

QUEER COMPANIONS

HOW does a cat catch, and hold, a hare? When it is only three or four months old a hare is bigger than the average cat, stronger, faster, and heavier; but a cat will kill it and bring it home. With rabbits, especially young rabbits, cats have a double chance; they can pounce in the grass and they can follow into the burrow.

MARCH 17 Though I have never seen a cat follow a rabbit into a burrow, or emerge from a burrow with a rabbit in its mouth, I am sure that this happens. But hares don't go underground. They have to be caught in the open, and while they must sometimes be caught asleep, a cat must be very lucky to hold them when it is clever enough to find them. Their sets are not often open to the sky and free of entangling grass. Nor is a hare always the timid animal that it is commonly supposed to be. It will escape if it can, but when it can't get away it will sometimes attack, suddenly, and with such surprising violence that a cat must be hard pressed to hold on. I suspect that cats, if they could talk, would be able to tell far better stories than fishermen

by "SUNDOWNER"

can about the size of those that got away.

However, it is the exception in nature that catches our attention. The killing of hares by cats is, after all, not so remarkable as the saving of a hare's life by a cat, which also happens now and again if we may believe the poets and the naturalists. I have not myself seen a hare saved by a cat, but I have seen a very old cat suckling a very young rabbit, and Gilbert White, to illustrate "the wonderful spirit of sociality in the brute creation," tells the story of a friend's cat which, having been robbed of its kittens the day a leveret was brought to him, stole the leveret and fed it and hid it until it was big enough to emerge with safety. That was not "sociality" but disturbed maternity, and if the kittens had survived, the leveret's life would have been short.

IN my copy of *The Natural History of Selborne* there happens to be a woodcut of a horse and a hen which, White says, proved Milton to be "somewhat mistaken" when he said that bird could not converse with beast or fish

with fowl. These two incongruous animals, White explains, were owned by an acquaintance who had no other animals, and by degrees they developed a mutual attachment.

The fowl would approach the quadruped with notes of complacency, rubbing herself gently against his legs; while the horse would look down with satisfaction, and move with the greatest caution and circumspection, lest he should trample on his diminutive companion.

I think most owners of animals have seen incongruous attachments, and that very observant owners occasionally see happenings which they hesitate to report. Though some animals are solitary by nature, and also some birds, most prefer company and pine without it. Both my cows have spent an appreciable portion of their lives tethered in patches of good grass inaccessible to them when they are running free. Both follow me eagerly to those places and graze greedily while I stand by. But if I take only one, and leave her there, she frets, calls, moves about, wasting psychologically what she ought to be converting physiologically. It is true that she does in the end settle down; but to achieve that I have to leave her tethered all day or find something to do myself not far away from her.

I can laugh as crudely as anyone at animal psychiatrists who—for a fee—tell rich women what to do with pampered dogs to ward off worry and ulcers. But we must all be psychiatrists more or less if we want all the milk our cows can secrete, all the eggs our hens can lay, and all the mutton and wool on our sheep without waiting too long for them.

NOW that German wasps are permanent residents of Canterbury I hear a new tale every day of the damage they are doing and of the risks of interfering with them. Others tell me what a difference they have made to the blow-fly population and will sooner or later make to the clover.

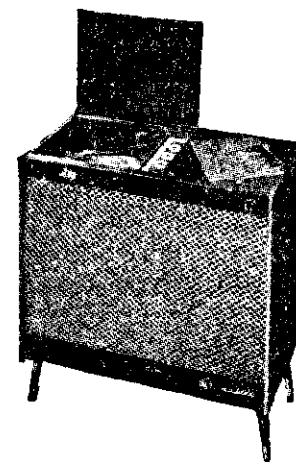
MARCH 20 *Omne ignotum pro horifico.* Until a

year or two ago those of us who were born in New Zealand had not seen wasps, and in a hundred years what our grandparents knew about them has been forgotten. Before they have decimated the orchards of Otago we shall no doubt have forgotten in turn how quickly they brought danger and ruin to Canterbury. But that will take a month or two. We have to do a little more shouting and shuddering before winter comes, or the world will not know that in Halswell County the other day wasps held up a grocer's delivery van, that in Mount Herbert County they robbed a widow of several cases of plums in one day and one night, that they put a truck over a cliff on Banks Peninsula, and let horses away to a false start at Addington (or Riccarton, or New Brighton, or Hororata, or somewhere).

But wasps, I am sure, are just like Scotsmen—harmless if they are not provoked. I don't like them as much as I like Scotsmen, or trust them as far, but they come in and out of our windows with the most peaceful drone, and leave the dinner table at once if we place a spoonful of honey on the kitchen bench. As for their love of their insect neighbours, when we still had stone fruit I saw six wasps, three flies, and one Red Admiral butterfly on the same nectarine, and when I looked again next day only the butterfly seemed to have moved. I would grow nectarines especially for wasps if they would find their own protein on the trees, but I suspect that they love flies, talk fly language, and share jokes with them at our expense.

(To be continued)

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"Most animals prefer company and pine without it"

(continued from previous page)

when the wind is in the east. Other times, you must go a hundred paces further upstream."

These are the sort of things we say at Mount Maunganui—in the face of the most powerful evidence to the contrary. Though visitors, and other ignorant fellows, may stagger up the beach with thrice our weight of fish, yet you never may convince us that they were not on the wrong possies.

There is one thing more, in the eye of our Ancient Egyptian. Right there in the corner, where you can hardly notice it. Obscured, disguised, beaten back though it be, yet it still is there.

The tinge of disappointment.

The fish is, after all, only a Good Eating Fish.

Because of their size, no fisherman ever really wants to catch Good Eating Fish. To the uninitiated, this must at first seem strange. The axiom appears obvious—if small fish are good to eat, then large fish must be the reverse.

Actually, in the case of the snapper, at least, this appears to be fairly true. A fishing friend of mine has a most

apt description of the edible qualities of the large snapper. He says that it tastes like a kapok mattress. Those who have tackled a senior snapper on the plate will recognise immediately the deftness of the phrase.

Yet there it is. No matter how skillfully he may dissemble, the fact still stands that the fisherman who comes home with Good Eating Fish only is, at heart, a disappointed man. In masterly fashion, he will set out to convey that, on this occasion, he was fishing for the table only; that, above all, what he wanted were Good Eating Fish. So craftily is this done that only another fisherman can detect the undertones of disappointment. The casual onlooker is left with an impression of our man skillfully discouraging any big fish from taking his bait—cunningly arranging his line so that only Good Eating Fish are attracted thereby.

Ah, well—it was always so. By the Pyramids or in Pilot Bay, we are actors to the end.

I must go. We are having fish for dinner.

No—nothing big or coarse. Just two or three Good Eating Fish.