Cockney Children's Games and Chanties.

BY EDWIN PUGH.

On such soft, sweet evenings as this which floods the countryside as I write, I am reminded of the early spring-tide of my own life, when I played with the Cockney children in a certain backwash of traffic in London.

Above the broken black line of house-tops the sky is still aflame with the glory of departing day. The sun has gone down in red wrath, and the stars shine pale in the meek blue of the East. The street is a riot of children; for if "men must work and women must weep," it is no less certain that children must play. And play they do, these little ones of London, with a feverish eagerness which seems to betoken that, knowing their childhood must be all too short, they are bent on making the most of it.

A windmill-vendor, two streets away, is shattering the settling evening hush with drunken, raucous blasts on a bugle. This backwash is gay with his wares—windmills, flags, and brilliant, soaring balloons. It is the children of a quieter temperament who amuse themselves with such toys, leaving more robustious delights to hardier juveniles. Here is one whipping a top; another is trundling a hoop; a boy on a pair of stilts seems bent on achieving something complicated in the way of a broken face; some girls are skipping. Let us listen to the skippers' chanties, though some, it must be confessed, are scarcely refined:

Vote, vote, vote for Ethel Jackson,
Chuck old Florrie out o' doors;
For Ethel is a woman,
And she likes a bit o' pudden',
So we won't vote for Florrie any more.

Some are strange minglings of quaintness and vulgarity:

Weary, weary, I am waiting; I can't wait any longer for you.
Three times a-whistling for you.
Maudy, are you coming in?
She puts my hair and breaks my comb:
I'll tell my ma when I go home.

Another runs:

Eight o'clock bells are ringing. Mother, may I go out?
My young man is waiting to take me for a walk.
First he buys me apples, then he buys me pears,
Then he gives me a sixpence to kiss him on the stairs.
I don't want your apples, I don't want your pears,
I don't want your sixpence to kiss you on the stairs.
Then he buys me bacon, fries it in a pan.
No one else shall have it but me and my young man.

But let us turn from these gentler diversions to consider the fiercer games of the boys.

Here is a typical group. One boy crawls on the pavement, swaddled in many jackets. He holds the end of a piece of string, the other end of which is held by a companion. A horde of yelling urchins circle about the pair. "Who brought this ugly bear to market?" they cry. To which the crawling boy's custodian replies: "Such a man as I." "What's your name?" "John Bull." "How many whacks for a shilling?" "As many as you can get." At that signal the yelling horde belabour the hapless, crawling boy with their caps while the other tries to catch them.

A full and minute description of the various games of this cruel and violent sort would fill a considerable volume. In most, the same element of spitefulness or danger seems to constitute their chiefest charm. Thus one game of leap-frog among the many is called "Buck-It," and is the most popular of all, presumably because it offers unique opportunities to any lad pining for a fractured skull. Then there are "Castles" and "Duck" or "Dully," in which huge flint stones are hurled recklessly about with sufficient force to break youthful legs like so much crockery. There is "Release," which is plain rough-and-tumble fighting with the anger left out. "No Man Standing" is rank, red savagery bound down to rules. "Horny Winkle's Horses," however, is only likely to prove fatal if you don't cheat. It is a crudely simple game. "One" boy stands erect against the wall. Two or three boys make a Bridge of their bowed backs, the foremost boy hanging on to the boy who is straddling, the second boy hanging on to the first boy, and so on. The other "side" have all to find place on this human bridge by taking a short run and a flying leap.

Then there are such gambling games as "Marbles" and "Buttons," the latter played usually with a heavy leaden disc known as a "nicker," and sometimes with a peg-top or a ball. In connexion with these gambling games are some strange, immutable conventions which are never transgressed or rebelled against by any boy claiming to be a sportsman. For instance: you may not play "Buttons" with buttons made of iron, and called, fairly obviously, "ironies," or with any very small brass buttons, known as "cunnies." You may not use a top the peg of which is shorter than the average boy's thumb-nail. Such a top is known as a "mounter," and any larger boy is justified in pouncing on it and destroying it.

"Chevy Chase" is Cockney rhyming-slang for "Prisoner's Base," and is played on historic lines with only a few slight differences. "I-spy-I" is hide-and-seek. "Tom Tiddler's Ground," "Red Rover," and "Puss-puss, give me a drop o' water," are all a species of "Touch"; other variants being "Touch Wood," "Touch Iron," "French Touch," "Cross Touch," and "Widdy-widdy-warny!" and they have this in common, that one player is always made the butt of the rest, and dubbed He. He is a kind of sport of fortune who is invariably cast for all the uncomfortable, rushing-about parts; He it is who receives the buffetings and jeers—as in "Ugly Bear."

