

Did You Hear That?

WHY PRICES ARE RISING IN ITALY

IN ITALY THE COST OF LIVING has just shown a steep and rather alarming rise. Between the end of July and August 21, wholesale prices rose by over 11 per cent., and between July 25 and August 25 the price of foodstuffs rose by over 20 per cent. During the same period, there has been an all-round increase in the tariff for gas, electricity, postal services and for telephones, and a heavy increase in the price of railway fares—both passenger and goods—has just been announced. What is more, the Government has a scheme for the progressive increase of blocked rents which will go up immediately by 30 to 100 per cent. Our Rome Correspondent, CHRISTOPHER SERPELL, says that the left-wing Opposition will certainly use this situation with which to beat the Government but he points out that however hardly they may fall on the man in the street, many of these increases have a rational explanation.

'The rise in the price of foodstuffs', he continued, speaking in 'Radio Newsreel', 'has been caused by the fact that the Government has withdrawn the subsidy which it paid to keep down the price of bread and rationed flour products. The state railways and the postal and telephone services have both been showing serious deficits which had to be met in the past by the treasury, so that in both these cases the citizen will now be paying directly out of his own pocket what the Government has unsuccessfully been trying to meet out of the state revenue. In other words the Government is making a desperate effort to balance the budget. At the same time it is trying hard to introduce drastic economies into its own household—a so-called Axe Committee has been established to cut down the individual budgets of the various ministries as far as possible. Increase in the blocked rents will certainly cause hardship; at the same time it must be recognised that these rents were blocked at their pre-war level and many landlords are getting a ridiculous return on their property. I can quote one typical example of this from personal knowledge. A seven-roomed flat here in Rome is being sub-let to foreigners at a rent of 80,000 lire—about £40—a month. But the real tenants of that flat who cannot be dispossessed because they had it before the war pay the real landlords only 8,000 lire—£4—a month, and that is of course blocked rent.

'The reverse side of the matter is that many poorer Italians have only been able to meet the high prices of food and clothing because their blocked rents were such a small item in their family budgets; and it does not take any Communist to see that an increase in rents accompanied by a much greater increase in commodity prices will cause considerable alarm and discontent'.

ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WATER-SKATER

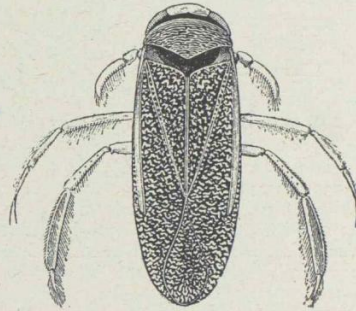
'Recently a new invention of a life-saving raft has appeared for airmen to carry', said EVELYN CHEESMAN, the entomologist, broadcasting in the Pacific Service. 'But it is always rather humiliating to think what clumsy methods human beings have for saving themselves from drowning when compared with the delicate life-saving outfits of certain insects, which can remain under water and come up again none the worse for it.

'Some insects are aquatic of course; they are specially designed for existence in the water and possess wonderful little organisms and extra structures to fit them for it: very simple, such as the vacuum pump of mosquito grubs which they push through the surface of water to pump air into their systems. Some have stream-lined bodies and flattened feet like oar-blades. Such are the water-boatmen which can dart about under water at incredible speed like fish. But there are terrestrial insects which can also go under water, and these amphibious insects can be compared with ourselves. We cannot change our bodies to enable us to remain a long time under water, but we can invent devices for getting over difficulties; so we have submarines, diving bells, diving suits, and life-preserving apparatus of various forms to keep our heads in the air, such as life buoys, life belts and jackets.

'But if compared with the beautifully finished adaptations of insects, the latter would carry off the prize every time. Take water-skaters for instance—long-legged, spidery insects that run about on the surface of the water. Some seem to delight in darting about under the spray of waterfalls, which seems very risky for such fragile creatures. And they have cousins which live on the sea, and you find those in quite rough

surf. But they do not suffer casualties, although they are not truly aquatic, and under certain conditions they can drown. The weight and the span of the legs of water-skaters are so nicely adjusted that they rest on the surface-film without falling through. That is their method, for water has a distinct film where it is in contact with the air—a thin film, but it exists, and these insects make use of it. There are many kinds of water-skaters in the Pacific, and it is particularly fascinating to watch them skating on a stream in sunshine, because in a bright light you can actually see dimples where their feet rest—they are bending the surface film without falling through.

