

Playing the Game

By Austin Harrison

IF there is one thing that an Englishman learns at school it is to "play the game." Already in the nursery we are taught not to tell stories about little brother, to take our bumps tearlessly, to tell the truth and shame the devil (as the phrase goes), so that when at last, fitted out in trousers, we enter school most boys have a fairly good notion of the system of life required of them. A decade or so ago we called it being a gentleman, but the definition is not so plausible to-day. Anyhow, this is our national attitude, the one we are most proud of; also it is quite peculiar to this country; actually it is the only discipline we respect.

Playing the game at school is unquestionably a fine education for a boy, especially as the chief things which occupy him are games. Games are played by rules—without rules, games would be silly and unprofitable, and the stricter the rules the better the games. That is recognised by every schoolboy in his first term. And this training hits us, as it were, on our soft spot. No boy was ever yet known so bold as to refuse to "walk out" if the umpire gave him out. We acquire a code of honour which is at once a system and an attitude, and it accompanies us to the grave. It is our philosophy of valour or modern chivalry. I have known men destitute of all the virtues who play cricket with an attention to rule and the chivalrous observance of rule which they extend to no other sphere of life. Nor can I remember ever having cheated at games, except perhaps in the early stages of golf, when no doubt I did say I had done a hole in nine, when in reality I had played eleven shots; but then golf is not temperamentally English, and its technique, even in the matter of counting, is not so easy as it seems.

Taking myself as a test, I think I can claim to be quite honourable about games—I remember once in a village match as captain refusing to allow the rival top-scorer to

continued...

PLAYING THE GAME

-the second of nine pages-

be given out by the yokel umpire, with the result that he knocked off the runs and beat us. Yet none of our eleven called me names in consequence. They accepted my observance of fair play as a local point of honour. Now if I were asked if I had never lied, never been unfair, unjust, cruel, wrong, stupid, or what not, I should not like to pretend that I had not; had not so erred often, and in many ways.

We play the game then (shall I say it?) like gentlemen. When we leave school we have this fine sense as the supreme law of our being; it is our real education. We enter life assuming this virtue in others, and its irradiation marks and unites us in a common bond of sympathy and discipline. It is the panache of club life, of the home, of Westminster; and the pleasant week-end, when we become again as schoolboys, is its Sabbath.

If this attitude is what may be called the virtue of our English civilisation, the most tangible, the most observed, the most harmonious sign of it, the drawbacks of this attitude are to all non-insular observers equally apparent and disadvantageous. Its very name, playing the game, signifies that games are the metal on which we expend our energies and virtues; and that means obviously that the physical ranks higher with us than the mind; in other words, that our code is drawn up far more with a view to our conduct in what, after all, is only a secondary interest in life, namely, recreation, while leaving to chance, or what inspiration we can derive from an attitude, our code for the real things in life, which, unfortunately for us, are not run by rules, and only too often are in direct conflict with all our training and preconceived notions of things in a world where we are apt to find intelligence, and the application of intelligence, competition, ambition, brain energy, and resourcefulness bewilderingly masterful and—perplexing.

Games do not teach a man to think and so create, because games are based on rules of adamantine endurance, and a man would as lief break two commandments than be called a "bad sport." This is our spirit—to codify life and so reduce our mental energies to a minimum.

But our code not only gives us an attitude, it provides us with a mental uniform. Out of the idea of playing the

PLAYING THE GAME

-the third of nine pages-

game we have evolved the etiquette of what we style "good form" or acceptance. We see this in every sphere of our life, from the manners of the Court down to those reigning in the servants' hall. And because of our subservience to the one, we are also the slaves of the other. But acceptance is the enemy of the intellect, for the soul of life is progress. All the time the game acts like a mental break. It is the Englishman's sentiment. Just as the boy is appraised for his physical powers at games, and not in the least by the other boys for his mental or scholastic abilities, so in after-life the man preserves his schoolboy outlook, his schoolboy discipline, his schoolboy pretence or swank, and always with a scarcely concealed derision he looks upon the man who thinks—the artist, the creator, the bohemian, the pathfinder—even as at school he looked down on all education which was not physical.

