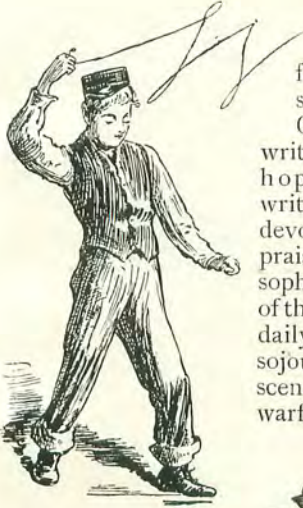


## The Street Games of Children.

BY FRANCES H. LOW.



HEN the day arrives for the "Philosophy of Street Games" to be written, it is to be hoped that the writer will, at least, devote a chapter in praise of the philosophy and heroism of the persons whose daily fate it was to sojourn near the scenes of such deadly warfare as *Tipcat*, or even the milder operations of *Skipping*

and *Peg-top* whipping. Fortunately for those of us who have to pass through small back streets, *Tipcat* is being rigorously regulated by the police: it ought, however, to be entirely abolished, except in parks, where, perhaps, it might be allowed to be played, as it is immensely popular amongst boys, and is in itself a highly interesting game. I have not attempted to describe all the games that are played in the streets. I have purposely omitted such well-known ones as *Leap-frog*, *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, *Hop Chivvy*, and the various running games which are played on the lines of *Touch wood*; and out of the countless games of marbles and buttons I have chosen two or three of the most popular and least complicated. To get a lucid explanation of the playing is by no means an easy business, partly because, no matter how retired a spot one chooses for the demonstration, a huge crowd of errand boys, bonnetless women, and loafing men is sure to collect round within a few minutes; and partly also because it is an extremely difficult matter to get the little performers to play slowly, and make the successive steps intelligible to an uninitiated person. If you ask, "But what is *Pegsy*?" they look at you for a moment with an incredulous grin, which implies that in their opinion you are an imbecile,

and answer, nodding their heads with an air of conviction, "Why, o' course, P stands for *Pegsy*!" and from this position they are not to be dislodged.

Exactly how the traditions concerning games are preserved I have not, in spite of a good deal of inquiry on the point, been able to learn; but that they are handed down from father to son is certain, since an elderly man—a Londoner—who happened to be a bystander in one of my crowds, told me that he, as a boy, some forty years ago, played almost precisely the same games as the boys of to-day. What is perhaps more curious is the early age at which street children are initiated into the freemasonry—if one may call it so—of the games. One of the funniest incidents I met with was in connection with the game of *Buck and Gobs*, which I shall describe in a minute, and wherein a preternaturally acute little imp of five or six years old figures. He could not possibly, owing to the age of his next brother, have been more than six at most, and I was disinclined to avail myself of his services, upon which, however, he insisted. He was a wizened, fragile little being, and his hands were so tiny and his wrists so weak, that he had the utmost difficulty in making effective play with the stones, or gobs, as they are called. After he had dropped the stones some eight or nine times, I said to some of the bigger boys who were standing round, "Perhaps you had better show me," and remarked mildly to the small performer, who was still heroically struggling with the stones: "I don't think you are a particularly good player." He looked at me steadily for a moment, spat on his small hands, and said in the most languid manner imaginable, "I'm a deb'lish good player, I am!" After this he put a dirty twig into his mouth and regarded the operation of his seniors with great contempt, every now and again hurling scornful words at them, and regarding me with a threatening eye.

One of the most popular—if not the most popular—of all the pavement games, both with girls and boys, is "*Buck and Gobs*." Four stones, technically called gobs, and a large, round marble comprise



"BUCK AND GOBS."

the property required for this game, the successful playing of which necessitates a large amount of dexterity and practice.

The player arranges four stones in a square on the pavement (see illustration); he then kneels down, throws up the marble, which he holds in his right hand, immediately picks up one of the gobs and catches the buck in the same hand, after it has bounded. After this process has been gone through with each of the gobs without dropping them, they are placed in twos, the player picking up the two gobs together; and after this the grouping is three together and one; and, finally, all four gobs close together, which are treated in the same manner as the single ones. If a player has got to this stage successfully, that is to say without letting a single gob drop throughout, he goes in for the final round, called "Pegsy." The gobs are again placed singly, and the player has to pick up one and drop it before seizing the second gob, meanwhile maintaining the play with the buck. No little skill is required to conduct the last operation successfully; but constant practice has made the children peculiarly expert, and it is quite usual for them to reach the final round without a single miss. Promptness of eye and hand to seize the buck swiftly, and prevent its rolling away, and to grasp the stones without dropping them is the chief requisite for success in this game, which I have found invariably played best by the girls, who are, however, a long way behind the other sex in anything involving exact aiming,

such as, for instance, in any of the numerous games of *Buttons*.

