

## Queer Competitions.

BY FRAMLEY STEELCROFT.

[Illustrated with Special Photographs.]



DOWN in the much-discussed, but really little-known, East-end of London, they do *not* take their pleasures sadly. I hope to make this clear in the following pages. Now, competitions of curious sorts occupy a very prominent place among these pleasures; and so, after a prolonged and heartrending struggle with rampant hilarity, our artist succeeded in obtaining a remarkably successful series of photographs, showing these interesting contests actually in progress. The central head-quarters of these competitions is known as "Wonderland," Whitechapel, and the presiding genius is Mr. J. Woolf, than whom no man knows better the "near East." Mr. Woolf himself originates most of the contests, but occasionally he receives an idea from one of his patrons. Our first illustration shows a basket-carrying contest, between porters from Spitalfields Market. The men commence with six baskets, run various heats, and then gradually increase the number until about seventeen baskets are swaying dangerously on the competitors'

heads, and threatening their several admirers, who are probably half crazy with excitement. These things are taken seriously — how seriously, no one could realize who has not seen a contest or two drawn off.

The moment Mr. Woolf announces on his playbills a new competition, entries begin to flow in, for the East-end contains champions (more or less) in almost every conceivable and inconceivable branch of pastime and trade. The prizes include cups, purses of silver, medals, and various useful articles ranging from a lady's blouse to a barrel of beer. Competitors haven't much time for practice. It may be (as in the case of the basket-carrying contest) that their daily work is practice enough. Fair play is rigidly enforced, and the official timekeeper, referee, judge, etc., are absolutely impartial. In the matter of the basket-carrying race, neatness is taken into consideration, as well as speed and number of baskets carried. Much, of course, depends upon the skilful stacking of the baskets.

Trickery is only to be expected, and malice is not unknown. One competitor turned up for the basket-carrying race fully equipped as a certain winner. The baskets (nineteen in number) were already stacked on a barrow outside; they were all *glued together!* Another man in the same race, feeling himself beaten in the last lap, and burning with rage against a person in the audience who had persisted in taunting him, contrived to let fall eleven baskets on his tormentor's head.

Nor are the ladies forgotten. The next picture shows a perambulator race between mothers, each mother bringing her own baby, and Mr. Woolf providing the perambulators. The winner claims the baby-carriage, but I am bound to say that frequently it isn't worth much at the close of the race. Even the babies enter into the spirit of the thing, and shriek with delight at the rapid movement and the overwhelming antics of their mothers.

I am assured that the organiza-



THE MARKET PORTERS' BASKET-CARRYING CONTEST.



THE MOTHERS' PERAMBULATOR RACE.

tion of a contest of this sort between women is a thing of tremendous difficulty. The competitors are boiling over with excitement, more or less suppressed. There are many false starts, to say nothing about recriminations and utterly irrelevant accusations bandied about amongst the ladies. The race is fairly fast, and often furious. Astute women try to cut off corners, but only succeed in injuring both the bassinet and its innocent occupant. The losers have to be regaled, or, rather, appeased, with heavy refreshments, whilst the winner and her prize are smuggled quietly away. The *status quo ante*, however, is restored on the morrow, when the fierce excitement has subsided.

To ignore the boys in these competitions would be to court disaster. The accompanying photo. shows a peculiar contest, the boys having to stand on their heads for three minutes. The first prize in this competition is magniloquently, if vaguely, described as "a purse of silver"; but it is safe to assume

that the amount is not large. The purse of silver sometimes has a pleasing variation in the form of a pair of hob-nailed boots or a suit of clothes.

In this contest regard is paid to age, weight, and height, which are kept pretty uniform among the competitors. The fathers and mothers attend mainly, it would appear, to deal out plaudits or imprecations according to the success or failure of their inverted progeny. The parents of the winner are proud of their boy—just as parents of high degree would be on learning that their son had won a valuable scholarship.



AN "UPSIDE DOWN" COMPETITION FOR BOYS.



GRINNING THROUGH HORSE-COLLARS.

Another strange contest is depicted in the photo. here reproduced. Half-a-dozen typical East-end gentlemen are seen making frightful grimaces through as many horse-collars. The judge—an artist in diabolical leers—guards against undue haste in awarding the prize, which is probably a silver watch. He calls for many demonstrations in the way of facial contortion, awarding marks after every “round.” Just before the

about to purchase a priceless work of art for the nation. Trade contests are extremely popular, particularly the butchers’ contest, which is portrayed in our next photograph. Here we see three local celebrities—champions all—competing for a complete set of butchers’ implements.

