Shepherd's Calendar **by "SUNDOWNER"**

ELITE CORPS OF THE HILLS

IF I have not yet finished *The Ring and the Book* the reason is that 20,000 sheep and 70 dogs are more exciting company than ghosts. I was just about tuned in to Browning after the pleasant distractions of the inland road to the south when a friend put *Musterer on Molesworth* in my hands. Then Italy became a far country again. I will return, but not today or tomorrow.

It is a slim little book of 70 pages, but the dogs bark all the way. "Look," they said, when

JANUARY 23 Dante passed nearly 700 years ago, "that lad has been in hell." This lad Bruce Stronach has as surely been in heaven. As I have still a few pages to read I don't know whether he walked out or was cast out, but he stayed in for three wonderful years. It is clear, too, that he knew where he was, even when breakfast was at 1.30; when the going was up a thousand feet of loose shingle; when there was no wood to boil the billy and not even a matagouri bush to make shade; when the dogs had to be anchored to a rock or tied in a circle round a single stick; when the shearers and shed hands had taken all the huts and bunks and the musterers, returning to base after a month's hard slogging, had to pitch tents and lie on the ground.

Mustering is always hard. On stations like Molesworth the average is a day of torture to every hour of delight. But the days end. The blistered heels cool off. The packman brings the swags and the tea. The dogs lie down in peace. The battle is over. The victory is sure.

Musterers feel, and paddock shepherds know, that they are the *corps d' élite* of the hills. If being a hero is never a full-time job in New Zealand, the high-country musterer lasts longer at it than anyone else.

* * *

HERE is a passage from Bruce Stronach that carries me back more than a day or two:

> We each laid in a stock of painkiller. We swore by it. Two drops to half a pint of water and some sugar. Guaranteed to cure anything—colds, headaches, stomach-aches and fatigue. We drank it, gave it to dogs for distemper, and rubbed it on swollen ankles. It was cheap and tasted like weak sheep dip, and was rated by us as far above any of the modern cures.

The Molesworth date would be '28, '29 or '30—say 25 years ago. But that paragraph could have been written 50 years ago or 75 and

JANUARY 25 still been true. A ledger kept by my father between 1865 and 1885, when he had a store on the goldfields, shows that painkiller was bought at intervals by two out of three of his customers, and must have had the same rating among miners as the Molesworth musterers gave it two generations later. It was a cure-all in most farmhouses when I was a boy, and I still carry somewhere between my tonsils and my brain the memory of its loathsomeness in hot water and milk. The frequency of its appearance on these ledger accounts suggests, however, that some customers had conquered the distaste. I don't think they could have taken it neat: but I would be surprised to discover that they broke it down with milk or added sugar to the water. I am surprised, too, by the weakness of the Molesworth prescription; but that was for physical healing only. As an exalter of the soul I don't know how strong painkiller would have to be, or how tough its users with practice might become. I have seen a ditcher in his cups drink Worcester sauce; a bricklayer suck the glass of his broken spirit level. More than once I have seen a station cook drink the kitchen yeast. But I give the palm for endurance to the miners who intoxicated themselves on that diabolical mixture of laudanum, rum and chilli that they bought week by week with their bacon, flour and tea.

* * *

I FORGOT, when I spoke recently about quarrelling dogs, that a musterer's whole pack will sometimes be tied to a single peg. Bruce Stronach says that his dogs learnt in a few days to eat and sleep tied in a circle round his mustering stick,

JANUARY 27 and that they neither fought, when he left them like that, nor got tangled. In bare country he might have to leave them all night, and he was never afraid that there would be trouble. But I wish I had been with him above Yoe Creek when the gang sat resting in the shade of a big rock and all the dogs ran up on it and looked down at them—70 in one big bunch (with, I suppose, gaping mouths and lolling tongues). To get to that rock there had been a heart-breaking climb through loose shingle, but it must have seemed worth while when the dogs staged that spectacle.

* * *

A NEWCOMER to the district asked me today if this is an abnormally dry summer or "about the average." I had to say that I did not know. I have not kept records, and I don't trust my memory. Far less do I trust present impressions. It seems an abnormally dry summer to me personally, because my sheep have run out

JANUARY 29 of grass and been boarded out. But that could be bad management. If it had been as dry for everybody else I would not have been able to buy grass but would have had to join the procession to Addington.

Meanwhile, my cows are milking reasonably well on a quarter of an acre of fat-hen. At first I pulled it for them and gave them a small ration twice a day. Now I let them do the pulling, anchored to my 200 pounds. In half an hour they have moved slowly through the patch once, most of the way eating eagerly, and jostling each other for bites. Then they pick for a quarter of an hour and I lead them out. The rest of the day they sleep and drink, and at night add an unknown quantity of dry tussock and withered grass. But there has been no marked diminution in their milk. If I am right, in supposing that they get a little fonder of the fat-hen every day, they are no doubt getting less to reinforce it on the hill; though it could happen with cows, as it sometimes happens with us, that we like things better tomorrow because they are associated with pleasant feelings today—in this case the rapid filling of an aching void.

(To be continued)