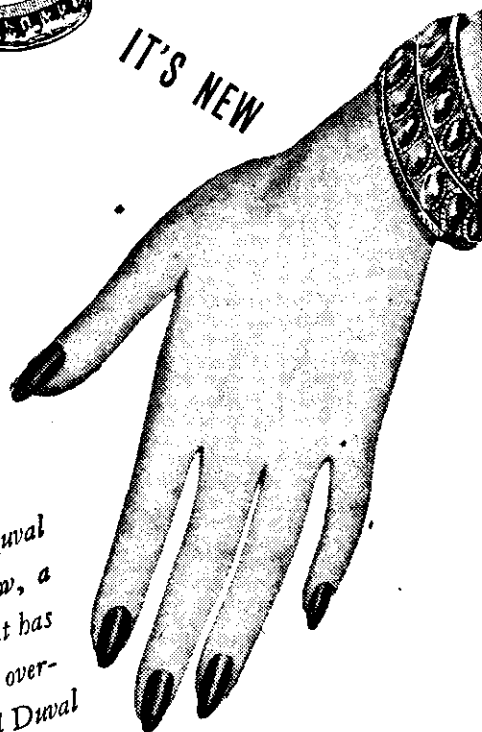


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JULY 22, 1949

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.I.

G.P.O. Box 1707.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 41-470.

Wild Life in the Playground

CHILDREN'S games are studied by psychologists who see them as possible clues to adult behaviour. An investigation is at present being carried out in New Zealand; and Brian Sutton-Smith, a research scholar who is studying the subject, will shortly make an appeal from 2YA to listeners who may remember some of the lesser-known games which were played when they were very young. The process of recollection, he said in an interview printed on Page 6, is "rejuvenating." Perhaps this feature of the project is worth more than passing notice. Not many of us are likely to feel a scientific interest in the playground, but we can do worse than accept the invitation to look back to remembered delights and perils. Some of these memories return to us without permission. We need only to see the first kites of a new season climbing bravely on the wind to feel around us the spring-time glory. A glimpse of children rushing about in the playground may take us back to the days when we too were learning to sidestep the "catchers" in "Bar-the-Door." It is not a long step from "Bar-the-Door" to Rugby football; and even shorter, perhaps, is the gap between the playground mood and adult experience. There are still people who repeat the old and wistful saying that those early days were the happiest of their lives; and most of them, no doubt, believe that they are speaking the truth. Some of us learn as we grow older that memory is capricious, and that both the dark and the golden moments can be preserved with misleading clarity. Memories are strengthened or weakened by what comes later in life. And in all of us may be found, in some degree, the hunger for a golden age, a static and gracious time in which either the individual or the human race may find relief from the pressure of living. It cannot be surprising, therefore, if the individual is glad to turn back in thought to early years when—as he now imagines—life was simple and straightforward. But was life ever as simple as it seems in retrospect? The best gift of childhood, surely, is the full and unspoiled activity of the senses, the clean response of nerves which have not yet been clogged by disappointing messages from the world outside. No colours in later life are as splendid as those which caress young eyes when the hills are standing in brightness after rain. No food prepared in the kitchens of Paris can taste like a plain meal eaten with an appetite sharpened by backyard games. And this capacity for enjoyment has its other and darker side. The griefs of the young may pass quickly, and they may seem to come for faint reasons; but they are felt intensely. Children in the playground come together and disperse with the effortless movements of birds flying and turning as if they obeyed a single instinct; and it is easy for the adult to imagine that they live in a world of their own. But it is only the tempo that is different. Beneath the wildness and the spontaneity are feelings and impulses which are with us throughout life. The emotional drive is more primitive, but it carries children towards purposes that remain dominant, or only partly submerged, in the adult mind. The individual and the crowd may both be studied inside the school gates. And because games are rooted in the compulsions of primitive society, where ritual and magic were often used for the expulsion of tribal fears, the playground is half-way between society and the jungle. We can look back to it regretfully, if we wish; but it may be wise to remember that, in watching ourselves when young, we are not in a different world. The child is in the man, and he is still learning the rules of the game.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 22, 1949.