

## *Are Indian Jugglers Humbugs?*

THE OPINION OF AN EXPERT.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. CHARLES BERTRAM.



ASK the average man for what India is most celebrated, and the chances are ten to one that he will ignore the glories of the Taj Mahal, the beneficence of British rule, even Mr. Kipling, and will unhesitatingly reply in one word, "Jugglers." Yes, India's jugglers have been the wonder of India, as well as of that greater India which lies outside its borders and within the British Isles. Their "Jadoo," or magic working, has resolved itself practically into three great tricks. Everybody has heard of them. They are the basket trick, the mango-tree trick, and the rope trick; while there are a lot of little tricks which serve as interludes during the progress of the greater ones.

There is nothing so interesting to the average mortal after seeing a trick as knowing the way it is done, and when opportunity offered for me to learn about the way in which the Indians perform their great tricks I jumped at the chance. It was Mr. Charles Bertram, the famous conjurer, who offered to initiate me into the mysteries which he had been studying during the six months' tour in that land of magic from which he had just returned, and to which by the time this article appears in print he will have gone back in order to make magic for the Indians themselves. Somehow or other, as he talked, one could not help unconsciously thinking of the foremost figures of the Israelitish nation when they appeared before the King of Egypt, surrounded by his magicians, and whatever wonders in the way of magic these performed, the other two were able to "go them one better," as the Americans succinctly phrase it.

"I went to India to learn," said Mr. Bertram.

"And you stayed to teach," I intervened, for I had heard and read in the newspapers of the reception of this English entertainer among the necromancers of the East.

Did they not refuse to acknowledge him a "Jadoo Wallah," and declare unhesitatingly

he was a "Shaitan Wallah," an emissary of his Imperial Majesty of the regions down below, instead of a human being like themselves, merely capable of mystifying other mortals?

"I certainly did teach one or two of them some of my tricks," smiled Mr. Bertram, in acquiescence, "for although Indian jugglery has a great reputation in Europe, the Indian jugglers are very keen on getting European tricks. When they succeed, they ignore the other jugglers as beneath them, and regard them as much as magicians as we do the thimble-riggers on any of our racecourses. Indeed, I have no hesitation in saying that, after seeing the performances of 176 different conjurers, who were gathered together in various parts of the country by the different Rajahs before whom I performed during my last tour, there is not a single trick which the Indians perform that European conjurers cannot do as well, and even better."

"What about the great rope trick?" I asked; "that throwing up of a rope into the air, up which a boy or man clammers, and is seen no more until happily he arrives like another Jack and the beanstalk in some undiscovered country in the upper air?"

Mr. Bertram smiled the smile of incredulity, but answered in one word, "Moonshine! There is no such trick. During my tour I asked for that trick, and not a single soul did I find who could do that or who had ever seen it. I heard of men who had heard of others who had seen it, but I could get no direct evidence, and all that I could discover about it from the Indians themselves was voiced by one man, who said to me in his curious English, 'All in imagination, all in traveller tales. I've been all over India looking for tricks; would I not have that if I could get it?'"

"I shall try again to find someone who can do that trick for me, or the related one of throwing up a chain on which a goat, a dog, and some other animals, and finally a man climb; but until I have seen it with my own eyes I adhere to my opinion, 'Moon-

shine.' There is a rope trick which the Indian jugglers do, and that is very dexterous. It consists in taking a coil of rope several feet long, throwing it up in the air, and balancing it upon the open palm. The rope, however, has a wire running down the middle of it, so as to enable it to remain stiff for the three or four seconds during which it is balanced, and that is how that trick is done, although a great deal of delicacy is involved in throwing the rope up with the exact amount of force to straighten out the coils, for anything a shade over or under would prevent the performance of the trick, which at its best is a juggling feat.

"As far as the other two great tricks are concerned, everybody knows in general terms what they are. In the basket trick a boy is put into the basket, a sword is passed through it in various directions, and the boy is seemingly killed, while later on he appears either from the basket or else is discovered some distance away, perhaps up a tree. The mango-tree trick consists in planting a seed, and showing the plant when it has grown a certain height, and later on when it has grown still more and has borne fruit. Now, there is nothing simpler than the way in which these tricks are done, as you will agree when I have explained them step by step.

