

AND HOW THEY ARE TRAINED.

By ERNEST W. LOW.



THE taste of the public as regards its amusements is proverbially fickle, and many of the performances which were hailed with enthusiasm by the audiences of only a few years ago, would to-day be received with a very languid show of approval, if, indeed, they did not evoke positive hostility. Particularly marked has the change been in the case of "variety entertainments," and all the more striking, therefore, is the fact that there is still a class of artists whose hold upon the affections of the spectators is still as great as of yore.

We never seem to get tired of watching the evolutions of acrobats; there is a magnetic influence in feats demanding nerve and agility which is well-nigh perennial; it appeals to those of all classes and all ages, to the horny-handed son of toil as well as the man about town; alike to the middle-aged paterfamilias and his boisterous boys and girls home for the holidays.

No doubt, the *souçon* of danger which attaches to these feats (which, as a matter of fact, is much slighter than is commonly supposed) may, in a measure, account for their never-failing popularity; but the tendency of late years has rather been in the direction of discountenancing the exploits which had nothing but their audacity to commend them. Public opinion has altered towards this as towards everything else, and nowadays the performers who rank highest in favour are those whose feats excel in strength, agility, and grace, of which the latter is by no means the least potent factor.

Very few out of the thousands who enjoy witnessing performances of this description have more than the very faintest idea as to "How it's all done." The question is constantly put by an inquisitive child to his parent, much to the latter's perplexity, who, being unwilling to acknowledge his ignorance, launches out into the most fallacious statements in his endeavour to enlighten the mind of the awestruck child concerning the life of an acrobat "behind the scenes."

Personally, I can even now recall to mind what a harrowing picture used to be drawn for my delectation of the tortures endured by the hapless young people, no older than myself, whose wonderful feats I had witnessed at the Crystal Palace with unfeigned wonderment and delight. Stories of little boys having their spines broken at the age of two (to make them supple!), of little, writhing creatures condemned to stand for hours daily with one leg strapped up, and of a multitude of other horrors, were impressed upon my youthful mind, with the result that many a sleepless night did I pass after these occasional outings.

No doubt my experience is not unique, and perhaps even to-day there are people who believe that an acrobat's training cannot be successfully carried through without a certain amount of hardship and cruelty. Indeed, to my shame be it said, until very recently some lingering doubts on the subject still occupied my mind, and they were only thoroughly dispelled after I had had the opportunity of personally witnessing the methods of the several celebrated performers

who have been kind enough to place the knowledge, gained from long experience, at my disposal for the benefit of the readers of THE STRAND MAGAZINE.

Few men are better qualified to speak on the ups and downs of an acrobat's life than Mr. Henry Balcombe, or "Ara," of the "Ara, Zebra, and Vora" trio. At the present time their performance mainly consists of balancing feats, amongst these being one which "Ara" claims to have originated. Exceedingly difficult it looks. "Ara" balances himself on his hands upon a small pedestal, and supports on his neck "Zebra," who in turn bears "Vora" upon his shoulders.

But although the trio's exhibition is of this character just now, there is hardly a branch of the profession which "Ara" has not had a turn at. Certainly, he and his brother Arthur ("Zebra") have been through the mill. They were apprenticed in 1875, at the respective ages of nine and six, to the Jackley troupe, and the following nine years of their lives were spent entirely abroad, and it can be understood that during this time life was not all *couleur de rose* for the two little Balcombes. Still, they learnt all that was to be learned in their calling, and although they acknowledge that many hardships had to be undergone unknown to latter-day apprentices, they have never regretted having been brought up in so hard a school.

There were scarcely any music-halls in those days, and travelling troupes had to depend upon finding concert-halls at various places they halted at, or, failing this, go through their performance in the open. Often as not, too, if business were bad, the hapless little apprentices would fare badly, not infrequently being really ill-treated. There is not much fear of anything of this sort nowadays, as the law has taken these little performers under its protecting wing,

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and a master not carrying out his duties as set forth in the terms of apprenticeship, would soon find himself called upon to answer for his conduct.

A few years after finishing their apprenticeship, the two young Balcombes struck off for themselves, their originality being apparent in their choice of professional names, which they selected by taking the first and last letters of the alphabet, so as to run no risk of clashing with other professionals. Then they commenced a most successful tour, visiting all the principal cities of Europe, and winning golden laurels wherever they went — there being a peculiar quality of refinement about their work which is lacking in that of many otherwise clever combinations. The "Nonpareil Trio," as the show is now called, only dates back two or three years, with the accession to the troupe of the youngest sister of the celebrated "Mosers," who is now known as "Vora," but in private life is Mrs. Henry Balcombe. Like her husband, she has been virtually all her life in the business, for since her fifth birthday she had been taking part in the performances with her brothers and sisters; on the next page is a picture of the little mite as she appeared soon after making her first shy bow to the audience.

