

# THE GREATEST OF ACROBATS:

## THE "MARVELLOUS CRAGGS."

BY ROBERT MACHRAY.

*Illustrated by Special Photographs.*



It is quite possible, nay, probable, that man began to play tricks on his body, or with his body, almost as soon as he realised that he had a body at all. When and where everything was experimental, we may be quite sure that he experimented upon himself. What was there, indeed, which might not be done with his frame—this goodly body of his—these muscles, bones, sinews, nerves, all so obedient to the mind's control—in a word, what extraordinary capabilities were there not in him?

Now there is no more amazing instrument in existence than the human body; "fearfully and wonderfully made," it is at once so strong and yet so delicate that people have, in all ages, taken the keenest pleasure in witnessing what could be accomplished by it. It is this, consciously or unconsciously, that has caused the vivid personal interest universally taken in the performances of acrobats, equilibrists and gymnasts of every kind. Thus, while the doings of such artists have fascinated kings, there is no village so rustic that has not turned out *en masse* and wide agape to see the humblest "tumbler on the green."

The name and fame of the Cragg family of acrobats are in the mouths of everybody, for they are conceded to be not only the greatest of English acrobats, but to stand absolutely unapproached in their own special line by any other performers in the world.

The Craggs are genuine artists, and exhibit a refinement, variety, facility, celerity and grace in their movements which are a joy to the eyes of all, while the pleasure is greatly enhanced by the unexpected turns, the quick surprises, with which they at once bewilder and delight the spectator.

The Cragg family at the present time consists of seven performers, and a presentment of them in one group will be

found in our illustration on page 491. The eldest, Mr. J. W. Cragg, the "father and founder" of the combination, is an extremely pleasant, hearty and intelligent man, and his age is somewhere about fifty-two. Considered as an acrobat, he is still in his prime; as a man, he is quite a young fellow still. The second member of the group is his eldest son, Mr. Edward Cragg; the other five members are, his daughter, Victoria, and four sons, the youngest of whom, affectionately known as the "Baby," is aged eighteen.

Calling the other day at the Craggs' Gymnasium in the Kennington Road, I was received very courteously by Mr. Cragg and his eldest son, and they were kind enough to supply me with some account of the fortunes of the family, as well as with a few interesting remarks on the training and the position generally of what I may term "acrobatism," past and present. I may here add that I was introduced to two little toddlers, a boy and a girl, hardly more than infants, the third



*From a photo by*

MR. J. W. CRAGG.

*[Sharp.]*



generation of Craggs, and was informed by their grandfather that these tiny mites had already begun, not only to imitate their parents and relatives, quite naturally and of their own initiative, but already were receiving instruction in the exercises of the gymnasium—exercises in which they took the most genuine delight. It will thus be seen that the name of the Craggs, as the most popular of performers, is one which is not likely soon to die out.

At this point I should like at once to say that, in common with many other people, I had had the idea in my mind that the training of young children as acrobats probably involved a good deal of cruelty. Had the sight of these laughing babies, for they were hardly much more, not been enough in itself to dispel this notion, what Mr. Cragg told me himself would certainly do so. He declares that there is absolutely no foundation for this charge of cruelty. There is no necessity for cruelty. "Our own children! Be cruel to them? Rather not"; that is what Mr. Cragg said. "The talent for it is either in the child or it is not—and we soon find out in either case."

Mr. Cragg informed me that he began life as a boy working in the machinery department of a printing office in Manchester. In company with a chum, who subsequently became his partner, he had seen several gymnastic performances, which stirred him up to attempt to emulate the acts he had witnessed. "I thought I could do something at it," said Mr. Cragg, "so I practised every day, along with my mate, on the bars and handles and levers and such like in the machine room, till I got some idea of it. You see I felt like it.

"Then there was another thing. We were only getting a few shillings a week, and we heard, or perhaps imagined, that the gymnasts whose performances we had seen were getting big salaries. Why, the fact was, we wanted to be men right away. So, next thing, we joined the 'Working Man's Club,' where there was a gymnasium, fitted up with trapezes, rings, parallel bars, and the usual furniture of such a place. But we did not go there very long, for in a short while we had got far beyond anything that

the others were able to do, and we had no mind to give ourselves away. So we practised in private for the future."

"Did you have no teacher, Mr. Cragg?" I asked. "No lessons from anybody?"

