“Isle of Portland” (in England)

(Part 2)

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To read the first part of the “Isle of Portland” article, see:

“A Week in the Isle of Portland in 1837 ” (Part 1 of 2) of this article, in *The Penny Magazine* of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge February 17, 1838, it is available at the following link on Stone Quarries and Beyond:
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Note: The article entitled, “Anecdotes of a Blind Person,” is included in the last 2 pages of this document, if you’d like to read it.

This article, which begins on the next page,
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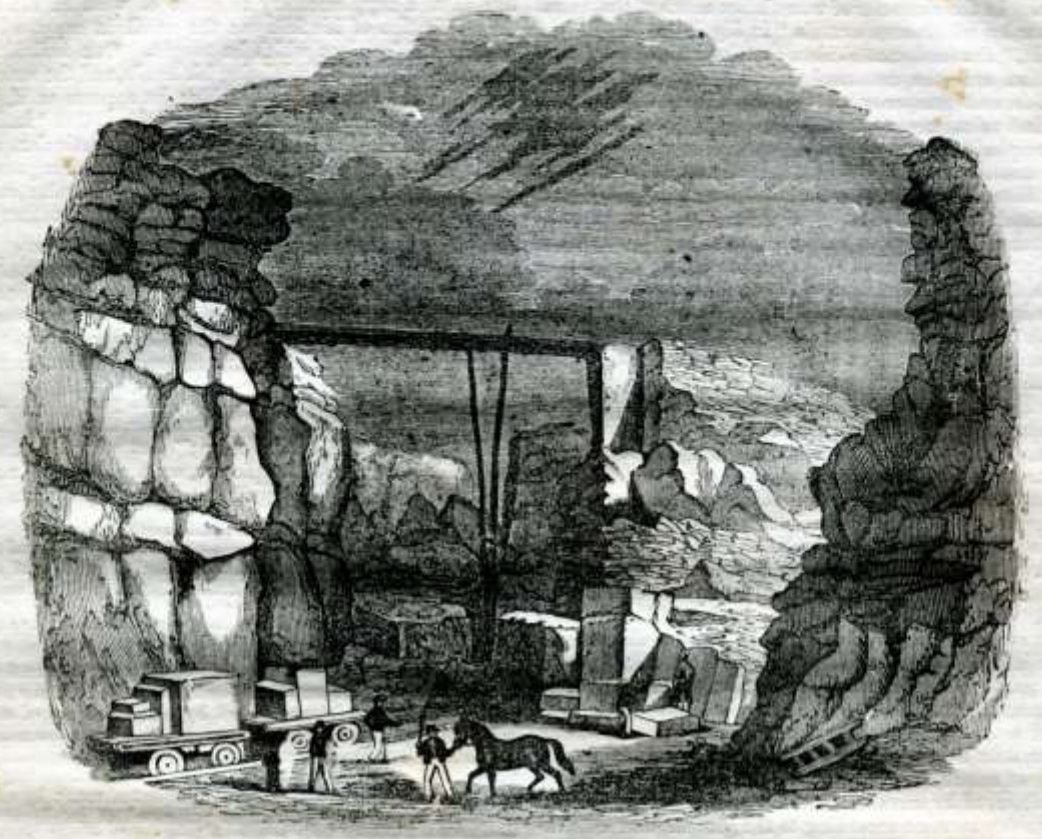
ISLE OF PORTLAND.



[Portland Quarry.]

[Continued from No. 377.]

Portland being a part of the ancient demense lands, the quarries are held by the sovereign as lord of the manor, and let out to proprietors under various forms of tenure. The quarries are about 100 in number. The crown holds and works about a fourth; and the rest are shared between some half-dozen proprietors, who pay a nominal rent per acre, and a real rent of 2*s.* per ton for every ton of stone raised and shipped. The immediate management of the quarries is entrusted to stewards or agents, at fixed salaries, averaging 70*l.* per annum. Under them are several "masters" or foremen, who take the oversight of a certain number of men, and whose pay varies from that of a common quarryman to 50*l.* yearly. The quarry itself is usually worked by a company of six men and two boys, whose pay in all cases depends on the actual amount of stone "won" and delivered to the agent.

