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# THE STORY OF A SAND PILE

G. STANLEY HALL.

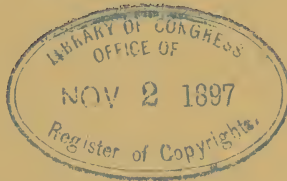


# THE STORY OF A SAND-PILE

BY

*novels*  
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THE SAND PILE.

# The Story of a Sand-Pile



THE town of B. is a quiet community of a few score families of farmers, some twenty or thirty miles from Boston. Among the few cottagers who spend the summer months there is the Rev. Dr. A., a professor at Cambridge, Mass., and widely known as an author. The family consists of Mrs. A. and two bright healthy boys, now fourteen and twelve, whom I will here call, respectively, Harry and Jack. Nine summers ago the mother persisted, not without some inconvenience, in having a load of fine clean sand hauled from a distant beach and dumped in the yard for the children to play in. What follows might be called a history of that load of sand, which I will try to sketch in the most literal and unadorned way, as I saw and heard of it, for the sake of its unique educational interest.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE SAND-PILE.

The "sand-pile" at once became, as everyone who has read Froebel or observed childish play would have expected, the one bright focus of attraction, beside which all other boyish interests gradually paled. Wells and tunnels; hills and roads like those in town; islands and capes and bays with imagined water; rough pictures drawn with sticks; scenes half reproduced in

the damp, plastic sand and completed in fancy; mines of ore and coal, and quarries of stone, buried to be rediscovered and carted to imaginary markets, and later a more elaborate half-dug and half-stoned species of cave-dwelling or ice-house—beyond such constructions the boys probably did not go for the first summer or two. The first and oldest "house," of which tradition survives, was a board pegged up on edge with another slanted against it, under which toys were taken from the nursery to be sheltered from showers. Next came those made of two bricks and a board. The parents wisely refrained from suggestions, and left the hand and fancy of the boys to educate each other under the tuition of the mysterious play-instinct.

#### HORSES, COWS, AND OXEN.

One day a small knot of half-rotten wood was found, a part of which suggested to Harry the eye and head of a horse, and a horse it at once became, though it had nothing to suggest tail or legs. In another artificial horse soon attempted these were represented by roughly whittled projections. Gradually wooden horses, made in spans for firmer standing on uneven ground, held together by a kind of Siamese-twins commissure, to which vehicles could be conveniently attached, were evolved. These horses are perhaps two inches long, with thread tail and <sup>made</sup> main, pinhead eyes, and a mere bulb, like the Darwinian protuberance on the infolded margin of the human helix, for an ear. For the last two or three years this form has become rigidly conventionalized, and horses are reproduced by the jig-saw as the needs of the community require, with Chinese fidelity to this pattern. Cows and oxen, with the characteristic distinctions in external form strongly



accented, were drawn on paper or pasteboard and then cut or sawn into shape in wood. Those first made proved too small, compared with later standards of size, and so were called yearlings and calves, and larger "old steers" and "Vermont spotted cattle" were made. Pigs and sheep came later, poultry alone being still unshapely, hens consisting of mere squares of wood of prescribed size.

#### FURTHER DEVELOPMENT.

There is no further record or memory of the stages of development of this community, for such it soon became by the gradual addition of half a dozen other congenial boys from the neighborhood, and I can only describe the buildings, government, tools, money, trade, laws, men, etc., as I found them. Nearly a dozen farms were laid out on one main and several lesser streets, somewhat like those in town, each, perhaps, five or six feet square, with tiny rows of stone for walls and fences, with pasture and mow-lots, and fields planted with real beans, wheat, oats, and corn, which is topped before it has spindled, and with a vase or box for a flower garden. A prominent feature of these farms is at present the gates, which are admirably mortised and hung, and perhaps represent the high-water mark of skill in wood-work. This unique prominence of a single feature on which attention is concentrated is a typical mark of childish production; as a girl or boy is drawn with buttons, or a hat, or a pocket, or a man with a pipe, or a house with a key-hole, etc., strikingly predominant. The view of this Lilliputian settlement from the road is quite picturesque. Houses and barns are perhaps a foot high, and there is a flag-pole, painted and sanded at the base, to prevent the