When I asked "Ara" to give me an idea of the way a youngster was taught from the very beginning, he told me that there was no royal road. The great thing to bear in mind is to learn to walk before you attempt to run. The great object of a

child's early training is to make him strong and supple before attempting anything in the shape of difficult feats. For this purpose he is put through a variety of simple exercises no more difficult than what may be seen done at many a school gymnasium, but the great difference is, that the little professional has to *keep at it*, to steadily go on practising until the most intricate movements are done without effort.



"ARA, ZEBRA, AND VORA."

First he is taught to bend his back slightly, and only slightly, for undue slackness in the muscles of the back unfits a man for the performance of many acrobatic feats.

Of course, I am not speaking of "contortionists" or "human snakes," with whom bending is the chief stock-in-trade. When the youngster can bend his back a little without straining, he goes on to learn "flip-flaps" and "hand-springs." "Flip-flap" is the name given to the evolution which consists of throwing the head back, placing the hands on the ground, and turning over to an upright position, and a "hand-spring" is the reverse of a "flip-flap." These and the "splits," which is too well known to need description, may almost be called the A B C of tumbling. When the learner has mastered flip-flaps and hand-springs, he is ready to attempt somersaults, back and front and side, and the more difficult "twisting somersault," which combines a complete vertical turn with a horizontal change of position.

Whatever branch of ground-work the learner is going to take up, the rudiments of the art have to be first thoroughly mastered. To use "Ara's" own words: "Tumbling is the father of all ground acrobatics." And he was particularly emphatic in bidding me remember that everything must be attempted very gradually, and every feat, however simple, done over and over again, until it becomes second nature. If the learner is content with just being able to manage a trick, he will never shine in combined work in which quickness of movement and "style" are so essential to success. "Ara" said it was quite possible for a young fellow of sixteen or seventeen to become fairly proficient in one branch, but if a boy wanted to become an all-round performer, like himself, he ought to start not later than ten years old.

Even after a man becomes thoroughly proficient he cannot afford to "rest on his arms reversed"; if he does not continually practise and improve himself he will soon get stale. Performing, as he does now, three

times a day, "Ara" has no need of additional exercise; but when abroad or in the provinces, and only appearing once in the evening, the mornings are regularly devoted to practising new tricks and general exercise for keeping in condition. He says he finds half an hour's *skipping* a splendid thing to keep the limbs supple and improve his breathing power.

"Ara's" long career has not been without its share of adventures and accidents, but, luckily, none of the latter have had any very serious results. As a lad, he was for some time doing the "Risley" business, which consists in one of the men lying on his back with his feet at right angles to the ground, on which human apparatus the lighter members of the troupe perform. Young "Ara," while doing a difficult somersault, was unlucky enough to slip, and, falling on the edge of the pad, broke his arm. Another fall, which might have been fraught with far more serious consequences, occurred at Rotterdam, when he fell off a high trapeze, owing to having forgotten the indispens-

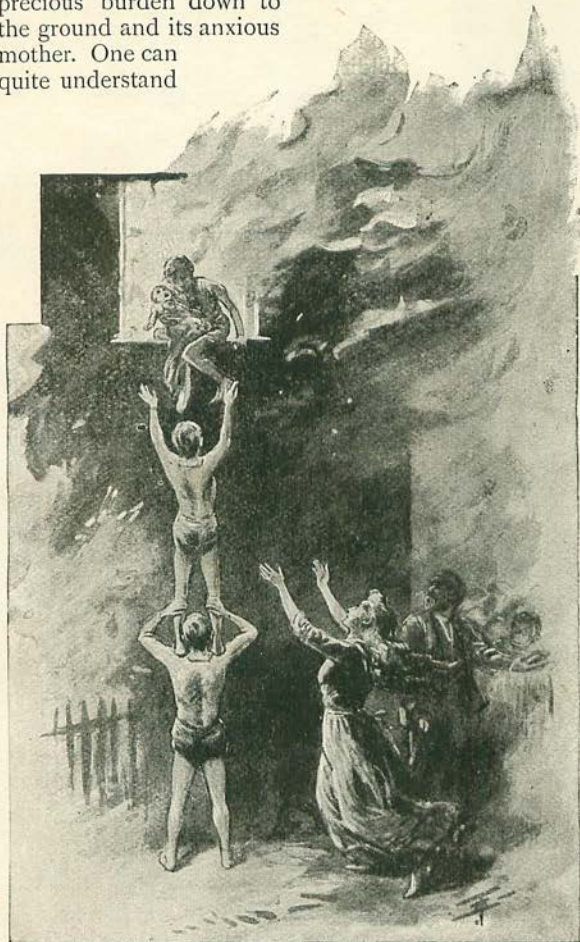


VORA, AGE 5.

