

FIRE AND WATER

by "SUNDOWNER"

I CAME back yesterday from one of my rare visits to the city to see smoke rising from the spot on which I had helped Jim to stack twelve tons of hay. Twelve tons is 360 bales, and they were only theoretical tons. Long before we were into the second hundred I was convinced that each bale was a hundred-weight or more, and I am still convinced

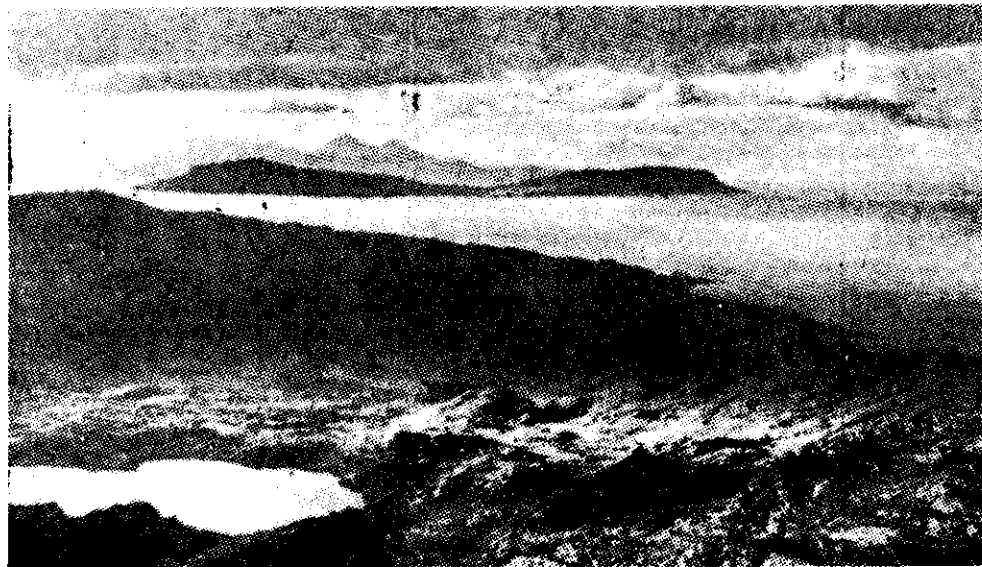
JANUARY 7 been weighed bale by bale the total would have been several tons more than we credited ourselves with moving. But that was all the fire meant to me—a day's tough labour lost. To Jim it meant money lost, time lost, feed lost, some big trees lost, and anxiety for perhaps twelve months ahead. It meant trouble if we have a long, hard winter, and a gap in a plantation that will irritate him for 20 years. It meant what stack fires

so well in private schools—and almost nowhere else—has given him a mastery over himself that most of us never acquire. We rage, moan, storm, whine, threaten, look for victims, or make sorry excuses. Jim says nothing and does nothing. Outwardly he seems to feel nothing, but that is education and discipline: keeping up the old tradition. I am against nearly everything that private schools stand for, but they turn out what the Scots call bonny fighters. Time, I am sure, will wipe them all out; but I hope it will not happen for five hundred years.

[T is a far cry from Canterbury to the Western Islands of Scotland, but I have seen so much hay cut, raked,

interest in cattle may sound a little surprising, but those who associate him only with London coffee houses and dictionaries don't know him. Here is a passage that would almost have got him into Ruakura:

The cattle of Skye are not so small as is commonly believed. Since they have sent their beeves in great numbers to southern marts, they have probably taken more care of their breed. At stated times the annual growth of cattle is driven to a fair, by a general drover, and with the money, which he returns to the farmer, the rents are paid. The price regularly expected, is from two to three pounds a head: there was once one sold for five pounds. They go from the Islands very lean, and are not offered to the butcher, till they have been long fattened in English pastures. . . . Of their black cattle, some are without horns, called by the Scots *humble* cows, as we call a bee a *humble* bee, that wants a sting. Whether this difference is specific, or accidental, though we inquired with great diligence, we could not be informed. We are not very sure that the bull is ever without horns, though we have been told, that such bulls there are. What is produced by putting a horned and unhorned male and female together, no man has ever tried, that thought the result worthy of observation. Not bad genetics for 1773!



OVER THE SEA TO SKYE

"It's a far cry from Canterbury to the Western Islands of Scotland"

always mean—loss, confusion, frustration, suspicion, and no consolation anywhere discernible. But Jim took it all as calmly as a shower in the night. The laughing at a fall lesson that they teach

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theories about life and worse still, theories about The Novel. This seems to involve a lot of non-narrative obscurity and no sense of humour. You gotta be tough. Life in the raw and no sunburn lotion.

The biographer, the autobiographer, the historian—all are collector's pieces, the autobiographer being the most voluminous. The biographer is often a suspicious species, snorting with fury when anyone else tackles a subject he has already "done." And the historian, in the spate of centennial splendours, peers with passionate perspicacity into the wranglings over the first main drain.

But the best thing about collecting authors is that it's so un-strenuous. They abound like pips on the beach, and you take your pick.

drenched, and raked again this season, and then drenched again, that I am reminded of what Dr. Johnson called the "perpetual perflation" contrived by Macleod of Raasay. Macleod was one of the enterprising islanders, and provident.

JANUARY 10 Most of them, Johnson found, showed the "genuine improvidence of savages," clearing their oats from the husk, when they grew any, by parching them in the straw, and thus "destroying that fodder for want of which their cattle often perished."

They gather a little hay, but the grass is mown late, and is so often almost dry and again very wet, before it is housed, that it becomes a collection of withered stalks without taste or fragrance; it must be eaten by cattle that have nothing else, but by most English farmers would be thrown away.

But most of the cattle survived. Many found their way to the mainland, and then to England, and it was the fattened bullock in those days that was the gentleman who paid the rent. Johnson's

moment imagine, since no rabbit ever appeared more mysteriously from a hat;

JANUARY 11 but the immediate problem was to get rid of him, and he had ideas of his own about that. I began by throwing a clod at him, as Barrie did when he first saw Lord Rosebery, but the only effect of that was to make him shake his polled head and come about his own length closer. Then Lily came very close and I got quickly over the gate.

The next step was thoroughly ridiculous. I unchained the dogs, but before I could find a stick the romance ended as suddenly as it had started. Whether he was a well-dogged bull or just a take and skeddadle Lothario I don't know, but he went at the double for the fence before I had even sooled the dogs on, cleared netting and barb like a well-schooled hunter, and left Lily running about bellowing on the wrong side. But she has never bellowed since, and it is now the fourth week.

(To be continued)

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