

# ORDEAL BY HEAT

by "SUNDOWNER"

**T**WICE this month it has been hot enough to send all my living creatures to earth: the dog into a cave of pampas grass; the cat to bare soil under the rhubarb; the fowls into a ditch behind the car shed; the sheep and

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cows to wind tunnels under the pines. On the first day the thermometer reached 84, and on the second 86.

That is heat in Canterbury, and in Auckland would be suffocation. But in the really warm corners of the earth it would be cool or cold. L. M. Nesbitt, who made the first traverse by a white man of the Danakil country of Eastern Abyssinia, brought his party through shade temperatures of 167 degrees, travelling on foot to save the dying camels. Because he has a head to help his belly and his legs, man is the toughest of all the bigger animals, in heat and in cold. From his caravan of 18 men, 25 camels, and four mules, Nesbitt lost three native carriers, none by sickness or exhaustion. But ten camels and three mules died of thirst, starvation and fatigue. What the figures would have been if all had been given precisely the same treatment—the same food and drink in proportion to their size and weight and the same hours of rest—it is not easy to say; but if there had been no human beings with them to supply these things, and preserve and ration them, the animals would all have died in the first week past the water-holes. The wild ass seems to be one of the toughest creatures in the desert, and to be able to keep itself alive where camels dare not go; but camels can live longer without water. The bulk of a camel must be a handicap where food is as hard to find as drink, though camels on this journey often gave themselves a meal by eating dry thorn bushes—closing their jaws on the rough branches and stripping them sideways of bark and twigs—while the mules stood and starved. What kept the men alive was foresight and discipline; but two of them, when the journey ended, were strapped on the back of camels, moaning, muttering, and periodically yelling, quite out of their minds.

**S**INCE Cherry-Garrard's book appeared I have believed that the expedition for the penguin's egg was the worst recorded journey in modern times. But some of the horror in that story was in the telling. Some was in the setting. Some was in the fact that death walked

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every mile with them and waited every night outside their sleeping bags. But they were a picked team, of high intelligence, high morale, and unshakable integrity. Nesbitt had two white companions, both Italians, and both, as it proved, of fine loyalty and courage, but the other members of his party were pre-Abraham in culture. It was an incredible feat to hold them together and bring 15 of the 18 out alive—three were murdered—through more than 400 miles of hostile and unexplored country, some of it high mountains and some of it gorges and burning plains 300 feet below sea level.

But the worst spots in the world have their surprises. Through much of this

territory a river flowed, not often in a straight enough line to be followed, but usually near enough to the line of march to make death by thirst improbable. That sounds comfortably safe. But the river was so full of crocodiles that it was not safe even to wash one's hands in it; the jungles on its banks were full of dangerous animals; the mud pools harboured hundreds of venomous snakes lying in cracks round the edges for birds dropping down to drink.

One night there was a continuous and dreadful agitation in the forest on the opposite bank of the river. The smaller animals screamed in their terror from one end of the thick woods to the other, as they ran wildly up and down, passing close in front of our camp. The forest awoke more fully all around us, and became filled with desperate cries. From the river below came a roaring and splashing and thudding of fighting crocodiles, punctuated at intervals by the wailing scream of the vanquished. Above all other sounds was that of the awful blows delivered by the hippopotami.

It is, I think, a matter of temperament whether sounds like those would be more terrifying than the night noises

Cherry-Garrard heard that were neither human nor animal, but came from the very abyss of desolation.

**T**HERE is a thunderstorm raging as I write this note, with those big drops of rain (and some hail) that you can follow as they come down. Sheep and cattle as far as I can see have disappeared into plantations and small birds into thickets of leaves. But a kingfisher is sitting it out on a power line with flutterings that must mean pleasure. Neither the hail nor the rain is producing any effect on him, but an occasional jerking of his head and twisting of his neck as blows descend on his crest; and I cannot doubt that it is all as pleasant to him as sunshine, and more exciting.

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But other native birds, too, if I could hear them above the din, are probably adding their appreciation of the rain now that the hail has ceased. Warm showers, when they do not last long, must be as refreshing to birds as a bath is to a man; but birds not accustomed to rain—and that means most of our importations—suffer badly in continuous downpours. It was pointed out many years ago by Guthrie-Smith that fantails will go on hawking for flies in a deluge heavy

enough to kill sparrows. There are no fantails about as I watch, but there were warblers on the wattle trees before the storm began, and I am sure that they are sitting it out comfortably. On Tutira, where Guthrie-Smith made most of his observations, there can be a foot of rain in two or three days. That is far more than we get in the South Island east of the Alps; but both in Canterbury and in Otago I have seen dead sparrows and finches after several days of rain. We forget, of course, that most of the birds in New Zealand in 1956 are newcomers. They have not been here long enough to adapt themselves to conditions which, though they are in general much easier than those of Europe, are in the matter of rain more extreme. In that respect our birds resemble goats which, though they will live in the desert and on the mountain-tops, will die in a few hours if left without shelter in continuous rain. That kingfisher, on the other hand, has been riding out rain storms since Kupe, and through thousands of years before that. Seventeen points of rain in seventeen minutes—though it dropped to the ground a few moments ago, it is now back on its wire—have no more effect on its health than the barber's spray on the head of a schoolboy.

(To be continued)

## OLYMPIC ECHO

**T**HE NZBS team who covered the Games in Melbourne came back full of admiration for the sangfroid exhibited by several well-known overseas commentators. For though the facilities provided by the ABC were excellent, the organisation of the Games is still not geared specifically for radio—which was, after all, only recognised as an essential part of the Games at Helsinki in 1952.

First, commentators couldn't see competitors before an event, and didn't know who was scratched and who wasn't unless the public address system gave this information beforehand. So, often, both they as well as the spectators had to read the numbers and identify competitors while an event was in progress.

Another difficulty was that the first heat of a semi-final could be under way without the commentators having draw cards to say who was in what heat. This happened with the women's 100 metres semi-final—the starters were on their mark for the first heat when the draw at last arrived. One world-known commentator grabbed the draw and gave his commentary on the first heat,

identifying runners by the lanes shown in the draw, then discovered that he had used the names of the competitors in the second heat. But he made a quick save. When the second heat was run, he used the names of the competitors in the first heat; and as several of the winners of the second heat won in the same lanes as the first heat winners, the end result worked out rather well. As this, like most of the commentaries for overseas countries, was recorded, not sent live, all that had to be done later was to switch the order of transmission of the two heats, and no one ever knew.

It was not always possible to give accurate placing of an event, we gather, especially in close finishes, because of the position of the commentators in re-

lation to the finishing line. One Empire broadcaster gave a very fine description of a heat of the 100 metres, and as the runners crossed the finish line announced A, B and C as first, second and third. When the official placings were announced, A, B and C were, in fact, nowhere: the commentator immediately called his studio technician and ordered him to "wipe" that recording, and to start again. Then, watching the empty field with one eye and the other on his stop watch, he remade the recording. This time, not unexpectedly, the right sprinters won.

A final example—this time in the 1500 metres. In this event 16 names appeared on the programme, but only 12 starters went to the mark, which was on the

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THIS photograph shows the extensive area set aside for radio commentators at the Melbourne Olympics