tiny inhabitants from whittling it, with a joint, and chords to raise and lower the flag, and a peg-ladder, the top towering perhaps two feet above the ground. There are pig-pens, with quite well-carved troughs, and hen-yards with wire-net fences, and a very undeveloped system of sewerage, suggested by a disastrous shower, and centering in a sunken tomato can.

#### BARNs AND AGRICULTURE.

Great attention has been bestowed on the barns. On one side are stanchions for cows, with stalls for horses, and others for yoked cattle, and stairs and lofts for hay, and genuine slanting roofs, and doors that clamp and bar inside against horse-thieves. One boy built a cupola and another a windmill, painted in many colors, on his barn, but this fashion did not take. The doors are not large enough for the boys' hands to enter with facility, and so the whole building was made so as to lift up from its floor on hinges. Hay is cut and dried, and sometimes stored in mows on scaffolds, while poorer hay is stacked out-of-doors about a skewer for a stack-pole. More recently, however, most hay is put up in pressed bales, about one by two inches, for market, or to be kept over for another year. Most other crops that are planted do not come to maturity, and so wheat, beans, corn, oats, etc., are bagged and sold or stored "as if" they had been grown by the seller. In this community, as often in real life in New England, the barn is often far larger, more expensive, and attracts more interest than the house. Only the outsides of the latter are attended to. The youngest boy alone, despite some ridicule for his girlishness, has embellished his house within, and set out moss, and planted flower-beds and vines with-

out. A young lady visitor thoughtlessly introduced a taste for luxury by painting not only shingles on the roof and bricks into the chimney, but lace curtains into the windows of one house. Another boy-proprietor dug and stoned up a well, made a long sweep and hung it with a counterweight in a natural crotch, and made a bucket of a cherry stone.

#### POPULATION.

The adult population of this community are men and women about two and a half inches tall, whittled out of wood. The women stand on a base made by their broad skirts, and the men stand on ground, or on carts, etc., by means of a pin projecting from the feet, by which they can be stuck up anywhere. One or both arms are sometimes made to move, but otherwise they are very roughly manufactured. They have been kept for years, are named Bill Murphy, Charles Stoughton, Peter Dana, etc., from real men in town, and each have families, etc. Each boy represents one of these families, but more particularly the head of it, whose name he takes, and whom he talks both to and for, nasally, as does the original Bill Murphy, etc. In fact, the personality of the boys is strangely merged in that of these little idols or fetiches. If it is heard that the original Farmer Murphy has done anything disreputable—cheated in a horse-trade, for instance—the other boys reproach or threaten with expulsion the boy who represents the wooden Murphy, greatly to his chagrin. The leg of one wooden man was blown off by a toy cannon accidentally, one Fourth of July, and he was given up as dead, but found after some months, and supplied with a new leg by the carpenter-doctor. The boys get up at night to bring these men in if they get left out

accidentally, keeping them in the house if they catch cold by such exposure, take them along in their pockets if they go to the city or on a pleasure trip, send them in letters and express packages to distant friends, to be returned, in order that they may be said to have been to this or that place. The best man has traveled most, keeps his farm in best order, has the most joints in his body, keeps dressed in the best coat of paint, and represents the best farmer in town, and is represented by the best boy. The sentiment toward these little figures is more judicial and paternal than that of little girls for dolls. Their smallness seems to add a charm akin to that of largeness in a doll for girls. If a new boy enters the community, or if accident or general consent, or any other cause, requires the production of new men, they are still made roughly after the old patterns, and far below the best skill the boys have now acquired in wood-work. Two years ago, when clothes began to be painted on these figures, those who were created as wage-workers were painted with overalls on. The question at once arose whether these men should be allowed to come into the house with their employers without a change of garments, which involved, of course, a new coat of paint. It was decided that they must live apart by themselves. Thus, the introduction of hired men marked the beginning of a system of castes. The boys' own wishes and thoughts are often, especially if of a kind that involves a little self-consciousness or restraint, expressed by saying half seriously that the little figure wishes to do this, or thinks that, etc. Their supposed relation to one another in the high tide of the play-spirit, dominates the actual relation of the boys to one another, as two little girls who were sisters were overheard say-

