

By our "good people," it was deemed the instrument of the devil; the fancy only of a depraved mind, and sure to lead its advocates to the bad.

My father, a musician of Puritan stock and a super-conscientious Presbyterian, had imbibed the prevailing prejudice, consequently the instrument was tabooed in our home, and so the stable (barn we called it then) became my only safe refuge for practice. But happily for me his prejudice, having no valid foundation, gradually subsided, and when he had become acquainted with the "devil's instrument" he experienced a change of heart.

The first banjo I ever heard was in the hands of a colored man—a bright mulatto—whose name I have forgotten. He frequently visited Elmira and the neighboring villages, playing and singing and passing his hat for collections. His repertoire was not very extensive, but, with his comicalities, sufficed to gain him a living. I cannot say that I learned anything from his execution, which, though amusing, was limited to the thumb and first finger,—pulling or "picking" the strings with both. He

was quite conceited as to his abilities (pardonable in banjo players, I believe), and to impress his listeners with a due appreciation of them, he would announce that such a trifling circumstance as the banjo being out of tune caused him no inconvenience and so, with a seemingly careless fumbling of the pegs, he would disarrange the tuning—"fro de banjo out a' tune," he said—but merely pitching the second string a semitone higher.

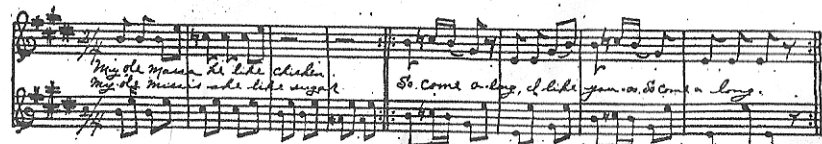
The following *morceaux* (No. 1), which I still recall, was his *piece de resistance* with the instrument fro'd out a' tune, and thinking it may amuse your readers, I give it.

This manner of fingering—as I learned in later years when visiting Southern plantations—was characteristic of the early colored player; an individual of rare occurrence, however, and whose banjo was of the rudest construction,—often a divided gourd with a coon skin stretched over the larger part for the drum. With this for accompaniment he would improvise his song as he went along, generally mentioning his massa or missus or some local incident. His fingering was unique,—requiring only

No. 1



No. 2



the first finger of the left hand for stopping the strings—on the first string at the first fret and the second string at the second fret. With the right hand he used only the first finger and thumb.

I recall the following (No. 2), which, varying in incident, seemed quite common:

Resuming: With the next Minstrel Company which visited our town came "Pica-yune" Butler, heralded as the greatest banjo player in the world, and the only acknowledged rival of the two most prominent banjoists of the period—Tom Briggs, then playing with E. P. Christy's Minstrels in New York, and "Hi" S. Rumsey, traveling with a theatrical company. As Butler's company remained in town several days. I had many opportunities for hearing him—not only in his solos, but often listening unobserved below his hotel window. As he played with the thimble, his execution—unlike anything I had ever heard, powerful and brilliant—strongly impressed me, and in my enthusiasm I thought him the most favored mortal on earth. Could I only know him, speak to him, tell him I could play "a little." But no, no; too timid to intrude, I merely "hung around," playing "hookey" from school during his stay, hoping he might discover me—somehow.

But timidity was finally overcome and in a way most unexpected. The company performed in the Court House, the largest "hall" in the village and, as water for the wash-up had to be carried in, I volunteered to assist and so gained unlimited entrée to the hall. It was Butler's custom to put his banjo in order after rehearsals for the evening performance and then run over some of his pieces. These occasions I always watched for, managing to be very busy near his dressing room—a little space screened by a curtain stretched at the rear of the stage. It happened one day while so engaged that, being eager to see as well as hear, I incautiously drew the curtain so

far that I was discovered, whereupon the hand I was so anxious to observe was quickly raised and brought in contact with my ear with a force which nearly stunned me. He was "awful sorry," he said; told me to come in; played a number of his pieces for me while kindly answering my many questions. He certainly had *struck* up an acquaintance with me which became more agreeable during the remainder of his stay, and enabled me to study not only his style of execution, but his principal pieces as well which, displayed upon the staff, I found were not so elaborate or difficult as they seemed when he played them. But I had gained some new ideas. Still more, I had heard a real "champion," had studied his execution, analyzed his pieces whereby he had assumed the title, and—well—I was encouraged. And now having acquired a pretty fair understanding of both styles of playing—Buckley's ("Guitar") and Butler's ("Banjo," or "Stroke")—I set about systematizing them in conformity with the rules and principles of music,—an undertaking which was of inestimable value in pursuing the study of the instrument.

Butler's playing, while effective, was far from artistic, and his repertoire limited chiefly to jigs, reels, walk-arounds and his comic songs. He was of medium height, rather heavily built, of a genial disposition, played his solos sitting and in a "make-up" similar to that now worn by our comic solo players.

The next banjoist whom it was my good fortune to hear was "Hi" S. Rumsey, another "champion," who came along with "Garry" Hough's theatrical troupe. In those days the programme usually comprised two plays; opening with tragedy or comedy and concluding with a light farce. Instead of an intermission between the plays it was the custom to introduce a specialty of some kind, generally a danseuse, but with this company Rumsey held that place.