

They were inferior to everybody but dag-pickers and swaggers, and this was her hour of brief authority.

UNTIL last week I had seen no more than half-a-dozen rabbits in three months. I was, in fact, beginning to hope that the excessively wet winter had drowned some in their burrows and forced the others to migrate. But this week I have seen three or four every day. Courting has begun, nesting has begun, and I know that the traps which have been collecting rust since autumn under a macrocarpa tree will be in use again before we are far into spring.

To ask where rabbits go in winter is like asking where blowflies go. They don't go. In both cases they remain, but with different habits, and in less conspicuous positions. On this particular holding I think the rabbits retreat to the gorse, burrowing occasionally under cover, but in most cases living on the surface. They do not occupy the established warrens, and when the earth is wet do not scrape. If I had watched long enough, and at the right times, I would no doubt have seen them emerge now and again for the tit-bits that tussock country provides even in the coldest weather, and I did see a pair come into the garden one evening at dusk. But the remarkable fact has been the absence of signs—tracks, scrapes, droppings and nibbled grass—and not merely of the rabbits themselves. If my country faced south I could suppose that there had been a seasonal migration to the other side of the hills; but I face north, and no rabbit goes voluntarily to the cold faces when the warm ones are open.

FROM astro-physics to shepherding is as far as from Fred Hoyle to the Man in the Moon. I can neither understand what these people say, nor believe it, nor reach any conclusion at all about it except that to me it doesn't matter; but I like listening to them. The only astronomer I have ever understood was born in the head of Dr. Johnson and confessed to Prince Raselas that he had wasted his time and was more than half cracked. There was, however, a return of "delight in sub-lunary pleasures" after a succession of visits by two fascinating young women, and when we take leave of him he is sane:

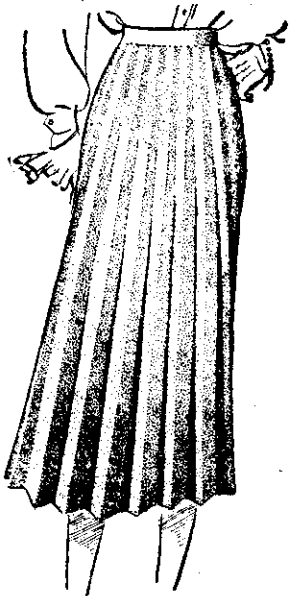
Of the various conditions which the world spreads before you I am not able to instruct you. I can only tell that I have chosen wrong. I have passed my time in study without experience: in the attainment of sciences which can for the most part be but remotely useful to mankind: I have purchased knowledge at the expense of all the common comforts of life. . . . I have, since my thoughts have been diversified by more intercourse with the world, begun to question the reality. When I have been for a few days lost in pleasing dissipation, I am always tempted to think that my inquiries have ended in error, and that I have suffered much, and suffered it in vain.

I am not going to suggest that Fred Hoyle is cracked, or robbing himself of life, or following a course that will end in disillusionment. If voices mean anything he is the happiest of happy philosophers, with his feet planted firmly on verifiable figures. But he could be wrong; and since his only way of talking to the ignorant is in dogmatic assertions which ignorance can neither accept nor deny, we end where the blind end when someone tells them that roses are red and violets blue.

(To be continued)

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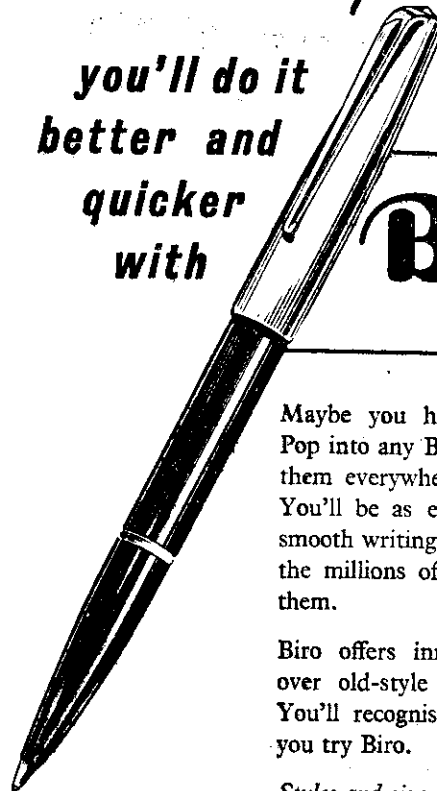
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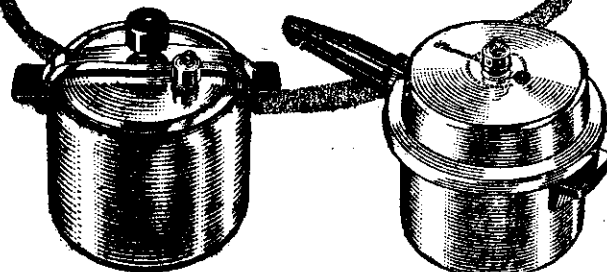
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