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I READ YOU

NOT very long ago, debunkers were about as numerous as bison. Now, in only a couple of decades, they've become almost extinct and should be given Federal protection.

It's a pity that the breed is vanishing. They did no harm, for anything valid that stood in their way was not toppled by their trampling rush, and they *did* uproot a stupendous amount of societal rubbish that we're better off without.

Well, at least we still have Bergen Evans, a very happy bison indeed, whose *The Spoor of Spooks* (Knopf) is a joyous romp through the lush fields of "scientific" nonsense.

Charles Fort would have used this rich book as another ax in his crusade, being faster on the drawing of conclusions than the researchers he was lambasting. Evans is just as quick to demolish irrational belief, even though he quotes Shaw on the law of the conservation of credulity: "the dispelling of one illusion seems to create a vacuum which draws in another." And Evans is as unable as Fort to resist overstate-

ment, ridicule and outrageous puns.

Nevertheless, both are fine sources of ideas. I wish I could explore *The Spoor of Spooks* more fully than these two pages allow—Evans takes on everything from dowsing to idiocies in the law—but one chapter is especially important in view of a thematic trend in science fiction.

Evans calls it "Psi-ing in the Carolines"—I warned you about his puns—and his target for tonight is Dr. Joseph B. Rhine of Duke University, the champion of extra-sensory perception and psychokinesis.

For years now, I've been waiting sympathetically for good news from Durham, N. C. Let Evans tell you why there hasn't been any:

"The existence of Psi has chiefly been determined, to the satisfaction of those who believe in it, by the fact that certain people have allegedly at certain times identified certain cards slightly more often than certain other people believe constitutes chance expectancy. . . . He (Dr. Rhine) does not claim that his

best performers can demonstrate ESP at will, but only that they have demonstrated it .36 or .23 'above chance'; and he must surely know that, under the circumstances he describes, truly scientific experimenters would make an allowance of that much or more for error of record."

Incidentally, the cards used are not normal decks; there are 25 special cards in five suits. This gives the subject a one-in-five chance at each guess.

Evans insists that a norm should be established by giving tests to large numbers of people. Then the exceptional person should be tested "until the results are stable, no longer altered by additional experiments. Then, and then only, can the tester be sure that he has established a difference between the individual and the group."

But Rhine won't do that, any more than he has agreed to intersperse blank cards in his special deck, claiming that "this would be a form of deception." When "promising" subjects begin slipping, he breaks off the experiment. But he keeps the positive findings as "evidence!"

Evans' appropriate comment is that, still better than winning at dice by quitting when you're ahead, "It would be even easier if you didn't have to play for keeps until you started to win

and were allowed to ignore some of your bad runs because they weren't up to normal!"

Rhine claims that most scientists believe he has proved the existence of Psi. But "hundreds of thousands of tests have been made with his own cards without finding anyone who could guess them more accurately than chance expectancy would indicate."

It's true that "Those who believe in Psi . . . forget the prophecies that don't come true, the premonitions that prove groundless . . . The ultimate test of the validity of any experiment is that those who repeat it will get the same result."

Yes—once method and tools are found. Fire, for example, was used long before Man knew how to make it. Not being able to make it didn't mean there was no such thing.

Evans hasn't proved his point any more than Rhine has. Like Flying Saucers, there's *something* there. We don't know what, but neither can we dismiss it by debunking tactics alone.

Whatever it is, though, Dr. Rhine's odd approach is more likely to obscure than locate it. A dismal fact, for we'd like it to be otherwise, but, to be entirely practical, we'd do well to look elsewhere for the latest news on Psi.

—H. L. GOLD