

Obstacle Races.



OUR insular pride is not a pride of personal sedateness and dignity. We may be proud of our country and our countrymen, and with reason ; but we are not above any amount of hearty ridiculous fun—perhaps, we may think, if not say, without undue vanity, because we have enough national dignity of character to stand the strain of much tomfoolery without deterioration. Also we like to give our tomfoolery a sporting character, and have so done from the beginning. Climbing a greasy pole after a leg of mutton, eating hot hasty-pudding for a prize, and jumping in a sack, are not things which it is easy to imagine a crowd of Spaniards and Frenchmen indulging in with enjoyment. But perhaps the sporting element is more acceptably incorporated with the comic in the obstacle race than in anything else of the sort.

Obstacle races are of varying sorts. Men may swim obstacle races in the water, may ride them on bicycles, or may run them on their own natural feet. The obstacle race is not a form of sport largely affected by the great London clubs, on their sprucely-kept

flourisheth exceedingly, and glorious and great is the congregation of guffawing spectators, who gather thickest at the muddy-water jump.

Nobody is very particular about his costume at an obstacle foot race. The blue-jacket tucks up his trousers and runs on his brown skin, the yokel goes perhaps in boots, perhaps in socks, and everybody else dresses according to his fancy—this being a go-as-you-please race of the most pronounced description. Indeed, a certain flavour of variety is sometimes introduced into the business by competitors disguised as Mr. Sloper, a policeman, and an old lady. A good, clear run is given before the first obstacle is reached, just to break up the crowd a little, and send them into their difficulties with plenty of impetus. It is a remarkable thing that, no matter what may happen in other races, there is always a dog about when an obstacle race is started—a dog which goes off after the runners, and barks and snaps angrily at their heels. He is as regular as the Derby-dog, and gets a deal more fun for his trouble. There would seem to be some affinity between stray dogs and boys, in that one or more is sure to be



THE START.

grounds, but at country meetings, held in the handiest field, at seaside regattas, and among the diversions provided at a sporting festival organized by a larky crew of blue-jackets, the obstacle race bloometh and

present, when anybody comes a cropper or otherwise gets into an undignified scrape, to enjoy the agony of the sufferer and deride him. That is why there is always a stray dog at an obstacle race.



RAILS AND POSTS

Perhaps the first obstacle is a row of hurdles, or rather of strong rails and posts, five or six deep, one beyond another, and very short distances apart. You may either scramble over these or crawl under. If you scramble over, you bark your shins grievously, fall between the rails, alighting on the most painful corners, and find difficulty in climbing out. On the other hand, if you crawl under-

neath, you only break the falls of all those who are scrambling above and falling through; also your own head, amongst the posts. It is considered proper to alight upon your feet on springing from the last rail, but the spectators prefer you to use the other end, a plan very frequently carried out.

After this the competitors, with such advantages as the scramble has severally given them, and such bumps and scrapes as they have themselves collected, take another run on the flat. At the end of this an immense net is pegged to the ground on all sides but the nearest. This net lies thick in many folds, and, in some secret place, either between two of the pegs or in the net itself, there is a hole big enough for a man to get through. The first man arriving here throws himself down and crawls under the unpegged end of the net, followed by the others as fast as they may, until that great net contains a piled-up crowd of wriggling humanity, each man making his best effort to find the exit, and getting in the way of all the others.

You never can tell when the first man will get out. He may find the hole at once or he may be almost any length of time; in fact, very often it is found that some frantic competitor is unconsciously standing on that part of the net. Sometimes, if the net is very large, the artful man does this purposely,



THE NET.



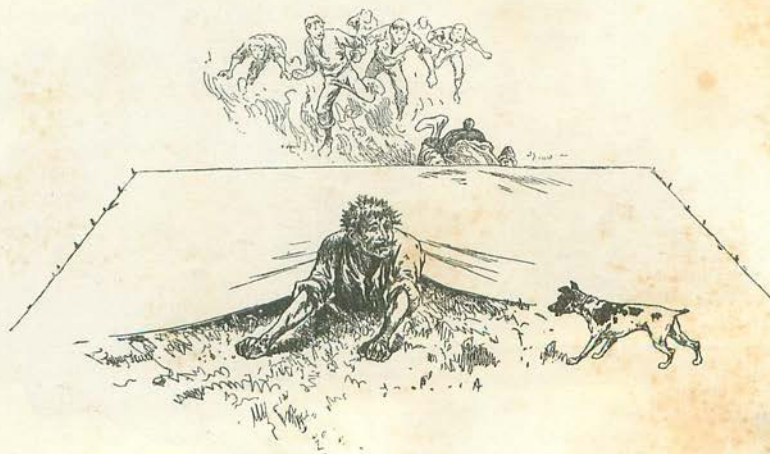
LADDERS AND PLANK.

in order to seize the opportunity when everybody is making a wild rush at some other part, and bolt out with a good start. When at last somebody does get through there is a magnificent scramble among the rest to follow, and the crowd stream out, much the worse for wear, and in a very different order from that in which they went in. Often is it the fate of the man who entered far ahead of the field to leave far behind it. And so for another run on the flat.

