

Down With the Lark?

WHEN I had to ask a veterinary surgeon three or four weeks ago to deliver Elsie's fourth calf I felt embarrassed by the fact that I had not joined the local veterinary club. But it was not parsimony that kept me out. It was shyness. It does not strain my sense of the ridiculous to call myself

a shepherd, since I own a small flock of sheep and keep them under daily observation. But I hesitate to call myself a sheep-farmer. I can't, with one cow, a heifer, and an eighteen-months-old steer, call myself a dairy or cattle farmer. Throwing in two dogs and two pups, seventeen fowls, and a cat, still leaves me so near the ridicule line that I must either stay out of the club or be conscious of the general sniggering if I join. But I did not know until today that if I had joined I would have been a member of one of the oldest clubs in the world.

Our own club, I think, is about fifteen months old. But there was a veterinary club in Ceylon, nation-wide in its operations, more than fifteen centuries ago, with public hospitals for animals. There were veterinary surgeons with Constantine's army in 322, and Romans writing

by "SUNDOWNER"

about animal diseases at least 300 years earlier. The Egyptians probably practised veterinary surgery centuries before Rome began, and it was certainly taught and practised in Greece five centuries before Christ. I am not sure that I would have trusted one of those practitioners with the delivery of Elsie's calf, but if I had known that a cheque for two guineas would have given me a kind of fellowship with Hippocrates and Varro, I might not have been so squeamish about filling it in. Now the stream of history has swept past me.

I DON'T feel any older or any younger, any bigger or any smaller, any wiser or any more foolish because this is my seventieth birthday. I feel grateful that I have reached 70 in reasonably good health, that my eyes and ears still work, that it gives me no trouble yet to touch my toes, lace my boots, digest a good meal, and sleep an unbroken eight hours. But I try at the same time

not to deceive myself. Seventy is three score and a half, and only the lucky get the other half. It is a shortening tether, a rapidly narrowing circle, contemporaries going, forebears gone. It is the last



K. F. Bignood photograph

SKYLARK APPROACHING NEST

span on Mirza's bridge, eyes averted as companions drop through, ears trying not to hear the splash. It can happen that the heart preserves its rhythm to the last plank, the spirit its serenity; but it does not happen often. When a man is in

different to death he has probably been unresponsive to life — a sleep-walker who never woke up.

In any case here I am and here I can't stay; and not many of us enjoy that knowledge. We may not be afraid, but we are not often exhilarated. Less often are we amused. We may smile when death comes, in the few cases in which we see it coming, but I don't think we ever laugh.

I certainly am not laughing today. I accept my age, and face the implications (I think) without anxiety or fear. But I don't welcome them or rejoice in them. I can't be as indifferent as Shaw pretended to be at my age, and perhaps was, since he had another quarter of a century to go, and had almost bluffed himself into believing then that age was

ignorance and stupidity. But I am not as depressed as Wells was, who knew at 70 that disease had overtaken him, and that his remaining years would be measured in units of insulin. All I sat down to say however was this—that I

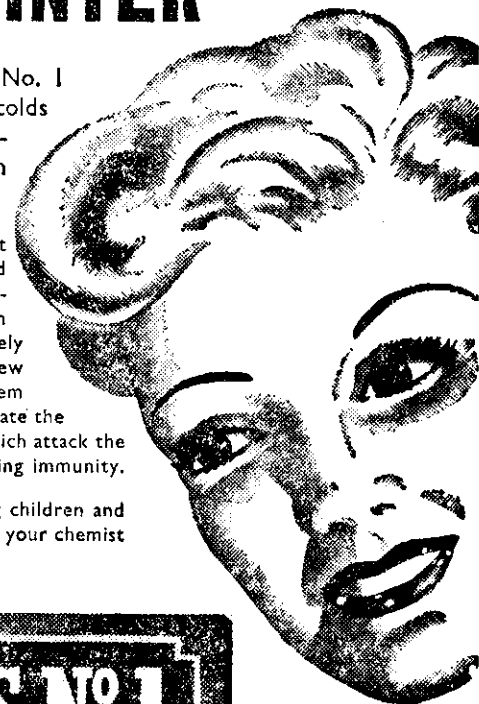
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