

# GREEDY EATERS

by "SUNDOWNER"

**H**ENS play so small a part in human lives that it is difficult, when they die, to remember how they lived. When Mary died last week at 16 she was the oldest hen I have ever known and the most interesting. But when I tried to reconstruct her story I could not be sure that I recalled it accurately. This is the picture that I think I see.

I bought her when she was two, with three others of the same age, and am ashamed to recall that I condemned her at first to day-long imprisonment without male company. It was months before I added Charlie to the family and gave them all the liberty of the bush; but it did happen at last, and for two years or more they were pleasanter rather than hens, spending much of the day up trees, but coming down at night to be fed and locked up again. During this period, perhaps because she was so largely insectivorous, Mary began to crow without ceasing to lay.

Then the Devil sneaked into her paradise. Two fox terriers burrowed under the fowlhouse door and tore every bantam to pieces but Mary, who was badly bitten but somehow or other got out the way the dogs got in and took refuge in a high tree, where she stayed the next day and night. We had completely given her up when she came down bedraggled and sore—and very hungry and thirsty.

A day or two later we put her in a box and posted her to the South Island. Here for 12 years she did precisely what she wanted to, having the liberty of a large vegetable garden and orchard, a house of her own, a husband of her own till she outlived him, a change from female to male whenever the weather said the word to her glands, and a long final period of neutrality and unruffled serenity. Instead of dying on her perch, she climbed into her owner's lap, opened an eye to see where she was, and the next moment dropped her head.

**JANUARY 20**

I WAS cheered when I read today, in a book on British mammals, that voles eat their own weight of dry food in about ten days. Without pausing to make an exact comparison I felt that this proved them greedier by many times than I am myself. When I did at last ask myself what the statement meant my complacency began to leave me. A vole, I discovered, weighs about thirty grammes, and therefore eats about three grammes of dry food in 24 hours. But it dies in nine or ten months, and in its whole life therefore eats about 30 times its own weight. If I weigh 200 pounds and eat two pounds a day for 70 years—Mrs. Beeton allows me  $2\frac{1}{4}$  pounds—my life consumption is more than 250 times my weight. To get down to the consumption of a vole would be about 6000 pounds of dry food in 70 years, or about four ounces a day: one slice of bread, one egg, one chop, one potato for every six I now eat.

**JANUARY 22**

I don't know whether the "wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie" of Burns was a vole, and I don't suppose Burns knew either. But less than a hundred years after Burns allowed that beastie to go free Scotland was in the grip of a plague of voles which did great damage to her sheep farmers. Statisticians by looking at the graphs of ewes that died and lambs that were never born can tell us in what year the voles were most numerous; and if we have open minds we will believe them. But the voles either took pity on Scotland just then or ate themselves out. Before punitive measures against them could be properly organised they laid down and died faster than the flowers of the forest, and in a single summer were "a' we'de away." \* \* \*

**JANUARY 23**

THIS question of food consumption reminds me that I heard someone telling farmers recently from 3YA how to slim their pigs without slowing down their increase in weight. I hope that this meant that fat bacon is on the way

out of our provision shops and lean, or at least leaner, bacon on the way in. Fat bacon no doubt has its place—half-way up Everest and in the Bay of Whales; but I am tired of paying for it and throwing half of it away. I hope the campaign will go further than the provision shops, and further than Ruakura (where most animal reforms begin), and that the farmer will soon be a laughing stock who exhibits boars or sows at shows that are just grunting masses of uneasy blubber.

Grossly over-fat animals are as repulsive as grossly over-fat men and women: unless the fatness is sickness and invokes pity. If a bull can't walk briskly round the show ring he should not be there, and no such animal would be there if we had sensible and wholesome judging standards. In general, sheep-breeders do better in this matter than breeders of cattle, partly because most stud sheep have their liberty, and partly because fatness can conceal only 50 per cent of a ram's faults and not 90 per cent as it can with bulls. There is the fact, too, with cattle, that mere mass can be more spectacular. It is only in a relative sense that a ram can ever look big, but when a bull looks like a moving mountain we are all childlike enough to be impressed.

**JANUARY 27**

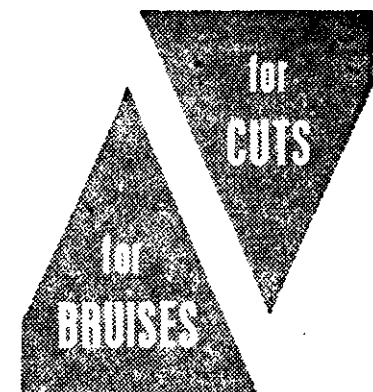
I HAVE been trying this week to read Eric McCormick and Laurens van der Post simultaneously—with humiliating results. Reading Eric is like reading the New Testament: I am not often on the level to do it profitably. Van der Post is not as intelligent as Eric, but he is thoughtful and high-minded. He has courage, humility, imagination and charity. But he breathes my air and eats my food, and I don't have to struggle too hard to keep him in sight. I am not fine enough for Eric or well enough disciplined. The result is that I have finished *Venture to the Interior* and read only a third of *The Expatiate*.

The day comes, I suspect, to us all when the finest in thought and art are beyond our grasp. I have not found that age detaches me from earthy things and makes me more aware of other voices. I think it dulls us spiritually as well as physically. I think there was a day when van der Post would have seemed second-rate and Eric the still small voice of truth. That is where my reason places them still, but my inclination their way has moved some degrees. Eric is for the silent watches of the night, for the increasingly rare hours when the best books I have ever read and the noblest people I have ever met are working together in me against the world, the flesh and the Devil. I suppose this means that the Devil will get me in the end. I am sure it means that apathy will claim me first.

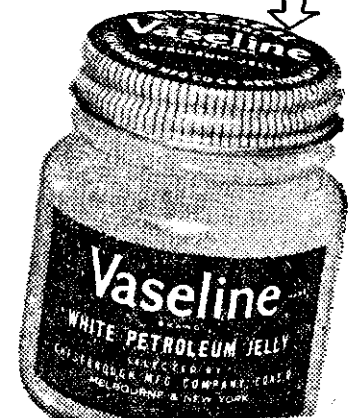
**JANUARY 29**

TWO mornings ago, as I milked my cow, six goldfinches sat in a row on the water-trough waiting for the level to rise to their reach. When they were at last able to drink they flew to the other side of the trough to keep me in sight as they dipped their heads. I noticed that there were never more than two heads down at the same moment. Yesterday the cat was lying on the covered end of the trough and the goldfinches watching from the willow branches above. This morning the cat met me at the back door with a goldfinch in her mouth.

(To be continued)



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