Street Games in Southwark

BY FRED BASON

Do you know that wonderful book, London Street Games by Norman Douglas? I have been looking at it to refresh my memory of the games I used to play with my pals in the streets of Southwark, where I was born in the year 1907 (and where I still live—at number 4 Broadmayne, in Portland Street, S.E.17).

I was an unwanted child, being born when my mother was forty-one. I had no brothers or sisters. So I spent most of my time, when I'd finished my home-work (which included cleaning knives, forks and spoons and my mother's shoes) playing in the streets with my friends. They didn't like my mother, because she was always confiscating the balls that fell into our basement and she wouldn't give them back to the kids until they apologised—and no child in Southwark liked to apologise.

Anyway, my friends would stand outside and shout: 'Mother's got a nasty cough; Father's got the gout. Old Freddie Bason, are you coming out?' They shouted so loud that at last my mother would tell me to stop my home-work and join them. Then we began to play our traditional games.

'Queenie' or 'Kingie' was a most popular ball game because any number could play it. It was called 'Queenie' when girls played it, and 'Kingie' when there were more boys than girls in the game. This game's charm lay in the fact that not only could any number of children play in one game but it did not need either skill or luck, and it didn't even need a real ball. Newspaper folded up and tied with string would do—or a ping-pong ball or a small piece of wood just big enough to hide in one's hand or up one's jersey or down one's knickers. 'Queenie' stood on the pavement with her back to the street. In the street were her subjects. She would throw the ball over her head into the street where someone would have to catch it. As soon
as it was caught 'Queenie' would call out 'one, two, three, Queenie' and turn round. All her subjects had their hands behind their backs. 'Queenie' had to guess which one had the ball. She had three guesses, and if she guessed right she still remained 'Queenie'. If she failed, the boy or girl having the ball became 'Queenie'. It was a good game because it could last for hours.

'Teaser' was a ball game only three could play. On either side of the street stood a boy. In the centre was another boy. The boy on one side had to throw the ball over the head of the boy in the middle to the boy on the other side of the street. But if the boy in the centre was able to get it before it reached the other boy then he won and the boy who had failed to get the ball became 'Teaser'. And you could be teased, because some rough boys threw it at you instead of over your head—and you had to dodge out of the way quickly and had no chance of catching it.

There was another ball game called 'Hot Rice'. Up to eight children played this game, which could be very rough. The leader of the gang would say, pointing at each person in turn, and including himself, 'Eanie—Meanie—Miny—Mo'. 'Mo' dropped out. Eventually there would be only two left. Still 'Eanie, Meanie, Miny, Mo'—between two children left; one when it came to 'Mo'. 'Mo' had the ball and the last one was 'Hot Rice'. The rest of the children had to hit him with the ball. There was a limited space within which you could run—usually between two lamp-posts. You had to be very nimble to avoid being hit. The drawback to this game was that no one was ever keen to be 'Hot Rice', and once 'Hot Rice' was hit the game seemed to be over. After all, though it might be fun to hit another boy (or girl) with a ball, if the penalty for hitting him made you 'Hot Rice' then unless you were extremely nimble or very brave you were inclined to miss him. Of course, it had to be a near miss or you would be judged a coward or a bad sport or a stinking thrower!

'Dead-man's Cap' was another rough game. It was only played by boys, and they had to have caps. It was played rather in the same way as 'Queenie', but the boys stood in a line some three feet apart, behind each other. The 'Dead-man' threw his cap over his shoulder. One of the other boys had to catch it—and hide it quickly. The 'Dead-man' had to guess or discover who had the cap. If he guessed right he had to return to the spot where he started from before the boy with the cap hit him with it. And a peaked cap could really hurt—especially if the other boys obstructed your run 'home'.

Girls had a lovely game called 'Alley Gobs'. I do not ever recall seeing any boys play it. 'Alley Gobs'? Well, the 'gobs' were four small square stones about one inch across. The 'alley' was usually a coloured glass marble. The gobs were placed on the ground close to the player. She threw the alley up and recaought it as she picked up one gob. Then she threw the alley up and picked up two gobs. In the final action all four gobs were picked up as the alley was caught. A real champion could do it all with one hand! I do not know if gobs are made now-a-days but I have in 1970 seen girls still playing 'Alley Gobs'; maybe they were a relic of their mother's schooldays.

