

WHY MEN PLAY

By R. STANLEY WEIR

IF it be thought that one should justify what this topic assumes, namely, that men *do* play, the proofs could easily be assembled from every land and age. Notwithstanding such arresting influences as wars, revolutions, Puritanism, industrialism or a sort of superior intellectualism, the love of play has perennially persisted; not merely in children, but in adults; not merely, I would add, in Britain and America, but wherever the human race has dwelt. Greece and Rome were great playing nations; as were, if cuneiform and other inscriptions attest the truth, the ruling races before them. Certainly, in what may be called Anglo-Saxondom today, the widespread predilection for collective and individual sports; the modern return to Nature, not to indulge the contemplative mood but for play; the books upon books that appear treating of games and amusements of all sorts; the scheduled competitions that attract their thousands of spectators, their tens of thousand readers and even the attention, at times, of continents, are surely proof that the description of man as a playing animal is not the least apt of those applied to him.

It must be admitted that there was a time, still in the recollection of many, when play in an adult was deemed a shameful waste of the fleeting hours. Even to look on at play was perilous to a reputation. The Saturday half-holiday was long denied. Even school-boys were begrudged the time devoted to games; much more profitably, it was taught, could their spare moments be employed in studious tasks. Although the educational value of play was recognized by Plato and other masters, an antagonism like that expressed by the pietist Tollner long dominated commercial and academic circles. The latter were not perhaps so pronounced in their eschatological convictions as the good Tollner, but on all other points they concurred. "Play of whatever sort," said he at a conference, "should be forbidden in all evangelical schools, and its vanity and folly explained to children, with warnings of how it turns the mind away from God and works destruction to their immortal souls." Happily, against this kind of thing there has always been more or less rebellion, and of late there have been signs of more complete emancipation. There is still absent, however, even in our own day, a full and frank recognition, generally, of the social and economic value of play in the evolution of the race. Kipling's sneer at "muddled oafs and flannel'd fools," although secretly resented by many, was openly questioned by few or none. He correctly voiced the average sentiment that play has no place in the life of a great nation and is valueless as a preparation for a national crisis. But Kipling was wrong and his rhetoric unjust.

The Iron Duke was much saner and sounder when he traced the victory at Waterloo to the playing-fields of Eton. Victories of a peaceful sort also, it is being seen, may yet be traced to a similar source. The world in which we live, its civilization and happiness, may yet be secured and preserved by a thorough-going recognition of the healing and softening virtues of play, and its power to awaken and develop human faculties where these have been stunted and arrested in growth from the lack of play. Happily, indeed, there are signs of emancipation for those whose joy in play ceased, as in so many cases, with unconscious infancy or the briefest childhood.

The growing vogue of golf, for example, was one indication, at least until the war broke out and interrupted so much, that not even the great increase in the volume of the world's business with its augmented demands upon time and energy had arrested man's playing proclivities. That vogue might, possibly, be partially explained by a general increase in wealth, for golf, although not necessarily so, is often, with its social accessories, a somewhat expensive pastime; it might also be explained as an agreeable reaction from the strenuous world of affairs; or as a result of electric and steam facilities for exodus from town to country; but, in the main, it was a proof of emancipation from the domination of the idea that play was the heritage of children only (even this was grudgingly conceded), and proof of the fact that to play, and to see others play, is a natural and peculiar characteristic of the genus homo and worthy of respect as such.

There is or was also (for if it took money to make the mare go, it was equally true of the motor), the growing and not uncouthly vogue for motoring. Of making many motors, there would seem, indeed, to be no end. Motoring, to the million, is more than a convenient means of locomotion upon serious enterprises; it is now a form of play. Unlike golf it is a form of play in which (the pun is unavoidable) not the motor but the sensory apparatus of man is exercised and indulged. Golf, although the reaction of a clean drive or other successful stroke powerfully and agreeably affects the senses, calls for action in the player's motor apparatus, to wit, his hands and arms and legs guided by eye and brain. His head, the professors tell him, he must keep still. Motoring, in the limousine or runabout sense, is, on the other hand, the use and gratification of man's sensory apparatus; his love, however he comes by it, of rapid flights on land or water or, as now, in the air; his pleasure in a luxurious, springy seat, something akin to which was enjoyed as a child by leaping in the

haystack; his delight in new sights and scenes; and, if he be his own chauffeur, the joy in the sense of control.

