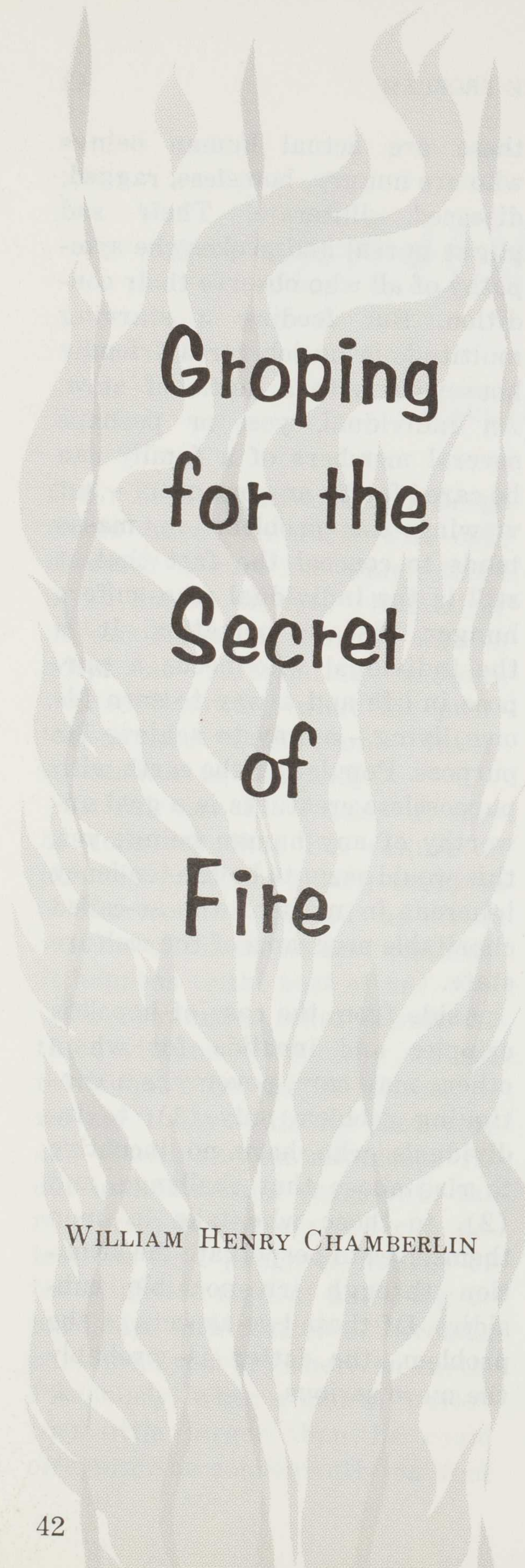




Groping for the Secret of Fire

WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

SUPPOSE that a primitive tribe in a distant jungle had forgotten the secret of how to make fire. Suppose the tribesmen were groping about with one experiment after another, trying desperately to regain the lost secret. There, in a nutshell, one would have a clue to much that has been going on in the Soviet Union before and since the fall from power of Nikita Khrushchev last October.

Anyone who has followed Soviet developments in the speeches of Soviet leaders and in Soviet newspapers and magazines during the last few years must be impressed by the amount of attention devoted to failings and breakdowns in the management of industry and agriculture. Khrushchev made one experiment after another. First, he set out to decentralize the cumbersome state economic bureaucracy that tries to run the national economy. Then, finding that the decentralized local "councils of national economy" were trying to keep for themselves more than their proper share of the available resources, he lurched uncertainly back to new methods of central direction. He was never able or willing to admit that the root of the trouble is in the sys-

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1965

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tem itself, not in this or that detail of administration or organization.

Khrushchev followed the same pattern in agriculture, regarding which he imagined himself a special authority. In his last years of power he was continually rushing about the Soviet Union, hauling local officials over the coals, issuing a stream of new recommendations and orders. In 1958, when good weather gave the Soviet Union a record harvest, the bouncy extrovert believed he had the farm problem licked. He began to boast that the Soviet Union would soon pass the United States in per capita output of meat and dairy products — a boast which inspired considerable skepticism in all who have lived and traveled in both countries.

But there was a very different story in 1963 when the Soviet Union was saved from hunger, if not actual starvation, by purchasing millions of tons of grain from the United States, Canada, and Australia. The other communist giant, Red China, found itself under the same necessity. A joke began to circulate about Khrushchev that he deserved a Nobel Prize in agriculture. He had planted grain in Russia and harvested it in America.

Although political change in the Soviet Union is enveloped in a

thick cloak of secrecy, it seems probable that economic failure ranks high among the reasons why Khrushchev had to go. For seven years he had stood on the pinnacle of Soviet power; he had been given his opportunity to make good on Stalin's old prediction that the Soviet Union would overtake and outstrip the leading capitalist countries, including the United States. (This boast elicited a private joke overheard by a number of foreign travelers in Russia: "We shouldn't get too far ahead or they will see we have nothing on our behinds.")

Standard of Living of Soviets Still Low by Comparison

There is a mountain of evidence to show that the Soviet standard of living today, with the fiftieth anniversary of the communist revolution less than three years off, remains abysmally low by comparison with the United States or most countries of Western Europe or even some of the Soviet satellite states in East Europe. Two recent news items may suffice. Here is an excerpt from the British *New Statesman* of October 23, 1964, written by a correspondent on the spot about living conditions in Moscow. (*The New Statesman* is a magazine of strongly socialist sympathies and, although not communist, cannot