

The Deciding Play in the Game of Life

A simple rule that I have always kept before me in business—together
with an account of some of my experiences in
picking and handling men

By Thomas E. Wilson

ONE morning some thirty years ago a lad named Thomas E. Wilson stood humbly in line, hat in hand, waiting for an opportunity to ask somebody for a job. Last year this same Thomas E. Wilson, at the head of a great Chicago meat packing business, had the experience of receiving a committee of important-looking men who came to him in behalf of our old friend, The Job that Seeks the Man. And that was not all: not only did the job seek Wilson, but a big enterprise actually wished to marry him in order to make sure to get him.

It was the year 1916, leap year, and the packing business which sought him brazenly proposed that it drop its own name and take Wilson's name. Besides that, he should have at once a dower interest, consisting of a big block of stock, and a salary of \$125,000 a year. That was how it happened, a little less than a year ago, that the name "Wilson & Co., Successors to Sulzberger & Sons Company," was suddenly brought to people's attention as conspicuously as possible.

In the course of his rise, Wilson (now forty-nine years old) has found out a great many things about people, and at our urgent request he tells some of these things

here. He tells them for the distinct purpose of passing some of his experiences and observations on to younger men who can make use of them to increase their own efficiency and business wisdom.

Wilson is a great executive. He is also two-fisted, likable, unaffected, free from any kind of "airs." One may read his story with the knowledge that he is saying what he thinks and is not doing any posing.

One of the things which brand Wilson as a high-grade executive is his habit of never appearing to be rushed. A small-caliber man is likely to seem swamped with work, no matter how little he is accomplishing. If you were talking with Wilson in his office, and Lloyd-George himself were seated just outside the door, eager for a chance to discuss a ten-million-dollar meat contract, Wilson would nevertheless give you the impression that you were the only individual in whose talk he was interested, and that your errand was the one important thing at that moment. And it *would* be, too, for Wilson's rule appears to be, "One thing at a time, and get it definitely decided while we are about it." I do not believe a balance sheet of his working hours would show any wasted time.

THE EDITOR

WHEN I first went to work as a youngster in my teens, I had a theory about the proper way to get ahead. I have not the remotest idea where I got this theory, but I had it, and I can see now that it has been extremely useful. In brief, my scheme was to approach each task, no matter how small, with the idea that it might possibly be the thing which would determine my whole future. To illustrate: A few years ago there was a baseball team which came within half a game of winning the pennant in one of the big leagues. The race was so close during the last dozen games that every player strained to his utmost. One more safe hit at a critical point might have turned the trick. Now, this one more hit might just as well have been obtained earlier in the season. There doubtless were many occasions when just a little more intelligent playing might have won an additional game, and that additional game, carried along to the team's credit until the end of the season, might have meant the championship. The trouble was that each player did not regard each and every play throughout the season as the deciding play.

I must have had it in mind that each little thing I was assigned to might be a de-

ciding play. I frankly assumed that anything done a little better than some other fellow did it might, perhaps, bring its reward in the form of promotion. Not knowing which task might attract attention to me, I simply tried to play safe and do each thing with as much thoroughness as I could, never doubting that sooner or later somebody would take notice. The point was that I *had* to get ahead, and it was simply a question of doing the little things as they should be done—better, if possible, than someone else was doing them. Maybe this was merely following the line of least resistance, doing the work in a way that would not bring a "call-down" from the boss, but it sort of grew into a habit. Any young fellow will find it just as easy to acquire good habits as poor ones.

Grabbing a Job That Another Man Turned Down

MY FIRST job was an unimportant clerkship with the Burlington railroad, at forty dollars a month. It took me a long time to land that job. There were other places to be had, some of them at higher wages, in groceries and small shops, but I wanted to get myself identified in some way with a big concern like a railroad, so that when I got to the top it would

be worth all the trouble of making the climb. I had a bland confidence in what the future held in store for me and fully expected to become the president of the Burlington.

One day, however, before I had quite got around to becoming president of the road—in fact, while I was still drawing only forty dollars a month—the packing firm of Nelson Morris & Company asked the Burlington people to pick them a man to keep the records of their refrigerator cars. The chief clerk selected his assistant. An hour or so after going to the stock yards to look over the new job, the assistant returned in a high state of disgust, exclaiming: "Not for me! I wouldn't work in as smelly a place as that for any hundred dollars a month."

