

# OPOSSUM

BARBARA and Bill sat over their tea in the high-ceilinged dining room of the old homestead. It was a still evening in late summer, the last glow of the setting sun fading behind the poplars, and dusk slowly creeping over the quiet garden. The children were away at boarding school, and Bill was due at a meeting that night in the now disused Road Board office four miles away.

"I suppose I must be on my way," said Bill. Tired after a long day harvesting, he would gladly have given up the meeting and gone early to bed. Instead he put his hand briefly on his wife's shoulder.

"So long," he said, "don't wait up for me."

BARBARA, faced with an evening to herself, felt no need to hurry. She watched the smoke from her cigarette slowly mount through the ring of light above the table and disappear into the shadowy ceiling. She heard the first moths arrive on the window, dabbing the pane with their soft furry bodies. A German owl hooted from the pine trees overhanging the mailbox. It was very peaceful, and Barbara too had had a full day, of washing and cooking and taking meals down to the men on the header.

TIME seemed to stand still until, almost imperceptibly, there came a soft thudding sound on the roof above, which slowly grew to a heavy lumbering tread. Barbara was instantly alert. This was the opossum who had lived, as far as anyone knew, a solitary existence in the garden for two or three

years. If he took apples or pears off the gnarled old trees, there were enough and to spare, so no-one missed them. If he gathered nuts from the hazel-walk, no-one ever caught him at it. He never touched the vegetables, and indeed was never seen except at night, silhouetted against the starry sky, sitting on one of the many ridges of the old house. Yet ever since he arrived in the garden everyone was determined to shoot him.

"He'll multiply as sure as eggs in eggs," said the cowman-gardener to Barbara one morning as he came in for his tea. "And then what'll become of my garden?"

"Yes," Bill had said, "there's no doubt we must get rid of the fellow before he brings more of his kind. They're a dreadful curse in a garden."

So every night, if the family had not already gone to bed, as soon as the opossum had swung himself up on to the roof by the matipo that grew close up against the south wall, and started his gymnastics—now scampering, now heavily tramping, now skidding in frolicsome glee down the corrugations of the red iron roof—someone would rush to the cupboard under the stairs, feel round in the dark for the cold steel barrel of the little .22 rifle, pick up the box of ammunition from the shelf above, and away out of the back door to try to catch sight of the round, silhouetted body against the dim glow of the day, or the less penetrable light of a rising moon.



A Short Story by JANET CRAWFORD

But a .22 rifle is not the weapon to use for such a venture. It never occurred to anyone to take the shotgun; and as it was always dark the opossum invariably lived to see another day, and another prank on the roof a few nights later.

The years passed, and still he played on the roof, until the family became accustomed to the thuds and the thumps; until, had they only known it, these noises began to be part of the pattern of their lives, like the inevitable fall of leaves in the autumn, or the crowing of cocks in the morning.

"There's the 'possum," one boy would say to his young brother as he hovered on the borders of sleep and the bedroom curtain stirred in the wind.

"There's the old 'possum again," Bill would murmur to Barbara, as he turned

his pillow over on a hot night. And he would sigh in a happy way to know that he was already in bed, and felt no need to be up and out after its blood.

BARBARA stubbed her cigarette rapidly, flicked out the light at the door, and as if by instinct made for the dark little cupboard under the stairs, where she found the rifle, selected two bullets from their tightly packed box, and silently slid out of the back door and across the drying green.

The frogs in the pond had started up their nightly chorus. The moon was full, showing high in the sky behind the house, and turning the roof into dark valleys and lighted slopes.

Then she saw him. He was sitting up high on the ridge, above a dark valley, the moon slightly to the right behind him. One of the bullets left its fellow in her pocket; she slipped the bolt home, but the faint click made no difference. He sat there motionless, as though gazing down at her. Slowly she raised the rifle to her shoulder, and as she brought it up against the moon she saw, for the first time on these nightly 'possum hunts, the sights clear as crystal against the brilliant background. She edged the tiny ball of the front sight into the groove of the back one, and very gently moved them from the moon to the 'possum, squeezing the trigger at the same time. There was a shattering report in the still night, and nothing now broke the gleaming line of the ridgepole. Only the sound of scrabbling and scratching was heard as a heavy body rolled over and over into the virginia creeper above the verandah. Then silence, followed by the frogs starting up again and a cold night wind swaying the pine-trees. Barbara gave a little shiver, ejected the bullet-case, and walked indoors.

In a daze she wrapped a flannel square round the head of the cleaning rod and pushed it through the barrel of the gun, replaced it in the cupboard, washed up the tea dishes and walked into the sitting room, trying to think of the many letters she had intended to write on this evening by herself. She sat down at her desk and drew the pad towards her. With her pen poised she sat for nearly twenty minutes without stirring. Suddenly she leant forward and wrote two lines, placed the sheet on the table, and took herself off to bed.

When Bill came back from his meeting, expecting to kick up a dying fire for a last warm up after his evening in a cold hall, he found the fire had never been lit. The page on the table caught his eye. On it he read:

*I shot the 'possum, and I'm miserable, so I've gone to bed.*

## The Meaning of Leisure

"LEISURE is no medicament at all unless you enjoy it. It should absorb just enough of your attention to make you forget your worries; but not so much of your attention as to prevent your mind from resting. That is what I consider the important function of leisure; not doing nothing, as that means that you brood; but doing something different that makes the blood flow from the congested cells of your brain into other empty cells. I find myself that the best relief from work is to do some different sort of work."—Harold Nicolson, author and politician, speaking in a BBC programme.

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 8, 1951.

## "THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

(Solution to No. 548)

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### Clues Across

- Release, but scold in the end.
- Composed.
- One who appreciates beauty.
- Strife.
- Dan errs (anag.).
- "Oh, what a tangled — we weave When first we practise to deceive" (Scott).
- Presage.
- "He saith among the trumpets, — —; and he smelleth the battle afar off" (Job 39, 25).
- Bird in the nest?

- Strange to say, this shepherdess is often found in China.
- Fortress.
- I've ached (anag.).
- Coming ones are said to cast their shadows before them.
- Mitigates.

### Clues Down

- Scoff at.
- for the goose is proverbially — for the gander.
- Edward or King?
- Outside.
- "Crabbed — and youth cannot live together" (Shakespeare).
- Re-appearance after eclipse.
- "They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, Through — took their solitary way" ("Paradise Lost").
- Father of Shem, Ham and Japheth.
- Unexpected piece of luck.
- What Mother Hubbard was looking for when she went to the cupboard.

- Dog-tired.
- Crooked cone.
- Brings to bear.
- "All, all are gone, the old familiar —" (Lamb).
- "Beware the — of March" ("Julius Caesar," Act 1, Scene 2).
- Crone.

No. 549 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

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