"No, sir," was the reply. "What we did was this. We got hold of a garret, in which we fixed up a trapeze to the beams of the ceiling. The garret was entered by a trap-door in the floor, and we practised every day with that trap-door wide open—that was to give us nerve."

"That was an original idea," I said, smiling.

"It served," replied Mr. Cragg. "It wanted some doing, too. But it

was when practising here that, while my partner hung and swung from the trapeze by his toes, I learned to hang and swing with the heel—and I think I may fairly claim that I was the first acrobat who ever did so."

"So you hung by the heel over that open trap-door?"

"Quite so," said Mr. Cragg. "Well, when we thoroughly understood what we were going to do, and had become perfect in our parts, we appeared one Saturday night



From a photo by]

[W. H. Bunnett.

THE HOME OF THE CRAGG TROUPE IN KENNINGTON ROAD.



at a benefit at the Casino in Manchester. That was the beginning of the 'Marvellous Craggs'—though we did not call ourselves by that name—for our performance was such a success that the management offered us an immediate engagement, and on the following Monday night we commenced our public career."

"Before we go any farther, Mr. Cragg," I said, "would you mind saying something in regard to the conditions which prevailed when you first went into the acrobatic business, and those of the present time?"

"I went first into the business in 1862, so you see I have just been thirty-five years before the public. Things were very different when I was a lad. In fact, the difference between those days and ours is just the whole difference between a theatre of that time and this, or, if you like, between the condition of the people in those times and in these. There were no luxuries for the acrobat then. Now we are familiar with all those devices which tend to lessen the dangers incident to our profession, such as nets, easy stuffed mattresses, and comfortable stage carpets. You see those things everywhere now, but even a stage carpet was almost unknown in the sixties."

"I suppose you didn't quite find yourselves in receipt of the expected fortune immediately?" I asked.

"It certainly seemed like a fortune," replied Mr. Cragg, "for we got two pounds a week, and that appeared an immense sum to us lads."

"And you have been performing ever since your first appearance in Manchester?"

"After Manchester," continued Mr. Cragg, "we worked round various theatres and halls, and then we joined Sanger's Circus, the headquarters of which were then at Bolton. Our engagement with Sanger's people lasted for two and a half years, and it was really during that time that I got a thorough grasp of the business of an acrobat. Then followed a time of broken luck, succeeded by one of worse. Neither myself nor my partner, whether singly or in combination, could get any work, and we had a

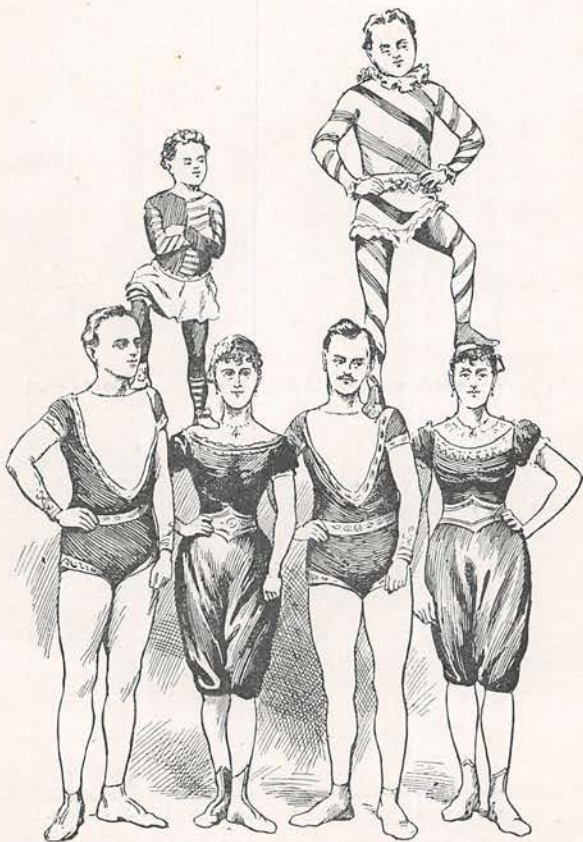
very hard time of it indeed. What made matters worse was that we were both now married men. We were unable to procure sufficient food, and when an engagement did at last present itself, we were so reduced by our privations that the performance came very near being a tragedy."

"How was that?" I asked sympathetically. I knew at once that here was an unusually good bit of actual experience. This man, who was so quietly and smilingly telling me about himself, had not only faced want, but perhaps death itself. And so it proved.

