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When every day brings something *new*; when the *newest* is automatically assumed to be the best—and newness *thrilling*—then consumership has reached its peak. And from the peak...



CONSUMERSHIP

by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

(author of "Fort Iron")

illustrated by ORBAN

GROUP FATHER asked, "What will you have for supper tonight, kiddies?" He beamed approvingly at their hesitant faces. "Chinese, Japanese, Mexican food? French, Javanese, Swedish? Your mother can cook all of them. Or what about Swiss? Swiss is newest;

your mother has just learned to cook Swiss."

"Swiss," Tommy said instantly.

Group mother smiled. He was the sweetest, most loveable, most discriminating of all the children in her care. He always knew what to ask for—what was best and new-

est. He'd grow up to be an ad-man; she was sure of it. She had discussed his future with all the fathers her group had had, and they always agreed with her. She was *thrilled* at the thought.

The faces of the others lit up like little sign boards. "Swiss!" they chorused. "Swiss! Let's have Swiss!"

"What about our new little girl?" group father said playfully. "I suppose she'd like Swiss, too, but she hasn't said yet what she wants."

At the word "newest" their eyes had turned toward Marian. She was different; she was new; she might be better. They were still unsure.

Marian, leaning against one of the walls, twisted her fingers. "I don't know what is 'Swiss,'" she answered. "But what I like, what I'd like is what we had at Gilda's, when she was my group mother. We had roast beef and potatoes, and a green salad. Apple pie. Except sometimes when we had chocolate cake. But usually we had apple pie."

Group mother's mouth opened shockedly. Group father motioned her to silence. Wait for Tommy, his gesture said.

"That's American food," Tommy said scornfully. "It's ob—obs'lete. N o b o d y eats American any more."

"I don't care," Marian answered. Her face was growing dark. "We had it all the time. I liked it; it was good. I liked it *because* we had it all the time."

THE TWO children glared at each other. *Oh, dear,* group mother thought. She'd been afraid that Marian was going to cause trouble, and now it was coming true. Gilda must be a very odd group mother, to produce such a child.

Aloud, she said, "Now, honey, you must do what the others want. If they all want Swiss, you don't really care."

"*He's* the only one that cares," Marian said, pointing to Tommy. "The others like whatever you tell them to. They don't care whether it's Swiss or—or Greek. They'd like mud, if you told them to."

Into the faces of the others was coming the look that group mother, and all group parents, dreaded. That expression—at once listless and confused—that deepened into a mask-like blankness, if you didn't do something about it immediately. Once they got into it, you could wave all the toys and treats in the world in their faces, and nothing would rouse them. They'd sit for a whole day, with their feet out in front of them on

the floor, staring at nothing. Something must be done; at once.

"We'll have American," group mother said brightly. "We haven't had it for so long it will be new and—and old-fashioned. T o m m y, wouldn't you like to have American tonight?"

"Swiss," Tommy repeated, but with less pugnacity. His mouth relaxed. "Oh, well. If she wants American—all right."

The faces of the others, now that they knew what they wanted, grew happy. "American," they began to say. "We want that; we want American tonight."

GROUP MOTHER had to look up American style in a couple of cook books before she could find the recipes, but after she found them she cooked a very mouth-watering dinner. It turned out that one or two of the younger children had never had apple pie before. They were *thrilled* over it.

After dinner, they played the Brand Game. This part of the day was what the syllabus for group mothers called Reasoned Discrimination in Preference, but they all agreed it was as much fun as any game, so why not call it that? To-

night the topic was breakfast food.

"Brand?" group father said, pointing his finger at Tommy.

"Bubble Pops," the boy answered, quick as a flash. Bubble Pops was new; it had just come on the shelves; not all the children knew the name yet. Group father smiled.

"Reason?" group father asked, pointing again.

"Bubble-light, p o p - c o r n crisp, gives needed bulk to bulk-starved modern systems!"

How well he knew it! Group mother laughed aloud, and all the children wriggled and smiled.

GROUP FATHER'S finger went around the circle, pointing. Mostly, the children gave the same brand Tommy had—though one or two mentioned older brands. They all got the reasons right. Later on, when the child who was asked to give the reason wasn't the child who had named the brand, it would be more difficult.

Group father's finger came to Marian, who was third from the end in the circle. "Brand?" he asked. Group mother, who knew him well, heard a note of apprehension in his voice.

"Wheat crisp."

It was an old brand, a brand

that hadn't been on the shelves for months, and it never had had much of a campaign to carry it. Group father frowned. "Why?" he wanted to know.

"I liked the way it felt in my mouth."

It wasn't the right reason, it wasn't a reason at all. Faces, here and there around the circle, began to wear the numb, blank look group mother dreaded so much. Tommy, his eyes shining with the joy of creation, saved the day.

"I know what she means!" he shouted. "I know! She means Wheat crisp has—has—has oral appeal!"

Group mother drew a long, happy sigh. He was going to be an ad-man; she was sure of it now. When a boy no older than Tommy started thinking creatively... She could hardly wait for it to be bedtime so she could start talking about it with group father.

