



SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

Back to the Wilderness

by "SUNDOWNER"

FOR a week I have felt almost as remote from civilisation as if I had been in the Matto Grosso. Though I was seldom more than 30 miles from the sea, the sea, if I can't see or hear it, soon disappears from my mind. In any case, it is not easy to remember the sea in the midst of high mountains, following tracks through dense scrub,

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over riverbeds and round low ridges. The fact that the rivers go to the sea means very little when it is impossible to follow the path by which they get there. New Zealand is a very small country; but it has most of the features of very big countries, accentuated by being crowded closely together. Every day when the sky cleared for an hour or two we could see mountains ranging from six to nine thousand feet, not in the remote distance, but almost hanging over our heads. It was not a friendly landscape, except to mountaineers and goats, and so much of it was barren as well as harsh that it was a surprise to come on traces of settlement at least 100 years old. But I was old, and could easily believe, that one early settler who bought his portion of New Zealand before he saw it, wept when he arrived from England to take possession. It must have been difficult not to weep over such gigantic folly as scattering some tens of thousands of sovereigns on the banks of half a dozen mountain torrents with English names between the Seaward and the Inward Kaikouras and nothing else that could be made English before the Last Trump sounds. But most of us are as foolish as our pockets allow us to be.

AND yet the incredible sometimes happens. A hundred years after the first land hunters penetrated this wilderness by pack track, private enterprise is driving a jeep track through country that no public authority would consider ready for roads for another 100 years, and I do not doubt that

the pack horse is now on his last legs. It is necessary to see where they go to realise what obstacles jeeps and land-rovers can overcome, and what loads they can carry while they are doing it. Twenty-nine years ago I rode from Kekerangu to Coverham on a track that made even the horses nervous. Now every board, brick and nail of a modern bungalow has been carried in, not exactly in advance of a road, but without the assistance of anything that a city motorist would call a road. I take off my hat to the men who do things like that, though I often disapprove of their reasons for doing them, and cannot think without sorrow of the conversion of a savage into a civilised wilderness.

THERE will, however, be pack horses while I live, and pack horses have long tails. Patsy is a pack horse, and Patsy therefore has a long tail, for which I thanked God continuously for two or three hours of every day all last week. It is true that a long tail and foul temper sometimes go together, especially if you call your pack horse a mule. But Patsy's tail goes with a sweet temper, and I learnt before the end of my first day that towlines have more uses than one. I am not humble enough to say that without Patsy's tail I should probably have broken down on the journey and put an intolerable burden on my two companions. But it is a little less than the truth to say that Patsy saved me an hour in every three, and had us all in camp each night before it was too dark to find wood; I mean too dark for my two companions to find it. It was sad to have to turn her adrift each night without a cover, and without even one handful of oats or chaff or hay, though we did once retrieve a dried hunk of bread from the fire and give her that for breakfast. Her lot would have been easier a little later in the year, when the small enclosures round the huts would have been carrying a picking of

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fresh grass, when the deer would have been away to the tops, and when the goats and pigs would have had other temptations. But at 2000 feet August and September are the hungriest months in the year, and I often caught Patsy looking at me with something less than love in her eyes. It was perhaps to ease the pangs of hunger that she gave an exhibition of rolling one afternoon—seven complete turns—that I thought ranked high among four-legged rockers and rollers. Now we are ships that passed in the night. She will never see me again, which will not disturb her; but I will never see her again, and that is not an exhilarating thought.

I did not expect to see many birds in such hungry country, but we had some surprises. The first was provided by eight tuis in some kowhai bushes while we were

still climbing up from the sea. Away from sanctuaries I can't remember as many tuis as that in an area not half a chain square, and they were both vocal and acrobatic; but we saw no tuis at all as we moved inland. We saw bellbirds all the way, and heard many that we did not see, but I thought it strange to find them in manuka, where there was not a single kowhai, cabbage tree, bush of flax, or anything else that I could see producing honey. I think they were living on grubs and insects, since I stood for some time watching one of them working under the bark of a big forked manuka and taking no notice of the fact that I was only a few feet away.

I twice saw a single tomtit, and once a pair, but the biggest surprise among the natives was a yellowhead, a single bird only, but a particularly big and bright one.

Yet the biggest surprise of all to me personally was the fact that chaffinches far outnumbered all other birds whether we were in the open or in the scrub. They were not perhaps as numerous as sparrows are about grain stacks and stables, but they were the only birds (with the possible exception of warblers, which were usually too fast for me to see clearly) that were continually with us at all levels and all times of the day. I had always thought of chaffinches as birds of civilisation, and was astonished to find them living in what seemed to me a very hungry wilderness.

Every riverbed had its quota of paradise ducks—on one small flat I counted 12—and hawks were quite as numerous as in the open tussock and grass land of Canterbury. But I heard no moreporks.

(To be continued)

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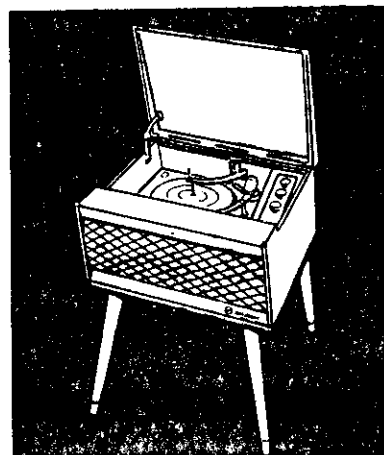
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