



Mr. Piper holds in each hand a full-sized banjo, and, while swinging them to and fro, plays a tune.

THE BANJO KING

By FRANK HOLMFIELD.

WHEN the outlook in South Africa was at its blackest, when military blunders were followed quickly by disasters to British arms, and many a heart was rent with grief and sorrow, there was one man, at any rate, who strove his level best to rouse the drooping spirits of those who lived with the thunder of guns beating into their very souls.

And, indeed, the enlivening effect of a banjo manipulated by a player who is a thorough master of the art, must have proved most welcome to those whose ears were accustomed more to the rattle of the rifle and the wails of the wounded. And Mr. Franco Piper, who holds the unique distinction of having played the banjo through seventeen months of the war, where and whilst that war was most felt, is not the man to have spared himself where the "bink-a-bank-a-bong" of his strings was wanted.

At camp concerts, or in the wards of a hospital, his cheery music "bucked up" many a despairing heart. Up and down the line of communications he flitted, from centre to centre, from camp to camp, welcome everywhere—for caterers of amusement were few and far between; so he and his "stud" of banjos were kept as busy as the proverbial nailer.

As a banjo-soloist, Mr. Piper has few equals; in fact, it has been said of him that he is the King of banjoists. Apart from this, however, he certainly has no equal as a trick banjoist. Those who saw him on his recent visit to this country, when he appeared at the London Pavilion, will readily admit that his is one of the most marvellous performances in the world of entertainment.

What Cinquevalli can do with billiard balls Mr. Piper can accomplish with banjos—with this important difference: Cinquevalli only juggles with the ivories, whereas our South African visitor juggles with banjos—and plays them at the same time! Whilst the banjos are merrily "flying in the air" or pirouetting about his feet in all sorts of extraordinary ways, Mr. Piper's fingers find time to touch the strings to such fine effect as to send abroad a perfect flood of melody!

How is it done?

Well, they say that genius is the perfection of an aptitude for taking pains. And that seems quite true in this particular case. Even as a baby, Mr. Piper yearned for perfection in the art of playing a banjo. At three he was able to play tunes with infantile ardour, if not with touching expression. And he continued to "pull the strings" so effectively that early in his teens he was regarded as a first class soloist—the best in South Africa.

When he began to practise banjo-playing extraordinary in the way of accomplishing juggling feats to the accompaniment of his own music, he was a mere youth. Years were spent in perfecting this branch of his professional work. For three hours a day he never ceased to practise during four years for one of



When the first tune is finished he changes rapidly his position and plays a march, while the swing of the banjos marks the time.



He places the banjos on the floor, causes them to rotate at an enormous speed, and plays a tune at the same time.

his more elaborate "tricks." It is indeed due to this sort of hard work that he now stands unique as a juggling banjoist. The accompanying photographs will give the reader some idea of his ability in this line, but one must really be present at his entertainment to fully understand

other set executing the seconds.

But these feats are mere preliminaries. There is something more wonderful to come. Placing the banjos upon the carpeted platform, Mr. Piper causes them to rotate at high speed — so high indeed that the instruments appear to the spectator as

how wonderful it is. Mr. Piper begins by taking a pair of full-sized banjos in his hands. Facing the audience, he swings the instruments alternately to and fro with increasing impetus. His hands and fingers are in the position shown in the photograph, viz., at the upper portions of the strings. As the banjos swing rapidly backward and forward the player's fingers are busily at work, so that a tune, produced with the utmost precision and in good time, floats through the air. The effect of the swinging movement of the instruments is decidedly a great improvement. In imitating church bells, for instance, the illusion is complete.

The performer, when he has completed the first tune, next assumes a new position. He stands with left or right side to the audience and swings the banjos sideways — as the pendulum of a clock moves — the pace gradually increasing. The tune has changed from a coon ditty to a military march, perfectly harmonised, one set of fingers playing the treble, the

mere blurred forms. Fast as they are travelling, however, Mr. Piper manages to touch the right strings at the right moment as they run around beneath his fingers, and with such wonderful effect that not a single note is missed during the playing of a popular air well known to the audience.

