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Shepherd's Calendar

ENCROACHING SHEEP

by "SUNDOWNER"

THE most noticeable change in Southland since I looked at it a few years ago, is the reduction in the number of cows. In a drive of about 50 miles through an area that once supported ten factories I found no factories and only two farmers who milked six cows or more. The others had all changed to sheep, and one of them told me that if I had come

APRIL 2 to see cows I should have brought a camera

with me to show me in another ten years what dairy cows were like. In some areas—Edendale, Mataura, Wyndham, for example—dairying is still flourishing, and will, I think, continue to flourish. But even here the picture has changed a little dramatically. The typical situation, when I spent three months in that area in 1938, was a farm running 50, 60 or 80 cows, with a few old ewes to keep down the ragwort. Now 70 would be an unusual herd; 40 would be near the average; and instead of 50 or 60 decrepit ewes there will be four to six hundred vigorous Romneys in the autumn and winter with five to seven hundred Romney-Southdown lambs in the spring and early summer. I was told, too, that one of the reasons why more farmers had not given up cows was the fact that their farms were not big enough to support an economic flock of sheep. Though the best land supports five or six ewes to the acre, with their six or seven lambs later, that is not enough for the man who holds less than, say, 150 acres.

It will be interesting to see what effect the change to sheep has on the social life of Southland and on the character of its farmers. Will softness creep in, or are they protected against that by the necessity to grow winter feed and turn out in rain and snow to make sure that the sheep are never without it?

IT was necessary as I drove through Southland to wear an overcoat, and the difference this made to my bulk was the difference between cheerful and lugubrious thoughts as the miles slipped by. What the ribald call my bay-window came so often into conflict with the steering wheel that I was seldom able to forget J. R. Wilkinson's almost last words to me before he died at 93: *Corpora sicca durant*.

Latin is economical in words, tolerant in arrangement, devastating in hitting power. It makes very little difference whether we say *Corpora sicca durant* or *sicca corpora durant*; whether we say *durant sicca corpora* or *durant corpora sicca*. We could, I think, ring the changes still further without making the Latin impossible. But however we arrange those seven syllables they always mean the same. The lean live, the fat die: Add to your weight and you add to your mortality. Fill your skin with blubber and you fill your pockets with dynamite. Eat when you like and you will die when you don't like. Shorten your waist-band and you lengthen your life-line. Be a sloppy blob and you will soon be nothing.

It was pathological to have ruminations like those when the sheep were so

big and white, the grass so green and long, the swedes, choumoulier, and rape as good as any I have ever seen in my life. But even the lambs shouted at me. The faster they fattened the sooner they went, until one day only the lean and dry would be left. I pulled my belt as tight as it would go, but I will have to buy a thinner overcoat.

[DON'T want to lose my way to Heaven in the belly and bowels of a hare; or stumble on the way over a heap of moist pellets. If reflecting rodents are holding me back from grace I must learn where and how to by-pass them. But prejudice and

APRIL 5 ignorance die hard. Before men of science who have no theological axes to grind I am meeker than any mouse, but Dr. Milne's authorities (*Listener*, March 26) prove a little too much. Everybody knows that there are more ways than one of killing a cat; but one certain way would be to keep it in a cage so narrow that it could not turn round. This, it seems, Messrs. Eden, Southern and Dewar did with rabbits. I hope they lay in a narrow drain pipe while they were making their observations, with their arms held tight by their sides, and a hedgehog tickling their toes.

AN uncle, whose sense of the ludicrous embarrassed him all his life, inducing giggling fits at the most inopportune moments, called at a farmhouse one day to discuss some matter of business. The door was

APRIL 7 opened by the farmer's wife.

"Could I see your husband for a minute?"

"He passed away last week."

I am ashamed of uncle. Instead of apologising or expressing sorrow or turning away, he laughed in the poor woman's face. The harder he tried to speak the louder he laughed, and finally ran out the gate and drove away.

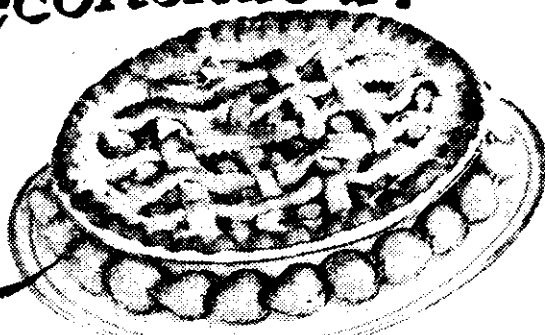
Uncle was not a strong, silent man. Neither am I. But I require all my strength and all my silence when I am told of these "passings away." Passed away where, I am more and more tempted to ask, and some day the temptation will be too great. I will out-uncle uncle, be vulgar, or silly, or inopportunistically jocular, and never be able to explain. But I would be safe if people just died.

I wish I knew why they don't. Six times on my journey south I was told of relatives or friends or acquaintances who had passed away or passed on or merely passed. Not one had died. Verbally they will never die, but linger on indefinitely like the dried grandfathers of New Guinea in Colin Simpson's *Adam with Arrows*. It was a relief to meet a gallant old friend in Invercargill, reading the morning paper at 91 without glasses, and determined, he said, to stay where he is until he can stay no longer. Some day, like the rest of us, he will die: but I don't think he will

(Continued on next page)

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