able handkerchief, to wipe the perspiration off the bar. Although the fall was about 40ft., he got off scot-free. He landed in the laps of a lady and gentleman, and before the former had recovered from the faint caused by the shock, he was once more aloft and proceeded with his act, to the surprise and admiration of the spectators!

"Ara's" pluck and agility were once put to a noble use. Very few professional acrobats can boast that their training was the means of rescuing another from certain death, but this was the case with "Ara" when he was but a slip of a lad. While performing in a small village, a fire broke out opposite the hall, and just as the troupe arrived on the scene a woman came rushing down the stairs imploring someone to save her baby, which was asleep in a room on the first story. To climb upon one another's shoulders (or, technically, to make "three-man-high") was the work of a moment for three of the Jackley troupe, and young "Ara"

was at the top. He could just get his hands upon the window-sill, but managed to pull himself up, brought the baby to the sill, and, resuming with difficulty his position on the shoulders of his companion, lowered his precious burden down to the ground and its anxious mother. One can quite understand



"ARA SAVES A BABY'S LIFE."

that the troupe had to stop in the place several days longer than had been intended, for the people came flocking in from the neighbouring villages in hundreds to see the boy who saved the baby.

Few people who visited Olympia a short time back can fail to have been struck by a troupe of acrobats who, fantastically attired as demons, went through some extraordinary movements on the top of high ladders. The leading spirit of the troupe is Mr. Conn Fredericks, who has made a *spécialité* of this ladder-balancing. He also originated the daring feat of riding

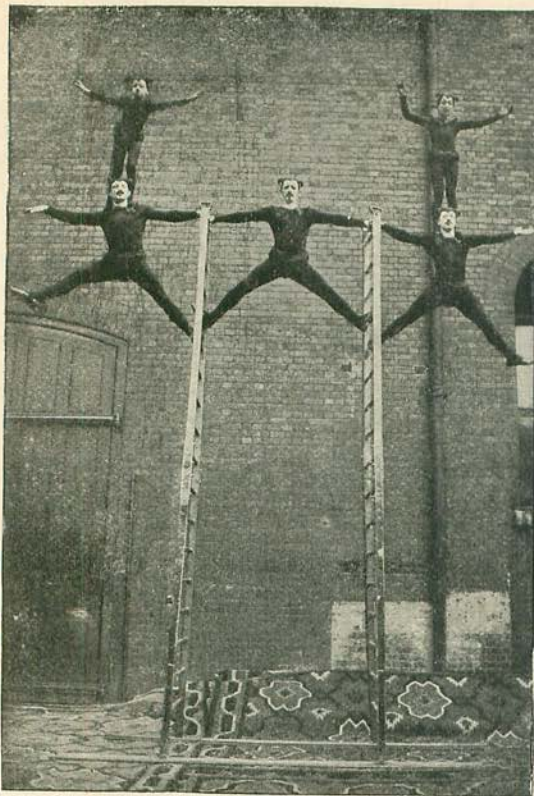
a bicycle down the "chutes," which caused such a sensation at the time. He hails from the United States, and is a good example of the result of the American system of training. He was never apprenticed, but while very young started practising acrobatic tricks at a gymnasium, and embarked in the profession at the age of twelve, much to the horror of his people, who are all strict Quakers in Chicago, and regard those who frequent theatres and music-halls as on the high road to perdition. So, certainly, Conn Fredericks' talents cannot be attributed to heredity or early associations.

Like "Ara," he has had a turn at almost every sort of gymnastic work; in his time he has given performances of trapeze work, the horizontal bar, tumbling, pure and simple, rope-walking, besides his unique ladder act. He explained that tricks on the trapeze and horizontal bar are learned nowadays by the aid of a mechanical appliance called a "longe." This consists of a broad belt going round the gymnast's body, attached to which are two ropes running through pulleys.

When the learner attempts a new feat, he puts on the belt, a man takes hold of the end of each rope, and, should he miss, they immediately give a pull, when he swings harmlessly in the air. This device has saved many a broken neck, but it had not been invented when Conn Fredericks learned his trade, so at that time a man learning somersaults off the bar had to trust to luck and

the services of a companion.