The Cockney game of "Oranges and Lemons," with its very ancient chanty, played by children of both sexes, after much elaborate finessing, resolves itself into a tug of war:

Oranges and lemons—bells of St. Clement's.
I owe you five fardens, says the bells of St. Martin's.
When will you pay me? says the bells of Old Bailey.
When I get rich, says the bells of Shoreditch.
When will that be? says the bells of Stepney.

But here the two appointed heads of the game evade this awkward question by joining both their hands and crooning, sepulchrally, as the remainder of the children pass, stooping, under their linked arms:

Here comes a light to light you to bed;
Here comes a chopper to chop off your head.
Last—last—last—last—last—man's head!

The average "gutter-snipe" has sadly little feeling for the picturesque or bizarre. It is the little girls who impart a savour of poesy to these street revels. There were no flowers in that backwash of traffic in which I played, but there were the little London lassies, and, having them always with us, we hardly felt the lack of buttercups and daisies. "Poor little frights!" I have heard fine ladies say, observing them. Matted hair, sickly faces, and thin rickety limbs. Ugly and weak and shrill and old before their time! True. Yet every one of them is a complete romance, badly bound in the shabbiest of cloth, but well worth the closest study.

Think of them at "Hopscotch"! Is there any mystery in the world more fascinating? It is the Eternal Feminine in epitome. They do something with chalk and a bit of china, and if they seem to do it wrongly they go on just the same. And if they do it right they are as pleased as a cat in the fender, although it seems to make but little difference.

Every little girl has her own idea of the rules of every game, and plays it according to that idea without the least regard to any of her companions. And they play with such an intense gravity you would think they were at the funeral of their childhood. For hours they will nurse a bundle of rags and sing to it, and rock it in their bony arms, and fondle it and slap it, and talk to it as if they imagined it to be alive—as, doubtless, they do. It would seem that they are playing at life, and playing at love and motherhood for practice.

Here are some more of our chanties, transcribed exactly as I remember to have sung them myself, without regard to the meaning—or, rather, lack of meaning—of the words, caring only for their music and their rhythm. Most are used as accompaniments to the innumerable variants of "Kiss-in-the-Ring." But they are employed also in yet another sort of game: a curiously competitive game in which one or more girls—usually the eldest or most forceful personalities in a certain circle—stand their playfellows in a row and call them out from the ranks, one by one, in the order of their popularity. Sometimes these most superior young persons adopt the guise of robbers or other evilly-disposed characters; but the outcome is inevitably the same: they select from the row of palpitating infants those whom they like best. To see the eager line of lesser mites haggardly hanging on their seniors' smile, their nod, their beck, and striving to attract their attention, is to witness a spectacle infinitely pathetic in its frank expression of the clamant need these young things feel for some human love and approbation. In "The Hunters," usually three of the older girls open the proceedings thus:

Here come three jolly hunters—the ring-a-ting, my darling.
Here come three jolly hunters—the ring-a-ting, my dear.

The children reply:

And what is it you wish for?—the ring-a-ting, my darling.
And what is it you wish for? the ring-a-ting, my dear.
HUNTERS: We wish for a daughter—the ring-a-ting, etc.
CHILDREN: And what shall her name be? —the ring-a-ting, etc.
HUNTERS: Her name shall be Jenny Jones, etc.
CHILDREN: Jenny travels all the way, all the way, all the way.
Jenny travels all the way, my fair lady.

A second chanty is used in connection with a game of a closely similar sort, called "The Robbers":

CHILDREN: Hark to the robbers breaking through, breaking through, breaking through.
Hark to the robbers breaking through, my fair ladies.
ROBBERS: What have the robbers done to you, done to you, done to you?
What have the robbers done to you, my fair ladies?
CHILDREN: They have stolen my watch and chain.
ROBBERS: We have got no watch and chain.
CHILDREN: Off to prison you must go.
ROBBERS: Off to prison we won't go.
CHILDREN: Fifty pounds you'll have to pay.
ROBBERS: We won't pay no fifty pounds.

There remains an unwieldly mass of "Kiss-in-the-Ring" rhymes to be selected from. "Ring-o'-Roses," "Poor Jenny is a-weeping," and "Here stands a Lady," are fairly familiar to many, I daresay; but, perhaps, "Bingo" is less well known:

There was a butcher had a dog, and Bingo was his name—O!
B-i-n-g-o! B-i-n-g-o! B-i-n-g-o!
And Bingo was his name—O!
Kiss me quick and go! Kiss me quick and go!
'Tis a starry night, the moon shines bright—kiss me quick and go!

There is a spice of piquant daintiness about "Bingo," greatly enhanced by the plaintive tune to which it is sung, but in "All-alone-i-o" we touch the gruesomely horrific. Here, as before, I leave out the endless repetitions, which must be heard to be appreciated.

