

The Wishing Squad

A Bit About the Boy and For Those Who Wish Him Well

(Arthur D. Chandler in the Outlook.)
Bernum and Bailey's circus had just come to town. I heard the roar of the lions and the trumpeting of the elephants when still a block away from Madison Square Garden.

As I came nearer, that peculiar circus smell reminded me of those early days when the coming of the circus was the great event of my life, when it caused thrills to radiate from my solar plexus all through my body. What a delight, full tingling in my toes and finger-tips! How I clutched that quarter of a dollar in my pocket for fear it might somehow get away! It was earned, if I remember rightly, by selling a snared partridge (or was it a muskrat's skin?)

Have you forgotten that time when you were a boy yourself, when every day was filled with wishing and every night with dreams? You were all alive then. Every fiber of your being, like the taut strings of a violin, was seeking expression. If you have forgotten those days, I beg of you don't read on, for you won't understand.

I am writing this for the gray-haired men who love to play with children and with whom the children love to play; whose souls have never withered up, and never will; who can understand a boy because their hearts are still young, though their legs may be reluctant to jump a three-rail fence.

My friends, then, who understand, you will recall that fringe of kids which is always around the entrance to a circus, hands in their pockets feeling for the dime or quarter that isn't there, with wistful faces shining through the dirt. That shine comes from the same old thrill we used to have when we were boys and wished very much for something we didn't have the money to buy. They were there around the entrance to Madison Square Garden, dozens of them—barefooted, ragged, dirty, and happy. Mingling with the bunch, I asked, "What are you kids doing here?"

"We're just wishin'!"

"What are you wishin'?"

Quickly came the reply from a blue-eyed, curly-haired youngster: "Say, mister, we're wishin' some rich guy would come along and buy us all tickets into de circus, see?" Another volunteered, "Ise wishin' I was a horseback rider like that guy on de poster," and another, "Ise wishin' I lived in de country an' de circus come and pitched de tent near where I was livin'!"

"What would you do then?" I asked.

"Gee, I'd sneak in under de tent mighty quick, an' so would all de adder guys."

Around the corner strode a policeman, and at the cry, "Cheese it, a cop!" in every direction suddenly vanished my "wishin' squad."

Those fluttering rags and pattering feet were gone, but they left with me a bag of gold; more than that—a fortune, if we measure wealth in terms of satisfaction. For on that day I "junked" from my vocabulary and point of view forever the unsavory terms "hoodlum" and "ragabond" as applied to boys of the street, and ever since that time I've looked upon them as just a "wishing squad." I've come to know hundreds of

them, and have never had reason to change my new point of view. I have grown to feel with them, and to care. So there has come about a better understanding of these "misfit" boys who make up the "wishing squads" of our city streets.

Maybe I was born with lots of faith in "misfit" boys. We had one in our town when I was young. Perhaps that is why the term "original good" has always seemed to me to be a fair working hypothesis. In fact, I sometimes think it works out even better in practice than the other more orthodox term, "original sin." Yes, I have faith—lots of it—in "bad" boys; the same kind of faith I have in seed corn, potatoes, wheat, rye, and in the soil. The potential is in the seed and in the soil and in every boy, but the Eternal Wisdom seems to require some one with common sense and common humanity to raise crops or to make worthy men out of "misfit" boys.

You will recall that in some parts of the Far West large areas of seemingly desert lands were formerly given up to sage-brush, cactus, and rattlesnakes. Then some men with a vision and with an understanding came along; they tapped the life-giving lakes among the mountains and they brought the water to the "wishing" soil. Homes were built and children played where formerly lurked the rattlesnakes. The sage-brush and the cactus gave way to the green grass, the fruit, and the flowers.

The soil of the desert was not really "totally depraved"—only judged so from its fruits. When neglect gave way to understanding and the proper means were used to bring out the dormant energy of the soil, abundant harvests were the result.

All normal boys, whether we call them "good" boys or "bad" boys, are just bundles of energy seeking expression—our "wishing squad." If the wishes of these boys are wisely directed and satisfied by intelligent parents and teachers, we will get the expression of this energy in anti-social acts which lead to the making of crooks—a harvest of enemies of society instead of noble men and good citizens.

Every state has its "human dump heap" for delinquent boys who have committed some anti-social act, such as truancy, vagrancy, incorrigibility, larceny, or "breaking and entering" (I have been a trustee of one of these human dump heaps for several years)—an institution to which boys are committed by the juvenile court to serve time for delinquency.

