

Christmas prize quiz solution

THE best answer to the *Nature* Christmas Prize Quiz (246, 385; 1973) came from Nicholas Kennedy of the Max-Planck-Institut Für Molekulare Genetik, who wins the prize of a year's subscription to *Nature*.

The correct solution is as follows, with Kennedy's answers in parentheses where appropriate:

1 High flux reactor: France and Germany. 2 The White House. 3 Zhores Medvedev. 4 Lynden-Bell and Hoyle, now at Manchester. 5 Glaciation on Mars. 6 Advisory board for the research councils. 7 Computer printout from an aggressive game developed by Maynard-Smith and Price. 8 Britain and the Netherlands. 9 Appointed Chairman (*sic*) of Atomic Energy Commission. 10 Michael Heseltine misled the house about Hovertrain's fate. 11 Lord Snow (John Maddox). 12 Always. 13 J. Watson speaking of cuts in research funds. 14 six. 15 Sir Arnold Weinstock. 16 Japan. 17 Heimaacy. 18 Hovertrain scrapped. 19 Motor car manufacturers (but not people who breathe air). 20 From $Z = 2.9$ to $Z = 3.4$. 21 5.9×10^6 . 22 Sakharov. 23 2030 AD. 24 Six and three. 25 S.F. Edwards. 26 Dinosaurs. 27 747 members of the Royal Society (the Elephant and Castle Bingo Club). 28 Stones, Tree trunks and large rocks. 29 Aigrain, Paris, MIT. 30 A Council for Science and Society. 31 Intraplate earthquakes. 32 Allotting money for sortie-lab. 33 Comité Recherche Européene Science et Technologie: selling price increase tax (Society for the Prevention of Inane Tests). 34 International Union of Pure and Applied Physics: Voronel was not allowed to attend meetings in Amsterdam and Moscow. 35 Letcombe Laboratory. 36 2.9 M.Y. 38 Margaret rejoined Geoffrey in California. 39 Cottrell. 40 January 2 to 5, 1974.

An innocent abroad: science in London

John Gribbin

JUST how badly is the present series of crises affecting that most important of scientific traditions, the symposium or seminar? Without the cross pollination provided by these meetings, science as we know it would be impossible; learned societies are still managing to meet regularly, but not without difficulties,

as I discovered on a recent visit to the Scientific Societies Lecture Theatre at Savile Row in London. To be fair, all the happenings of that eventful afternoon are unlikely to coincide often—but they do provide a potted guide to the hazards of attending scientific meetings in February 1974.

Everything began well, and it was a relief to leave the candle-lit *Nature* offices, even if only for the slightly less unrelieved gloom of the tube. The meeting itself was a Specialist Discussion of the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS), on "Extragalactic Radio Sources", and began on time in the cosy lecture theatre at Savile Row. Unfortunately, however, these meetings are beginning to suffer somewhat from the problems raised by their own success. They were introduced relatively recently, in an attempt to break down some of the traditional barriers of formality at the monthly meetings of the RAS and to provide a forum for more informal discussion of specialist topics, where "A Fellow" could stand a chance of contributing something worthwhile to the proceedings.

The first series of these new meetings was a huge success, in spite of the cramped conditions at Burlington House where they were then held, and rooms were literally packed to overflowing with fellows eager to keep up with advances being made at the frontiers of astronomy. Now everyone can sit in comfort in the luxurious accommodation at Savile Row. But the speakers are removed from the audience by the usual paraphernalia of lecterns and so on, and the seats both encourage drowsiness and make Fellows reluctant to stand up and be counted. The result is that the meetings, instead of providing a lively forum, are now no more than a series of highly informed lectures, which are certainly among the best of their kind, on occasion, but which are drifting back into the rigid chairman/speaker/audience format of old.

Indeed, I confess that, presented with what seemed to be a choice of a quiet snooze or getting an early train home, I succumbed to the latter temptation and left the proceedings early. That is when my troubles began.

The nearest tube station to the lecture rooms is Oxford Circus. Progress in that direction was impeded by what seemed to be half the British student population, filling Oxford Street while demonstrating in favour of higher grants, and chanting "Heath out," a suitably apposite slogan on the day Parliament was being dissolved. But it was possible to squeeze into the station and get as far as the platform, where a loudspeaker was busily requesting passengers to leave at once because of a bomb scare. Nobody seemed too worried about this

probable hoax, except two schoolgirls who ran squealing up the escalator as if they expected to meet Donny Osmond at the top.

So it was back into the fray above, and a brisk walk down Regent Street to Piccadilly Circus, where there was no bomb scare, but the journey now involved a change at Green Park underground station in order to get to Victoria. At Green Park there was a remarkable sight—a genuine practitioner of the three card trick, actually persuading mugs to deposit money with him. The only surprising thing about the three card trick is that anyone can believe it is not fixed, but in front of an admiring audience this practitioner took two customers for a pound each, while the nearby busker, striving to earn a reasonably honest living by playing what seemed to be a bass oboe, was passed by on the other side. Perhaps there is a moral to be drawn here.

Resisting the temptation to invest £1 (it looked so easy) I hurried on to Victoria and points south. Or so I thought. A blank departure board (the biggest of its kind in the world, we are informed) told the sad story. No trains to Sussex, let alone Brighton. An appropriate end to a curious afternoon.

Push for solar power in the United States

THE US House of Representatives last week passed a bill which would provide some \$50 million over the next five years in government money to subsidise the development of solar heating and cooling devices. The bill, sponsored by Mike McCormack, a Democrat from Washington State, was passed by 248 votes to 2, a margin which indicates that in election year the energy crisis is good for voter appeal.

The idea is to add money to NASA's budget to enable the space agency to let contracts with industry for fabrication of residential heating and cooling devices. The goal is to develop 4,000 units in the five-year period. Half the units would be installed in federal buildings or federally owned houses. The other half of the units would be installed in private houses, at no cost to the owner, but they would remain the property of the US government for five years so that their performance can be evaluated.

McCormack pointed out during debate on the bill that if the programme is successful in persuading 5% of the houses and buildings in the United States to generate 80% of their heating and cooling requirements from solar energy, the bill will save 600,000 barrels of oil a year by the mid 1980s.

The bill now goes to the Senate, where prospects for its passage are bright.