A very little of this, and the next obstacle is met. This is, in the first place, a wooden frame supporting a horizontal pole or plank nine or ten feet from the ground. There are two ladders by which this may be scaled, so that there is a likelihood of two men reaching the top at the same moment. But the way down on the other side is scarcely so convenient. Here you must walk on a steeply sloping, narrow, and very springy plank, as far as an old packing-case, or some similar support, and then on just such another plank to the ground. You must not jump off, or "fudge" this arrangement in any way, or you will be ruled out. The

spectators, however, do not object to your falling off. This last is a very easy feat, as anybody may find for himself who will try walking down a thin plank at an angle of about forty degrees, with a big man striding down before him. To succeed in the race it is preferable to be a good way ahead at this obstacle, and to have the plank to yourself; but, considered entirely as a show, a rush of four or

five on the plank at once is superior. Another level run leads, perhaps, to the canvas—or maybe tarpaulin. This is a good large sheet, laid flat, stretched, and pegged firmly down on two sides. You arrive at one of the unpegged sides and proceed to insert your head under the canvas, like a gentleman about to be guillotined. The task is to grovel under the whole length of that canvas, and get out at the further end with as little delay as is consistent with bringing your clothes with you. If you are close behind, and gaining upon a man under this canvas, it is advisable to look out for his feet—as well as you can; sometimes they catch you about the ears, heavily. It is bad enough to be alone under this sheet; but to be under



CANVAS.

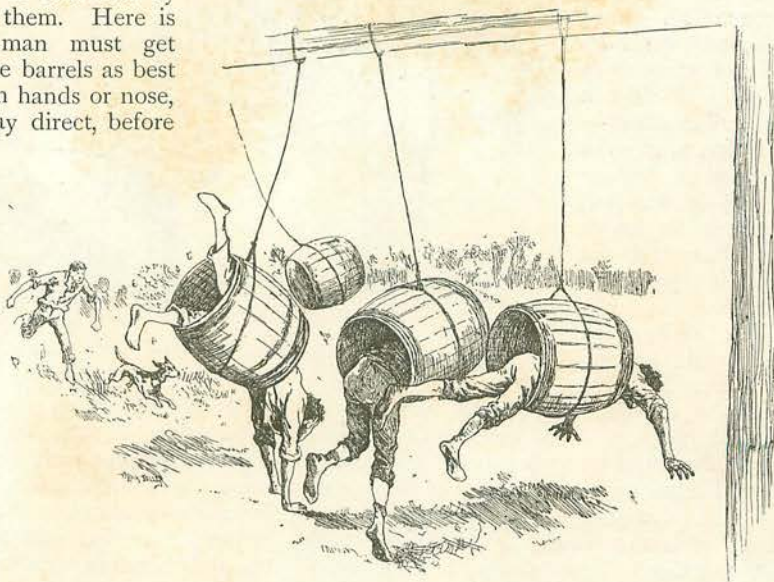
when the presence of several others is tightening it, is mere personal flattening and the wiping out of features. The tendency of this gentle exercise to produce baldness has not hitherto been taken into account by the compilers of medical essays, but it must form an enormous factor in the total result. You may observe the crowd come out visibly balder than it went in, just on the spots where the friction with the canvas acts.

There will probably be another obstacle before the final run in—perhaps a row of barrels, minus the ends, suspended at a height of three or four feet by ropes lashed about them. Here is great fun. Every man must get through one of these barrels as best he can—alighting on hands or nose, or both, as Fate may direct, before rising to finish the race. To get through a swinging barrel is none too easy a job, as the gentle reader may test for himself, if so minded.

