

Adulterated Children

By PHILLIP GRANT

MAN is born with certain natural rights. They are the right to live and the right to own himself. From these other natural rights stem: freedom, equality, justice, and his right to own the product of his labor. While man is born with these rights, he is soon taught to cease exercising them and to accept legal rights as a substitute.

That man is indeed born with natural rights is most evident among children, for they are closer to birth than their less fortunate parents—they've had less time to get used to the idea of surrendering them. Children, then, are the only humans who exercise their human rights.

During the first few years following birth, the child is undoubtedly an anarchist. He recognizes no law other than his own selfish desire. He takes what he pleases, destroys property that isn't his own, accepts food, clothing and shelter from other humans without shame, and feels no obligation whatever to give an equal satisfaction in return. In the worst sense of the word, the infant is an anarchist—a brat.

But one day, quite suddenly, he is reminded by an unexpected spanking that he is not alone in the world; that the world doesn't revolve around him. He is made aware that father, mother, brother and sister are also human and therefore are entitled to enjoy their human rights without interference from him. He learns—without the aid of law-makers and propagandists—that he can be happiest and can avoid painful spankings by recognizing father's sole right to his meerschau, mother's exclusive right to her embroidery scissors, and sister's right to the parlor on beau night. It is at that point of his development that he ceases to be an anarchist.

Eventually, he longs for the companionship of other children. The longing is quite natural for, as Spinoza remarked, man is a social animal. Before long he learns that he must abide by certain laws—unwritten universal laws of social behavior. If he wishes to enjoy the privileges and advantages of the society he hopes to become part of, he learns that he is expected to conform to boyhood's code of decency. He learns that even the crippled and undersized members of boyhood's society can expect no special privileges. On the other hand, regardless of his color, family background, or religious inheritance, he will be given opportunities equal to those enjoyed by any of the other members. He sees no difference between humans—not unless his "enlightened" grown-up acquaintances have planted their own petty hatreds in his mind.

Upon joining boyhood's society, he instinctively learns that he has no right to destroy, use, or take the property of another boy without express permission; that he may not destroy even the shack that his labor helped to build since he would then be also destroying the product of another human's labor; that he must be a friend if he wants a friend; that to lie,

cheat, or steal is sure to be followed by punishment. And, if, after joining the "gang," he discovers that its ideas of right and wrong are contrary to his own, he is free to resign and to seek society more to his liking elsewhere. (That is a freedom adults can seldom enjoy).

These laws of social behavior are common to

all boys—in every city and in almost every nation. But that is not to say that all children, without exception, obey the rules of childhood's society. Some can't give up their love of *absolute* freedom easily. They just can't bring themselves to accept the rules of the herd. Nevertheless, he who breaks the unwritten laws of boyhood's society is certainly punished until he either conforms or quits. Not with a sock-in-the-jaw or a kick-in-the-pants; for that would be too mild. Generally, the punishment is far more severe. He is ostracized—he is left out of things—he isn't included when the boys choose sides or go off swimming or doorbell ringing. And, there is no punishment more severe than to be ignored or to be held in contempt by one's fellow humans; no unhappiness greater than loneliness.

It is significant that these punishments aren't planned by learned lawyers; that they arise as naturally and universally as weeds. No one boy judges the guilt or innocence of the culprit. Nor are policemen, jails, or executioners employed. Perhaps that is why miscarriages of justice, corruption and graft are practically unknown in the child's world. Nature seems to govern her children with a firm, impartial hand. She punishes when punishment is warranted. She rewards with popularity and prestige those who, without special privileges, surpass their fellow humans. Obviously, the childhood society we refer to here is a society of free children.

But if we observe the behavior of children in reform schools, we shall find another kind of childhood society. Among these children we find government by the muscular; we find liars, cheats, thieves, grafters and other specimens commonly found only among adults. Why the difference? Because reform schools are conducted and regulated according to laws written by adults—and adults are notoriously stupid. They lack the juvenile appreciation of freedom. They install bars, locks and unreasonable rules to keep the boys from exercising their natural right to punish the bully, liar and cheat according to the universal laws of society. They are compelled to live with the cheat; compelled to play and work with the liar; and are denied, through their loss of freedom, the right to ostracize the villain. Consequently, they are left with no choice but to out-bully, out-steal and out-cheat the bully, thief and liar. The result: a building full of sinful-as-adults brats.

The child who escapes the strange reforms of the reform school continues to exercise his human rights as long as he can. Unfortunately, as he grows older he comes into more intimate contact with his elders. To live peaceably in their society, he is compelled to abide by their absurd man-written laws. His parents and teachers and the literature he is allowed to read, hammer any opposition he may feel for their stupidities, out of his nature. He must agree to make their ways his way, even though it is plain that the adult lives always in an atmosphere of injustice and confusion. He eventually stops exercising his natural rights—gives them

up one at a time and replaces them with legal rights. Thus he leaves the orderly, peaceful freedom and justice of childhood forever—and becomes an adult. *Poor kid.*