DID YOU HEAR THIS?

Extracts From Recent Talks

Away From It All

I WONDER what your choice of escape literature—as they call it nowadays—happens to be. Mine is the thriller novel. They're such comfortable things. I can always go to sleep right in the middle of one when I want to.

I suppose that sounds nonsense. Thrillers are supposed to be the stories that make your hair stand up on end and waggle. They're supposed to harrow you and batter you. Well, they don't have that effect on me. Just occasionally I read one that really does thrill me because the people in it seem like human beings and the things might really have happened to you and me. But generally they're such obvious make-believe that they can't touch you—not the real you. They just serve to distract you and keep those tiresome thoughts in check and those horrid worries round the corner. And then, they're such comfortable reading in one way. You know they'll end happily. That's absolutely the rule about thrillers. Good always conquers. The villain is carried off to the police station and justice. Personally I like the kind best where he pulls a little tablet out of his pocket and, before the police can

do anything about it, swallows it and falls dead at their feet. I suppose that's what's called cheating justice and it always seems to annoy the clever detective tremendously. But I prefer that kind of ending myself. Anyway, whether he kills himself or not, the villain is always laid low in the last few pages. He's got to be. Thrillers are like that.

But life isn't, you say. What does that matter? Haven't we enough real life all about us — too much — and haven't we lots of clever young people writing about it—oh, so realistically—with tragedies and disappointments and anti-climaxes on the very last page and an ending that sends you sobbing to bed. . . Speaking for myself, I've lots to cry over just now without looking for it in books. . . So let's be thankful for thrillers and all those harmless books that end with weddings and legacies and general fun. They're much jollier to go to bed on. —*(Mary Scott, "The Morning Spell: Take Down A Book," 2YA, August 24).*

Who Was Gauss?

I have mentioned the name of Gauss because it has during the past few months acquired a significance in connection with the command of the sea. Gauss was one of the greatest mathematicians of all time and ranks with Archimedes and Newton. In addition to his epoch-making contributions to pure mathematics, he is known for his researches in astronomy and terrestrial magnetism. In recognition of his work in the latter science, the British Association in 1895 decided that the unit of magnetic potential should be called a Gauss. Hence we have the name "degaussing apparatus" for the device by which ships are rendered incapable of affecting the detonating part of a magnetic mine.—(Professor R. T. J. Bell, "The Human Side of Mathematics." 4YA August 13).

No Style of Our Own

QUESTION: Do you think New Zealand, with a short architectural past—and much of that in a period when architecture in many parts of the world was stationary and far from inspiring—will develop an architectural style entirely peculiar to this country?

ANSWER: Frankly, I don't. The best architects of to-day in all lands, are fully alive first to the necessity for making our buildings thoroughly suitable for the purposes for which they are built—regardless of what former custom has been, and secondly to the utter futility of trying to impose a preconceived exterior that doesn't suit, and to the worse fault of trying to embellish with bits of decoration, cribbed from somewhere else, something that is fundamentally wrong in its general lines and layout.

This is realised in New Zealand and then there is this other important factor, materials. It is recognised, here as well as elsewhere, that concrete and steel, separately and in combination, have come to stay and that architectural developments must be sympathetic to the possibilities these materials offer, just as mud and cob were successfully handled in their day. Another factor which suggests that an individual style will not develop in New Zealand is the contraction of the world in the past half-century. Distances which used to take a quarter of the year to cover can now be travelled in a week, shipping, railways, and motor services can transport important building materials almost anywhere, so there is no necessity to do without an important building commodity just because it is not a local product. For example—where would we be in New Zealand if we had not imported steel girders which are the bones of half our largest buildings?—*(R.S.D. Harman and F. A. Shurrock, "Things as Seen by An Architect," 3YA August 14).*

