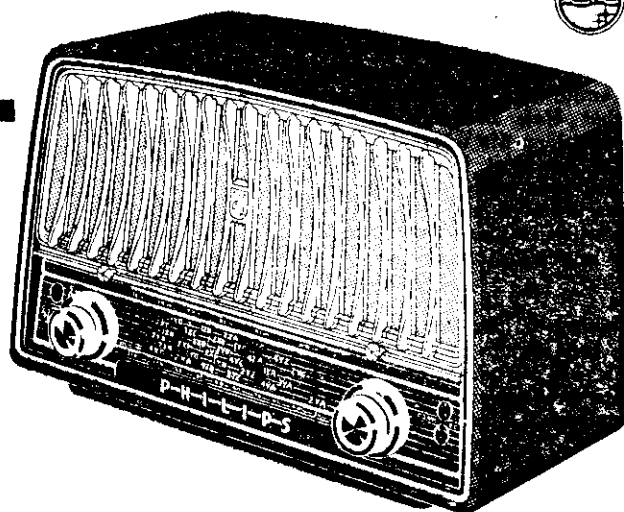


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## The Chicken-Hearted

"PLAYING chicken," one of the lunacies of the age, made its appearance recently in Sydney. The New South Wales Police Commissioner said promptly—and perhaps a little precipitately—that if anyone was killed the culprit would be gaoled for life. This may put an end to the evil before it can spread, though it has come a long way since it first appeared in the United States. According to a newspaper report it is "a so-called game in which two cars are driven at high speed head-on towards each other: the driver of the first car to swerve is labelled 'chicken'." There are variations on the tilting theme; but the general idea is to prove, at the risk of death, that Jack is a better man than Bob. Sooner or later, if the "sport" is allowed to continue, Jack and Bob will both be dead or mangled. A lapse into imbecility can be expensive when the imbeciles are driving motor-cars.

Some thinkers may see "chicken" as one more symptom of the spiritual sickness from which mankind is supposed to be suffering. How far this illness exists, we do not pretend to know; but it seems probable that men today are in much the same spiritual condition as their forefathers, and that their "illness" is congenital. The strutting male who must prove to himself and the tribe that he is a fine fellow has been a nuisance in his community since the world began. If there is any difference in him today, it is merely that his capacity for mischief has been increased by mechanical aids. Men who felt obliged on fine points of honour to exchange pistol shots or sword-thrusts could harm no one but themselves. In a motor-car, however, a reckless and suicidal driver can involve others in his own destruction. Duelling could not be tolerated because it became a waste of life, especially in military circles, where officers were expected to die only for professional reasons. Yet in those days there was at least a code of behaviour behind the folly—subject to abuse, no doubt, and absurd by modern standards, but intelligible to those who accepted it. The present-day

youth plays a dangerous game under compulsions from a weakly-organised mind. His real motives, if they could be disentangled, might not be greatly different from those of the duellist, who was more likely to be influenced by pride and fear than by conscience; but he does not understand them and could not explain them in terms that have any current meaning in society.

Young men have always wanted to prove their manhood, and have never been without proper means of doing it. Today they will climb mountains, descend into caves, go underwater with aqualung and spear, make hard journeys and undertake feats of endurance. Sometimes they go ill-prepared and rashly, and have to be rescued by expensive search parties; but the vast majority pass through their testing years without fuss, and manage to enjoy themselves as well. If an attitude becomes morbid there are reasons to be found for it in weakness of character or environment. Every disease has its own history in cells that were once healthy. "Playing chicken" is a gang pastime which grows out of street-corner boredom and infantilism. To accept a "dare" may be in the highest playground tradition, and to be afraid of losing face is natural enough in primitive communities. It is disturbing to find that the playground and the jungle are still the spiritual homes of youths who begin to look like men. The chicken-hearted are always with us; but the real chickens are those who are so unsure of themselves that they must strut before they can walk. Society intervenes when folly becomes dangerous. Yet if the folly is too widespread, and takes a morbid turn, some awkward questions are raised about the moral health of the adult community. Youths who charge about in motor-cars must be controlled for their own sakes, and for the common good. Can it be said, however, that their aberrations are monstrous departures from normal behaviour in a world where the nations themselves are playing chicken—not with motor-cars, but with a bomb?

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 24, 1957.