"In the first place, it must be borne in mind that Indian conjurers travel in little groups of four or five, and each, as a rule, does his own trick. This allows one man to prepare his apparatus without observation while another one is going through his performance, so that seemingly these people do their tricks without any previous preparation. Again, they carry about with them a lot of bags, bits of old cloth, and blankets, which, although the uninitiated public does not know it, are of the greatest service to them in getting rid of things which have served their purpose.

"In the mango-tree trick the performer first picks a piece of a mango tree about 6in. high, with a tuft of three or four little leaves. This is pushed up inside the little rag doll, which is hollow in the middle, and

which is always used by the Indian conjurer instead of the magic wand of the European. Then he gets a large piece of the tree, about 18in. high, to which is attached by artificial means a little green mango, or, if out of the mango season, a green plum, which serves the purpose equally well. This branch he wraps tightly in a large piece of wet cloth, to be used at the proper time. He also provides himself with two mango seeds, one of which is perfectly normal, and the other as like it as possible in size. This latter he slits in the centre, and puts in a little wedge of wood to hold it open, while at the other side he affixes three or four little bits of string, and he pares down the end of both the branches so that they will fit into the slit in the prepared seed.

"Having made all his arrangements, the conjurer advances with four little bamboo sticks, tied round the top with a piece of string, after having handed them round for inspection. Round these he puts a piece of thin material, which hangs over the top and covers the front and two sides loosely, but not the back, thus forming a sort of tent, which is open behind. This tent is about 3ft. high, and the thinness of the cloth allows the interior to be dimly seen through.

"The juggler next gets a tin pot, like an ordinary corned-beef can. This is filled with earth, and is handed round for inspection. On the earth he pours water, so as to make it wet—in fact, a thick mud. As soon as the audience is satisfied that the pot contains nothing but this mud, he hands round the first seed for examination, and asks someone to push it into the wet earth.



"HE THEN COMES TO THE FRONT OF THE TENT AND LIFTS UP THE CLOTH."

He then comes to the front of the tent, lifts up the cloth, puts the pot into the tent, and lets the cloth drop over it. Suddenly he appears to notice that the audience can see through the cloth, so he takes up a large piece of thick coloured cloth, in a fold of which is the large piece of the mango branch, and covers the thin cloth with it. Then he lifts both cloths together, and you see the pot still there and unchanged. He now procures a 'ohatty,' or

pot, of water, and sprinkles it with his hand into the tent to water the seed, and so hasten its growth.

"Here ends the first part of the trick, for the seed is supposed to take some time to germinate and grow. To pass the time the conjurer comes in front and begins doing some other tricks, for example, the cups and balls, or the diving duck, or the transformation of three seeds into

a scorpion or small snake, all very elementary tricks, indeed, which I will tell you about later. Having done this trick, the conjurer goes behind the tent, taking his mystic rag doll, in which there is more than meets the eye, with him. Under cover of the tent, squatting on his haunches, he pulls out of the doll the first little sprig of mango with the three or four leaves on it, and inserts the prepared end of it into the slit in the mango seed. He then takes out the original seed from the pot, stuffing in the other one into its place. He next lifts up the curtain from the front, waters the pot again, and takes it out to show to the audience, which is astonished to see the original seed has grown up in so short a time. He even takes the old plant out of the pot and shows the bits of string now covered with mud, which to the casual observer look like tendrils, or little

roots growing from the seed. He now re-

plants the seed, putting the pot back by way of the front of the tent, which he lifts

up for the purpose, and takes the chatty of water from the front to the back of the tent, and pretends to water the plant from there. This opportunity he uses for taking out the big piece of plant from the cloth: after removing the small piece of mango, he sticks the big bit into the aperture in the seed, for which purpose you will remember I told you he had previously cut it to the right size. This branch he now puts into the pot, and the little piece which he has just shown he wraps up in the corner of the cloth from which the larger piece was taken.

"Although the tree could now be shown full grown to the audience, he does not discover it yet, but goes on with another small trick which may occupy as much as ten minutes. At the end of that time he takes the chatty for the third time, as if to water the plant, again lifts up the front of the tent, this time to find, to his own apparent amazement, that the plant has grown, and on it there is actually fruit.

"Here the second part of the trick may be said to be finished. The tree is now as big as it will grow, and the Indian takes it and shows it to the audience. Then he takes it round to the back of the tent, and puts it in



"THE ORIGINAL SEED HAS GROWN UP."



