

Childhood's Bonds

by "SUNDOWNER"

HE is an Edinburgh Scot, 66 years old. His father, his grandfather, ten generations of grandfathers, fed from the hand of John Knox. So, until a year or two back, did he. But his flesh was always a little stronger than his spirit, a little more wakeful, and a little more insistent, and for 60 years he fell at more hurdles than he took running. Then something happened

JANUARY 9 to him, I don't know what, but he became suddenly genial and exuberant. I think he just gave up, accepted his limitations, and saw the chinks in his puritan armour. Because we live in different worlds our meetings are perhaps two or three in five or six years, and one has just taken place.

"Mahn," he said, "it's good to see you. Are you well?"

"Very well. And you?"

"As well as I've ever been in my life. Better than I've ever been. I've had a wonderful year. I eat what I like and drink what I like. Do anything that I want to do. Look at me."

I had been looking for two minutes. He was a stone or more heavier, a year or two older, but so free of the furtive anxieties I had often seen flickering behind his glasses that I asked for his secret.

"Meat and drink," he said, beaming. "No more fads, no more fasts, no more prayers, no more tears. I'm just a civilised animal, and not too civilised either."

With that he shook hands again and parted, but his benevolent smile still warms me. And he is more civilised than

he thinks. Animals can't smile. They can frisk and play, and sometimes grimace, but the journey from that to the embracing geniality of this reconciled sinner will take ten million years.

WITH one or two exceptions—E. H. McCormick, J. C. Beaglehole, and perhaps two others—I have not seen culture come to anybody in one generation. When it seems to have happened a closer examination of the case usually reveals something important that I have overlooked. Nor have I often seen the emotional bonds of childhood broken in one generation. If we

JANUARY 11 are born and bred in the country we babble like Falstaff of green fields when we come to die. Wobblers we may be from our mothers' wombs, as fickle as wind and as unstable as water, but try to change us and we are as rigid as steel. In 60 years I have not succeeded in combing all the tussock out of my hair; in breaking the spell of matagouri; in extracting from a manuka bush in Canterbury what I found and still find in every bush in the Molyneux valley. I have now one bush of matagouri which I guard jealously; two roots of Spaniard; and an acre or two of tussock. I look across a more splendid plain than any in Otago, at higher and more splendid mountains. I have fruit trees, chestnuts, willows, and elms; flowering hedges, flowering trees, everything that grew in the garden of my boyhood, and many things that it was too cold to grow. But they are all second-best; replacements



"I look across a more splendid plain than any in Otago"

and not the originals; substitutes for the things that filled my days in childhood, but not the things themselves. I have been looking at and living with them for 25 years without getting them into my heart and brain. It is like trying to smell musk all these years after the smell has departed. It looks the same. It is the same. But it emits no fragrance. The most we can extract from it is the memory, uncertain, elusive, and tantalising, of a fragrance that once was. So it is with associations in general. Break them and they can't be replaced. If we start in the highlands we stay in the highlands wherever our feet wander afterwards. I don't know whether it is a rich blessing or an inescapable curse. It is the death of progress, the life of thought. It ties the Arab to his desert

and leaves the Jew free to build roads, railways, foundaries, ships, and harness atomic energy. It makes heroes of us, and cowards; nations too proud to fight, nations too tough to surrender; inverts if we stay at home, cripples with split personalities if we wander. I have wandered.

I WAS greatly surprised this morning to find a magpie floating in the water-trough. It was quite dead, with wings spread, its feet stretched backwards, and its head below the surface. I could not decide, without skinning it, whether it had been injured first and fallen into the water or had merely slipped in and been unable to get out. The water was about nine inches down on the sloping sides, which are concrete, and greasy with slime. Eight or nine feet above the trough there are the bare, heavy, oblique limbs of an old macrocarpa.

JANUARY 14 If it was a simple case of drowning, the question is how the bird fell in. If there was injury—a collision with the tree, a blow by another bird, or concussion from a spent bullet—it would still be difficult to think why the accident happened immediately above the water. All in all I suspect thirst and a slip.

But nearly all birds can keep afloat for a few minutes. Lloyd Morgan proved that "even little chicks a day or two old can swim well." With a glass trough and a camera he showed not merely that they kept afloat but that their feet and legs went through the same motions as those of ducklings and other young water birds. They soon tired, of course, and sank as the water wet their down, but the survival period was from two to three minutes. I think a mature magpie would last longer than that, and should expect it to scramble out of a trough if the sides offered any resistance at all to claws and feet. But in this case there would be no resistance. The sides were made smooth to begin with, and in 20 years they have been only occasionally scraped. Slime grows in the water, and dust settles in the slime to become mud. If the water had been a little higher the bird's beak might have been used to help its wings. But the edge was just beyond reach, and the struggle was probably short.

(To be continued)

(Solution to No. 834)

T	A	C	I	T	P	M	V	F
E	H	R	R	O	U	T	I	N
A	V	E	R	A	G	E	M	L
C	S	G	C	P	I	L	L	S
H	Y	S	T	E	R	I	C	S
E		D	P		I			
R		P	H	Y	S	I	C	I
		R		T		N		
S	I	A	P	A	T	H	E	T
C	A	M	E	L	T	A	A	I
O	A	E	I	M	B	I	B	E
O	N	T	A	R	I	O	I	L
P	E	T	N	T	R	E	N	D

Clues Across

1. Tear this to make even strong men weep (3).
3. He could truthfully say, "I'm a cop, Len" (9).
8. The game of selling part of one's nose to the highest bidder (7, 6).
9. This is a real change for a peer (4).
10. Goodbye, we're taking a turn in the fall (8).
12. "... let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the — of Lebanon" (6). (Judges, chapter 9.)
13. Stealthily follows the conversation in the ship (6).
16. Promise in marriage (8).

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

18. The amorous glance of a frog leaning over a lily pond (4).
21. Teach the first arrangement of a type of embroidery (13).
22. In the matter of the tendency, it's repeating (9).
23. Bears have one; in fact they have two (3).
14. Where there's a will, there's at least one (7).
15. In short supply (6).
17. Curtail a country to obtain one of her coins (5).
19. It may be used to overcome 3 down (5).
20. Standing order to the printer (4).

No. 835 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

Clues Down

1. To make it, Edgar must first undergo a transformation (5).
2. Made fast, and mostly made well (7).
3. Here we have father at home and suffering (4).
4. A vehicle to be found in Invercargill and Auckland (6).
5. Dog tears found in the sea? (8).
6. She's out of her mind to begin with (5).
7. Would the dress-maker find them almost useless? (7).
11. Short rest (8).
22. Haggles (7).

1		2		3		4		5		6		7
8												
9					10							
					11							
12							13			14		
							15					
16		17							18			19
								20				
21												
22											23	