Such things as system, organisation, logic, originality, are distasteful to him. Quite naturally. Games are played by rules which relieve him from thinking. He prefers to regard life physically, not intellectually. Trained on the mechanism of muscle, he naturally neglects the machinery of the brain, or rather affects to neglect it, because as a schoolboy brains were "stuck up." He would far rather be an "international" than an artist, a philosopher, a saint, or a creator. And the spirit narrows him, stultifies him. It causes him to hate what is new, to suspect innovation, to dislike creation, to codify life and thought. His main object is not to be ruffled with "new fangled" notions and ideas, for his desire is to play the game as he sees it. And that is, of course, why we in this island, apart from the naturally conservative influences of insularity, are invariably ten or twenty years behind Continental movements, whether in art, music, thought, inventions, and applied science, even in our own games, as the "All Blacks" taught us at football.

Playing the game is not only our virtue; it is our vanity. From time to time we get stirred up, as in the Boer War; but things soon settle down again, and though Bernard Shaw has for years relentlessly battered us for this conservatism of ours, we look upon him as an entertainer rather than as a reformer, and really enjoy being made fun of. We learn to take fun at school. Practical joking is a natural

PLAYING THE GAME

-the fourth of nine pages-

part of our expression because, again, it relieves us from using our minds, from being "serious," from taking things seriously. All this is reflected in our art and our attitude towards art. The serious play bores us; the truthful biography is "bad form." Novels must end happily, and be constructed on the conventions. Always our idea is to eschew the unpleasant, to pretend that life is milk and honey, to avoid its facts, which are the real tragedies and comedies of life. We don't want to know. In the old days we drove Byron out of the country. To this day Shelley, our sweetest poet, is branded as a blasphemer. It is so much more convenient to have our religion, our politics, our codes and institutions planned and ordained for us, because all we have to do then is to adapt ourselves, *i.e.*, to play the game.

In a word, though we are individually perhaps the cleverest people in Europe, collectively we are the most conservative, and deliberately so. It is our national pride. "We muddle through," we say, or we "Wait and see," as Mr. Asquith defines it. Occasionally a man like Lord Haldane tells us we must pay more attention to education, but no one minds. As we don't take things seriously, so we don't take our politicians too seriously. It would not be "good form" to take them seriously. Only Labour tries to do that, or the Irish, the Celt. They play the game—we play the game. The Empire, we say; it exists. We always have come through; the spirit of England is the thing, then we have the spirit, and the money, and the ships.

It is a common thing to hear travelled Englishmen say: "I don't understand how we are what we are, seeing that the amateur is everywhere top-dog." What they mean is that a people which leaves things to chance and higgler-mugger ought not to win in life. The answer to that is, of course, our individualism. It is the old-fashioned big family which made our Empire—the younger sons who had to go out and fend for themselves. There is a healthy counter-irritant to the insular complacency of playing the game, which is the incentive it gives to character and individuality. Our self-satisfaction goads the rebels to rebel, the creators to fight, the ambitious to achieve. And this is at once our paradox and strength.

PLAYING THE GAME

-the fifth of nine pages-

If nothing succeeds like success in a country where physical achievement is the summit of man's desire—our exaggerated hero-worship is religiously kept up by the Press—it is equally true that nothing drives a man more to success and more to excess than the obstructions placed in the way of the egocentric and the individual by forms and formulæ and the mental anæsthesia of a majority who refuse to "grow up." In the "country of the blind" those who *can* see will see. All the time they itch to burst the harness which straps in respectability to mediocrity. They hate the blinkers of institution-ism. They cannot conform. They don't, and the curious part of it is that they are not expected to. This, again, is part of our strength. The rebels are the "odd men" in the State. They abound. As we know, we are a people of cranks, faddists, and lonely knights charging the wind-mills of creed and principle, idea and idealism, principle and theory, and some go up and some go down, which the more successful get *fêted* in our drawing-rooms.

