Indoor Games in Southwark

BY FRED BASON

In last year's issue of The Saturday Book I recalled some of the games which children used to play in the streets of Southwark when I was a boy. So many readers wrote to me about this that I thought I would follow it with some recollections of indoor games that we used to play—and which have been played, in one variation or another, ever since. I still live in Southwark—at number 4 Broadmayne, Portland Street, London S.E.17, if you want to write to me—and I've noticed how the old games still go on. The names, of course, may now be quite different, but the games are essentially the same as they were in the 1920's.

Have you ever heard, for instance, of a game called 'Ships to Port'? Any number can play it, but four is a good number. You cut out of tissue paper a number of outlines of ships, as they look when viewed from above. They must all be of the same size. Then they are placed in a line, side by side, but about a foot apart. Some four feet ahead of them you draw a white line, and write the word 'Port' beyond it. Now, if there are four of you playing, you get four pieces of stiff cardboard, and when the referee says 'Go!' each player tries to fan his ship with the piece of cardboard towards the 'Port'. The first over the white line is the winner.

You can play the same kind of game with horses, cut in outline out of tissue paper, and fanned on towards a winning post. Or you can cut out frogs, slightly bend the back legs, and fan them along towards a plate. The first frog on the plate is the winner. I have seen children blowing frogs sometimes, instead of fanning them with bits of cardboard. This game is nearly always called 'Ships' or 'Horses' or 'Frogs', but of course you can invent different forms of it. One point I must stress is that each ship or horse or frog must be numbered for identification. In the heat of the game one can easily be mistaken for another.
Somewhat similar is a game we used to play called 'Feathers'. For this you used small feathers, which were placed in a line, and blown towards a plate, all the competitors blowing simultaneously. You needed a stern referee for this, as you can't number feathers.

Having puffed yourself to exhaustion you needed a less strenuous game, and this might be the one called 'Commander'. Everyone sits down except the child who is nominated as Commander. If he or she says 'Get this . . . (anything in the room)' you get it. If he or she says 'Get that . . . (whatever it might be)' you don't get it. It is a variation of an old game called 'Do this, do that'. A clergyman in Southwark adapted this into what he called the Politeness Game. In this you only obeyed the Commander if he used the word 'please'. This is, of course, a rather silly, simple game, but you'd be surprised how much fun we had out of it.

A game calling for more intelligence is 'The Newspaper Game'. You get four or five or six copies of a Sunday newspaper, with a lot of pages. They need not all be the same newspaper, but they must each have the same number of pages. Each newspaper is then folded up so that all the pages are out of order—page 3 next to page 20, and so on. These newspapers are then handed out to the players, who sit in a row, with a non-player at each end so that the end players don't get more space to move in. At the word 'Go!' each player has to try and re-arrange the pages of his or her newspaper so that they are in the right order. The first one to do so is the winner. This game used sometimes to be called 'Southern Railway', perhaps because we kids saw trains coming into London packed with commuters, sitting in rows, reading their morning papers.

For a bit of peace and quiet you want to hand three or four copies of the same newspaper to three or four children and offer a bar of chocolate or an ice cream to the first one who can find and ring round in pencil a particular word—let us say, 'God' or 'sad' or 'glad'. In my childhood the word to be found was nearly always 'war'—but we've had enough of that now. This was a good game because it made the kids read.

Another newspaper game—a much rougher one—was called the 'Corner Game'. In this, four players stood in four corners of an empty or sparsely furnished room, and another player stood in the middle of the room holding a rolled-up newspaper. At a given word the players in opposite corners had to run across and change corners without being touched by the rolled-up newspaper held by the player in the middle. A whack from a rolled-up newspaper could be painful, and there was always the danger of a collision between two of the players. An easier version of this game was called 'Dog in the Corner' or 'Cat in the Corner'. The player in the middle was the Mouse. The dogs or cats at opposite corners had to change places before the mouse could get into a vacant corner. The one left out became the mouse.

The 'Box Game' is one I never played myself, but it was described to me by an ex-policeman I met. You placed twelve match boxes on the floor about a foot apart. The player had to hop on one leg between eleven of the boxes, then pick up the twelfth box whilst still standing on one leg. He would then turn round and hop back over the boxes on one leg, placing the box he had picked up on top of the middle box in the line. When he got back to the starting point he would pick up the first box in the line, reverse, and hop back, placing the box he had picked up on the pile in the middle. He would hop back and forth, picking up each time the box at each end and adding it to the pile until all twelve boxes were piled up, one on top of the other.

