

CONSCIENCE AND COWARDICE

D.M.M., Timaru, sends me this caustic paragraph from a book that attracted some notice five or six years ago (*While Following the Plough*, by John Stewart Collis):

My own liking for sheep is limited. As a flock they may fairly be said to be more pitiful than human beings. Their deplorable lack of self-possession and confidence, their perpetual hurrying and scurrying, their weak face, their ceaseless maa-ing and baa-ing make one feel that somehow they have got lost in evolution and are in a frightful state of anxiety about it.

It disturbs me a little to think that although I bought and read the book

then I had to struggle hard to recall it when D.M.M.'s note reached me yesterday. Oddly enough, I had no difficulty in finding it, since the moment Collis himself came back to me I remembered that I had put him with Whitman and Boswell and Thoreau and Cobbett and Shakespeare and the Bible and one or two other books to go with me on a series of caravan journeys. Now I can't think why I ever gave him such a place and then so completely ignored him. Perhaps he was strongly recommended to me. Perhaps I was caught by a review. Perhaps it is a sufficient explanation that I was then in my middle sixties and too old to remember new things.

But to get back to the sheep and that paragraph. Is it more than clever journalism? A little more, I think, but not much more. Collis is an acute observer and an interesting commentator but his pen is a little sharper than his eye. He can't quite forgive sheep and shepherds for holding their places so long in romantic literature and art. Neither can I, but sheep and shepherds as they are make a prettier picture than literary-slickers as they often are



CAST SHEEP

and as Collis himself is when he says that "sheep have now so little control over their bodies that a slight hollow in the ground may make them fall over while grazing," and adds that "if they do fall over they can't get up, and often die in 20 minutes." I am all for getting the wool out of our eyes when we look at sheep or anything else, but to draw a creature like that and call it a sheep is about the same thing as calling man a forked radish or a biped without feathers..

I HAVE looked at Collis again and must now modify what I said yesterday When he discusses animals, which is

seldom, he is as unsympathetic, and that means as uncompre-

JUNE 10 hending, as

I was when

I called him a literary slicker; but it is a different story when he is talking about the soil and its cultivation, about springtime and harvest and ploughmen and tractor drivers, and the outsiders who go blindly past on the public highway. Animals, I think, have never meant much to him, including even his own dog, which, though he mentions it once or twice, remains just a dog without purpose, or personality, or sex, or breed. But only writers of the first rank, and no contemporary writer whom I can recall see the agricultural scene more clearly than he does and have fresher

and more penetrating things to say about it. I think I must have laid him aside in the caravan because I was a little afraid of him, and unconsciously perhaps a little jealous. He says so many things, I realise now, that I probably wished to say myself, and if I went on reading him would not have been able to say, that I perhaps found his company embarrassing. Whatever happened then I am grateful to D.M.M. for compelling me to read him again now and pay him the tribute I owe him.

I HAVE been troubled for years over the difficulty of saying to a man while he is alive what it is useless say-

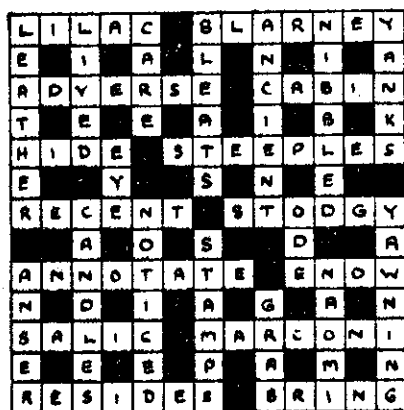
ing about him when he is dead. When a close friend died the other day, after an illness that I found revolting in its injustice and cruelty, I could not even tell his wife how much his friendship had meant to me. Instead of calling on her or writing her a truthful letter I sent her a telegram that the messenger himself could have composed. It is a situation that must be recurring every day, and I wish I knew how to end it.

All I know is that it would have clouded our friendship if I had attempted to tell George (as I will call him) how much I admired him. He would not have doubted my word at the time, or looked for a motive, or suspected me of abnormality. He might even have been less embarrassed listening than I would have been speaking. But he would have been bewildered. As he thought about it he would have been worried, and in time uneasy about meeting me again. Finally, with nothing said, and nothing changed, in either of us, we would have drifted apart. That, too, is a situation that must be commoner than is generally supposed, and one from which there is no escape if we once create it.

But I have never composed a letter of condolence, written an obituary, or sent a post-mortem message of any kind without feeling that the time to speak had passed; that I had shamefully let it pass; and that nothing I could now do or say would satisfy the living or avoid offence to the dead. If we were animals or angels we could perhaps evade these situations, in one case by being too dull to know about them, in the other by having goodness enough in all our contacts to make them impossible. But I don't know how human beings can avoid them as long as they remain the crude, selfish, cowardly pretenders that all of us, in our different ways, inevitably are.

(To be continued)

(Solution to No. 650)



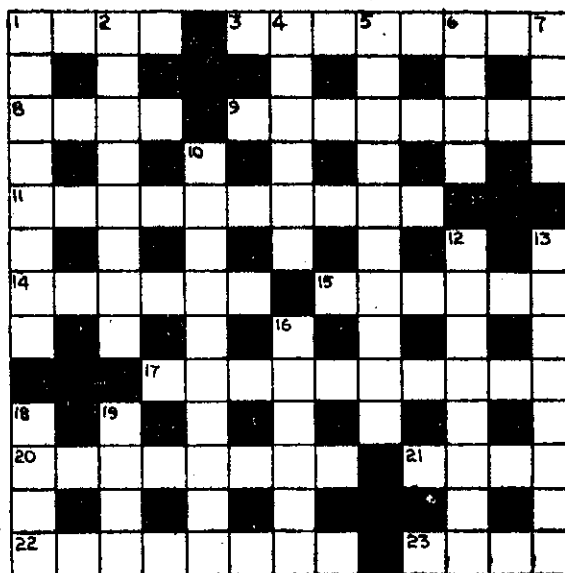
Clues Across

- Charon plied the ferry across this river.
- A crowd in front of a measure of 18 down gives rise to slaughter.
- In France we display common sense.
- Surprise, as in shot.
- "Man's — to man Makes countless thousands mourn" (Robert Burns).
- Fairness.
- Spoilt darling.
- Bird ate eel? This would make you ponder.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- Would Eric ever become a fence?
- "Thy soul was like a —, and dwelt apart" (Wordsworth).
- Repeat.
- You don't need pen and paper for this examination.
- Complete form of triangle.
- Strip.
- Extent of surface.
- Confused automobiles.

No. 651 (Constructed by R.W.H.)



Clues Down

- Ten lines on guard?
- "His — hose, well saved, a world too wide For his shrunk shank" ("As You Like It," Act 2, Scene 7).
- "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, — thee from felicity awhile" ("Hamlet," Act 5, Scene 2).
- Ephemeral.
- The first murderer.
- Repetitive part of a large choir.
- Sing about the matter.
- Sad rites (anag.).



THE National Orchestra's guest conductor Warwick Braithwaite (above) will conduct a Command Performance by the orchestra at Dunedin during the Royal Tour. Announcing this, the Minister in Charge of Broadcasting, Hon. R. M. Algie, said also that Mr. Braithwaite would remain for several months of the 1954 concert season, by which time the appointment of a permanent conductor would have been announced