

BALL-HOPPING EXTRAORDINARY.

BY FRANK HOLMFIELD.

Photographs by Foulsham and Banfield.

THE bawl and the ball play prominent parts in the comedy of childhood.

We become familiar with both at the very earliest age. Later on, at cricket, "footer," and tennis, the ubiquitous ball again makes its appearance in our lives. In fact, paradoxical as it may seem, the ball game is one that is never played out.

During the past month or two the bouncing ball has cropped up in a new place. It has bounced its way into the programme of our evening entertainment, where no doubt it will continue to "bob up serenely" for some time to come. Ball-hopping, as presented recently to patrons of the Empire's principal palace of variety, the Alhambra, has been reduced to a science, and the effects produced cannot be denied their claim to be wonderful.

Everybody may make a ball hop in a more or less conspicuous manner; but when that simple art is so improved upon that we hear reproductions of familiar sounds, such as the thunder of an approaching express, the thump of horses' hoofs, the burr of a steam saw, and so on right away to the cooing of a turtle dove or the sighing of the sea, we cannot but conclude that Messrs. Robertus and Wilfredo, the two young American performers who manipulate a set of balls with such extraordinary effect, possess that infinite capacity for taking pains which is called genius.

From six to a dozen balls are used in the various "acts" of this bouncing show. About the size of those used in tennis, they are made of the purest rubber obtainable, solid, and cost about five shillings each. The exercises, if they may so be called, are exceedingly interesting to watch, apart from the illusive sounds produced as each comes in contact, in perfect rhythm, with the

platform. Only those with the quickest eyes and supple hands can hope to emulate the simplest of the feats, for the balls seem to dart at lightning speed from hand to hand, forming, *en route*, the most beautiful of curves and angles. So rapidly are the balls hopped that, to the eyes of the spectator, they seem to form definite white lines in their flight, with an effect which is almost indescribable.

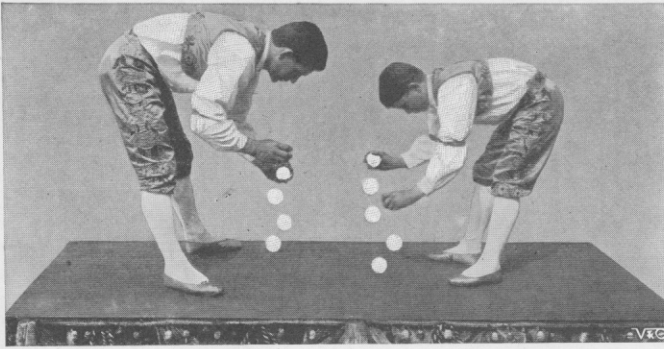
One of the most striking effects produced is that in which the sound of a starting train is first borne upon

the senses of the audience, then the increasing speed, the rush and roar of a fifty-miles-an-hour express, the gradual slowing down and stoppage.

The manipulators, to produce these effects, stand facing the audience, and, holding a couple of balls in each hand, skilfully pitch the spheres downwards. They are rapidly passed from right to left hands, each ball being thrown in unison, touching the platform in its flight, as shown in the accom-



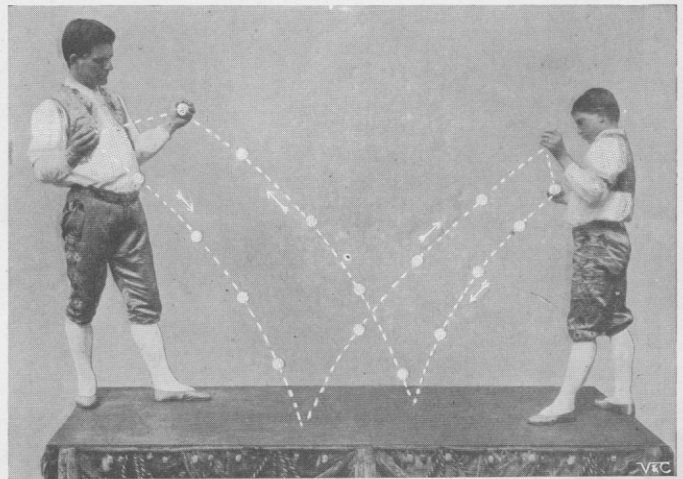
I.—Producing the sound of a starting train, full speed, slowing, and stopping.



