

Escape Into Delinquency: The Case of Robert E.

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Robert had not come home from his paper route. Late in the evening the worried parents reported him missing, and in the early morning hours they were notified by the police that Robert had just been picked up in Ithaca and would be kept at the police station there until his father could call for him. The father took the first bus to Ithaca to bring the boy home.

The home of the family, although situated in a very good neighborhood, would impress one by its lack of comfort. The father, an interior decorator, working for the biggest furniture store in town, is a thin, small man with somewhat feminine and apologetic mannerisms and gestures. While he is making conversation, Gretchen, the youngest daughter, 5 years old, is sitting on his knees, and he is petting and hugging her tenderly. The mother is a heavy woman, extremely nervous. Her eyes look toward the ceiling while she is addressing someone, a nervous habit which is quite annoying for the conversational partner, and hints toward some social deficiency. Martha, a very pretty 9 year old girl, clings to the mother. After a little while Robert presents himself, the 14 and 1/2 year-old only son, a handsome lad with engaging manners, not shy, very interested in the conversation. He is a passionate and very well-informed stamp collector, and shows proudly his excellently kept collection. He is very happy to find anyone interested in the matter. The father remarks a little scornfully, "Anyone who shows interest in Robert's collection will have his love forever." He himself is not interested at all. The eldest daughter, a 17 year old high school senior, appears just for a minute. She seems to be a shy, rather withdrawn girl and not attractive. She is coming from some religious youth service and is leaving in order to attend another church meeting.

Religiosity seems to be the keynote in this home. Mother teaches Sunday school; Father, who besides his main job, works evenings in a defense plant, complains that this job sometimes calls for Sunday work, which goes definitely against his religious convictions; and Robert states that he wants to become a missionary.

There was also a distinct feeling of financial struggle in the family. When coffee and cake were served, the father remarked apologetically about the lack of a coffee table. He wanted to get one for a long time, but . . . Then he made fun of the cheap china purchased at the bargain store. The little girls showed proudly their Christmas presents: the coats and dresses made over of old garments of Mother. There were also knitted articles made by grandmother, and some shabby, cheap toys.

Why did Robert run away? There was considerable tension in the home, but this did not offer sufficient explanation. Was Robert rejected? The father showed affection for nobody but Gretchen. When asked whether there was a pet in the house, the father's response had been, "This is my pet", hugging Gretchen. The father had also talked quite a bit about his not-being-home-at-all, as he is working days and evenings until ten. "There is no fun anymore, since Daddy is working nights," he said. The financial tension should not necessarily affect the children. What made matters bad was that the parents obviously were unable to accept the difficult situation emotionally and to cope with it. This was demonstrated by their apologetic attitude. However, all these matters probably were contributing factors to Robert's behavior but yet no explanation.

Further conversation with the parents revealed the tragic story of a boy living continuously under financial stress ("I must pay *my* bills"), and in continuous, tormenting uncertainty concerning the affection of his parents.

Robert had been a healthy, happy baby, and on good terms with his older sister. When he was 4 years old, nearly 10 years ago, he became seriously ill; a streptococcal infection kept him for many months in the hospital, many weeks in critical condition. During his illness his sister, Martha, was born. He left the hospital, a weak, delicate child, who needed constant attention. The slightest cold spelled "danger" in his case, and so it was natural that his mother watched him anxiously all the time. ("Robert, button your coat!" "Robert, take another sweater!" "Robert, don't get your feet wet!") About 3 years ago Robert had an operation; his tonsils and adenoids were removed, and this helped. The boy recovered completely; he became a big, strong lad, handsome too, a good athlete.

The special care and attention was no longer necessary and no longer given.

Two years ago, Robert started with his paper route. He interrupted this work once when the parents felt that he did not devote enough time to his home work; but when the agent came to the house and asked him to resume work he started again.

Together with the mother, a detailed plan was worked out concerning Robert's earnings. A certain percentage was to be saved toward his education and put into the bank; another percentage he was to keep as his allowance, but he had also to contribute to the household. Last fall the need arose that Robert should buy his own clothes. There was again a session with his mother. She asked him if he wanted to buy his own clothes, and he agreed. A new distribution of his earnings was worked out, which included the weekly installment he had to pay on his topcoat. (The savings toward his education suffered!) Soon afterwards the trouble

started. Robert did not pay his weekly installments, and the clothing store sent bills to his home. Worse, he was way behind with his paper bill. Finally, he had not paid it for four weeks and did not know what to do. That was last fall. He packed a little suitcase and tried to leave the house, but ran into his mother. He admitted later that he wanted his mother to detect his intention. He did not dare to approach her directly and tell her that he had spent too much money; he wanted to be asked. Now he confessed that he had spent the money with his gang (other paper boys) at pinball machines, for cokes, hot dogs, candy and ice cream, and airplane magazines. His mother tried to impress on him that he was responsible for the paper and that he had to go without any allowance and save every penny until everything was paid. She made him kneel down and pray with her. She worked out with him the plan, according to which in a few weeks the paper bill should have been paid; he was to ask the clothing store that he be permitted to interrupt his payments for those weeks. The matter was settled, but soon Robert became unruly at home. He didn't attend to his duties around the house like taking the ashes out, bundling the waste paper, etc. He always had to be reminded. He became very slow coming home from his paper route, was late for his meals, especially Saturdays when he was collecting the money. He never settled down to do his homework; Mother always had to be after him. However, Robert, a freshman in high school, continued to be a good student, well liked by his teachers. Finally an open fight between Robert and his mother developed. As Robert didn't attend to his duties, the mother made him experience the fact that she would not wash and mend his socks, etc. This was the method by which the mother thought to cure him. At the end of the very same week Robert disappeared.

