

Joshua's Brethren

by S. Y. RAY

THE township at the Bay has three faces. To the country people—the market gardeners and poultry farmers—it is all colour and gossip and nights at the pictures, and for them the perennial miracle is enacted in its streets when their cheques, ridiculous slips of coloured paper, are translated into chairs and tables, sports coats, sausages and washing machines. For the summer visitors it is a straggling line of dusty shops where goods are either not in stock or are twopence dearer than they should be. It is a regrettably necessary adjunct to the wide paddocks, the whitebait streams, and the curving line of beach that frames the surf. And to the town folk themselves it is the unconsidered background of their lives, the loom on which their own important patterns are woven, and they find it dear or dreary according to their temperaments.

If the three classes for which the town exists are distinct, they are far from separate. The town and country people envy and grumble at each other, but they trade and intermarry and visit until the line between them seems almost to disappear. Even the city folk, the campers and week-enders and the renters of summer baches, if they come often enough, get on to intimate terms with the town people, and are looked for and welcomed as the turning year brings them back into season. They drive or hike into the country, too, to buy vegetables and eggs, and are amazed at the prices one way or the other. They try to sound knowledgeable about crops to the farmers, who think them funny but profitable, and the relationship is comfortable in its way.

BUT there are other and deeper divisions at the Bay, for the market gardeners are pakeha or Maori or Chinese, and the town-folk divide similarly with a few Indians thrown in for good measure. Even these divisions are blurred about the edges, so that a number of children are never quite sure of their nationality, and their faces do not help much, for as often as not they have slant eyes, rich brown skins, and aquiline noses, or black silky hair, full lips, and pale grey eyes.

By and large, the Europeans and Chinese dislike and respect each other, and like and scorn the Maoris, who take life and people easily as they come. The children, even the purebreds, form gangs and bash each other without racial discrimination until they become adolescent and embarrassed. There are individual family alliances, too. The Smiths give the Lee Wings two ducks each Christmas, and get in return more free vegetables than they can ever hope to eat. And the Murphys and the Ropitas drive each other in to Mass on alternate Sundays.

THE weather at the Bay is curiously predictable. In August comes the false spring—a fortnight or more of mild days and sharp, delightful nights. Backyard fruit trees falter into flower, and reckless caravanners, their great mobile boxes very clean from winter storage, set up on the vacant sections. Then the memory of kindly skies is drowned in the inundation that follows, when for day after day the grey sky seems stitched to the grey earth by a million threads of rain. The early blossoms

fall into the mud and are violated by it, and the black lamp-posts and the black wires and the black skeleton trees and the black grotesque husks of last year's flax stand like signposts to desolation. The houses are huddled inwards, windows blind and doors sealed against the all-penetrating moisture. The grey sea surges on to the lifeless shore, and the whole countryside seems wrapped in a sleep of death.

And then, when hope and comfort are gone, one day, suddenly, inexplicably, a wind goes shaking and growling through the wet flax, the dead ceiling of clouds opens to reveal pearly vistas, and as night falls a few dim stars gleam over the sodden scene.

When the Bay awakens next morning the world is made new. The early morning sun has turned the stretches of surface water into scars of mercury, and soon they and the gardens, the cows, the sheep, the bridges, and the houses themselves, are steaming away like kettles as the water wafts merrily upward again in its own mad immemorial cycle. The Bay people open their doors and windows and shout to each other across the gardens, and a few days later the caravans are back, and then the campers and the week-end cottagers, and finally the picnic parties litter themselves over the paddocks and beaches like great untidy flowers of spring.

ON the first Friday evening after the rains had gone, the Bay township, as always, came violently to life. Children and adults, farmers and visitors, brown, white and yellow—the street was crammed with people. The air was sharp with salt and sweet with flowers, and the fragrance of wet earth came in gusts and mingled with the hard smells of petrol and oranges. In the Royale tea rooms, the women got the weight off their feet and talked of meat prices and marriages; while in the back bars of the two pubs the talk was all of whitebait nets and spring gardens. The children, mad with freedom, stuffed themselves with green ice blocks, and pushed and screamed in the streets.

Where the shops petered out at the end of Main Street, a mildewed marquee had been pitched, and a billboard, shakily chalked in scarlet proclaimed—

WHAT IS SIN?

ARE YOU HEADED FOR
DAMNATION?