"HE PRETENDS TO WATER THE PLANT."



"HE FINDS TO HIS OWN AMAZEMENT THAT THE TREE HAS GROWN."

on that side. Once more he pretends to water it, as if he thought it would grow more; but while he is doing this he really pulls up the plant, wraps it in the wet cloth again, and throws a piece of carpet or a blanket carelessly over it, and at a convenient moment an accomplice, or member of the four or five men working together, picks it up and gets it away while the attention of the audience is being held by some other trick. And that is the whole of the famous mango trick," concluded Mr. Bertram.

"Then the idea that you see the tree gradually growing——" I began.

"Is all humbug," said Mr. Bertram. "There is no difficulty in the matter. I myself do a modification of this trick, making a rose tree grow and bear a couple of dozen roses which I distribute among the audience, so that there is no question as to their reality. This trick amazed even the mango-tree trick workers, who have not been able to discover how it was done."

"How is it done?"

Very simply, indeed. Merely by long

that as simple as the mango-tree trick?" I asked.

"Quite," replied Mr. Bertram, "as I think you will acknowledge when I have explained it to you. The basket itself is peculiarly shaped, being much larger at the bottom than it is at the top. The lid is perhaps 30in. by 18in., and is oval, while the basket itself spreads out to 4ft. 6in. by 2ft. 6in. at the bottom. This is shown empty to the audience, and a man or boy, who invariably wears a turban and some striking article of clothing—for example, a scarlet-coloured jacket—is brought forward by the conjurer. He is then put into the basket and crouches down, doing everything to emphasize the fact that it is only just large enough for him, a fact insisted on later by the lid when put on the basket not being allowed to fit closely.

"Now the conjurer takes a large piece of thick cloth or blanket, 6ft. square, and covers the basket entirely. The boy is, of course, in the basket now. The moment he gets in he has taken off his turban and any



"HE DRIVES A SWORD THROUGH THE BASKET FROM TOP TO BOTTOM."

practice and sleight of hand. Conjuring, however, is only, in my opinion, a *raison d'être* for entertaining, and though it involves a certain amount of dexterity and a good deal of ability to make people believe things, yet it is not difficult in itself, and there is no reason why, with a certain degree of aptitude, and with sufficient practice, anyone should not be able to perform many of the illusions which startle an audience."

"And what about the basket trick? Is

little article of clothing he can spare—for example, the bright-coloured jacket. Then he lies at the bottom of the basket and curls round it—eelwise. The performer now removes the cloth and drives a sword through the front of the basket, and then through the top to the bottom; but, of course, he takes good care to miss the boy, as he does when next he drives the weapon through the back, high up and diagonally to the front. Meantime, the boy wriggles round from one side

to the other, the basket being held down by the other men in order to prevent it moving. The business with the sword is repeated several times so that it seems to go through every part of the basket.

"The cloth is now put over the basket again, and the conjurer, placing his hand under it, removes the lid, takes out the turban and the jacket, and throws them away. Then, as if enraged at some remark which is made by one of his comrades, he jumps into the basket, but as

the cloth covers it it is impossible for any of the audience to see inside it, and the people believe that it is empty, while, of course, the boy remains curled up along one side. The conjurer now gets out of the basket, leaving the cloth over it, and puts the lid back under it. Suddenly he darts forward, taking with him the cloth from off the basket, which is now covered with the lid, and under cover of it picks up the jacket and turban from the ground where he has thrown them, and snatches in the air with the blanket as if catching the body, and goes back with much excitement and much jabbering to the basket, which he covers with the blanket, when suddenly something is seen moving under the cloth. Immediately the lid of the basket goes up. In another moment the boy, having replaced his turban and put on his jacket under cover of the cloth, which is snatched away, makes his smiling reappearance.

"There is another way, however, of doing this trick, by which the boy is discovered out of the basket in some other part of the ground where the show takes place, but this requires a background in the shape of a wall

or corner of some sort for its proper carrying out. The basket is put down as before, with the boy in it, and the sword passed through, with the result that he is seemingly killed, even blood being allowed to flow to add to the realism, while the

youth's screams are made either ventriloquially by the conjurer himself or by the boy in the basket. The bringing of the blood is a very simple matter, for the handle of the sword is made hollow, and contains some red liquid. On being pressed the liquid flows

down a groove in the sword, and comes out near the point, so that it really appears as if the boy had been stabbed. Having got so far, the conjurer brings four poles, 4ft. or 5ft. high, which are stuck up in the ground around the basket. The audience is, of course, in front, but the

conjurer has two or three confederates on each side at the back near the wall. As soon as the boy is put into the basket he takes off his brightly coloured jacket and cap, which are covered with a cloth, and are got hold of by one of the men.