ing, "Let's play we are sisters," almost as if the play made the relation more real than the fact.

VALUABLE INDUSTRIAL TRAINING GIVEN.

Prominent among the benefits the "sand-pile" community has brought the boys, is the industrial training it has involved, particularly in wood-work. In this respect preparation for the summer is made to enliven the long Cambridge winters. The evolution of the plough, e. g., is as follows: It began as a rough pointed paddle; then came a pole drawn by the small end with a stiff branch cut long and sharpened, then a rough share, then a metallic point, then two handles, then a knife, etc. Thus, the plough, which fortunately did not get stereotyped early, has passed through a number of stages still to be seen, and is now quite complete in form. In the case of the hoe and ax, wood has supplanted metal because more easily and correctly fashioned. The rake, shovel, pick, harrow, and dray, pitchfork, snow-shovel, ladder, stone-boat, beetle-and-wedge, and gravel-sieve, all show stages of improvement, and sometimes involve some skill in shaping or adapting wire, tin, etc. These tools are all very small, and not for the most part adapted to much real use, and quite disproportionately large as compared with the size of houses and men. Milk cans, pulleys, wheel-barrows, carts, wagons, and harnesses are made with still more skill. Harnesses have real collars, hames, bit, bridle, and string lines. Wagons have wheels (made of a section of a large curtain-stick or of checker-board men), brakes, end-boards, king-bolts, neaps, and shafts, stakes for hay, a high seat for the driver, etc. They can be made to tip up, and include many varieties—as a milk-cart with money-box, a

long timber-truck, market wagon, and others. Could the stages of evolution through a few of these implements of farm-work have passed be pinned on cards in their order of development and photographed they would quite likely reflect in some respects the progress of mankind in their production. It is in connection with these products mainly that a patent office has been proposed, but up to the close of last season not established.

#### TRADES AND INDUSTRIES.

Carpentry has thus proven the most successful industry, and has of late slowly come to be largely the monopoly of Harry, who probably has most skill and the best tools. One boy made a croquet-set of very miniature proportions. Another established brick-works, based on a careful study of those in Cambridge; but the products of his yard, though admirably done, have not come into demand as building material. Another attempted moulding and pottery, including baking, but with rather poor success. A tiny newspaper, some three inches square, devoted entirely to the affairs of the "sand-pile" was started, with seven subscribers, at a dollar per month in their peculiar currency, but the labor of duplicating soon caused its abandonment. At one time candles were manufactured in tiny moulds. Two sailing vessels, the Argonaut and Neptune, were made and raced till boom and gaff were broken. Tiny pine trees were set out, and ash fertilizers prepared and used for crops. The farmers near by go to a distant meadow to cut marsh hay at low tide, and are gone over night. This the boys parodied with a damp spot of mow-land as a marsh, and over night, represented by the interval of dinner. Cord wood of several lengths, with

an inch representing a foot, and with both cleft and trash varieties, was cut down, piled, and sold. On one occasion the boys were observed creeping about one-eighth of a mile and back, propelling their tiny horses held between their fingers, each span drawing a cart loaded with their wood. The functions of carpenter and doctor are fused in one, the office of the latter being chiefly to mend broken limbs, splints being used, but the *vis reparatrix* of nature being represented by the drying of glue.

