

Persistent Pigeons

by "SUNDOWNER"

"COME to Dunedin," a Roslyn correspondent writes, "and see a few wood pigeons in a South Island garden." In case I "question or doubt" him, he encloses a photograph "taken late in April this year." The photograph, unfortunately, is not clear enough for successful reproduction on this page,

but it is clear enough to convict the writer of these notes of ignorance—and to make him very happy. Though it is just on 50 years since he left Dunedin and he has resisted occasional impulses to return, he remembers still that one of his consolations when he went unwillingly to school there was the Town Belt and his teacher G. M. Thomson's talks about the birds in it. But he does not remember seeing a pigeon there, or hearing G.M. mention one. After the Blue Mountains he saw no more pigeons until he went to live in Nelson, and even in Nelson the sight of one in 1910 was an event. It would interest him to know whether the pigeons in his correspondent's garden are wanderers (or the descendants of wanderers) returned, or members of a colony that has held its place since the first days of settlement.

While I am happy to think that pigeons are everywhere on the increase, I find it difficult to understand why. They lay only one egg, and it takes longer than a hen's egg to hatch. The young bird takes six or seven weeks to mature, and the parents during all that period are an easy mark for sparrowhawks by day and weasels by night. In daylight and darkness they are exposed to human enemies, Maori and Pakeha. Though they are probably never short of food, since leaves, buds, and flowers are as acceptable to them as berries, their only defence while they are eating is the law, and it is optimistic to think that all or most people

observe it at all times. It is possible—I don't know enough to feel sure—that their low production is balanced by their high degree of protectiveness while the nestlings are growing. Once in the bush behind Day's Bay I blundered on a nest not quite as high from the ground as my own head. It was, in fact, only two or three feet from the ground at the nearest point, since the young tree in which it was placed was growing on a bank, and it was quite easy for me by climbing the bank, to look down on the brooding bird and touch it with my hand. This I did, gently, and although the pigeon half rose from the nest and withdrew itself from my reach, it resisted interference and did not fully uncover its egg. Such boldness in a wild bird must be very unusual; but I could not help thinking at the time that in defending her egg or her chicken the mother risks her own life. However, if a large proportion of the young birds hatched did not live, pigeons would already have disappeared.

LAST year Crocus, a Romney-South-down pet, had two lambs, both all-white. Both were successfully reared, though Crocus was only a lamb herself when they were born, and she was always short of feed. The interesting fact, however, was that only one of the two ran with her continuously. The other teamed up with

another lamb and its mother, returning to its own mother only when it wanted a drink. I remember, too, that, when I first found those lambs, only one was beside its mother. The other was lying in some rushes about two chains away from her, but was at once claimed by Crocus when I placed it near her. Now she has twins

again, one all-white, the other black-nosed like its Shropshire father, and in this case, too, I found only one lamb with its mother the morning I first saw them. The other, the black-nosed one, was some distance away, and still tends to lie by itself when it is not drinking. But Crocus knows that there is a second lamb if one only goes to her for a drink. She calls and looks round, and although she does not rebuff the first comer, she stands still and relaxes only when the second is on the way to her and in sight. It is a repetition of last year's situation as far as I observed that and remember it. There was a period last year when I paid no special attention to the absence of one lamb. It was only after it was big enough to eat grass, and go its own way, that I became aware of the noisy search for it each afternoon before my little flock climbed the hill for the night. Then I saw it happening evening after evening, and could not doubt that Crocus had some kind of awareness that she possessed two lambs and not one only. She certainly can't count, or think or plan in numbers. But if she goes looking for a second lamb when it is not looking for her, there is an impression of duality somewhere that spurs her into action. In ten million years one of her descendants may know how many mouths make five.

MY mail today brought me this story from a friend I have not seen for 50 years: George D.W., now in his middle eighties.

SEPTEMBER 1 Since dogs keep their secrets I am not able to say that the interpretation is "true in every detail." I am sure the facts are.

Confronted suddenly by a crisis, something involving life and death, and demanding instant and drastic action, the brain of a dog can, upon occasion, function quite as efficiently as that of a man. In support of this contention I submit the following anecdote, true in every detail. The incident was enacted a good many years ago: 58 to be exact; and took place on the shore of Lake Wanaka, at the town then known as Pembroke. Some little distance from all other buildings, and facing up the lake, there stood a popular establishment known as Sachtle's Commercial Hotel. Of this not a vestige remains today. Besides the hotel building proper, a large and up-to-date structure, there was a dance hall, complete with stage and permanent decorations. This was separated from the hotel by a stable yard, about 40 feet square. Across the back of the yard was a row of half a dozen "loose boxes," for the stabling of horses. These, fitted with the usual doors, cut across at half their height, opened outwards, and the lower half was closed. A board fence with a pair of folding gates enclosed the yard from the road, and would be about a chain distant from the water's edge. That day one of the gates was open, having been torn off its hinges by a careless driver. In the straw bedding of one of the loose boxes the hotel pet, a little Spaniel bitch, was nursing her litter of four pups. In the corner of the yard, by the hall, some of us men were effecting a repair. I was holding a screwdriver.

A sudden commotion started over in the loose boxes, but before anyone could reach them, over the door came Gyp, with a weasel hanging from her lip. Not to us did she come for help; not she. Instead, she took a line of her own, which was a beeline for the lake: out of the gate, across the road, down the shingle bank, and in. In amazement we watched to see how she would make out; but there was no need for any doubt. To hold the weasel under she was obliged to half drown herself; but she persisted, and vigorously, too. Possibly her idea was to compel it to release its hold, but that it never did. But she had the best of it. She knew when her head was coming up to inhale, the weasel did not; and so it was that when she came out it still hung there. But it was a very dead weasel.

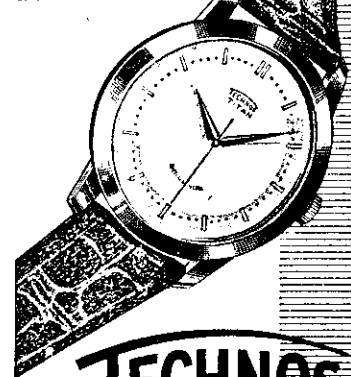
My screwdriver had to be requisitioned to prize open the death-gripped jaws.

The fame of Gyp's exploit spread throughout the district, and it would not be surprising if there still remains someone else, besides myself, who remembers.

(To be continued)

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NATIVE PIGEON

"In daylight and darkness they are exposed to enemies"