Before proceeding to explain the processes used in getting the stone, it will be necessary first to describe the structure of the crust or superficial strata of the island. A visitor would accomplish this at once by a glance at any clean-faced cliff in his neighbourhood, but in the absence of ocular demonstration the following description and the cut in the next page will very clearly exhibit its constitution.

First occurs the surface-soil, 7 feet deep. Second, three layers of grit, called "Bur-stone, Cap, & Scull-cap," or collectively, the "Turf-layer," 16 feet. Third, Roach-stone, 9 feet; which immediately covers the good Portland stone of commerce, in a compact horizontal bed of about 8 feet in depth. Beneath it follow various beds of clay, marl, flint, &c. Here then we have a superincumbent mass of earth and stone, 32 feet in depth, which must all be removed before a single foot of the good stone it covers can be procured,—a hard task, and one which is rendered still more so by the fact we have before mentioned, that till this is done the workmen are not entitled to any remuneration. In a quarry of this size, and worked by the number of hands described, the labours of *three years* are required to accomplish the task. First, the layers of surface-soil and rubbish are dug, and carried in strong iron-bound barrows, to be thrown over the fallow fields in the neighbourhood. Next, the "Turf-layer" is raised, but the obstinacy of its structure and its weight make it a work of serious labour. The strata of which it is composed sometimes present great solidity, and at other times are naturally split in large masses; in both cases they have to be reduced to small lumps, and lifted into carts. The breakage is done by driving wedges, and other similar contrivances; and the lifting by a peculiarly formed shovel, whose long handle is laid along the thigh, and the load raised by a sudden jerk, the combined action of the arm and knee, and thrown into a cart, to which seven or more horses are attached, and by whom it is carried, either to be thrown over the cliffs into the sea, or piled up in large mounds at a distance. The Roach-stone is the next stratum, and as it is unbroken in its mass, of great hardness, and nine or more feet in depth, it requires of course a long struggle to accomplish its removal. After clearing the surface, the first step taken is the preparation of a blast, for splitting the Roach into blocks sufficiently small for removal. A circular hole, 4 feet 8 inches in depth by three inches in width, is then drilled in the rock; filled at the bottom to the height of 2½ inches with gunpowder, tightly rammed, and connected with a train on the outside. This is then fired, and an explo-

sion follows, which splits the stone for several yards around into perpendicular rents of about an inch across. The masses of stone between these rifts have now to be removed, and as some of them weigh upwards of fifty tons, an amount of power would seem to be required, far beyond the compass of half a dozen quarrymen, and the scanty mechanical means at their disposal. The only instruments used are rollers of various sizes, and strong double-handled jacks; months are consequently consumed in the slow-paced operation. Three of the jacks are placed against the mass, and then follows what may perhaps be justly deemed the severest struggle in which human bones and muscles were ever engaged. More than one hundred thousand pounds of stone have to be moved a hundred yards and more *over heaps of loose stones*, by half a dozen men! The jacks being fixed in the most advantageous positions, the men commence to heave round the winches; and then the shrill cry is heard of "High, boys, high," repeated with great rapidity. Meanwhile the winches of the jacks, turned against so prodigious an amount of resistance, make a progress as slow as the minute hand of a watch. It is sufficient, however, if they do really turn at all, for it is by the smallest possible degrees the removal is at length accomplished and the pit cleared for the production of the best stone. The exhaustion which these labours occasion is evidenced by the frequent periods of rest, and in the constant use of the water-keg, from which they drink copiously. One of the men, when I asked him if the work was hard, said, "Sir, we are obliged to *heave our hearts out*, and all in the sun too!" They do not, however, appear to suffer any permanent damage by their labours, and but little abatement of strength, even in extreme old age. A night's rest cures all. One old fellow upwards of seventy years of age, who was doing the work of the strongest, told me, that through that long period he had never known sickness. The secret of this is to be found in pure air, free exposure to all weathers, and a certain quiet of mind.