To begin with, the thing is unstable, tilting fore and aft at a touch, and swinging in every direction. This makes it difficult to raise oneself into it at all, and doubly difficult to wriggle through, once the head and trunk are in. Half-way through, the victim presents a helpless and tortoise-like appearance, making mad efforts to throw his hinder half sufficiently high to cause him to fall out head-foremost. Once he has been fortunate enough to alight on his hands and save his nose, the smart practitioner does not waste time in a merely comic attempt to kick and wriggle himself clear of the barrel, but makes three or four steps forward upon his hands, when his feet fall quietly to the ground behind, and he rises, top-end uppermost, to run. The man who, resting on his hands, tries the kick-and-wriggle plan, even if he succeed at all, only falls in a confused heap, with his head at the bottom of the pile. Then, when he rises, he is apt to cause hilarious applause by bolting off in some utterly insane direction, quite away from the finish; for several seconds' struggle in a

barrel liable to spin round, followed by a miscellaneous tumble head-downward, never improves a man's topography, and his first impulse is to rush straight ahead.

An improvement of some kind is frequently introduced into the barrel business; an improvement, that is to say, from the point of view of the unsympathetic onlooker; for any improvement in an obstacle race always takes the form of some new persecution of the competitors. One such improvement was introduced at the sports held in con-



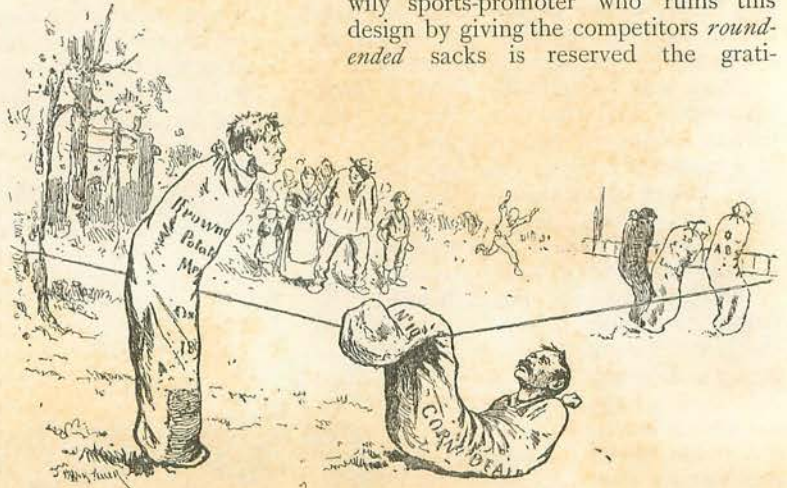
SWINGING BARRELS.

nection with the Manchester Jubilee celebration. The barrels, usually empty, were stuffed tightly with a fearful mixture of paper, tow, cotton-waste, and soot. To fight one's way blindly through paper, tow, and cotton-waste in a wobbling barrel is a worse thing than to do the same through the empty article; but when soot is added in generous quantities—then is the bitterness of the obstacle race seen indeed, and felt, and tasted. The gentleman who invented this horrible preparation holds a most respectable position in Manchester, and has probably now repented, wherefore his name shall not be mentioned; but a few hundred years ago he might have commanded an immense salary as a judicial torture-merchant and witch-baiter. In this particular race itself one competitor was especially unlucky. He was far and away the best of the crowd, had come out triumphantly ahead at all the previous obstacles, and

arrived at the stuffed barrels a long distance to the good. He seized the nearest and boldly rammed his head among the contents; but he got no further. Man after man arrived, and, with such luck as might be his, wriggled through his barrel in more or less time, and started away again, a sooty scarecrow and a public derision. But the first man, head and shoulders immersed, still struggled in hopeless suffocation until everybody was hundreds of yards away ahead, and then it was discovered—that the miscreant carpenter, whose business it was, had forgotten to knock the other end out of this particular barrel!

The sack race, pure and unadulterated, is a funny spectacle enough, but when sack racers have obstacles set them beyond their sacks, truly they must work for their prizes. There are two ways of getting over the ground in a sack. One is by grabbing the loose sack tightly with the hands and jumping—both feet together. This looks a good way, but the least inaccuracy in balance, or alighting with feet too far back or forward in

the sack, means an ignominious bowl over, and much prostrate wallowing. The better way is to get a foot into each extreme corner of the sack, pulling it tightly up in the middle, and to waddle along with quick, short steps. But if these steps be too quick, or not short enough, disaster is certain. For the wily sports-promoter who ruins this design by giving the competitors *rounded* sacks is reserved the grati-



THE SACK RACE—THE ROPE OBSTACLE.

tude of the many—spectators, and the indignation of the few—competitors. A rope across the path and a ladder laid on edge are usually enough obstacles for unfortunate creatures in sacks. It is not easy to jump over that rope and alight right end up, and therefore some turn their backs and fall over it. But then you are down, and might as well have lain down first and rolled under—which, again, some do by choice. If you have come a cropper near the rope, this is the best plan, since it involves only one getting up. The ladder, too, may be jumped or tumbled over, but in the latter case it is uncomfortable to go face-foremost. An attempt to wriggle *through* the ladder on the part of a competitor already prostrate is likely to end in painful failure and an ill-used chin. At the finish, of course, in all sack races, it is policy to fall through the tape, as being quicker than running, jumping, or waddling to breast it; but—and it is a



THE SACK RACE—THE START.

riding which would mightily astonish the crowd at, say, the Herne Hill track. It is, perhaps, only at such a race that one may encounter a belated survival of the jockey cap among cyclists, and the rule is for the costume to partake of the characteristics of road and path, the former predominating, with now and again a distinct suggestion of the



THE SACK RACE—THE LADDER OBSTACLE.

great but—never fall an inch too soon, or you will go under without touching it.

