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Draft for Broadcast Talk.
By H.E. Bates

An odd item of television news caught my idea today and it set me thinking about my childhood. It seems that local authorities up and down the country are rather perturbed because children aren't playing any longer with the things they're supposed to be playing with. Apparently they've started to ignore those carefully provided swings, roundabouts, see-saws, shoots and so that you see in recreation ground and public parks. For some reason of their own they prefer to play on bomb-sites, in back alleys, on bits of waste land and in back-yards. In fact at games of their own invention or games that have been handed down through the generations. Or they just kick tins about instead.

I'm not really surprised. 40 years ago this is exactly what I was doing. And just about the same Time the author of *South Wind*, Norman Douglas, was writing a book – now quite scarce – called *London Street Games*. For the material for this book Douglas scoured 16 London boroughs and as a result he was able to make some references to nearly a thousand games.

Now I couldn't possibly hope to compete with this. To begin with I wasn't born in London. I was born in a small provincial boot-manufacturing town. Our street was rather a long one and in it there was one grocers, one pub, one tiny newsagents, one pork butcher's, and two sweet shops which will also bakehouses. Occasionally I used to help make the sausages at the pork butcher's, which was just opposite our house, and sometimes as a reward I was given a pig's tail. They're rather nice, pig's tails, if you've never tried them. I mused also to fetch bread from the bakehouses and I used to buy nearly all my sweets at the two little shops. Not quite all-because sometimes I bought some from an old lady called Polly Quick. But she had her shop opposite my school and I didn't often have a penny to spend on weekdays. In those days, working class children very rarely did. Pennies only came on Saturdays.

The street also had five gas-lamps in it. This is important because it was under the light of the street lamps and in the lights of the pork butcher's window and the sweet shops that we played our street games. This was the streets child's stage. Against a black-cloth of loaves in floury windows, boxes of Reckitt Robin, Sunlight Soap, farthing chocolate bars- yes, farthing ones – liquorice all-sorts, an extraordinary toffee called 'everlasting' – I suppose because it very nearly was-and cats asleep under gas-light on sherbet lucky bags – we played every evening between tea-time and going to bed. We were really turned out to play – like little animals being turned

out to graze – largely, I suspect, so that we shouldn't get under our father's feet at that time of day. At half past five or six the shoemakers would all be going home from the factories, and they didn't want to be bothered with children while they ate their kippers and bloaters or fish and chips for tea.

One of the pleasantest of our street games was called Chibby-up-the-Rat's Hole, or more properly, I suppose, Chivvy. My mother speaks of the game called Chivvy-Round-the-Lamp-Post, which is probably the same, and Norman Douglas of one called Chivy-Chase, which might well seem to be a corruption of Chevy Chase. We played this very often, and also a game called Cockerels, not mentioned by Norman Douglas at all. Cockerels, like Chibby was a running-and-catch game, where one person opposed to several others, called them to run, caught them if he could and so added to his own strength into all the rest were caught. Hide-and-Seek was the most popular game. It has a thousand versions, of course, and its Midlands name is Hi-Acky.

You may have also called your version of hide-and-seek Hi-Acky- or perhaps Yacky- and you may well have wondered what that strange words meant. Now there's little doubt that these street games are nearly all very, very old. In fact it seems pretty certain that some of them are survivals of ancient fertility rights. There are several other versions of Hi-Acky. In some parts of the country it was called Eye-Eggo or Hi-Egg, but in all cases the seeker had to touch the person found before that same person could be considered out, or caught; all of which, I'm told, has close parallels with the very ancient fertility rights of the Lupercalia, a festival dating back to pre-Roman times. It has also been ingeniously suggested that the expression Hi-Acky is a direct survival, corrupted and Anglicised, of the Latin words Hic Jacet, meaning "here lies", the verb to lie being often connected with hiding, as with animals and people "lying low". There has been a still further suggestion that when you play another street game and begin singing "Here we come Looby-Loo" the 'Loopy-Loo', or 'Loopy' part of the song is another Anglicised version of Luper, the first syllable of Lupercalia – but don't ask me to enlarge on this. It's probably very dangerous ground and all I'm really doing is to remember an Edwardian gas-lit street in a Midland town.

The interesting thing is that the games were played everywhere – all over England, in Wales and up in Scotland, especially in cities and towns. Mopstick, Stag, Tick or Tag, I sent a Letter to my Love, Cops and Robbers, Relievo, Monday- Tuesday, Sally Go Round the Moon, Cat and Stick – there are hundreds of them. To of my own favourites were Three Old Men Come Workhouse a kind of charade, and Apprentice My Son, which we always played under the sweet shop window.

The only other one I have time to mention is one where you draw squares on the paper with chalk, as you do for hopscotch, and then shut your eyes and try to walk or hop across the chalk lines without touching them, saying, "Am I on? Am I on?" as you feel your way.

It's one of the comments games and the only reason I want to mention it is because last year, when I was in Venice, I came across to little Italian girls playing it in one of those lovely, quiet empty squares of which Venice is full. There they were, those two little Venetian girls, playing just as we used to do, eyes closed, feeling their way across the chalk lines, and as I watched them I could have sworn that they were saying "Am I on? Am I on?"

Perhaps they were. Even if they weren't I couldn't help feeling how lucky they were - able to play in their deserted piazza as happily as I played on my Midland street stage, under the gas-light - and as safely.