

JANUARY.—PLOUGH MONDAY.

THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE TWELVE MONTHS BY THOMAS MILLER



He ploughs the hills and ploughs the dale,
 He ploughs through field and fallow :
 Who does not wish the Ploughman well,
 Is but a sorry fellow.—*Old Ballad.*

MANY of the old games, and masques, and mummings, which were in accordance with the simple habits of our homely forefathers, have long since passed away. A few only remain, out of those which it was their delight and amusement to witness; and even these are shorn of their ancient splendour; for, though still picturesque, they have a faded look, and seem no more in keeping with the manners and customs of the present day, than the murrey-coloured coats, and slashed doublets, and trunk hose would be, if dragged forth from the old oaken recesses in which they have lain, disturbed only by the moth for many a long year, and worn again by the present generation. Such as have survived the stern mandates of Cromwell, lived through the Restoration of Charles, and withstood all the stormy revolutions which at last settled down, when the House of Hanover was securely seated upon the throne, we shall occasionally glance at in our descriptions of the months; for they are still within the ancient boundary-line which every year is rapidly cutting up, and into the opening of which the steam-boats and railroads are entering, and overturning nearly all that is picturesque and primitive, that has for centuries given such life and beauty to the rural landscapes of England.

January, with its short days and long nights, though it still comes as of old, with frost, and snow, and cold, and darkness, brings with it once a year its merry Plough Monday, and in a few out-of-the-way country places the village street is all astir with the little crowd of gaping rustics, just as it was, except for the changes in costume and architecture, three or four centuries ago. The old fiddler, who dates every incident in his life from the many country wakes, feasts, and statutes he has attended, is again in requisition, although the snow lies deep upon the ground; the drum, which only sounds at the club-feast, or on such occasions as these, is again dragged from its hiding-place; and sometimes the old-fashioned pipe and tabor, which have been blown and beaten by the descendants of the same family, through many generations, are called in to awaken the sleeping echoes of winter. You hear the noisy group long before they heave into sight along the winding lane, engirded with its high and leafless hedges—green only where the ivy trails, or the prickly holly shoots up; they are announced by the loud huzzas which rend the air, and are followed by all the loiterers who have congregated from the villages for miles around. Heralding the way, come the healthy-looking round chubby-faced country lads,

waving their hats and caps, regardless of the cold; their heavy boots crunching the snow at every step, and their hard naked hands nearly blue or purple through exposure to the frosty air. They are followed by pipe and tabor, fiddle and drum. Then appears a strong healthy-looking ploughman, with his heavy ankle boots, worsted stockings, stout corduroy breeches, and thick plush waistcoat, over which he wears a gown, borrowed for the occasion of Nanny or Molly, and the skirt of which he generally tucks up under his waistcoat until he enters the village, to keep it from dragging; and thus arrayed, with bonnet and cap on head, he comes dancing along, about as gracefully as a brown shaggy bear, and rattling the money-box, which he carries in his hand, at every step, for he is the Betsy, so famous in the olden time as the chief *figurante* on a Plough Monday. Next follows the plough, drawn by ten or a dozen stout countrymen, by ropes either thrown over their shoulders or fastened around their waists, while their hats or white smock-frocks are decorated with ribbons of almost all colours, amid which are placed bunches of ears of corn; he who guides the plough being ornamented like another Ceres, and, doubtless, like her, intended to represent the emblem of plenty. Next appear the threshers with their flails, and reapers with their hooks, waggoners with long whips dangling over their shoulders; bringing before the eye the whole procession of harvest, from the plougher, the sower, the reaper, the thresher, down to the dusty miller, who has covered himself with an extra coat of meal for the occasion, and has come to take toll out of the proceeds of the day.

While writing, the scene rises before the eye as distinctly as when in our boyish days, above twenty years ago, we stood a happy spectator, regardless of Winter—

Clothed all in freize.
Chattering his teeth for cold, that did him chill;
Whilst on his hoary beard his breath did freeze.—SPENSER.