In a bicycling obstacle race, the general idea of the conspiracy is to mock the boasted speed of the cyclist by making his machine a hindrance, a tribulation, and an incubus unto him. He is tempted, for instance, by a long stretch of level track to "pile it on," and go ahead; only to be met at the end by a row of hurdles, or something equally solid, which he cannot pull up in time to avoid running into, and over which he must then drag his damaged vehicle.

The bicycle obstacle race, like, indeed, other obstacle races, is chiefly to be seen at small country meetings. It is a shy and modest plant, and never ventures into the glare of metropolitan notoriety. A town racing cyclist will not

adventure his feather-weight instrument among the bangs, bumps, and general misadventures native to the obstacle race. Wherefore it comes to pass that in such a race, when it is found, many machines of uncertain age and build are to be seen, and many riders with gets-up and styles of

jockey or sulky-driver thrown in by way of imparting as sportive a flavour as possible. Sometimes fancy costumes are presented, and then jockeys and sweeps, Ally Sloper and Mephistopheles chase one another on bicycles of varying sorts and dates of manufacture.

A country meeting, too, where sports are held in a grass field, affords many advantages in the way of natural obstacles, through which the track may be laid, with a resulting steeplechase highly gratifying to such enemies of the cycling pastime as may be present.



"OFF AND AWAY."

The track at a country meeting, prepared for an ordinary straightaway level race, presents in itself more often than not a series of difficulties not to be despised. There was a field (possibly is still) in Bedfordshire, used annually for bicycle races and other sports, wherein the unfortunate competitor, in what

was supposed to be an ordinary straightaway handicap, was condemned, among other things, to negotiate eight or nine immense holes, about a yard in diameter, and of a sufficient depth decently to bury a Newfoundland dog in; to bump off a grass-edge four or five inches high on to shingly gravel, and up again a little farther on; to make frequent ducks to avoid the fate of Absalom, where the track ran below overhanging trees; in one place to plunge boldly among foliage where a small tree on one side reached out affectionately towards another opposite; in another to avoid utter jamming and smashing up with other competitors where the track suddenly narrowed; and generally to look out for the casual brick, the insidious gully, and the fortuitous dead branch, as well as, perchance, the occasional legs of some urchin projecting from under the ropes, where he sat lowly and hugged a post. All this in the straight stretches, the corners, of which there were many, being of angles which seemed to preclude any possibility of getting past them except by the process of dismounting and carrying the machine round. So that, when a hole, several bricks, a gravel-bump, a dead branch, and a boy's legs all occurred at a bad corner, where tree branches hung low, the rider had small leisure for meditation. On such a track as this little artifice is required to prepare for an obstacle race, and perhaps the district may afford other and larger natural features, available as obstacles

After a miscellaneous burst-off—such a burst-off as only a country meeting could show—a wide ditch or stream may be encountered, which must be waded knee or

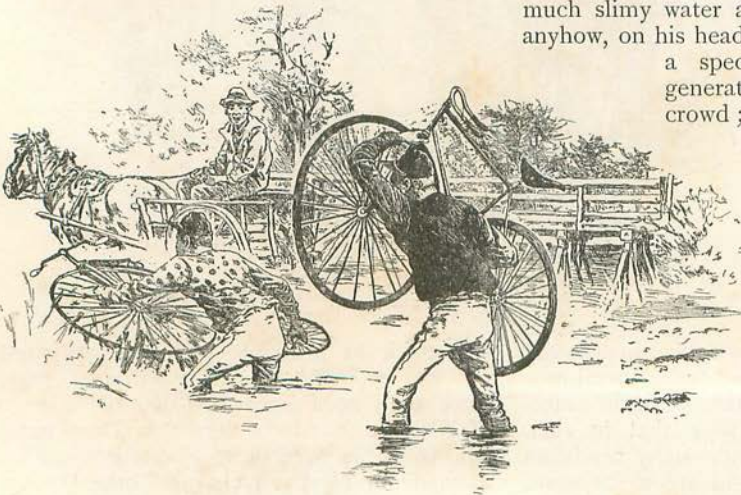


OVER THE STEPS.

waist high, while the bicycle is carried overhead.