This game is almost entirely confined to the boys, possibly because the little girls are not able to supply the necessary playing instruments in the shape of trouser buttons and a big piece of lead, which is melted and flattened in the fire, and called a nicker. Brass trouser buttons are articles of immense value in the eyes of street boys; they are difficult to obtain, and in the majority of cases are cut off by the boys from their own garments. My little informant, who disappeared behind a corner and returned with half a dozen in his hand, said, in answer to my somewhat anxious question as to whether his mother would not

be angry :

"Oh, *she* won't know. I often rips 'em off, but I sews 'em on again. 'Tain't only them girls can sew !"

The marked and invariable contempt exhibited by the boys to the softer sex seems quite unjustifiable, as in a large number of games the girls are formidable rivals, if not actually better players.

*Buttons* consists of seven or eight buttons being thrown as near as possible a specific line on the pavement. The one who gets



"BUTTONS."

nearest goes in first. He stands on the curb, takes his nicker, and aims it at a button agreed upon by the rest. If he hits it, he gets the button and has another turn; if he misses, the next boy goes in, and the one who has got the most buttons is the winner. This game is called *Nicking*. Another consists in putting all the buttons close together on a line and hitting one out of the line without touching the others. This is called *Hard Buttons*, and its successful play necessitates a very neat and steady aim. Almost all the other games of buttons, of which there are at least some seven or eight variations, are played on similar lines; and the fact that the winner may keep all the buttons he takes no doubt accounts in a measure for their great popularity.

Both the games described above are in "season" during the summer months, as are also *Hopscotch* and *London*, whilst a few games, like marbles, may be played nearly all the year round. I

have not been able to obtain any precise information as to why certain games are played at certain seasons: for instance, why marbles should be countenanced all the year round and buttons only during summer; but on the whole the theory seems to be that "hot" games, involving a certain amount of physical exertion, such as tops, tip-cat, and running games, should be played in winter and less active ones in summer; but even this theory is incomplete, as *Release*, which involves a large amount of running, is played as much in hot weather as in cold.

*Hopscotch* is almost as popular with both girls and boys as *Buck and Gobs*, and is decidedly most embarrassing to the pedestrian who happens to walk unwarily across the chalk lines and bring the "hopper" to a full stop. A glance at the illustration will show how the lines are drawn, the spaces

being respectively named one sie, two sie, three sie, four sie, and puddings. The exact playing varies slightly in different districts, but the usual *modus operandi* is for the player to deposit the bit of broken china—generally off a cup or saucer—which she holds in her hand, on "one sie." She then hops up to P. and back again, picking up the bit of china as she comes down again. She repeats exactly the same process until she has placed the china on "four sie," and brought it down with her. Then the real play begins with what is called "Hard Labour." The chip of china is placed on "one sie," and the player, hopping on the right

foot, has to chip the china into each space. If it goes on the line, or if she chips it more than once in each space, she is out, and someone else goes in. If, however, she surmounts these difficulties and hops back to one sie, chipping the china before her, she goes in for the final heat. The bit of china is placed on her toe, and her object is to walk up to "four sie" and back with-

out letting the china drop off, at the same time making only one step in each space. This game has the additional advantage of keeping the attention of all the other children who are not "in" employed and interested, as an artful player who is not carefully watched can easily "chip" the china "twice," or take two steps, or commit any of the other small breaches of the rules, for which the bystanders are, of course, on the alert. A bit of broken china figures in nearly all the games, and it is certainly rather a commentary on the people who are so anxious to bestow expensive toys of all kinds on poor children, that their favourite games are played with a bit of chalk, a few buttons, a scrap of broken china, and some stones out of the roadway.

*London*, so far as I can gather, is a completely modern game, and is more in



"HOPSCOTCH."

vogue in the north and west of London than in the east. The accompanying illustration shows the figure that is drawn in chalk on the pavement, the two side loops being for the player's marks. Should there be three or four players, the figure is made longer with an additional number of lines, and there are extra side loops; the game is, however, usually played by two persons. The bit of china is put on the bottom line and "nicked," or "spooned," along with the finger. If it rolls on, say, 2, the player draws a mark in the side loop nearest 2 from opposite corners. The other player has then a turn, each player going in alternately. The second time the player's china goes on the same number a line across the opposite corners is drawn; the third time this occurs a line is drawn across the middle of the square horizontally, and the fourth time perpendicularly. Here the real pleasure of the player begins.

