

Owls and Sparrows

by "SUNDOWNER"

IT was Thoreau, I think, who found himself getting drowsy one day as he watched a nodding owl trying to keep its eyes open watching him. I have seen owls behaving like that in zoos, but never at large. They are either sound asleep when I see them, and unconscious of my presence, or they are wide awake and not embarrassed at all by the daylight. An owl is

JULY 10 calling from my pine trees as I write this note at 3.30 on a bright afternoon. He and his companions sometimes call so continuously during the day that I used to wonder, when I first came here, if the magpies had learnt to imitate the cries that must so often wake them from sleep. To magpies they would not be alarming cries, and I am not sure that they alarm even small birds once darkness has settled down. Nature can be abominably cruel, but sometimes when we think it is cruel its victims are drugged against its terrors. A hen has neither sense nor full sensibility in the middle of the night, and I imagine that the birds which owls eat in the dark suffer less than those which hawks, cats, and weasels eat by day. I try to think, remembering the drowsiness that overcame Dr. Livingstone when the lion was crunching his arm, that even the daylight victims of predatory animals and birds suffer less than we suppose. But that is a little further than wishful thinking will carry me confidently.

FOR the second time now our calf, which was born on December 13, has kept us awake half the night (and neighbours, too, I fear) bellowing out that she wants a mate. If we had found a mate for her when she called first she

would have been a mother at 15 months, and not quite half grown. In any case, the nearest mate is a Shorthorn with a baleful eye, who stands all day and I suspect most of the night glaring out of a barbed wire enclosure, and weighs about 2000 pounds. It might be easy in her present mood to get our spotless lily into this lion's den, but I would not wish to be responsible for getting her out.

I don't know how common precocious calves are, but I know that Lily has



N.P.S. photo
"Not embarrassed at all by the daylight"

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larger than it is, coasting along on the name of its earthquake, until it gets its railway.

At midday service cars begin to arrive and the town comes to life. The service cars are the lifeblood of Murchison, pumping passengers through in a steady stream at four shillings per head per lunch. Yet though more than 20 years have passed since the great 'quake, tourists still descend uneasily from the buses, questioning the wisdom of remaining even an hour in so shaky a locality.

All routes converge here: southbound from Nelson and Blenheim, and northbound from Christchurch and the West Coast. The crossroads on which the town stands, is, however, a conceit that will not bear investigation. Two of these roads shrivel to cart-tracks within a hundred yards; both lead only to the riverbank. Thus the town stands not upon a crossroads, but rather at an artificial L-bend.

Although the Four River Plain is the logical place for a town, Murchison has been a long time growing on it. Rivers were the problem; until bridges were built the road to the goldfields had no means of leaving the north bank of the Buller. And so the prosperity of the gold years passed Murchison by. Pictures of the town fifty years ago give it a stern

colonial character, with moustachioed heroes looking out from the verandahs of its two parent hotels, a few shops, and bush coming down close to the back doors. Nowadays, of course, the plain is cleared for farms, and even the hills are balding. But the gold towns have perished while Murchison survives, founded on the rock of its situation.

FROM Murchison the way runs south across the White Creek Fault. Here the road dips over a low cliff which sets the land at two levels. In the Maruia Valley we have a glimpse of a 22-year-old waterfall. At this point the 'quake dropped thousands of tons of rock across the bed of the river, changing its course, and plunging it over the fault line. The Shenandoah Road is dusty, narrow and very winding, notched with cranky little bridges whose every plank is a pistol shot. Mostly it tracks through dense bush; but sometimes there are blackened valleys, empty spaces littered with the bones of old forests. For more than a hundred miles now there are few signs of human habitation; only occasional farms peopled by red-faced farmers, and perhaps, if the numbers are sufficient, a storekeeper. The river falls deeply below, shining through the beech forest, and the road climbs over into Canterbury.

had no forcing food, and is in all other respects a baby. She still comes twice a day to the bucket and tries to suck my coat sleeve when I pull the bucket away, choosing a wire in the fence to slobber over when I reject her. She still likes me to rub the few places she can't herself reach to lick, and can't persuade Elsie to lick for her. That certainly is not very often, since cows, for some reason I have not yet discovered, are extremely obliging to one another when their co-operative moments meet. Horses help each other, too, but in their case the arrangement is mutual; you bite my back or flank or rump and I will bite yours. But cows don't lick each other simultaneously. One does the licking, the other the enjoying, and when the service ends, they usually return to hostility again. What makes them complaisant and helpful for a quarter of an hour and meanly selfish for the rest of the day? And how does the animal requiring the service know that the other is in the mood to render it?

MY mail today brought me this letter:

Auckland,
25 June, 1951

Dear Sir,—I always read with pleasure your articles in the *New Zealand Listener* and "The Charm of Birds" (8 June) particularly appealed to me, as sparrows and I have been intimate friends for many years. I am therefore writing to tell you that where Viscount Grey and you tailed, I have succeeded. I am sure you won't be jealous.

At first the birds were, as Viscount Grey said, "almost ostentatiously distrustful," but after almost daily visits for two years to Albert Park I won their confidence and they lost all fear of me. As soon as I appeared, there was a whirr of little wings (music in my ears), and down the birds came on my hands to feed. There was a large tree with a long branch within easy reach and on it there would be perched about a dozen birds in a row. I simply walked up and fed them in turn—no distrust there! Often when going up the street to the park sparrows would see me and, in spite of the rush of trams and traffic, would fly down to take bread from my fingers.

One day a photographer was passing the park and took a photo, but the birds were frightened when he came near, and only one remained on my hand. He was more successful later and got a print showing four sparrows on my hand. Unfortunately, I have only one copy.

Owing to my age (nearly 85) my visits to Auckland are now only occasional, and my Albert Park friends have, I suppose, passed away. However, at home here, I have many feathered friends. No sooner do I leave the house than they fly down to my feet, but they will not come on my hands yet; though I have not lost hope. I rarely go out without having bread or seed in my pockets, and all along the half mile walk to the local shops the birds come to me for food. One little cock sparrow at the tram terminus is particularly cute. When other birds are devouring crumbs, he first waits at my feet to see whether some seed is forthcoming. This is surely intelligence and not instinct, which, as some experts say, is a natural impulse by which animals (I suppose also birds) are guided independently of reason or experience. I mentioned this case to a tram conductor (also a bird lover), who seemed rather incredulous, but one day I proved it to him and he said, "Well, I'll be blown."

As for pigeons, they would come on my shoulders and arms and I had to "shoo" them away to give the sparrows a chance.

Yours faithfully,
WILLIAM WOODHEAD.

Attached to that letter was this one:
Auckland,
16 July, 1951.

Dear Sir,—A few hours after he had written the enclosed letter to you on June 25 my father became seriously ill. He passed away on June 29, four days later. I am forwarding the letter and a photograph to you as I feel that this would have been his wish.

Yours faithfully,
C. E. WOODHEAD.



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