When a quarry has been cleared of its rubbish, and the flooring of good Portland stone brought fairly into view, the real business of a quarryman—that by which he would choose to be known—commences. All his preliminary labours have required little beyond the exercise of mere strength, but now judgment and ingenuity are called for in the selection and preparation of the rude lumps of stone for architectural purposes; and the *labourer* becomes an *artisan*. The cleared bed of pure stone is found to be split in numerous directions by what are called "gullies," and these of course divide it into masses, varying in size according to the width of the gullies. In this way blocks of every imaginable size and form are procured; and when they have been wedged out, a council is held by the men, and it is discussed whether this one would make a pier-stone for a bridge; another, a shaft for a column; a third, a baluster for a parapet, and so on. These important uses determined, the masses are severally dragged to convenient spots, and reduced to square or appropriate forms by the action of a double-headed iron picker, called a "kivel," and weighing twenty-five pounds. The only business remaining, previous to the delivery of the stones to the wharf, is to ascertain their weight, and to mark it on them. The former is computed by measure, 16 square feet being estimated to weigh a ton; and the latter by cutting the amount in certain hieroglyphic characters. A monogram of the proprietor's name is also added. The measuring rod used for the above purpose was covered with odd symbols, of which I could make nothing.

When the stone is ready for delivery, it is lifted on a stage-like cart, with solid wooden wheels, exactly resembling the waggon of the ancients and the Moorish bull-cart of Spain at this day. To this is yoked seven horses; and in the case of the western quarries it is then taken to a railway station at the top of Fortune's Well hill, and entrusted to the care of a company, who send it round the hills, by inclined planes, to a wharf at the foot of the Chesil bank, a mile and a half distance, and for which they are authorized to charge 8*d.* per ton for stone of the best, and 4*d.* for roach and other kinds of inferior quality.

[Western Cliffs, Portland.]

We have mentioned that quarrymen are paid only for the stone actually delivered from the quarry. Ten shillings a ton is fixed by common consent as the average price, and this is supposed to include the value of all the preliminary labour. The money thus earned is placed to his credit, and at the end of six months an account is made out, and a balance determined, which is often against the workman; the labour of "winning" the stone occupying a period of three years; and the men receiving nothing in the interval, the agents meet the destitution which would otherwise be suffered by opening chandlers' stores, and letting the workmen have all the larger necessaries of life on account of their prospective gains. The average amount earned by a workman, if he were constantly employed, would be 12*s*. per week; but this average is much reduced by various casualties. Thus, if it rain before nine o'clock in the morning, he is not allowed to work that day; if the wind be high, the dust of the pit drives him from his labours; should the markets be dull, his week is reduced to four days; if a burial take place, he is obliged, on the tolling of the church-bell, which commences at noon, to leave work for the rest of the day; and should the deceased happen to be a stranger, he is even compelled, by immemorial usage, to attend and assist the obsequies. Added to this is the time lost by accidents, which in so perilous a trade are frequent; and the cost of tools also, which are found by himself. These drawbacks combine to reduce the weekly wages to an average of 9*s*. or 10*s*; but even that small pittance is frequently reduced to 7*s*.

