

PLAGUE OF FLIES

FOR a fortnight I have been shepherd to Jim's sheep as well as my own, and the blow-flies have chosen this period to be as filthy as only blow-flies can be. Four sheep have died, and four others nearly died, all because I was not quick enough to detect the first strike. Even when I saw the flies I had still to catch the

FEBRUARY 15 sheep, and a sheep can be very sick and still elude a 70-year-old shepherd who weighs 200 pounds and depends on a dog who has not seen or heard anything clearly for many months. I did in the end catch every victim, but 10,000 eggs today are 10,000 maggots tomorrow, all working without a pause on the skin and nerve-ends. The surprise was not that four sheep died, but that any lived, and I don't think I have ever found so much satisfaction in mass murder as the treatment of those sheep gave me.

Prevention is, of course, better than cure in these cases, and I gathered from Jim on his return from the Marlborough Sounds that the method there is to spray or paint every animal with whale oil as soon as it is crutched. The case for whale oil is, I suppose, that it is cheap in the Sounds, always available, and free of staining ingredients. If it is also more effective than the accepted proprietary preparations, the reason perhaps is that it prevents the wool from getting wet, rotting, and developing the odour that attracts flies. I am tempted to believe that the odour of the oil itself is the repellent, but abominable though that is to us, I am not bold enough to think that it also stampedes flies. In the days when I kept horses I was persuaded once to apply whale oil to the

feet of a thoroughbred which had become cracked. I can't remember that it did anything to his feet, or even to his susceptibilities, but it left me with a worse problem than Lady Macbeth's. Her difficulty in sweetening her little hand was personal to her. Mine was communicable, and communicated, and to this day I never see a cracked hoof without furtively smelling my palm.

WHEN I get tired of cutting fat hen and carrying it in a rope to the cows, I put them on ropes and let them do their own cutting. At once they begin showing me how clever they are. They cut many things that are not fat hen, but very few that are not palatable and nourishing. When Elsie licks me her black rough tongue seems capable of nothing but the crudest operations—

FEBRUARY 17 cleaning her calf, removing itch from her thick skin, or rolling a raw potato into the space between her back teeth. When I lead her through the fat hen patch I discover, if I watch carefully, that this tongue not only sweeps food into her mouth but keeps rubbish out. For the speed at which it works, it is far defter than my fingers in separating what she wants from what she does not want, sweeping it in if it is good, pushing it aside if it makes no appeal to her. I have often watched elephants feeding, and been fascinated by their skill in gathering up messes they can never have seen at all in the wild—a bran mash, for example, emptied loose on a floor—but for selective skill I would place Elsie's slobbering tongue high on the list of mechanical aids to digestion.

The unexpected does, of course, happen sometimes, and I am not going to

say that when an offensive item slips in her method of getting it out again is invariably ladylike. But how does she get it out without getting everything else out at the same time, and how does she detect its presence so quickly in the moving procession down her throat? Outside her mouth her tongue has the help of her lips and nose. Inside—if we forget the taste glands in the tongue itself—there is nothing but tireless muscles working with the selective skill of fingers and an automatic accuracy that fingers seldom acquire.

Sheep are neater feeders, horses apparently more clever with their lips, but I would sooner risk Elsie among, say, daffodils buried in grass than the cleverest horse I have seen. In Southland cows are so skilful in avoiding ragwort that it takes possession of paddocks carrying no sheep; and I don't think the Hauraki Plains would be yellow in spring if cows were the mere gobblers of grass that we so often suppose them to be.

I SAW something yesterday that I had never seen before, and don't expect to see again—an international cricket match that generated no heat. As far as I could judge from the centre of the biggest stand everybody was happy from the beginning to the end of play. Missed catches aroused only sympathetic sighs,

FEBRUARY 21 boundaries—whoever hit them—brought clapping and laughter; louder laughter once or twice than I had ever before heard at cricket. It was a game that remained a game all day; not once a struggle for national prestige that frayed nerves, tried tempers, and made half the spectators fretful babies or boors.