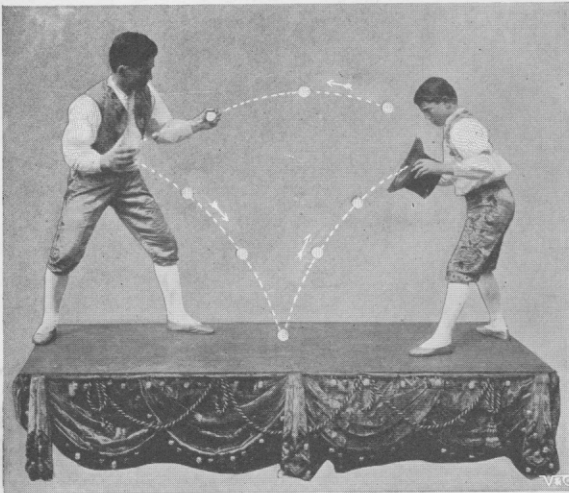
II.—The marching of soldiers and the boom of distant guns.

panying photograph. As a single *faux pas* would spoil the effect—and what, under ordinary circumstances, is more erratic than a rubber ball?—the skill necessary to keep up the illusion must be prodigious. Seldom, indeed, does a ball fail to find its billet. It almost seems as though some invisible guideline kept each one in its unerring course.

In most of the exercises to be described, the ears as well as the eyes of the spectators are entertained. Now it is the plaintive lowing of a cow that is heard; then the sighing of the sea, or the rustle of the wind



III.—Hopping a dozen balls from the right hand of the thrower to the platform, thence to the left hand of the catcher, passing from his left to right hand, thence to the platform, and up again to the left hand of the thrower, thence to right.



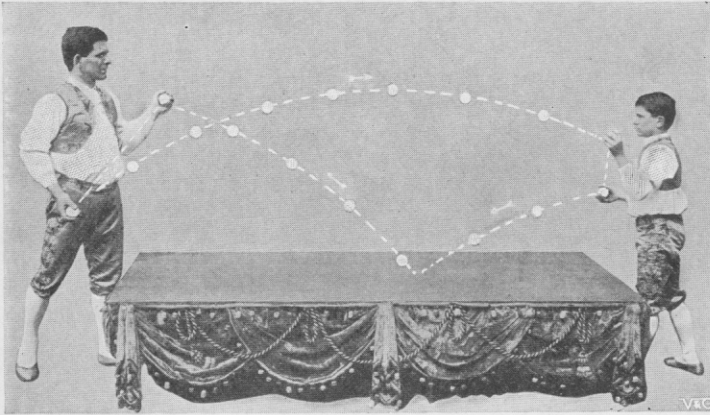
IV.—The performer who wears the top-hat suddenly snatches it from his head and catches the whole of the balls as they are showered from the hands of the thrower, by way of the platform.

amongst a forest of trees; again we listen to the growling of a mastiff or the sharp, short bark of a terrier; anon comes the sound of artillery fired far away, or the tramp of armed men—in fact, this wondrous manipulation of balls carries away the imagination as does the playing of a pianoforte by a Paderewski, or the touch of a Kubelik upon the strings of a superb violin.

