



Image of a society

Roy Fuller ; new introduction
by Jeremy Lewis.

TO KATHLEEN SYMONS

*Fiction must almost be in vain
For whom the real will entertain;
But this, so it may also live,
Begs all the interest you can give.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Because of my regard for building societies and for my friends who work for them I emphasize the obvious: that there is no Saddleford Building Society, nor have its directors, staff, and affairs any counterpart in reality. Entirely fictitious, too, is the company and its property with which this story also deals.

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IN the basement of Saddleford House, Ramsden, the House Manager, sat gazing through the door of his tiny office, cleaning his earhole with a paper clip. He could see the gates at the bottom of the lift shaft and, through the gap at the side, the store for surplus furniture, discarded mahogany partitions, and outmoded advertisement signs. Along the sides of the gap were Ramsden's bicycle and a stack of rather battered bronze plaques bearing the legend 'Saddleford Building Society. Established 1862'. Ramsden put the paper clip down and pulled out his watch. It was twenty to four. He drummed on the desk with thick fingers: the back of his hand looked as if he were wearing a glove made of ginger fur. Into the fur, from the arm, extended the faint azure of an old tattoo pattern.

The lift machinery sent out a faint hum, and soon the lift slid into the basement aperture. Ramsden threw himself into a negligent but exasperated attitude. A small man in blue overalls burdened with the complications of a pint mug and a plate with a jam puff on it extricated himself from the lift and came into Ramsden's office.

'I'm sorry I'm late Mr Ramsden,' he said, putting the mug and plate on the desk.

'I always have my cup of tea at three-thirty,' said Ramsden.

'I know that,' said the other obsequiously. 'There were a queue.'

'Don't you go round the back?' asked Ramsden.

'Yes, Mr Ramsden, but them canteen women went on serving the queue.'

'You're too weak, Willie,' said Ramsden. 'You want to make your personality felt.'

'Yes, Mr Ramsden.'

'And I hate jam puffs.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Ramsden. There were only custards and jam puffs and you had a custard yesterday.'

'Well, I could have had a custard again.'

'I'll go and change it,' said Willie, making to take the plate.

'Oh, stop fidgeting,' said Ramsden. He sipped his tea and took a bite of the jam puff. 'Did you clean Mr Gerson's windows?'

'Yes, Mr Ramsden.'

'I'll give you a tip, Willie my lad. You want to watch Mr Gerson. Please him. See his windows are kept clean. Don't wait for the right day to come round, don't wait till he complains. It's me that's got to take the can back, remember. Mr Gerson's a particular man.'

'Yes, Mr Ramsden.'

Ramsden chewed and kept his eyes on Willie as he had, half paternally, half bullyingly, chewed and kept his eyes on ratings when he was a chief petty officer in the Navy. 'What would you think,' he said, 'if you were a traveller for a big firm selling scouring powder and you called on the House Manager of a big building society and you were shown downstairs into the basement and into an office this size?' Ramsden made a small gesture with his mug.

'I don't know, I'm sure,' said Willie.

'You'd think it were a bloody poor do,' said Ramsden. 'The Saddleford Building Society and it puts its House Manager below ground in a hole you couldn't sling an 'ammick in. Look at it from the Society's own point of view: it's bad propaganda, it creates a bad impression.'

Willie had heard all this several times before, but he nodded his pale face absorbedly. Indeed, he was not uninterested in the status of the House Manager's office: in twelve years Ramsden would be retiring – perhaps even before then he would die, for he drank a lot of beer and took no exercise – and he, Willie Ashworth, might well be the House Manager, with one of his staff of cleaners bringing him tea at three-thirty.

'Of course,' Ramsden was saying, 'the Society's expanding, it's short of room. But then there aren't many chaps work here that have to see people from outside. I'm seeing people all the time. There's the travellers, as I've said, and the new cleaning women I take on, and all the outside contractors. They ought to make room for me upstairs. They could make room. Now if they took those two chaps in the Internal Audit Department –'

Ramsden's house telephone rang. He put down the remains of his jam puff and picked up the receiver.

'Hello,' he said shortly. Then his tone changed to one of efficient sweetness. 'Yes, Mr Blackledge,' he said. 'Yes, right away.' He put the receiver back, looked at Willie and then at his scarcely-touched mug of tea. 'God's perishing teeth,' he said. 'Why do they always want me at tea time?'

'Shall I go and get you another mug of tea, Mr Ramsden?' asked Willie.

'No, Willie. Don't know how long I'll be.' Ramsden walked over to the lift, got in, and pressed a button.