## MERCANTILE PURSUITS.

Trade centered in the grocery store, of which Jack was one proprietor, the name of the puppet he represented being painted on the sign. A toy watch was hung in the gable to represent the clock over Faneuil Hall Market, and a clay watch dog was on guard by night. Cans of pickles were put up; partridge and huckleberries, in small glass bottles; candy was sold by the barrel; tomatoes were represented by red barberries, and watermelons by butternuts. Grass put up in bags for cows and horses was sold by weight on a pair of small scales. Shelves and counters, and a canvas-topped market wagon were the chief features of this establishment. Its goods were, however, for the most part, in a sense unreal, its business declined, until at last its proprietors were obliged to declare themselves bankrupt, and a bill of sale and auction closed its career.

## MONEY AND EXCHANGE.

The need of a measure of value and medium of exchange was felt early in the history of the "sand-pile." A special kind of cardboard was procured, and later, as this material was found not to be proof against

counterfeiting, a species of felt was used, out of which small ellipsoidal currency was cut with a gouge of peculiar curvature. These coins were of two sizes, representing dollars and half-dollars respectively. At the beginning of the first season ninety dollars and fifty half-dollars were given to each boy, and the gouge and felt, representing mint and bullion, laid away, thus insuring a strictly limited circulation. This currency became so very real that actual silver dollars and half-dollars were said, I know not how correctly, to have been vainly offered for their felt counterparts, and fluctuations in the silver value of which recorded the varying intensity of the play-spirit of the "sand-pile." When the grocer failed he became really a pauper on the community. He was, I think, the youngest boy, and his monetary ventures had gradually relieved him of his entire capital. He was aided in little ways, and meetings were held to discuss the best way of relieving him. One proposition was a general pro-rata subscription; another was a communistic redistribution of the money of the community. These schemes were successfully opposed, however, and it was at last agreed to inflate their first currency by issuing enough money to give each boy an additional sum of ten dollars. While this matter was under discussion, and redistribution was expected by some, prices were affected, and a few sales were made at prices so high as to cause embarrassment later.

#### LAWS AND THEIR ENFORCEMENT.

Laws were enacted only to meet some pressing necessity. Town meetings were summoned by an elected crier, who shouted, "Ding dong, come to town meeting!" These assemblages were at first held on and



about the fence, or near their hotel, each boy holding his little wooden dummy in his hand and turning up its arm when ayes or noes were called. Later a bell and hall were provided. The officers elected were president, flagman, whose duty it was to keep the flag-pole in order and the flag flying, a pound-keeper to look after stray animals carelessly left lying about or lost by other boys, a surveyor of roads, whose duties were sometimes considerable after a shower, a janitor for the hall, and a sprinkler and waterer of crops, etc. A scheme of taxation was proposed, but as it was to be based mainly on land, and as the task of measuring the sometimes irregularly laid out farms was considerable, it was never carried out. A system of fines was also adopted, the enforcement of which led to quarrels, and was stopped by parental interventions. A jail and a grog-shop shared a similar fate. So great was the influence of proceedings in this community upon the general direction of interest and attention that it was feared that an undesirable degree of knowledge of criminality and intemperance would be fostered if these latter institutions were allowed to develop. It was at these meetings that the size of a cord of wood and an acre of land was settled. Judicial as well as legislative functions appertained to these meetings. After a firecracker had blown up a house, a law was passed limiting the proximity to the village at which fireworks should be permissible. A big squirt-gun served as a fire-engine, and trouble was at once imminent as to who should control and use it, till it was enacted that it should be under the control of the boy whose buildings were burning. One boy was tried for beating his horses with a pitchfork, and another for taking down the pound wall, and leading out his cattle with-

out paying the fine. Railroads were repeatedly proposed, but never constructed, since the earliest days of the "sand-pile," when they did exist for a short time, for the double reason that they would interfere with teaming, which was on the whole still more interesting, and because every boy would want to be conductor and president of the company.