"Presently the conjurers begin to quarrel among themselves, and an awful noise is made with tom-toms, which distracts the attention of the audience. The conjurer gets a great piece of cloth and puts it on the front pole, where it is held by one of the con-

federates. Then he brings the other end of the cloth in front of the basket for an instant on its way to the third stick. During that moment the boy jumps out of the basket, runs along the back of the cloth, dodges between the legs of one of his confederates in the crowd, and under cover of the passing of the cloth to the fourth pole, taking with him



"HE JUMPS INTO THE BASKET."



"SNATCHES IN THE AIR WITH THE BLANKET AS IF CATCHING A BODY."

the cloth in which are his cap and jacket, climbs a tree, if there is one handy, puts on his cap and coat, and is ready for the conjurer to call attention to him at the given moment."

"And that is all?"

"That is all."

"The little tricks are equally simple, and any schoolboy might do them. The changing of the three beans into a scorpion or snake, for instance, is done merely with a box which has two compartments. In the upper one the beans are kept, while the lower contains the scorpion or the little snake. These compartments are separate, and either can be opened at will. The conjurer puts the three beans into the hand of one of the audience, and tells him to hold them. Then he makes him open his hand to show they are still there. The conjurer takes them out of the person's hand to exhibit to the audience, and puts them back into the box. He asks the person to again hold his hand out; the conjurer then deftly opens the lower box and lets the snake or scorpion fall into the person's hand. The man himself is naturally startled, and, jumping back, believes the conjurer really changed the beans into the reptile.

"Another of these little tricks is the jumping rabbit. For this purpose the conjurer takes a shallow tin, about 3in. deep and 7in. across, which he fills with water, on which he sprinkles some red powder until the water becomes thick and opaque, so that anything in it cannot be seen. He then shows a little china rabbit, about an inch long, which he drops into the water, and

draws a circle on the ground about 18in. in diameter, in the centre of which he places the tin. Then he takes the rabbit out of the water to show it is still there, and replaces it immediately. Outside the circle he drops a fetish in the shape of a monkey's skull, or some other uncanny object, declaring 'rabbit him go monkey, monkey him call rabbit.' 'Jadoo Wallah do makee rabbit jump,' and so on. Suddenly with a spring the rabbit jumps out of the tin and drops by the side of the fetish outside the ring.

"The whole of this trick consists in the conjurer putting into the tin a little spring which is fastened together by means of

some gummy material. This he inserts when he takes out the rabbit to show that it is in the water, and when he puts the rabbit back he is careful to put it on the spring. The water dissolves the gum, the spring acts, the rabbit is forced out of the tin, and that is the way that trick is done.

"Similarly, with regard to the little diving duck. The same kind of pot is used, filled with water, but filled so full that a good deal overflows and makes a mess on the ground. A little red stuff is sprinkled on the top, but the water is not made thick as in the previous case. A little china duck is placed on the surface, which at the word of command dives head foremost, and does not come up again to the surface until bidden. This again is mere child's play, for there is a little hole in the bottom of the pot through which a very fine hair runs. This hair is fastened by means of a blob of wax to the



"WITH A SPRING THE RABBIT JUMPS OUT OF THE TIN."



"THE CONJURER SECRETLY PULLS THE STRING AND MAKES THE DUCK DIVE."

duck, and at the word of command the conjurer secretly pulls the string and makes the duck dive. The object of spilling the water on the ground is to disguise the fact that the pot leaks through the little hole through which the hair runs, and which of course it is quite easy to cover up with a finger while the pot is being filled.

"Another favourite trick which they do is to take a basket about 18in. in diameter, and 4in. high, which is turned upside down and a stone put under it.

"Make ten rupees come," the Indian will declare; but on lifting up the basket there are no coins, but perhaps a little scorpion or a snake. This he picks up and throws into the

bag which he always carries. After some more manipulation the basket is lifted again, and twenty little averdavats emerge from under it. This certainly looks startling enough, but the execution is mere child's play, for it is perfectly easy in putting the basket down the first time to remove the stone and put the scorpion in its place; while the amount of fumbling which goes on to get in the little birds, which are all inclosed in a black bag, is such as never would be dreamed of by any man whose ambition it was to be able to appear before a European audience.