The knights enter the lists. Three whole sheep are prepared, and the man who turns his sheep into joints in the neatest manner and the shortest time wins the prize. Mr. Woolf acts as timekeeper, and one of the best-known master-butchers in Aldgate presides in the dual capacity of judge and referee. The head is first cut off; the sheep is then cut down the middle and quickly turned into ten separate joints of mutton, five on



BUTCHERS' CONTEST—CUTTING A SHEEP INTO JOINTS.

final grin, the judge sums up, so to speak. He implores the men to brace themselves for a supreme effort, and the gallant fellows certainly respond nobly to the call. The judge is sometimes assisted by five or six competent experts, and this interesting body holds consultations and deliberations with all the gravity of a committee of artists

each side. These are, of course, leg, loin, shoulder, neck, and breast. A little under three minutes is the record time, and a very wonderful performance it is.

A singing match, such as is next depicted, reveals surprising talent for mimicry and comicality. This is a free-and-easy gathering of market men, and the champion singer is



A SINGING CONTEST.

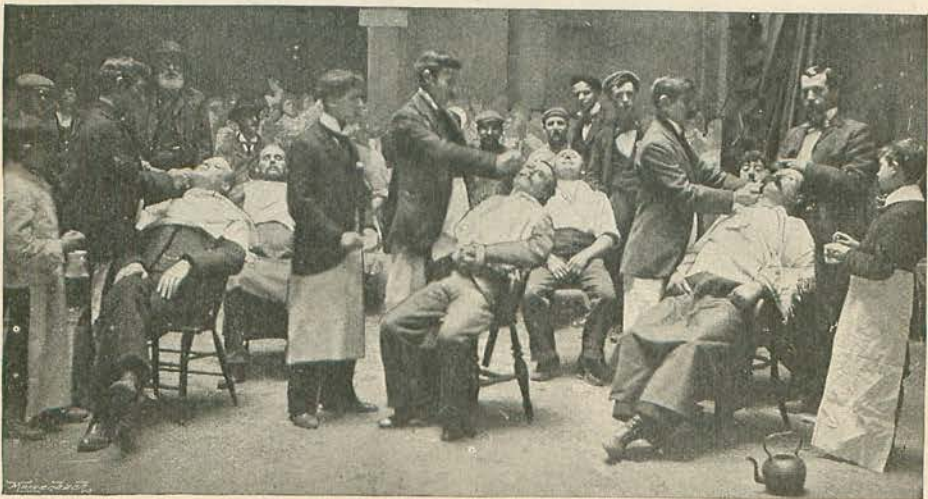
selected by general vote. In the centre is seen one of the cleverest amateur coster vocalists in London—one from whom Mr. Chevalier might obtain many hints—for it should be borne in mind that this is the genuine article photographed in his native place, and not the coster of the variety stage.

Impresarios and agents would do well to attend these East-end singing contests, for there is much talent latent there. One or two of the men actually compose their own words and music; but the majority of the competitors sing the latest successes of the day. The little fellow seen on the right in the photo. is quite a local celebrity—a juvenile comedian of astonishing ability,

and one that would delight the drawing-rooms of the West-end with his quaint whimsicalities.

But for right-down uproarious hilarity, give me the shaving match. The one represented in our photo. may be taken as typical of all.

The subjects were inspected by a disinterested barber, and parcelled out to the competitors, two to each. And each shaver was allowed the services of his own lathering-boy; he might also bring his own implements, but it were well for him to look after them. On one occasion an evilly-disposed person removed a competitor's razors, and only replaced them after he had whittled a few oak sticks with them.



A SHAVING MATCH.



BOYS' TREACLE-ROLL CONTEST.

But let us get into the present tense, being more impressive. The subjects are reclining—napkined and smiling through the layers of lather. Each competitor—an undistinguished foreigner—stands with uplifted razor quivering with excitement, and awaiting the word of command. "Go!" the air is filled with strange cries, mainly from the subjects. They are cut horribly, and cry out in a language of their own. It is not magnificent, but it is like war. One subject can stand it no longer; he rises, gory and wrathful, and smites the artist allocated to him.

But let us turn from a scene of such

feverish excitement, and consider the pastoral simplicity of the boys' treacle-roll contest. In this we see that a number of hollowed-out pieces of French bread have been filled with treacle, and suspended at regular intervals from a slack rope. The boys have their hands tied behind their backs, and the one who can eat the most in a given time is hailed as the prize-winner.