Indeed, the man who can best carry his machine has a very great advantage in contests of this kind. A bicyclist wading through much slimy water and carrying his bicycle anyhow, on his head or shoulder, is in itself a spectacle always certain to generate mirth among a village crowd; but when he stumbles

on the uneven bottom and goes under with a mighty flop, bag and baggage, or when he sticks in the mud, great is the joy of Willum and Jarge. A high hedge, especially one with a ditch on the further side, is another good obstacle native to such a field as a



THROUGH THE STREAM.

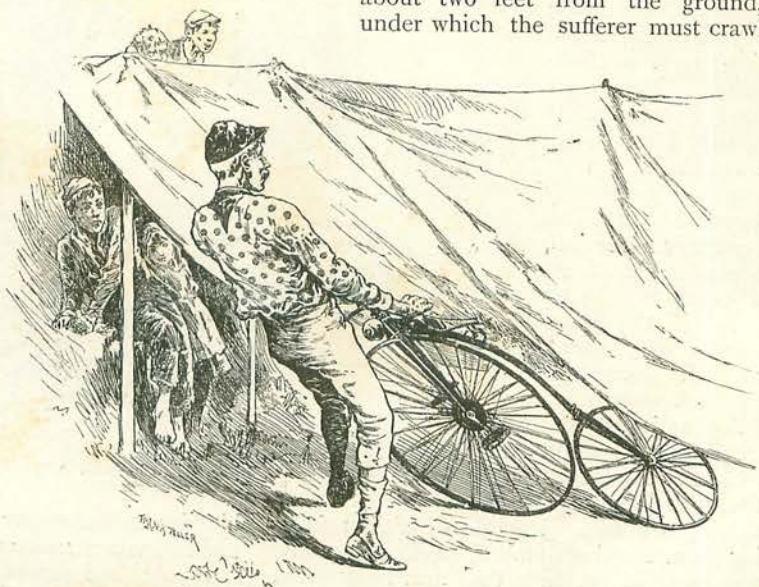


CHAIRS.

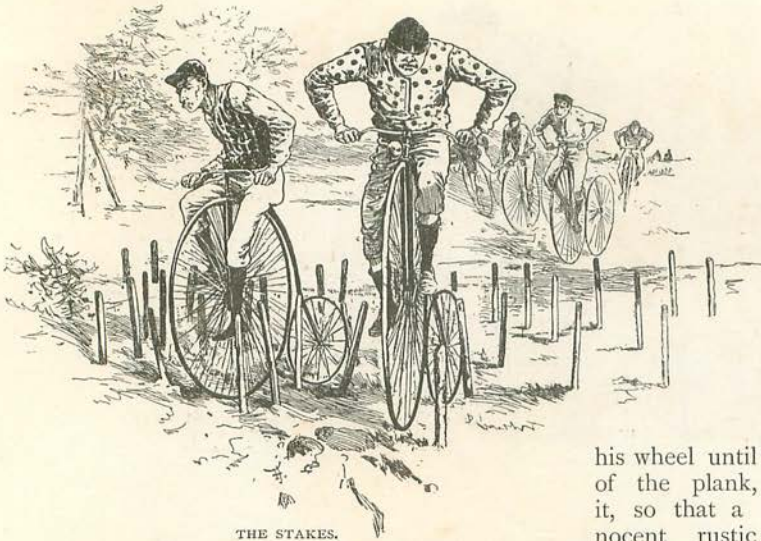
bicycle obstacle race is frequently run on; while an artificial obstruction in great request is a wooden flight of stairs up over and down which the competitor must carry his machine, unless he be foolhardy enough to try to ride over, as has been more than once disastrously attempted. The attempt has not always been a voluntary one, for the stair-flight is a magnificent trap for the hasty young man who rides at his best pace and can't always pull up at the right moment. So is the cluster of chairs, barrels, and benches, and the committee oft-times make his career a grief and a weariness unto him. For it is necessary to select an advantageous opening among those chairs and sundries, and then to dodge gingerly between them. Now, it is commonly found that the widest-looking opening leads into the most impossible "no thoroughfare," the biggest and hardest pieces of furniture, and the most grievous spills; so

that not always he who is first among the chairs is first out of them, and he who tackles them with the boldest rush is likely to sprawl among them with the most bruises.