Again, in aerial work, nets were entirely unknown until recent years, and the trapeze performer, when he went up to his lofty perch, literally had his life in his hands. In this respect, then, the lot of the learner is far happier than it used to be. In spite of being brought up in what may be styled the heroic school, he doesn't believe in the system adopted by many of the English acrobats, who, he says, want to teach in too much of a hurry, instead of sending the pupils through a regular course, as they do in the States. The English performers go in for specializing,



THE FREDERICKS TROUPE—THE GREAT LADDER TRICK.  
From a Photo. by A. M. Bliss & Co., Leves.

while it is rare to come across an American performer who cannot do all-round work.

There are several tricks which Mr. Fredericks disapproves of; balancing on the head is one which he thinks leads to very bad results. In fact, he assured me that men who continually do this feat, sooner or later suffer from brain trouble.

A performer named Thuer used to do this some years ago while swinging on a trapeze, and for a time he was a tremendous attraction, but finally he went out of his mind. Surely one trick he wanted to do was the most extraordinary that has ever been heard of. This is what he proposed to do. He was to stand on a trap-door, a rope, with a knot to come under his ear, to be placed around his neck, and then the trap was to be opened! Of course, he was never permitted to perform this gruesome act in public, but it is a fact that he practised it successfully, and managed a drop of 2ft. to 3ft. with impunity!

For this reason he does not encourage his little son to do head balances. Conn Fredericks, junior, takes part in his father's Mephistophelian antics, and a most engaging little fellow he is. He is just twelve, and, according to his father, started tumbling at the age of two! He is a clever little chap, quite childish in his ways, and absolutely without any comprehension of the meaning of the word "fear." In fact, his daring is a source of anxiety to his father and mother, for they never know what he'll be up to when he's out of sight. Not many days ago he was discovered perched up on the girders at Olympia some 100ft. from the ground, and turned a deaf ear to the entreaties of the manager, who implored him to come down. And when he at last consented to come back to *terra firma*, it was only with much difficulty that he was dissuaded from sliding



THE FREDERICKS TROUPE—PRACTISING SOMERSAULT  
THROWING.

down one of the wires! He has only been taking part regularly in the work of the "Demon" troupe for the last two years, and doesn't express himself as very satisfied with that sort of work. He says he wants to be a comedian, and sometimes rebels against the acrobatic work; but when his father threatens to take another boy in his place, he soon comes round to a different frame of mind. His father doesn't give him



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family — husband, wife, with a baby in her arms, and a boy or girl, coming from a place miles away, all perched on the back of one unfortunate horse!

Undoubtedly the cleverest trapeze performer in existence is a member of the "Hanlon" troupe, who, as "Little Bob," caused a perfect furore some twenty years ago. "Little Bob" is not very big in stature now, but he has three boys, aged twelve, eleven, and four, whom he has set his heart upon teaching to follow in his footsteps. He himself has been a member of the most famous troupe known to the present generation.

First he was apprenticed to the original Hanlon-Lees, whose reputation was so greatly enhanced by the attractiveness of "Little Bob's" feats, and afterwards he was one of the celebrated Hanlon-Voltas, with whom he



THE FREDERICKS TROUPE.

too much work to do; like the majority of men who are masters of their craft, he believes in the beginner doing a little and doing it well.

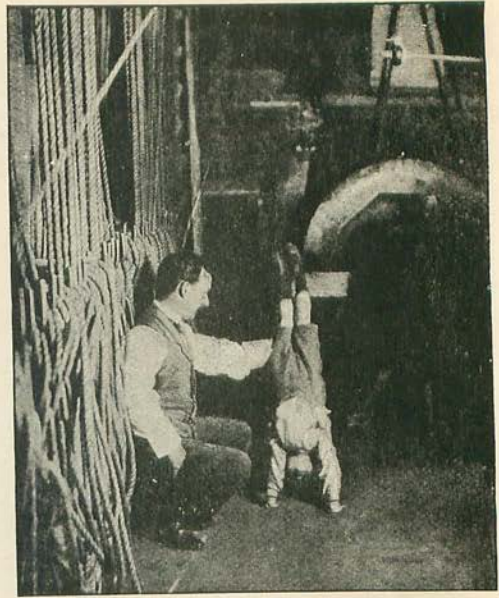
Mr. Fredericks was for a long time travelling with Barnum's circus, and he says the most enthusiastic audiences he has ever had were those made up entirely of niggers in the Southern States. The coloured folk used to literally go mad over a circus, and it was no uncommon thing to see a whole



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worked both the trapeze and the horizontal bars. He had an engagement with his troupe at the Alhambra recently, and I paid him a visit one morning, when I was enabled to watch him putting his boys through their paces. Needless to say, Mr. Edward Hanlon, the smallest one, aged four, has only just commenced, but he positively beamed with delight when "Little Bob" lifted him up to the bar, and he pulled up to his chest twice very sturdily.

