

A NEW GAME AND AN OLD PUZZLE

A WEEK or two ago, for example, Wellington children were playing marbles with all the concentration of habitual addicts. But marbles as an amusement were displaced almost overnight in many schools in the City and in Hutt Valley by a paper-folding, fortune-telling game. That, in turn, had been (at the time of writing) at least temporarily displaced by the appearance in the shops of the first post-war toy balloons. The sudden appearance of balloons could, of course, be explained by the simple economics of availability of supply, but the paper-and-marbles phase sent us out looking for something different in the way of an explanation.

The paper-folding game is curious enough to deserve some description. A square of paper is folded intricately until it looks something like a flower with four triangular petals. On each of these is written the name of a colour (red, blue, green, silver, for example). If the paper "flower" is then opened up a little, eight turned-down corners can be seen, each of which bears a number. On the back of these flaps, beneath each number, are written the "fortunes."

The routine of the game is for the owner of the device to ask the onlooker to choose a colour. The paper flower is then flipped (it opens like a snapdragon blossom), as often as there are letters in the word chosen. Four of the numbers are revealed each time it opens and "Choose a number" is the second step. The number chosen, of course, determines the "fortune" of the chooser, and what is revealed may be either comic or complimentary.

Who Invented It?

When parents asked son or daughter (it seems to be mainly a girls' game—girls are possibly more gullible) where they picked up the game, replies were usually vague: "Ronnie showed it to me," or "Mary brought one to school." The origin was a mystery. Experts in physical education, who have opportunities for studying children's habits, could shed little light on the subject. They had heard of the game, some had seen it, but whether it was imported or indigenous, new or old, they had no idea. One remembered something like it in England 40 years ago.

But they agreed that many children's games are like commercial travellers' tales, which are popularly supposed to come in the first place from the London Stock Exchange, having their brief vogue and either heard thereafter in diversified forms or forgotten entirely. There has been little objective research in New Zealand into this part of a child's life, though games are recognised as a strong influence in growth.

No Records Kept

That is mainly because parents either do not think it worth while to record what they see or cannot be bothered. But it has been established that in New Zealand, at any rate, traditional games have no fixed periodicity. They flourish for a while, but it does not necessarily follow that they will be played again at the same season next year.

Only a few have their cycles governed by the calendar. "Conkers" is one of these, for it can be played only when chestnuts are available. It is more popular in the South Island than in

MOST of us have noticed at some time or another the curious and apparently irrational cycle of children's games. At some seasons the footpaths blossom with spinning tops, or "beds" of hopscotch, or are made hazardous by small boys who career erratically along in trolleys built almost invariably out of a board, a butter-box and four cast-iron wheels. There is nothing strange about the games which children choose to play—most of them have been played for generations—but just why marbles should, as it were, be here to-day and gone to-morrow, over a wide area, is a puzzling phenomenon.



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the North. Kites, too, are generally flown in spring when the winds are steady, and the ice-slide is a purely mid-winter pastime. If marbles are procurable, the game may be played—other things being equal—all the year round, and if an enterprising shopkeeper puts a display of taws, allies and glassies in his window, he will be the economic factor originating the vogue. Swings and plank-slides are stable in their popularity for the thrills they give.

Localised Games

We discovered in a series of interviews with the physical educationists that there are two games which are indigenous each to a single locality. "Egg-Pie" seems to be played solely at the Alexandra High School; it has not been noticed anywhere else. It is a chasing and aiming game. The requirements are seven holes, named after the days of the week, and a ball which is dropped into a certain hole by a player on the run. Another player standing opposite the hole picks it out and throws it at the runner. A points system is worked from the number of hits.

At the Matamau school, six miles out of Dannevirke, "Chibby" is the favourite game, and this, too, is believed to flourish nowhere else in New Zealand. A chasing and catching game, it is played by 30 children at a time, and is along the lines of "Prisoner's Base." A form of this activity (mentioned in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, under the name of "The Country Base") used to be played in England by adults. So

many played it in the streets leading to Westminster Palace in London, that a law was once passed banning it when Parliament was sitting. Who brought it to New Zealand nobody knows.

They Just Happen

These two games are "non-infectious" and stable. Others come into fashion, or favour, at any time. No signal seems to be given; they just happen. And the rapidity with which they spread and the wideness of their scope is difficult to explain. Both teachers and children have their "bush telegraph." In the teachers' case it is the more efficient, because of their mobility and their habits of travelling widely during the holidays. With the children it works through occasional meetings at parties, at picnics, or at the beaches when children from one district see what others do to amuse themselves—but it would not, of itself, altogether explain the games-cycle.

The water-bomb and water-pistol seem to have had their day, at least for the time being. And the pea-shooter, to the relief of many an adult, is apparently out of the fashion. Games of this kind, involving the serious discomfiture of somebody else, are frowned on by teachers. A ban is applied and its effect lasts till some adult or parent, who most likely was once punished for playing the game himself, teaches it to a child.

In most small boys there is a destructive streak. The educationists say it's wise to give them a hammer, a few

nails, and a block of wood. It's cheaper than having them operate on the furniture. The "gang" craze is not half as popular as it was and its wane is probably due to the frowns of authority. "Tip-cat" while good exercise for the eye and the hand can also be dangerous to both. Paper darts are having a slight run at the moment, but are likely, at any time, to disappear, especially if the anti-social practice of dipping the heads in ink comes back into favour.

Every parent notices how a group playing in a backyard will suddenly vanish. The noise stops completely—children always talk at the top of their voices. There can be only two reasons for this change of activity, and they are familiar to everybody who has anything to do with children. Either the most dominant personality has thought it time for a change of scene and game, or a case of apples has been opened by somebody's mother a few doors away. Food is a powerful lure.

Children and their games are much alike the world over, just as the word "Mother," in almost every language, starts with "M." But occasionally a new type of game is so ingenious that father stops playing with the electric train and insists on taking a hand.

The Power of Imagination

A father of four children who makes coloured movies of backyard scenes unknown to the actors and actresses, believes that the best playground of all is that uncultivated bit in the shelter of the hedge at the bottom of the garden. Here an upturned table becomes ship, aircraft, railway carriage, shop, or hospital. It makes the place untidy but it's worth it, he says.

But if you take the family away from home, there's nothing like a beach or lakeside to keep them occupied. Children do not get half as much fun being rowed about in somebody else's boat, or taking a launch trip, as in getting hold of a few planks, and knocking up a raft of their own.

Play Stages are Typed

Trained observers have terms for stages in a child's play. Up to four or five years it is individual. And this is followed by the imitative and imaginative types when a trolley is not just a board, two axles and four iron wheels, but a fire engine answering a hurry-up call, or a locomotive climbing the Spiral. Adventure games come next. Cowboys and Indians still roam the kitchen garden, taking cover behind the raspberry canes or launching a vigorous offensive from the potato ridges. This phase lasts till the hobby age which is generally nine-plus.

Some simple stamp-collecting, elementary pottering with carpentry, doll-dressing and sewing come next. But any of these pursuits may be interrupted for a game or two of hopscotch for the girls, marbles for the boys, or hide-and-seek for all hands. After nine, games tend to become organised. But there is organisation simply in the sense that there must be a referee, for it is an exceptional group of children that can agree on anything for long.

Survivals of the Past

A great many children's games are survivals of exciting, tragic or comic events in history. Some are the outgrowths of ancient customs of religion

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