That about the hundred dollars a month made me prick up my ears, and I asked if I couldn't have a chance at the job. They gave me the chance and I went to work for Morris & Company. I was not particularly enthusiastic about the malodorous surroundings, as they were in those days, for my olfactory sense was normally keen, but I couldn't help feeling that maybe I was answering a call of opportunity.

I found that I could sit quietly at a desk and hold the car-checking job; but I got interested and wanted to know all about

the handling of the cars and the repairing of them. So I put in a good deal of time in the yards. After a while I was placed in charge of all car repair work. The company began to build its own cars and I was entrusted with the management of that. Then I got to be the head of the purchasing department, and looked after the buying of supplies and construction material for the whole plant. They next gave me charge of all construction work, and this led to my being sent to various points throughout the country to locate new branch wholesale plants. I also had to select men to run these new branch establishments.

Picking Out the Right Kind of Man

IT WAS in this work of picking men that I got an opportunity to learn how to size up and handle other people. Knowing people and knowing how to handle them is, I believe, the greatest asset of any executive. I tried in every way possible to train my observation, to compare men with other men. In picking a manager for a plant, I didn't go so much by the man's record as by the way the man himself impressed me. It was not difficult to tell if a man was ambitious, mentally alert, and favorably inclined toward hard work. Every little while I appointed to an important place a man whom nobody else had ever suspected of having ability. A high percentage of these men made good and I was mightily pleased, for when they made good I knew that I, too, was making good.

I always sought a man who was anxious to land the job. The fellow who is overjoyed to get a certain job is the one who will work hardest at it. I never like to employ a man who is not sure he wants what I offer him. When a man takes a job with the air of doing me a favor to accept it, I know that he is apt to think that he has discharged his full obligation in taking the place, without doing much afterward. In order to obtain a man full of enthusiasm for the work to be done, I often found it wise to pick somebody from a much humbler place. The man who has been making a monthly salary of only seventy-five dollars is likely to leave no stone unturned and no midnight oil unburned to make good on a job paying one hundred and fifty dollars—much more likely than if he had already been getting almost that much.

Two Kinds of Young Men

ONE day I offered a young man a place with a salary of about a third more than he had been used to. Both the salary and the nature of the work appealed to the young man.

"I'll think the whole proposition over a while," he told me, "and let you know about it."

"But I have decided not to hire you," I replied.

"Wh-a-a-t!" he exclaimed. "I thought you just got through telling me the job was mine if I wanted it."

"Yes," I admitted, "and you agreed that it was a fine opportunity for you. You are satisfied with the salary and you like the kind of work. Yet, instead of grabbing it on the spot, you wish to think it over a while. I am forced to the conviction that you are lacking in decision."

A man troubled with the fault of indecision won't do in our business. I'm sorry, but I've changed my mind about you." And the job went to somebody else.

There was another case quite similar to the one just mentioned. I had offered a young man a place that was a decided improvement over the one he had.

"I like the proposition," the young man told me, "and I know that I am going to take it, and yet I wish that I might put off the actual acceptance until I have talked with my wife. She and I have always looked on everything like this as a partnership affair, and I would just like to be able to tell her that I didn't decide without first letting her have some say in the matter."

That, you see, was a slightly different situation from the other one. I thought the man showed a commendable partnership spirit that should be encouraged, and told him to talk it over with his wife first, by all means.

A Wife Who Takes an Interest in Your Business

AFTER all, there is nothing so important, or which can contribute so much to a business man's success as a fortunate selection of a wife. At the time I got married—I was then thirty-one—old Mr. Nelson Morris remarked:

"Well, you won't be much account in business for a year; but that's all right. No bridegroom is very useful in business—he's so taken up with his new wife."

I was filled with a desire to convince Morris that he might have spoken too sweepingly. I made up my mind that on my return from the honeymoon trip I would work harder than ever before. Just after our arrival in New York, on the wedding journey, I chanced to hear of a piece of property in Brooklyn that was advantageously located for a branch. It could be leased very cheaply if taken at once, but the negotiations would take up so much time that there would be little opportunity for sightseeing while in New York with my bride. I wasn't sure that I didn't owe a greater duty to her than to my employers, especially inasmuch as I was on leave of absence. A wedding journey is an important event to a young woman, and it seemed a shame that this one should be marred by my business affairs. Yet I yearned to make Nelson Morris retract what he had said about bridegrooms.