The diresome tarpaulin, too, is spread in the path of the unhappy rider, with just such greater awkwardness to him than to the pedestrian, as may be calculated from the encumbrance of his bicycle. Often the place of the tarpaulin, however, is taken by a series of scaffold poles, fixed across the course at about two feet from the ground, under which the sufferer must crawl



THE TARPULIN.



THE STAKES.

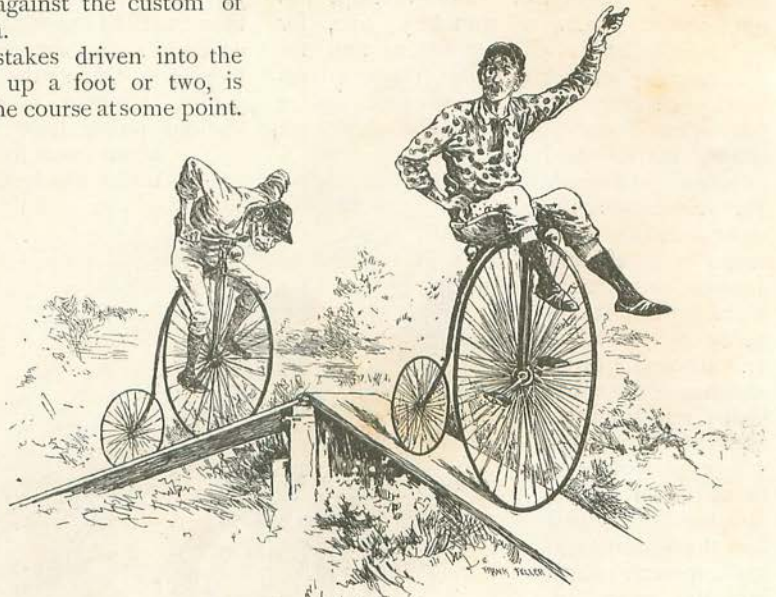
and drag that bicycle. Also it has been demanded of him on more than one occasion that he ride along the whole length of a bricklayer's ladder, over the rungs, as it lies upon the turf. This practice now seems to have been abolished—probably at the instance of one of the humanitarian societies who protest against the custom of hook-swinging in India.

A confused row of stakes driven into the ground and standing up a foot or two, is pretty certain to adorn the course at some point. They are a fearful thing. They look so insignificant, and they upset so effectually. Unless they have been carefully planted with the humane design of letting everybody through scatheless (and they never are), a cropper is almost a certainty; for, even if the front wheel be steered through accurately, the back wheel must follow as it list, and catch whatever be in its way. And then the sufferer must get up as gracefully as possible, carefully refraining from rubbing himself, smile pleasantly, and proceed toward the finish in what comfort he may.

The plank obstacle is an easy one—merely an inclined plane a foot wide or more, up which one must ride and down another. It requires nothing more than steadiness and careful steering, but it is bad for the competitor who approaches it with a wobble; for, verily, that wobble, once on, shall not leave

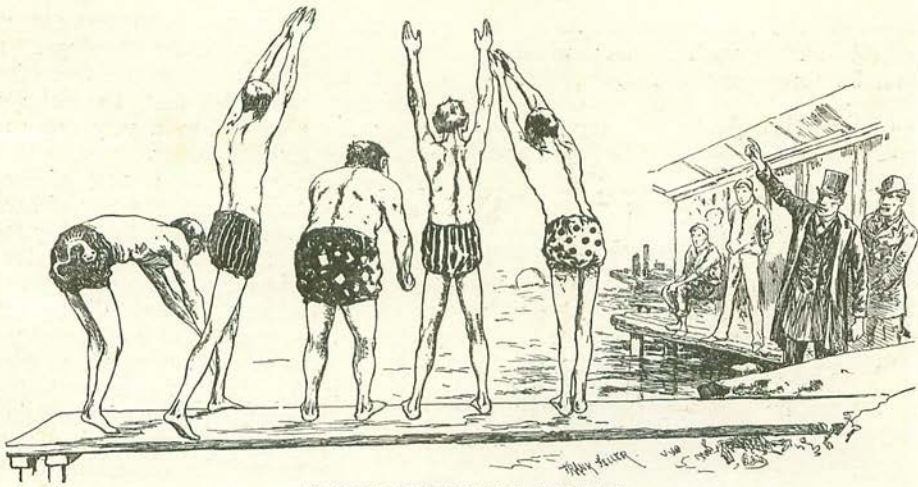
his wheel until it goes over the side of the plank, and carries him with it, so that a certain amount of innocent rustic enjoyment may be extracted from the contemplation even of this simple obstacle.

