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SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

Lessons for Laggards

by "SUNDOWNER"

THERE are, I suppose, windier places in the world than the windiest parts of New Zealand—southern Patagonia, northern Greenland, the Campbell and Auckland Islands, and the high steppes of Central Asia. They are places that I know only in books, and I must be as ready to accept them as I am to accept Heaven. But I have been a doubter for three days and three nights. Throughout that period I have not seen an upright tree, heard a bee, or caught the song of a bird smaller

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than a rooster. Why our roosters still crow I can't think, since they are moulting, and risk being stood on their heads if they pause with their backs to the weather. I suppose they have to crow, standing or falling, to maintain their roosterly morale, but they have nothing else to crow about while this wind continues. Perhaps their crowing is physiological—so many hundred heartbeats, and their sound-boxes go off like alarm clocks.

But a three-days dry wind on top of a ten-weeks drought is more than I can accept cheerfully. It means that I can't run sheep again before spring, and in the meantime shall not be able to keep my cows in milk without feeding them on hay at twelve or thirteen pounds a ton. My neighbours have something to worry about too, of course, but they are young men and have time to recover and forget. I want the joys of farming now (without any quotation marks).

THE longer the drought lasts the more I value lucerne. As far as I can see from my hilltop—it is never less than five miles, and on clear days not less than 25—the plains are the colour of brown paper with the lucerne patches standing out like green postage stamps. But I don't have to look as far as that to see what lucerne, once it is fairly established, can do in the absence of rain.

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A couple of hundred yards from my front door Jim has three

paddock of it in three different stages of growth which, though they gain something from the contrast with the surrounding dust, delight both my eye and my nose. One patch is almost ready to thresh, one just passing from bloom to seed, and the other still a purple blaze: but there is no sign recognisable by me that any of the three is crying out for water. If the roots are not getting as much water as the plants would like, they are clearly finding enough for growth, bloom, and colour, for scent and honey, and for a lesson to the laggards like me who neglected at the appropriate time to dedicate at least an acre to lucerne as an insurance against the calamity that has now overtaken us.

I CAME on this remark today by a young French explorer who lost himself recently in Guiana:

You can't be flabby and easy-going in the jungle. If you want to stay alive you've got to take hold of yourself and overcome your laziness, however excusable it may be in moments of exhaustion.

It has been said thousands of times in thousands of ways, and is equally true morally and materially. But when I said it once to one

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of our ancestor-glorifying groups it was regarded as an attack on the first four ships. It was wrong to say that necessity made the pioneers what they were—to point out that they were ordinary men and women like the rest of us hammered by circumstances into what they became. It probably was wrong to say such things to such people. One of the questions to which I have never known the answer is whether to leave my sister when she prays or throw a bucket of water over her. Tennyson said "Leave her alone. Don't alarm or confuse her." And that in general is what I do. But I can't always agree with whoever said it that a harmless lie is better than a hurtful truth. I have moods in which I can't believe that any lie is harmless or any truth hurtful, and it must have been in one of those moods that I addressed the daughters of the revolution (as they would have called themselves in U.S.A.). I should have remembered that in a hundred years or so I will squeeze by as a pioneer myself.

I USED to think that what would worry me most at the Judgment Seat would be the parade of animals—the sheep, the lambs, the rabbits, the calves, the cats, the pigs, the deer, I had murdered. Now I begin to think it will be the faces of the people whose

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letters I have not answered. And I include only those correspondents whose letters it was my duty to answer.

There are letters which no one should answer: letters which are just silly or

(continued on next page)



Department of Agriculture photograph

CUTTING LUCERNE

"Like green postage stamps on brown paper"

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 2, 1954.