There are none so blind (the Bible reminds us) as those who will not see. For many years, disguised as a technical editor for a pharmaceutical house, James Blish—than whom few people see better—observed a certain facet of the Manhattan scene with camera-keen eyes. At the end of each week he donned his white crash-helmet and motorcycled back to his home in Milford, Pennsylvania, his wife and collaborator (writer Virginia Kidd), and their three children; where the filth and fury of the New York Island was replaced by clean and sylvan quietness . . . through which, however, the memory of the blind beggars of Manhattan, like so many mute mimics of Tiresias, wandered in mystery, disquiet, and reproach . . . And then the author of THE SEEDLING STARS, Hugo Award-winning A CASE OF CONSCIENCE, THE FROZEN YEARS, THE OATH (F&SF, Oct., 1960), THE MASKS (F&SF, Nov., 1959), and a treasure-house of other excellent stories, sat down and wrote this perceptive account of hucksters and hawkers and others who toil darkly in the long and blazing noon.

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

by James Blish

THE EARLY MOTT STREET morning was misty, but that would burn off later; it was going to be a hot day in New York. The double doors of the boarded-up shop swung inward with a grating noise, and a black-and-white tomcat bolted out of an overflowing garbage can next door and slid beneath a parked car. It was safe there: the car had been left in distress two days ago, and since then the neighborhood kids had removed three tires and the engine.

After that nothing moved for a while. At last, a preternaturally

clean old man, neatly dressed in very clean rags, came out of the dark chill interior of the shop with a kettle heaped with freshly fired charcoal, which he set on the sidewalk. Straightening, he took a good long look at the day, exposing his cleanliness, the sign of his reclamation from the Bowery two blocks away, to the unkind air. Then he scuffled back into the cave with a bubbly sigh; he would next see the day tomorrow morning at the same time, if it didn't rain. Behind him, the bucket of charcoal sent up petals of yellow flame, in the midst of which the briquets nestled like dragon's eggs, still unhatched.

Now emerged the hot-dog wagons, three of them, one by one, their blue-and-orange striped parasols bobbing stiffly, pushed by men in stiff caps. The men helped themselves to charcoal from the bucket, to heat the franks (all meat) and the sauerkraut (all cabbage) and the rolls (all sawdust). Behind them came the fruit pushcarts, and then two carts heaped with the vegetables of the district: minute artichokes for three cents each, Italian tomatoes, eggplants in all sizes, zucchini, peppers, purple onions.

When the pushcarts were all gone the street was quiet again, but the cat stayed underneath the late-model wreck at the curb. It was waiting for the dogs, who after a while emerged with their men: scrubby yellowish animals with long foxy noses and plumy tails carried low, hitched to the men with imaginative networks of old imitation-alligator belts and baby-carriage straps. There was also one authentic German shepherd who wore an authentic rigid Seeing-Eye harness; the man he was pulling was a powerfully built Negro who was already wearing his sign:

PRAY IN YOUR OWN WAY
EVERY DAY
TAKE A PRAYER-CARD—
THEY'RE FREE
I AM BLIND
THANK YOU

The others still carried their signs under their arms, though all were wearing their dark glasses. They paused to sniff at the day.

"Pretty good," said the man with the German shepherd. "Let's go. And don't any of you bastards be late back."

The others mumbled, and then they too filed off toward Houston Street, where the bums were already in motion toward the Volunteers of America shop, hoping to pick up a little heavy lifting to buy cigarettes with. The bums avoided the dogs very scrupulously. The dogs pulled the men west and down the 60 steps of the Broadway-Lafayette IND station to the F train, which begins there, and they all sat together in the rear car. There was almost no talking, but

one of the men already had his transistor radio going, filling the car with an hysterical mixture of traffic reports and rock-and-roll.

The cat stayed under the late-model wreck; it was now time for the children to burst out of the church and charge toward the parochial school across the street, screaming and pummelling each other with their prayer-books.

Another clean old man took in the empty charcoal bucket and the doors closed.

The dogs pulled the men out of the F train at the 47th-50th Street station on Sixth Avenue, which is the Rockefeller Center stop; they emerged, however, at the 47th Street end, which is almost squarely in the middle of Manhattan's diamond mart. Here they got out their cups, each of which contained a quarter to shake, and hung on their signs; then they moved singly, at five minute intervals, one block north, and then slowly east.