The thing is far from easy. Besides the horizontal swing of the bread on the line, there is also a vertical dancing movement, caused by the slackness of the rope. Then, again, when a piece is bitten out of the roll, the thick, viscous stuff inside comes pouring down on the upturned face.

Talking of messes brings me to the washing contest, which is next seen, and whose vicinity is neither safe nor desirable. The splashing is terrific, because the ladies know that the winner is entitled to the stool, tub, washing-board, and clothes washed. These latter usually consist of soiled towels, handed



A WASHING MATCH.



THE WEIGHT-CARRYING CONTEST.

weight-carrying contest, which causes no end of fun. The weights to be carried—sacks of wet sand, flour, cement, or potatoes—are carefully compared, and then placed in the middle of a 40ft. circus-ring. Round these stand the competitors, and, at a given word, the men hoist the sacks on to their head or back, and commence the race. No restrictions are put on the method of carrying, but marks are awarded for grace of move-

ment and dexterity in the management of the load.

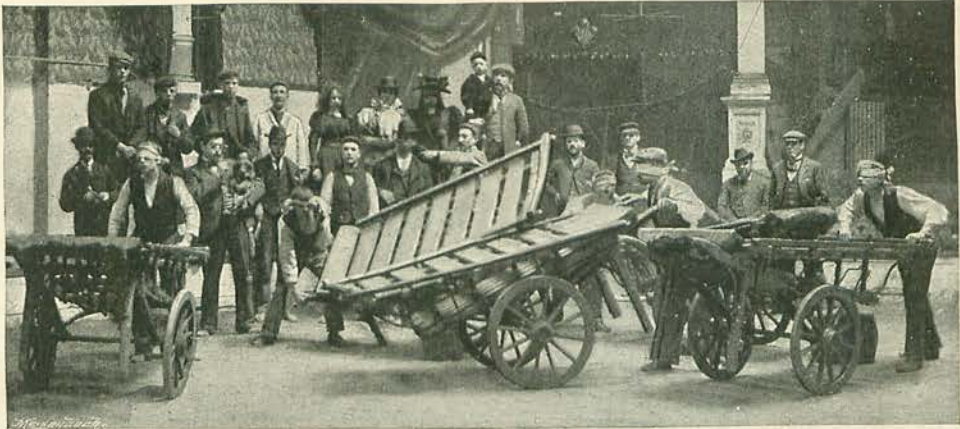
out by a non-combatant expert. They have to be thoroughly washed and wrung out within five minutes. Any unfair dealing is resented by the arbitrators. It is also resented by the competitors themselves, who sometimes assert their love of fair play in a violent manner, and, perhaps, with wet sheets wrung hard. The celerity of some of the champions is amazing. One woman could do a large family's week's washing in little more than an hour.

Here is another competition in which boys only take part. It is called the Boys' Animal Race, and the competitors can race how they please, provided the palms of their hands rest upon the ground. As might be expected, there is never any lack of entries when a boys' contest is announced; and at such contests the decisions would be easy enough, were it not that the lads' fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, muster in strong

In the next photo. is seen in progress the



AN "ALL-FOURS" RACE FOR BOYS.



THE BLINDFOLD COSTERS' BARROW RACE.

force, and are never backward in giving the management large pieces of their mind when they consider their boy has been unfairly treated.

