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SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

The Charm of Birds

by "SUNDOWNER"

I SPENT all yesterday morning, and most of yesterday afternoon, sitting over a wood fire reading a book left behind by John: *The Charm of Birds*, by Viscount Grey. I have never been able to decide whether it is good or bad that the Greys of the world should be jostled all their lives by vulgarians; but I think it is. Because they are Greys they are not often embittered; and although they may be driven out of public life their private lives are usually of more value to the world in the long run. No-one reads Lloyd George today for other than political reasons, and even politicians read him only in their least lofty moments. He saved England, as the fire superintendent saves a house by brushing aside the bucket brigade and turning on the hose. But we don't ask the superintendent to spend his holidays with us, to worship with us and lend us books. We thank God that he was there when we wanted him, send him a cheque if our credit is good, and hope that it will never be necessary to see him again. He hopes as devoutly that he will never again see us. It has not been a personal relationship on one side or the other, and nothing is gained or lost when it ends. Nothing is lost today when we don't read Lloyd George's speeches. But we lose if we cease to read Grey, give up walking in the woods with him and sitting listening with him under a tree. He was not the ablest man of his day in Parliament, the deepest, or the wisest. He was, I think, the best man there—an uncorrupted and incorruptible liberal who made men feel better as often as they were with him. He does it still when we read him, even in his last dictated papers which blindness prevented him from polishing. I am too old to be changed by the books I read, and I hope too sensible of the ridiculous to pretend that reading these chapters yesterday ennobled me even momentarily. I can, however, say that I felt nobility near me as I read.

Grey was too humble to call himself an ornithologist, too modest to use the voice of authority, too honest to pretend that the time he could spare for birds made him an Audubon or a Hudson. But he was far more than a mere observer and recorder. Birds meant something to him in nature that nothing else meant, answered some of his questions about sorrow and suffering, and spoke to him with their wings as well as with their throats. "The main purpose served by flight," he said, after watching some starlings, "is utilitarian, to enable birds to reach feeding places, to escape from enemies, to change their climate; but they also use flight to express blissful well-being; by this as well as by song they are gifted beyond all other creatures to convey to the mind of man the existence in nature of happiness and joy. How far this is consciously felt by birds I will not discuss: it is good for man to watch it, to listen to it, and to know that it is here."

Most of his birds have never been seen in New Zealand, and of those that

we do now know some already have different habits. Sparrows, for example, he calls "almost ostentatiously distrustful," and says that when he put out food "never would a sparrow eat while anyone was looking on." My sparrows, and those of my neighbours, too, follow me into the fowlhouse when I go with wheat and almost steal it out of my hand. Everyone must have fed sparrows at open-air picnics, especially on picnic grounds frequently used, and seen them return again and again for crumbs and other bigger morsels. They usually fly away to eat, but not always, and never far, and they are always back in a moment looking for more. I have never succeeded in persuading one to eat from my hand, but I have had them sit on my shoe and eat, fly on to a table (in the open) and steal from my plate, and once enter a tent (with flaps up) and take food from a frying-pan. They are never off guard, as blackbirds

sometimes are, and our native pigeons and robins, and that, I suppose, was what Grey meant when he called their familiarity offensive because it was combined with this extreme and obtrusive mistrust of man.

THE death yesterday of J. R. Wilkinson recalled the last three words I heard him speak: *Corpora sicca durant*. It was kindness and not affectation that made them Latin words: he was giving me a warning, but giving it in the least offensive way. He could have said, "Eat less, drink less, get rid of that sappy corpulence if you

want a long life." Instead he rebuked me in that gentle scholarly way that was half a reproof and half a benediction. It is a blow to lose him, even though he must at last, like G. B. Shaw, have been tired and anxious to sleep; but it is a consoling thought that his own lean and dry body carried him into his ninety-fourth year. Canterbury will produce other men of comparable qualities, but they will not be known by me.

(To be continued)



HEDGE SPARROW AND YOUNG

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 8, 1951.