

MISCELLANY

by Michael Frayn

THOSE of us who have the sacred liberty of the individual at heart (said Rollo Swavely, the well-known public relations consultant) are gravely concerned about the spread of this dangerous fashion for consumer research and consumer advisory services. And now that they've managed to inveigle support from BBC Television—well, frankly, old boy, the time has come for all men of goodwill to band together and say: "It's just not on."

Now look, Mike, I wouldn't try to hide anything from an old friend like you, and anyway you've probably heard that I've got the account for the newly-formed Fair Play for Manufacturers movement. (No, no—doing it for love, old boy, I assure you.) Anyway, I know I couldn't move your stony heart with the manufacturers' sufferings—though, by God, Mike, some of the fully authenticated cases I've got on my files of real hardship inflicted by consumer research reports—some of the sheer misery I've seen our chaps suffering, just because they've made one little slip like putting an inflammable ingredient into their fire-extinguishers. . . .

No, Mike, it's not the manufacturers I'm thinking of at the moment. I'm buying you lunch today not as a public relations man, but simply as a disinterested private citizen who feels he can no longer stand idly by and watch the terrible inroads consumer research is making into the personal liberty of the ordinary man in the street.

You see, I know you Liberals—or radicals, or Socialists, or what have you. I mean, God knows, I'm one myself. I know your heart's in the right place, but the trouble with you is you're all a bit woolly-minded. You look at "Which?" and the rest of them, and you think in your fuzzy, imprecise way that they're somehow on your side against the wiles of the manufacturers.

But it's not like that, you see, Mike. These organisations are actually *reducing* your right of choice. Instead of letting you choose goods for yourself, they appoint snoopers to choose them for you. And these snoopers don't know you, or anything about you—they don't know the little fads and fancies that go to make up the quintessential you. Their cold, impersonal criteria don't take any account of the housewife who actually *wants* a slightly less inhumanly efficient food-mixer, or the fellow who expresses his personality by actually *choosing* to pay more for the identical formula of shaving-soap. They're making life soulless and impersonal. What is a man, when all's said and done, but the sum of his consumer choices?

And in the end, Mike, they're going to destroy your choice altogether. They're going to force the models they've set their minds against off the market—drive the manufacturers who fall foul of their petty-minded preconceptions about what you ought to like out of business. You start off by going along with their advice voluntarily—but you'll finish up buying the best goods whether you want them or not—because there won't be any bad or indifferent products to be had! Could police-state tyranny be carried further? And what do you think's going to become of the advertising industry if there's only one brand of each product?

But the real point, Mike, is the basic constitutional one. The faceless men behind consumer research are trying to deprive people of what I call the Fifth Freedom—the absolutely fundamental and inalienable right of man to be influenced by advertising.

What can ordinary chaps like you and me do to stop them? Well, Mike, this is where you come in. I don't often ask you a favour, but for the sake of our precious heritage, for the sake of the western way of life, I am asking you just to make one appeal to your readers. Just five little words, Mike, but they could nip the whole conspiracy in the bud. As a matter of fact, it's the slogan of the Fair Play for Manufacturers movement. I'll write it down for you, Mike:

MAKE A BAD BUY TODAY!

"A most unusual seminar," says the heading on an advertisement which has been appearing in undergraduate magazines recently. The advertisement is issued by a firm who describe themselves as "the most brilliant of all the advertising agencies," and who are looking for "the most brilliant of all this year's graduands."

"They propose to invite up to twenty of you," it continues, "after a long interregnum in London, to spend a weekend with them during this Easter vacation. The hospitality at this weekend will be almost vulgarly profuse. Continual distraction will be offered. But there will also be one written paper of the most taxing kind. It will need great stamina to endure it all."

It certainly will if this is anything like the weekend which Harris-Harris, the brighter than brightest agency, hold each year at Wosby Hall, the ancestral home of the Selection-Board family. Here the daiquiris flow like water, served by top models in fishnet stockings, while fashionable dance bands play softly among the Picassos.

"The ambience here," says Garth Peacock, one of the agency men assigned to the job, waving an odiferous Balkan cigarette at the time-hallowed setting, "is almost, comment dit-on, vulgarly profuse, don't you think?"

"Er, yes," mumbles R. Slodge, former President of the Oxford Union. Garth Peacock presses a tiny pocket transmitter key which registers at headquarters the damning comment "This man considers himself superior to popular cultural values."

"Have another cigar, Nubbs," says Peacock to the former Cambridge stroke "Er, no thanks," replies Nubbs, and Peacock signals ruthlessly "Deficient in phallic motivation." Nubbs passes the solid gold humidor on to Cropper, once editor of "Isis." but Cropper, who has smoked five cigars already, shakes his head queasily. Peacock adds another comment to the Nubbs report—"Complete failure to persuade in face of difficult market conditions."

"I hope," says Peacock, "you're not all finding the weekend too utterly boring?"

"Not me," replies Potkin, the noted Oxford actor, gesturing for another bottle of champagne. "Can't soak the stuff up fast enough," ("A certain lack of moral fibre," signals Peacock.)

"Oh, far from it," adds Mark Smoothe, undergraduate son of the Minister of Chance and Speculation, also ordering another bottle. "I think the amenities we are enjoying here are a fitting background to the sort of seminar which, today more than ever, plays an absolutely vital part in the progressive development of the free world." ("A brilliant creative mind," transmits Peacock.)

"Where's the lavatory?" demands Cropper urgently. ("A poor ability to choose language that brings out the most attractive aspects of a subject," notes Peacock.)

By the time Cropper has hacked his way back through the almost vulgarly deep pile of the carpet, bowing footmen have ushered the whole party on to the luxuriously appointed assault course, where Roscoe is waiting to put them through an almost disgustingly elegant initiative test.

"What we should like you to do," he explains, "if it's not too almost utterly tedious, is to imagine this ditch is full of synthetic raspberry jam. You have to get the synthetic raspberry jam over this wall on consumer resistance without touching the real raspberry jam made by the same firm. To do it you've got nothing but four feet of tarred twine, two empty oil drums, one model in black lace underwear, and £100,000. . . ."

When the fleet of Rolls-Royces takes them back to the almost sickeningly exquisite house, they face the most testing moment of all. One by one they are shown into the presence of J.B., the head of the agency himself, as he sits in the Sheraton Room surrounded by Cellini champagne-coolers and Fabergé foot-warmers.

"Sit down, Mr Nubbs," he murmurs in an almost insupportably aristocratic tone. "Tell me, Mr Nubbs, do you believe in God?"

"Er, well, I, er . . ."

"Of course you do. Take a cigar and then sell me the idea in 50 punchy, easy-to-read words."

Yes, it certainly demands stamina. And remember, stamina demands Swiz, for only new wonder Swiz has magic Fiz!