

The Complete Art of Barrel-Rolling.

BY ALDER ANDERSON.



HERE was once a traveller, if a certain well-known history is to be credited, who entered in his journal the fact that the majority of the inhabitants had red hair, because the first person he met on entering the town had auburn locks. Reasoning from analogous premises, it is not impossible that more than one visitor to Paris last autumn may have carried away the impression that the art of trundling a barrel was held in higher esteem there than any other. If of a sour disposition, and inclined to philosophize out of season, such a person would probably fortify his impression by sundry profound reflections on the egregious folly of a crowd that could find amusement in so ridiculous a spectacle, and would think how much cleverer the folk were in the particular little corner of the world he came from. Oh, those frivolous Parisians!

As a matter of fact, barrel-rolling has only just been granted the freedom of the corporation of French sportsmen, or, rather, has been admitted on probation. The recognition of its merits it owes to so-called mere chance. It came about in this wise.

The principal annexe of the Paris Exhibition, at Vincennes, failed to attract the public that brings the golden manna to expectant showmen. In despair, and to avert black ruin, the exhibitors put their heads together and argued late and long. They must find something to "draw." Necessity, the mother of Invention, was present, and thus did the sport of barrel-rolling see the light of day. It may be said at once that it gives every indication of growing up to be a healthy, vigorous man.

To trundle an empty barrel, tipped at an angle, as shown in the illustration, may appear to you the simplest feat in the world until you try it. You then discover that in this, as in most other things, there are *finesses* you would never have suspected. Once started on its career—its mad career, to use an unhackneyed expression—by a vigorous hand, there is nothing like your barrel for giving a practical demonstration of the law of inertia, which says that a body in motion will move for ever unless checked. Mr. Pickwick's hat in a gale of wind was as nothing to it. Woe betide anything that gets in the way of the rolling barrel and rashly tries to check its movement. It leaps,

it dances, it almost seems to fly—it frequently seems to be trying to roll the roller. If left to itself, however, entirely, it falls ignominiously on its side, and is thereupon at once disqualified.

To adequately describe such a race, not only has the entire vocabulary of queer terms possessed by the sporting reporter to be drawn upon, but many new expressions must be coined to render the impressions experienced by the spectator, as man and barrel in unison come bounding down the straight together.

After the race was over I engaged one of the champions in conversation, but he was flushed—with success doubtless—and the explanations he gave me were for the most part couched in language that was more forcible and picturesque than polished or precise. Thus much was clear, however. He looked upon that day's performances as likely to mark an epoch in history, and was convinced that the eyes of all lovers of sport in Europe were at that moment fixed on Vincennes. He showed me the peculiar turn of the wrist necessary, and if he had been able to employ English would doubtless have added that only a hand of steel in a velvet glove could keep a barrel in the path it should go. When I left him he shook me so vigorously by the hand that I distinctly felt the steel, though I cannot conscientiously say I detected the slightest trace of velvet on the palm that pressed mine.

But barrel-rolling is not merely a sport; it is learnt, in the first place, as a matter of business. A day or two after the race I set out on an expedition, for it well merits the name, to visit the barrel-rollers in their home. The haunts of the tourist have to be left far behind and the Paris of play exchanged for the Paris of work, honest toil that broadens the back and hardens the muscles.

Not unnaturally the barrels of Paris group themselves round the terminus of the line of railway that leads to Bordeaux. On the quays down by the river-side they lie by the hundred, and barges are ceaselessly adding to their number, though the enormous warehouses on the other side of the roadway seem to be audibly complaining that they are already as full as they can hold. Barrel-laden drays clatter noisily over the cobbles, one after the other. The whole neighbourhood literally reeks of barrels. If the poets



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READY FOR THE START.

[Photo.

be not rank impostors, here or nowhere Bacchus and his merry train should hold high revel.

But these are not the barrels we saw capering at Vincennes. These barrels are full, and no more staid object in creation is to be found than a full barrel. A barrel, paradoxical as it may seem, is really full of spirits only when it is empty. A little farther away from the river we shall come on the true racing barrel in endless variety. Large barrels, medium barrels, and small barrels; new barrels and old barrels; barrels that are fat-paunched, and barrels long and lean; high-priced barrels, low-priced barrels, and barrels that look as if they might be dear at any price. It would be difficult to meet more accommodating people than the owners.

If you cannot afford, or do not want to purchase a barrel, you can hire it by the day, week, or month, or on the three years' system. What, perhaps, will strike you as more wonderful than anything else is the fact that there are actually people here ready and eager to buy barrels from *you*. Last year, for instance, there was so much wine in the South of France that, for a time, it seemed there would not be barrels enough to contain it, and the price of hire went up from a farthing to a penny a day. Should you, however, possess a barrel and wish to receive money for it, you need not take so long a journey to effect your purpose. When barrels do not come to him, Mahomet, the buyer, goes to them.