Two little children sitting on the sand—
All—all—alone-i-o!
Two little children sitting on the sand, down by the greenwood shady.
There came an old woman who said, "Come along o' me!" All—all—alone-i-o.
These two children said, "No, no!" All—all—alone-i-o.
She stuck a penknife through their hearts. All—all—alone-i-o.
The more she washed, the more blood came. All—all—alone-i-o.

And there the tragic story ends with an abruptness that is Greek in its ferocious suggestiveness.

In "The Hard-Working Boy" we again find that curious admixture of sentiment and practicality so characteristic of Cockneys of all ages. The names used are, of course, always those of participants in the game. I use fictitious names for convenience sake:

Her name is Kate Hopkins, she works at her needle,
And when she has money fine clothes she shall wear.
She shall sit in the garden, in the garden till morning,
A-dreaming of Freddy, the hard-working boy.
Now, Freddy, my dear, why don't you come here?
I'll kiss you and call you my own darling dear.
I'll take you all round, and show you the town,
And buy you some cherries at sixpence a pound.

But the Pick of all is, I think, the anonymous chanty:

Up and down So-and-so Street, the windows are made of glass,
Call at Number So-and-so, and there you'll find a lass.
Her name is Amy Robinson—catch her if you can—
She's after Johnny Tomkins before he is a man.
He huddles her and cuddles her and sets her on his knee,
And says, "Why, dear, do you love me?"
"I love you. Do you love me?"
"To-morrow, to-morrow, the wedding shall be!"

Two of the wilder and more nonsensical rhymes, and I have done. The first is often sung, over and over again, with maddening iteration for hours on end.

Sally go round the stars, Sally go round the moon,
Sally go round the chimney-pots on a Sunday afternoon. Whoo-oop.

My last chanty ends in a sudden collapse of the small players in the dirt of the road, and runs thus:

Our boots are made of Spanish, our stockings are made of silk,
Our pinafores made of calico, as white, as white as milk.
Here we go! around—around!
Till we all shall touch the ground.

One wonders what was the origin of these strange morsels of doggerel which have come down to Cockney children through the centuries; mangled and garbled, most of them, out of all meaning, yet still preserving a certain rhyme and rhythm. There have been times when I have seemed to scent in the welter of words some suggestion of an obscured sense of the ironic, of the grim, of the playful, even of the religious and the political; but I have found the pursuit of researches in this direction most baffling and elusive, and so I am grown content to bear them in mind as mementoes of my own childhood, and to associate them with gay high spirits and excited little bodies in swift breathless motion.

Rain Fairies.

Pitter! patter! Drops of rain
Fall upon the window pane,
From the clouds each fairy floats
For the rain-drops are their boats.

Pitter! patter! Through the air
Swift they hasten here and there,
For they have a lot to do
Ere the sky again is blue.

Pitter! patter! Now they fly
O'er the meadow lands so dry.
To refresh the earth they strive,
And the drooping flowers revive.

Pitter! patter! Next they meet
On the pavements in the street,
Driving all the dust away
That has lain there through the day.

Pitter! patter! Through the town
They go dancing up and down,
Not a speck of dirt is seen,
Every roof and gutter's clean.

Pitter! patter! Fairy feet
Soon have made the country sweet;
Then they beckon to the sun,
Telling him their work is done.

EVA C. ROGERS.

The Hurricane and the Bee.

A brown bee in the morning to my window creeper came,
And sighed: "I think the Hurricane is very much to blame.
For, tearing through the garden in the darkest hour of night,
It snatched a hundred blossoms, and has thrown them left and right;
A rose I meant to visit has been scattered on the lawn,
While four-and-twenty columbines are absolutely gone."

Just then the creeper rustled as a scented zephyr came,
And cried: "For such a fancy you are very much to blame:
The wind that swept the garden in the night time's darkest hours
Was but a gentle reaper of the nearly withered flowers;
The best and brightest blossoms you'd have found upon the spray,
By seeking them this morning in a less impatient way."

"Oh, well," the Bee responded, as he buzzed across the lawn,
"Of course, as one was missing, I expected all were gone;
But tell you friend the Hurricane, when next you meet him, please,
His presence in the garden isn't relished by the Bees."

The voice grew faint and fainter, till it softly died away.
And I heard the zephyr murmur as it moved the ivy spray:
"That's just like many people, who will build a pile of woes
Upon the scattered petals of a single withered rose,
And when they find their error, haven't grace enough to say,
They're sorry to have spoken in so prejudiced a way."

JOHN LEA.

"What a lottery marriage is!" exclaimed Cora. "Why, there's Mary Andrews, she's married De Smythe—rather stupid, but the best catch of the season."

"Yes," assented Miss Snyder. "But it is a queer lottery. She drew a blank that is worth ten thousand a year."