

# THE FACE OF VIOLENCE

WHY is it that crime, brutality and violent death fascinate and excite us? We read about them in books and newspapers, listen to them on the air, queue up to see them in films. Is this preoccupation a new thing? How are we to explain it? Does the gangster story, the sensational court report, the radio crime serial, the violent film satisfy the same wish for power and adventure which the criminal, the thug, or the storm trooper satisfies in a different way? The BBC's award-winning programme "The Face of Violence," soon to be heard here, attempts to find the answer to these questions.

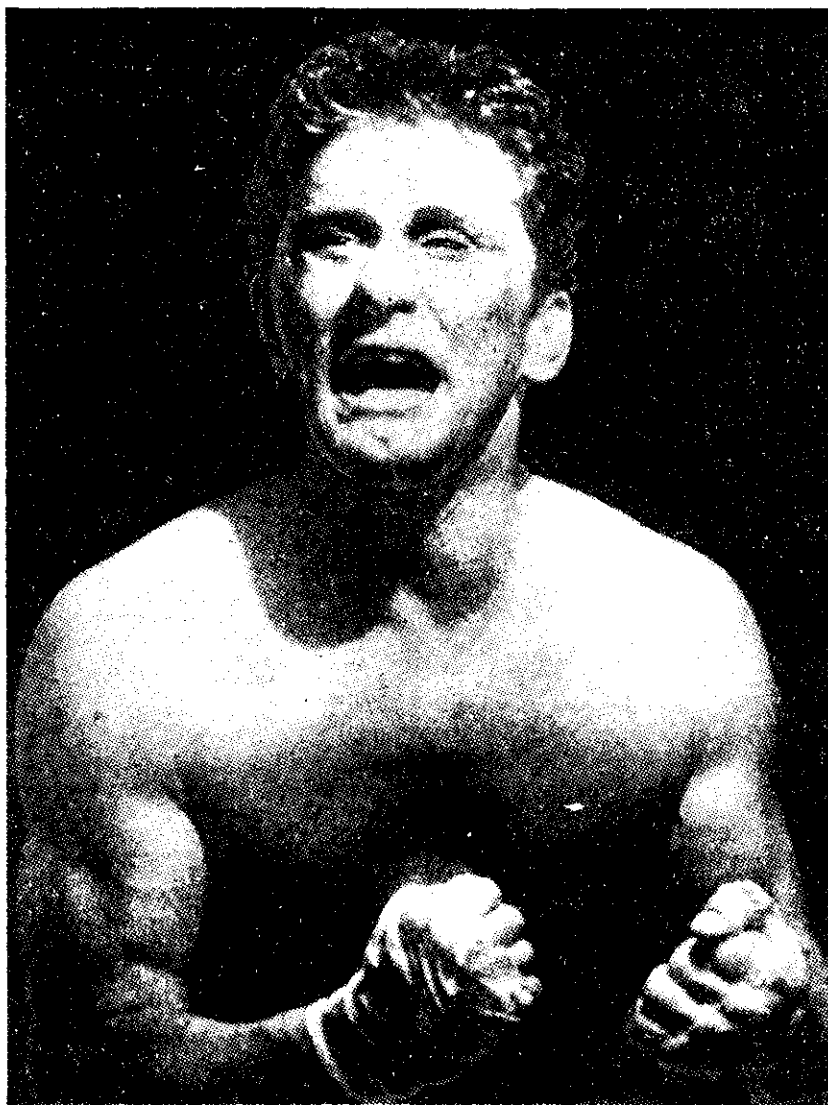
NEARLY two years ago when the controversy on corporal punishment was filling English newspapers with "the great battle of cosh versus birch-rod," the BBC broadcast a dramatic programme, *The Face of Violence*, which made everyone who heard it sit bolt upright and take notice. One critic described it as "the one really effective contribution to the controversy convulsing the newspapers," and said it "really got down to the question of why the lawbreaker has become hero number one and why everyone from the bishop downwards regards tales of bloody murder as the one sweet relaxation for the mind oppress'd."

*The Face of Violence* was the work of Dr. J. Bronowski, who, in the *Radio Times*, told how he came to write it.

"Towards the end of his life Charles Dickens used to give public readings from his works," Dr. Bronowski wrote. "One of the passages which he read most often was the scene from *Oliver Twist* in which Bill Sikes murders Nancy and then, trying to escape, accidentally hangs himself. This reading always had a prostrating effect both on Dickens and on the audience. Yet Dickens insisted on giving it against his doctor's orders, when he was already very ill; and there is some evidence that on occasion he hired a man to protest against the reading from the audience in order to heighten its dramatic effect."

This example (Dr. Bronowski argued) showed that the obsession with brutality in books, the cinema and the Press was not a new thing. Even earlier the same preoccupation had run under the gay surface of *The Beggar's Opera*, and late in the 18th Century admiring crowds still gathered at dusk at the notorious Dog and Duck alehouse to see the highwaymen and the foodpads set off, ostentatiously farewelled by their flashy women.