The water affords facilities for obstacle races equally with the land, and such a race among swimmers has its points of interest. Often a condition is that each competitor take with him, the whole way, a large inflated



THE PLANKS.

bladder or an empty barrel. These things must be taken *under* certain obstacles, such as a pole fixed across just over the water, a row of punts, or the like. Let anybody who



SWIMMING OBSTACLE RACE—THE START.

has tried to take a large inflated bladder under water with him tell of the joys of

wooden bridge, which the swimmers may be made to climb over, or a pontoon bridge may be put down for the occasion. Something with rails on it is preferable to the barbarous tastes of the scoffing multitude, since they afford an additional awkwardness and tend towards indecision and the breaking of toes. If this bridge be at a shallow part it is also sometimes considered an improvement, since an inconsiderate and vigorous dive may lead to personal battery in the bed of the stream.

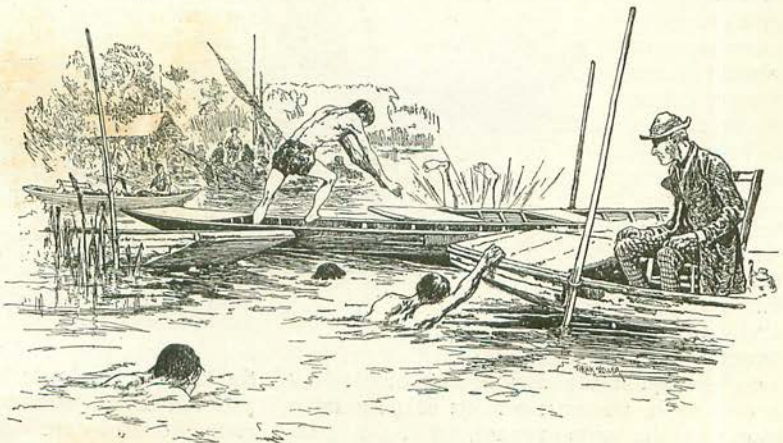


THE BRIDGE.

these feats. Or the rules may dictate that the competitor must climb over the obstacle himself and push his bladder or barrel under, taking care not to lose it in the process. Indeed, special rules and directions must be made for almost every obstacle race, the most meritorious set being that which entails most misery upon the competitor.

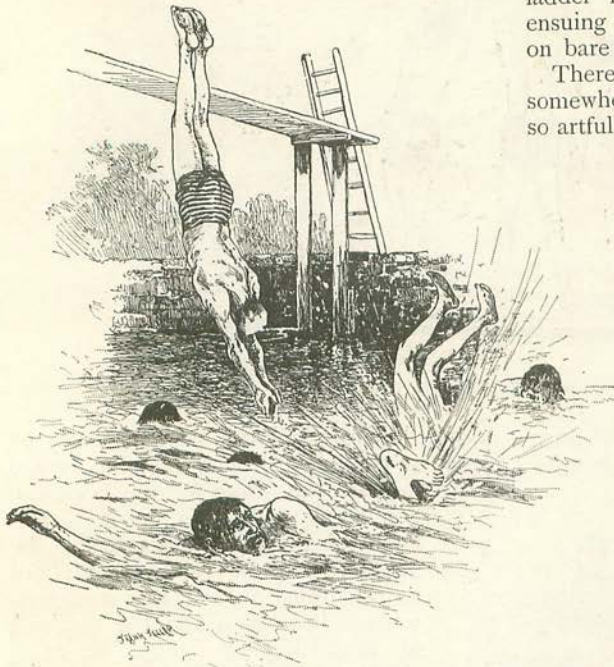
Obstacles existing in the ordinary course are not altogether wanting in a swimming race properly planned. There may be a

Next, perhaps, the hardy adventurers meet a row of punts, moored across the waterway, often an irregular row, demanding generalship in selecting the easiest point of attack. For, by properly selecting one's direction, it is pos-



THE PUNTS.

sible here to find an advantage, taking a pull at this and a push at that; while it must not be forgotten that he is not neces-



THE LADDER AND PLANK.

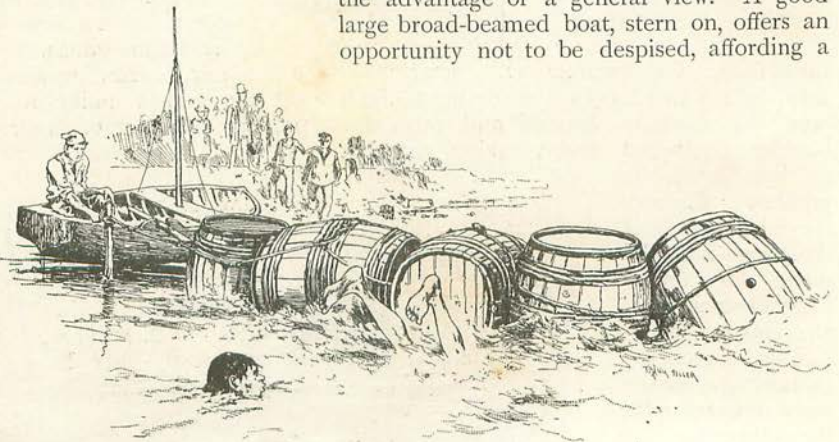
sarily slowest over who has most punts to negotiate, providing he have but one pull out and one dive; since running and jumping are quicker than swimming.

