

# POTATOES ON THE CONSCIENCE

by "SUNDOWNER"

IF it is true that there is to be a potato famine this winter, I am one of those responsible for it. Though I could easily have grown enough for half a dozen households, I have, in fact, grown enough for one household for six or seven months. I can of course plead a wet winter and spring and a phenomenally dry summer and autumn; but I can't

excuse myself without accusing myself too.

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I have produced five hundredweight instead of a ton because I knew I could not consume a ton, and gave no thought at all to the needs of other people. It is the way with most producers, and will continue to be their way for a long time if conscience provides the only spur to action. Not many of us grow potatoes or wheat or butter or wool, for the love of God; or even for the love of man. We grow them for love of the one miserable fellow we know best and think about most, and it always astonishes me that we so often in serving him serve others as well. I have forgotten who said that bankruptcies restored his faith in divine justice. Famines, I think, work the same way. But the justice can be rough.



Department of Agriculture photo  
"We grow them for love of the one miserable fellow we know best"

IT is not often too hot in Canterbury to sleep comfortably indoors, but after tossing restlessly till midnight last night I went off with a hammock into the orchard. Though the

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house had been stifling the air under the trees was in motion, and refreshingly cool. But when I sleep in the open none of the things happen that I expect to happen. If I use a hammock I hear only what is above me, and that is usually the wind in the tops and soon lulls me to sleep. If I lie on the ground even the hedgehogs avoid me, though I do sometimes hear them. In spite of the signs we see after rain or snow I think there is less movement among animals at night than we commonly suppose. I have seen and heard more activity early in the night, or very early in the morning, than in the middle of the night, not merely because I am myself more alert then, but because animals sleep too. When I used to hunt pigs and deer my best hours were the last in which I could see to shoot. Stags sometimes roar all night, and pigs sometimes root all night, and it has once or twice happened that I have been awake all night to hear them. But I have often come on pigs, and occasionally on deer, sound asleep at day-break.

Birds I don't expect to hear at night, except owls, and other birds disturbed by owls, but the most memorable night I have ever spent in the open in New Zealand was made memorable by mutton-birds, which came in to the land after dark and for an hour or two set up such a loud, confused, and terrifying wailing—sometimes like young puppies yelping, and sometimes like a demented woman screaming and moaning—that I was glad not to be alone. It was my first experience of mutton-birds, and I was a long

time in realising that the noise was in the blackness above us, not in the bush or on the ground, and that the birds were moving continuously over our heads to their burrows on a cliff-face a hundred yards farther on.

But no sound frightened me last night. The pet lambs, now almost sheep, heard me and called when I went out; one of the dogs came out of his kennel and went in again, rattling his chain over the board; the cat came and purred, with astonishing volume, on the ground below me; an owl called more than once, and a magpie once (very melodiously); a bantam crowed in Jim's trees half a mile away, his shrill sharp voice reaching me five or six times in succession; sheep coughed two or three times out on the flat, a cow, far off, gave a single bellow, and then—yes, I had to see him—it was broad daylight and that was the rural mailman going up the valley.

A READER who thinks that a pretender should do the thing properly has posted me a shepherd's crook—I am afraid at a great cost in stamps. It is not

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a symbolic crook but the real thing—4 feet 6 inches long, light and tough, and obviously imported. I used it at once on my dogs, not as a rod for their backs, but to give them two minutes each in a neighbour's dip in the hope of ridding them for a day or two of fleas. As my aim was not high, my failure has not depressed me much, but it surprised me that Tip came meekly for his turn after seeing what had happened to Mac.

I see a crook now and again at Addington, but not often. I suspect that young men think them "out," and are not eager to be seen with one, while the older men have difficulty in replacing those they have broken or lost. But they are, I

think, a survival of other days and other ways that have lost none of their usefulness. I shall not, however, make myself a smock.

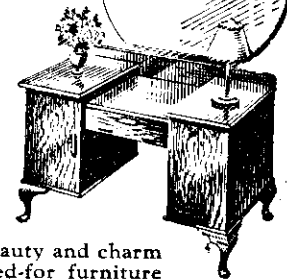
LATE yesterday afternoon a hedgehog came out of a bush near our back door and trotted off down the garden. He was so clearly bent on business, neither loitering nor

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listening nor turning aside, that we fell in behind him, wondering how soon he would start on the earwigs and slaters and if the butterfly grubs were big enough yet to tempt him. But he proved to be a vegetarian. Instead of looking for flesh he went straight for fruit, having either a Lenten conscience or a pre-hibernation hunger for vitamins. It was clear, too, that he had been on the job before, since he went straight to the tomato plant whose fruit hung nearest to the ground, and began at once to eat. When he had finished the bottom tomato he stood on his hind legs and reached up for another a little higher, having a good deal of trouble in steadying himself and the fruit at the same time. This manoeuvre, I thought, was one he had not practised much, unless he could not see clearly in the still bright light. He could reach the fruit easily enough with his snout, but when he put out his front feet to hold it firmly they kept missing it and waving in space. In the end, however, he pulled it to the ground, and it was not till then that he seemed to be aware of our feet, which were now only a few inches away. We had to touch him gently before he "froze," and then coiled, and I have no doubt that he returned to his meal when he heard us moving away. Now I am wondering how much of the damage I have been attributing to opossums has been entered in the wrong account.

(To be continued.)

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