

PLAGUE OF FLIES

by "SUNDOWNER"

THE day before yesterday I posted two airform letters—one to London and one to New York. Unfortunately, I forgot that the postage had risen, and put sixpence instead of eightpence on each. This morning I received a letter from the Chief Postmaster informing me that I had understamped each folder by twopence, that this would have

DECEMBER 20

meant a fine for the receiver (which he was sure I would wish to avoid), that holding the letters back would have defeated my purpose in sending them air mail, and the extra stamps had therefore been added and the letters sent on, and that it would be appreciated if I would affix four pence in stamps to his letter, deface them, and send the letter back to him in the post free addressed envelope enclosed.

If that is routine courtesy by the Post Office, as the printed forms suggest, it is a very effective answer to those who sneer at public servants.

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IT is one thing to pray for rain, another thing to accept what comes. I am as grateful for the rain as most men must be when they win art unions or sweepstakes or guessing competitions or political elections or some other prize for which they have entered without any expectation of success. It has held off a provincial calamity when hope had just about died. But I could have done without the blow-

DECEMBER 22

flies. As long as the grass was dry and the sheep were clean the flies stayed wherever flies usually stay in such weather—in the tussocks, perhaps, or under them, in cracks in the ground and behind the loose bark of trees. I don't know where they go when conditions are not favourable for egg-laying, or what suddenly stimulates their ovaries when conditions change. But within 48 hours of a warm moist night I found a sheep and a lamb both badly struck. I got the sheep clear after one clipping and painting, partly because she has coarse wool that it was easy to examine. The lamb seemed to be clear yesterday, but today it went down again, and when I examined it more closely it was moving from its tail to its loins and even under the coarse hair from its hocks down to its feet. Because its wool was short, close, and dark on the surface (Merino-Southdown), the discoloration produced by the maggots was not noticeable until the affected area was shorn. I confess that it gave me pleasure to see the maggots dropping off and dying by the hundreds as I forced the deadly mixture in with a brush.

But it is sad to see sheep so helpless. Cows and horses can defend themselves up to a point. They will also help one another up to a point. Sheep have no defence, and apparently little feeling of discomfort or uneasiness until it is too late. Then they lie down until they are slowly eaten and poisoned to death. It

is the price they pay for our cleverness in changing their size, shape and covering.

* * *

THE next time I stand for Parliament I will promise that when I am elected and made Prime Minister I will make it a penal offence for doctors, dentists, lawyers and accountants to have magazines in their waiting-rooms with torn or missing pages. When the applause following that promise dies down I will go further, and with both hands on my heart declare solemnly that there

DECEMBER 23

will also be a censorship of the reading matter provided; that no magazine may be more than five years old; and that every table must carry something for shepherds, shepherds and farmers. It was all very well in the bad old days to think that anything would do for the unfortunates you were going to pluck, fleece or skin. Not many people went to professional rooms then; if they did go they were sick or in some other deep trouble that left them little inclined to read; and they had not long to wait. Today these places hold a considerable proportion of the population of every town. People sit and wait and listen and wonder in crowds. They don't know one another well enough to talk, though many are clearly bursting with the desire to exchange experiences and symptoms. When you see those you must be careful not to catch their eyes, and it is cruelty to people already suffering anxiety to compel them to gaze for half an hour on the pages of a magazine that jumps from Field-Marshal Montgomery to Frank Sinatra.

There are hours when I would go much further than this—insist that each magazine or review should be current, written for those whose thinking begins above their collars, and chosen with as much care as their purchaser bestows on his socks and ties. Those, however, are hours embittered by sitting in a room full of people who do not once look at the distractions lying on the table, but fix me with eyes in which I can see as many questions as King Lear asked Gloucester. In my calmer moments I know that magazines are not placed in professional rooms to be read; that two world wars have been fought to establish our right not to read what somebody selects for us; and that every torn and missing page is a nose-and-thumb defiance of the indoctrinators.

* * *

I DON'T think gooseberries rank high on the list of delights for which kings have risked their crowns. I can't remember a poem in their praise or a painting inspired by their beauty. But I am one of those vulgar people whose juices flow at the sight of a laden bush. They are among the associations of Christmas, the pleasures of a South Island summer; and I have never paused to ask myself

DECEMBER 26

why they are absent from my picture of the North Island. They have always grown in the North Island. A hundred years ago Sir Donald McLean put them second on the list of "handsome presents" received from the missionary Colenso, the first place going to wine, the last to milk.



Sparrow Industrial picture

"Gooseberries are not the only joys that are no longer what they used to be"

But Sir Donald grew up in a country in which every gooseberry would be a grape.

It is, however, one thing to like gooseberries and another to eat them. Until I found the courage to spend £7 on string netting, and discovered how to make six feet of string cover ten feet of leaves and fruit, I was forestalled every season by the blackbirds which started on the berries long before they were sweet or even soft. This year I gave the birds two bushes and netted four, and the season is ending for all of us at the same time.

There is, I believe, a doubt about the origin of the word gooseberry. Some authorities are satisfied with "goose" and "berry," even though they can't explain how the two became associated. Others believe that the "goose" is a corruption of a Dutch or German word meaning curled or crisp which was applied to the hairs on the fruit. Today, of course, most fruit has lost its hair, and with the hair much of the flavour and sweetness. But gooseberries are not the only joys that are no longer what they used to be.

(To be continued)

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