

A Lesson in Life

By Timothy Shay Arthur

“I will stop now,” said Mr. Fanshaw, at *forty-five*, pausing in his life-work, and looking back over the *broad fields* through which he had been reaping for years, and then at his *barns and store-houses*, which were filled to overflowing. “Having enough and to spare — why toil on, eagerly and anxiously, for more? Having borne the burden and heat of the day — why not accept the rest that a liberal competence offers? Let *others* work now — my part is *done*. If I add to the wealth already accumulated — can I enter more into its enjoyments? Then *why* strive on? No, I will stop now, and take what the *good life* has to offer. Only a few years remain to me at best; why waste them in this dull round of simple money-making?”

Mr. Fanshaw was a philosopher, in his own estimation. He pondered this view of the case at intervals which grew briefer and briefer, seeing it in a stronger and stronger light, until the proposition was fully accepted, and he calmly arranged to withdraw from all active participation in business. With the very first step in this arrangement, came a shadow of misgiving. Then he went all over the argument by which he had been influenced to *retire* from active life, but could discover no flaw therein. He had ample wealth, yielding an income beyond what, even in luxurious living, he could spend. Why, then, continue to dig and delve? Why gather in more — and lay it up for others to scatter? Why waste his energies for nothing?

Mr. Fanshaw regarded the argument as conclusive, and notwithstanding the shadow of misgiving which, at the very first movement, crept over his feelings — he walked steadily to the result in view. It took him over a year to get disentangled from the many business connections in which he was involved, during all of which time, that faint shadow kept growing more and more palpable, and when, at last, freed from cares and duties, he sat down in the *sunshine of his prosperity to simply enjoy* — he could perceive little or no warmth in that sunshine. He looked up, doubting and questioning, into the sky which bent over him. It was not blue, and bright, and sparkling to the eye — but had a kind of leaden dullness which left its hue upon his feelings. A strange *unrest* began to disturb his spirit. Wearily the days passed, and the nights became more and more sleepless.

“Go into the country,” said a friend, who saw, in the face and manner of Mr. Fanshaw, the evidences of a *growing life-weariness*. “Build yourself a handsome villa, and surround it with all the charms of nature made more beautiful by art.”

But Mr. Fanshaw had no taste for rural life or landscape gardening. His mind had received no cultivation in that direction; and there were no early associations to draw him back to woods and fields. A city boy, he had grown up among city scenes, and the city’s hard features were stamped upon him. For over twenty-five years, all interest had been absorbed in merchandise and boxes of goods; in stocks and bills; in mortgages, bonds and money securities. And now, that he no longer cared for these things — what came in to take their places and hold his restless thoughts?

“Visit Europe,” suggested another friend, who saw the growing discontent of Mr. Fanshaw.

This was thought over. A year in London, Paris, Florence and Rome looked promising. He went, and enjoyed to the degree, a man of his education and habits of life is capable of enjoying; but found the *annoyances* incident to traveling abroad in excess of the pleasure. So he came home, to find home drearier than when he went away. There was a time when Mr. Fanshaw enjoyed the daily newspaper; but then he took a lively interest in cotton and grain, and the price of leading stocks. Political affairs had also a certain attraction; for the political world was in close connection with the business world. He moved about, too, among live men, all on the alert, like himself, and ambition, as well as interest, kept him posted in common affairs, so as to stand their equals. But now he had ruled himself out of the current movements of the day, and gradually losing the “run of things,” lost the old desire for his newspaper — no, we err — not the old desire, but the old *enjoyment*. The newspaper was resorted to as before, with a certain pleasurable *anticipation*; but rarely did its columns yield the honey he used to find. Dry and unprofitable all. Daily the paper was thrown aside in *disappointment*.

Out of the live current, Mr. Fanshaw was moving in a small, sluggish eddy, round and round. Vitality was departing every day. Mind was growing weaker through an impotent exhaustion of itself; and as it grew weaker — he grew unhappier. Plainly, Mr. Fanshaw had made a mistake in retiring from business. So one ventured to say.

“I know that,” was his answer. “I didn’t understand myself.”

“Go into business again,” was suggested.

But Mr. Fanshaw shook his head, answering, “No, I am out of the current, and have not the boldness to venture in again. Nearly three years of *idleness* have *reduced the old vigor of mind*. I feel that I would be unequal to the requirements. A business life, as the world goes now, is a different thing from floating with the tide. There is no success, but for those who *strain every muscle* pulling against the stream.”

And this was the simple truth. *Ease, idleness, and loss of mental vigor through sluggishness of mind*, had robbed Mr. Fanshaw of strength to such a degree, that he dared not venture again out upon the waters where he had once held his place among the boldest and most vigorous.

Two years more of a fruitless life, and then, without warning, down from a summer sky fell a desolating financial storm, sweeping from hundreds and thousands, all over the land, the *gathered wealth* of years. While it raged, a bolt struck the fair edifice which Mr. Fanshaw had built, and it fell in hopeless ruin to the ground. Of all its goodly stones, scarcely one remained unbroken in its place.