"It was at Cremorne," went on

Mr. Cragg, "in '68, I think. As I told you, I was weak from hunger; here was a chance to get food, and I felt I had to take that chance, whatever happened. On the first night I missed my hold and fell down a distance of forty feet from the trapeze. You see I was not up to my work through lack of strength. Hurt? Yes. But not nearly so seriously as might have been expected. Anyway, we pulled through."

"After that my partner and myself—we played under the name of the 'De Castro



THE ORIGINAL TROUPE.



Brothers'—went about with two or three different circuses all over the country, sharing in the fortunes—which fluctuated very much—of the managers of these different shows. When they were successful we were

wives into the acrobatic business, and we now called ourselves the 'De Castro Family.' By this date—about 1871—our reputation had been completely established with the public, and we had engagements constantly



*From a photo by]*

*[Elite, San Francisco.*

THE CRAGGS.

paid our salaries, and when they weren't we had to go without."

"Ups and downs?"

"Not a few," said Mr. Cragg. "It was just about this time that we brought our

offered to us in every part of the kingdom. It was not so easy to get about the country in those days as it is now," said Mr. Cragg reminiscently. "There were not nearly so many trains, for one thing, nor were the



A FAVOURITE TRICK.

railway managers so solicitous for the comfort of actors and other professionals as they are to-day. Still, we always were able to skip from one place to another, and so not to disappoint our patrons.

"It was just about this period, too, that my relations with my partner came to an end, and since then, with the exception of a short time, I have always played under my own name of Cragg, and my assistants have always been members of my own family. One of our first appearances was on the Continent, at Havre, in 1871—the first of many Continental tours. We have always had great success on the Continent."

"What people do you find most appreciative?" I asked.

"I don't know," responded Mr. Cragg, "that there is very much difference to be seen in our reception anywhere. On the whole, however, I have observed that wherever people devote themselves to any great extent to athletics and the exercises of the gymnasium, there we get a shade more enthusiastic reception. For instance, the Germans are great gymnasts, and

their reception of us is always particularly cordial."

"You have travelled extensively, have you not?"

"We took our first trip to Australia in 1873, and after playing in the big towns, we toured through New Zealand, India, and China. At Singapore we had, as part of our entertainment there, a troupe of Japanese acrobats, and were therefore able to make a comparison between our own performances and theirs. Now there is no doubt that the Japanese are exceedingly clever in their own line. They are wonderful adepts in the art of balancing, but they are, according to our ideas, very slow in all that they do. They were astonished at the speed, the swiftness, the evenness—considering the speed—with which we went through the various acts we introduced.

"After a more or less successful trip—our ship came near being wrecked in a typhoon—we returned to England in 1876. Would you believe it, we had thought ourselves thoroughly well known in England, but when we returned we found we had been forgotten. Such is fame! Not getting an engagement as quickly as I desired, I bought a theatre at Blackpool, and a little later settled down at Leigh, where I remained for two years. Then I came to the Alexandra Palace, abandoning for ever any wish I had to play the rôle of proprietor of a place of entertainment, for I had found my



From a photo by]

[Rockwood, N.Y.

A DARING LEAP.



experiments in that direction to be the most abject failures.

"At the Alexandra Palace," continued Mr. Cragg, "we first brought forward what we called the 'Pedestal Act.' We went through the whole of our performances on a table, three feet wide and ten feet long, placed at a distance of ten feet from the ground. On this very confined space four of us—myself, my wife, and two children—exhibited our performance with entire success."

"You then went to Egypt, did you not?" I asked.