The earnings of a quarryman being so small, and his family very commonly large, it may be worthy of inquiry how they are supported; and as they are both well fed and well clothed, and have never resorted to "parish allowance," except in some few cases of extreme age and decrepitude, the subject becomes one of the deepest interest. The resources of a Portland family are the following:—1. An acre of land, used either for raising corn, potatoes, or the general products of a garden. For this 20*s*. rent and 10*s*. tithe and poor-rate are paid, and 30*s*. is supposed to be the cost of seed and miscellaneous expenses. The corn and potato grounds are mostly on the top of the island, and the gardens on the declivities. On these little plots the men spend their leisure evenings and holidays in a diligent cultivation of the best vegetable products. In this way flour for the puddings, potatoes for the winter store, and, notwithstanding the sterility of the soil, a good supply of small fruits and esculent vegetables, are produced. Gooseberries, sheltered by walls from the sea-breeze, bear abundantly in the season. Gooseberry-cakes, of the size and form of Cheshire cheeses, may be seen drying in the sun (before baking) at many of the cottage windows. 2. A cow is often procured by the savings of the thrifty housewives; the grazing costs nothing, the Vern-hill serving as meadow land for the common use of the island. Milk is consequently cheap and abundant; and home-made cheeses are found on most tables. 3. Fowls are numerously reared, and add the luxury of eggs to bacon. 4. On the Southern Downs the common mushroom grows in great abundance, and to an enormous size. I measured some a foot in diameter. These are carefully gathered, and enter largely into the seasoning of a Portland feast. 5. Water-cresses are found sparingly in moist spots, but are gleaned with diligence, and provide a relish for the breakfast. 6. On all the fallow-fields (and these are numerous, crops being raised only in alternate years) the Cuckoo-pint (*Arum Maculatum*) grows in unparalleled abundance, and the field is then called a "starch-moor:" the roots are gathered by the women, the farinaceous matter is extracted, and a fine supply of British arrowroot secured. Much of it is sold in Weymouth, and the produce brought home in clothing. The Society of Arts, by judicious gifts, formerly gave great encouragement to this manufacture in Portland. 7. Harvest-work is exclusively performed by women; and as none but Portlanders are employed, a comfortable purse is thus secured by many families for winter purposes. 8. Fish of every sort abounds, and is sold at low prices fresh from the sea. The village of Chiswell is wholly employed in the conduct of the fisheries. This is, of course, a very capital circumstance in the economic history of Portland; and as Weymouth takes all the surplus produce, an additional advantage is derived in the many occasional shillings which the young women of the island earn by its carriage thither. 9. Shepherd's work on the plains is performed by the younger boys, who are paid in food and clothing. 10. Fuel costs nothing: the island is destitute both of coal and wood, and as a substitute dried cow-dung is used. The females are employed all the early part of summer mornings in collecting and drying it, and in stacking up a reserve for winter consumption. It burns with a low clear flame and emits much heat, but to a stranger has a slightly unpleasant smell.

Thus the Portlander and his busy family, by an industrious and prudent use of the scanty favours of the comparatively barren rock on which they spend their days, contrive to support themselves in a degree of comfort rarely equalled by the poor of their own or any other country.

The frugality and perseverance exhibited in these pursuits would naturally lead us to infer the existence along with them of a high tone of moral feeling.

1. They have no place of confinement in the island, and stocks, whipping-posts, or any analogous instruments or modes of punishment, are totally unknown. 2. The magistracy is a sinecure, a committal not taking place once in fifty years. "*In short*," said an islander whom we questioned, "an accident might happen in that length, but then it would be a chance." 3. No persons are allowed to live together in an unmarried state. 4. The Sabbath is strictly observed with uniform propriety. The degree of sanctity with which it is regarded may be estimated by the fact that I heard it related as a tale of wonder that in London boys were actually allowed to play marbles on Sunday. 5. The strongest oath and the common expletive is, "On the word of a Portland man." These facts, in connexion with various others of a similar but minor character, present an amount of public virtue as admirable as we believe it to be unparalleled in the British Islands. We were happy, but not surprised, in learning that this desirable state of things is clearly traceable to the influence of Bible principles, a circumstance which we shall not stay here to prove, beyond stating that in the Wesleyan chapel at Fortune's Well, out of a congregation of 600 persons, there are 170 approved communicants.

The Portland quarrymen constitute about 500 of the population, and are evidently a distinct and well-defined race. They are nobly formed, and come very nearly to the finest antique models of strength and beauty. In height they vary from 5 feet 10 inches to 6 feet. Large bones, well knit and strongly-compacted muscles, confirmed in their united energies by the hardest labour, in a pure atmosphere, give them a power so Herculean, that three cwts. is lifted by men of ordinary strength with ease. Their features are regularly and boldly developed; eyes black, but deprived of their due expression by the partial closure of the lids, caused by the glare of the stone; complexion a bright ruddy orange; the hair dark and plentiful, and the general expression of the countenance mild and intelligent. Their usual summer costume on working days is a slouched straw hat covered with canvass and painted black, a shirt with narrow blue stripes, and white canvass trousers. On Sundays they add to these a sailor's short blue jacket, and look very like good-natured tars in their holiday trim.

