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SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

Freedom in the Afternoon

By "SUNDOWNER"

A VISITOR spent a good deal of time today wandering round my shelves, taking books down here and there, and replacing them without comment. An hour or two later she began talking, a little sneeringly, about books and authors that "dated."

Except for the sneer she was right. All my books date — not excepting Shakespeare, the

MARCH 2 Bible and Homer.

They began, like me, to date the moment they were born. They will date more and more, and faster and faster, with every year that passes. Immortality has never been anything but suspended mortality, or who could open his mouth, lift his foot, have or indulge emotions or thoughts?

I could not use my books, or even go near them, if they did not date. It would be worse than going to a party where all the guests chatter at the same time and nothing at all is said. But those even that date most said something to me when I first read them and have that significance still. I am not going to cast them out or pretend that I never kept such low company. There are of course interlopers, accidental and unwelcome intruders that came for review and were never thrown out; volumes squeezed into bundles bought at sales; or, deader and most useless of all, truncated, emasculated, sterilised and deloused text books. But even for those I have the traces of sentiment I hope I may never lose for the contacts and experiences of vanished days.

TO save their lives we brought home two Hamburg cockerels that we found waiting for the axe in Andy's more sensible economy. Now I have to think of reasons for not using a gun. They fly like pheasants, crow like bantams in the middle of the night, cackle if the dogs bark, and stampe

MARCH 4 my staid Rhode Island Reds by dropping

down at daybreak from the trees.

When they first arrived I tried to make them conform to our established poultry-yard routine—imprisonment in the forenoon and liberty in the afternoon; but their first night of captivity was their last. Though I spent a long time trying to drive, tempt, or stampede them back into the hen-house, and once or twice almost succeeded, they had heard of Milton:

Strait they changed their minds,
Flew off,
And into strange vagaries fell
As they would dance.

So far they have not danced. But they have done nearly everything else that farmyard fowls should never do—especially in a country whose flightless birds are world-famous.

If biologists are right in saying that birds ran before they flew, and that their first flights were a kind of parachuting from higher to lower trees, our Hamburgs are some millenniums older than the hens with which they are now running. The question is whether to drag them back again biologically or hurry the barnyarders on. If I shoot them evolution gets a setback. If I allow them

to mate I rush my Rhode Islanders to a giddy eminence that they may not appreciate.

BECAUSE she is dry at present and resting Elsie does not come home often enough to supply me with manure as I require it for the garden. I am reduced therefore to wandering about with a bucket and a shovel, and each bucketful reminds me of

MARCH 6 an observation made by Darwin 120 years

ago in Patagonia:

The Guanacos have one singular habit which is to me quite inexplicable; namely, that on successive days they drop their dung in the same defined heap. I saw one of these heaps which was eight feet in diameter.

It is a pity we can't breed that habit into our own domestic animals—cows by preference, or sheep if cows will not co-operate. But I don't think we can. Guanacos are camels, and although they can be tamed, and breed freely in captivity, camels and cows will not mix. Perhaps it is as well that they will not. Of the perversity of cows most New Zealanders are sufficiently aware, and some New Zealanders in the last 40 years have learnt a little about the perversity of camels. But if we may accept the verdict of Palgrave, who should have known, half of what could be said against camels has never been told. They are not merely bad-tempered, but savage; not merely ill-mannered, but disgusting; not merely stupid, but stupid to the nth degree; not merely annoying, but maddening beyond all accepted and reasonable standards of toleration:

He takes no heed of his rider, pays no attention whether he be on his back or not, walks straight on when once set going, merely because he is too stupid to turn aside, and then should some tempting thorn or green branch allure him out of the path, continues to walk on in the new direction simply because he is too dull to turn back into the right road. In a word, he is from first to last an undomesticated and savage

animal rendered serviceable by stupidity alone, without much skill on his master's part, or any co-operation on his own, save that of an extreme passiveness.

IN the search yesterday for that observation on Guanacos, I blundered on this about sheepdogs:

When riding in Patagonia it is a common thing to meet a large flock of sheep guarded by one or two dogs, at the distance of some miles from any house or man. I often wondered how so firm a friendship had been established. The method of education consists in separating the puppy, while very young, from the bitch, and in accustoming it to its future companions. An ewe is held three or four times a day for the little thing to suck, and a nest of wool is made for it in the sheep-pen; at no time is it allowed to associate with other dogs, or with the children of the family. The puppy is, moreover, generally castrated; so that, when grown up, it can scarcely have any feelings in common with the rest of its kind.

A problem that worried Darwin was why wild dogs, even when they hunted

MARCH 5 in packs, were afraid of these sheepdogs and seldom attacked

them. He decided that it was "a curious instance of the pliability of the affections in a dog." Whether wild or tame he has "respect or fear for those that are fulfilling their instinct of association."

When dogs are domesticated, man fulfils their instinct of association. In the case of these Patagonian sheepdogs, the sheep fulfilled their instinct of association, became their fellows, and gave them power and confidence; the wild dogs accepted this situation, feeling themselves confronted, not with a dog only, or one animal only, but with a dog raised to the 10th, 20th, or 100th power of menace by the number of sheep associated with it. It is an argument that I find a little difficult to follow, but if that is not the explanation, I can't imagine what is.

I don't know whether dogs are ever left in charge of flocks in New Zealand. I think they were once, and it would occasionally, I imagine, be a vigil lasting more than a single day. But I have not myself known of dogs left in charge of a flock for more than an hour or two.

(To be continued)



"Imprisonment in the forenoon..."

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 27, 1953.