In the exercise shown in

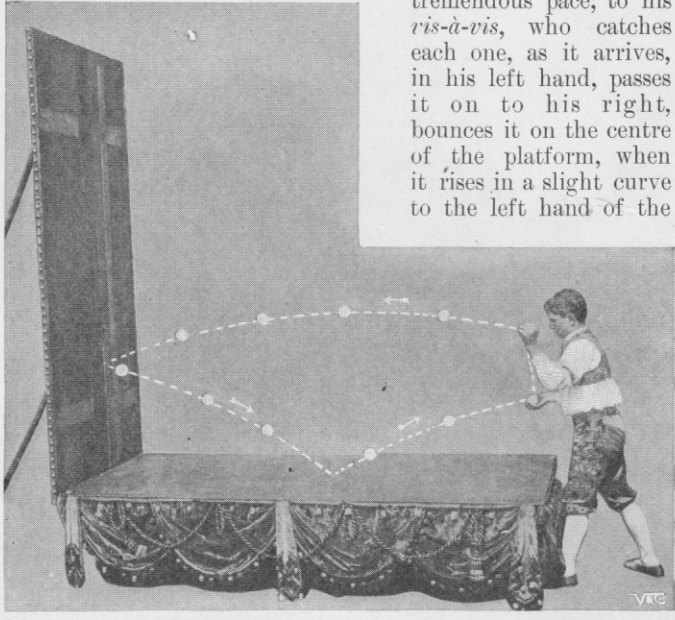
photograph No. III., a dozen, sometimes more, balls are used and kept in constant flight. The balls, in lightning-like succession, are sent from the right hand of the thrower to the platform, forming a slight curve before they strike. Thence they bounce upwards to the left hand of the catcher, and are passed into the right, to be pitched once more on the platform; thence upwards to the left hand of the thrower, passed to right again; and so on, a continual stream of balls ever in flight, and forming an extremely pretty sight as the snow-white spheres glide with mathematical precision from point to point, one never varying from the lines of that which it immediately precedes.

The younger performer then dons a top-hat, and again the balls speed

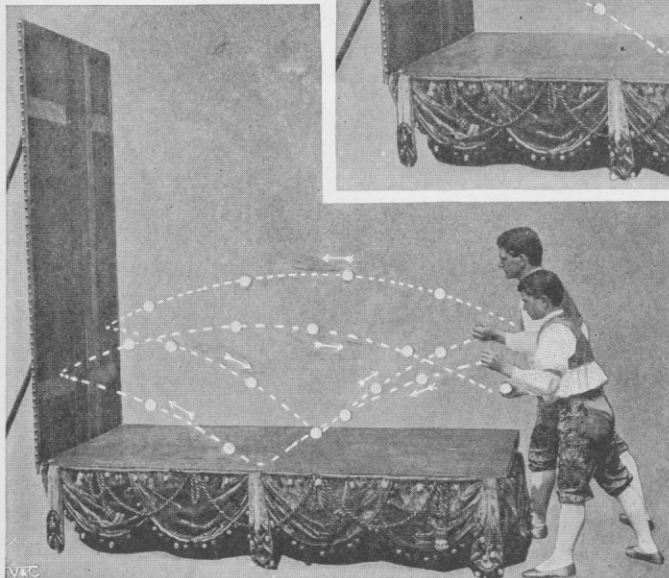


V.—The balls are thrown from the man's right hand to the youth's left, thence to the latter's right, bounced on the platform, describing a curve into the left hand of the man, and thence to his right.

merrily on their course. Suddenly, however, the top-hat is snatched from his head by the wearer, who, instead of catching the balls in his hand as before, dexterously "pots" the whole of the dozen balls in the hat, as they are showered at top speed from the hand of the thrower, to rebound from the platform. The neatness of this trick must really be seen to be properly appreciated, for the quickness



VI.—From his left hand the player throws the balls to strike the upright frame, thence they rebound to the centre of the platform, and up again to the player's right hand.



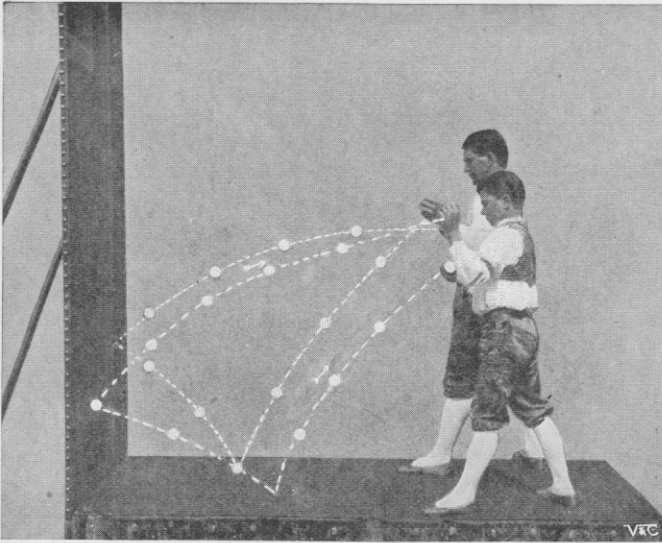
VII.—This is a very difficult and bewildering figure.

of eye and dexterity needful to snap off the hat just in the nick of time to receive the shower of balls can never be shown by the art of photography.