'Water-skaters, if they do happen to get under water, close some of their breathing tubes with wonderful little valves to keep out water, and



From 'Natural History of Aquatic Insects', by L. C. Miall (Macmillan)



Above: water-skater (actual length just over 1/4 inch); its velvet 'pullover' captures air-bubbles. Left: water-boatman (actual length 1/2 inch); its hair fringes act as oars

over the others they have short-piled velvet, which catches and imprisons air-bubbles. This keeps them supplied until they can get back into the upper air again. If you deliberately detach these bubbles while they are under water, they will die. It is delightful to see the ease with which water-skaters stride about on rough seas, bending their heads between their legs to pick up food like a giraffe drinking. There is no danger of their drowning; it makes us long to do the same. It is a reminder to us what an awkward shape we human beings possess, and what a disadvantage it is to have a mouth which lets water into the lungs. To have only one pair of legs and to have adopted the upright position has many advantages, but not where problems are concerned of being in the water. It would mean a lot to us if we could have velvet life-jackets growing on us'.

CINEMA IN THE BUSH

The people of a bush town in eastern Nigeria were to see their first film, shown by one of the mobile vans of the Colonial Film Unit. 'I had arranged to go and see what happened', said MONTAGU SLATER in a talk in the Home Service. 'It was nearly dark, but I could see the gleam of eyes and hear the murmur of people gathering in little groups at the edge of the town bush. They put on a George Formby record—he is one of the favourite singers among the Ibos in these parts. They like the "chung-chung" of his ukulele. There's still a lot to be done before the film can be shown and the people are gathering only in twos and threes in a bored incredulity—till George Formby's voice, hugely amplified, begins to search crevices of the bush a couple of miles away. Somewhere in this darkness people begin to put their noses out of their compounds. The lads of the age-group club-houses put their heads out. A dancer opens the door of a rehearsal compound and shuts it again. The fisherman at his fishtraps and the priest in his sanctuary hear the record.

'We cannot see any of this, but that is what is happening. Here the showmen are still fiddling about with cables or threading film, but the crowd is gathering. The first to come are the children—all the children of the town, at least 600 of them. Now a few women with babies on their backs stand and hesitate. Now a hunter or two, gun on shoulder, on the way home from an evening's sport, pause and wonder what nonsense is going on. George Formby is doing his stuff. Now the town centre is full of people. A Nigerian policeman who has been brought

in the van begins to arrange the audience. It all goes jokingly and smoothly. Children sit on the ground in front. Grown-ups can sit or stand as they like. Soon there are about a thousand people here. The men and women tend to sit separately. The women wear nothing but sober-coloured cloths; they are naked from the waist up. The men dress more brightly in gaily patterned cotton togas hitched over the shoulder, and some of them wear beards curled in ringlets like Socrates. The elders, wearing sun helmets, decorated with two or three eagle feathers, sit down beside us. Some of them have a sword-bearer with an old Portuguese sword.

Suddenly the film starts. The films are silent, but beside the screen is a microphone through which an African talks to the audience in their own dialect of the Ibo tongue. The commentator talks direct to the audience and they talk to him. He asks them questions and gets answers. What do we see? London scenes first, West Indian service men and women in a ceremonial parade, and a thousand people laugh delightedly at the stiff arm-swing of the service girls marching. Then there is a news-reel item about elephants in India—or perhaps it was Burma—elephants rolling logs. Elephants are a legend in Iboland. The sacred masks of some of the most powerful ju-ju dancers represent elephant heads, and several of the rich men in this town have elephant tusks which they use for horns on high days and holidays—horns on which a skilled player can articulate far more elaborate messages than any western bugle call. They talk a lot about elephants but they've never seen one. Elephants are of the past. They have gone to another part of the country. So when the elephants come on the screen there is a long-pitched "Oo-er" from the crowd. The commentator says in Ibo: "This is an elephant. Say it after me. Elephant". Everybody says "Elephant". The children are squealing with delight. Even the men press in closer. Now late-comers are running down the paths between the palm-trees, whole families, father carrying a hurricane lamp, his wives beside him, the children running in front saying, "Come on, come on, we're missing it". And more hunters come in, naked but for the loin-cloth, shouldering aged muskets and shot-guns. Their faces are cut deep with the old tribal markings. They stand gazing at the screen, sometimes shyly, sometimes with a faint scowl. Now one or two miners, who live here but work miles away in Enugu, come pushing their bicycles through the bush paths.

One of the films shows a neighbouring town clearing the bush and making a new road. It is the climax of the evening. When a dozen men hack at a tree with their hatchets and the tree falls, there's enough noise to disturb the crickets; and then we see scores, hundreds, perhaps a thousand men with native hoes hoisting earth for the embankment. The high-spot of the show is a close-up of a man's hands lashing bamboo poles for a temporary bridge. As the hands make a knot you can hear a multitude of breaths inhaled and then let out in deep contentment: "That's right. That's how". Any close-up is always a high spot but this is the highest.