Having spent some time in inspecting the quarries, we may now proceed to other parts of the island.

On reaching Blacknor Point, the road should be again taken on the edge of the cliffs. Inland nothing is to be seen but barren downs, dotted here and there with scanty flocks of Portland sheep. These are elegant creatures; smallness of limbs, delicacy of features, and a certain look of goodnatured intelligence distinguish them. The mutton is highly esteemed in the neighbourhood. Turning from the downs, the sight is perpetually relieved by the cliff scenery. Black and hideous caverns, "long lashed by rude winds"—rocks varying from one to three hundred feet in height, severed by convulsions from the body of the island, stand nodding to their fall—chasms of great depth, running inwards to distances beyond the examination of the most curious, intercept the path, and constitute, by the rapidity of their succession and the strangeness of their forms and combinations, a series of magnificent pictures. The first mile of the walk will be amusingly diversified by the black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*) and the herring-gull (*Larus argenteus*), who build in the cliffs, and rise in vast numbers on the approach of a stranger, uttering a succession of sounds so like those of hearty laughter, that I repeatedly fancied myself the subject of human merriment. Occasionally also, in retired bays, various species of auks and puffins may be observed in small parties, swimming and diving in apparently the most harmonious rivalry. A walk of a mile terminates in a series of land-slips, in the midst of which several workings for the dislocated stone are established, approached by pathways so steep and narrow that the foot of a chamois would seem to be required for their safe passage. In these places the blocks of stone are tossed over to the beach, and lifted on board small vessels during calm weather. Proceeding onwards, the upper and lower lighthouses come into view. These are well-built structures, admirably ventilated, and furnished with numerous stationary burners of intense brilliancy. Each of these establishments is surrounded with two or three neat dwellings, for the residence of the families and servants of the respective keepers. These abodes must be very monotonous;—six months out of the twelve the winds are so high, the wife of one of the keepers told me, that "womenkind and such-like" could not dare to go abroad. From the lanterns a fine view is obtained of the Portland Race.

The lighthouses were built to warn mariners of the dangerous neighbourhood, as well as to indicate the position of Portland Bill, which juts into the sea immediately beyond them. Proceeding forwards, the "Holes," "Jack Russell's Window," and "Large Hole Point," successively claim attention. These are caverns worn by the waves in the face of the bare cliff. Many legendary tales of starving mariners and sea-born sprites are connected with these caverns. What the guides regard as the very lion of the island is nothing more than a cavern of unusual dimensions. In stormy weather the sea rushes violently into this cave, fills it, and finding an aperture at the upper end, rises for a moment in a columnar form, then sinks into the abyss beneath, to be again and again tossed upwards.

[To be continued.]

ANECDOTES OF A BLIND PERSON.

In a small village in one of the northern counties of England there resides a man of the name of J*** W*****, who at present is between thirty and forty years of age. When he was a little boy, he had the misfortune to become totally deprived of sight, though not before he had been a short period at school, where he had learned a little of both reading and writing, being considered a child of remarkably quick parts. His parents, who owned and occupied a small farm, both died about this time, and their little blind son was received into the family of his paternal grandfather, where he continued to reside until he grew up to manhood. During this period no attempts were made to impart to him any useful knowledge; for in that part of the country there were then no institutions for the education of the blind. Such being the case, the only active employment he engaged in was that of lending a helping-hand wherever he could assist in the duties attendant upon the management of his grandfather's farm. While a mere youth, he was considered a sort of prodigy by his neighbours and acquaintances; for he not only attempted many things that seemed far beyond the reach of persons labouring under the severe affliction with which he was visited, but he often actually succeeded where others failed who enjoyed the full possession of all their faculties.