It is not unusual in a swimming obstacle race to give the swimmers an occasional trot over dry ground, or up or down a ladder, thus equalizing the chances of the lean and long-limbed with those of the fat, who float and swim the better. Thus, perhaps, after a bit of straight-away swimming the way may be blocked by a dam, and all must get out and scramble along at the side towards a ladder, up this, and off the plank to which it leads,

into water once more. Now, men can only ascend an ordinary ladder in single file, so that he who reaches the foot of the ladder first must be first to make the ensuing dive; wherefore, a very eager race on bare feet for that ladder.

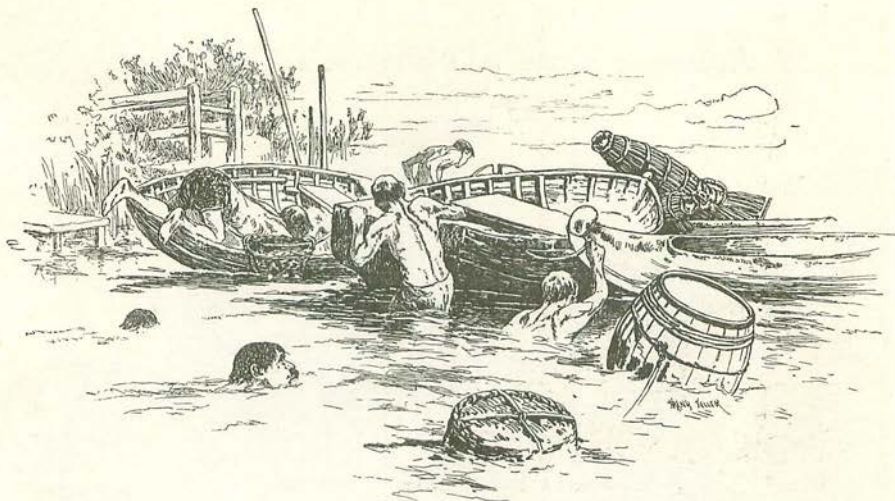
There should also be a row of barrels somewhere on the course; a row of barrels so artfully lashed together that they turn over in any direction at a touch. An incompetent committee has sometimes allowed diving under these barrels, but the correct thing is to send the competitors over—if they can get over—unless they are carrying the aforementioned bladders or barrels, when to get under will be something difficult to do. But to get *over* this row of barrels and pass the bladder *under*, this is the thing which should be ordained, that all the people upon dry land might rejoice with a great laughter.

After this a little more plain swimming will lead, perhaps, to a miscellaneous string of obstacles, all across: boats, baskets, punts, barrels, canoes—anything, and nearly everything that floats—loosely tied together. Here, more than anywhere, the swimmer requires generalship. His eyes are below the level of the obstruction, and he has not the advantage of a general view. A good large broad-beamed boat, stern on, offers an opportunity not to be despised, affording a



THE BARRELS.

fairly easy pull up and promising a clear run through the barricade. Of all things, canoes and barrels are to be avoided, as well as all craft broadside on. Any green novice who has tried getting into a boat from the side



MISCELLANEOUS OBSTACLES.

will know this, even if the reflection never occurs to him that a broadside-on obstacle probably means more behind in awkward positions, with a chance of falling between.

After this perhaps a net, and then the finish. The net is not a vast difficulty, having only to be dived under or, easier still, lifted. But it gives a check to the merely fast swimmer in his rush home, and prevents the oncoming competitors from seeing exactly how the race is going in front, and makes them peg away to the end. Also, the head-long young man, coming as hard as he

can with the side-stroke, is apt to run foul of this net, to his utter confusion and entanglement, and the "letting up" of some slower competitor maintaining a better look-out.

And of such are the ways of the obstacle race—a thing good in that it gives play to something more than speed alone, whether on water or dry land, and teaches prompt resource, activity, and address; and provides vast diversion for unventuresome on-lookers, who revel in the misfortunes of those bolder than themselves.



THE FINISH.