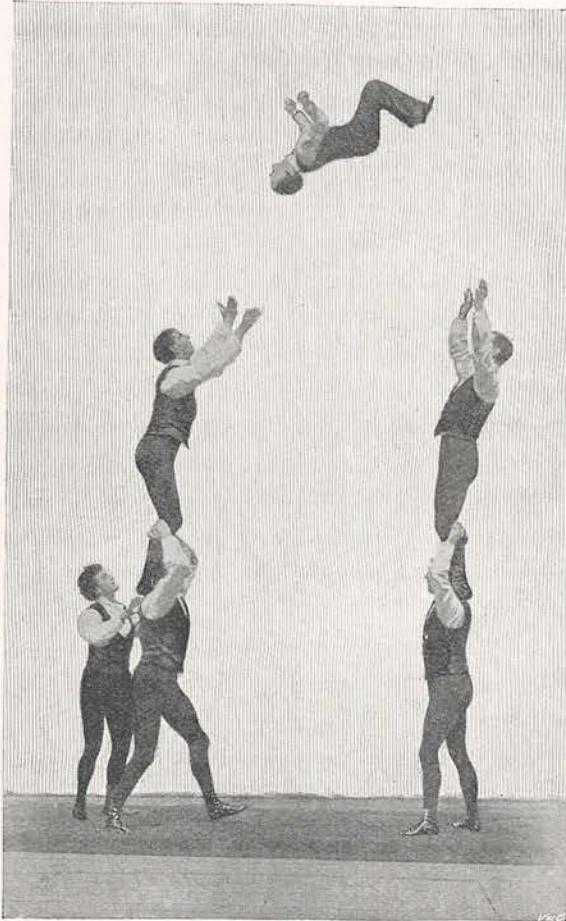
"Yes," said Mr. Cragg. "We went there just after the Egyptian war—1882. We had a terrible time of it. We landed at Port Said, and we had expected to do very well. Imagine our surprise, then, when, on informing the Commandant that we were desirous of giving a performance under his patronage, we were told that the soldiers had received no pay for a considerable time, and as they constituted pretty well the entire population of the place, he was sorry to have to say that there was but a small likelihood of our obtaining any remuneration for our services. However, we gave our entertainment in a café, but without getting the money, of which, of course, we stood in need. Then we went on to Alexandria, where we had no better fortune. Our condition would now have been hopeless but for the fact that Mrs. Cragg had brought with her £50, and nothing in the world would induce her to part with this

sum unless it was a passage back for us all to England. Indeed, it looked as if we were never going to get back to England. I interviewed the captains of the various ships and vessels bound for home, but without success. Meanwhile I was giving shows that brought us in the princely sum of twenty francs (sixteen shillings) a week! Our clothes and boots were getting shabby and worn out.

Still the missus stuck to her £50. That was her sheet-anchor. At length, after a long delay, I induced the captain of a crazy cargo boat, going on to Dunkirk from Alexandria, to take us with him for the £50. We took just nineteen days to do the journey—just nineteen days—think of it! We arrived on Christmas-day at Dunkirk without a cent. I borrowed enough money from the captain to telegraph to my agents in London, and after that we were all right. Almost immediately I got a contract at Lyons, and since that time I have never been out of work for a day, except when travelling."

"You have made several very successful tours in America, have you not?"

"We have been four times to America," replied Mr. Cragg, "and we have twice travelled from the Atlantic clear through to the Pacific coast. The most wonderful thing about our American tours is that performances at cities far apart have often had to be given on successive nights, the distance between the two places—often several hundred miles—having to be got over in the best



From a photo by]

[Rockwood, N.Y.

A LOFTY BACK-SOMERSAULT.



way possible, in twelve or fifteen hours. We have also been twice to Australia, the last time in 1891. Our appearances on the Continent are quite too numerous to mention."

"Would it be discreet, Mr. Cragg," I asked, "to ask whether England or the Continent pays you best?"

"Oh, for that matter," replied Mr. Cragg, "I don't mind telling you that we make more money on the Continent than we do in this country."

"Now," I asked, "will you not tell me something about your performances themselves, and the way you train for them?"

"To take the training first," said Mr.

"On the contrary, I enjoy excellent health. Once, when I was examined by a doctor, he assured me that I was as sound as a bell. I have no doubt that my profession has added years to my life."

"Now in regard to your performances—the particular acts associated with your name?"

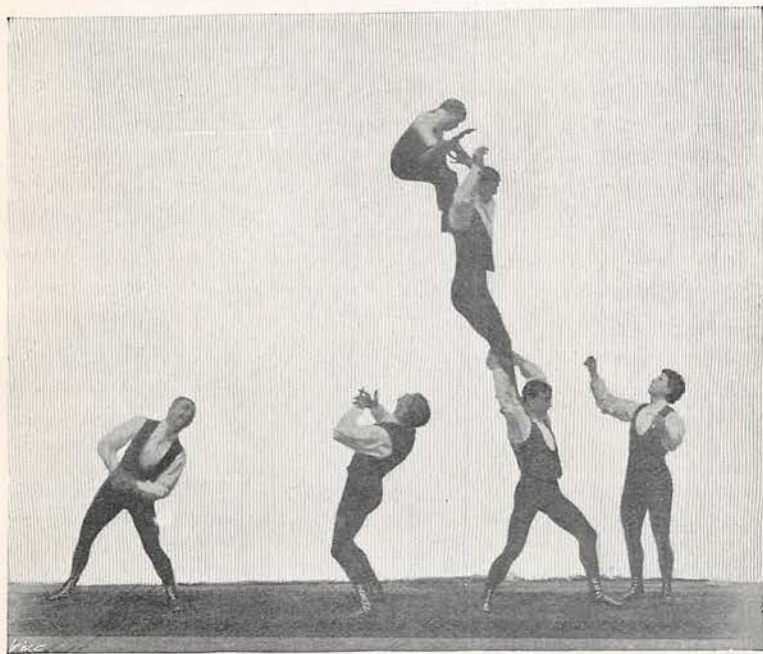
"I should like to say in the first place," said Mr. Cragg, "that our performances have always had the merit of being strictly original. I have never consciously copied any other man's doings, but I do not think it too much to say that acts introduced by me or by my troupe have been copied by