When one considers the marvellous nimbleness and touch of finger required to get through such a performance without a blemish, one begins to realise that Mr. Piper has earned this reputation that entitles him to be called the Prince of Banjoists.

But if the foregoing feat is wonderful, what of the next? It is remembered that the two banjos revolved in the same direction. Now we see two piccolo banjos, placed upon a small table, and rotating at full speed, each in a different direction — *one whirls to the right, the other to the left!* Even the unmusical spectator will, under the circumstances, appreciate the difficulty of the performer in playing the same tune on the two banjos.



One banjo is rotating to the left, the other to the right, while the tune is played without an error.



A variation of the above feats. One banjo rests on the upper end of the other, and both rotate, but in contrary direction.



He rests a banjo on the floor, and, playing a tune all the while, causes it to move with a revolving motion across the stage.

The movements of the fingers of the left hand must be entirely different from those of the right hand, to meet the strings at the supreme moment when they pass below the fingers in their circular flight. And Mr. Piper never makes a mistake; the most musical ear in the audience will fail to detect the slightest error of sound in the harmony.

This feat is followed by another of equal, if not greater, skill. As will be seen by reference to the photograph, the pair of banjos are manipulated whilst the lower part of one rests on the upper end of the other, the two revolving at tremendous speed, but in contrary directions! I don't like to think of the fate of any ordinary banjo player who attempts to imitate this feat. Colney Hatch is the only possible sequel. It may frighten off ambitious ones when I state that only after a couple of years' hard practice was Mr. Piper satisfied sufficiently with this feat to perform it in public.



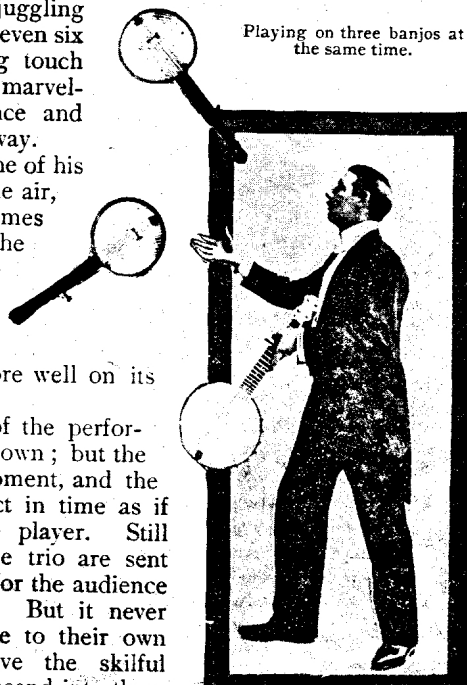
Another extraordinary way of playing a popular tune on a banjo is next illustrated in Mr. Piper's quaint way. He takes up a full-sized instrument, and, walking to the left side of the stage, rests the lower end on the carpet. He now proceeds to whirl the banjo in such a way that its rapid revolutions set it moving directly across the stage to the other side. As

the banjo travels thus, Mr. Piper's fingers are as busy as ever, and whilst the banjo is whirling its way the favourite tune of "The Old Folks at Home" is flung out, with all its pathos, into the auditorium, where it is greeted with the enthusiastic applause which this good old song never fails to produce.

And now the most amazing part of Mr. Piper's playing is introduced. It takes the form of a series of juggling feats with one, and two, and three, and four, and even six banjos. The quickness of eye, and the unerring touch of finger, displayed during these feats are truly marvellous, and offer emphatic proof of what patience and perseverance can do for those who are built that way.

First of all, the Prince of Banjoists takes up one of his big "stud" of instruments. He throws it in the air, as Cinquevalli does a billiard ball. It sometimes makes half-a-dozen circles in the air before the strings come once more under the player's mobile fingers; but it always gets there at the precise moment when a string or two must be touched to fill in the necessary note of a tune, and that note is lightly touched and the banjo is once more well on its acrobatic career in the air.

