

Brothers and Betters

A CORRESPONDENT sends this note from Otago:

by "SUNDOWNER"

With regard to your interest in animals. I often wonder if there are good people or friendly people or kind or honest ones, or if virtues have entities of their own and enter different bodies. I have seen them all manifested in such unlikely places—I'll swear I've met friendliness in inanimate objects. Do you think that some day we shall find that animals are our brothers as we did with the black races? It's a pity we spend centuries killing off all the most intelligent and noble ones before we deign to associate with them. . . . The most vivid expression of patient resignation I ever saw was in the eyes of a rat that was trapped: I was afraid it was injured internally or I should have let that patience free in a fearful world. But hypocrite that I was, I was glad there was an excuse for having it destroyed.

I am no expert in the virtues, but if they include patience, kindness, honesty and friendship I don't think they show up better in animals than in men.

I have affection for animals, and misplaced love spends a lot of time trying to justify itself. But my attempts are never very successful. I think dogs can be friendly beyond the limits of appetite, fawning, and fear; pigs, cows, horses, and even sheep respond to kindness and seem to return it (as when Elsie licks me). It is, however, all response and no initiative. Honesty is beyond the range of all animals, and their patience is physical and not moral.

But I know the terrible look in trapped rats. I saw one drowned in an open cage in clear water nearly 50 years ago, and the shame of that still haunts me. I know the rage, hate and defiance of trapped ferrets and opossums. I know the shrinking, terrified sick look of a rabbit that has given up struggling. I know of so many horrible things done by men to animals—of so many I have myself done—

that when brotherhood is finally established between us it will not be an equal partnership morally. But I don't think animals are themselves virtuous. They don't do some of the abominable things we do because they don't know how to do them. But cats torture mice. Hawks eat holes in live rabbits. Gulls pluck the eyes from live sheep. Hens bully and sometimes kill strangers. Because they don't know what they are doing cruel animals are never the brutes that cruel men always are. But kind, patient, friendly, honest? No. Not once in all the millions of years since life first entered their dust. Our brothers? Yes. Better brothers in a thousand ways than we are. But not good.

I WAS just about to start my evening meal on Saturday night when Jim came in to borrow a rabbit trap. He had been away from home for two or three days and had returned to find that ferrets, or weasels, or stoats had killed about twenty of his Rhode Island pullets (a special strain more than half-grown). I gave him all the traps I had, six, and

JANUARY 30 held a torch while he set them in the most likely places. Then I came home again, feeling a little guilty over the ferrets I had caught during the winter, and liberated.

But I will not liberate any more, if I trap any more, which is unlikely now after Jim's catches. I saw him again this morning (Wednesday) and he has already caught and killed eight animals—all ferrets, and all but one full-grown. The death of so many pullets in so short a time had made me suspect weasels, which kill for the sake of killing, and sometimes hunt in packs, but I saw some of Jim's victims and they

were undoubtedly ferrets. This is to say, they were what I have always called ferrets, though the fashion now is to call them polecats or a polecat cross. I have, in fact, been told by a biologist that there is no such animal in New Zealand as a ferret, and no such animal anywhere; but I am bold enough in my ignorance to deny that. Ferrets have been ferrets in New Zealand for 70 years at least, in Britain for 700 years, and in Europe for at least 1700 or more. If they are descended from polecats they do odoriferous honour to their ancestors, but I am not going to call the rose by another name merely because it smells like something else.

IT interested me today to hear a wheat-grower say over the air that wheat-growing is no longer exacting in its labour demands, and may soon be the most completely mechanised operation on the farm. I had just been reading the life of a

FEBRUARY 5 Norfolk poacher, lent to me by Ernest Adams, and edited by Lillias Rider Haggard, and had been arrested by this footnote:

Some idea of the extent to which labour was employed for the harvest in the 14th Century can be gathered from the *History of Hawstead*, by Sir John Cullam, as from accounts quoted we find (in the year 1388) 553 persons engaged on the harvesting of a corn area of about 200 acres.

Now, if the speaker I have quoted was not too optimistic, we are in sight of the day when the farmer will not again handle his wheat after he empties it into his seed-drill. Labour will, of course, be necessary still to work the machines, but instead of 500 men there will perhaps be five. I almost hope that it is not true.

NO one seemed to remember when the King died that he was one of the world's leading farmers. Though kings farm, as they do so many other things, by proxy, the fact that they interest themselves at all in any industry has a marked effect on what other people do in it. They must not be called good farmers

FEBRUARY 7 merely because they own good farms, or famous breeders of livestock because the animals they own win prizes and bring sensational figures at sales. But they can be good farmers, and they can be famous breeders, and it happens that for a hundred years or more the association of the British throne with British agriculture has been personal, active and sincere. George III was "Farmer George," not merely because he liked to be, but because he deserved to be regarded as a farmer. It is apparently not true that he introduced Merino to Britain; but he was responsible for the biggest number of importations, and for preserving the blood of the best strains. It is not true that Queen Victoria founded, suggested, or had much to do with the founding of the Royal Agricultural Society. But she was its deeply interested patron for 60 years, and her interest added greatly to its prestige and usefulness. Apart from everything else she killed the genteel notion that farming was not a "nice" occupation, and every occupant of the throne since has taken the same sensible attitude.

I don't know how good King George's cattle were, or how good were his sheep and horses. I know that by wishing them to be good, and associating himself actively with all the improvers, he made improvement easier, and often brought it about.

(To be continued)



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