This was the lift shaft at the rear of the building: it cut through a series of similar and undistinguished corridors lined with the staff lockers. At the ground floor level Ramsden glimpsed, through glazed doors, the clerks at work in the vast hinterland behind the banking hall. As he swam upwards through the first floor one of his own staff passed carrying a bucket and wearing a safety belt, on the unending task of cleaning Saddleford House's 374 windows. The lift stopped at the second floor and Ramsden made his way round the corridor to the front of the building. Here, the final section of the corridor was barred at either end with swing doors marked 'Private': Ramsden always referred to it as the quarter-deck. Cream distemper gave way to a dark glossy panelling, plastic floor covering to carpet, the wall lights were someone's dream of a baronial hall. Off the corridor were the offices of the principal executives, at the end of it the board-room. Ramsden, removing with his finger nail a raspberry jam seed from a tooth and wondering if an opportunity would occur now to broach the question of his undignified quarters, knocked on the door of Blackledge's room.

The front of Saddleford House, its original brown stone almost black with Saddleford grime, formed one side of a square of which the others were the railway station, a row of banks and offices, and the Station Hotel and the bus terminus. The square was cobbled and in the middle, its sightless eyes turned towards the station's classic pillars, its thick finger holding, like a child who has just learned to read, its place in a book, sat a statue of John Bright. From the window of his office Stuart Blackledge

watched a pigeon fly from a cornice of the Yorkshire Penny Bank to the arm of Bright's stone chair and, with a little tilt of its tail, deposit a dropping on the lime-streaked plinth. Blackledge's teeth were clenched on a Dunhill rough-grained briar, his hands, resting on the back of his hips, threw behind him the folds of his black jacket. He was beginning to put on a little weight: there was no space at all between the small knot of his grey silk tie and the stiff cut-away collar and between the collar and his neck. His face gave promise of turning red, and the hair brushed back over his ears was already shot with grey in the light from the window.

He was wondering, for a moment, why the end of the working day, the slight fading of the light holding the promise of artificial light, drinks, food, companionship, was failing to rouse in him a pleasurable response. He sent up a little smoke signal from the bowl of his pipe and felt the strong muscles in the small of his back, but was not reassured. Then he recalled that he had left his house in the morning on bad terms with his wife Rose. He could not now remember the cause of the quarrel or imagine that their relationship was capable of engendering one even: he was filled with such goodwill that he felt himself unjustly accused, martyred. Behind the Station Hotel distant slender factory chimneys trailed a smoke that quickly merged into the grey sky. A few exclamation marks of rain appeared on the window and his lips pouted round the stem of his pipe.

Ramsden's knock was followed, after the correct interval, by his entry. Blackledge turned round and went to sit at his desk. He knocked his pipe against the signet ring on the little finger of his left hand so that the ash fell into an enormous ashtray, and looked at Ramsden across the leather blotter, the yardage of glass, and the silver inkstand.

'Ramsden,' he said.

'Yes, sir,' said Ramsden.

'Is the canteen ready for my talk? The blackboard there? I may use it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You'll see that those women don't start washing-up until I've finished?'

'Yes, sir,' said Ramsden again, trying to think why the Mort-

gage Manager was concerning himself with these petty details, which had naturally all been settled by Haigh from the Establishment Department who was responsible for the arrangement of this educational scheme for the staff. Ramsden, with slight alarm, wondered whether Blackledge's questions were not the feint before the smashing blow – a typical Blackledge tactic – and tried to bring to mind his recent misdeeds and omissions. The matter of his change of office vanished from his agenda.

'Last year I had to send someone to stop the clatter.' Blackledge began to fill his pipe. 'By the way, Ramsden, how are the contractors getting on with the garage?'

'Not too badly, sir. They should have finished by June.'

Blackledge's eyebrows shot up. 'As soon as that?' He put the pipe between his teeth. 'Let me see, there will be room for twelve cars, won't there?'

Ramsden agreed. The site on which Saddleford House was built fell away slightly at the rear and, there, part of the basement had been designed as a garage. Recently the space had been reorganized and when the alterations were finished would accommodate the cars of twelve officials of the society instead of the previous seven.

'You've got the five new names?' asked Blackledge.

'Yes, sir.'

'And re-allocated the spaces?'

'Re-allocated the spaces?' Ramsden repeated.

Blackledge looked severely at the gilt-framed prints of old Saddleford hanging on the panelled walls. 'People won't necessarily want to keep the numbers they were probably quite fortuitously allotted in the past, you know, Ramsden. This is an excellent opportunity to rationalize the whole situation. Take my own present number – five. When I joined the society in 1936 it so happened that number five was vacant and therefore it was given to me. Damned awkward number – behind that pillar.'

'Yes, sir,' said Ramsden. 'I got the five new names from the Premises Manager: I hadn't thought about re-allocation – I'll talk to him about it.'

Blackledge fixed his light grey eyes on Ramsden's ginger-fringed ones. 'I don't believe it's quite a Premises Manager

matter,' he observed coldly. 'I think I had better deal with it.'

'Yes, sir,' said Ramsden uneasily.

'Let me see,' said Blackledge, 'the General Manager will keep number one, of course. I shall have number two, Mr Gerson number three, the Assistant Secretary number four - I'll jot the names down tomorrow, Ramsden, and let you have them.'