The drawing-rooms of those whose hereditary, class, instinctive and interested business it is to play the game. As the majority stick to convention and code, so the others, the outsiders, pose, and are expected to pose (Bernard Shaw, for instance, established a knicker-bocker uniform as a protest of distinction and rebellion). But the pose itself becomes a convention and a code, and so neutralises its own purpose. It places. The creators, too, find themselves playing the game, their game. The moment they are tabulated, they become only another paradox in the paradox which stifles us.

When an Englishman says of another man, "He is a superior fellow," he implies that he does not play the game—wear the orthodox clothes, say the orthodox things, conform, move, and think with the fashions (of thought as well as of the tailors) of the times. In a word, the superior man is the "swot" of his old school-days, the chap who read Pater, say, when he ought to have been "out running" or kicking a football about in the House yard. Every foreigner who comes to these islands is struck by this curious habit of ours of hiding our lights under a bushel, of avoiding serious discussion (except in politics), of disclaiming authority, knowledge, wisdom, of shutting our-

PLAYING THE GAME

-the sixth of nine pages-

selves up and the vital truth within us, seeking always to cloak under the semblance of form the affirmation of our own individuality. Our aversion to expert knowledge, our neglect of technical science, the conceited indifference with which we treat our poets, artists, thinkers, discoverers, and truth-seekers, while covering with honours our placemen, our rhetoricians, our limelight-men, the Pan-jandrum of Mammon or the hustings—this attitude derives from our reliance on the physical rather than on the mind, and is the result unquestionably of our inferior education.

It has led to the establishment of false reputations and false values because of the lack of any standard whereby to test them. We have no Academy of Letters, no Ministry of Fine Arts, no national opera, no national school of art; till quite recently we had no technical schools. All is left to the voluntary effort. Here, again, neglect leads to incentive. The Pitman, Clarke, Polytechnic schools are instances, but they arise in their own despite. We who possess the finest literary drama in the world have no National Theatre, no school of dramatic art, no standard. Poets like Davidson and Middleton die in our midst, of starvation; only when they are dead do we discover them. Our magnificent men of science are not used in any scheme of government—they are not politicians; the politicians as such have no use for them. Brains, real brains, are at a discount in the country of extrinsic success, while the lip-servers, the big talkers, those whose power perishes in their graves, drive about in the chariots of fortune.

Even when a man like Lord Roberts tries to make us think, we scoff and heed him not. In entering upon a campaign of reform he ceased to be one with the crowd; he became an outsider, another educationalist. His words fell on deaf ears—he was not a wind-bag, he was not a politician; that is to say, he was not the spokesman of a constituency. But we listened to Isaac Trebitsch, and put him in Parliament. He pandered to our foibles, our vanity, our blather of the hour. Lord Roberts went about like the poet with a noble poem, the dramatist with a non-commercial play, the inventor without a syndicate, the thinker without a private income—unheard, unwanted. And this failure of our greatest

PLAYING THE GAME

-the seventh of nine pages-

soldier is the exact reason of the success of the foreign mountebank. The man told us what we did not want to know, the rogue told us what we did want to know.

"Playing the game" did not help us there. How could it? An attitude, however noble and inspiring, is not the key to life or knowledge or wisdom—things in themselves inaccessible because above all codes, definitions, or absolute precepts of conduct. We spurned the soldier, and accepted the politician, not because the country is insane, but because its values had got out of proportion, because it lacked perspective, because there was no standard to measure men by, because there was no true national sense and responsibility. So the actor won; by actor I mean the platform gentleman, the speaker as opposed to the thinker, who generally is no orator.

Indeed, our standard had largely come to be the platform. Hence the ease with which lawyers attain to political power; they can argue. *What* they say is not the point; the criterion is their forensic ability. In an individualist State, the megaphone tells. We love arguing. So to-day we are still arguing about the voluntary principle and what not. In a real sense speech is the curse of our civilisation, though we are the poorest speakers in Europe.

