

Noises in the Night

I WAS not surprised when it was reported recently from Sydney that the rabbits of New South Wales are learning to climb. What surprises me is that they have taken so long to learn. Netting fences don't worry hares, unless they have an overhanging top, and rabbits have nothing to learn from hares in the arts of self-preservation. They have, in fact, so many tricks unknown to hares that they have probably not been compelled to learn, as hares have been, that three feet of wire netting are nothing to a creature with four muscular feet equipped with four-free-working toes and the capacity at any time to leap four feet into the air.

JULY 1 But the real rabbit surprise is their name—where it came from, and who first borrowed it to describe incompetence in human beings. I don't know whether it is still true that there are no rabbits in English law, only conies, but if rabbits have at last broken out of legal phraseology it can be no problem to them to get under or over a farmer's fence. In any case, they have been clever enough to change their name without the assistance of lawyers, and to the confusion, for several centuries, of etymologists. I have read somewhere that only young conies used to be rabbits, and that no one knows when mature bucks and does stole the name or where the young things found it to begin with. My *Oxford Dictionary* suggests that the word rabbit came to us through Northern French, Flemish or Walloon, but admits that the ultimate origin is still unknown. My *Skeat* finds a possible connection with a Spanish word which means "wagging the hindquarters." Humans who change their names without authority sometimes go to gaol. Rabbits did it in the dark ages, when the world was brutish and harsh, and have carried the deception into the present age of light, when even thinking of violent changes can be an offence to God and men.

I have no objection to opprobrious terms for men who can't take a clean

★ Peak Listening ★



Rugby and cricket tests notwithstanding, the NZBS audience will almost certainly reach its 1956 peak on August 9 when the Hon. J. T. Watts (above) will present his Budget. All YA and YZ stations will broadcast his speech, beginning at 7.30 p.m.

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by "SUNDOWNER"

pass or hold a straight bat. If men are foolish enough to take games seriously, let them learn the tricks. But why call them rabbits when they fumble? Why not call them lawyers or doctors or teachers or preachers, who stumble and fumble most of their lives?

* * *

WHEN Will told me last week that he had seen a wood pigeon in his garden I was not sure whether to be excited or sceptical. It was something I had not seen in a South Island garden for 50 years, and most of us are not quick to accept the discoveries of other

JULY 4 people. We are quick, far too quick, to question and doubt; but I find it easier to accept Will's pigeon than to believe that his eyes deceived him. In the migrations of birds and animals there are always a first and a last, and both, when we encounter them, are sensations. If wood pigeons are returning to this valley, in which they must have lived for hundreds of years, Will saw the first to come back. If they are going for ever, he may have seen the last loiterer.

To get the facts in such cases one would have to be a Guthrie-Smith, as watchful, as well informed, and as well placed. I am none of those things, but most of us, when we look back, can recall experiences that we could not get others to believe. There are people still living in Southland who are sure that a badger was seen in the Waiau River. In that case, I am just as sure that they were deceived. But I saw a wild pig two years ago on my own boundary, where no pig can have run wild for 80 years. Fortunately, for my credibility, the pig returned the next day, and I was able to point it out to witnesses. Guthrie-Smith traced the history of the first stag seen on Tutira, which had wandered from the Wairarapa a hundred and fifty miles away, and joined a small herd of wild horses, "forming with them one of those curious animal friendships that strayed creatures make." I don't suppose the stag was often seen, but it requires no great effort to imagine the reception given to their story by the few who did see it and report it. A more astonishing "stray" was the buck rabbit who, in the early 'eighties, reached Tutira in the company of a flock of gone-wild turkeys. But only a Guthrie-Smith could report a fact like that without raising the eyebrows of his readers. Truth can be stranger than fiction when it is established as truth, but its reporters should have courage and thick skins.

* * *

AT 2.15 this morning an opossum woke me by chattering and hissing from the fork of a cabbage tree just outside my window. When I opened the door to investigate a second opossum rushed away from the foot of the tree and the first one climbed higher into the leaves. I don't know

JULY 6 whether the second had been pursuing the first for romantic reasons, and getting no encouragement, or whether the first had found something to eat up the tree and was

trying to dissuade the second from following. When I lived at Day's Bay and had half a dozen regular opossum visitors, three quiet enough to take bread from my hand, and one bold enough to come inside and climb on to my knee for its supper, I noticed that when hissing began up a tree it was directed at an intruder on the ground or advancing on a limb. I thought then, and still think, that the complainant was a female and the intruder a male bent on attentions that the female did not want; but I was never able to see enough to be sure. Here the opossums are not tame, and not treated with kindness, but I can think of no reason why one of them should pause halfway up a cabbage tree to snarl and hiss unless there was another not far away provoking the exhibition. Nor can I think that there is anything in a cabbage tree worth fighting for in the middle of winter if it is not the conversion of No into Yes. That struggle

I'm afraid I interrupted a little rudely, and I might have ended it permanently if the moon had been a little bigger and the bushy top of my tree a little smaller. But although I could hear the fugitive when she scrambled on top of the leaves, and make her move by smacking and shaking the trunk, I could not frighten her into a position in which I could see her outlined against the sky.

At half past two in the morning an opossum fighting for her life holds out better than a man wanting to get back to bed; so I gave up without shooting. But I could still see the tree when I lay down again, and although I tried to keep awake to find out how long the opossum would take to recover her confidence and move off, I did not see her descend. Perhaps she resumed her romance in another tree where only the magpies heard her.

(To be continued)

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