'Very good, sir. And if the Premises Manager asks me -'

Blackledge cut him short. 'If the Premises Manager has any questions he must come and see me.'

Ramsden shuffled his feet and half turned to go. Blackledge's voice brought him round again - a voice now pitched lower, slightly honeyed, warm.

'Ramsden,' said Blackledge, 'you're an expert. I'm thinking of buying some rose bushes: what kind ought I to get?'

Ramsden came a little nearer to the desk. 'Didn't know you were a gardener, Mr Blackledge,' he said.

Blackledge let himself be patronized. 'I'm not. Far from it. Beginning to get interested though. Now those rose bushes -'

'Well, sir,' said Ramsden, 'it all depends on what you want. But why don't you go in for these hybrid polyantha ...'

Blackledge permitted Ramsden to speak enthusiastically for several minutes and then suddenly looked at his watch. 'Good Lord!' he said. 'I must go and talk to those children. Thank you, Ramsden. Most valuable. I won't forget what you've told me.'

Ramsden marched along the corridor with the glow of a man who has done himself conversational justice. And then, as he descended in the lift to his cold tea and the remains of the jam puff, he said to himself: I wouldn't trust that bastard as far as I could throw him.

Walter Haigh, the Establishment Department clerk in charge of the mechanics of the annual staff educational course, wore glasses and a suit which had frayed round the button holes and down the lapel seams and which his wife had carefully but unskilfully mended with thick cotton. He had three young children and soon after the war had bought a house with the help of a mortgage from the Society. His unspectacular appearance

concealed an intense ambition to move out of his lowly position. In the meantime he gave his life value by regarding it as dedicated to the ideal of service to others. He was chairman of the Saddleford Building Society Staff Christian Union.

In the canteen, at the end furthest from the service hatch, chairs had been arranged in rows in front of a table and a blackboard. Haigh stood at the back and counted the heads of the score of young men and women already occupying the chairs and giggling a little. It took him back to the days when he was a W.T. instructor in the Army. When he had made sure, by counting the heads three times, that no one was missing, he walked rapidly down the stairs to Blackledge's office, and poked his head round the door.

'All present and correct, sir,' he said, twitching his nose to ease the pressure of his glasses.

Blackledge rose leisurely, concealing his irritation. He had no business to be irritated by this Haigh figure, by the cheap shabby suit, the ill-fitting glasses, the bogus accent which Haigh had acquired with his eventual commission in the Army ('pat', he would say when pronouncing 'put', knowing it was wrong to say 'poot'). And then he remembered what Rose had said to him as he left the house that morning, said reflectively as of a stranger: I never used to think you an irritable man.

As they went along the corridor, Blackledge pulled down the points of his waistcoat masterfully and said: 'What are they like this year, Haigh?'

'Not a bad lot, sir, actually.'

Blackledge strode past the lifts and bounded up the stairs, leaving Haigh a yard or two behind him. But when he reached the fourth floor he was breathing heavily and he felt the blood throbbing in his temples. It was hard for him to realize that he was over forty.

The chattering ceased as he walked to the table. His eyes swept the rows and he said: 'Ladies and gentlemen.' He was conscious that in using this form of address he was bestowing an unmerited but welcome honour. 'Ladies and gentlemen. As you know, I am the Mortgage Manager of this Society. I am here to introduce and commend this little educational course to you because originally it was my idea that such courses

should be held. Don't let me frighten you by using the word "course". There are no examinations or tests in connexion with the visits you will make during the next few weeks to the various departments of the society. All we want you to do is understand a little better how this organization works and what it does.'

Out of the corner of his eye Blackledge could see Haigh sitting in isolation on the left: as the man made his nose-twitching gesture Blackledge determined to tell the Establishment Officer there was no need for Haigh to stay during this introductory talk. It was mere officiousness and time-wasting.

'There was once a man who worked at a conveyor belt in a factory. His job was to tighten a bolt on a piece of machinery as it came past him. He was good at his job and when he had held it for fifty years the directors of the factory asked him if there was anything particular he would like as a reward for his long and faithful service. This man said yes, there was: he would like to be taken to the end of the conveyor belt so that he could find out what he had been helping to make these fifty years.'

One or two sharp boys laughed: Blackledge expected no better response. On the whole it was poor material that they were getting from the state's inordinately expensive educational establishments. 'We don't want you to spend your time with us like that wretched man.' Blackledge twisted his signet ring. 'Now what is a Building Society? The Building Societies Acts - the Acts of Parliament that govern all we do here - state that the purpose of a building society is to raise a fund so as to make advances to its members on the security of freehold or leasehold property. A building society, curiously enough, doesn't build. It obtains money from its investors - from its shareholders and depositors - and lends that money to its borrowing members to enable them to buy the houses they live in - or sometimes to buy shops or farms or even blocks of flats.

'The first department you will visit will be the Accounts Department. There you will see how the money comes to us from our investors and how their accounts are taken care of. Then you will visit my department, the Mortgage Department, which I can't help thinking the most important in the society.'