

The Clutch of Conscience

by "SUNDOWNER"

A RETIRED dairy farmer I know and greatly respect, a man of my own age who has suffered enough illnesses and accidents to carry off two or three less resilient men, ends a letter to me on this note:

I could not sit on a stool now, as one leg would stick out straight, so I won't be able to milk any more. I can't kneel down to weed the garden, either. Having all these good excuses, and a good stock of firing for the winter, my conscience won't worry me when I'm loafing indoors reading or playing chess.

Conscience does strange things to us, as Shakespeare knew, but it does nothing so strange as to rob us of the capacity to do right

APRIL 30 without blushing. All his life my friend has been

a slave of his conscience. (All my life, for that matter, I have been on the run from mine.) He has been diligent, as no man would be without a moral goad; honest, as no man can be without losing blood and sweat; studious, in the full realisation that knowledge is its own reward; and unselfish, as only the good can be anywhere, since selfishness is not only born in us but necessary for comfortable survival. And now the tyrant he has served so faithfully grudges him his rest. He can't loaf without "good excuses"—a broken thigh, an arthritic knee, peremptory orders by his doctors, and the knowledge that if he does not loaf in front of his fire he will soon have something worse to answer for and no excuses at all.

Conscience not only makes cowards of us. It makes fools of us—and if we would call things by their proper names,

blasphemers too. Loafing when we are tired, or sick, or spent, is something that our consciences should compel us to do. But they don't. They are so twisted by the impieties of superstition and ignorance that they will not release us even when they can do nothing more for us than darken our closing days.

I HAD no more reason to love Sir Heaton Rhodes than he had to care whether my skin was black or white. Territorially we were neighbours, but although my rabbits bred with his for 25 years this brought their owners no closer together than the marbles are to the knife in a schoolboy's pocket. But I found myself ready to weep for him yesterday when I went with Jim to the sale of his pedigree Red Polls. The slaughter lasted for four hours, and when we left for home we were both silent. Then Jim said: "It's a good job the old man was not alive to see it."

Dispersal sales are always depressing, but I have not often felt so strongly the vanity of human wishes. There was first the setting—the beautiful valley, the beautiful trees, the many-roomed mansion hidden from all the bustle that built and maintained it, and not a soul left to care what followed. There were, I believe, some not very close relatives among the buyers bidding for sentimental reasons, but the crowd as a whole seemed completely indifferent to the fact that every bid spelt *vanitas vanitatum*. For more than half a century this stud had been a rich man's pride.

To build it up his money had flowed round the world. Men had spent their lives feeding these animals, grooming them, taking teams of them to shows, registering their calves, recording their milk and butterfat performances, folding away their ribbons and sashes, tacking up their prize-winning cards. And there it all was—disintegrating unit by unit and nobody caring. There was not even the indecent glee the greedy show when they think they are getting something for nothing.

The sale dragged. Bidders were indifferent and casual. Buyers seemed not to value what they bought. It was clear that Sir Heaton had spent his time, his money, his enthusiasm, his devotion on something that New Zealand did not want. When his long life ended a breed ended, too: a beautiful breed, a good breed, a breed with everything but the two qualities farmers put first—more milk and more meat than could be obtained from any other breed.

I AM beginning to lose faith in New Zealand's last rabbit. I have always known that it will be bought at a great price, but my pessimism today has another explanation. I have been reading the diary of C. E. Douglas, rescued, edited, and annotated by John Pascoe.

Douglas spent his life exploring unknown mountains and gorges in South Westland, and in February, 1891—more than 66 years ago—he found rabbits up the Waitatoto Valley in places where no white man, and probably no man of any colour, had ever been before. He mentions them first on February 24, when they are "not very plentiful." On February 25, however, having moved on a little, he finds "rabbits galore," and by February 27 finds them "swarming . . . barking and killing all the trees," and is convinced that they have been there for years. Perhaps, he adds darkly, they will gradually exterminate the Westland bush, as they did the bush of St. Helena and Ascension, and with "the trees off the ranges, all the little soil the country possesses will be washed away down the river and deposited at the mouth—a bright look-out for the cockatoos." Then he lets himself go:

Breed Ferrets in galore, spread Poison as you like, this Island will never get rid of the Rabbits. What is the use of destroying them down country, when they can retire to the Wilds and breed in safety. People don't seem to know the Geography of this Island, or to enable them to borrow more money from home, they don't want to know. Why at least a fourth of the country will never even be inhabited, and consequently will remain a breeding ground for Armies of Vermin, who have been introduced in the country by the dense ignorance of the people.

If time has been a little kinder to us than Douglas thought it might be—and the wonder is that a half-starved, half-clothed, half-frozen, and almost wholly neglected explorer had any cheerful thoughts at all—time's fingers point two ways. At present we have the rabbits under a pressure that they have never felt before; but if they raced us over the Alps and into Westland, if they were firmly established in the bush 70 years ago, and crossing and recrossing the divide at, say, 5000 feet, they will do it again rather than lie down and die in Otago and Canterbury. No Rabbit Board will pursue them into some of the places in which Douglas found them.

(C) Punch

(To be continued)

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