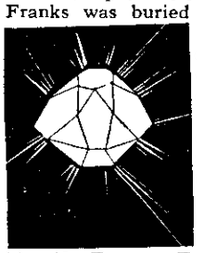
Absent-Minded Mathematicians

WHAT manner of men were the great mathematicians who made the epoch-making discoveries which mark the progress of mathematical science? The popular idea of a great mathematician is coloured by the stories told about the absent-mindedness of Archimedes and Newton. Most people have heard how Archimedes was worried over the question of how to decide whether the crown of King Hiero was of pure gold or of base metal gilded over, and how he was so thrilled when, in his bath, there came to him the idea that the comparison of the weight of the crown and its weight when it hung suspended in water would give him the test he sought,

that he leaped out and ran through the streets of Syracuse shouting, "I have found it." Only slightly less familiar is the tradition that he was put to death by a Roman soldier as he lay on the ground poring over some geometrical diagrams which he had drawn in the sand, while the army of Marcellus ravaged the city, just captured after a three years' blockade. Many schoolboys have chuckled over the picture of Newton standing gazing at an egg held in his hand while his watch boiled merrily in the pan. Yet there is some basis of reason for such peculiar actions. Mathematical research demands intense concentration, and when that is practised till it becomes a habit, the mathematian is apt to become absorbed in his thoughts and totally unconscious of surrounding persons or things. In this way he gains a reputation for eccentricity. Sylvester has described how, when he was an actuary for a London insurance company, he discovered and developed the theory of binary forms. He says: "It was done at one sitting, with a decanter of port wine to sustain nature's flagging energies, in a back office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The work was done at the cost of racking thought—a brain on fire and feet feeling, or feelingless, as if plunged in an ice-pail. That night we slept no more."—*(Professor R. T. J. Bell, "The Human Side of Mathematics," 4YA August 13).*

Bad Luck for Hitler?

AN historical sapphire of more than ordinary interest is the stone that Charlemagne wore set in the clasp of his mantle. The great emperor of the Franks was buried at Aix. After the conquest of Germany by Napoleon, the clasp with the sapphire—which was supposed to give its wearer dominion over the whole world—was taken from the mantle covering his remains and presented to Napoleon. But he in turn gave it to his brother Joseph, to whom it brought bad luck. It passed into the hands of Napoleon III., who gave it to his wife, Empress Eugenie. As you know, the Franco-German War of 1870-71 brought Napoleon III. to



utter defeat. The Empress came to desolation and loneliness in a foreign land, and their son was killed by the Zulus in battle. With the death of Eugenie the stone became the property of the Spanish Duke of Alva, who was her nephew. He, wise man, got rid of it by giving it to the Cathedral of Rheims, where it is to this day—that is if it has not caught the eye of the present invader of France.—*("Ebor" on "Precious Stones and Gems," in 2YA's Children's Hour, August 12).*

Cause and Effect

The vast mass of experimental evidence, and the laws of nature which summarise it, constitute the grand edifice of physical science. We believe in these laws because they have been repeatedly checked, and can be again tested if so desired. The miracle of the Universe is the invariableness of physical law. As Poincart expressed it: "the greatest miracle is just this: that in nature there are no miracles; that nature is not governed by accident, but by law." Under like conditions a like result follows. This is deduced from experience. It may be called the Law of Cause and Effect. This law—under like conditions a like result follows—is the rock upon which the faith of the scientist is built. Science produces the laws which reality obeys. In other words it informs us how things actually behave under various conditions. Study of the past proves to the hilt the contention that "hasty generalisation is the bane of science." — ("The Search for Truth: How Science Advances." Talk by Dr. C. M. Focken, 4YA August 20).

The Search for Truth

NEARLY all scientists are influenced by a belief in some form—of the simplicity of nature. But at present we seem to be far off any unified and logical foundation for the material universe. And attempts at this are far from simple. So *much* remains incomprehensible that an attitude of discouragement and loss of faith is sometimes found. The facts and theories of science are more mysterious to-day, than in the days of Aristotle. We've been taught many wholesome lessons in humility, but we must not lose heart. Comfort may be drawn from the belief that the search for truth is more precious than its possession. Also the stream of discovery shows no signs of abatement and increases continually the volume of scientific truth. In the story of progress truth after truth has been unearthed, law after law has been discovered, and fallacy after fallacy has been removed. There has gradually emerged a glimpse of a grand cosmical scheme of orderliness, which commands our respect and compels our awe.—*("The Search for Truth: How Science Advances." Talk by Dr. C. M. Focken, 4YA August 20).*