There was a variation of 'Alley Gobs' and it was usually called 'Five Stones' or 'Bouncer'. The stones were just ordinary small sea-shore pebbles and the bouncer a small rubber ball, about the same size as a golf ball (often an actual old golf ball was used) which had an extremely good bounce. The ball was bounced and a stone was picked up. It was returned to the ground and two stones were picked up at the second bounce. This was continued till all five stones were picked up. There was a variation in this game when the ball was allowed to bounce once as one stone was picked up and bounced five times before picking up five stones. To wait for a ball to bounce five times, then catch it and pick up five stones with the other hand, was no mean feat. The ball had to be thrown down with terrific force in order to get five bounces out of it before you caught it. Keeping an eye on the ball for one second and then glancing down to where the five stones lay in another second was a real art. Of course the winner was the one who made no mistakes in the series of moves. Girls used to play this game for hours—all innocent fun.

The sex education of children today has taken all the fun out of playing 'Doctors and Nurses'. When I was a little boy we had no sex education whatsoever. But I learnt several anatomy lessons
from playing 'Doctors'. We could seldom get a patient; so the nurse was our patient. It was all good fun and usually ended up with the Doctor giving the nurse a tickle where she was most ticklish. I never heard of any child in my part of London coming to any harm whatsoever by playing 'Doctors and Nurses'. 'Mothers and Fathers' was almost the same game—because mother got ill and father had to examine her to find out what was wrong. (Nurse had caught some disease and the Doctor had to find out what was diseased.)

Most of the boys in Walworth owned a peg-top when I was ten years old. I asked six boys of Walworth recently and none had any idea what a peg-top was, so I assume they are no longer made. The best 'tops' were made from boxwood, and three-pence would pay for one that would last for years. Good string was wrapped around it, and at the flick of the wrist you pulled away the string and the top would spin on its steel-nail-like base. There were also peg-tops that one whipped round with a thin piece of leather on a stick. Humming tops were made of tin, having very elegant designs all over them. They made a pretty little tune as they hummed around. Sometimes they were made to spin with string, but mainly they had a small mechanical device at the top of the humming top which one pushed up and down until the whole twirled round. I always longed to own a humming top, but they were priced from 2s. to 3s ed. each, and were way beyond my parents' purse strings. However, my dad did buy me a hoop. It was made of iron, about four feet in diameter, and an inch wide. With a stick you knocked the hoop along—and you had to run to keep up with it. It never wore out. I grew tired of it and after two years' constant wear I swapped it for a penknife. This had a section for taking out stones from horses' hoofs, but I never found a horse needing my attention.

Vicious boys used to tie the tails of stray dogs together with string—or tin cans on to the tails of cats. But the police stamped out these games pretty quickly with on-the-spot justice, a thrashing—and now tell your mother why I did it! But they never told—and to be caught by a policeman let your side down. There was also a dangerous game called 'Bangers'.

You needed a large key, three or four live matches, a nail or piece of thick wire, and some string. Into the top of the key you rammed the live heads of three matches, then you jammed home a nail (the same size as the hole in the key) over the live heads and twisted the rest of the nail or wire round the key. Then a large piece of string was attached to the key at one end and the handle of the key at the other. The key would then be swung with great force against a wall and would explode with a startling noise. Boys were injured with pieces of it. If a teacher at school or the police found you with a large key you had to have a very good explanation, or you were in for a good hiding!

'Twisting' (or Twisters) was a game I never did like. Two children joined hands and twisted round and round. I always got dizzy. Mostly girls played this game, but when a boy and a girl played 'Twisters' they were usually fond of each other, and, having whirled round and round, they got dizzy and had a good reason to sit down, hold hands and do some kissing!

Until Park Keepers got wise there was a game called 'Steady Sticks'. One got all manner of sticks or branches off trees, usually about six inches long. They were placed on top of each other, and you had to remove some of them without any of the other sticks moving. It was not so easy as it seems; when the branches were odd shapes they seemed to cling together. But pulling off branches of the very few trees in Walworth was frowned upon not only by Park Keepers but by parents. (Tree climbing often split trousers!)

I've not seen them for many years outside a circus but both boys and girls made and played on stilts in my childhood days. Two planks of wood about four feet high, two blocks of wood nailed on, a foot from the base, and you walked along on the blocks. It was a good game—but making stilts was not at all easy. The wood usually came from long egg boxes, but it took ages to find blocks to nail on to them. A champion stilt-walker could hop along on one stilt for at least a hundred yards and was much admired. For some reason girls were not good on stilts.