Stunned at first; then *appalled* by the disaster; and then quickened into a fearful sense of his helplessness and hopelessness, Mr. Fanshaw’s first state of mind was one of bitter complaints. He called this misfortune a *hard and cruel dispensation*; and when a wiser one than himself drew near, and sought to lift his thoughts into a purer atmosphere, where he could see stars shining in the midnight sky — he rejected his offered words of instruction, and called God *cruel and unjust*.

“Nay, my friend, say not so,” was answered. “*God is good, and just, and wise*. Out of this darkness, he will, in his own good time, I trust, bring you into marvelous light. His ways are not as our ways, but they lead upwards; he sees not as we see — and his purposes are eternal felicity. I think that he has *work* for you yet in this world, Mr. Fanshaw; work that only your hands can aright perform.”

But Mr. Fanshaw rejected the proposition. Worldly wealth had been the *greatest good* in his eyes. Through long years he had toiled for it with an unabating ardor. And now, it was swept from his grasp!

It so happened that, a few days afterwards, Mr. Fanshaw was in the house of this wiser friend, to whom in remembrance of warm expression of interest and sympathy — he had come again, moved by the bitterness of a state that began searching about for relief. While they sat talking, a *child* was engaged in building a *toy castle*. He had blocks of all sizes and shapes, adapted to his purpose, and steadily rose wall and buttress, tower and battlement, growing under his hand in symmetry, fitness and beauty — into what seemed in his eyes, like a very creation of his will, until the goodly edifice was completed.

The friend called Mr. Fanshaw’s attention to the child, and they observed, with interest, the entire cheerful absorption of his mind in what he was doing, each well-considered piece going into its place, to the murmur of a song which issued in a continuous flow from his lips.

“He is building as men build,” said the friend, “happy in his work. The mental activity required, gives an exhilarating tone to his feelings, and he sings as he toils.”

At last, the castle was completed, and the child stood and surveyed it, now looking from one point of view, and now from another, and now walking round and round.

“Observe,” said the friend; “he is silent now. No music is floating through his lips. The work is done, and he is beholding it with satisfaction; but is he as happy in *contemplating* his work — as he was in *doing* it?”

After a few minutes, the child ceased inspecting his castle from all sides, and going to a sofa, threw himself thereon with a sigh which went audibly through the room. There he lay, for some time, listlessly, but with his eyes upon his finished work. Then he manifested signs of restlessness, got up and walked around his goodly edifice again — sighed, and went to the farther end of the room — then came back, and renewed the inspection. But he did not sing any more.

“Do you understand the case?” asked the friend.

Mr. Fanshaw had a dawning perception of its meaning; yet answered with the shake of the head.

“The child’s experiences, are *the man’s in miniature*. He is growing restless for a lack of employment. Most earnestly his thought went into the construction of that castle, and he looked to the beautiful form he was creating, as something in which he would find happiness. But, the building is *completed*, and he is not happy. His mind has fallen away from its strain; the warmth of friction is felt no longer; thought is dull, and he has a foretaste of that *aching void* in the heart, of which so few men understand the meaning, or for which so few who experience it ever find the cure. Now, let me knock down his castle, and see what the result will be.”

“Oh, no, no!” answered Mr. Fanshaw, interposing; “that would be cruel.”

“Cruel only on the outside, but with a *sweet nut of kindness* in the center,” was the almost tenderly spoken answer, for it was the father who said this; and rising, he moved past the toy building, touching it as if by accident. A crash, and the blocks lay a mass of shapeless ruins on the floor. With the crash, rang out a cry of pain, and the child, who had worked through a whole hour to erect this goodly castle, flung himself in grief across a chair. His sobs and tears went to the heart of Mr. Fanshaw, and he said, aside, to his friend —

“That was not very nice.”

“We shall see,” was the answer.

A few minutes passed in a silence only broken by the child’s sorrow.

“My son.” The father spoke in tenderness, yet firmly. There came no answer.

“Come to me, Alfred.”

The boy came, slowly, great drops glistening on his eyelashes, and wetting his cheeks.

“That was a *fine castle*, my son.”

The child answered with a sob. He saw, yet, only the ruins.

“A beautiful castle,” added the father, “and *you* built it.”

Out of the ruins began to arise, in the child’s mind, the fair creation which he had wrought only a little while before. His quivering lip grew firmer, a glimmer of light shone through his tears.

“And you can build it again. Be a brave, strong boy. Clear away the ruins, as we do after a fire, and set the foundations once more.”

Only a word or two beyond these were needed. The child was soon at his castle-building again, all absorbed in the work; and soon the music of his happy heart came murmuring through his lips.

“There was a *sweet nut* within that bitter husk, Mr. Fanshaw,” said the friend; “and if you will take a lesson from a child, and go to *building* again — you will find a sweet nut in your misfortune also.”

And doubtless he found the rich and juicy kernel, for in a little while afterwards, under the *spur of necessity*, he was out in the busy world, and at work, trying to *build* once more.

[Editor’s note: you will also want to read Arthur’s insightful book, “Retiring from Business.” Book is found under “**Novels**” at <https://www.bereansoftallassee.com/articles/arthur/main.html>]