Like all the peripatetic professional men

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THE RACE—THE UMPIRE IS ON A CYCLE.

[Photo.



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THE UMPIRE STOPS A MAN WHO HAS LET HIS BARREL FALL.

[Photo.

and dealers in odds and ends who perpetuate the customs of the past in Paris streets, the barrel-buyer has his special chanting cry. Sooner or later you are sure to hear his rather plaintive wail, modulated on two notes only, "*Tonneaux; des tonneaux, des tonneaux! Marchand de tonneaux.*" He is frequently a man of a certain commercial status, may own a horse and cart, has his name and address possibly printed in the Paris Directory, pays cash for his acquisitions, and is of a well-fed, sleek appearance that augurs well for the profit he makes on his dealings. As soon as you or your deputy have agreed with him on the price he whips the barrel up from the cellar and has it roped on to his cart in a trice. Upon his dexterity in effecting this operation he prides himself not a little, and it really is surprising to see the address with which he will guide a heavy cask through a crowd, now fast, now slow, now coming suddenly to a dead stop to avoid a catastrophe. These are the men with whom barrel-rolling is a matter of their daily occupation.

"Can you tell me where I can find the champion of the world of barrel-rollers?" I asked, politely, entering a barrel-maker's.

"Never heard of him. No time to think of nonsense like that. We

have only time to work here."

Such, in slightly varying terms, was the answer I received in half a score of similar establishments. One stout fellow asked me to look at him and say whether I did not think he could roll a barrel as well as any man living if he chose to make a public exhibition of himself. There was a bitterness in his tone I was at a loss to account for at the moment.

I had more success with two men who stopped

the cart they were driving in order to rearrange its load of casks. "My friend," I said to one of them, with as much suavity as a person of British blood and breeding can honestly muster, "I am looking for a needle in a haystack—in plain words, for one of the champion barrel-rollers. Can you tell me where to find him? If so, I shall be eternally grateful." The man looked at his colleague and his colleague looked at me. "Evidently an eccentric, harmless, necessary *Angliche*," their eyes said as clearly as eyes



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THE WINNER PASSES THE POST.

[Photo.

can. "Why not humour him and earn his gratitude?"

"You have been hunting in the wrong places. Look among the *chineurs* who deal in old barrels, not among the men who make new ones."

Then I understood the reason of my previous insuccess. I had inadvertently run into the lion's den. Every old barrel put into circulation again means a new barrel the less sold. New barrels and old barrels are mortal enemies.

"Take the first turning on the right, the second on the left, the third on the right again, and then go down a passage you will see in front of you. It will take you right among the *chineurs*."

I warmly thanked the good Samaritan, compounded my eternal gratitude by a present modest payment in cash, and, by dint of much asking, eventually found myself in the promised land. But, alas!

the whole adult male population was absent, pursuing its daily avocations. There was a large crop of children that showed me the race of *chineurs* is not likely to die out; but the children's guardians, the wives of *chineurs* to a woman, could give me but scant information beyond each expressing the loyal conviction that her own particular "man" was as good a barrel-roller as was to be found in the world.

I wanted something more precise than this, and in my perplexity a man at last appeared,

a true *chineur* every inch of him, I felt assured. Unfortunately he wanted to get information from *me*, and I could not persuade him that my visit had not something to do with a twenty-four hours' barrel race from Paris to Melun, rumour of which had agitated the whole district. "Think, then," he said, with unnatural solemnity, "Paris to Melun! Twelve leagues, twenty-four hours! Something like a race,

that! What is the racing in the Exhibition to that? It is in the street, in the road, you can see what a man is worth."

As by a refrain, each phrase was punctuated by "Paris to Melun! Twelve leagues, twenty-four hours!"

"Tell me, my friend, what are the qualifications of a good barrel-roller? It takes long practice to become proficient, no doubt?"

"Never become proficient if you have not got it in you," was the curt answer.

"You mean that the good barrel-roller, like the poet and the dramatist and other transcendent geniuses, is born, not made?"

"I say that he must have the vocation. *Voilà!*"

A dog-shearer by the Seine bank once gave me exactly the same answer to a similar question. It is clearly as hopeless for the ordinary man to dream of ever emulating a roller of barrels or a clipper of poodles as it is for him to write sonnets.

Another career closed for the ambitious!



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THE CHAMPION BARREL-ROLLER.

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