

WILD GOOSE CHASE

by "SUNDOWNER"

I HAVE never plucked a goose, or killed one, or eaten one. I have never owned one, or had anything else to do with one since I was a very small boy, to whom a goose was a very big bird, and an angry goose a terrifying spectacle. Father would not have a goose on the farm because geese muddled the ford and fouled the grass;

AUGUST 1 and all the farmers round about, but one, shared his opinions. That one was six miles away. And because father had no geese, I have none; because he hesitated to add one more to his annoyances and

goose I would have taken a morning off. But the *Country Magazine* lad claims "Seventeen hundred a week over seven years" in his spare time. The italics, of course, are mine. But the figures are his; and if they are figures of fact, Bob is my uncle, and Danie Craven my dear patient modest friend who would not complain if I stood with both feet on his most tender corn.

ELSIE'S calf is like a red red rose, but lighter than one of my sheep. She is so small, so narrow, so little capable of dealing with Elsie's milk supply that



"I never see a goose without wanting one"

worries, I hesitate to add one to my obligations and ties; because he found life easier without geese, I find it safer. But I never see a goose without wanting one. I never pass one on the road without wishing to stop and watch it. I never see goslings without knowing that I have been a fool.

Many of us are fools. We live, not by reason, but by prejudice; learn not by experience, but by prejudiced and misinterpreted experience; save pennies and throw away pounds. Our attitude to most birds, big and little, is indifference or hostility. If we keep fowls we neglect them. If we have ducks or turkeys or pheasants or geese, we are eccentrics, people schoolboys talk about and school-girls vaguely fear. So it was when I went to school myself. So it is still, or I would cut myself free of these attitudes: buy a pair of geese or turkeys or pheasants or peacocks to show me what I am missing.

At that point my wild goose chase was interrupted by two cows and two calves all demanding immediate attention. Now, two hours later, I have forgotten where I was going. But I remember that what started the chase was a fantastic story I had just read in the *Country Magazine* about the speed at which geese can be plucked. Fowls are a slow job, even with the assistance of almost boiling water. Ducks, I imagine, are at least a half-hour's job. Turkeys I would have placed next, and allowed myself three-quarters of an hour after a little practice. For a

I have allowed her to stay as a share-milker, though I know very well that the day will come when she will convict me of folly. However, every calf we have ever had has done that, except those I killed and buried before they knew what life was. If there was an exception it was the

AUGUST 4 one I never handled because it arrived after I had bought tickets for Queensland, and was reared, as God meant all calves to be reared, at the heels of its mother. But when I came home five months later and found a creature at least half as big as its mother, with a coat like an opossum rug, only a good deal sweeter, and a skin that rippled when it walked; when it looked at me with something like the contempt that a Hollywood minx shows to the girl who went to school with her; when I spent half a day catching it and half an hour getting a halter on its head; when it broke rails and jumped hurdles and dragged me twice through mud, scalding my hands when I let go; when it showed me quite clearly that it did not like my looks or my voice or my manners or my methods (and never would, so there!), I surrendered it secretly to the butcher. But I had to wait five more months before I let the secret out, fully, and with desperate finality, and asked Jim to ring for a carrier. By this time the calf was almost a cow, a more beautiful cow than I had ever possessed or am likely to possess again, and when I braced myself to the task of catching her again and leading her away after

all those weeks of neglect, she walked off as meekly with me as a cow that had been handled every day. But from another morning like that may the good Lord deliver me.

A READER asks me why some birds walk and others hop. If I answered him it would have to be in the language of the T.A.B. I could guess at reasons, but my correspondent's guesses would be as safe as mine.

AUGUST 6 There must be anatomical explanations, but the real problem is why evolution gave some birds a hopping mechanism and organised others into walkers. Pliny had something to say about it 1879 years ago:

All living creatures [he said] have one certain manner of marching and going, according to their several kinds, unto which they keep, and alter not. Birds only vary their course, whether they go upon the ground or fly in the air. Some walk their stations, as crows and choughs; others hop and skip, as sparrows and ouzels; some run, as partridges, woodcocks, and snipes; others again cast out their feet before them, stalk and jet as they go, as storks and cranes.

Pliny's statement (as translated by Holland) was made in the first century A.D., and it is 17 centuries before we come to Gilbert White. But when we do reach White it is difficult to find the traces of 1700 years of new knowledge. Here is White at Selborne in 1789:

Most small birds hop; but wagtails and larks walk, moving their legs alternately; all the duck kind waddle; divers and auks walk as if fettered, and stand erect on their tails; crows and daws swagger in their walk; woodpeckers use their tails, which incline downward, as a support when they run up trees; parrots, like other hook-clawed birds, walk awkwardly and make use of their bill as a third foot, climbing and descending with ridiculous caution. All the poultry parade and walk gracefully and run nimbly.

It is wonderful observation, but it explains nothing. What both writers say is that birds walk as they do, or hop as they do, because they can't, with their structure, do anything else. It is a little better than defining a horse by saying that it is not a cow, but it leaves the essential things unsaid. Why are a stilt's legs so long that White wondered how it "could wield such a length of lever with such feeble muscles," and a swift's legs so short that it can neither walk properly nor rise from an even surface? It is not an answer that a stilt requires long legs for wading and a swift short legs for a life on the wing and on perpendicular surfaces. Nor does it carry us further to say that the Creator made them like that. Of course He did, but when, how, and in what stretch of time? A lark walks, a sparrow hops, a quail runs; but they must be about the same age biologically, they live in the same climatic zones, they will eat the same food, they are exposed to the same enemies. Why is it an effort for a lark to hop, for a sparrow to walk, and for quail to run slowly? I can't even begin to think of the answer.

(To be continued)

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