

THE HARD LAW OF AVERAGES

RUSHING in last week after all the harder heads had paused I added to my little flock of ewes and lambs. No rain had fallen for a month. The weather office had announced an "absolute drought" for September. The Forestry Department was issuing fire warnings. Jim had "seen a season end in October."

I took no notice. I had more than enough grass (I thought) to last till the end of the year. There was a law of averages. The rain would come.

But I took notice today when the thistles and nettles lay down and died under the trees where my sheep shelter in winter and find shade in summer. It was almost as dramatic as the death of Sennacherib's hundred and four score and five thousand warriors. Three days ago I was wondering how to deal with these pests, which had increased alarmingly on both sides of the plantation, the nettles in the sun, the thistles in the shade. I was even considering Jim's suggestion that I should carry a couple of gallons of water with me every time I climbed the hill and store it under the trees till I had enough to make a hormone mixture. But when I arose early this morning and went up to see what Jim's plan involved, behold my enemies were all dead corpses.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green.

That host with their banners at sunset were seen:

Like the leaves on the forest when Autumn hath blown.

That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

The question is, will they lift their heads again? When the Assyrians arose and found themselves dead, they had the decency to stay dead. Can I be sure

of *Urtica urens* and *Silybum marianum*? I have no Isaiah to help me, and as far as I know, not one gene of David to intercede for me. I can turn my face to the wall, like Hezekiah, and pray; but if I pray the Lord not to let the thistles come back, what am I asking him to do to the grass? It is a week since I embraced the law of averages, and there is still not a rain cloud on this side of the Alps.

[HAVE never had a high opinion of the shepherds of Cervantes even as figures of fun. They did, however, move large flocks of merinos from the lowlands to the highlands of Spain every summer, and get them down again in autumn before the snow came. By large flocks I mean several millions; and if merinos were as quick on their feet then as they are today, and as slow and perverse in their heads, the shepherds were more than the bumpkins of legend. I gather from a book I have just been reading (*Evolution of the Australian Merino*, by E. W. Cox), that the method was to divide the flocks into sub-flocks of convenient size—2000 to 3000—and to have one shepherd with every 500 sheep. I imagine, too, that there was rigorous accounting, and that shepherds whose tallies fell too far short of the number of sheep delivered to them had their anxious moments.

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But 500 seems a high figure. Though there would be roads most of the way, there would be no fences, and since the sheep would have to be folded at night the flocks must have been docile, the shepherds active and skilful, and the folding arrangements unusually convenient to avoid confusion and loss. It is, I

suppose, safe to assume that the sheep were well trained. If they spent a third of their time in the mountains, a third on the plains, and a third travelling from one to the other, year in and year out; if they lived as long as they were capable of producing wool, and had the same shepherds following them most of the time, three out of four would usually know what was expected of them, and do it automatically. But there would still be the fourth learner, the young and lively lambs, the unpredictable individualists. If I had been writing this Calendar in those days I think I would have had to write most of it by moonlight, and would not often have felt energetic enough to begin. I am sure, too, that if a youth had arrived late at night with the news that "the famous shepherd and scholar Chrysotom died this morning," I would not have wanted to know whether he died of the plague or "for love of that devilish lass Marcela."

[BLUSH to confess to such weakness, but the nearer Betty comes to her diary date, the longer I hope she will be in reaching it. Powdered milk seemed a miserable substitute when we first turned Betty out, but it has worked like a Gresham's law of the dairy. The ease with which we obtain our bad milk is dulling our inclination for the good.

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Fortunately for our morals, Betty has not studied economics. When her time comes she will not consider us at all, and since we will then consume far more cream than we should, I have good as well as bad reasons for hoping that she will not call on me too soon. In any case we shall have escaped for a month. There is a cow not far away that has been giving milk without a break for four years, and one of the friends we made in Queensland told us that she was going to have her heifer spayed so that it "would go on milking for ten years or more." The excuse in her case was that she lived on an island; but I don't know what the case is for milking a cow indefinitely on the mainland. There are no doubt freak animals here and there that could be used in this way; milk factories that will go on producing as long as they receive raw materials; machines that we still call cows because they have four legs, chew the cud and moo. I have seen photographs of cows that have been made to milk by hormone injections, as I have seen a bitch that secreted milk by internal stimulus only. But I have no desire to see an increase in these freaks. I would sooner be laughed at by my grandchildren than stared at by a mechanical cow incapable of understanding what I had done to her.

(To be continued)

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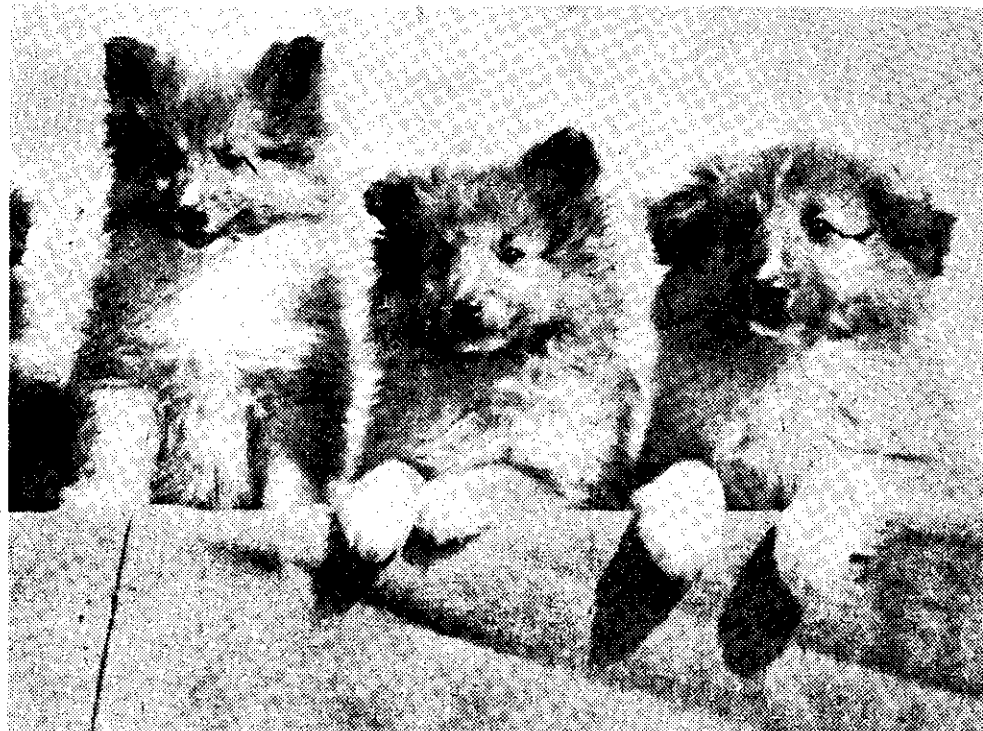
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