But man plays passively as well as actively in these emancipated days. If our inclination, modified largely by our means, our opportunities or our chance predilections, is not for the golfer's green fields or the motorist's highways, we may purchase a seat in Philadelphia or Boston; or, if youthful and impecunious, climb to some contiguous height, to behold the Red Sox trounce the Phillies or be trounced. Common it is for social critics to reproach the "audience" on such occasions for their sloth as mere spectators. The truth is, however, that the thousands of thrilled and excited onlookers are, in a real sense, participants. The sensory apparatus of each follows or accompanies the motor apparatus of the players in every throw or catch, every hit or run. We do not, after all, play entirely by proxy. The throngs that surround champions at play are not entirely idle physiologically.

If now we may ask the question, Why do men play? we shall find that, like most simple questions, it is really a very profound one. Social origins are always difficult to trace, and the origin of play as a human characteristic is perhaps as obscure and ancient as the origin of man himself. During the last quarter of a century, however, a few scholars have been devoting themselves to the systematization of the play of animals and of man. Among the latest and perhaps most authoritative books are "The Play of Man" and "The Play of Animals," by Karl Groos of Basel. Here, a distinction is made between, first, the impulses by which the human infant gradually wins control over his own psycho-physical organism without direct regard to his companions; and, second, those other impulses as they are directly concerned with his relations to others. To denote the playful exercises of the first order of impulses, the expression "playful experimentation," already known in child-psychology, is used. The playful activity of the senses is illustrated by the child early beginning to grasp or handle every object within its reach, a motor action indeed, but one, also, gratifying the instinct of touch. The mouth of the infant is, of course, very sensitive to touch stimuli, the lips and tongue especially. Professor Groos thinks that the later pleasure derived from smoking is due more than is commonly realized to this instinct, as is also the habit of holding in the mouth a broken twig or wisp of hay or tooth-pick. Water appears to afford delightful sensations of touch to the infant as it does to growing children and their elders. Here, doubtless, we have the beginning of a later fondness for swimming. The regular ticking of a watch excites the liveliest interest in the merest infant. The enjoyment of rhythm in music abides with us through life. Why this is so is obscure, unless it is attributed to the common habit of entertaining infants and children by music and verse-jingles in which rhythm is strongly marked.

It is impossible to repeat here the numerous illustrations of how the sensory and later the motor apparatus of the child is developed as given by Professor Groos. Enough to say that he, in common with men like Grasberg of Wurzburg, Ribot of France, Colazzo of Italy and J. Mark Baldwin of America, are devoting themselves with enthusiasm to a systematization of the facts concerning play; with a view to the discovery of those principles or criteria which will adequately explain why men play, and to what extent play is necessary or desirable in the development of the race.

I must add with reference to the second order of impulses above referred to, that here are included fighting plays and their imitations: boxing, the football of today and *mêlées* of the days of chivalry, playful duels, board games with chess at their head, games of cards and chance, hunting and courtship plays, dramatic and other imitative actions, social or concerted plays.

So far, while it must be admitted that no convincing explanation of the origin or function of human play has been propounded, enough has been done in the way of close observation and systematization to reveal that the subject is of astonishing interest and of, possibly, enormous significance. This can be shown quite as well by a brief and critical exposition of one or two imperfect but commonly received theories as in any other way. Perhaps the best known explanation is that of Herbert Spencer, who first attempted a scientific formation of it. Schiller was its first exponent in Germany, when he accounted for play by calling it an aimless expenditure of exuberant strength which is its own excuse for action. Spencer, in his "Principles of Psychology," says:

In the more-evolved creatures there often recurs an energy somewhat in excess of immediate needs. . . . Better nutrition, gained by superiority, occasionally yields a surplus of vigor. The appetites being satisfied, there is no craving which directs the overflowing energies to the pursuit of more prey, or to the satisfaction of some pressing want. . . . Hence play of all kinds—hence this tendency to superfluous and useless exercise of faculties, that have been quiescent. . . . Gratifications that accompany actions performed without reference to ends, will mostly be those which accompany actions predominating in the creature's life. And hence the first form of them called play is shown in the superfluous activity of the Sensori-Motor apparatus.