other acrobats, and that most of the performances now given are either modelled upon or directly taken from me and mine. Now whenever I have found any special thing of ours being played by other acrobats, I have immediately, or as soon as possible, withdrawn it from my bill of fare."

"Do you mind giving me an example of this?"

"Well, take what is known as the 'Fall Together'—that is, where the performers, standing in two or three columns on each other's shoulders, fall down together at a given signal, turning a

somersault in the course of their descent—that has always been a very popular act. It is a very effective one, and has to be done very carefully. The act of falling must be simultaneous, that is the secret. We will suppose there are three men standing one on top of the other in a straight column. Now, if you will take the lead pencil with which you are writing these notes," said Mr. Cragg to me, "as representing the perpendicular line formed by the three men, and let it fall over, you get exactly the way in which the three men must make their descent, if you can call it that, so as to make the 'fall' properly. This act was imitated in America,



From a photo by]

THROWING OFF.

[Rockwood, N.Y.

Cragg, "I don't think I can rightly say that I put myself under any special training. As a matter of fact I am always in training, taking a certain amount of exercise every day. My family are all teetotalers, but I am not one myself. Then I don't pay any particular attention to what I eat. I live quite plainly and naturally, like anybody else, and so do the other members of my family who make up our combination. To my mind there is a great deal of nonsense talked about training."

"Have you found that your health has suffered from the exercise of your profession?"



resulting, however, in the injury of several imitators and in the death of one boy, who was thrown backwards, his body falling from, instead of with the 'line.'

"Then, again, I had to drop the 'Horizontal Bar Act,' and other specialities. One of the principal features of our performance just now is what we call the 'Table Trick.'

"Then, too, I should like to say that we were the first acrobats to introduce the use of the dress suit in acrobatic performances, instead of tights and spangles. Now there is no doubt that is a great improvement. Of course that, too, is being copied. We have, however, a new act in preparation, for which we have been in training, so to speak, for nearly two years, and which we hope will put into the shade anything we have hitherto accomplished."

Then Mr. Cragg showed me various souvenirs of his different tours in all parts of the world—photographs, old-time play-bills, ship-logs, and, I must not forget to mention, the Diploma of Honour and an exceedingly handsome trophy presented to the Craggs in Paris.

As it is quite impossible to describe in detail any given act of the "Marvellous Craggs," I must refer my readers to the illustrations which accompany this article. It will be observed that on the first illustration, on page 492, one of the acrobats, the youngest Cragg, is being tossed upwards from the soles of his father's feet, from which, as from a spring-board, he turns

somersault after somersault, alighting (always on the upturned feet) now on his back, now on his feet, now in a sitting posture, with amazing rapidity, looking for all the world during this performance more like some strange figure of rubber than a human being.

In the second illustration on the same page, this young gentleman (the "Baby") is seen leaping, at a height of some ten feet, on to the shoulders of the acrobat beneath, who at the same instant is springing on to the shoulders of another immediately below him again. This looks a most difficult and daring feat, and the anxious attitudes of the other acrobats who are standing near, ready to catch the jumpers if anything goes wrong, gives a special zest to it.

The illustration on the next page shows the "Baby" executing a lofty back-somersault, and this said, sufficiently explains itself.

In the last illustration we see the "Baby"—who certainly forms a "whole show" in himself, such a wonderful artist is he—climbing on to the shoulders of one of his brothers—himself supported (and notice that, though his body is bent it is yet as rigid and tense as if made of iron) by the father. From this position the "Baby" throws himself—executing *two* back-somersaults on the way—on to the shoulders of another acrobat, the artist standing looking up at him, with a welcoming smile, at the extreme left of the picture.

