

Challenge to Scientists

ITAIN has recently been experiencing the strange openings that seem to accompany Mr Uri Geller wherever he takes his one-man show. Knives and forks have been bent, broken watches restarted and feats of parent telepathy performed. No generally accepted explanation is yet forthcoming.

Although the phenomenon of Mr Geller is new to Britain, he is well known both in Israel and the United States for his performances. It is important that he aims to be doing these strange things not as an illusionist using sleight of hand or deceptive material but as someone invested with a previously unappreciated power. He prepared to back up this claim very convincingly by performing in such inauspicious surroundings as the back of a taxi in the company of the Science Correspondent of the *Sunday Times*. If he is an illusionist he runs the risk of being detected every time he shows off his skills, particularly when his performance goes on to videotape. Further, any stagehand knows how an illusionist works, but none has yet revealed Mr Geller's secrets.

It needs to be said, however, that not everyone is convinced that Mr Geller is other than a great illusionist and that there seems to be somewhat more scepticism in Israel and the United States than has yet developed in Britain. For a fairly cool assessment *Time* of March 1973, should be read. Nevertheless he has clearly created a *prima facie* case for further investigation and it is to be hoped that the proposal by the *New Scientist* that he submit to examination by its panel will be taken up, even though he has already been examined extensively by a team at Stanford Research Institute.

What does all this mean for the scientist—and not necessarily only the scientist interested in psychic research? There are two distinct challenges to him.

The first is that analysis of this phenomenon must be absolutely neutral and above board. One of the remarkable things about this whole affair has been the way the public has asked that it be investigated by scientists. It has been common to hear phrases such as "I will not be happy until a panel of scientists have pronounced on it". In mediaeval times it was priests, later it was noblemen, in Victorian times businessmen and now scientists who are the arbiters of acceptability and correctness. It is not possible to believe that this situation will last much longer though it is difficult to decide who will eventually supplant the scientist in this role—trade unionist, professional footballer or television announcer. Nevertheless, while this duty still falls to the scientist he has a great responsibility to be utterly objective and entirely open. There have been some doubts cast on the Stanford investigation because of the lack of publication of the results apart from a report at a conference. On the other hand it is undesirable that Mr Geller should be used either by someone delighting in the occult or exceedingly sceptical of it.

The second challenge to scientists will arise if investigations continue to turn up signs of psycho-kinetic powers, and with the present evidence this certainly cannot be ruled out. It would then be urgently necessary for the

scientific community to come to terms with something totally beyond its powers of explanation—indeed something which in a religious context would be called a miracle. Just as the public wants scientists to validate Mr Geller, it would also want them to explain him and, however awkward this question may be, it should not be avoided. If Mr Geller indeed possesses extraordinary abilities it is immaterial whether he is an isolated unrepeatable phenomenon or whether a large number of people can be taught the skills, and it is immaterial that he manifests the abilities in ways up to now better known to music-hall illusionists than to scientific investigators. The challenge would still exist—that well established scientific laws as apparent to laymen as to scientists are not inviolate under the influence of some presumed mental process.

It is difficult to see how research into the causes of such extraordinary happenings could proceed. One suspects that any approach which involved extensive instrumentation would end unsuccessfully. Technology has an unerring ability to suppress human skills. Nevertheless a boost for psychical research would be very welcome. There are too many loose ends lying around for comfort, and psychical research has not yet been able to shake off its mildly eccentric character and its ability to attract fierce criticism.

The viewing public, shown a chest operation under acupuncture one week and an exhibition of knife bending the next, is bound to ask searching questions about conventional scientific wisdom.

100 Years Ago



THE London Association of Correctors of the Press held a *conversazione* on Saturday last under the presidency of Mr. B. H. Cowper, editor of the *Queen*. We are glad to notice that the principal items of the programme were of a scientific character. Mr. E. R. Johnson, Chairman of the Association, read a paper on the past work of the Association, enumerating some of the papers and discussions on philological topics which had engaged its attention, and while commending the study of philology, the advantage of an acquaintance with one or other of the exact sciences was set forth. Mr. G. Chaloner, late Secretary of the Association, and lecturer on Chemistry at the Birkbeck Institution, enlightened the meeting as to some of the properties of hydrogen, accompanying his remarks with appropriate experiments. Mr. J. T. Young discoursed on the glacial period, and exhibited some fossils illustrative thereof. The wonders of the microscope and stereoscope also contributed to the enjoyment of