Well, I put the whole situation up to Mrs. Wilson, intending to let her cast the deciding vote. She was genuinely enthusiastic over the idea of surprising my employers with a little business achievement on our honeymoon. To make some personal sacrifice to boost along my career would, she declared, be a pleasant adventure. She smilingly gave up a number of delightful little excursions we had planned together, and remained contentedly in the hotel room while I was over in Brooklyn conferring with real estate agents.

Ever since then Mrs. Wilson has followed the theory that no sacrifice is too big for her to smile over, provided it contributes to our success. I have never had to hesitate about leaving town unexpectedly on business just on the eve of a social engagement. Always I have known that such disappointments would never ruffle

her in the least. And this knowledge has been a tremendous help.

For fifteen years I never took a vacation, and throughout much of that time I put in an average of more than fourteen hours a day. I couldn't have done it if the work had not fascinated me. Nobody gets very far unless he likes his work. A man should not look upon his job or work as a mere expedient for bread and butter. The man who works under pressure will not get very far. Initiative comes only to those who are fascinated with and enjoy their work, and if a man doesn't like his work he ought to change his job. I liked mine because I could see things growing and developing.

How Wilson's Present Job Was Offered to Him

A FEW years ago I was made president of Morris & Company. Then came the unexpected offer which enabled me to direct a big enterprise with my own name over the door. The business of Sulzberger & Sons Company had been refinanced by New York capitalists, and these men determined to get me to manage it. Their representatives called me on the telephone from a Chicago hotel one day, right out of a clear sky, asked to see me, and made me an offer. I declined. Some time later a friend on the street asked me when I was going to the new job. I told him I wasn't going.

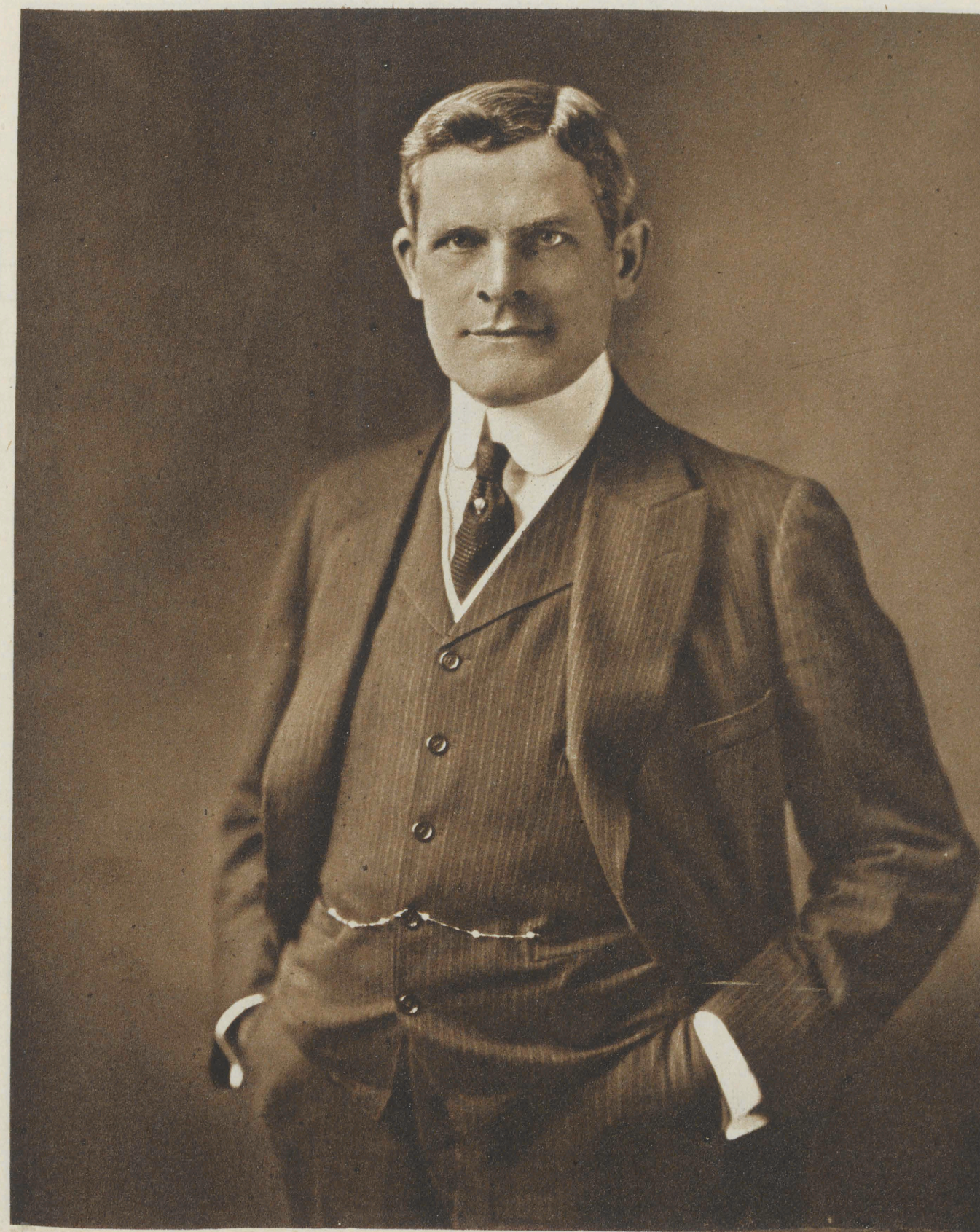
"Oh, yes, you are," he assured me; "I heard that you didn't know it yourself yet, but you are going. They are going to make you an offer you can't refuse."

