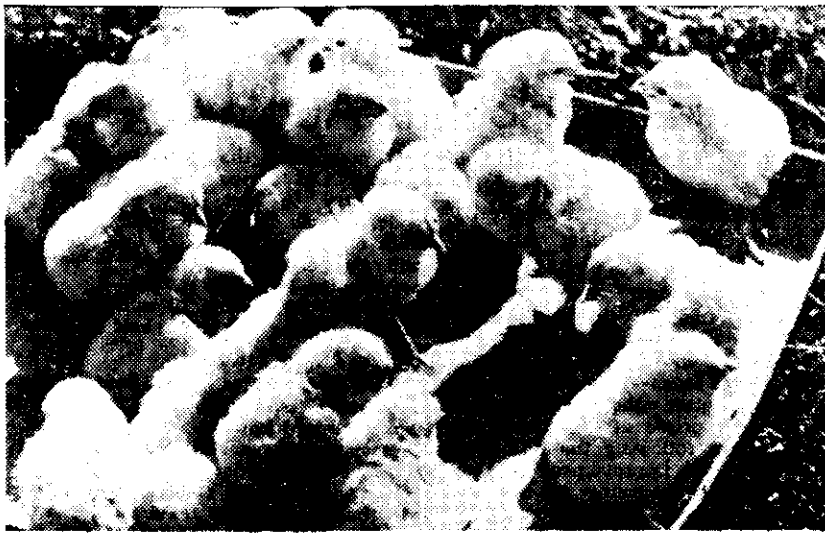




"My pullet hatching chickens in winter commits an isolated folly"

to be. Among those creatures that lay eggs instead of producing their young within their own bodies, seasonal aberrations might be fatal for the offspring, but would not often injure the mothers. A hen rearing chickens in the wild in winter would be hard put to it until some or all of the chickens died; but she would not die herself. A cow carrying a calf in hungry country through a hard winter often does die; before its birth if the conditions have been unusually harsh. If those people are right who call instinct ancestral memory, it is clear that some animals have better memories than others. My pullet hatching chickens in mid-winter commits an isolated folly; but what are we to think about the moths whose instinct drives them into the candle flame, about the birds that dash themselves to death against lighthouses, or the lemmings that drown themselves when instinct leads them to a river or the sea?

A READER wants to know what I think of this story broadcast, he says, by the BBC:

A neighbour of mine had a remarkable old dog. They were one day bringing the ewes and lambs down the hill when a little Cheviot lamb bolted and the dog failed to bring it back. W at did the old dog do but run to the lamb, sniff it, then back to the flock. He sniffed through the ewes one by one till he found its mother, parted her out, drove her back to her lamb, and brought mother and lamb back safely to the flock.

I think it could have been told by one of my sheep-farming brothers, but I had better not say which one. I think he would have made a

JULY 18 better story of it, and in the telling have banished

his own as well as my doubts. I think he would have convinced those who heard it for the first time that although the dog was remarkable the performance was no more than those who live with good dogs would expect. I think he would have remembered other remarkable dogs and other performances astonishing to those only who don't know what dogs will sometimes do. I think they would all have been real dogs, wise beyond the average run of dogs, and that every recorded performance would have been founded on fact. But I am not yet as old as my brother, and my past, when I look back, is all clear daylight. When my brother looks back there are peaks in the haze which my factual eyes can't perceive. He can

see things, hear things, describe things that fascinate me when he makes me aware of them, but fade into dream stuff afterwards. So that BBC dog leaves me undisturbed. His nose, his logic, his craft, and his conscience would have been rabbit feed in the matagouris of early Otago. In any case, one of my brother's dogs would never have left that lamb. He would have stayed with it, run with it until it was tired, and gently circled it back to the flock and its anxious mother. Not till he had been dust for 50 years would my brother have thought him worth a story.

I CAN think of no more reassuring sound than the cackle of a hen that has just laid an egg; unless it is the cackling of two hens. Though I can't recall that Browning was influenced by hens, or was living near hens JULY 20 when he wrote *Pippa Passes*, I seldom myself hear their cackle without feeling as Pippa did that New Year's Day at Asolo—that the world is worth a song.

Tomorrow I must be Pippa who winds silk. The whole year round, to earn just bread and milk.

But "this one day" she was free, with a lark on the wing and a snail on the thorn, and love in her heart for everything and everybody. As we are all Pippas some of the time, and the humbugs, pretenders, and sinners she passed most of the time, we need all the proof we can find that our shabby lives are worth living. My hens say it more convincingly than philosophers and men of science.

Nor is it simply that they say it in the morning, when confidence comes easily. What makes it so reassuring is the fact that they can't help saying it, that it is not their message but life's. There is no prudential reason why a hen should cackle. All she achieves in my yard by announcing an egg is the unwanted attention of a graceless cockerel. All she can achieve anywhere is the theft of her egg and a hint to her natural enemies. But she still cackles. It is as necessary to her as twittering to a starling on the roof or the leap into space of a sportive kitten. It is something above and beyond reason—as a good woman once told me religion is. So I gather an egg and cast out fear. I hope that is worship.

(To be continued)

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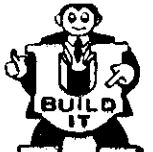
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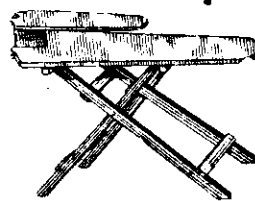
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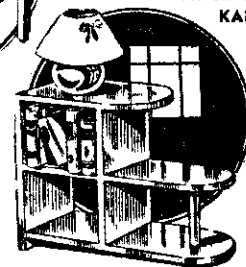
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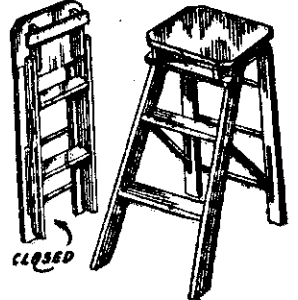
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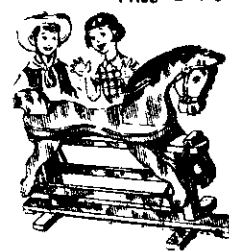
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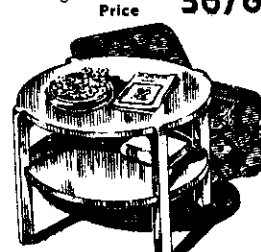
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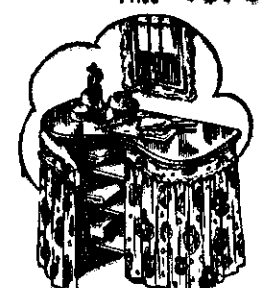
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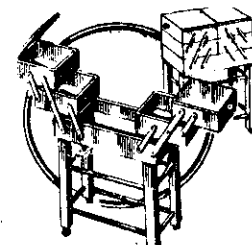
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