'Gammy' or 'Broken Bottles' was a game of skill mostly played by girls. Four or five would stand in a ring and throw the ball to each other. If they failed to catch the ball they became 'Gammy'.
‘gammy’ means awkward or lame) and forfeited the use of one hand—so they had to catch the ball with one hand. If they next failed to catch the ball they knelt on one knee—still trying to catch with one hand. Another failure to catch and they were down on both knees. If they failed to catch the ball in this almost impossible position they were ‘out’. There was a variation whereby, having failed to catch the ball with two hands first time, you went on one knee but could still use both hands to catch the ball—then both knees on the floor but two hands in use—then with one hand behind your back you had to catch the ball or be ‘out’. It really depended on the force with which a ball was thrown at you. If a ball was thrown at your face rather hard you were indeed Gammy, and didn’t want to play any more! And little girls can be quite cruel at times. But I could never understand why it was called ‘Broken Bottles’. On the other hand ‘Knocking Down Ginger’ did use a bottle and it was often broken. It was a good game, with a soft ball. ‘Ginger’ was either a tin or a bottle. (We used tough ginger-beer bottles.) The ball was aimed at ‘Ginger’, bounced against the wall, and you caught the ball after its bounce. It was an art to do both—knock down ‘Ginger’ and catch the ball on the rebound—and you had to be really ‘Ginger’ (which was the word for ‘alert’ when I was a lad) to play this game successfully.

I remember clearly the words of a ring game played fifty years ago:

There was a King of York
Who had ten thousand men
He led them up to the top of a hill
Then led them down again
And when they were up they were up
And when they were down they were down
And when they were only half way up
They were neither up nor down.

I remember the words—but for my life I don’t remember how the game was played. And there was another jingle I recall—but what game it was I can’t remember:

One, two, three, four, five
Once I caught a little fish alive.

Six, seven, eight, nine, ten
Then let it go again.
Why did I let him go?
Because he hurt my finger so.
Which finger did it bite?
The little finger on the right.

And here is a jingle from my childhood days which girls used:

Hoxton boys are very nice boys,
Peckham boys are better
But Walworth boys are best of all,
Better, better, better—and Best!

at ‘Best’ they’d dash off to touch their best boy.

‘Penny for the Guy’ had nothing to do with fireworks or even with Guy Fawkes. Girls played this game. Six large rings were drawn on the ground in some sort of circle. A girl stood on each circle. There was a girl in the centre. She had a school hat in her hands as she said: ‘Have you got a penny for my Guy?’ ‘No,’ said a girl in one of the rings, ‘but I will see if my neighbour has a penny to spare.’ And on the word ‘spare’ the two girls in circles changed places and the girl in the centre had to get into one of the circles before either girl had completely moved from their circles. If she succeeded then the girl who had lost her circle had to go into the centre, and the game started again. There were at least four feet between each circle, but the girl in the centre had to be very speedy in order to run into a ring before the others had changed places. This game had a variation. The girls sometimes said ‘Have you got a match to light my lamp?’ and their answer would be ‘No—but I’ll ask the girl next door’. And the instant ‘door’ was said they had to change places. Not knowing for sure what the exact wording of the reply gave a slightly even chance for the girl in the centre. Because one girl could say, ‘No—but I will pop across and see if my neighbour has a match.’ Action started on the completion of the reply.

‘Snakes’ was a boys’ and girls’ game that had to be played within a certain limited area or it would last for hours. A leader would be chosen. Any number of children could play but it seldom
exceeded ten. The leader had to chase and touch any of the other nine. Then the leader and first caught held hands tightly and had to run together to catch someone else, and the next one caught held hands with the first two. It became great fun when eight children had to catch the last one. The last one did not become the leader. It was the first caught who became the new leader. It was called 'Snakes' because they looked like a frisky snake as they all ran around together tightly holding hands. Anyone who broke the line of gripping hands was out of the game.

'Follow the leader' was another name for this game forty years ago; but I understand that 'Follow the leader' today is a very rough game. If the leader today breaks a window with a brick you break the same window with another brick. And that reminds me that children yesteryear got a lot of fun tying together the knockers of two front doors next to each other. Then they'd bang at one door and rush across the road and watch. As the people in one house came and opened their door the knocker next door would bang as well! Such fun—unless you got caught. It was usually played on foggy nights to enable you to run into the fog and vanish just after the second knocker was banging. Of course you had to hear them and see the residents come out, see them gaze up and down the road, untie the string attached to the next house or explain to the neighbour 'It was kids playing their blooming games'. The fun and the thrill was seeing the annoyance. Another trick was to stick a match-stick into a bell push on a door and start it ringing, then retire to a safe distance to await results.

Nowadays we get so tired in October and November saying 'No' to children begging money—'A penny for the Guy'. It has become almost a racket. Sixty years ago children made grottoes from grass, flowers, bits of glass, cigarette cards and bits of fancy paper, and begged for pennies for the Grotto. I've not seen a grotto for at least twenty years in Southwark. An old resident told me that around 1910-15 grottoes were made of flowers and fancy paper which surrounded the photograph of a dead father or someone close to the child, and it was an understood thing that you gave a penny to help pay for a wreath.