

GODS LIVE IN THE WOODS

A SHORT STORY, written for "The Listener"

By FRANK SARGESON

AFTER they'd finished a late breakfast Henry put some more fire on and filled up the kettle. Then he brought out a big thermos and began to cut slices of bread. Rex still had plenty to say, but Henry interrupted him.

"I'm going to bring some sheep down from the back," he said.

"Good," Rex said, and he went on talking.

Rex was one of Henry's nephews and it was donkey's years since he'd been down to the farm, not since he'd been a boy. The previous evening he'd driven down for the Easter week-end. He'd arrived late, but full of talk, and they hadn't gone to bed until long after midnight. Anyhow it made a change for his uncle Henry, he was a bachelor, and except when he had somebody there helping him on the farm he lived on his own. It was years now since he'd finished breaking in his farm from heavy bush country.

"Come on," Henry said, "or it'll be lunchtime before we start."

He put what they were taking to eat in a tucker-bag, and they went outside. There had been rain in the night, but now it was a fine hot day, one right out of the box. As much of the sky as you could see between the sides of the valley was a wonderful blue. Henry let the dogs off the chain, and they bounded about until they were sure where the boss was going, then they went on ahead along the road that led up the pumice floor of the valley that was Henry's farm. And it was only a few minutes up the road to the woolshed, its pens overshadowed by huge willows. Rex remembered the woolshed from the time he had been there as a boy, but the willows had only just been planted then.

"By jove, Uncle Henry," he said, "they make a man realise he's a lot older than he feels."

NOT far beyond the woolshed the road ended. Here the valley began to close in and there were no more pumice flats, the spurs being thicker and coming down right to the creek. And above the creek the track that began where the road left off was cut into the spurs. It was really what was left of a tramline that had been used for bringing out logs. Nor was the country so good up here, it was even steeper, and on the shady faces the fern had properly got away. And places where the grass still held were scarred by slips that showed up the clay and papa. One of these had come down from above the track, and piled up on it before going on down

into the creek. A chain or so of fence had been in its way and it had gone too. You could see some posts and wire sticking out of the clay.

"That one came down in the flood last winter," Henry said. "A man is lucky to have any farm left. But what was it you were saying?" he said.

And Rex went on to say what nonsense it was for Easter to come at the wrong time of the year. "It's to do with re-birth," he said. "Springtime. It's a pagan ceremony really."

"Yes?" Henry said.

And Rex said he didn't go to church any more, he'd joined the Rationalists instead.

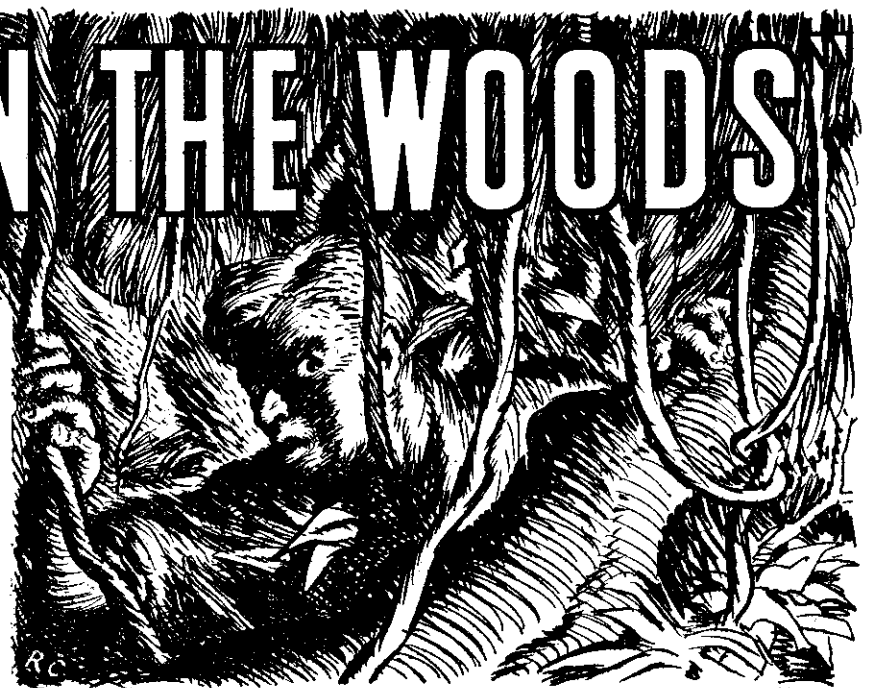
HIS uncle listened while he went on to explain himself, and by that time the valley had begun to widen out again. All the same it was the end of it, the side ridges joined up in a tremendous circle, and the basin that they made was broken up by spurs coming down off the skyline. And filling a long wide gully between two of them was the only piece of bush that was left on the farm. Everywhere else you saw only the grass, sheep and cattle dotted about, fern and manuka getting away, the fire-blackened skeletons of trees still standing, and the great bare faces with the clay and papa showing. It was as though everything there was to see was there to be seen. But looking up towards the bush wasn't at all the same, you couldn't help but feel that it was quite different.