A rather pretty figure is that which is formed by the balls as shown in photograph No. V. The performers have descended from the platform, standing one at each end. With a quick, graceful movement the man on the left throws the dozen balls, one following another at tremendous pace, to his *vis-à-vis*, who catches each one, as it arrives, in his left hand, passes it on to his right, bounces it on the centre of the platform, when it rises in a slight curve to the left hand of the

older manipulator, who again sends it on a similar journey, the flight of rushing balls continuing for a minute or two.

An upright covered frame is now fixed at one end of the platform, and this enables the ball throwers to form some very dainty figures and to produce the most



VIII.—The older player throws from the left hand to the platform, the balls hopping against the right-hand panel and thence to the thrower's right hand. The younger player goes through a somewhat similar figure.

illusive sounds such as have been described already.

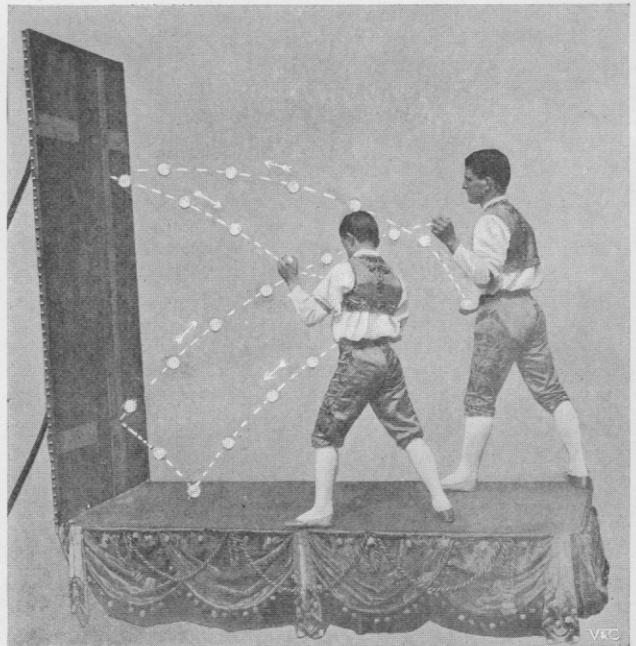
The younger player first goes through a smart exercise alone, as shown in photograph No. VI. He stands at one end of the platform, balls in hand. Throwing from the left, each ball strikes the covered frame about eighteen inches above the level of the platform, whence it rebounds to the centre of the latter, rising again to the player's right hand, and thence to the left. All the balls, of course, travel at the highest speed. The dexterity of throw and catch necessary to keep the balls in perfect flight is marvellous, for the slightest twist imparted to any of the spheres would simply shoot them out of their course and spoil the figure.

Next we find the pair hard at work on one of the most difficult and bewildering of figures, as will be seen by a glance at photograph No. VII. But one would want to attempt to perform the feat before understanding how complicated are the movements of the balls.

The balls are first thrown at the usual high speed from the right hand of the older player against the right hand panel of the upright frame. Thence they rebound to the centre of the

platform and into the player's left hand. At the same time a similar number of balls are thrown from the left hand of the younger player to the centre of the platform, rising thence to the left hand panel of the upright screen, rebounding in a semicircle to the thrower's right hand. With the balls travelling in so many directions, to the eyes of the spectator the movements are simply bewildering; but, cool and calm, and with the greatest precision, the players continue their seemingly complicated manipulations, the balls rarely missing their course until the "act" is completed.

