

More Than Skin Deep

THE rapidly-changing colours in a rabbit I skinned this morning — from silver to purple to a pastel combination that I could not name—reminded me that a painting of a skinned rabbit was a modern French artist's first step to fame and fortune. It was not, however, as far as I can remember, intended to be an exercise

APRIL 25 in the beautiful. If I did not see the original in

New York—it runs in my mind that I did—I saw a reproduction and an explanation that gave it a place beside the last bitter efforts of Orpen to awake the world to the realities of modern war. Orpen was sick when he made a green and rotting corpse the centre piece of one of his pictures (officially commissioned), but he was not mad. If he was, he was not as mad as the people who refused to face the facts of the war they had won at such a cost and for such a pitiable result. Nor is this young Frenchman mad. He is not healthy or normal or balanced or at peace with himself and God; but he has vision and feeling, and misery chose him in his childhood to be her mouth-piece. Perversely, too, she has made him a best seller.

But what struck me most as I watched my changing rabbit was the fact that so much beauty lies hidden where no eye can see. The beauty that is in the eye of the beholder does not start there. Though colour is nothing without light—flowers are all the same in the dark—the potential beauty of that rabbit's flesh was as great a won-

by "SUNDOWNER"

der as the beauty the light revealed. Science has given us hundreds of reasons for the colour in feathers, fur, scales, and skin, and ignorance hundreds more. But what reason can there be for the colour under these coverings that does not, during the creature's life, shine through? What advantage is it to a rabbit to catch the eye after it is dead? The beauty in dead flesh, even if it is a transposed beauty associated with the pleasure of eating the flesh, hastens the destruction of living flesh. I did not eat this rabbit, or wish to eat it. It went to Scamp, who has no sense of colour. My inclination to eat it would probably have been greater if it had shown no colour, or as little as fish show below the scales and skin. But I eat rabbit at long intervals, and when I do I am pleased that it has a lighter colour (raw and cooked) than, say, squirrel, which has almost the same texture and taste. I must fall back on the arguments of those who praise Picasso and his imitators: "Don't ask what it means. Enjoy it."

OWNERS of lanes and roadways used by other people put a barrier up once or twice a year to keep their rights alive. In the same way, and I am tempted to say for the same reason, Elsie refuses once or twice a year to be caught and led. Though she is now between nine and ten,

APRIL 27 fat, and within three months of her seventh calf, she just laughed at me today when I went to catch her, snorted, and ducked, and bellowed, and ended on her knees hornng a tussock. Then, having asserted her independence, she looked as blandly at me as if she had never run away, held her horns steady for the rope, and trotted along at my heels. I know that she was not being rational when she surrendered or irrational when she ran away. She is just a fat lump of beef and bones incapable of planning or reflecting. She is quicker than Betty to learn a new trick—which is always the same kind of trick: finding her way to food supplied in a new place. But neither one nor the other can think of ways of tricking me. If I catch them with their heads through the garden fence and throw something at them they will not repeat the offence within the next five minutes. But an hour later, or half a day, they will return to the same place, and the same sin, even though I am watching with a stick in my hand. They will, however, the second time

desist if I shout at them, which I suppose is mental progress if there is no morality in it.

I HAD hopes, when my Universal Superannuation card was called in to be renumbered, that a new number would mean a new card. It was reckless optimism. What came back was precisely what went away—a frayed piece of folded cardboard 2¾

APRIL 28 inches wide by 3½ long that had done service for eight years, with its absurd little divisions all over-stamped, and its two supplementary slips, imperfectly stapled in, already stamped fifteen times. I confess that the untidiest feature of this precious certificate (worth now nearly £2 a week) is the addition by my own hand of my full name and address; but one reason for that was the lack of clear space on which to write.

I have thought of many possible excuses—that reinforced cardboard is costly; that the Government Printing Office is outgrown and over-worked; that Parliament is in session; that paying out pensions is unproductive work at a time when the cry is for more production; that Social Security is a new department learning a new service; that the service comes first, and the method second; that the service never fails; that it is my own fault if I go on living after the Government—any Government—must wish me to be dead. But I wonder if the Minister-in-Charge has heard that he pays twice who pays courteously, and that courtesy in this case has a cardboard dimension.

I DON'T know the author of *Si savait jeunesse, si pouvait vieillesse*. But I think he was a shepherd. I think the words came to him at tuppings time and were then given a wider application. I have two rams—Bert, a two-tooth Shropshire, and Harry, a full-mouth Southdown. Bert is energetic, but lacks strategy. Harry is shrewd,

APRIL 30 but easily tired. Because they are in a flat paddock, with no hiding places, Bert no sooner makes a capture than Harry dispossesses him. Then Harry lies down. Bert, instead of keeping an eye on him, one eye at least runs about looking for another ewe and expends a good deal of energy in finding one. Being neither tactful nor mannerly nor restrained he stampedes most of the ewes before they have had time to consider his proposition, and when one does at last seem interested, Harry rises to his feet. If the romance is ripening fast enough, Harry chases Bert away at once. If there is likely to be delay he is content to watch. Bert is too young to watch. Sooner or later he turns his back on Harry and receives a broadside that leaves him winded and dazed. Then the whole business begins again. Harry, tired, lies down. Bert, bewildered but buoyant, returns to the flock, asking them one after another if they don't think him the best-looking boy they have seen this year. The answer, in nine cases out of ten, is a short run out of his way and the resumption of nibbling. If the tenth girl gives him a second look, Harry gives him one, too.

(To be continued)

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