"The most startling trick which I ever saw was done by a man who was performing some of the little tricks while the mango tree was growing. He took a little ball of rough cotton, about the size of a walnut, and threw the ball to a woman who formed one of the

party of those who were assisting him. The jerk unraveled about two yards, and she broke the end off and kept the ball. The conjurer placed the end which he held into his mouth, and by a deep breath the cotton flew into his mouth, and he appeared to chew it. Then he borrowed a penknife from me, and with a big blade made as though he would stab himself in the throat, the woman preventing him with some show of excitement;

but presently turning her back, the man seized the opportunity to plunge the knife into his stomach, and that he did very well. He then put his hand under the loose linen shirt he was wearing and began to draw out a piece of cotton.

"When he had drawn out nearly as much as the length of the piece which had been broken off, he lifted his shirt slightly and showed the end of the cotton apparently embedded in the skin. He then took the knife and moved it upward against the skin,

as if he were pressing out the last bit of thread, which was tinged with red as if with blood. This was really an admirably executed little trick, although by no means difficult. The sucking in of the cotton is skilful, but with a very little practice I was able to do the same thing, and so can anyone else, the only precaution to be taken being to prevent the end coming into contact with the back of the throat, for if it

did it would bring on an attack of coughing.

"Of course the chewing of the cotton is merely a method of secreting it, and another piece of cotton of similar length is rolled up



"TWENTY LITTLE AVERDAVATS EMERGE FROM UNDER IT."



"THE WOMAN PREVENTING HIM WITH SOME SHOW OF EXCITEMENT."

previously and put in its place with the end coloured with some paint. A little brown material is put over the skin with a scrap of cotton, perhaps a quarter of an inch attached to it, so that it really looks as though it were sticking up out of the skin, and the upward movement of the knife scrapes this off and it can easily be got away at a convenient time. This is hardly a trick for an English drawing-room.

"Another of their favourite tricks is to take a lot of powdered chalks, which are sprinkled into a chatty of water, and the conjurer drinks it. Then he asks what colour you would like him to bring. According to the word he blows on to a white plate the required tint. For this trick all the colours are merely wrapped up separately in a small quantity of skin like goldbeater's skin, and secreted under the lips. Of course, as soon as each little packet has been broken, it is quite easy to swallow the skin if it cannot be got rid of in any other way, and conjurers, I may tell you, often swallow more things than they care to digest.

"I myself perform a modification of this trick, but in a much more intricate manner, and certainly no one has yet been able to discover how it is done. I take an ordinary decanter and glass, wash them in the sight of the audience, and fill the decanter with water. Then I pour port, sherry, absinthe, whisky, and milk from it in turn at the desire of anyone in the audience. Then I wash glass and decanter again, and repeat the trick, which I finish by producing champagne, the goodness of which I attest by drinking it myself."

"That goes more than one better than the Indian," I suggested.

"I am glad you think so," said Mr. Bertram, "for that is the opinion of the Indian jugglers themselves. As for the other little tricks that they do, they are all of them as simple as they can be, one of the most marvellous being the cutting of a turban into two pieces and renewing its length. Every schoolboy, however, knows how to cut a piece of string and apparently bring it back to its original condition, so that I need not

go into the details of this explanation, for the principle is exactly the same, although, I may add, that when I did the string trick for a party of native conjurers they were completely astonished, and did not recognise it as another form of the turban trick, which, however, is far easier to do than the string."

"A word about snake-charming," I asked.

"All I can tell you," said Mr. Bertram, "is that one

of the greatest authorities in India on animals, a gentleman who has a natural history museum worthy of a nation, assured me that all the snake-charmers use snakes from which the fangs have been taken, so that there is absolutely no danger in their manipulation."

With that our interview closed; but a few days after, meeting a friend who had been in India at the same time, he told me what Mr. Bertram had omitted, or was too modest to state—that the jugglers were so overcome with astonishment at his performances, that they frequently fell down on the ground before him and kissed his feet in token alike of admiration and acknowledgment of his superiority.



"SHOWED THE END OF THE COTTON."