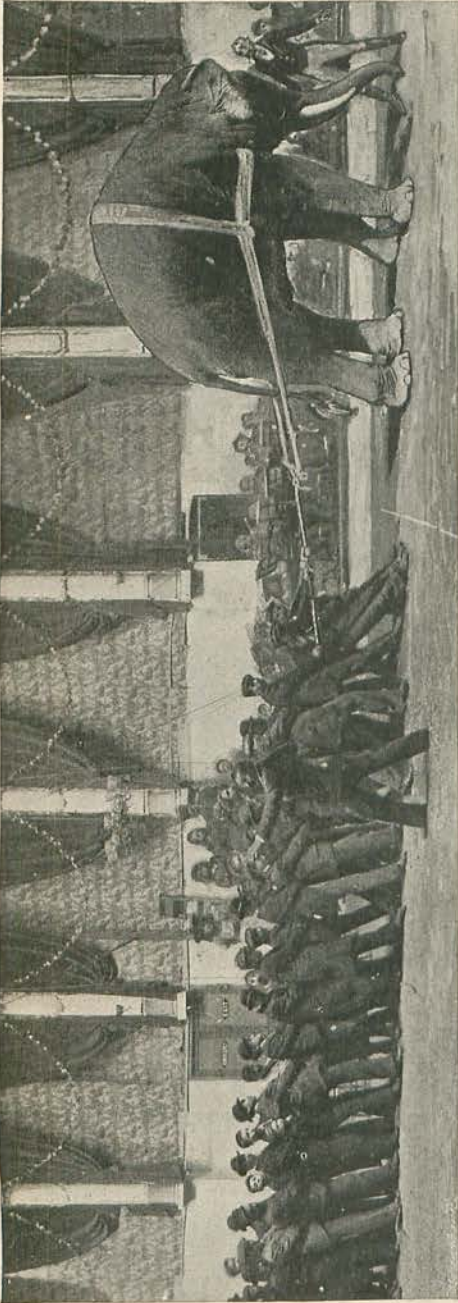
A pretty big space is required for the costers' barrow race. The competitors are always blindfolded. In order that the necessary *elan* may be present in the race, the barrows are not the costers' own. This being so, tremendous energy and magnificent recklessness are shown. Each man feels that, having a good substantial barrow in front of him, he can literally go anywhere and do anything. He does. The starters stand all in a row, but the mode of progression soon becomes chaotic. The barrows crash into each other end on, broadside on, and at every conceivable angle. One quiet, resolute man, having first carefully surveyed the course before the bandage was placed over

his eyes, incontinently runs amuck among the audience, and expresses great surprise on learning that he has half killed an elderly female, and stunned a gigantic Billingsgate porter who, but a moment before, was making the great building resound with Homeric laughter.

Kicking the football through a hoop is the next contest to be dealt with here. The hoop is held or suspended by a cord, and the winner is allowed to claim the football as his own. Many skilful football players enter for this contest, but the feat is far harder than one would think. It is, however, considered so easy that scores of people, including girls and elderly women, enter the contest, with the too frequent result that the ball leaves their foot at right angles, and strikes full in the face some jubilant on-looker who probably took up a position



KICKING THE FOOTBALL THROUGH THE HOOP.



ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY MEN PULLING AGAINST AN ELEPHANT FOR A BARREL OF BEER.

has actually photographed the winning feat—if one may use such a word in connection with a kicking contest. The exposure was made at the very moment when the ball was passing through the hoop. As this particular contest is one requiring some skill and judgment, readers might try it for themselves, and invite their friends to do likewise. Of course, when done in a circus ring with a great (and unprotected) audience all round, unlooked-for contingencies arise which create surprising diversions.

But the most impressive of all the queer competitions was the one billed as "One Hundred and Fifty Men pulling against an Elephant for a Barrel of Beer." Of this our artist has secured a capital photo. The competitors, I should mention, get their barrel of beer whether they win or lose. Their task is to pull the huge animal back over the chalk-line. But it has yet to be seen how many men are required for this. The night our artist attended there were, hauling on the rope, twenty or thirty men above the advertised number; yet the elephant—a fine brute, weighing nearly four tons—simply promenaded about with his lengthly and excited following.

One never-to-be forgotten night the men played a trick upon the elephant, to say nothing about the elephant's master. Finding that they were losing, the hindermost gave the big rope a few twists round one of the stout wooden beams that supported the building. The elephant felt a sudden check, and strained forward far more than we see him doing in the photo. The proprietor smiled benignantly, knowing nothing. Suddenly the great beam broke with a loud report, the huge elephant lurched heavily forward and nearly fell, and half the roof came tumbling in on the audience, many of whom were half delirious with merriment at the turn things had taken. It was the most successful of all the queer competitions, but it didn't pay.

Our old friend the greasy pole is next on the list. The photograph depicts the moment of triumph, when the successful competitor has at length reached his goal—a fine leg of mutton—and is waving his cap with his free hand in token of victory. The pole is greased with soft soap, laid on thickly. Notwithstanding this, sailors from the docks frequently climb it with an alacrity that astonishes the beholders. The ordinary rank-and-file of the competitors, however, strive in vain to reach even half-way up, their repeated failures moving the audience

considered absolutely "immune" against accidents.