In war, a people discovers itself as in no other time; war which, to use the words of von der Goltz, "is to-day entirely the *business of the nation*, not of its leaders." Playing the game is only half the battle in war, as we are slowly finding out. When hostilities broke out last August, we thought we could go on with the old methods and the old values, trusting to our great spirit and that Providence which has stood us in such good stead. Though our scientists explained the value of cotton in war material, we paid no attention, any more than we did for months to the German spy system, and to the urgent necessities of organisation, discipline, and direction. We thought we knew better. We thought our spirit was sufficient. We thought we had nothing to learn.

I am not seeking to criticise; I merely wish to indicate our weak spot; nor, of course, is there the slightest originality in the diagnosis. Benjamin Franklin in 1747 wrote this, I think, in *Plain Truth*:—

PLAYING THE GAME

-the eighth of nine pages-

"It is said the wise Italians make this proverbial remark on our nation, viz., 'The English feel, but they do not see'; that is, they are sensible of inconveniences when they are present, but do not take sufficient care to prevent them: their natural courage makes them too little apprehensive of danger, so that they are often surprised by it, unprovided of the proper means of security. When 'tis too late, they are sensible of their imprudence: after great fires they provide buckets and engines; after a pestilence they think of keeping clean their streets and commons and shores, and when a town has been sacked by their enemies, they provide for its defence, &c. This kind of after-wisdom is, indeed, so common with us as to occasion the vulgar, though very significant saying, when the steed is stolen you shut the stable door. . . .

"But the more insensible we generally are of public danger, and indifferent when warned of it, so much the more freely, openly, and earnestly ought such as apprehend it to speak their sentiments; that, if possible, those who seem to sleep may be awakened to think of some means of avoiding or preventing the mischief before it is too late."

More apposite words could not be found to describe our present position and its requirements—the result of "waiting to see," which means not seeing till the shock is upon us. In the old days, "playing the game" was at least a standard; it stood for certain robustious qualities which, on the whole, were lived up to. But modern civilisation is *commercial*. And playing the game means acceptance of the existing order of things. That is our difficulty to-day. The Press is gagged, the House is gagged, sent packing for a holiday at a moment when intelligent criticism is of the utmost importance, and Mr. Asquith continues "weighing and balancing," which is the latest version of wait and see. It is because of this code that we have no public responsibility.

The game to-day means hypocrisy. It treacles all our public life, sapping moral honesty, moral courage, undermining impersonality and straightforwardness. As the game now stands for hush-up, men play hide and seek, and in every sphere they are afraid. "My position," they say, "I dare not. A man must look after himself, you know." This hypocrisy, the condition of commercialism, or mate-

PLAYING THE GAME

-the last of nine pages-

rialism before spiritualism, warps our judgment, blunts our perceptions, deadens and leavens us under the thralldom of money-making worldliness; it stifles the truth—man—and lets in the fraud, the superficial, the specious, the charlatan, the actor-type of politician, and—the nimble foreigner.* All the time “Filbert” scores in the slum of fashion, humbug, sensation, and sentimentality. In the land of hypocrisy, playing the game has no longer any true meaning, for those who do play it cannot assume responsibility, and always they are led by those who pretend to play it, but play it for their own material ends.

The last words Lord Roberts spoke to the nation were these :—

“The appeal has again gone forth for men—more men. Two years ago, at a crowded meeting in Manchester, I said to my fellow-countrymen: ‘Arm, and prepare to quit yourselves like men, for the time of your ordeal is at hand.’ I claim a hearing, therefore, when I say to-day: ‘Arm, and prepare to quit yourselves like men, for the time of your ordeal has come.’”

I know nothing finer than this simple message by the man whose warnings we mocked at. That is England, the heritage he left to us. In the patriotism of this soldier it is for us to find ourselves once more, and so win to our national completion spiritually as well as physically. He played the game, the real game—of country. To-day we have to play ours, no longer individualistically. sentimentally, chaotically, amateurishly, but *nationally*, as he would fain have taught us. It will be the finest game we ever have played.

* We talk a good deal about shutting out the Germans after the war, but we never shall unless we change our non-critical attitude, and work and think as hard as we play.