THE PLAY CONFESSIONS OF A BUSY MAN:
BY J. GEORGE FREDERICK

The play instinct in childhood is said to be a rehearsal of the primitive experience of the race, in common with all the other innocent savageries and selfishnesses of adolescent life.

Looking back upon my own boyhood, it seems to me that its most poignant memory is that of a desire to deal with things, rather than the oppressive load of thoughts which were so sternly urged upon me. In school I worked myself into despair over the elusive and seemingly useless ideas and abstract propositions which constituted my curriculum; while many hours of my spare time were voluntarily spent watching, and, if possible, helping in a printing office, which was the special object of my fascination.

To take proofs, no matter how heavy the proof roller; to set type, no matter how tediously it went, and to "kick" a press, no matter how sore of limb it made me, was as purely play to me as when, in my infancy, I had set up tin soldiers and shot them down with paper cannon balls. And when, being rather hopelessly mediocre in "scholarship," I was allowed to go to my beloved printing office, under formal apprenticeship, the entire exacting course of my daily labor for years was always invested with a play-charm which lightened even the plentiful drudgery of the work.

Before my apprenticeship was over, my maturing mind brought me, in what was very probably its psycho-physically normal time, to a taste and a delight in thought and reflection, and the time soon came when I was wanted for more important work than setting type.

From that date to this my vocation has been to put thought into words; and the happy, child-like time when I put words into type and printed them, all day long, is probably gone forever.

But when we who were children become adults, we have only added a superstructure to childhood—we have achieved, but the latter-day progress of the race; and its adolescent period is a very vital part of our natures still. If in our vocations and avocations we utilize but the lately-refined portion of our capacities, and neglect the more primitive soil from which it grew, Nature's plans for roundly balanced individuality are thwarted.

I used to be ashamed of the play-passion which I felt occasionally, even after life had settled down to very sober earnest. I could see no dignified reason why a man who ran a business and delved in
philosophy and who had cut all his wisdom teeth some years before, should desire to play with saw and plane, or type and press, or trowel and spade. I crushed my desire to enter boyishly into the miniature telegraph line and other electrical experiments which some of the boys who were about the house were absorbed in. I wondered why I should be so childish as to construct waterfalls and mill-wheels while idling in a meadow, or whittle curious things with a jackknife.

As the years went on, however, and business and writing left me more and more without opportunity for a great deal of outdoor recreation, and used only my faculties of judgment, reflection, analysis, literary composition, etc., I became bolder; and one day, with a boy's delight, I fitted up a corner of my basement with a bench and tools; with electrical paraphernalia, with a little printing outfit—much of which had been hoarded from boyhood in the attic.

To go down to that little corner, after a day's aggravating mental drains, and make something for the house, a magazine rack, or something even simpler; or to set up and print a little "symphony" of my own writing, or some small piece of printing which I could use; or just to find out new things about electricity by playful experiment—was an unlimited and unending source of rejuvenation to me.

In time I widened my field and systematized it. I added gardening, and plumbing and painting and paperhanging, and other things, until I fear I am a living incarnation of the old-fashioned epithet, "jack-of-all-trades." I take a delight in doing odd jobs, and would not for worlds miss the fun of doing what heretofore a duly accredited mechanic had to do about the house.

Of course my philosophic temperament has often asked the question why and wherefore, and has probably gently tolerated this play tendency of mine as a bit of childhood clinging to an adult with unseasonable persistence. But serious reflection, coupled with observation of other men, has made me give this part of me an honorable and rational place in the economy of my mature individuality.

If this play-work has the power to refill the cups of my spontaneity, even recuperate my vitality, and soothe tired nerves, it must be a very important psychological and physical need of my nature. It is evident to me that the body, the mind, and even the soul benefits by working at something with the hands. All the refinements of mind are psychological progressions from more simple sense-experiences; the greater part of our human nature is built for concrete expression in work with the hands and senses.
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President Hadley, of Yale, has most accurately divided mental character into three divisions—those who are most interested in things (mechanics, etc.); those who are most interested in social activity and management (business men, politicians, etc.), and those who are most interested in ideas (thinkers, writers, clergymen, etc.). Normal men have all of these tendencies, for one grows from the other; but practically always one is predominant in an individual. The immediate tendency, therefore, is to cultivate the predominant faculty to the almost total exclusion of the others; and this specialization is one of the peculiar banes of all modern life, and American life in particular, it seems to me.

When one realizes how very many people are engaged in the two latter classes of activity, which engage the sense-faculties very little, if at all; and also, how many even of those who are at work making things must operate a machine and confine themselves to one part of a product, then one realizes how far away from the normal use of all our faculties we have strayed.

So real and universal is this human joy in making and shaping things that it will not be lost to the race, even by generations of starvation. I know a very dignified bank president who has a curious little shop at the back of his suburban estate, the keys to which he carefully guards. In this little retreat I have had the pleasure of seeing him put in operation a wholly purposeless system of shafts and pulleys, driven by a little motor, and have watched him devise new ways of transferring the power and of applying it, which gave him the keenest pleasure. There he works out models for some of his inventive mechanical ideas—none of which are as yet valuable or patentable. There also he has made sundry chairs and other handi-craft pieces, and has even attempted to mould in clay. He tells me that anticipation of “fooling” in his little shop adds cheer to his arduous work in the bank, and, he believes, postpones old age indefinitely.

There are many like this bank president, and many who would like to be like him, but have not the courage or the time. I verily believe that if one half or more of men in business were to sincerely choose the thing they would like to do all day long, if there were no other consideration to think of, it would be to work in wood, or metal, or clay, or earth. The number of men who secretly envy the carpenter, the farmer, the artisan of every sort, while a real or fancied necessity drives them to labor at the more effete task which brings the larger amount of money which modern standards of living seem to demand.
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I do not wish to formulate a philosophy about this tendency of mine, and the commonness of it among men. I simply wish to record my opinion, influenced by my remembrance of boyhood, that play-work is a very vital part of education; and also to encourage among "grown-ups" the adoption of some form of work with the hands, in which the heart takes delight. It is probably true that it is impractical in this modern life for a man who has an artist's delight in making things with his hands to cease his business and devote himself to it completely. Undoubtedly many a good joiner and cabinet-maker or wood-carver, or potter, or other artisan is spoiled by becoming a banker or office man; but against such loss society could not consistently protest. Ink and organization have so revolutionized the world's work that thousands of men perform their day's labor by sitting at a desk and dealing purely with symbols and the means of communication. The world of ideas has become so supreme and immense that the world of things has become a complete and undersized servant to it. But our physical and mental faculties which demand work upon concrete things, the age-old development of artisanship in us, will not be put away so easily. You cannot kick away the scaffolding by which you have climbed high, without endangering equilibrium.