#### REASONS FOR HAVING NO CHURCH.

"Why do you have no church?" the boys were asked. "Because," they replied, "we are not allowed to play in the "sand-pile" on Sunday, but have to go to church." "And why have you no school?" "Why," said they, exultingly, "it is vacation, and we don't have to go to school."

#### TOPOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATION NOT WELL DEVELOPED.

The geography of the surrounding region is not well developed. The house in which the parents lived is called Cambridge; its piazza is Concord. A gully made by a water-spout is Rowley. Another smaller sand-pile once started near by is West B. A neighbor's house more recent is Vermont. A place where worms are dug for fishing is called Snakeville, and another spot where some Oswego starch boxes once lay is Oswego. Boston is a neighboring settlement. The topographical imagination of these boys is far less developed than in the case of a group of school children the writer once knew, who played for years about a marsh half submerged in spots by high tide, and who had named continents, capes, bays, lakes, rivers, islands, promontories, to the number of perhaps several score, from real or fancied resemblance to great features of the world's surface on the map, and who had in a number of cases helped out resemblances by dig-

ging, and who carried on a brisk commerce between leading ports for entire summers, and with many details and circumstances of real trade.

VALUABLE CIVIC TRAINING.

The conservatism of Harry and Jack and the boys that gathered about them was shown even in the name "sand-pile," which the whole enterprise still bears. This designation is now entirely inappropriate, for all the sand originally dumped on the spot has been carefully removed, and its place filled in with loam. Each spring, when the houses, barns, etc., are brought out and set up, the traditions of the preceding year are carefully observed in laying out the streets. Most boys hold that the monetary relations of the previous year should continue over to the new season, the rich at the close of the last year starting rich this year. This view generally prevails against the theory of an annual year of jubilee, and a release from last year's debts, that the poorer boys uphold. All the boys in town, even those who do not belong to the "sand-pile," are not only greatly interested, but decidedly more proud than envious of it. It seems remarkable that during all the years of its existence no boy has been mean enough to injure or plunder it at night, or angry enough to demolish anything of importance. This latter is, of course, in part due to the gradual habit of settling matters of dispute that are wont to be brought to an issue with fists and feet by meetings and speechifications. The accumulation of values here, as elsewhere, begets not only conservatism, but mutual forbearance and consideration. Most destructive in the "sand-pile" are little girls, who quite fail to appreciate it, save in spots, as it were, and are, therefore, as far as possible, excluded.

## A VERY REAL COMMUNITY.

The institution is in general very real to the boys, though in different degrees to different boys, and some parts and some periods of it more so than others. Sometimes they are so earnest they rise early to play before breakfast. They pour out grain for the cattle, and tip them up on their noses that they may eat, and then must clean up after them. The cattle "promise" the younger boys not to eat the beans, and the wooden figures never talk about the boys behind their backs, for "they told us so," said one. Of all the names in use in the "sand-pile" but one has been invented, all the rest having been copied from real persons about them. They are little troubled about incongruities of size. Some barns cover between one and two acres, and a horse could almost be ground up and put into a bushel measure, etc. Yet in a general way relative sizes are fairly preserved. It is a striking feature, to which I have observed no exception, that the more finished and like reality the objects became the less interest the boys had in them. As the tools, houses, etc., acquired feature after feature of verisimilitude, the sphere of the imagination was restricted as it is with too finished boys, and thus one of the chief charms of play was lost. Often the entire day was spent with almost no intermission in the business of the "sand-pile," and all went very pleasantly when perfect harmony reigned. Most of the playtime of nearly every day of the boys most interested, for several summers, has been devoted to its very diversified direct and indirect interests.