The reason, of course, was that prestige was not involved. It gives Fiji no pain to be beaten by Canterbury, Canterbury no embarrassment to bow to Fiji. If there was complacency, too, it was harmless; almost benevolent. The weather was perfect, the players smiling and happy, the spectators nearer to neutrality and goodwill than I have ever seen spectators get. Nearer, too, I must repeat, than I am likely to see them get again.

For I have not believed for 50 years that competitive games breed goodwill; except negatively and in retrospect. There is, I suppose, goodwill in the handshake of two old footballers who remember mauling each other 40, 50, and perhaps 60 years earlier. There may even have been the essentials of goodwill, lame and battered and sore but not quite dead, when they cheered each other after the match. But if there was goodwill then in the spectators it was well concealed. If it developed later the secret was still not divulged. If New Zealanders love Welshmen today they are not the New Zealanders I meet. If they love them more than they did three months ago I have not detected the signs. If they love, for several years have loved, and forever now will love South Africans, I am as blind to that as a life-long friend has been to the merits of Australians since they beat England at cricket 60 years ago, and made nonsense of the prophecies of his Yorkshire father. I will not find a better friend if we both see 100; but my visits are brief when Australia has a particularly strong test team. It hurts me too much to see how Australians can still hurt him.

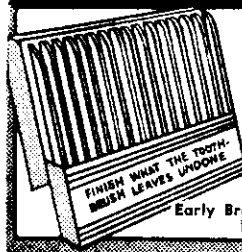
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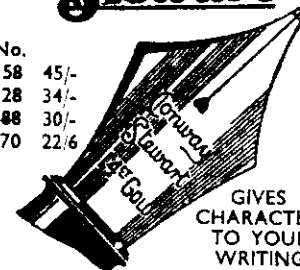
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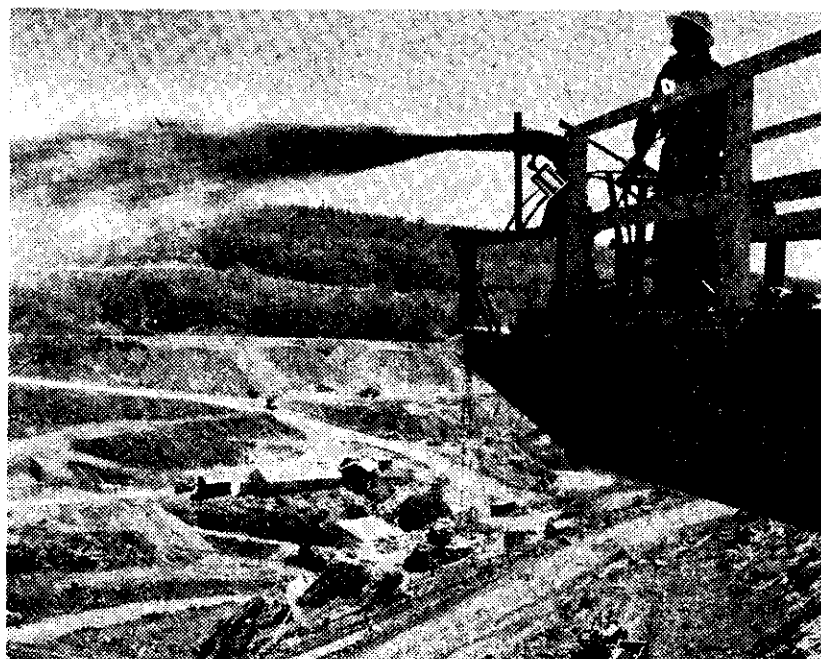
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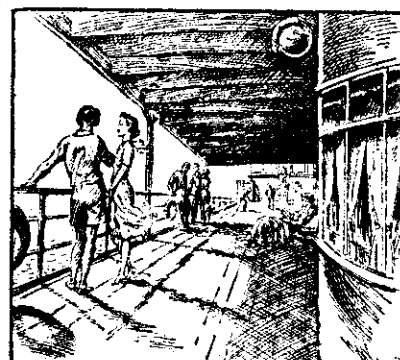
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N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 12, 1954.



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