Each competitor is allowed twelve kicks, and some of the more skilful men make wonderfully near shots, once they have "picked up the range"—to use a military term. Only Association balls are used. In the photo, it will be noticed that our artist





CLIMBING THE GREASY POLE FOR A LEG OF MUTTON.

have really nothing to do but remain perfectly still. But a certain desire for more or less transient fame prompts them to give utterly unnecessary demonstrations of an embarrassing kind. Embarrassing, that is, to the carriers. For the carried clasp their hosts (if I may so call them) tightly around the neck, and even hit them in the eye with their disengaged hand. This sort of thing is discouraging, and not conducive to agility, but it raises the delight of the audience to a perfectly frantic pitch. Sometimes one pair will conspire to spoil the chances of another who look like winning; but unfair conduct is almost invariably detected, and those who practise it disqualified.

One wonders how the next contest originated. Can it be a garbled version of the mediæval tournament? It may be briefly described as an indiscriminate *mêlée*—the combatants mounted on donkeys and armed with wet mops. As each knight is “unhorsed,” he retires more or less gracefully (sometimes he has to be “persuaded” with his own mop); and the solitary survivor—the man remaining on his donkey to the last—is hailed as victor and prize-winner.

to the wildest mirth. I was told of one morose man who, having at length won the leg of mutton, committed, with that curious but effective weapon, a violent assault upon those who had jeered at his awkward efforts.

Than this there is no more popular contest. Each coster brings his own “moke,” and wonderfully intelligent some of these animals are. The donkey on the right in the photo. is well known throughout the East-

Here is a very peculiar competition. It is called the Big Babies' Race; but this is a curiously inexact title. It is simply a race between men, each carrying a man in his arms baby-fashion. The men to be carried are, of course, weighed carefully, and any material difference in weight is allowed for by extra start. Now, this is where the fun comes in. The carriers, as you may judge, have their work cut out for them. They have to move pretty fast, and carry from ten to twelve stone in the bargain. The carried, however, are very differently situated, and



THE "BIG BABIES" RACE.



A COSTERS' TOURNAMENT.

end as a marvel of intelligence. He is shapely and well groomed. He has already won several prizes at the donkey shows (most delightful of exhibitions), and at the word of command he will lie down, ring a bell, or fetch his master's pipe. All this, of course, after the hard day's work is done.

The quick-dressing contest for boys is vastly diverting. A number of lads remove their hats, coats, waistcoats, and boots, and place these in one big heap in the middle of the ring. The heap is afterwards tossed and carefully mixed by the attendants; then the competitors retire to the judge's box, some little distance away. At a given signal they make a dash for the heap of clothes, and the one who dresses himself in his own clothes

and reappears at the judge's box in the shortest time—that boy wins the prize, which is probably a brand-new suit of clothes.

The scene is one of the wildest confusion. The boys put on each other's clothes, and only discover the mistake when too late. They wrangle and waste precious moments fighting over a tattered vest, or two right boots. You will see them delving at the big heap, and pitching aside their own garments in the great excitement of the moment. The contest becomes even more complicated when men and boys compete together. Then you may see the smallest of small boys hurrying towards the judge's box in a pair of navy's boots and a huge coat trailing along behind. 'Twas all that was left for him,



A QUICK DRESSING CONTEST FOR BOYS.



A DRY BISCUIT EATING MATCH.

poor child, and he *should* put in some sort of appearance.

Eating-matches are among the most popular of all. One is depicted in the accompanying photo. The starters in this extraordinary race stand in a row, hats or caps in hand. In these latter are placed identical quantities of dry arrowroot biscuit, each lot most carefully weighed. Not a crumb is to be wasted. This rule is enforced because tricky competitors have been known to crumble to dust the greater part of their biscuit, thus having to swallow, perhaps, less than half the task allowance. Each man is allowed a mug of water, lest he should choke. The champion biscuit-eater is, I am told, a Shadwell man, and he doesn't waste time in chewing the dry stuff, but just swallows whole lumps, leaving many of his fellow-competitors gasping, choking, and coughing, in the throes of mastication.

There is another eating match.

Scalding hot suet dumplings, all of one weight, are placed before a number of lads, and the hands of the latter are tied behind their backs. The moment the signal is given, the young fellows bend to their work with all the zest of the Oxford eight. Possibly you wouldn't think this kind of contest admitted of any ingenuity? It does, however. This particular eating match was brought off on the stage at

"Wonderland" before a crowded audience. I watched the winner of the first heat tackling his second dumpling. The others were blowing vigorously upon the steaming mass, but he was not. He just smote that scalding dumpling with his head—the corner of his forehead, to be exact—and flattened it out over the plate. Then his task was easy, for after the first upward rush of steam, the dumpling grew comparatively cool in a few seconds. And the other fellows wondered why they hadn't thought of the same thing.



EATING SCALDING DUMPLINGS AGAINST TIME.