## THE AGE LIMIT.

As boys reach the age of fourteen, more or less, the

'sand-pile" gradually loses its charm, and seems childish and unreal. One member of the circle was, I think, fifteen, and had become quite alive to its fictitious nature. Unimaginative boys have proved mischievous and a source of constant annoyance to those who took everything in dead earnest. Thus, it has been realized that to admit aliens indiscriminately, or especially boys who had begun to imagine themselves young gentlemen, was dangerous. Indeed, I fancy that the golden age of this ideal little republic has already passed, and that a period of over-refinement and enervating luxury is likely, if it has not done so with the close of the last summer, to end its career. It was known that I was to visit it in the fall again and, perhaps, write a brief sketch of it; it was decked out to be photographed; the young lady with her æsthetic paint brush had introduced new ideals, for paint decorates bad woodwork; the "sand-pile," being near the roadside, attracted more and more notice. The carpenter took to making miniature saws, saw-horses, squares, screw-drivers, planes, vices, and other tools, copying his own tools for beauty, more than for use, and, in short, a gradual self-consciousness supervened, so that the boys came to have in mind the applause of adult spectators, as well as their own pure interest. They have long been wont to call themselves, in some relations to their wooden figures, the *giants*—somewhat as their parents in a sense represent, when they have occasion, as is most rare, to interfere, the blind fate that rules Jove himself. I thought I observed that the giants were more high-handed, and prone to intervene in the natural working out of problems and events, as a miracle-working Providence is sometimes said to break in on the order of nature. There seemed to be a slowly de-

creasing autonomy, heralding the decline of full-blooded boyishness and the far-away dawn of a new and reconstructed adolescent consciousness.

NOT SUCCESSFUL OUT OF ITS OWN ENVIRONMENT.

Still, when the inevitable return to Cambridge and school comes at last, the boys, it was said, seem for some time to be left with less eager interest in events, and to be some time in getting up as strong a zest for anything else. It is not that they become indifferent or pessimistic in the least degree, yet, possibly, life seems a little cheap and servile. They tried to colonize the "sand-pile" here, but Cambridge is too large to oversee and copy, and they were soon lost in trying to light their houses at night from within, and in constructing a system of drainage and sewerage, etc., and gave it up to spend playtime in the less absorbing ways of following and imitating the college ball games, and making houses, horses, and new inventions for next summer's "sand-pile."

EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE SAND-PILE.

On the whole, the "sand-pile" has, in the opinion of the parents, been of about as much yearly educational value to the boys as the eight months of school. Very many problems that puzzle older brains have been met in simpler terms, and solved wisely and well. The spirit and habit of active, and even prying observation has been greatly quickened. Industrial processes, institutions, and methods of administration and organization have been appropriated and put into practice. The boys have grown more companionable and rational, learned many a lesson of self con-

trol, and developed a spirit of self-help. The parents have been enabled to control indirectly the associations of their boys, and, in a very mixed boy-community, to have them, in a measure, under observation without in the least restricting their freedom. The habit of loafing, and the evils that attend it, has been avoided, a strong practical and even industrial bent has been given to their development, and much social morality has been taught in the often complicated *modus vivendi* with others that has been evolved. Finally, this may perhaps be called one illustration of the education, according to *nature* we so often hear and speak of. Each element in this vast variety of interests is an organic part of a comprehensive whole, compared with which the concentrative methodic unities of Ziller seem artificial, and, as Bacon said of scholastic methods, very inadequate to subtlety of nature. All the power of motive arising from a large surface of interest is here turned on to the smallest part. Had the elements of all the subjects involved in the "sand-pile," industrial, administrative, moral, geographical, mathematical, etc., been taught separately and as mere school exercises, the result would have been worry, waste, and chaos. Here is perfect mental sanity and unity, but with more variety than in the most heterogeneous and soul-disintegrating school-curriculum. The unity of all the diverse interests and activities of the "sand-pile" is, as it always is, ideal. There is nothing so practical in education as the ideal, nor so ideal as the practical. This means not less that brain work and hand work should go together than that the general and special must help each other in order to produce the best results. As boys are quickened by the imagination to realize their conceptions of adult life,

so men are best stimulated to greatest efforts by striving to realize the highest human ideals, whether those actualized in the lives of the best men, the best pages of history, or the highest legitimate, though yet unrealized, ideals of tradition and the future.





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