When one glances up from the formidable-looking commitment paper into the frank, open face of the boy, one naturally asks: "What got you into trouble, son?" The answer is almost invariably the same: "Playing hooky." "Why didn't you go to school?" "The teacher was down on me or 'I didn't like the teacher," or "I didn't like the school." "What did you do when you weren't in school?" "Went wid de gang." "What did the gang do?" "Crooked copper,

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brass, an' things like that." "Where did you sell it?" "To de junkman." "What did you do with the money?" "Went to de movies or bought eats and candy." Probably ninety per cent of "delinquent" boys will answer these questions in almost exactly the same language. Most of these boys have had very unfavorable home conditions, caused by poverty, drunkenness, or the death of a parent.

The public schools are inadequately equipped to interest the wild boy who has not been properly domesticated. He does not fit into the nice round hole prepared for him in the school system. There is not time, and there is little inclination, to trim the hole to fit the boy, so the teacher "trims" the boy, and the truant officer, when he can catch him, is kept busy dragging the reluctant urchin back to school.

Nature abhors a vacuum. So does a boy, whether it is in his stomach or in his pocket.

When a bunch of boys "on the hook" get together, each one having an empty stomach and empty pockets, nature finds cause for immediate action, to the great pleasure and profit of the nearest junk dealer.

"Why do you steal junk?" I have asked many boys. "Because it's easier to get money that way." "Does the junkman know you stole it?" "Sure. How

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else could we get it." The "Fagan" who teaches boys to pick pockets is no man who encourages boys to become thieves by receiving from them stolen goods. So serious has this menace become that the New Jersey Legislature has recently passed a law making it a state's prison offense to buy junk from a boy under sixteen years of age. Legal evidence sufficient to convict them seems difficult to get, and the junkmen continue to smile and make their illegitimate profit.

With honest labor in great demand and juvenile delinquency on the increase, why should not the government conscript the junkmen and put them at some honest job that does not help to make criminals out of the boys of the street? Mr. Edison has said: "Let me have the pay the truant officers get each year, and I'll make all the boys scout to school."

Adapt the fascination of the movies to the needs of the class-room, and a very potent cause for truancy will be made to pull in the right direction. The potential for the making of a noble man is in the soul of every normal boy.

A wonderful harvest of men awaits those who have a vision of the larger motherhood and the larger fatherhood; who understand what it means to a boy to feel, perhaps for the first time in his life, that "somebody cares" and is willing to give him a square deal; who have grown by experience to realize that the largest compensation in life does not come to us in terms of cash, but in terms of satisfaction.

It was said to me by a philosophical friend: "Men understand dogs and horses better than they do boys. Whether men utterly forget their own boyhood or simply misremember it, it is true that they misunderstand boys as completely as if boys belonged to another species of creature."

For whatever reason, life is not arranged with much thought to the natural needs of boys or with much sign of insight into the boy heart. Education, restraint, rebuke, all are arranged with too little imagination for boy impulses that not only cannot be eradicated but that should not be eradicated. They do not sufficiently recognize the boy as a person. We read of boy hardships in biography with immense sympathy and sentiment, and too often forget that the next wishing youngster we meet, particularly if he is breaking some rule in the making of which he has had no voice, is potentially living the first chapter of a biography.

I want to see the world made safe for boys. I want to see boys taken into the game, and not shored aside as common enemies, whose rights, wishes, needs, and potentialities are to be considered only in biographical retrospect. If the boyhood of Lincoln was important, not only to Lincoln but to the world, so every boy's boyhood is important; for though he may never be a Lincoln, he is, and will be, a factor one way or another in the welfare of the group in which he grows up. To thwart, badger, or belittle him is to lose sight, not only of something that belongs to him, but of possibilities for good or evil which it is our business to consider for the sake of the humanity on which his qualities will react.

The Hindus say, "My neighbor is myself in another body." It is every man's duty to say, "This boy is myself in a younger body—perhaps a body badly housed, badly fed, badly taught, badly governed, and, by the will of God, badly

tempted. I shall do for him what I should like to have done for me in these conditions. I shall not too quickly and smugly say, 'My lickings did me good,' or 'My hardships were the making of me,' but try to remember how many boys were ruined by lickings blindly administered in the wrong way at the wrong time, and how frequently needless and preventable tortures of hardships have scattered human wrecks along the pathway of life. I shall try to re-

member that it is not what I needed (if by a miracle I remember that), but what this individual boy wishes and needs, that is to determine my conduct toward him—my conduct personally and as a member of human society." When this has become the common vision, there will no longer be a "boy problem."

The Dutch vessels taken over in U. S. ports for use in the war zone will be manned by naval crews.

Somewhere in France.
Marie—That young American soldier yonder— isn't he a dear? He speaks French, I understand.
Vivette—Yes, I know him. I wish he could speak French. I understand— Florida Times-Union.
Tightwad.
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