

## CHANNELS:

# The Children's Hour

MARYA MANNES

THE BRITISH have very strange ideas about children. For one thing, they think an hour of television a day is enough for them, and that this hour should end at six. They believe that children should be instructed and entertained, and they do not think that emptying bullets into somebody's stomach or knocking someone down in a brawl is either instructive or entertaining.

They think that adult lusts and rages are for adults, and that children are no better off and certainly no wiser for witnessing them. They believe that children—and they use this term for an audience ranging from about five to fifteen—have a lot of interesting things to do besides sit and watch television. Finally, they believe in innocence: a state of being in which a child learns and understands only what it wants to learn and understand, and in which the delicate, expanding mind—safe from the cares and cruelties of the world—can dream its private, long, irrelevant dreams.

To this end they have put into their BBC children's hour the best they have in wisdom, fun, and adventure. They have left out the violent, the vulgar, and the sordid—stimulating, no doubt, for many who call themselves adult, but injurious, they unequivocally believe, to the young.

"All very fine," an American might say, "but what's to stop the kids from turning to another channel or simply staying on after six and listening to adult stuff?" The answer is simple if startling. There is no other channel. And adult television does not begin until eight o'clock—too late for the British young.

The British can indulge in these quaint fantasies because they conceive of television as a public service

which must uphold rather than upset national traditions. The British are sufficiently appreciative of this concept to pay a tax of six dollars a year per set. There are, of course, people in Britain who fear the dangers of government monopoly more than the perils of commercial competition. Yet it is reasonably safe to assume that even if British television should admit some commercialism, British children will still have a very limited and early viewing time and will never be cajoled into buying a certain bread after being titillated by murder or mayhem.

HERE ARE some of the things that go into the BBC children's hour: a play, specially written for the program on a theme of adventure or history, acted by a professional cast, and lasting anywhere from a half hour to the entire period; or a ballet, often preceded or accompanied by an explanation of what its patterns and positions mean in terms of story; or a special newsreel, adapted to young interests (animals, sports, exploration, etc.); or storytelling by a highly accomplished man or woman; or comics and clowns on occasion; or talks, casual but informative, on the natural wonders of this world; or puppets—many puppets. Notable omissions are juvenile juries and quiz kids, since another quirk in the British character causes precocious exhibitionists to be viewed with a distaste bordering on horror.

American children regularly exposed to adult television fare might well regard the BBC hour as insipid in its innocence. Producers of the Ford Foundation's excellent program for children, "Excursion" (Sundays, 3:30 P.M., NBC), may find that ears attuned to the spatter

of bullets and the din of quiz shows may be deaf to a calm voice telling of peaceful things. But that is more a reflection on the child's state of being than on the program itself, for it so happens that the BBC children's hour is enjoyed by a great many adults who recognize good writing and acting when they see it and are surprised to find themselves learning a number of useful things from teachers more attractive than those of their youth. If sophistication, worldliness, and the surge of emotions are absent in this hour—well, they will come soon enough when the young are no longer young.

IT IS OBVIOUS, of course, that even if we wanted to adopt the British approach towards children's television it would be impossible to do so. The pattern has been fixed, the bedtime clock will never be set back, and far too many toothpastes and breakfast foods have been urged upon Mom by the kiddies to make the voluntary sacrifice of this vast consumer audience conceivable. So far, all the shrill cries of outrage from American parents and educational groups at the TV food their children are fed, all the industry "codes" and pious promises of self-censorship have done very little to purge from the screen its vulgarizing elements during those hours when children look at it.

There is, I think, one way out: a form of censorship which could not possibly violate any human freedom and which might alter the whole TV spectrum overnight. This censorship would consist of prohibiting only two things: the shot and the knockout. Both are last resorts of the storyteller. Forbidden to use either (except in mass scenes of battle or history), the TV writer would have to start writing—about people who can live dangerously without gun or fist, who solve their problems and conquer their foes without resort to force. The weapons of primitive, uncivilized man are the easy ways out, the crutches of poor, unimaginative writers. And these are what our children are now accepting as legitimate—nay (if used by the hero) even laudable means.

