

LIVING AND LEARNING

by "SUNDOWNER"

THE first instruction I had in journalism was to verify figures and facts. I was never to trust my memory, or the word or memory of anyone else. The second instruction was to cover up my tracks. If XYZ wrote asking when Queen Victoria was born, I was not to reply: "XYZ.—Queen Victoria was born on the 24th May, 1819." I might be wrong. In any case,

AUGUST 5 there was always a reader who knew, or thought he knew, more than I did. I was not to help him to make a nuisance of himself. I was to reply: "XYZ.—May 24, 1819."

They were good and necessary instructions, and saved me much trouble. But the other day I forgot both, I was talking about rabbits, and I used a figure I had taken from a newspaper summary of a scientific report I had not myself read. The figure was wrong. I said that the rabbit population of New Zealand was reduced last year by about 4 per cent, and gave Dr. Wodzicki, of the Animal Ecology Section of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, as my authority. Dr. Wodzicki's statement was that 4.5 per cent fewer rabbits were killed in 1951 than in 1950. We live and sometimes learn.

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I DROPPED *Prisoner of Grace* last night (with its 1453 parenthesis and farms without live animals) when an announcer said something about cows

on the Isle of Wight. Then I picked it up again. The cows were Cows—cattle in which I have no interest. But I had read only three more pages when I ran into this rhapsody on sailing:

There is no sound but the popple of water against the bow and a deeper gurgle under the bilge; the boat slides forward with a motion which is not like any other, even the smoothest, because in the smoothness of sleighing you feel all the time the hardness of the crushed snow, and in the rushing of a motor car you feel the bounce of tyres and springs, mechanical contraptions. And in the intoxicating dash of a high gig (much more exciting than a motor) you felt the pull of the traces and the crunching of the wheels, the whole vibration and shaking of the thing tilting nervously on the camber of the road. But in sailing you feel all the time the lovely touch of the water, bearing you up with its enormous wild strength.

How true that is I don't know, since I have never sailed. I know only that if sailing is more exhilarating than sledging down a wet hill track behind two lively horses I have missed a lot of pleasure in life by keeping away from the water.

The pleasures we have never known we of course don't miss, and I did not allow Joyce Cary to lead me back to Cows. But when I went to bed I put myself to sleep by reading *Farming for Ladies* (by the author of *British Husbandry*) and dropped off after memorising and then trying to repeat in the dark this description in doggerel of the qualities of a good cow:

If long in the head, and bright in the eye;
Short in the leg and thin in the thigh;
Broad in the hips, and full in the chine;
Light in the shoulder, and neck rather fine;

Round in the carcase, and wide in the pin;
Fine in the bone, and silky of skin;
Deep in the bosom, and small in her tail.
She'll ne'er be deficient in filling the pail.

This morning the jingle was gone but the points were still clear in my head, and the highest mark I could give Elsie was eight out of a possible fourteen. Even after I had slept on it I could not say that she is long in the head, or broad in the hips, or full in the chine, or round in the carcase, or wide in the pin. I would not like to say that she has a silky skin. With an effort I can say that her eyes are bright, her legs short, her thighs thin, her shoulders light, her neck fine, her bones fine, her bosom deep, and her tail small (if slender will do for small). In short, she is not a good but only a fair cow, and the fair cow, Eric Partridge would say, is something for which there is no printable word.

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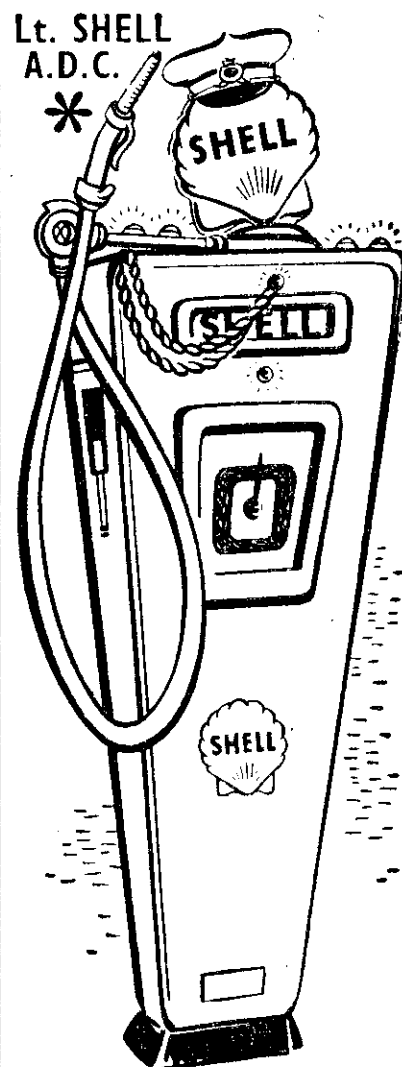
AFTER a sleep of less than three weeks my weeping willows are awake again. On the old tree it is not much more yet than buds and a change of colour; but the young trees are already in leaf. I don't know why they were the last to lose