The signs were all metal, hung at belt level, front and back, and all were black with greenish-yellow lettering. The calligraphy was also the same: curlique capitals, like the upper case of that type font known as Hobo.

The messages, however, were varied, though they had obvious similarities in style. The one following the man with the German shepherd and the prayer-cards, for instance, said:

GOD BLESS YOU
YOU CAN SEE
AND I CAN'T
THANK YOU

Slowly they deployed along 48th Street toward Fifth Avenue, which was already teeming with people, though it was only 10:00 A.M. At the Fifth Avenue end, which is marked by Black, Starr and Gorham, a phenomenally expensive purveyor of such luxuries as one-fork-of-a-kind sterling, an old blind woman in the uniform of the Lighthouse sat behind a table on which was a tambourine, playing a guitar and whining out a hymn. A dog lay at her feet. Only a few feet away, still in front of one of Black, Starr and Gorham's show windows, was a young man with a dog, standing with a guitar, singing rock-and-roll at the top of his voice. Two blocks up Fifth Avenue, at the terrace of Rockefeller Center, two women and a man in Salvation Army uniforms played hymns on three trumpets in close harmony (a change from yesterday, when that stand had been occupied only by an Army officer with a baritone sax-horn which he could barely play), but they didn't matter—the men weren't working Rockefeller Center any more; having already done for that area.

The dogs ignored the old woman and the rock-and-roller as well, and so did the men. They never

sang. The man with the transistor radio turned it up a little when he worked that end of the block.

The street filled still further. As it got on toward a blistering noon, the travellers that counted came out: advertising agency account men ("—and when the client's sales forecast was under ours by fifteen per cent they went and cut the budget on us, and now poor old Jim's got his yacht posted for sale in the men's room"), the middle echelons of editors from important weekly news magazines (with the latest dirty verses about their publishers), literary agents playing musical chairs ("—went to S&S and took Zuck Stamler with him with twenty-five per cent of the contract and an option clause bound in purest brass") and an occasional bewildered opinion-maker from the trade press ("—a buck eighty-five for *spaghetti?*"). None of these ever dropped a coin in the cups, but the dogs were not disturbed; they walked their men in the heat.

I MAY SEE AGAIN
WITH A TRANSPLANT EYE
GOD BLESS YOU

The travellers settled in the St. Germain and the Three G's, except for the trade press, which took refuge in the American Bar. Secretaries stopped outside the restaurants, looked at the menus, looked at each other indignantly and swung up Fifth toward Stouffer's, where they would be charged just as much. The match-players said "Viva-la!" and "Law of averages!" and "That's a good call," and damned the Administration. The girl account exec had one Martini more and told the man from the client something he had suspected for five months and was not glad to hear; the agency would not be glad to hear it either, but it never would. Rogers and Whitehead, Authors Representatives (they had never been able to decide where the apostrophe should go) had shad roe and bacon and decided to drop all their Western authors, of whom they had three. The president and editor-in-chief of the largest magazine enterprise in the world decided to run for president after all.

The men listened and shook their cups and walked their dogs. The transistor radio reported that the news was worse today.

At 3 P.M. the temperature was 92 degrees, the humidity 40 per cent, the T.H.I. 80. The German shepherd pulled his man back toward Sixth. The other dogs followed. At the token booth the cups were checked: there was enough money to get home on. Along 48th, the restaurants emptied, leaving behind a thick miasma of smoke, tomato sauce and disastrous decisions. Tomorrow they would do for 47th St., where the Public Relations types gathered.

The cave on Mott Street was relatively cool. The men took off their signs and sat down. The radio said something about Khrushchev, something about Cuba, and something about beer.

"Not a bad day," the big man said finally. "Lot's of jangle. Did you hear that guy with the three kids decide to quit?"

The man with the radio reported: "Goin' to rain tomorrow."

"It is?" the big man said. "Hell, that's no good." He thought for a while, and then, getting deliberately to his feet, he crossed the dark chill room and kicked the German shepherd. "Who's in charge here?" The dog looked back sullenly. Satisfied, the man went back and sat down.

"Nah," he said. "It won't rain."