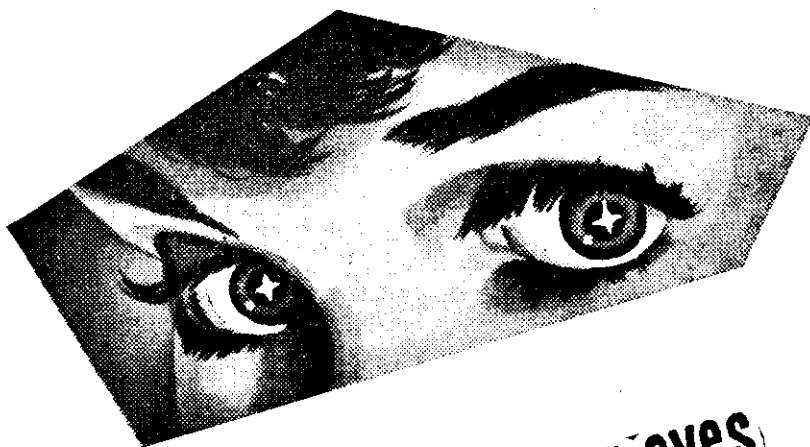




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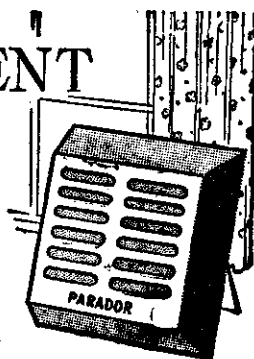
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"The fox sat on a full house and won comfortably"

The Memoirs of a Fox-shooting Man

ONE should not, of course, do such things. Nor even think them. There is something soiling to the mind in the mere contemplation of unworthy ends.

Silence offers no redemption. I have already waited much too long, oppressed by secret guilt, or—worse, much worse—luxuriating in it. But perhaps it is not too late, even now, to unburden myself.

The first thing I have to confess is that the title I have just set down, and am looking at with mingled shame and wistfulness, is something of an overstatement. Nevertheless, I allow it to stand, as (let us say) the crumbling monument to a great aspiration, the sepulchre of a dream.

It is something over twenty years ago since I first went to England, a wild colonial boy who didn't know Blackpool from Whitechapel, and who thought a *brasserie* was something women wore. After a shortish spell in London I found myself beating a retreat from the great Wen and settling down for a period in a south-western county while things in general had a chance to settle down. The change was a tonic to the nerves. The days passed like a procession of angels carrying banners.

There came a time when I made a trip to Bath to see the Roman remains and bought an old shotgun in a second-hand shop. If that sounds just the least bit inconsequential, I can't help it. I'm just trying to tell you a true story in simple words. Having done a good deal of rabbit-shooting in New Zealand, where rabbits are looked upon by farmers very much as Job regarded boils and whirlwinds, I saw no hindrance to adding yet another simple flower to my garland of rustic joys. For a week or two I took a stroll every evening at dusk on the lower slopes of the big, partly-wooded hill half a mile from our cottage. I had some good sport, and brought home more than enough for the pot. When I took a brace of rabbits to the people across the road, they told me that the land on which I was shooting belonged to a neighbouring farmer; and I resolved to go next day and formally ask his leave, merely as an act of courtesy, explaining how much I had already helped him in dealing with the rabbit pest. This approach, I

thought in my generous way, though technically a little too retrospective, would give him an opportunity of showing his indebtedness to me and extending the hand of gratitude and friendship. I expected warm congratulations, and perhaps even a delicate compliment or two about my marksmanship. He might even ask me in for a drink.

The reception I got was warm enough. So I was the — who'd been shooting his — rabbits. He'd heard the shots, but couldn't catch up with me. I would please get off his — land and leave his — game alone, or he'd send for the police. Mention of the fact that I was an ignorant New Zealander only seemed to add fuel to the fire.

This was surprising, and not a little dampening to the spirits. But only for the moment. My humiliation acted as a sort of compost, within which a seed lodged. I began to think about the situation. Strange that rural England should take up such an oddly proprietary attitude towards a rodent pest like the rabbit. Perhaps the rat also? I must enquire. When in Rome. Unlikely, of course, that either of these should be a sacred animal like the fox.

Ah, the fox! At this moment the seed of ambition sprouted. I conceived the idea of writing a best-selling book with the title I have just lifted out of my album of memories and set at the head of this autobiographical fragment.

To business, then. I had been told that a vigilant watcher might very occasionally catch a glimpse of a fox at dawn or dusk in the fields around our cottage. I loaded both barrels of the shotgun and set it behind the kitchen door, ready for instant action.

Nothing happened for some weeks. No fox appeared. Then came New Year's Day. The Tattletown Hunt was, I learned, to be working, or playing, or foxing, or whatever the right term is, in our neighbourhood. The beagles were also to be out and about, and altogether the district was to have quite a rousing time of it. We had another refugee from London staying with us, an old friend, and he and I decided to try running with the beagles. We had lots of fun, and so did everybody else,

(continued on next page)

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 27, 1956.