



Shepherd's Calendar

HEADS IN THE SUN

by "SUNDOWNER"

BECAUSE I am too old to learn new tricks I will never be a fisherman. In any case, it suits me better to bask in the tussocks while John, or Ernest, or Jim, or some other fanatic threshes the rapids and tries the pools. But the fanaticism of anglers must have saved the world from much black blood. It

must be impossible, with your feet in the water and your head in the sun, to nurse grudges or magnify grievances. The worst you can do is to think out reasons why you must not catch fish by any easy or commonsense methods, catch too many, or use a line strong enough to hold them if they are determined to get away. It is lunacy, but not dangerous or destructive lunacy like rocking and rolling or splitting atoms.

And even in its spectators angling encourages piety. I never go on these strange expeditions without thanking God before I come back for mountains and rivers and wild Irishmen. It is luck beyond all deserving and planning that there is hardly a New Zealander anywhere who can't escape in a couple of hours into some wild wilderness. It is the chief excuse for motor-cars, and the only explanation I have ever been able to find of the five-day-week, which God Himself has never found sufficient. Not

a tree or a bird or a bee or a blade of grass stopped work yesterday or is idle today as I watch from my window; but God will forgive us our trespasses if they are never worse than running away, after five days labour, to the mountains and the river-beds and the bush. He may even go with us and speak to us.

BERT, my Shropshire lad, charged Lucky Jim, my Half-bred, down a dry bank. On the way he tripped over Harry the Southdown, who had been lying down and chose that moment to get up. The result was a broadside by all three in a cloud of dust. But Lucky Jim was unlucky. Though he was entirely innocent, Bert and

APRIL 8 Harry, when they got back on their feet, both turned on him and battered him right through the scattering ewes, who, though they had just been telling him what a nice-looking boy he was, now behaved as if they had never seen him. I ought to be able to add that Bert and Harry then quarrelled and left Jim his chance. But Harry lay down again; and Bert, after chasing Jim well out of courting range, had the field to himself. The time will, of course, come, in two or three or twenty million years, when

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sheep will register their marriages and regulate them. But at present they are just Romans and Sabines.

I DID not know, till John and Jim opened my eyes last week, that a salmon, once it leaves the sea, lives on memory and expectation. The stomach of a quinnat opened for my information was not a stomach at all. It was a shrunken tube no thicker than the pencil with which I am writing this note, and quite empty. It astonishes me that I have contrived all these years to escape a fact known to every fisherman, beggarman, and

APRIL 9 thief between the Alps and the sea, and perhaps to every schoolboy. But there were no salmon out of a tin when I was myself at school, and the science we miss before we reach twenty is seldom supplied later without gaps.

I knew, of course, in a vague way, that a salmon on the run to a spawning ground was not to be caught with bait; that if it snapped at a loaded hook the explanation was bad temper and not hunger; and that its flesh every day of its run lost a little colour and firmness. But I did not know that its stomach ceased to function. I thought simply that it became less interested in food as it became more interested in reproduction, like males and females in general. But that shrunken stomach is still worrying me.

There are no doubt millions of parallels among insects and smaller organisms, but those lesser breeds have never interested me much. I can't think of a parallel among creatures weighing from 20 to 100 pounds, or imagine what biological purpose is served by a habit so remote from our own experience. But salmon seem to be a bundle of mysteries from their first to their last hour. Biologists can't make up their minds, I gather from my small store of book knowledge, whether the salmon is a river fish which goes to sea to feed or a sea fish which runs up rivers to spawn. It is agreed that salmon return, if they can, to the river from which they entered the sea, but it is not certain by what means they find it. They can be confused by the transfer of eggs or young fish from one stream to another, and they sometimes return before they have lived long enough in the sea to be ready for their duties in the river. The fish whose entrails opened my eyes so suddenly was, John told me, merely a grilse. That is to say, he was an adolescent. In addition he was, when Jim caught him, ascending a river not regarded as suitable for salmon, and he had probably either lost his way or descended from parents who had lost theirs. I wondered what would have happened to him if he had reached his spawning ground and found himself the only salmon there. Would he have gone back to sea and lived to spawn another year or have died where he was frustrated and uncompleted? It was biologically reckless to stop eating until it was certain that there would be a mating. But as Sir J. Arthur Thomson once said, fish hide their light under a very big bushel.

(To be continued)

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