"The same crowds went all the way to what is now Marble Arch to see them hanged, and enjoyed that as much. These scenes give us a vivid insight into the meaning of the gangster and the gangster story in all ages. The crowds that cheered and jeered at these men led narrow and humdrum lives. They were starved of adventure, and the prize-fighter, the pirate, the men of violent action, expressed for them all the colour



THE actor Kirk Douglas in the role of the dying fighter in "Champion," a violent portrayal of the brutalities and violence of American prize-fighting, based on the short story by Ring Lardner

and daring of which their own lives were starved."

Dr. Bronowski believes that both in the past and today men have felt that adventure and risk have been taken out of their own lives by the conditions of civilised life itself. Seeing the great impersonal rule of law as the force restraining them, they have equated spirit with lawlessness, and adventure with the criminal. "We all like to score off the forces of order—the schoolmaster and the customs inspector"; and even the detective heroes of fiction are most often men more nimble-witted than the solid law—"a Sherlock Holmes or a Peter Wimsey with whom we can share the vicarious triumph over the flat-footed guardians of society."

When daily life seems unbearably monotonous and mechanical, there is always the danger that the daring and violence of the lawbreaker may be painted as worthy examples—the only manly actions in a world of machines. "This is what draws young men into gangs: they see their leaders as heroes in the fight against the forces of order which seem to be thwarting them . . . This kind of worship can engulf a whole nation: Mussolini and Hitler recruited their followers with just such slogans, making them feel that their brutality was virile and natural in contrast with the dead oppression of a mechanical world."

Dr. Bronowski and Douglas Cleverdon, who produced *The Face of*

*Violence*, discussed the subject off and on for three years before they made up their minds about the form the programme would take. They finally decided on a parable. The central character, Mark, a decent citizen, is haunted, obsessed by an act of brutality seen in the war. He cannot remember the act in detail; the face of the evil-doer is

blurred in his memory, and he isn't sure of his name—though it could be Crump. Seeking inward peace, Mark decides that he must first seek violence in order to find and then kill this man. He journeys into an alien society, to the haunts of criminals, and into the company of circus freaks and people whose minds and bodies are warped and twisted into hate. But slowly he sees that these forms of violence cannot answer the question he has begun to ask: What is violence, and why? Now he knows that it is not "the venom of a pervert or a hunchback's spite," but the thwarted passions in every human heart that rise and strike. He turns to ordinary people—and there at last catches up with the "villain."

"The streak of Hogarthian horror" which ran through Mark's encounters in dives and boxing booths was "tempered by the grave, compassionate commentary of a two-part Chorus which summed up the moral of the journey at convenient intervals," said W. E. Williams, then radio critic of *The Observer*, in praising this programme. These two voices comment in verse, and they draw the moral finely:

Life stares at the man  
Out of the stony eyes of his boyhood  
And the man shivers to think  
What he has become.  
If the stony face will not flinch  
Under his pleading look,  
Forgive the man his violence  
For violence has a human face.

*The Face of Violence* was placed first equal for last year's Italia Prize, which has been awarded annually since 1949 by European radio organisations to the best literary or dramatic or mainly musical radio programme. The prize, which is awarded alternately for literary and dramatic works and musical works, was founded on the initiative of Radio Italiana to induce the best creative talent to write and compose particularly for broadcasting.

In the BBC transcription which New Zealand listeners are to hear Lewis Stringer takes the part of Mark, Ivor Barnard plays Crump, and Anthony Jacobs and Julian Orde are the Chorus. The music was specially composed and conducted by Antony Hopkins.

*The Face of Violence* will be heard from 2YC at 7.30 p.m. this Saturday (January 5). Later it will be broadcast from other NZBS stations.

## BACKGROUND TO DR. BRONOWSKI



"I CAME to England when I was twelve, and when I landed I could speak, rather badly, two words of English which I had learnt on the channel boat," Dr. Bronowski, still in his early forties, confesses in his book, *"The Commonsense of Science,"* just published—a work which shows his close interest in the relation between the arts and science. His earlier books include *"The Poet's Defence,"* and a study of William Blake on the one hand, and on the other numerous papers on mathematics. Educated at Cambridge, Dr. Bronowski has lectured in mathematics, headed a series of mathematical and statistical units planning the economic bombing of Germany and Japan, and journeyed to Japan as scientific deputy

in the Chiefs of Staff mission which reported on atomic bomb damage. From 1947 to 1950, when he became director of the Central Research Establishment of the National Coal Board, he worked on the application of statistical research to the economics of industry and spent six months as Head of the Projects Division of UNESCO. It was his description of atomic bomb havoc at Hiroshima that first made BBC listeners aware of a new personality in broadcasting. This first impression has been confirmed by his broadcasts on atomic energy and science subjects generally, and in the "Brains Trust" and "Any Questions?" His major radio features include "The Journey to Japan" and "The Closing Years" in the BBC series, "The Half Century."