MARIAN sat quite still for a minute. She pushed her chair back from the table and got up. "It's wasn't oral appeal," she said, "I don't care what you say. I just liked the way it felt in my mouth."

She walked away from the table. They heard the door of her room close.

"Let her go," Tommy said without turning. He hunched

his shoulders. "Let's go, gang! Let's go on to the next part! What slogan begins with the words, 'Nuttier, crisper...'? Think hard; you all know it. Ready? All together! Now!"

"Nuttier, crisper, more pro-

found,
Better flavor than fresh
ground!" their voices rang out. Their faces glowed with pleasure at getting it right.

He was giving them leadership too, group mother thought. She was *thrilled*.

The Brand Game continued. The children grew more boisterous. The group dwelling—with the enormous increase in consumers that had taken place in the last ten years, all the new group dwellings were being erected in the littoral—the group dwelling began to rock gently in the incoming tide.

NEXT DAY was Applied Product Selection, or, as the group called it, super-market day. The topic was cleansers, bleaches, and detergent flakes.

Group father coptered them in to the super-market. They had lunch at the soda fountain, which specialized in smorgasbord; they played amid the spun-glass snow and plastic rocks of the Kiddie Wonderland. By two o'clock, they were laughing and push-

ing their kiddie-sized shopping carts through the super-market aisles. Product Selection went quickly, since they knew what they wanted. By four they were back in the group dwelling again.

"And what did *you* bring back, Marian?" group mother asked when the others had displayed their products and given the reasons for their selections. "Show us, dear."

Marian looked down. Her hands were behind her back. "I didn't bring back *anything*."

There was a tiny silence. Then Tommy said, "She did too bring back something. She picked up something in the Kiddie Corral. She's got it in her hand."

Group father was already prying gently at Marian's fingers. "Dear, you mustn't have secrets," group mother told her helpfully "The others show us everything."

The hand, in the end, opened without much force from group father. They all bent forward eagerly to see what Marian had been carrying.

IT WAS a small irregular bit of grayish translucent stone, having, in its depths, a faint suggestion of silvery spangles. It wasn't very pret-

ty, really—not nearly so pretty as a synthgem.

"Why, it's just old junk!" Tommy said loudly, but group father was more generous. "You can keep it," he told Marian, folding her fingers over it. "We might even get you a little box to keep things like that in. 'Souvenirs of my super-market trips,' it could be called."

"That's a good idea," group mother said warmly, trying to fight the cold feeling in her chest. "We'll get boxes like that for all the kiddies. We're not due to take up Hobby Selection until summer, but it wouldn't hurt to start preparing ourselves for it now."

Marian's hand came open. The stone rolled on the table and dropped to the floor. "I don't want it," she said, blinking fast. "If everybody's going to have it, I don't want it any more." Tears began to roll down her cheeks, but she walked away with her head high.

The group parents had a long talk about her that night. They were worried. No use blaming Gilda for the quality of her group motherhood; what they wanted was to rescue Marian for consumership. In the end they decided they must just do the best they could with gentle, constant

suggestion and example. Tommy might be able to help.

THE CLIMAX came two days later, on doll and toy delivery day. Since Marian had joined the group late in the afternoon of Mail Order Choice Day, group mother had marked the catalogue for her, as she sometimes did for the less discriminating children, those who didn't know what they would want. Group mother had hesitated over triplet dolls—wonderful for educating little girls for consumer production—but she had settled at last on a life-sized baby with velva-plast skin; it slept, walked, talked, nursed, wet, and soiled its diaper.

The big, thrilling box arrived, the dolls and toys were given out. Marian received her new possession in silence. Her face seemed deliberately blank. She took the doll off to her room, though the others stayed in the living room with their toys.

An hour or so later, group mother was called from her detouring in the kitchen by Tommy. "Come and see," he said mysteriously. His eyes were shining. "Walk real light; you mustn't make any noise."

He led her down the buoyant corridor to Marian's room

and opened the door a trifle. "Look," he said, whispering.

For a moment group mother couldn't believe what she saw. Velva-plast is hard to break; Marian must have devoted a great deal of ingenuity to breaking it. Later, group mother decided that she had put the doll's head on the floor under a table leg and jumped up and down on the table until she produced the initial break. However that might be, the doll, in pieces, was lying on the floor now, and Marian, with blunt-nosed scissors, was working industriously at the head of it.

GROUP MOTHER succumbed to a burst of avastistic fury. She rushed into the room, caught Marian by the shoulders, and began shaking her. "You wicked, wicked girl!" she said passionately. "How dare you, how could you! You've broken your doll. You wasteful, wicked girl! Your beautiful new doll!"

She released Marian so suddenly that the girl staggered against the wall. For a moment, group mother fought for self-control. Then she said, more calmly, "Why did you do it, anyhow?"

Marian looked at her with bright, defiant eyes. "I hate it," she said, "I hate it. I want the doll I had at Gilda's. I

want *that* doll; I want the doll I loved!" She began to sob wildly. "I don't want to have to love new things all the time!"

