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Shepherd's Calendar

HERESY ON

SHE was still in her thirties, young enough to be sorry for herself, and foolish enough to keep on saying so.

"I came too late to this country," she said, "and to this narrow life."

"I call it a full life, full and satisfying."

"I know you do," she answered angrily. "That's why I have been waiting for you. I think you are a humbug. I don't believe you mean what

MARCH 7 you write about cows and sheep. What is there interesting in sheep? They all look the same, smell the same, behave in the same stupid way. Tell me what you see attractive in them."

"I will if you tell me first what you found attractive in Birmingham."

"I'm not going to be put off. Face up to these sheep I see all day and hear all night. Tell me what you see in them. Have they looks, or brains, or character, or nice ways?"

"You must let me praise them in my own way. I have never said that they have what you mean by looks, or probably mean by brains. But did you ever hear in Birmingham that beauty begins in your own eyes?"

"We're not in Birmingham. I wish we were. We're in Central Otago, with its rocks, and rabbits, and silly bleating half-breds. Tell me why you call sheep-farming a good life."

"Let me take the short way. Sheep can't fly like eagles, or sing like thrushes, or dance like Bojangles Robinson. They can't paint pictures or play Beethoven. Neither can dogs or horses or monkeys, or all but two or three of the people of Birmingham."

"You're dodging. You know that sheep can't be praised. They're dull, like most of the men who own them. As for their women, you either don't know how they live, or you know and won't tell. But I know. For eight years I have done nothing but cook and wash up, bake scones and serve morning tea, listen to dull talk about fats and stores, or put up with being ignored."

"That must have been terrible."

"It has been terrible. It has been insufferable. And you add to the injury by calling it a good life."

"I will modify what I have said. I will call it relatively good. Better than Birmingham. Better than trams and buses and picture-shows and dance-halls. Better than the clatter and chatter of any town."

"I would go back tomorrow."

"What keeps you?"

"My husband and children."

"You wouldn't take them back to the jungle?"

"They wouldn't go. This is the only life they know."

"Or want to know."

"That's the trouble. They think they live here when they only exist. Working, eating, sleeping, and then doing it all again. My God! Day after day with sheep. After the places I've been and the things I've seen. If they would only realise how I feel—forget their silly

THE FARM

by "SUNDOWNER"

sheep for an hour or two and talk about something else."

"Try Hollywood on them, or Blackpool, or Brighton."

"They wouldn't listen. They would wait till I had finished and then ask for more tea. Always tea. Tea and mutton and cakes. No wonder I'm half crazy."

"Half a New Zealander, you mean. Throw in the other half and you'll all be happy."

"God forbid!"

I DID dodge and hedge with that farmer's wife, first because I could not think of the answers she demanded off-



"Have they looks, or brains, or character, or nice ways?"

hand, and second because it was fascinating to hear such heresy in such a place. But I find it difficult to answer her yet. I don't think she can be answered with the definiteness of one-and-one and two-and-two; with simple yeas and simple nays. Even to me, tied to them with more

MARCH 9 strings now than I can count, sheep are not in

themselves fascinating, or beautiful, or intelligent, or especially likable. They hold me because they are associated with so many other things that hold me—the memories and experiences of childhood, the most satisfying experiences of maturity, the material things without which we could not live, the spiritual experiences without which we would not wish to live, the whole animal-angel combination we call human life, and find richest and fullest when we get as close to the earth as sheep always are and feel as little strangeness.

This is not the whole story, or most of it, or a fully intelligible part of it. Though the story is not too deep for words, it is too deep for the words available to me at this moment. But what I

can't see or say clearly John Pascoe's camera caught for me when he took the photograph that hangs above my bed and that I never look at without emotion—tussock hills with men, horses and dogs in the foreground, and a thousand sheep straggled ahead of them down a gully and over a ridge.

A VISITOR asked me today how many rabbits I had, and I had to tell him that I could not even guess. It could be twelve, it could be twenty, it could be fifty, it could be five. All I know with certainty is that I have not seen a single rabbit for a week. I have seen a newly stopped burrow that means another brood of young ones, arrived already or about to arrive, and I

MARCH 11 have seen fresh scrapes made in the open at night. But as Doctor Johnson insisted on his tour of the Highlands, neither remembering nor guessing is the method of an honest reporter. I have never counted my rabbits, or my opossums, or my

hedgehogs. I see a hedgehog every second day, hear an opossum every second night, and before I picked my fruit I usually found half a dozen apples and about a dozen nectarines damaged every morning. But I don't know the appetite of an opossum or of a hedgehog. I don't know whether they visit me singly or in families, but I would be surprised to discover that the number is ever large.

I noticed recently on a journey to Southland and back again that there were more dead opossums on the road than dead rabbits, but I would not conclude from this that there are more live opossums in the country I passed through than live rabbits. I would think rather that opossums are a little slower on the road, and a little more confused by headlights, that they are more often killed when cars do over-run them, and that they play more about bridges and power poles. It is only from bush areas that we get trapping records, and those are assembly points whose figures are misleading. But it is clear that opossums are more widespread already than rabbits ever have been.

(To be continued)

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 2, 1953.