As for the eldest boy, Robert, he is already no mean performer, and has appeared in St.



THE YOUNGEST OF THE HANLONS.



ROBERT HANLON.  
1.—THE BACK PERCH.

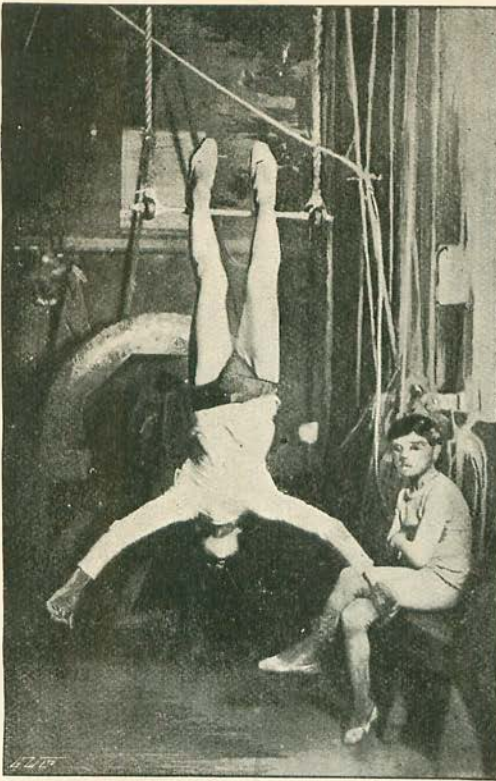
to judge the swing of the trapeze, when to leave go, and how to catch the other properly, and to land safely on the little platform suspended in mid-air, which is technically known as the "perch."



ROBERT HANLON. 2.—SOMERSAULT FROM BAR TO BAR.

Petersburg with his father. Their preliminary teaching bears out my previous information; they stand on their hands, do the splits, "legs and shoulders," before they are put on the trapeze. After learning a few simple feats on a trapeze near the ground, they are started on the high one.

The first thing to learn here is how to fall, so as to land properly in the net, for an awkward fall of 60ft. or 70ft. means broken limbs, if no worse. Then they are carefully taught how



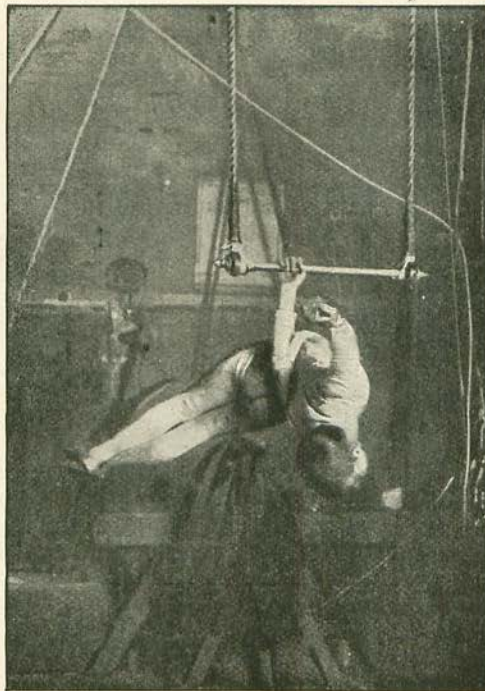
THE HANLON TROUPE PRACTISING.



THE HANLON TROUPE PRACTISING.

"Bob" is a very abstemious man; he never touches alcohol during the day, but he has no faith in dieting, and says he eats just what he fancies, and lets his boys do the same. He told me that there is comparatively little danger now about trapeze work so long as the apparatus is carefully looked to, but before the introduction of nets it was very different.

Many years ago, he had to be thrown from one man to another on the flying trapeze, and they practised the feat with half-a-dozen men holding a blanket, dodging about so as to keep under him and catch him if he



THE HANLON TROUPE PRACTISING.

missed his hold. On the other hand, bar work close to the ground is rather risky, for if a man slips, he is bound to hurt himself more or less. With all this, bad accidents are very rare considering the number of men engaged in the business.

Taken all round, the life of an acrobat does not appear to be an altogether unenviable one. But even given the possession of all the necessary qualities, I should not recommend anyone to adopt the profession. To attain to mediocrity is not very difficult, but, like the great poet, the great acrobat is "nascitur non fit."