In the face of such a failure in consumer education, there was nothing group mother could do. Without even consulting group father, she called the Child Direction authorities. In half an hour or so they came, very friendly, very polite, and took Marian, who was weeping and shuddering, away with them.

GROUP MOTHER, in bed that night with group father, tried to take an optimistic view of things. "They'll be able to argue with her, persuade her, won't they?" she asked. "At the Child Direction clinic, they'll show her how she's wrong. Don't you think they'll get her over it?"

"Um," group father grunted. He gave a sudden chuckling laugh. "I was just thinking. Suppose the Child Direction clinic doesn't help her? Then she'll be sent to one of the in-clinics, like the Orthoscopic School. Suppose that doesn't help, either? The authorities won't give up, of course; they'll try what they can do with deep analysis."

"Well?" group mother said rather sharply, for she didn't

like the possibilities group father was suggesting.

"Well, I was just thinking. In the end, she'll be a sort of consumer. She'll have learned a lot of consumership, from all the things the authorities have tried. She'll be a skilled consumer, when it comes to psychiatry."

Marian a consumer after all, and in spite of herself! Group mother giggled. Suddenly, she was feeling much better. How *discriminating* group father was!

She drew his head on to her shoulder and embraced him tenderly. "You're the nicest group father I've ever had," she told him warmly. "The very nicest. Yes, oh, yes."

"The latest one is always the nicest," group father answered; his voice sounded rather sad.

NOW THAT Marian was gone, life in the group dwelling settled down to being breathtakingly thrilling again. Some of the children went to other groups and new ones came, but they all were doing well. Group mother got a new group father. The group took up Hobby Selection and did marvellously with it. Now that Marian...

Yet sometimes group mother felt a paradoxical regret for the child. Her angry face

had been alive, her defiant eyes had been bright. The others were pliant, gentle, slogan-conscious...but their faces were a little like the faces of sheep. Group mother was glad that Tommy was still with the group.

The boy was developing wonderfully. He shot out slogans as a pinwheel shoots out sparks, he gave the others wonderful leadership. His vocation seemed certain. If group mother sometimes felt a little uneasy about him, she told herself it was because she couldn't believe in her good luck.

Summer passed, and Book Day came. Book Day came only twice a year, but it wasn't one of the most thrilling days. The children didn't like it as much as they did some of the other ones, though all of them over ten could read. Tommy, though, had always liked it especially.

The parcel was opened, and group mother gave Tommy the books she had helped him mark in the catalogue. There were four of them, all on the subject of advertising: *Admen*, *The Modern Magicians*; *Derge*, *The Wonderful Story of an Advertising Campaign*; *The Romance of Copywriting for Young People*; and *The Habit Shapers*. He took them

in his arms and went to his room to look at them.

IT WASN'T more than two hours later that group mother and group father knocked at his door. They were all going swimming in the surf near the group dwelling; they had some wonderful new water toys, and it was part of what the syllabus called Training for Competence in Play.

When Tommy didn't answer, group mother knocked again. When he still didn't answer she and group father grew alarmed. They opened the door and went in.

Tommy was sitting on the floor with his feet out in front of him; his face was as blank as a mask. The books group mother had ordered lay about him. Most of their pages were gone. He had folded the torn-out pages into paper hats and boats. They were all over the floor.

Group mother had to lick her lips and swallow before she could speak. "Tommy... Tommy, what's the matter? We're going swimming. In the nice green frothy water. With wonderful water toys. Don't you want to go swimming with the rest?"

He didn't answer. Group mother licked her lips again. She tried to think of more

effective persuasions, but she felt a sort of despair. It had never happened with Tommy before.

GROUP FATHER motioned her to silence. "Tommy, you've got to stop this," he said authoritatively. "We're going swimming. Swimming's fun. Don't you understand? You've got to want to go swimming. You've got to want."

Something—annoyance, fatigue, something—came into the impassivity of Tommy's face. "I don't want to have to want *anything*," he said.

"But Tommy," group mother said—she was almost crying—"but Tommy, you can't not want things! Why, you're going to be an ad-man! You're going to spend your life telling people about all the thrilling, wonderful things they want!"

Tommy made a gesture like a man brushing a fly off his nose. "Don't want," he said. He sounded very tired. His

eyes closed; his face grew blank. The group dwelling bobbed a little in the outgoing tide.

Group mother drew a shuddering breath. Tommy could be roused; she knew that, in the end, she could rouse him. All group children were this way sometimes. It was only that this was the first time for Tommy. It didn't mean anything; certainly not.

Yet, over his static head her eyes sought those of group father almost wildly. She was trembling from head to foot. Her hands were clenched on each other. Did group father see what she saw?

Had he heard in Tommy's words what she had? Had they sounded to him, against all reason, like the death warrant of a culture? The crack in the dam that presaged the roaring, uncontrollable flood? And did he feel at the thought, as she did, an intense relief?

