

THE ENGLISH SPARROW

My good friend, Mr. L. H. Smith, of Strathroy, Ont., has certainly made a very pretty defence of the house sparrow, though I cannot say it is a very able one. This is not his fault, however, but rather that of the sparrow. He has indeed made much of a bad case, and is to be congratulated upon the interesting manner in which he has presented it. The sentiment of his article will doubtless be charming to the unenlightened, but unfortunately, in this age of the utilitarian, sentiment alone is not sufficient. It is facts, and facts only, that will satisfy.

After a careful perusal of Mr. Smith's essay we fail to see that he has given any good or satisfactory reasons for defending the sparrow. He has replied, but very feebly, to only one of the charges brought against it, and has made claim for only one good trait in its character. Consequently, it appears that he takes his stand merely on account of a sentimental attachment, which he has strangely formed for the bird. He says, "I love the sparrow because he is an emigrant from the same land which I am. In my boyhood days he was the object of my highest nimrodian aspirations," etc., and again he says, "Perhaps but for the sparrow and his pursuit, the innate love I have for all things out-of-doors might never have been awakened in me," etc. These are his reasons for throwing down the gauntlet on behalf of passer domesticus. That they are pardonable, we grant; but that they are justifiable, we cannot admit in these matter-of-fact days, when everything is submitted to the crucible of utility.

As Mr. Smith was one of the first to introduce the sparrow into Canada, he doubtless felt it incumbent upon him to take up the cudgels in its behalf. From the title of his essay one would hardly expect an impartial presentation of the facts of the case, and it is, therefore, no matter of great surprise to find that the article gives one the extremely erroneous impression that the English sparrow is a most desirable, insectivorous bird with a charming song. In his zeal to defend his pet Mr. Smith has ignored the mass of indisputable, condemnatory evidence in regard to the bird sparrow's economic relations, which has been accumulated by a host of observers in all parts of the continent.

We, therefore, consider it is in the interest of justice, and only fair to the readers of "Rod and Gun," that the other, more unfavorable, aspect of the question of the sparrow's character should also be presented. Nowadays the desirability of the presence of a bird in a country depends chiefly upon its relation to agriculture. It is not so much a question of the bird's utility as of its non-injurious tendencies. It is its negative rather than its positive characteristics that determine its status. If the bird does no harm, or if its evil deeds are counterbalanced by its good, then we say let it flourish.

In his introductory paragraph Mr. Smith states that the English sparrow "was introduced to this country to perform a task which our native birds did

not appear to do—the destruction of the larvae of the meadow-worm, that so often infest the trees in our streets and parks." That this was the honest, but mistaken, intention of Mr. Smith and the other misguided gentlemen, who so zealously brought the bird to this country, we do believe, but that the sparrow has accomplished the object of its introduction we regret that we cannot assert. It is now a well-known fact that the sparrow, like most of our birds, will not eat hairy caterpillars, and that, according to the report of the Biological Survey of the United States, fully two-thirds of its diet consists of vegetable matter, chiefly in the form of grain, seeds and buds. If the introducers of the sparrow had studied our native birds more carefully, they would have found that a foreign importation was unnecessary, for we already possessed certain species, the cuckoos, that consider hairy caterpillars most delectable morsels and destroy them in great numbers.

As already noted, Mr. Smith attempts to refute only one of the charges against the sparrow, to wit: that it drives away our native birds. At first glance his arguments and illustrations seem most sound and plausible, but on closer inspection we find the former fallacious and the latter not to the point.

In the first place, he asks how it is that the sparrow in England has not driven away some of the other species. In reply we would ask Mr. Smith how he knows that it has not done so. As he himself admits, the sparrow has been striving with the other birds in Great Britain for centuries. Consequently, there is no doubt that the present relationships of the feathered bipeds of that country are the result of the inevitable law of "the survival of the fittest." The weaker birds yielded ages ago to the pugnacious sparrow, and now we find living in its proximity only those birds which are well able to defend themselves against its ravages.

Mr. Smith cites the case of the house martin, which has flourished in spite of the persecution of the sparrow, but this does not prove that our Canadian birds shall be able to prosper likewise. The martin is quite competent to cope with the sparrow, for, if it were not, it would have been compelled long ago to seek its nesting-place beneath the brow of some remote cliff, rather than under the eaves of the dwelling of man. It would have been as much to the point if he had cited the case of the rook.

Mr. Smith claims that the sparrow did not drive the native birds away from his own premises, but, by anyone acquainted with the facts, this cannot be accepted as an argument. It was my privilege to live in the same rural town with Mr. Smith for many years. If my memory serves me truly, he not only provided boxes for the sparrows, as he states, but for other birds as well, and further, he protected the wrens from the depredations of the foreign usurpers by making the entrances to their nests too small to admit them. Besides this he provided food for the birds, and the sparrows waxed fat and indolent under his beneficent care.

(To be continued.)

SMOKELESS POWDERS.

To the Editor of Rod and Gun.

I read with a great deal of interest Mr. Conover's article in your December issue, in which he speaks very highly of the well-known American smokeless powder—Dupont. Without in any way detracting from what he says in laudation of his favorite powder, I think he has, in his communication, made a remark regarding two well-known modern explosives which, no doubt unintentionally on his part, might be read to their injury. The remark I take exception to in his article is his reference to Schultze and Noble's Ballistite, where he says: "As each of the modern explosives was brought forward it was examined and its defects noted—Schultze, among the first in Europe; next the powder of Reid & Johnston, in England; and in France the poudre B of Vieille, and the ballistite of Noble."

Now, whatever may have been the defects of Schultze powder when it was in its experimental stage, when all smokeless powders were an experiment, there can be no doubt that now it is one of the best propellants in the world. I have used both Dupont and Schultze with satisfactory results, but if I had to choose between them I would select Schultze. The action of the two powders I found to be very similar, the recoil from each the same, but I have always thought Schultze a stronger powder than Dupont.

Regarding Ballistite, I know nothing from actual experience, never having shot any of it, or even seen it. This I do know, however: that it is one of the most popular powders among the trap shooters in England. For instance, take the scores at live pigeons, at the Gun Club, Notting Hill, and the National Gun Club, Hendon, the other day. In a three pound handicap sweepstakes at the Gun Club there were 17 subscribers and six used Ballistite, including the winners of the money, who divided 71 pounds. In the next event there were 16 subscribers, six of whom shot Ballistite, including the two who divided the purse. Of the others, eight used Curtis & Harvey's Amherite.

At Hendon, in a race for the Members' Challenge Cup, value 25 guineas added to half sovereign handicap sweepstakes, there were 12 subscribers. Of these, four used Ballistite, five Schultze, including the winner, who shot at 33 yards, and the others Amherite and E.C.

So much for these various nitros, in which I have no further interest than any sportsman who wants the searchlight thrown on all matters affecting his favorite sport.

But one serious defect all these powders have, or rather their manufacturers have, and that is that none of them seem to have the good sense to properly advertise their wares in Canada. And the same remark applies to other articles, such as guns, shells, wads, shot, etc., pertaining to the want of Canadian sportsmen. How these gun and ammunition makers expect to reach the thousands of Canadian shooters without doing so is more than I can understand.

BLUE BILL.