight, all aroused in the same moment of time; aroused not by the volume of sound, which, though astonishing, is not equal to the roar of a bull; not by the setting, since that remains the same for the call of cattle, which produces no such excitement; not by the strangeness, since stags, though imported, have been here for 70 years; not by heredity, since there have been no deer in my ancestry for, I suppose, 20 generations. It is something that, if I lived in Africa, would come with the roar of a lion; but stags are not dangerous like lions, and New Zealanders are not infected with fear of them in their mothers' arms.

But now the moon is up. There will be long shadows in the hollows near the bush and the hinds will be feeding in the open. Eighteen days have passed since darkness overtook light. Even the stags which have no calendars will be roaring.

* * *

IN one of the tributes paid last week to Sir Winston Churchill—perhaps Lord Samuel's—the point was made that Sir Winston is never cynical. That is, I suppose, roughly true; but the more I think about it the more surprising I find it. Perhaps it surprised Lord Samuel, too, when he thought about it, but if it did he is a good dissembler.

APRIL 12

I think it more likely that the observation was as far from cynicism as Sir Winston's pronouncements on peace or poverty or the British Empire which scoffers find so hard to swallow. The obstacle is not his cynicism but theirs. They can't believe that a man who has lived so long and seen so much, met so many big and not so big people, wrestled so often with rogues and scoundrels, taken and given so many knocks, read and written so many secret documents, and used and worked with

so many adventurers—they can't see how a man could emerge from all that with his adolescent faith undimmed. Neither can I. But I believe that it has happened if I can't think how. I believe that Sir Winston's fundamental beliefs have not changed in 60 years. I believe that they are orthodox beliefs, and that when he falls back on them in 1955 he feels as secure as he did in 1895, and is not even tempted to question them when they lose their meaning for other people. He escapes cynicism by seeing doubt and disloyalty as the same thing.

Only the lucky few can do that. Though cynicism is usually the refuge of cowards and fools, the funk-hole of failure, jealousy, meanness, and disappointment, most of us drop into it sooner or later, and not many climb out again. I think I have read somewhere that a cynic, etymologically, is a dog-like man, a man who smiles or snarls on one side of his face. The comparison is a little rough on dogs, since a dog's purpose in curling his lip is to make clear the state of his mind. The cynic's purpose in sneering is to bring somebody better than himself into contempt or ridicule; to cast doubt on goodness, and mud on clean hands. We pretend that we are fortifying ourselves against lies and deceit when we scoff, but our usual purpose is to conceal ignorance, indecision, and fear.

TWO sheep to the acre on a dry hillside in an autumn without rain are one and a half sheep more than the land will carry. If I sell them I lose half of the money I gave for them, little though it was. If I buy hay for them it will cost me £10, and perhaps £15, a ton, and a great deal of labour. So, being a procrastinator as well as lazy,

I will do nothing. I will keep the water-troughs full, and hope, against all knowledge and experience, that when rain does come grass will foolishly follow. It is as likely to follow now as the leaves are to return to the trees, and if it does it will meet the same fate.

But mellow fruitfulness without mists has its compensations. I can milk Betty without a coat; trail her round the garden without wetting my feet; lie down anywhere without a ground sheet. I can almost suppose, like the bees, that warm days will never cease. Though it seems to be light rather than heat that tells birds what to do and when to do it, it is drought that brings them to the water every morning while I milk, and nights without fog or dew that bring hedgehogs to the back door nearly every afternoon. I think it is the dry warm nights that keep the fantails so busy early in the morning and late in the afternoon and bring so many bellbirds with them. If they are not eating insects I can't think what the bellbirds are getting, since we have at present no clover, no honey-producing plants or trees, and no water in secret places for baths and drinks. Yet the bellbirds are here every day, and they are not, like the waxeyes, eating fruit. Nor have I seen them doing what I can now see two waxeyes doing a few feet away—moving in and out of the dry flower head of a cabbage-tree and swallowing the hard seeds whole. I suppose that abnormality breeds abnormality—unusual appetites to cope with unusual food supplies.

(To be continued)



THE HANDLING and marketing of eggs is expected to produce a lively discussion in "Question Mark" (YA link, Monday, May 9, 8.30 p.m.). The speakers will be Alan Lambert, a producer, of Kumeu, F. Jackson, an Auckland distributor, Harry Mark, a suburban grocer, and Margaret Black, housewife. This representative panel will attempt to answer the question: "Are We Getting Fresh Eggs?"

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 6, 1955.

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