Amongst his youthful predilections was that of music, and in this respect he was by no means singular; since it is generally remarked that the solace of sweet sounds has peculiar charms for most persons labouring under blindness. Accordingly a violin was procured for the poor boy, who without any aid or instructions soon made such proficiency in the musical art, that the name of J*** W***** was placed upon the already long list of "blind fiddlers."

When he attained the age of twenty-one he came into the possession of the small farm that had belonged to his father; and notwithstanding that his nearest and best friends advised him to rent it out to some one, and live upon the proceeds (limited as they necessarily must be), and not incommode and trouble himself with its management,—he unfortunately was deaf to good advice, and actually entered upon his patrimony at the term subsequent to his coming of age. Although, as has already been observed, he was remarkably active and intelligent for a person in his melancholy condition (for the loss of sight under all circumstances places a person in a melancholy condition), yet when he took upon himself the management of his own farm it soon became apparent that he would have farmed better, and more profitably, had he possessed his eyesight. Several of his performances were, nevertheless, quite marvellous,—for with a pair of steady horses he was able to make pretty good work as a ploughman, and it was not unusual to see him driving his cart to mill or market. But his labours were not confined to the ploughing and tilling of his ground; for in the time of harvest he might be seen mowing his grass, or with a sickle cutting down his oats and barley. Shortly after he commenced farming on his own account he entered into the marriage state; and at the present time he is the father of a family. But although he became possessed of a helpmate, his pecuniary prospects were far from improving; yet before he became irretrievably involved in difficulties, he gave up farming to those who could better *see* how to manage it. Having disposed of his property, he then rented a small house that stood by the side of the high-road leading through the village; and being bent upon doing something for a livelihood, he procured a license under the (then) recently-passed act for retailing beer upon the premises, and accordingly opened a beer-shop. But as the remote and out-of-the-way situation of the village precluded the possibility of his doing much business in that line, he turned his attention to dealing in horses (for which he had always shown an inclination), and frequented the fairs and markets all through the country. His friends attempted to dissuade him from embarking in a business that obviously required the possession of all the senses—and particularly that of seeing; but their remonstrances were again ineffectual. It must be admitted, however, that he was more of an adept than his friends had imagined; for on many occasions he would return from the markets with a more valuable horse than he had set out with—besides a few extra sovereigns in his purse, which he had realized by his various tradings and exchangings. It was very remarkable, too, that

in all his dealings and traffickings among horses he never met with any accident nor was he ever robbed of the smallest sum of money.

Not among the least surprising feats of "Blind J***," (as his neighbours and acquaintances familiarly called him), were the adroitness and accuracy displayed by him in finding out the bye-roads, gates, and dim paths leading to many of the secluded farm-houses in the mountainous and thinly-inhabited district where he resided. The writer of this article, who knew him in his infancy, and still knows him well, has many times had the curiosity to watch his motions when travelling through the lanes and meadows; and the result has always been an increased astonishment at the accuracy with which the sightless equestrian would quit the main road,—force his horse up to some gate he wished to open,—unlatch the gate with apparent facility,—and then continue his route amongst the various turnings and windings, until he arrived at the door of the farm-house he was intending to visit. All this would have been the less surprising had he been mounted upon some old and staid animal to which the lanes and paths were mostly familiar; but this by no means was the case, since, from his constant dealings in horses, he rarely made two excursions with the same animal. He was likewise noted for the breaking-in of young horses; not only on his own account, but for any of his neighbours that chose to employ him in this way; and what is very extraordinary, he never met with the slightest accident to himself or the horses under his charge; nor failed in subduing the most vicious tempers, nor of rendering them as tractable and gentle as it was possible for them to become.