Her object is now to get the china again into 2, the number by which she has obtained her marks. If she does this she exclaims aloud triumphantly, "Now I've got a soldier's head!" She then draws a little round close up to her square, but on the other side of the line. She then has another turn, and, if the china again goes into 2, she cries, "Now I've got the soldier's belly!" and adds a large circle on to the one she calls the head. If it goes into four or five, and she has not previously nicked the china into these numbers, she simply makes a stroke, as before; the sixth time that the china goes into 2 the player gets the soldier's legs, and she has now got her soldier. The one who obtains most soldiers is the winner. If the china goes over any of the boundaries, or on the

lines, the player is out, and has lost the game. The chief attraction of this game appears to be in the naming aloud of one portion of the soldier's anatomy; the little girls seem to have some sort of idea that the language is not quite polite, and I observed they looked at me half doubtfully, as if in expectation of finding a shocked expression on my face, which might result in jeopardising the promised pennies. Nothing of the sort, however, being visible, they proceeded with great gusto to describe another soldier, much to my amusement.

In *Duck*, which is the name given to the stone which acts as a target, a hole is scooped in the road, in front of which a stone is placed. The game consists in knocking the duck into a hole from a little distance; but, if the player is unsuccessful, he may have another turn, provided he can pick up his own stone and reach the pavement without being touched by his opponent. During this operation the boy or girl says:—

"Gully, gully, all round the hole, One duck on."



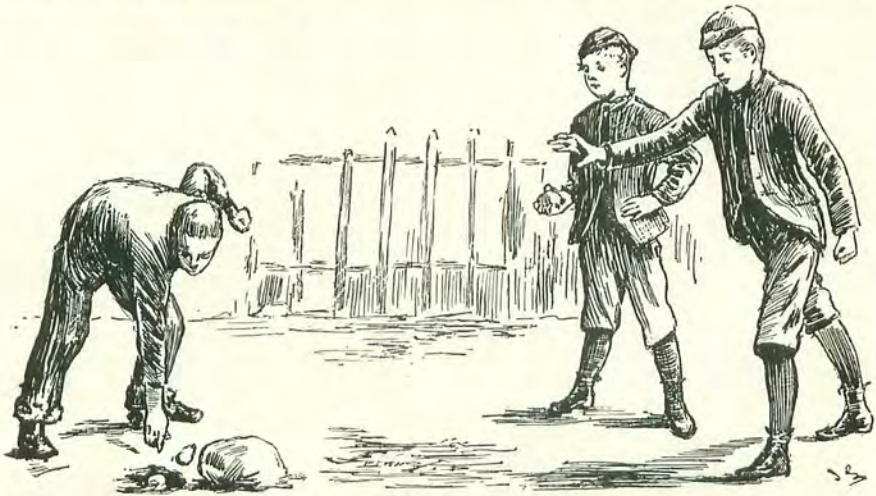
"LONDON."

This game, which is principally played in the road, is, however, fraught with some danger to the limbs of the players, who are too intent upon grasping their stones and eluding their pursuers to regard passing vehicles with much attention.

Of ring games, which appear to be played exclusively by girls, there is a large assortment. Many of them have appropriate singing accompaniments, and when gracefully and quietly carried out by the performers, are very pretty and picturesque. The preliminary arrangements of these round games form a fine field of observation for the student of child character. One child, scarcely ever the best-looking, or

strongest, or eldest, instinctively assumes the leadership, to which the rest of the children voluntarily bow. In my square there is a certain Mabel —, as she is

Play and cuddle and kiss together ;  
Kiss her once, kiss her twice,  
Kiss her three times over !”  
(*The two in middle kiss boisterously, whilst the ring  
races round singing very quickly.*)



“DUCK.”

usually called by her friends, who is nothing less than a born general. Amongst her squad there are girls who must be at least five or six years older than herself, and yet her generalship, so far as I can see, is never challenged. She selects her own favourite companions for the most coveted posts, orders the entire company about, administers slight corporal punishment to stupid or careless recruits, settles in the most arbitrary manner any disputes that arise—generally to her own advantage—in short, by the exercise of goodness knows what magical qualities, has some dozen children under her command every evening.

Of round games, I think *Poor Jenny is a-weeping* is by a long way the favourite. Any number of children can join in the game, which is played by a ring being formed, with one child in the centre, who personifies Jenny. The circle moves round singing :—

“ Poor Jenny is a-weeping, a-weeping, a-weeping,  
A-weeping, a-weeping, all on a summer day !  
On the carpet she shall kneel,

(*Here Jenny kneels down*)

While the grass grows in the field.

