

Love's Labour Lost

by "SUNDOWNER"

THERE is, I suppose, a rapid, humane, efficient and commercially economical method of curing hens of broodiness. We are poor fish if in the ten or twenty thousand years of our dependence on hens for eggs we have not learnt that very necessary lesson. But I have not learnt it myself. After a lifelong association with hens I am not much wiser than I was 60 years ago when I thought it sufficient, and a very good joke, to thrust a broody hen's head through a sheet of newspaper and let panic do the rest. In addition to the joke panic did nothing. Nor was it effective, though

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the method has its supporters to this day, to duck a broody hen in cold water—once, or twice, or three or four times according to the severity of the attack. Locking hens up was not effective, whether the coop was big or small or dark or flooded with light. Starvation was not a cure unless it was continued long enough to settle the patient as well as the disease; and that barbarity I never saw.

I have, however, seen, and at one time or another tried, most of the others. The light breeds we have, of course, cured permanently through their genes—made machines of them which have no biological memories. The average White Leghorn has no more inclination to hatch eggs than I have to climb trees. Though God is not mocked in the long run, poultry farmers have mocked Him for a generation or two, and paid no price but pullorum, coccidiosis, cholera, leg-weakness, layer's cramp, congestion of the liver, prolapsus, lice, scabies, mites, ringworm, round, tape and gape worms, catarrh, bronchitis, congestion of the lungs, pneumonia, tuberculosis, pox, roup, and a dozen other loathsome and intractable diseases which wild fowls never contract. But it is useless to try the same tricks with the heavy breeds, which all sooner or later remember that laying their eggs is only half their job.

My present problem is to persuade my Rhode Island Red hens that sitting in empty nests, or on sticks, stones, or bare ground is love's labour lost. If I see the signs soon enough, carry the affected birds away, and tie them in a windy but handy spot under a tree, where it is easy to feed and water them three or four times a day and rouse them to their feet as often as I pass them, I can change their inclination in three or four days. If I allow them a couple of days on the nest, any nest, shut them in a box or a coop, or merely exclude them from the fowl-house, they will remain broody for a week or two, rush back to the nest at every opportunity, or sit as near to it as they can get outside. The professional method, according to Sir Edward Brown, is to place the hen in a box with a slatted or netting floor and suspend this in the air. I have not tried it, but it seems a little less kind than tying a hen on five or six feet of string and keeping her under observation. Excitable fowls may suffer unduly, but my R.I.R.'s cease pulling in a minute

or two and are, in fact, quicker to learn the lessons of restraint than cows, calves, sheep, lambs or dogs.

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THE background to all these notes is animal farming. If they stray round the universe now and then that is because farming is carried on by farmers who read sometimes, observe, enjoy, suffer, and think. Because animal farming is their theme the notes are often disgusting, brutal, coarse and mercenary. They are refined and gentle by comparison with the truth. I don't know

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any record of farming as it actually is; anything so false as the romantic pictures of it or so offensive as those showing nothing but gains and losses. The truth is something I have never dared to present for a single day.

Here is a faint echo of an echo of it. I decided, when I killed Betty's calf a year ago, that I would somehow or other avoid that horror this year. I would pay for the services of a pedigree bull which, since Betty came from a registered herd herself, and still has the proof tattooed in her ears, would give me something in calves that even a hard-baked farmer would not allow to be killed. When the calf arrived it was without a blemish in conformation, coat, nostrils, eyes and feet. But it was a bull. I could not keep it myself as a bull for more than a month or two, and I found that I could not give it away. I could feed it for a few days and then sell it to the Bobby Pool, for 45/6, castrate it and sell it in a few months for veal, or go through all the

misery of petting it for a year or two and then turning my back on it while the butcher drove it away. It was kinder to shoot it at once, if possible while it slept, but it opened its eyes when I approached with the rifle, and when I held the muzzle within a few inches of its forehead to make sure that the bullet penetrated the brain, it jerked its nose up affectionately at the very moment when I pulled the trigger and died so slowly that I was sick.

I will not go on with the story. I tell so much only to shut romantic mouths and burn a hole—if by any chance it were possible—in the pocket of the man who is thinking greedily of that lost 45/6.

* * *

THOUGH rain has come it is not yet the rain. We have had a few points, distributed thinly over two nights, but carried off again by hot winds and a scorching sun. Enough seems to have been retained in the soil to bring seedlings through the crust in the garden; but the grass

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has not recovered its colour or its succulence. (Does wilted grass recover, or is it replaced by new growth?)

When we talk about the colour of grass in New Zealand we usually mean the colour of imported grass. New Zealand was not a green country a hundred years ago, and its uncultivated areas are nowhere green today (if we except a few swamps). To get the hundred greens of our bush it is necessary to stand under it and look up at the sun and the sky, but seen as we usually see it the bush is black or bronze or brown. It has always seemed strange to me that our milder and often moister climate has produced a more sombre landscape than England's on soil usually as kind. The explanation no doubt is atmospheric, the effect of our constant

and more violent winds on the growth, shape, and colour of our leaves. The surprise I suppose is that the disparity is not greater—that we have any big-leaved trees or shrubs and not merely so few.

But the landscape I see from my window was never bush-covered, and is not now covered by native grass. Every green patch owes its colour to cocksfoot, clover, lucerne, fog, or rye, or to wheat and barley. We have removed the original skin everywhere but on the swamps and the river beds, and even there we have changed the colour by additions and subtractions and rearrangements. But I still think it odd that this has so greatly increased the effect of contrast, intensified the green where there is moisture, accentuated the fawn and grey and brown where the moisture for some reason or other has failed.



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