

# Blackbirds Among the Raspberries

I WAS not annoyed today when finding a blackbird entangled in my strawberry net, cut the string to liberate it. I was relieved that I had not been required to make the decision myself. But I was not pleased when I heard, in Otago, that a raspberry-grower who had promised to pay for blackbirds' eggs, was offered

**JANUARY 12** 60,000. I am, of course, not dependent on raspberries for my bread. I have twelve sets of canes from which the birds have so far allowed me to gather about twelve berries, none of them quite ripe; but if I had twelve hundred sets, or twelve thousand, I might find myself doing what I was told that grower at Beaumont had done—weighing my estimated loss in fruit against the cost of destroying next year's harvest of birds.

I was not told what was paid for the eggs; but if it was only two-pence a dozen—the price of sparrows' eggs in my childhood—the pay-out would be nearly £50, or the equivalent of 500 pounds of raspberries at two shillings a pound. Sixty thousand eggs would, of course, not produce sixty thousand birds, even if there were no cats, ferrets, weasels, stoats, hawks, owls, rain storms, high winds, and marauding boys. They might, however, yield 10,000 birds, and 10,000 hungry blackbirds would not be long in eating 500 pounds of stoneless fruit. Economically, therefore, the expenditure of that £50—even if it really was spent—was good business if the story began and ended there. But I find myself wondering if £100 may not be necessary next year

to counter flies and blights, and if fruit-growing would be possible at all in a birdless country.

I HAVE been long enough in journalism to know that there is always something bigger than the biggest, longer than the longest, older than the oldest, earlier than the earliest. This, however, is the story, as it was told to me by one of my brothers, of the beginning of pre-lambing shearing in West Otago.

A neighbour, who at that time had not much experience of sheep, and as a cattle man no great interest in them, kept 300 ewes away from his rams one May 20 years ago, shorn them, and left them on a high tussock block until he could send

them to Burnside. But a snowstorm flattened the fence separating them from my brother's ewes, which had rams with them, and two of these rams walked through. Before the situation was discovered half of the culled ewes were in lamb, and instead of going to Burnside they stayed for the winter among the snow tussocks and did better than the main flock. So the neighbour began to think. If winter shearing was safe for old ewes on hard country it must be safer for young ewes on good feed. In any case, it was worth a trial on a bigger scale; and the trial was made. Next year it was repeated, and the next, until now, my brother assured me, everybody in that area "swears by it."

That could, I know, be an exaggeration. There must be diehards who oppose this innovation as violently as

they oppose all others; and if I had looked for them I think I would have found them. But it is a fact that August and September shearing is common in West Otago, and becoming more common, and I made it my business to discover, if I could, how the newly-shorn ewes fared in the storm—a blizzard with heavy snow—that hit the district in October.

"I lost a few ewes," one man told me, "five or six. But if I had not shorn I would have lost 50 or 60, and God knows how many lambs." His argument was that shorn ewes on cold country run for shelter when a storm comes, and take their lambs, born and unborn, with them. Woollies stay where they are, and often die there. If they survive themselves, their lambs die, and it is difficult to move them once the storm is on them. "Winter shearing is cruel," this man said, "but it saves their lives"; and the other farmers I asked agreed with him. I asked this particular man because his farm is high and cold—fertile hills with deep gullies facing mainly west and south. I don't suggest that it has a bearing on the question, but I have seen more woolly sheep this week in Canterbury than I saw in Otago last week, and I think I could still find more within a radius of 30 miles of my home than the whole of West Otago carried past Christmas.

A HIGH-COUNTRY shepherd told me today that a deer culler's Labrador had caught his best dog on the chain and worried it to death. Labradors are not big, but they are savage and strong, and the qualities that make a heading dog precious—silence, sensitivity, discipline, and absolute obedience—are not helpful factors in a fight.

Nor is the owner **JANUARY 17** of this dog one of those shepherds who use the team to catch runaways and destroy strays. He suppresses quarrelling and fighting the moment they begin. His dogs, he told me, would not know what to do in a fight, and in any case, a chained dog has no chance against a dog running free. I am glad he shot the Labrador.

I have been surprised in Addington yards to notice how seldom the swarms of dogs there ever fight. When I was a boy dogs were usually allowed to establish their own order of precedence, and this sometimes took weeks. Then, however, dogs travelled only on foot. Now they go to work in trailers and car-boots where quarrelling is dangerous as well as a nuisance. I have twice seen an accident caused by a momentary diversion of a driver's attention from the road in front of him to the dogs behind him, and a general dog fight is an especially disturbing noise. I have also seen a farmer with a deep tear in his hand given by two fighting dogs in the back seat which he had tried to separate with his eyes on the road and not on them.

(To be continued)

## Illustrations

↑ **SUPPOSE** most housewives do the same when they've had a busy morning. I like to put my lunch on a tray and take it into the sunporch, or out in the garden, and linger over it while I browse through a magazine, especially an illustrated one. But nothing annoys me more than to see a picture completely out of keeping with the story it's supposed to illustrate. I've made quite a hobby of picking out wrong details and I could tell you some beauties. —From an NZBS Book Shop talk by Margaret Robinson.



N.P.S. photograph

"Now dogs go to work in trailers . . . where quarrelling is dangerous as well as a nuisance"

## Fonteyn's Favourites

WHEN Time put Margot Fonteyn on its cover a little over four years ago it described her as "a dancer fit to be ranked with the all-time greats." Miss Fonteyn had gone to the United States a few weeks before with the Sadler's Wells Ballet, a trip which looked like a 50,000-dollar gamble. As it turned out it was a tremendous success. Night after night the Metropolitan Opera House was packed, and when the company went on the road tickets for all their performances were already sold out.

Margot Fonteyn, whose grace and technique had American ballet critics going back to Pavlova and Karsavina for comparison, had made her London debut 16 years before as one of the 32 snowflakes in *The Nutcracker*. Some people had laughed at the serious little girl who would spend half an hour in

the wings warming up for a five-minute role. The point was that even then Margot Fonteyn was a perfectionist. By the time she was 20 she was a superbly finished dancer, though it took an enforced spell from ballet, after an accident, to turn her into the great artist she is today.

In *Ballerina*, to be heard from YC stations, Margot Fonteyn introduces her own choice of music from the ballet. There are eight programmes, starting with *Casse Noisette* and *Les Sylphides*, which will be broadcast from 4YC at 8.20 p.m. on Monday, February 8, and from 2YC at 7.45 p.m. on February 13. Ballet music introduced in other programmes includes *Rio Grande*, *Facade*, *Swan Lake*, *The Fairy Kiss*, *Apparitions*, *Nocturne*, *Les Patineurs*, *Giselle*, *Carnival*, *The Spectre of the Rose*, *Horoscope* and *The Sirens*.