Stand up, stand up on your feet,

(*Here Jenny stands up*)

And choose the one you love so sweet ;

Choose once, choose twice, choose her three  
times over.

(*Here Jenny chooses another child and takes her into ring*)

Now you're married, we wish you joy,  
First a girl, and then a boy,  
Seven year after a son and daughter,

It will be seen from the above specimen that one must not expect too much in the way of sense or grammar or refinement in these street songs ; but there is a heartiness in the singing and a zest and enjoyment in the dancing round which go far to compensate for any trifling drawback of this kind.

A rather curious round game and a very favourite one is *Bobby Bingo*. There is the usual circle, which moves round with one child in the centre, and the words run in this way :—

“ There was a farmer had a boy  
And his name was Bobby Bingo,  
B'ngo (each letter is spe't out),  
Bingo,  
Bingo,  
And Bingo was his name, O !”

Then the girl in the centre points to each child in the circle with her finger, saying to herself as she goes round, B I N G O, over and over again. If she says any letter but “ o ” aloud she is out. This is by no means so simple a matter as appears at first sight, as can be proved by anyone who spells out the ridiculous word several times quickly, taking care to say only the last letter aloud.

*There stands a Lady on the Mountain* is practically the same game with different words, and the same applies to *Master, Master, where's your Gold ?*

In *The King of the Barbaree* the girls march to and fro in long lines singing a number of verses, each of which ends in

the "King of the Barbaree," and is accompanied by clapping of hands.

The *pièce de résistance* of quite a number of round games consists in flopping to the ground, a proceeding which seems to be a source of hilarious and side-splitting mirth to children. In *Ring a ring o' roses* the girls make a ring, and move round singing :

"Ring a ring o' roses,  
Pocketsful o' posies,  
A maiden's fairy crown,  
We all fall down."

The last line finds all the little maidens seated on the pavement with gleeful and delighted faces. Precisely the same wildly exciting *finale* occurs in *Our boots are made of Spanish*, another popular game amongst small girls, who also divert themselves with skipping, which is too familiar

description of *Waggles* practically covers most of the games played under tipcat. Four boys stand at the corners of a large paving stone, two of whom are provided with sticks, whilst the other two are feeders and throw the cat. The batter acts very much in the same way as in cricket, except that he must hit the cat whilst in the air. He hits it as far away as possible, and whilst the feeder has gone to find it gets runs which count to his side. If either of the cats fall to the ground both batters go out and the feeders get their turn. The popular game of *Whacks* is played on much the same lines, and, as it has to be played near railings, usually results in the smashing of a window, which is possibly one of the reasons of its attractiveness.

It is not difficult to understand the



"POOR JENNY IS A-WERPING."

to need any description, and a variety of games with soft balls.

This I think pretty well exhausts girls' games and mixed games in general.

*Tipcat* is almost exclusively played by boys, and although it will not be in season again till next spring, it may not be *inapropos* here to warn persons of its dangerous results, in the shape of impaired eyesight and even blindness, from the eye being struck by the cat. Amongst boys the game goes by the name of *Cat and Stick*, and consists, as is perhaps superfluous to state, of a stick and a small piece of wood sharpened at each end. A variety of games can be played with these weapons, but they are all on much the same principle—that of hitting the cat when in the air, and a de-

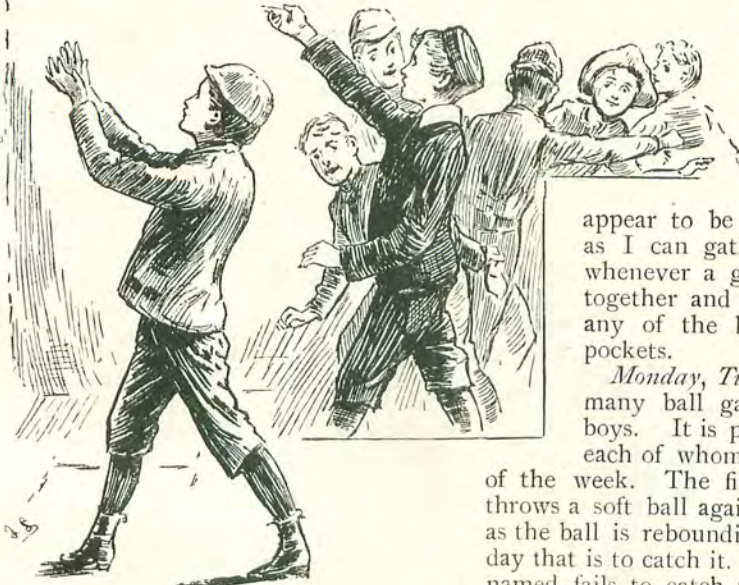
fascination of marbles to a healthy boy, who need never be at a loss for amusement so long as he carries half a dozen of the little round balls in his pocket. The various games of marbles appear more provocative of disputes than any other street game, the reason being due probably to the greater desirableness of the prize. For, as in buttons, the winner keeps the marbles he hits or captures, and one can sympathise with the anguished feelings of Tommy when he sees his cherished coloured glass marble passing into the triumphant possession of Billy. It is at that tragic moment that Tommy is wont to bring the accusation of cheating on the tapis. *Holy Bung*, the somewhat unsavoury title given to one game, consists in plac. ing one marble