"It's an easier climb up this way," Henry said.

He turned off towards the bush, and they crossed over the creek just above where another one came down from the bush and joined in. And you couldn't help noticing that the water was cloudy in one and clear in the other. At that moment Rex was saying that religion didn't have any meaning any more, but his uncle interrupted him. He was standing on top of the bank where he could watch the two streams mix.

"A man can stand here and see his farm going down to the sea," he said. "But carry on with what you were saying," he said, and going up to the bush Rex went on to say how science had got the wood on religion property. "Yet believe it or not Uncle Henry, I know a crazy sort of guy who reckons things'll crash and then there'll be a return to the old pagan religions. But can you see people going back to believing in gods and dragons? Well, I'm blown if I can."

BUT for some time the dogs had been out of sight somewhere ahead; all of a sudden some sheep moved, and by the time Henry had got the dogs to



come behind they were on the edge of the bush. And for a while inside the going was tough. There was the sloping ground for one thing, but it was mainly because, years ago, the biggest trees had been taken out. The stumps still had the sloven sticking up, though it was covered over with moss now. And there was the litter of the tops, and the logs that hadn't been worth while, all overgrown now, rotting, and hung with moss.

Rex didn't talk any more. He followed along behind his uncle and the dogs came after, panting, flattening themselves on their bellies to squeeze under the biggest logs, jumping on to the smaller and then down. Henry knew his way though, the tough part didn't last long and then it was a fairly easy grade up what seemed to be the back of a side spur. It was more open bush too, nothing had been taken out, and every here and there they'd come on great barrels that were springing up, up, until they passed out of sight above the lighter stuff. Henry said that climbing the hills made him feel a lot older than looking at the willows did, and he'd keep on stopping for a breather, and they'd stand there without even Rex talking. After the sun it was all very cool and dim, with a smell of damp and rot, and still, except for the birds, and the sound of the creek somewhere down below. The dogs stopped too, and panted with their tongues hanging out. Nor did they wander, they were content to follow along close behind, as if they too had the feeling that this wasn't at all like being in the open country.

THEN Henry said, "Do you remember the time you thought you were lost?"

"I had the wind up that time," Rex said. "But dash it all Uncle Henry, remember I was only a kid then."

And it started him off talking again. He said he'd often thought about how frightened he'd been that time, when really there'd been nothing to be frightened of.

"Well," Henry said, "it isn't too nice getting caught in the bush overnight."

"Still," Rex said, "you know there's nothing that can hurt you. I wouldn't mind spending a night in the bush. Not now," he said.

"No?" Henry said. "But the wetas come out at night." And he laughed. "The Maoris call them taipos."

But Rex said that was just a piece of superstition, and he was going to explain about that when his uncle said, "Listen!"

Quite close to them something was moving, then there was the stillness again. The dogs peered. They pricked their ears, left off panting to sniff, and you could see the hair bristling on their backs. Then Henry took Rex's arm and pointed. "See," he said. For a moment Rex couldn't see, then he did. "Good God!" he said.

From only a few yards away the face of a bullock with big curving horns was staring at them. And from what you could see of the rest of it, it was a wonderful dark-red beast.

"I need a fence down below," Henry said. "The sheep don't come up through here but the cattle do. And I've got to have the cattle to help me keep the fern down."

He stooped to pick up something to throw but the beast suddenly turned round. There was a crash, a sway of small stuff, and it was gone.

Rex wanted to know, didn't he feel like cutting the bush out?

"No," Henry said, "I've done enough of that."

"Why?" Rex said. "Wouldn't it pay?"

"Oh, yes," Henry said, "There'd be money in it all right."

AND they started climbing again, and it wasn't long before they came out of the bush without having gone through very much of it. They'd come out high up on one side, and stopping for another breather before going out of the shade Henry took a couple of apples out of his tucker-bag, and while they ate

(continued on next page)