Come TONIGHT! Hear the world
famous Joshua Dager (fresh from
American tour)

Homely Service — All Welcome

SPEND AN EXCITING EVENING!!!

The long boredom of the rains was ended. The tomatoes were planted, the breath of the coming summer was in the air, and nobody wanted to go home. So Joshua Dager caught them all.



"Nobody wanted to go home, so Joshua caught them all"

The tent was small, and was soon so crowded that the air became blue with smoke and stifling with human smells. The Takapaus were there, and the Tunia boys, the Conways, the Murphys, the Wongs, MacPhersons, Robinsons, Ah Lings and Piranas. They crowded up together as they did in buses and at the pictures, neither hostile nor friendly, happily indifferent. And here, too, the racial lines met and merged in places. A group of youths fooled and giggled on the outer edge. Three were Maori and two were white. The lovely watchful faces of two boys, one Oriental and one European, glowed palely in the shadows. Fat Mrs. Rawlins and thin Mrs. Hemare, who were neighbours and friends, dug each other in the ribs and exploded into toothy giggles. And across the barrier of fools a Maori boy sought and found the slant eyes and flower face of the girl who was his secret lover.

MR. JOSHUA DAGER had a formula. He liked, so to speak, to set 'em up before he knocked 'em down. He believed that some sincere praise of his congregation's virtues, and he was a man who could find virtue in the most unprepossessing congregation, established a rapport which made his later denunciation and pleas for repentance infinitely more effective. When he saw his tent crowded as never before with so many faces of such a variety of hues, he thought hard and felt himself inspired to blunder in where angels fear to tread.

He was enormously powerful as he strode up and down in the middle of the tent, where an oil-lamp gleamed weirdly on the coarse grass. The crowded circle of docile eyes followed his every movement.

"My friends," he began, "this is an inspiring sight which I see before me tonight. I see you all seated here in my little tent, regardless of race and condition and I say to myself, 'This is neighbourliness, this is brotherhood, this is love!'" He extended his arms in an embracing movement. "My friends, I certainly do admire you. You know, there are countries I've been in, where men don't love their neighbours. Why, I've seen a man cross the road sooner than pass a coloured person!" He paused impressively and the audience was as still as death in the shadows and the eyes did not waver. "But you, my friends, ah, how different it is with you. Yes,

sir, I certainly do admire you. I've never seen anything like it. You're just like one big happy family, you love your neighbour!"

And in the crowd there passed a strange little flutter as a hundred pairs of eyes moved secretly to examine their beloved neighbour. A Chinese market gardener glanced sideways at the obese pink flesh, the sweaty shirt of a European business man, who in turn saw the grimy clothes, the stained teeth and the clawlike hands of the other. The alien smell of each, unnoticed before, broke in nauseating waves against the nostrils of the other, and a thrill of pure hatred passed between them. Mrs. Rawlins and Mrs. Hemare met each other's eyes bravely and their faces froze into silly gapes of horror as though they were unprepared for the colossal ugliness they encountered. The flashy youths moved sheepishly away from each other, the school-boys stared ahead in horrible embarrassment and the lovers no longer met each other's eyes.

Mr. Joshua Dager moved on to his main theme and hell-fire and damnation flowed gloriously from the lips, but in the shadows, silently, and one by one, his audience slipped away.

The late shopkeepers, locking up for the week-end, wondered why the town had lost its noisy vigour, why the street seemed naked and the little groups of homing people were silent and ashamed.

World Theatre

THE role of Adolf, the Captain, in Strindberg's tragedy *The Father*, has always been acknowledged as a supreme acting part. That fact has, indeed, been the proved downfall of many stage productions of the play, where the part has been allowed to become greater than the whole. The true test of the production is the manner in which the character of the Captain is kept in its proper relationship with that of his wife Laura, who deliberately goads him to madness and death by her cunning, unscrupulous behaviour. Listeners will be able to judge for themselves how actors and producer have preserved the balance in the BBC *World Theatre* version of the play. It will be broadcast from 4YC at 8.0 p.m. on Thursday, February 4, 3YC at 8.30 p.m. on Saturday, February 6, 1YC at 7.12 p.m. and 2YC at 8.30 p.m. on Sunday, February 7. *The Father* was arranged and produced for broadcasting by E. A. Harding from an English version by Max Faber.

N.Z. LISTENER, JANUARY 29, 1954