on a hole, and making it act as a target for the rest. The marble which can hit it three times in succession and finally be shot into the hole is the winning ball, and its

"nicks" speaks with equal contempt of bowling. Sometimes these differences lead to a slight disturbance of the peace, more often the parties call each other names, and later on resume playing. *Chipping off the line* *Follow me leader*, and *King of the ring*, in which six marbles in two parallel lines are tolerably familiar, and consist mainly in hitting specified marbles. Marbles are properly in fashion during August, but regulations on this point

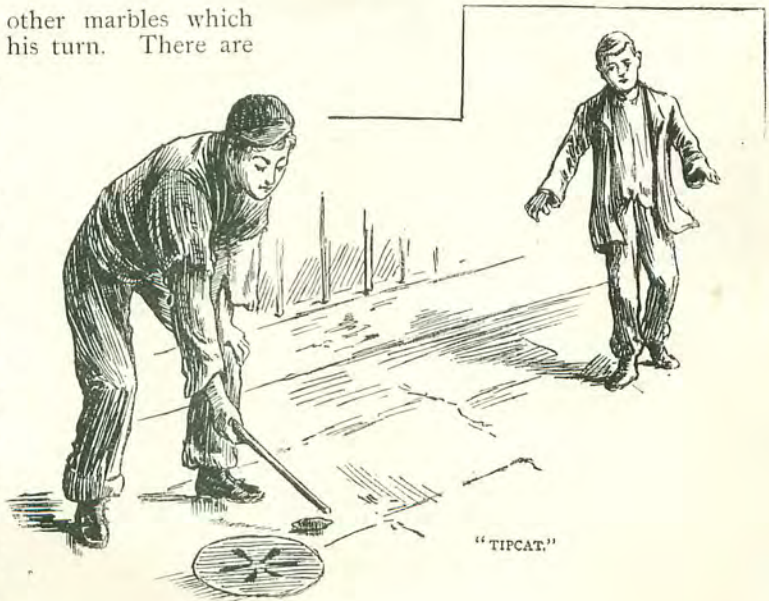
appear to be very lax, and so far as I can gather they are "on" whenever a group of boys come together and find they have got any of the little balls in their pockets.

*Monday, Tuesday*, is one of the many ball games patronised by boys. It is played by seven boys, each of whom appropriates a day of the week. The first boy goes in and throws a soft ball against the wall, saying as the ball is rebounding the name of the day that is to catch it. If Tuesday, who is named, fails to catch the ball, he picks it



"MONDAY, TUESDAY."

owner gets all the other marbles which have missed before his turn. There are no specific laws as to the kind of throwing that must be employed: shooting, bowling, and nicking are all countenanced, the method adopted by each boy being the one in which he is most expert. I have observed that if he patronises *bowling* he generally takes care to inform you that this form of art is a great deal more difficult than *nicking*, for instance; whilst the young gentleman who



"TIPCAT."

up and immediately tries to hit one of the boys, who rapidly disperse at a "miss." If he succeeds he goes in and throws the ball, whilst the boy who gets hit three times is "out," and the winner is the boy who has either not been hit at all or hit the fewest number of times.

Lack of space forbids my doing anything more than naming the other running games, the principal of which, *Release*, is played in playgrounds as well as in streets; *Monkey* and *Boozalum*, which are variations of the old-fashioned *Hide and Seek*,

and *Chalk Corners*, which is a form of paper chase, the trail of which is chalked on the corners of paving stones.

The subject of "Street Games" is deeply interesting, and deserves more exhaustive treatment than I have been able to give to it in a short magazine article. Not the least pleasant feature connected with them is to be found in the happy temperaments of the young players who can get enough pleasure and enjoyment out of the mere act of playing to be able to dispense with any stimulus in the way of prizes.



"KING OF THE RING."