

# Grasslands Prophet

by "SUNDOWNER"

I WAS amused to find a suggestion in Gibbon last night that farmers have been playing noughts and crosses with their carrying capacity for 1500 years. Gibbon, of course, does not put it that way, or any way with definiteness. He merely repeats, without his usual cynical comment, that "four sheep were equivalent to an acre of the best land" when the Saxons seized it because husbandry then was "languid and unskilful." If he had said one sheep and four acres the sentence would not have stopped me, but four

**JUNE 22** sheep to one was a little more than I could swallow, even from Gibbon, as evidence of languid and unskilful husbandry. I think a farmer pulled a historian's leg, that the leg was innocent and accepted the pull, and that Gibbon was more anxious to ridicule the monks, who "in their profound ignorance of human life presumed to exercise the office of historians," than to check his agricultural statistics. Even though a sheep in those days produced less than 30 pounds of mutton, and would not therefore eat much grass, not many of the acres of England were feeding four mouths in Vortigern's day. Far more must have been in the condition of the bishopric of Durham, the whole territory from the Tyne to the Tees, "a savage and solitary forest."

It is, of course, impossible to know what the facts of husbandry were after the Romans left—first, because records were not often kept, second, because those that were kept were not often accurate, third, because they were often lost, and fourth, because those that were not lost were the possession of men whose use of them was religious-political more often than it was historical. Before I could accept Gibbon's figures I should require to know whether they came from a lord of the manor or from a monk, from an authority collecting tribute or from a Saxon invader short of men and trying to tempt more to follow him.

It is, I suppose, a good general principle to be wary of enthusiasm when it rises to gale force. Even when it is a gentle breeze I take precautions if it never stops blowing. But when Sir Bruce Levy lets himself go on grass I open all my pores and look round to see how busy the reporters are. Fortunately they do not often fail me, since Sir Bruce is now news.

**JUNE 25** I thought they had missed him a few days ago at Lincoln, but they had saved his most dramatic paragraphs for their farm page and weekend readers. Here is one for the politicians:

Grassland farming should be a calling deified by the nation, and the reward to its operatives should exceed the reward of

any other service in the nation. If New Zealand is to prosper and maintain its standard of living, this attitude of mind, translated into action, is imperative.

I hope they add it to their catechism for candidates in November. Though I don't quite know how to deify a calling, and could, in fact, if I were that kind of pedant, detect a threat there to re-



SIR BRUCE LEVY  
Going it alone in a noble cause.

vealed religion, I know, as every reader will, what Sir Bruce meant, and swallow him hook, line, and sinker.

But those are nine lines only out of an arresting 49. I have often myself said that all flesh is grass, repeating a phrase at least 5000 years old. But Sir Bruce says that all light is grass, or ought to be; not merely all progress and prosperity in New Zealand, but nearly all our education and culture. That is going it alone in a noble cause; going the whole hog, the whole cow, the whole sheep, and the whole caterpillar tractor. Up go my hat and my gumboots!

NOW that they are to have their own stud book we must suppose that Australia's polled Merinos will stay polled. If a horn reappears it will cut the throat of its owner, or sterilise him. The day must in fact come—I think it will come this century—when horns in

**JUNE 27** Merinos will look as grotesque as they do already in Highland cattle; are beginning to look in Ayrshires; and in a generation or two will look in all beasts bred for a quiet life.

But horns will not disappear painlessly. The producers of them will not suffer when they go, but the admirers will moan into the third and fourth generation. I may moan myself if the disappearing happens in my day; or feel like moaning; or show, or have, or pre-

tend to have, faint traces of regret. There is nothing in the animal world that catches my eye like a well-horned Merino ram, which has masculinity without menace—unless you are stupid—and dignity without strutting pride. So there is nothing handier in a cow (sometimes) than horns to hold a rope or block a bail. It takes time to put on a halter, and cows—why, I don't know—never meet you half-way like horses and generously present their noses. But one day at Addington, one hour on the rail of a station cattle yard, or one look into a loaded truck, knocks the romance out of horns unless they are on the head of a stag; and stags refuse to carry them all the time.

TRUTH, Peter Fleming discovered when he was in the Matto Grosso, is a perishable commodity, not easily transported long distances. He was tempted to make a sensational story out of his experiences because that would at once have been accepted. Home readers wanted to hear that the jungle was full of hidden

**JUNE 30** dangers—prowling jaguars, vicious and venomous snakes, leaping tarantulas, savage and treacherous Indians. They wanted to believe that the rivers were full of baleful alligators and man-eating fish; that the climate was death to white men if they lingered in that green hell too long; that to stray half a mile from a river bank was to be lost forever; and that no white man would, or could, venture alone into that world. In fact, he could never find the jaguars, though he occasionally saw their pugmarks; snakes were scarce; the tarantulas were aestivating or shy; and he very soon found himself treating alligators with contempt. Once only, he said, did they succeed in frightening him:

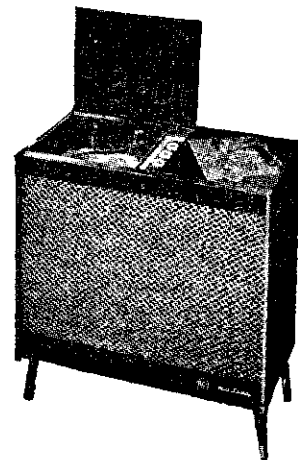
After supper we had gone out to wait at the head of a small lagoon behind our camp, where we had seen many tracks of tapir and deer. As we came quietly through the scrub we were surprised to hear a deafening and continuous uproar going on in the lagoon: a boiling, squelching, thrashed sound, as if a herd of elephants was wallowing in it. We emerged on to the shore and found ourselves in the presence of all the alligators in the world. . . . What they were doing heaven only knows. But by degrees the presence, close at hand, of so many slimy armoured bodies moving motionlessly in the sticky dark became oppressive. Almost with surprise I realised that for once the alligators had filled the role which our expectations had assigned to them: that I was thinking of them not altogether with contempt.

In short, though he found the Matto Grosso more of a health resort than a white man's grave, he found it difficult to record that on the spot and get it believed by readers of *The Times* in London.

For other but not wholly dissimilar reasons I find it difficult to record my daily experiences with animals without writing myself down as a romantic or an ignorant fool. People don't wish to see animals as they are but as they must be to justify their attitude to them—whether that is blind brutality or wishful sentimentality. From Canterbury to Auckland is not very far as news travels nowadays, but it is too far for the transport of an animal fact to a recipient out of sympathy with it. And the most difficult to convince are not the hard-headed but the soft-hearted—the anthropomorphic simpletons who see purity in a calf's eye and man in everything.

(To be continued)

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