The best way to play this game is to have two players competing against one another, and two rows of match boxes. The player who completes his pile first is the winner. If you haven't got two dozen match boxes you must time the players' performances with a watch—but this is not so exciting. This game is, of course, a variation of the old favourite 'Hopscotch'. If you touch the ground with the foot you are not using you are 'out'.

Have you ever heard of the 'Watch Game'? You draw a circle eight or ten feet across, and number it from one to twenty-four as on a 24-hour watch. You then add the second and hour hands—in any position: it doesn't matter. The player is blindfolded and led to the centre of the watch face. Having been turned round once he is asked to walk round the watch. If he
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walks outside the circle of the watch he is 'out'. If he walks carefully round the circle he can stop where he wishes and the number nearest to where he stops is his score. If he is lucky he will stop near number 24.

A more intellectual game is 'Sportsmen'. This is a test of memory. I will describe it in modern terms, though it was certainly being played fifty years ago. The first player is asked to name a sportsman. Suppose he says 'Freddie Trueman'. The second player has to repeat 'Freddie Trueman' and add another name, say, 'George Best'. The third player has to say 'Freddie Trueman, George Best', and another, let us say, 'Henry Cooper'. The fourth player has to repeat all these names and add a fifth—say, 'Bobby Moore'. The game goes on round the circle, each player repeating all the names in the right order and adding another one. When a player leaves one out or gets the order wrong he drops out, and the game moves on to the next player. It's a real test of memory, and if anyone can keep it up to twenty-four names or thereabouts he deserves a prize. You can play the same game using place names instead of sportsmen's names.

A game with a bit more action in it—and very enjoyable action it can be—is 'Underneath the Blanket'. You divide the players into two sides of, say, six children each. One side goes out of the room. Of the six who remain in the room two crawl underneath a blanket on the floor and the other four hide behind a sofa or somewhere else. In come the other side, and they have to guess the names of the two who are underneath the blanket. They have five minutes in which to guess, or else pay a forfeit. There can be a lot of fun as they poke the blanket and try and make the hidden pair cry out and give themselves away. Some twenty-five years ago I had a very pleasant three-and-a-half minutes underneath the blanket with a well-known film star noted for her bosom—until we were both named. But that wasn't in Southwark!

I expect you know the round game which we used to call 'A.B.C.' It's quite simple. 'Adam took his Apple', says the first player. 'Betty had a Bee', says the second. 'Clive enjoyed Cricket', says a third. And so on until you get to 'Zoroaster played his Zither'—if you get that far.

Fred Bason

Now for some bucket games. The simplest is 'Cover the Shilling'. You fill a bucket with water and drop a shilling into it. Then the players have to drop their pennies (old pennies) into the water and try and cover the shilling. If they do it is more by luck than judgement as there is no accounting for the movement of your penny once it enters the water.

Another game played by the kids in my neighbourhood now is called 'Southwark Sardines'. Twenty or thirty little fishes are made out of tissue paper and numbered. They are then placed in the bucket. A 'fishing rod' is then made by tying a piece of string on to the end of a walking stick and tying on to the end of the string a piece of Scotch Tape or some other adhesive tape. The fisherman stands a little way away from the bucket, so he can't see inside it, dips the Scotch Tape into the bucket, moves it around, and pulls it out within the allotted time of five seconds, or whatever it is. His 'catch' is then taken off the Scotch Tape and counted up according to the numbers on the 'fish'. The fisherman with the highest score wins. (A new 'bait', in the form of a new piece of Scotch Tape, is required for each new competitor.)

That is the modern form in which that fishing game is played, but in my young days we played exactly the same game except that the 'fish' had pins stuck through them and the 'bait' at the end of the fishing line was a magnet.

Games have changed in their details, but not necessarily in their fundamentals. But sometimes you come on some peculiar modern developments. In a house in Walworth not long ago I came on a boy saying 'Puff, puff, puff, puff', as he stomped around the room. All right, he was a train. But on the floor of the room a little girl was lying. When the boy got to her he stepped on her tummy—and went on—'Puff, puff, puff.'

I didn't think the girl was enjoying herself very much, and I asked what the game was. They said they were playing 'Suicides'. Yes, suicides! The girl was being run over by a train because Her Man (I doubt if she was six years old) 'had left her' and she 'had nothing more to live for'. Soon they would change over and she would be the train. The boy would then be run over by the train (her train) because 'his love had been unfaithful'. Proper astounding, in my opinion!