AUGUST 10 their leaves and the first to regain them, since they are just limbs from the big tree rammed into the ground. They get more sun than the parent tree, but they also get more wind, and I should have expected the widest and deepest root system to be the least subject to change. It is, however, a very short sleep in both cases; hardly a sleep at all, but just a nod, a nap, and sudden waking like a full man's doze before the fire. Nor can I doubt that there are cases where the new growth pushes off the old without any pause at all—that there are weeping willows in New Zealand which not only threaten to become evergreens, but have already done so.

The question is, where do we go from here? Will a change of habit mean a change of character, and if it does, will the change be good or bad? The chief economic use of willow in New Zealand is for shade, emergency stock feed, and the control of erosion. The chief drawback to its use is its tendency to block waterways. Are we in sight of the day when willows will give us no breathing space at all between summer and winter and show no more respect for big streams than for small and sluggish ones? Or have they (with their cousins the poplars) the only answer to our slipping hillsides and drifting shingle? I think it was Guthrie-Smith who thanked God that weeping willows had remained celibate in New Zealand.

(To be continued)

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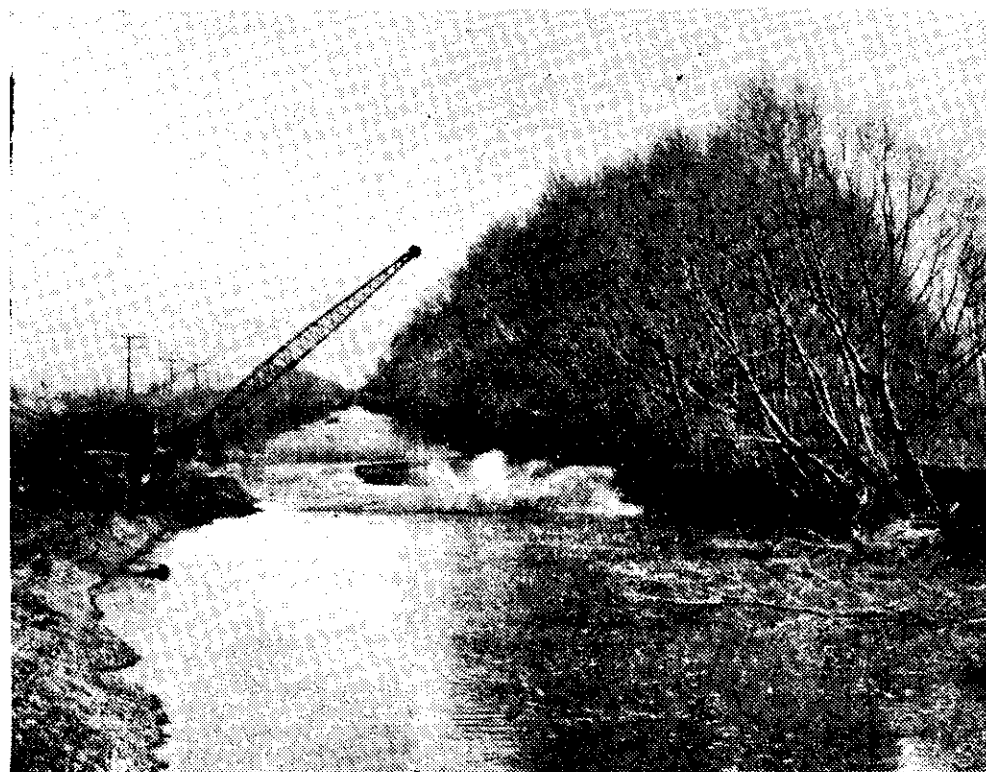
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