The pair of champion ball-bouncers now mount the platform again to give us another taste of complicated figures (No. VIII.). The older player throws from the left hand to the platform, the balls hopping against the right-hand panel of the frame, and thence to the thrower's right hand and on into the left to repeat their journey. The younger player throws from the left against the panel, the balls rebounding from the panel downwards



IX.—This complicated figure is one of the smartest in the whole performance.

to the platform, thence upwards to the thrower's right hand, being tossed from that to the left to be sent again on their travels. Another bewildering "act."

Perhaps the smartest figure of the lot (No. IX.), is now tackled. The bigger performer throws the balls from his right hand against that panel of the frame facing him. They rebound to the left hand of the youth, who shoots them as they arrive in turn into his right hand, to be thrown down on the platform a foot in front of the upright, against which it rises and strikes, whence it rebounds to the first player's left hand, and on into his right, to be immediately sent away on a repetition of its former rapid flight.

So far as appearances go, the concluding figure (No. X.) is the most striking one of all. The taller of the performers stands on the platform close to the open end, whilst the young player stands down behind. Quickly and gracefully a shower of balls falls against the lower part of the upright frame, rebounding to the platform, and thence upwards to the thrower's left hand, and into his right for their further flight. Down below, the younger player throws the balls on a longer curve. They strike the frame, rebound to the centre of the platform, thence into the right hand, and so on to the left, to be thrown again and again.

It is a very pleasing sight to watch the balls, in snowy curves, go through such varying evolutions, each stream of white spheres invariably following a regular, unwavering line, whilst producing sounds which need no words of the manipulators to explain.

"How is it done?" I asked Mr. Robertus.

"Simply by constant practice," was the reply. "Each of those figures you have seen has taken us months to perfect for public exhibition. The balls used must be perfectly round, and I need hardly tell you they require the most careful handling. We are enabled to achieve extraordinary angles only by giving each ball a certain twist as it leaves our hands. You try how hard it is

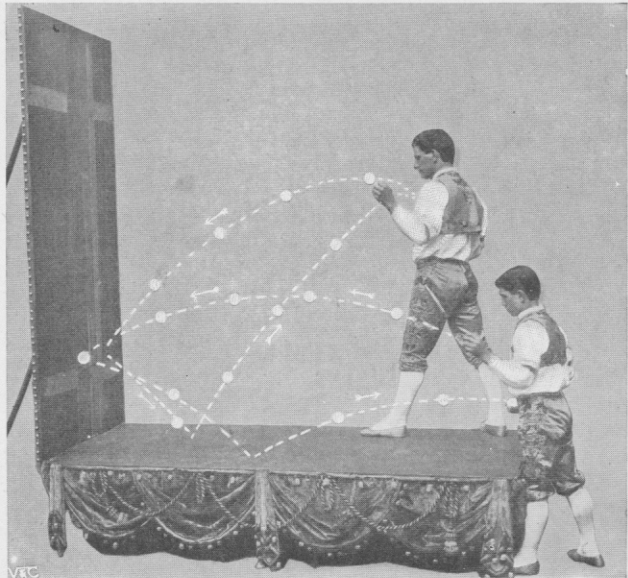
to make a ball take precisely the same course in bouncing."

The experiment was made—and proved a miserable failure.

"That's what my first great difficulty was—indiarubber balls are so erratic. But we overcame it by careful practice. We found, too, that, in spite of the most particular selection, an indiarubber ball—solid as these are—is apt to get out of shape after a little use. We have to watch each one most carefully. One badly shaped ball may spoil a whole figure if it is not discovered in time.

"Oh, yes; we have had some suggestions from geniuses who think we ought to add sensation to dexterity. One man not long ago wrote to us suggesting that it would produce a magnificent effect if we used blazing balls on a darkened stage!

"A German professor of mathematics challenged us a couple of months ago. He declared he could produce all our figures after an hour's practice. Our manager, for advertisement sake, encouraged him, and the professor duly appeared on the stage in the evening to 'wipe us out.' In two minutes he had the whole theatre laughing at him, but he only gave up when he received a tremendous blow in the eye from a rebounding ball, with which he had asserted he could form the most difficult figure."



X.—So far as appearances go, this figure is the most striking of all.