And they did. We came to terms and I changed jobs. When I took hold of the new work I let it be known immediately that new ideas were in order, regardless of whether they applied to one's own department or to the other fellow's. And I aimed to impress it on all employees, including the humblest, that if anything wasn't going to suit them they could walk right into the main office and talk to me about it. Too much dazzling dignity about a general manager's office is often a great handicap to a business.

An Executive Should be Accessible to His Men

THE trouble with the executive who is too inaccessible is that he loses more by the arrangement than anybody else. In shutting others out, he shuts himself in—away from the numerous advantages of personal contact and points of view. There's nothing like looking a man in the eye and hearing his story, to get at the meat of a situation. Most executives prefer to have everything brought to their attention in writing. That plan may be a time-saver, but my own experience has been that it will pay to get all information possible by face-to-face interviews. Sometimes a tone of voice or the arch of an eyebrow talks more than could be written in a letter.

I strive constantly to have every employee on the pay roll doing the kind of work he likes to do. At every opportunity I talk to the men, including the laborers about the plant, trying to find men who have special aptitude or liking for some particular thing. A man may be doing his task well, but there (Continued on page 64)



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is always the chance he could do something else even better. Think of the plight of the man who is obliged to sit and add figures all day when he is naturally poor at figures but is a born wonder as a mixer among men, and yearns to be out selling goods. Think what he is losing, and what his employer is losing.

Raising a Man's Salary

WHENEVER a man is capable of filling a bigger place he should be promoted if possible, if for no other reason than to keep him from stagnating, and also to let him know that merit is being recognized. Sometimes it is not possible to show appreciation of a man's work by giving him a better job. In such cases it is often wise to raise a man's salary. A raise even of only a dollar or so sometimes serves to give a man encouragement which is the making of him. I have heard executives say that men are frequently spoiled by salary raises, but I take no stock in the theory. If any are spoiled in that way they would have been spoiled anyhow, and the number is so negligible that we may well ignore it. I question the altruism and magnanimity of an employer who has a man's welfare so much at heart that he throttles his own earnest desire to pay the man more money, lest the raise should weaken the man's character.

The higher up he is, the more dependent an executive becomes on those under him. The real success of an executive, it seems to me, rests on his ability to promote wisely, and at the same time to keep the force working in harmony and contentment. A little jealousy here and there in an organization can ruin its efficiency. I have known men who had enough general grasp of things to have made great department managers, only they could not get along harmoniously with those about them. If a man can't get along pleasantly with his associates, he cannot successfully handle a force of men. I never like to promote a man to a responsible place if he has failed to work in hearty cooperation with the men alongside of him. When you hear men say of their boss: "He is a good fellow to work for," you may know he is a successful executive.