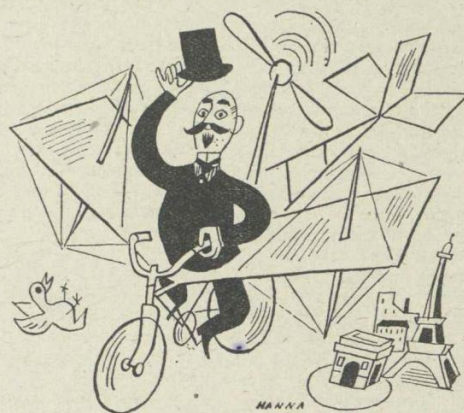
We came away before the show was over leaving a still intent audience. If they couldn't quite believe the pictures I couldn't quite believe the audience. I don't think I'd ever seen hunger for knowledge on quite such a big scale as in that bush cinema. They want the cinema to tell them how—how a motor-car works, how diseases are cured, how things come to be as they are?

A FLYING BICYCLE

In Paris, Frenchmen are going to an exhibition of inventions—inventions that are never likely to come to anything commercially. GUY HADLEY, B.B.C. Correspondent, said in a talk from Paris given in 'The Eye-witness': 'The inventors are nearly all amateurs and some of them have been working on their ideas and coming back to this exhibition with them for years. In fact, the most human thing about this show is the sight of these persistent Frenchmen, and Frenchwomen too, repeating at stand after stand explanations of their gadgets with an enthusiasm which seems tireless and a far-away look which never quite leaves their eyes.

The inventions themselves cover an amazing range of activities. Some reflect the scarcities of present-day life in France: for example, there are devices for economising in soap; for getting more miles out of a gallon of petrol; for saving shoe leather by fitting detachable soles and heels. The growth in crime is reflected in an impressive variety of safety precautions for the front-door: these range from acid-resisting steel bars, which fasten four ways by the turn of a knob, to a detonator which explodes, if all goes well, in the intruder's face. There are other inventions which reflect the spirit of the modern age; for instance one exhibit is a cigarette lighter which uses neither flint nor wick nor petrol. It works on a fuel mixture said to be identical with the fuel used in the V1 and V2 weapons during the war.

Another idea is a camera fitting which enables one to photograph oneself; and close by is a device for coupling two bicycles together side by side. But the most spectacular exhibit of all is undoubtedly the flying bicycle. It consists of a metal bicycle frame supporting an elaborate wooden structure of wings and fuselage and tail, which looks rather like the trellis-work at the bottom of the garden. The flying bicycle is no newcomer at this exhibition; it's been making the headlines for years, and its inventor has sworn to fly in it some day?



HOP-PICKING AT THE CROSSROADS

The really important thing seems to be that this may be one of the last hop-picking seasons in the conventional sense', said R. G. LLOYD THOMAS in a Midland Home Service talk on the situation in Worcestershire. 'Hop-picking has reached the crossroads and whether future crops will be culled by man, or more accurately woman, or by machine may well be decided this year. The first step has already been taken by a Pershore farmer who normally engages a hundred pickers—this year he is relying entirely on a machine and is confident that it will prove satisfactory. Other hop growers—a little less optimistic perhaps—are using both machines and pickers; and there are of course many arguments for and against. Some growers are convinced that machine harvesting is the method of the future, some believe that machines will never replace human pickers and there are the few who are already satisfied that the machine is good enough to replace human hands already. This year is likely to be a vital one because new machines are being tried out—locally made, and with satisfactory trials to commend them—and if they prove reliable under full working conditions they may begin the machine era in hop-picking.

This year, however, the human element again predominates. There is considerably improved accommodation on some fields, largely because of sympathetic farmers. And of course the old problems remain—large numbers of children under the age of five left to run wild whilst their mothers pick; the health and accident problem which, less dependent upon voluntary help this year because of the implementation of the National Health Act, is still a major responsibility of local Health Officers.

Thanks to the efforts of these energetic officers and the sympathy of the hop growers, conditions are improving all the time but approximately two-thirds of the pickers are still housed in existing farm buildings and the remaining third in specially constructed barracks. This year too some growers are using dual-purpose buildings for the first time, in which the internal cubicles can all be removed so that in the off season the building is available as an implement barn. Conditions are still far from satisfactory and the really acute problem develops at week-ends when visitors invade the fields and join their families.

But if the hop-picking machines do not prove entirely successful—if the human element remains vital—then big changes are possible. County Council officers, for example, feel that something along the lines of a holiday camp with amenities for entertainment, recreation and proper supervision of children—away from the fields—is the answer to the problem. The idea is that the pickers should be transported to the fields every day by bus and that these streamlined camps could be used for five or six months of the year if they were made available to fruit pickers, pea pickers, harvesters, hop pickers and potato diggers?.