Snakes in the Grass

by "SUNDOWNER"

"WE still have a fortnight," the experts said. "If rain comes this week or next, Queensland is safe. If the drought continues there will be a major calamity."

The rain did come. It came an hour or two after I read that report, and it is still falling two days later. The hurricane flag is flying, the radio is issuing cyclone warnings, the fishermen in harbour are securing

JULY 17

their boats. The centre of the storm is reported to be 50 or 60 miles north, and 100 east, and I am conscious of a little suppressed excitement as it moves rapidly south-west.

In the meantime I am listening to the reactions of the farmers, who are behaving as farmers have always behaved since Abraham. Wheat growers, who have not yet sown half their crop — they say "planted" here — are jubilant. They will now get the other half sown, and save the 300,000 acres already in seed. In short, it is a heavenly storm on the Darling Downs, where the rainfall is about 20 inches in summer and ten in winter, and this winter so far has been about three inches. But even on the Downs farmers are not all shouting Hallelujah. Dairy farmers say that if frost follows the rain, or a week or two of raw weather, they will be where they would have been if the rain had not come—30 or 40 per cent behind their output at this time last year. Dairy farmers in other districts, and cattle men generally, are saying that the rain will "sour" the grass the drought has not destroyed. What they mean I don't know—if they mean anything more than farmers usually mean when luck comes their way, and they growl to prevent others from thinking that it is better luck than it is. There is certainly a great deal of grass in Queensland as far as I have yet penetrated—from the coast inland for about 500 miles. It must be grass because it is not rushes or bushes or scrub (what we mean in New Zealand by scrub). It is a growth a foot or more high, and seems to be as strong in the bush as in the open. But it is the colour of straw, the feel of coarse twitch, and as palatable, I imagine, as nassella tussock. If I were a dairy farmer I don't think I would lie awake worrying because this stuff was being flattened by heavy rain; though I might if I were a Queensland dairy farmer with 20 years of experience behind me instead of 50 years of ignorance of Queensland conditions. If I were not sure that I must be wrong I would think that a little softening and fermentation is precisely what this pasture needs to make it edible; but I have never seen what seven inches of rain can do in winter in the Tropics with the thermometer at 70 and likely to stay there. Nor have they, in fact, often seen it in Queensland. This is the first July cyclone for 19 years, and even the experts were about as ready for it as our experts were for the flood in the Tangiwai River on Christmas Eve.

"To most New Zealanders the trouble with Australia is snakes"

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TO most New Zealanders the trouble with Australia is snakes. To most Australians the trouble with New Zealand is earthquakes. Though one is about as dangerous as the other I walk carefully in long grass and avoid sitting on dry logs. But the capture of a live taipan last week within

JULY 21

100 miles of Brisbane makes nonsense, but not unexpected nonsense, of the idea that snakes here hibernate in winter and are as harmless then as dead leaves.

Why should a snake or anything else hibernate in Queensland, where I watched crows making a nest on July 4, and on July 1 lay on the sand in hot sunshine watching people bathing in the open sea, only my sagging waist-line preventing me from joining them. I have certainly not seen the kitchen frogs the last two or three days, or the big tarantula that watches me from the ceiling of the living room. But the mosquitoes still fly, and still bite, when the sun goes down; the lizards still run up the wall; the two-inch cockroaches scurry into shelter when I switch on the light in the laundry; my bedroom window is visited every afternoon by a brilliantly coloured two-inch wasp who is building a clay house on the edge of one of the panes, and in a week has added seven chambers, each (as I can see from the reverse side of the glass) with a wriggling grub inside. Six-inch tomato plants put in three weeks ago are now more than a foot high. Potatoes are growing faster than ours grow in November. Gums and wattles are breaking into bloom in the bush. If this is winter, it will interest me to see what developments come with spring. But that captured taipan, seven feet two inches long, aggressive, and so venomous that recovery from its bite is extremely rare, knew better than to accept the hibernating superstition.

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THE snakes I imagine I see in the bush are always silent and still. But that does not make them all dead sticks. The living taipan lay so still that the farmer who discovered it was able to withdraw quietly and telephone a collector 150 miles away, who raced up in his car and caught it four hours later as it was escaping into

JULY 24

a hollow gum tree. How long it would have slept if it had not been disturbed I don't know. As long as the sun lasted, I suppose. But I gather from a discussion in a back number of *Walkabout* that a taipan "would probably press a man hard if it pursued him"; and that it sometimes does pursue men.

Snakes have apparently not been timed in Australia — or anywhere else under conditions acceptable to science—but the flashes of speed vouched for by *Walkabout's* contributors covered as a rule only five or six feet. They were thus not running speeds but rather muscular spasms lasting for a second or less. Dr. Donald F. Thomson, the naturalist who invited the discussion, gave it as his personal opinion that, although most snakes could not overtake a man, a taipan, even if a man saw it coming, would make him "run fast to escape a quick rush." Most snakes fortunately rush only for their hideouts, and when they seem to be coming at us are heading for shelter in a direct line beyond us. It is a comforting thought, but not comforting enough, I imagine, to keep one's pulse steady while the rush is under way.

(To be continued)

(continued from previous page)

He is puzzled, but unperturbed.

"Come again?"

"Simply staggering."

"Ah," he says, "I thought you'd be pleased with it." He goes to tuck it in his bookcase with similar mementoes of a successful scholastic career.

TOMORROW is another day, and a happy one. My voice has come back. I throw myself into the business of using it with all the gusto of an actress who, after a period of resting, lands the title-role. Twelve decibels at least from early morn (well, 7.30) till late at night. And gone are my inhibitions about what the neighbours think. I scorn the cowbell that used to summon the children to meals, and find a primitive delight in flinging up the window and yelling "Chow!" or "Come and get it!" I am seized afresh with the wonder of communication. Lower the tone of the neighbourhood? All the better—lower the rates. And so nice for the neighbours to know what's cooking in the Botthamley household—give them the same sort of pleasure I get out of my overheard phone conversations. So I lean out the window and shriek happily—

"George, get that bike off the road!" "Lauren, Baby doesn't want any more bubble gum." "Jimmy, just run round to Mrs. Thompson's and ask if she can oblige me with half a pound of butter till tomorrow." "Susan, how did you get that enormous tear in your pants?" "No, Mary, that's a flower, not a weed. Put it back before Daddy sees it."

Realising that there's nothing much more beautiful than the sound of your own voice.