

FENCES TO MEND

BECAUSE I don't want to reach the stage with the rest of my neighbours that I have reached, and passed, with Jim, I hesitate to ask for their co-operation even when it would pay them to give it. If we have neighbours we must have fences; and if we are both to be good neighbours the

AUGUST 7 fences must be good, too. But Taranaki cast its spell over this valley before the first grazing run was broken up, and no one has been reckless enough since to break the spell.

I made a feeble attempt to break it when I first came here. I asked a neighbour on one boundary to join with me in erecting a new fence. He said he was busy, but that if I put up the fence he would pay his share of the cost. That was my first mistake. I put up the fence, and some of it is still there 25 years afterwards. But it is not all there, and half a fence can be worse than none. I have not had the courage to approach my neighbours on my other boundaries, partly because my sheep, if they go out, can always, as things are, come back, and partly because old men can't ask young men to combine with them in any physical effort on equal terms.

Jim accepts my age, and my mechanical efficiency, and has long since got used to the fact that when I look over his fence I am saying, like the man of Macedonia to Paul, "Come over and help us." If it is not my pump it is my car, and if it is neither the pump nor the car it is the electric light or the radio or a leak in the roof or the hot water system. Sometimes it is the hanging of a gate or the topping of a tree or the straining of a fence or the extraction of the standards in an old fence with a tractor and a hydraulic lift. Advice about sheep is a routine service, and although crutching is supposed to be on a *quid pro quo* foundation, I have never yet been sure whether Jim has taken all of the quid or part of it or none of it.

It is the kind of situation we can drift into once, but not, if we have self-respect, slide into twice. So I keep to myself on three fronts; but when I found a sheep following outside the fence on one of these fronts, and trying to get through to my side, I realised that it was one of our pets which had

by "SUNDOWNER"

been trespassing, and that my 25-years-old fence would have to be reconstructed. The job is done. So are my fingers and my back. But if an enemy ever falls into my hands—say a researcher in wool—I will not consign him to the place where torments are prepared for him, but send him up my hill on a cold day to tie number eight knots in number seven steel wire that has been exposed for 25 years to the weather.

"ANYTHING," my brother said to me the other day, "can happen to farmers; riches in the morning, poverty in the afternoon."

I think he spoke the truth. More than men in any other calling, if we except sailors, say, and airmen, farmers move from adventure to adventure and from gamble to gamble. They never know, and never can know,

AUGUST 9 that they will reap where they have sown; that a big lambing will be a big tailing; that sweet hay in the morning will be sweet hay in the evening; or that their dead enemies will stay dead. My own operations are not on a big enough scale to make any of these misfortunes tragedies: I have only an egg or two in any basket, and if I lose them all I am not much shorter of bread. But I have seen farmers putting all their eggs into one basket this week and losing them all next week. I have seen them ruined by frost, by wind, by flood, by fire, by the collapse of a market, by the arrival of a bug. Though such things do not often happen here, everyone who has reached 70 can remember wool at threepence, butter at fourpence, oats at ninepence, and potatoes and mutton for the carrying away. Worse still is the memory of skilled farm labour at a shilling a day and keep; such keep as was then available—meals, and blankets thrown in two bags nailed across a shaky frame.

But the farmer is blind and deaf and forgetful and dumb who looks back and sees nothing else. He is a farmer who farms for gain and gain only, and never cares how it comes. Every farmer farms for gain to begin with, and ceases to farm when the years fail to bring it. But he is not a farmer if his operations are not adventures as well. He is

a gambler whose plunges are as colourless as investments on the totalisator. And since farm births and farm deaths never cease, since the weather seldom repeats itself in precisely the same way, since the drought today may be a flood tomorrow, since no man can say this year who will want his potatoes next year, or his apples, or his onions, or his wool, gaining and losing remain perennial excitements. A choir, as I write this note, is telling me a little stridently that there is no death. I am not able to join in. But if dullness is death; if it is death to lose an interest in the world when there are no more plums to pick, he is a poor farmer who dies before his time.

I DON'T know whether it is news or nonsense that the wife of a Lancashire farmer has successfully crossed a hen turkey with a barnyard rooster. I don't know the biological background of turkeys, and I am too far from a reference library to find and climb their family tree. If the story is possible, I have no difficulty in

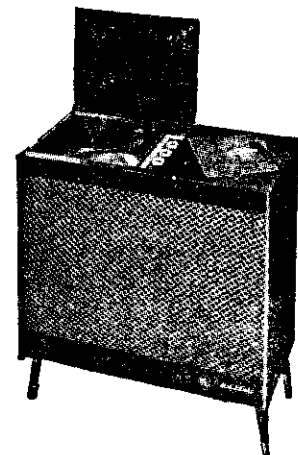
AUGUST 12 supposing it probable, given the necessary combination of isolation and proximity. I was told the other day by a Scots brother-in-law that the capercaillie, which belongs, I think, to the grouse family, is such a notorious wanderer in the mating season that his offspring are the despair of ornithologists. Again I don't know how true that is, or how true it could be. If there are other birds close enough to capercaillie biologically to make productive mating possible outside the family circle, I can believe, as most people will who have kept ducks and fowls together, that there are birds which will go outside that circle; though miscegenation must be rare in the wild.

But it is amusing that the production of this hybrid has not only been accepted by the popular press as a possibility, but hailed as the first step in a poultry world revolution. The next step, we are assured, may be a bird as good to eat as a turkey and as profitable to keep as a high-producing hen. Since I don't eat turkey the possibility interests me only theoretically, but it will be time to talk of combining eggs and meat in a hybrid when we have done it successfully in a bird of straight breeding. It is true that poultry farmers who cull hard enough get almost as many eggs from some of the heavy breeds as they used to get from the best of the light breeds; but they do not get them as easily. Anyone can get 150 eggs and more from a Leghorn; but to get as many as that from an Australorp or a Rhode Island Red calls for foresight, care and skill, and pushing production further is quite likely to lead to intractable broodiness.

However, birds are good subjects for breeding experiments, since it is easy to try out the possible combinations without waiting too long for the results. If crosses between hens and turkeys are not hybrids but halfbreeds, they could no doubt be changed in size, weight, colour and conformation almost as fast as fanciers breed bantams; but egg production is more complicated. In any case, if "churkeys," as I suspect, provided neither eggs nor meat, but just a newspaper sensation for the silly season, we may hear of them again, but I don't think they will ever grace our tables at Christmas.

(To be continued)

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