Then another banjo is added, and both sets of the performer's fingers are called into use. One up, one down; but the right note is always "twanged" at the right moment, and the tune, be it waltz or march, is rendered as perfect in time as if the banjos rested at ease in the arms of the player. Still another banjo soon makes its appearance, and the trio are sent careering in the air amidst intense excitement, for the audience are always on the look-out for a grand smash. But it never comes. Keeping perfect time to their own tune, the three banjos leave the skilful hands of the player only to descend into them



Playing on three banjos at the same time.



in turn at the proper moment. Now a fourth instrument is added. Yet the performer never quails. He is as cool in paying attention to and manipulating the quartette as he was when only one required looking after. Further, the musical effect is enhanced. In juggling one, two, and three banjos Mr. Piper only plays the air, but as soon as the fourth instrument joins the skyward flight the performer plays the air on the banjos that fall into his right hand and the "seconds" on the pair to which his left hand is devoted. The effect is really charming.

Up to the present, Mr. Piper has not gone further than juggling with, and at the same time playing upon, four banjos in public. But he is at present hard at work on an even more sensational act—that is, juggling whilst he plays a harmonised air with no fewer than *six* instruments. He kindly allowed himself to be photographed whilst performing this prodigious feat, which the British public may see for themselves on his next visit to this little corner of the earth.

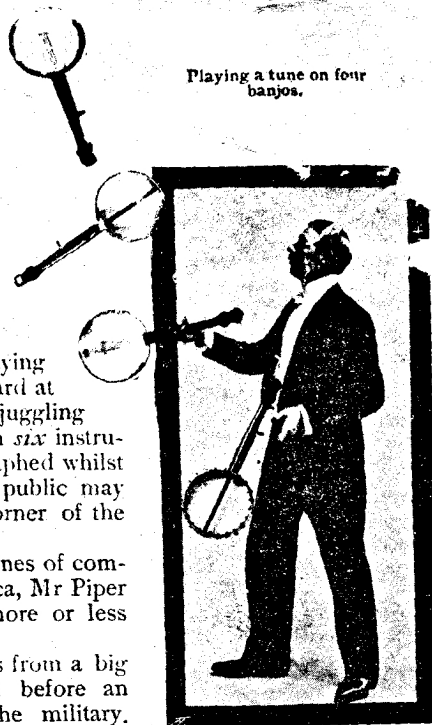
During his professional trips up and down the lines of communications and from camp to camp in South Africa, Mr Piper did not fail to have a share of experiences of a more or less adventurous nature.

One night he was hurrying back to his lodgings from a big marquee where he had given his entertainment before an audience of civilians and the military. Suddenly he was challenged by a sentry. So unexpectedly was the challenge hurled at him from the darkness, that, for the life of him, he could not recollect the countersign, nor, indeed, utter a word. The next moment he heard the rattle of the sentry's rifle as it was brought to the "present!" Then a brilliant thought saved the situation. He carried his banjo under his arm, and, luckily, it was uncovered and ready for use. In an instant the familiar strains of "Wait Till the Clouds Roll By" were strummed out. The sentry, laughing heartily, recovered his rifle and stood at attention and growled: "Advance, Mr. Piper and banjo—all's well!"

A rather pathetic little incident, in which Mr. Piper and his banjo-playing took part, happened in Bloemfontein. One evening he sat at the open window of his "diggings"—which were in a house on the outskirts of the town—practising some tunes on his instruments. As he played the familiar air "The Old Folks at Home" he heard the sound of someone weeping coming out of the darkness. Mr. Piper ran out, and, striking a light, discovered a young Boer, wounded badly.

The poor fellow was in a dying condition. Near the end he asked, in fairly good English, for the tune he had heard as he lay outside to be played again. Mr. Piper did so, and as the last bars of the melody trembled out the Boer fell back dead.

Playing a tune on four banjos.



A feat Mr. Piper has not yet ventured to perform in public. He plays a tune on six banjos at the same time.