Notwithstanding that he had calculated upon considerable profits from his beer-retailing establishment, as well as something in addition from his trading in horses, yet he could not hide from himself the disagreeable certainty that he was yearly becoming poorer and more narrowed in his circumstances. He therefore came to the resolution of making the most of his musical talents; so that that which had hitherto been practised as an amusement should henceforward become a source of emolument. Such being his determination, it soon became blazoned abroad that "Blind J***" would feel much obliged to the inn and public-house keepers in the surrounding country-towns and villages, if they would patronise him at the fairs, dances, and merry-makings; and as his name was already favourably known throughout an extensive range of country, not so much for his fiddling as for various other wonderful achievements as a blind person, he soon had the satisfaction of finding himself ranking with the most popular of the ambulatory fiddlers frequenting any of the neighbouring districts; so that the money he made in his new calling, added to his other small items of income, seemed to bid fair towards ensuring for himself and family a comfortable subsistence.

One of the most remarkable characteristics in J*** W***** was the uncommon retentiveness of his memory. This has already been partly exemplified in the manner he was able to ride through the country, from hamlet to hamlet, and from house to house, alone and unassisted: but after he became a professional attendant at the fairs and merry-makings as a fiddler, many more individuals had opportunities of observing this wonderful tenacity of memory; for a voice that he had once heard he never forgot; and being (principally in consideration of his bereavement) a general favourite, most of the young men (and many of the maidens too) used to make kind inquiries after his health, on which occasions he invariably asked their names, and never afterwards forgot them, no matter where or under what circumstances they chanced to meet.

In many parts of the north the ancient custom of itinerant musicians perambulating the country a little before Christmas commences is still kept up. They journey from house to house, playing some familiar air before the doors or the windows of the rural dwellings, addressing by name the several members of each family, and wishing them a "good night," or a "good morning," as the case may happen to be. In this way they continue these nocturnal visits until Christmas begins; when laying aside their instruments, they perform the same journey by day, when it is expected that every householder will contribute his mite; for it would be considered unpardonable to refuse a trifle to the "poor thwaites," as these itinerant minstrels are called. When the subject of these remarks had become a professional performer at the fairs, &c., he undertook to traverse by night a wide and wild district, for the part of the country wherein he resided was mountainous and scantily inhabited. Being a total stranger to many of the fell-side farm-houses, he considered it necessary to have a companion in these nightly excursions, with whom he agreed to divide whatever money they should collect at the end of the season, although his guide happened to be non-musical. The season was a remarkably severe one, and the musician and his conductor were frequently exposed to severe frosts and storms of drifting snow. One night, when the frost was more intense than usual, and when the poor fellows were near the extreme limits of their nightly wanderings, about four or five miles from home, they reached the side of a rather small but rapid stream, across which they had to find their way by means of a score of pretty large but somewhat irregular stepping-stones. It was the guide's duty to venture over first, and explain to his sightless superior if there were any new or peculiar difficulties; and then the musician and his violin (for he would not intrust it to the care of another), aided by a long and stout staff, undertook to pass over. It appeared, however, on the night in question, that the guide had neglected to inform J** W***** that the surface of one of the stepping-stones was incrusted with slippery ice, and the consequence was that the unsuspecting and courageous fiddler, having fearlessly placed his foot upon the treacherous stone, off it slid before he had time to recover the false step, and the next moment he found himself plunging in the rapid current. His presence of mind, however, did not forsake him; for although he momentarily lost his footing, he managed to hold his violin high above the surface of the half-frozen river. This little adventure certainly had the effect of preventing him from completing his ordinary circuit that night—or, rather, morning; for having lost his hat in his anxiety to save his fiddle, and being thoroughly drenched, he found it necessary to hurry homewards by the nearest route in order to escape from the ill effects of the intense cold.

But this little misadventure was far from cooling his musical ardour; since about the same hour on the night following he was at the identical same place, and fording the treacherous stepping-stones. But on this occasion he was *alone;* for as his companion had neglected his duty in making him acquainted with the difficulty on the previous night, he had given him to understand that for the future he should dispense with his attendance. After this occurrence took place, this extraordinary person continued to perform his nightly long and rough journeys *alone;* and which he undertook for several succeeding winters;—and respecting which he has often been heard to declare, that upon the whole he was much better off without a companion; for having so many rude stiles and fences without stiles to climb over, he found there was a considerable saving of time when not incommoded by a useless attendant.

*** The Office of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge is at 59, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

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