The way to learn how to work in harmony with others, as an employee—at least this was my own experience—is to study one's job not only in its relation to himself, but to other people, and in its relation to other departments. Let us illustrate cooperation by the simplest example imaginable: Suppose that I am to pick up a tin cup full of water from a table and hand it to somebody who desires a drink.

Now the natural way to pick it up is by the handle. But the other fellow must then take hold of the cup in one hand, probably his right hand, as a matter of habit. He wishes to hold it by the handle while drinking. To do this he must transfer it first to his left hand, and then back to his right hand. There are two needless motions over what would have occurred if I had simply picked up the cup with the handle toward him in the first place. It would take me no longer to do it that way, but the total amount of time we both take, if I thoughtlessly do my part in the way, most convenient or natural for me, is considerably more. Multiply this little illustration a millionfold and you get an idea of what would happen in a big institution like ours if men failed to cooperate.

As an employee I always liked to think of myself as a kind of partner in the business. When I was getting one hundred and fifty dollars a month, I figured that this was six per cent on thirty thousand dollars, and that I therefore had as much interest in the welfare of the business as a man holding that much of the capital stock. The more the business prospered the better chance I would have to prosper.

An employer should be slower to fire a man than to hire him. To refuse to employ a man probably does him no great harm, but to discharge him may leave a permanent imprint on his character. He may regard himself as having been tried and found wanting—a failure. I would seldom fire a man for a single mistake. Many men are stronger for having once made a blunder. They have profited by it and are resolved that nothing like it shall ever occur again. I should much prefer to have a man make mistakes—as long as he isn't a repeater—than to make excuses. A little excuse is a dangerous thing. It is a habit that grows on one. A man gets to depend on excuses for careless work instead of striving to do the work properly. The fellow who never has an excuse, even for poor work, shows that he is trying his best to do it right and has at least a clear conscience.

When it does become necessary to discharge a man for misconduct, every effort should be made to convince him that the fault is his own. I don't know of anything I should dislike more than to have a man leave my employ with a feeling that he has been treated unjustly. That would be bad for him, and it would be almost equally bad for me.

Whether an executive or employee, I have found that it is well to concern one's self chiefly with the matter immediately at hand. I try not to hurry through a thing because something else is awaiting

attention. If you have only ten minutes for a certain task and keep thinking about how little time you've got, you might as well not have any time at all. But if throughout the ten minutes you calmly act as if you had ten hours, the ten minutes may be all you'll need.

I find that it is well to train one's memory to take in minor details. If I were to tell an employee to drive a nail at a certain place in a fence and didn't see that employee again for three months, I should like to be able to ask him if he had driven the nail.

It isn't that an executive should carry details in his mind in order to have them carried out. He could have a checking up system for that. The main advantage lies in the wholesome moral effect, the fact that every employee knows that the boss notices things and remembers them.

Executives Should Cultivate Vision

ANOTHER quality that men in executive places should try to cultivate, of course, is vision—the ability to see in a proposition not only its present aspect but its possibilities.

For instance, this concern some time ago found that in marketing a by-product known as gut, used in the making of tennis rackets, it would be a great advantage to make and sell the tennis rackets themselves. That was a good idea, but it did not go far enough. It is not easy to sell tennis rackets unless you have other sporting goods to offer along with them. We had hides, curled hair, wool, sheepskins, etc., for sale. It occurred to me that some of these could be utilized in making baseballs, baseball mits, shoes, and the like. At the end of a few months we had a sporting goods department that had grown into a million-dollar enterprise.

When I leave the office I try to forget that I am in business, and seek recreation. This I may do simply by clearing out my mind, just as one might empty a moving picture theater, and letting in a new crowd of strictly non-business thoughts. Every man, however, should have a hobby. Mine is my farm. I can get a lot of recreation just by thinking about the farm, and ways of breeding better horses, hogs or cattle. When I feel the need of a real vacation, I like to get into the wilds of New Mexico where there are grizzly bears, the faithful broncho, wild turkeys, trout, and such things to help give one a complete change of scene.

However, it is not often that I seem to require a vacation, for I get plenty of real enjoyment out of my work.

"FROM \$5 a Week to \$150 a Day." This is a story of a business woman's steady rise, what her main idea was, together with an account of some of the useful knowledge she has gained through her long experience. It will appear in the September number, by Helen Christine Bennett.