Censorship of the shot—let's see what *that* would do to the industry—and for the kids.

# The Thoughtful Hero

GOUVERNEUR PAULDING

THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS, by Charles A. Lindbergh. Scribners. \$5.

THERE IS NO risk whatever in saying that *The Spirit of St. Louis* is a classic. It will be read for the lucid account it gives of a very deliberate adventure undertaken at a certain moment in the history of man's struggle to become the master of all he surveys. In that moment, in that succession of moments over the American land, the sea, and Europe, Lindbergh looked down upon our world as no man had ever looked down upon it before. When, after his night-long colloquy with the voices that spoke to him in his narrow cockpit, dawn came and he brought his plane close to the sea, no one had ever lived to tell what such a lonely dawn was like. Nungesser and Coli had seen it, perhaps, but they could look into each other's eyes, and they had died.

If *The Spirit of St. Louis* were no more than the story of that flight, if it told only how a young man prepared it and carried it out, it would be such a story of courage, such evidence of reason and judgment, that one could ask for nothing more. But Lindbergh gives a great deal more.

In *We*, Lindbergh did not want to make the flight seem too difficult—aviation had to be promoted—and also it seemed at the time immodest to admit the obstacles of fatigue and doubt which only a superior courage could overcome: "Being young and easily embarrassed, I was hesitant to dwell on my personal errors and sensations." But now the difficulties can be stated, the moments of greatest trial exposed. Of course all this must be done in a spirit of clinical precision. Lindbergh observes, as if once again he were working with Alexis Carrel on the mechanical heart, the faltering of the human heart and body, the mastery of the human spirit over exhausted nerves

and the temptation to sleep and die. All this is written so strongly and so straight that the effect is hallucination: We make the trip with Lindbergh. But during the thirty-three and a half hours of the flight Lindbergh thought also of his boyhood. It is those memories interwoven in the narrative which build the ultimate triumph of this book.

FOR IT is the boyhood that prepares and explains—and, in a way justifies—the flight. It is Lindbergh's boyhood that sets the flight in its proper perspective as an incident, no more than an incident, in a man's life. It is this boyhood in Minnesota that accounts for Lindbergh's contempt for those who saw in his flight nothing but recklessness, or nothing but courage, or an achievement after which there would be nothing much left for Lindbergh to do.

It was a happy boyhood; but it was a stern one too, a practical one, with responsibility coming to young Lindbergh very early in life and quietly and practically accepted. At sixteen he had a farm to take care of. He had to buy cattle at auction and not make a mistake about it; the farm was not being run for fun. The fun young Lindbergh had was fishing and swimming with other boys who were working as he was working, close to the earth, in sympathy with the life of the farm, through the changing seasons of the American Midwestern countryside.

The fun young Lindbergh had was to talk with his father, because his father talked to the boy as if he were grown up. And then there was that wonderful time when father and son went up to the headwaters of the Mississippi and then followed its course, portaging its rapids, setting up a tent at nightfall, cooking the fish they caught, until the river brought them home. The fun young

Lindbergh had was to learn the precise use of every tool by using it to make precisely useful objects. And then the fun became anything that had to do with an airplane.

When you read these wonderful scenes of childhood you think sometimes of Carl Sandburg's Midwestern childhood, and sometimes of Mark Twain's, and then you realize the difference: In Lindbergh's childhood there is this sense of everything leading to a purpose, everything combining to form a special type of man—the contemplative in action.

Lindbergh is the man whose dream became action—reasoned, planned, and measured action.

NO ONE will ever write a book about flying like this one. Lindbergh knows it: "... unlike the early years of aviation, our dreams of tomorrow are disturbed by the realities of today. . . . We have seen the aircraft, to which we devoted our lives, destroying the civilization that created them." Lindbergh is writing about the past, when flying seemed to make men freer. His is the last voice to reach us from that past which is lost to us.

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