

Saturday Review of SCIENCE

BRIGHT LAD & THE ONE-EYED ANARCHIST: A FABLE

BY BRUCE WALLACE



nce upon a time in a small kingdom there lived a One-eyed Anarchist who resolved to assassinate the King's young son, the Prince. By watching from afar, the Anarchist found out that each day the Prince stopped to buy a popsicle from

the local Good Humor man. Directly across the street from the Good Humor wagon was a dark passage, complete with pillars behind which one might lurk. Our story begins with the One-eyed Anarchist—bomb in pocket—lurking behind one of the convenient pillars. What a sinister plot!

Suddenly the Anarchist groaned silently and swore. Despite the care that he had lavished upon his scheme, he had neglected to measure the width of the street. Because he had but one eye, he lacked depth perception. Hence, since he did not know how far he must throw the bomb, it seemed his assassination plot must fail.

At that very moment, when all seemed lost, the One-eyed Anarchist saw Bright Lad, a well-known and respected neighborhood youth, coming down the street.

Bruce Wallace is a geneticist at Cornell University.

Bright Lad was counting, half-aloud, "2,234, 2,235, 2,236."

"Bright Lad!" the Anarchist called. "2,237, 2,238, 2,239, 2,240. Yessir!" replied Bright Lad.

"What are you counting today, Bright Lad?" asked the Anarchist.

"I am measuring the length of the street in paces, sir, because I believe in collecting quantitative data."

"Have you ever measured its width, lad?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"Surely, if you knew its width, you would be able to calculate its area, would you not?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. And with very little effort I could then calculate the number of cobblestones required for paving it. And the number of trees needed to make it pleasantly shaded. And the size of the gutters needed to carry off the heaviest rainfall."

Bright Lad, who had read both John Evelyn's *Fumifugium: Or the Smoake of London Dissipated* and Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*, bubbled with enthusiasm.

"Good thinking, lad, good thinking!" said the Anarchist. "Might I not help you in your good work? Here, I shall buy you a popsicle if you will but pace across the street to that Good Humor wagon and then tell me its width."

"Yes, indeed, sir, I shall. And thank you for your interest and encouragement; I believe that matters of this sort shall be of much value to our city and kingdom."

Several days later, having by now read Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and several Pelican paperback originals as well, Bright Lad appeared at the door of the Royal Apartment.

"I must see the King," he informed the aide who guarded the door, "in order to suggest means for beautifying our city and improving the living conditions of our citizens."

"The King is mourning the loss of his son, the Prince, lad, and has asked not to be disturbed."

"Oh, dear. Yes, of course. Have they apprehended the assassin?"

"Yes. The villain is the One-eyed Anarchist."

"Then I must have spoken with him only minutes before the crime."

"What did he want, lad?"

"Nothing. Indeed, he was most kind in encouraging me in my studies. But, bless me, that is why I am here. Since the King is indisposed, might I tell you what I have in mind?"

Without waiting for a reply, Bright Lad continued, his words tumbling out in a torrent: "The main street in town, the one on which the assassination took place, is 2,500 paces in length and thirty-five in width. Cobblestones are as large as my fist, and, therefore, there must be about eight million paving stones in the entire street. Now I estimate that one cobblestone in every thousand disappears each week during student demonstrations and through various forms of thievery; thus, the King's quarrymen should provide 8,000 stones weekly to the Royal Highway Store.

"During a heavy rainstorm as much as three inches of rain may fall in an hour's time. Because the length and breadth of the street are known, I can calculate the volume of water that . . .

"Aide? Aide?" Bright Lad went on. "Have you understood what I have said? Do you see the importance of these calculations? I am trying to demonstrate that knowledge can be used to better man's estate.

"Return later? The King will send for me? Well . . . fine. But please explain to him how precise knowledge arrived at through careful observation is the only sound basis for human progress. His can be a city—nay, a kingdom—fair beyond the imagination of man, provided that he makes use of scientific knowledge scientifically arrived at by scientists such as myself.

"And please, sir, convey to the King my deepest sympathy over the recent and untimely death of his son, the Prince."

Moral: *Knowledge may be value free, but it is first used by those who most need it, and they, in turn, most likely are those who finance it.* □



Photographs by Simon Trevor

During the blazing drought of 1970-71 in Tsavo National Park East, vegetation provided neither nourishment nor shade for the elephants. This weary calf, separated from the herd, refuses to leave its dead mother.