This theory of surplus energy, as it has been called, will be found, upon examination, to be an incomplete explanation of play. One rather suspects that the upholders are misled by the figure of speech contained in the words. Potential energy does not of necessity demand an outlet, as witness many men whose herculean powers long lie quiescent and are used only in an emergency. Again, it is a fact that many will persist in play to the point of exhaustion, long after surplus or normal energy has been expended. Recently, on a raw October day on the

Kanawaki golf links near Montreal, I saw James Braidwood in his eighty-sixth year, probably the oldest golfer not only of Canada but of America, playing the course with Andrew Forgan of the well known golfing family of that ilk, aged eighty. It was not certainly any instinct to get rid of superfluous integration of ganglion cells that induced these octogenarians to play golf. The characterization of play as "superfluous and useless exercise of faculties" and as a mere simulation of activities is, then, rather summary and uncritical. The fact of adult and even octogenarian play should rather suggest some deep-seated impulse deserving our respect, pending a closer investigation of its history and cause.

The theory of the "recreation of exhausted powers" has also been advanced as an explanation of man's love of play. It is also the favorite apology, the world not having yet advanced to the view that play serves valuable ends in itself. But it is apparent to every observer that men will continue to play long after the limits of recreation have been passed, just as they will play without surplus energy. Play is often, doubtless, a recreation, but is as often indulged in, when the need of recreation is not apparent, for the pure joy of it. Recreation, too, as Herr Groos has pointed out, is often closely related to the very work of which we are weary. Fresh objects varying the direction of our efforts, a slight change in the psycho-physical attitude are often sufficient to dispel the sense of fatigue without recourse to play.

Some light is thrown upon the play-propensity in man by the tendency to repetition which is a mark of it. This is implied, perhaps, in the statement that play is often pursued to the limits of exhaustion. Most games, it may be noted, are framed upon the principle of repetition. The batter is never weary of batting the ball or of gaining bases. The golfer never tires of smiting his ball, or of proceeding from putting-green to putting-green. In games of cards, billiards, the acts of rowing, swimming, dancing and a hundred other amusements involving the simplest movements, the innate fondness for repetition is surely of great significance. In dancing the repeated movements, accompanied by music of strongly marked rhythm, itself a repetition of the beat at regular intervals, often result in a tranced condition—so great is their power.

Why the repetitious act peculiar to each kind of play should give rise to feelings of pleasure and satisfaction; why there should be an entire absence of desire to modify these by variations; why the rules

of each game are so conservative in their rigidity, would seem to point to the value of practice in sensori-motor acts with a view to perfection and mastery. In the economy of nature concentrated practice tends towards a more speedily acquired control, and the satisfaction thus experienced is proof of its value. Here we approach psychological aspects of our subject, and find in the "joy of being a cause," as it is termed, one of the fascinations of play. Again, as man seldom plays alone, always preferably with others, valuable social results ensue. Leadership is established by superior skill; comradeship by pleasurable associations.

The absorption of man in his play is assuredly one of his prominent characteristics. Is this fondness a thing to be encouraged or discouraged in the interests of the race? Are we justified in limiting play to children only as a preparation for life, and restricting it severely by public and private opinion in so far as the adult is concerned? One can understand a philosopher like Herbert Spencer, with ample physical and mental endowment, eschewing play, decriing it as "superfluous and useless exercise," and condemning a very skillful opponent at billiards as having obviously misspent much of his life; but what of those of less complete equipment mentally and physically? May it not be that they are, by their indulgence in play, contributing to the increased efficiency of the race; and are thus obedient to the leading and suggestion of Mother Nature herself, who was once thought, under a different metaphor, to be wholly corrupt, but now, by the wise, is venerated for her strong, silent, though often misunderstood intentions? It may seem paradoxical to suggest that men play, the better to fit themselves for the struggle for existence; but this may well be the truth; and that Nature, as she so often does, rewards obedience to her dictates with pleasurable feelings. There is now not the slightest doubt that play as a means of developing the sensori-motor apparatus of the child is essential; but why should we say that that process of development with its priceless mental reactions should at any time cease in the life of the individual? There is profound truth in the saying of Schiller that man is most human when he plays. What, then, if he ceases to play?

Our world truly is a work-a-day world; and yet man constantly strives to ease and simplify his tasks; thus converting drudgery into an approximation of play. The highest form of work is that which is performed with joy. When we work with joy we play.