He didn't come home from his paper route in the evening. At 10 o'clock the disturbed parents reported to the police. After midnight they were notified that Robert had been picked up in Ithaca and should be called for by the parents at the police station there.

The detailed description of Mr. E. as to how he found and approached his son is not pretty. He saw Robert in the back room of the police station, he noticed his emotion when he recognized his father, he saw how the boy's eyes filled with tears—but he remained "dignified" (his own words!). He didn't look at the boy, asked if there was a charge for the service of the police, and offered to pay for the long distance call. The policeman had no change, and the poor boy, anxious to please his father, volunteered: "Daddy, please take it from my paper money." When this was settled, the father nodded toward the boy: "Come on!" Without any conversation they went to a restaurant, had a silent breakfast, walked to the bus station, sat in the bus, a whole hour, without a word, walked home. In the street where the family lives, a woman called after them: "Robert, why didn't you bring the Sunday paper?" The boy looked help-

lessly at his father, but received no support. When they came to their house, the father pointed to the pile of papers on the porch. "Take Mrs. R.'s paper down, and come right back!" Mr. E. then ordered his wife not to display any emotion, and not to talk to Robert.

The boy was sent up to undress, take a bath, and put on his pajamas. Then he was summoned into the parents' bedroom where the "trial" took place. He was asked first why he had run away, and his first word was: "Mother was so mean to me." He had to admit that he had again spent paper money, that he was "in a mess". He had bought airplane magazines and some food. He had to give a report on his trip to the last detail. Then a new plan was worked out. The boy was to give up the paper route; but he had to keep his job until everything was paid, and this would be the case, according to a careful calculation, within 5 weeks. Robert would have no more allowance. When the discussion of the whole matter was closed, Mr. E. excused his wife, and told Robert that he was going to chastise him. He warned him that he had to take his "thoroughly-deserved beating like a man". Afterwards he told Robert that he was forgiven now, and encouraged him "to give Daddy a kiss". The boy, completely broken down by now, was sobbing. Finally, he was told to confess to the Lord, and father and son knelt down, confessed and prayed together. The boy dressed then, took the papers, and carried them out. He had had practically no sleep the night before. (At the police station, he had been sitting on a chair.) — —

Robert had had a good start in life, and there seemed to be no trouble during his early childhood. (However, it should be kept in mind that the nervous tension in his home atmosphere, the slight neurotic behavior of his father, who covers "feminine" traits with "masculine" sternness, and the nervousness of the mother most likely existed *then* just as they do today.)

Robert's long illness and weakness led to exaggerated attention on the part of his mother, which was discarded rather suddenly when the boy got well and strong. This change in the parental attitude could easily be misinterpreted by Robert, the more as Gretchen, still an infant then, received so much attention and affection. As a matter of fact, during our conversation the mother remarked that quite often Robert complained toward her about favors which the little girls had received (according to Robert) years ago. Such complaints are full proof of Robert's continual comparing and weighing his parents' expressions of affection toward the different children, full proof that he regards himself as a "rejected child". He is struggling for his parents', especially his mother's, love and approval, but at the same time (a good demonstration of the ambivalence of his feelings), he displays his rebellion against them. Thus, he complies with his mother's money plans, but does not act accordingly; thus, he wants to become a minister, but—far away!—a missionary. The tension

within the boy created by his feeling of being rejected makes the tension in the home unbearable to him. This is another reason for his dislike of the home, his slowness to come home.

It is not surprising that the rejected boy feels it gratifying to act as his gang expects of a well-liked and accepted member. The running away, the climax of Robert's problem-behavior, expresses his rebellion, his escape, a cry for help,—and his revenge.

How can Robert be helped? Certainly he must be convinced that he is not rejected.

For this purpose, the attitude of the parents requires a thorough re-orientation. It was most unfortunate that the father dealt with Robert in the way which was described. It could only deepen the assumption of the prejudiced boy that the parents did not like him. The beating was bad enough, but the father's relentlessness toward the boy, yearning for one loving word or gesture, was still worse.

Although there was no hope to change the parents' attitude by telling them to show more affection; it had to be tried through discussing in a *general* way parent-child relationship, stressing the children's need for affection and security, the advantage of a warm home atmosphere harmonious and free of tension; the difficulties of adolescence, the frequently rebellious attitude, the longing for adventure.

Finally the parents made observations like the following: "Mother, I am afraid Robert does not even know that we love him." There followed a careful discussion of the need for confidence in the child; and the parents decided by themselves to let Robert again have a small allowance, and to make other appropriate changes in their behavior with their son.

The father volunteered the information that during his own childhood he had once overheard a remark of his mother commenting on the fact that she originally did not intend to have him, that he came "unwantedly". Mr. E. added that he pondered over this remark for years, wondering whether his mother really loved him, and watching her secretly for signs of love.

The parents finally agreed to permit the writer to talk with their son. There was not much talk about Robert himself, and of his recent adventure; the conversation was about his parents: how they really felt, and how they were hiding their emotions; and how he should feel that buying his own clothes was proper for a young man.

The response of both parents and son was good. It is to be hoped that the new attitudes will be maintained. If they are, we can look forward optimistically to a successful outcome in this case.