



Shepherd's Calendar

by "SUNDOWNER"

BLOSSOMS IN SEASON

HELEN, my niece and neighbour, who spent August in Clyde, was surprised to find the fruit trees as far forward there as they were here, and no marked differences in the flower gardens

of Dunedin. Now in a note from Mangonui, Northland, R.R.D. sends this information:

Today (September 9) our peaches are nearly but not quite in full bloom; but our red plum shows only the first spray, while the Japanese plum has not thought about blossom yet. Neither have our two pear trees, about 20 years old; and this is in a district where we grow good winter swedes and potatoes in all the four seasons.

It is chiefly advertising, R.R.D. thinks, that makes us expect more dramatic differences as we move north and south. Though, he has been crossing from island to island for some years.

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the whole he was well pleased. He had moved into Miss Smithell's vision and he had redeemed himself from ordinariness.

His hand on the second day was still sufficiently painful to allow him to wear his bandage again with a clear conscience. And his reception at the office was fully as gratifying.

"Well, Mr. Cathcart, how's the hand this morning?"

"Much better, thank you, Miss Smithells." And then for fear her interest should wane—"Throbbled a little in the night, though."

"Did it keep you awake much?"

"Oh, off and on," said Tom, as he sought by understatement to assume the role of a long-suffering man who has had a hell of a night. He yawned to give point to his trials.

"Never mind, you'll soon have it right."

With this, Tom had to be content. It was not very much to hug to his heart. But if he had advanced very little, he had not slipped back. He was still holding his bridgehead.

On the third morning, however, he found himself in a pretty predicament. His hand, he discovered, had healed beautifully. The wound, so recently angry at the edges, had closed over and only a weal was left to mark it. Even Tom's mother lost her concern.

"It's almost as good as new again. You won't need your bandage today."

Tom was not so sure. True, the injury no longer justified it. But what of Miss Smithells? The bandage had claimed her interest in the first place, and it was the bandage he relied upon to retain it. One day's deception could surely be forgiven. And so he swathed his hand again and went off to the office.

Miss Smithells was busy at her desk, so busy indeed that she failed to acknowledge his arrival by so much as a gesture. Tom cleared his desk and his throat noisily and groaned as he writhed in freshly-acquired pain. Miss Smithells made no response. A little desperately now, Tom unwrapped his bandage and proceeded to tie it more tightly. He took one end of the rag between his teeth and did his awkward best to knot it. It was a cue to Miss Smithells to come to his aid, a last attempt to give her a proprietary interest in his wound.

But the head cashier remained bent over her desk. Of the pantomime behind her she was completely unconscious. She had seen Tom come in at the door—but it was with the same abstracted gaze she gave to flies alighting on the wall-paper. Tom's bandage had ceased to reclaim him from ordinariness; the one had become as unremarkable as the other.

he says that he is always surprised, when he goes south in the last week of August or the first days of September "to see that fruit trees such as peaches and plums, which were not out in blossom at Mangonui, or just starting to spray, are in abundant bloom" by the time he gets down to Canterbury, in, say, six days. "And going north about the same time, I do not find that the Waikato is ahead except for grasses, or that Mangonui is noticeably earlier than either Canterbury or the Waikato."

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I CALLED off the ferret campaign when I had caught and killed six—five bucks and one doe. Now I am pursuing them in print. It was pointed out to me that what I had killed were perhaps not ferrets at all, but polecats, and that biologists were beginning to wonder whether

SEPTEMBER 17 true ferrets had ever reached New Zealand. This sent me to G. M. Thomson again (*The Naturalisation of Animals and Plants in New Zealand*, 1922), and to K. A. Wodzicki (*Introduced Mammals of New Zealand*, 1950), and neither one nor the other is quite definite on the point.

Thomson says (p. 72) that wild ferrets are polecats, but confesses (p. 74) that he has found no record that the "true" polecat was ever introduced into New Zealand. He also suggests (p. 75) that ferrets can't have brown coats. Dr. Wodzicki agrees that we have stoats, weasels, and a third mustelid that is commonly called a ferret, but thinks it safer, until research has gone a little further, to call this third animal a fitch.

I resist the temptation to use Juliet's argument, and I am not going to say or suggest that Dr. Wodzicki is too cautious. In science no one can be too cautious. But our ferrets have been fer-

rets as long as I can remember. They were ferrets when they came here, and whatever liberties they have taken in mating and breeding since, they have remained ferrets. They are all "common," all "wild" if they are not in boxes, all predatory, but all capable of being domesticated. The younger you get them the more tractable they are, and the more carefully you take them by the neck the less often you will get bitten. But asking me to call them fitches is asking me to call magpies shrikes and our black teal scaups.

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QUITE as interesting (now that I am in their company) as the uncertainty of the authorities about the origin of our ferrets, is their uncertainty about their survival and distribution. Thomson thought on page 72 that our South Island winters were too cold for ferrets.

On page 75 he admits that he now knows better, and says that ferrets withstand cold quite easily if it is dry. But he still thought (in 1922) that ferrets were not common in the South Island. Wodzicki says that although "many domestic ferrets are kept by rabbiters" and "wild ferrets or polecats" have been reported from various parts of the country, it has been difficult to collect specimens for his researches.

That makes strange reading to me, and must, I am sure, be strange to most people of my age who have a rural background. In 12 years in the North Island I never saw a ferret, primarily because I was a city dweller most of the time. But I can't remember a year in the South Island when I would have had difficulty in trapping a ferret in any district in which there were rabbits or fowls. Jim caught 23 ferrets in autumn with two traps. I have just caught six in eight days. In my whole life I must have seen ten ferrets for every stoat, and I should think at least three weasels. But Dr. Wodzicki has found that stoats are more widely distributed—not necessarily more numerous—than either ferrets or weasels, and that weasels in recent years have become exceedingly rare. I hope it is true; but I helped to kill a family of weasels (parents and half-grown young hunting together) in the Raglan motor camp four years ago, and I have seldom spent a day on the roads of Otago or Southland without seeing a weasel cross in front of me. On my last journey south (February, 1953), I saw a weasel cross the road near Tekapo, a second run into a culvert near Miller's Flat, a third just escaped my wheels at Rae's Junction, and a fourth emerged from a gorse hedge near Waitahuna, stopped for a second and looked at me, then raced back into cover again. In sum that is not many; but I can't believe that there were no fathers and mothers, and no litters of brothers and sisters, not far away out of sight.

(To be continued)

THE way you go about the business of book selection depends entirely on what you're reading for . . . if you've a particular objective, then purely random selection doesn't really enter into it. Of course, your objective isn't always quite straightforward. I knew a man once who read the entire works of Gertrude Stein to please his girl friend. . . He finally became one of the most fluent exponents of Miss Stein that I've ever listened to—and his girl friend married a compiler of a 16th Century anthology."—Peg Escott, in an NZBS Book Shop talk.