We again see the big farm-house, with its ivy-covered porch, in which the jolly farmer, with his top-boots, blue coat, and pipe in mouth, stood beside his buxom and merry-faced wife, looking on with as much apparent pleasure as the little children, who rested with their hands on the top-most and frost-covered bar of the gate which they had climbed. What he dropped into "Betsy" the ploughman's box, fell with a heavy sound, causing the bonneted bearer to rattle it with extra force, and to cut a variety of most mnlady-like capers. Then came the great brown jug, piled high with foaming mighty ale, which seemed quite a load even for the strong arms of the stout dairymaid who bore it; little Jack, the farmer's boy, followed with large drinking-horns, and a basket filled with such huge lumps of bread and cheese as showed that the worthy giver knew right well how to measure a ploughman's appetite. Then pipe and tabor, and drum and violin, were mute for several minutes, and all the sound heard, excepting an occasional huzza, was like that of a dozen horses crunching and feeding together. The jug was again refilled and emptied; and so they passed on from house to house until they at last came to one where a noted miser resided. They knocked at the door—there was no answer. "Betsy" rattled his box louder than ever, but no one came; drum, tabor, pipe, and violin thundered and screamed in vain; huzza after huzza was sent forth by the assembled crowd, but excepting a stealthy peep from behind the blind, and which would have cost the waiting-maid her place had she been discovered by the old curragdeon, no other sign of life appeared within. "Gee-ho! Come-up!" exclaimed the man who held the stilts or handles of the plough, and in a moment the deep bright share was into the ground: backwards and forwards it went, cutting deeper, and the men pulling stronger at every furrow they made, until the whole lawn at the front of the miser's house lay brown, bare, and ridgy as a newly-ploughed field.

When the mischief was done the old miser made his appearance, and threatened the ploughman with law, imprisonment, transportation; but no one seemed to advocate his cause. It was an old custom thus, to plough up the ground at the front of the doors of those who gave not "largess" on Plough Monday; nor do we remember a single instance of prosecution for the misdemeanour. Such abuses, however, we doubt not, have been instrumental in abolishing these old and useless customs. What we have here presented is a faithful portraiture of rural England only twenty years ago; and there are still, we believe, a few green quiet corners in our island, where Plough Monday is kept up in the present day. We have here preserved the outline of a faint and faded picture, the rich colouring of which began to decay from the very hour when Cromwell and his Roundheads shnt up the ancient gallery of old English amusements. It was opened again at the restoration of Charles; but the damp and the mildew had settled down upon it. A new race of men had sprung up, and a mighty change, which is still advancing, began to show itself throughout the land—the merry England of our forefathers was growing into the working and thinking England in which we now live.

The race of rovers,
Who danced our infancy upon their knee,
And told our marrelling boyhood legends store,
Of their strange ventures happ'd by land or sea;
How are they blotted from the things that be!—SCOTT.

Few, unless they are well versed in geology, would dream of the appearance which our island presented in those early years that have passed away unnumbered by man, but which have left traces of their existence beneath the hills and vallies we daily tread. The landscape, which at this season of the year is leafless, and sometimes buried in its winding-sheet of snow, was thousands of years ago adorned with flowers, and fruits, and trees which now only blossom and ripen, and wave in the far-off sunny lands of the East. Then the huge hippopotamus wallowed in our rivers, and the mammoth and the mastodon shook those old (and ages ago buried) forests beneath their tread. In the excavations of railways, in the very heart of our ancient hills, and in the deep beds of our beautiful rivers, do we find the remains of these extinct monsters. The dam and its offspring sometimes buried side by side, a convincing proof that here the young was once bred, lived, and died. Amid the giant ferns of this early world, which have dwindled down to the knee-deep bracken through which we now tread, did the striped and sabre-toothed tiger couch, ages before his angry growl ever fell upon any human ear. Then the great-cave bear went prowling about our island; and herds of wolves and jackals pursued the maned and shaggy bison through the forest fastnesses. The huge elk, whose remains have been discovered, and the span of whose antlers from the tip of each horn was above thirteen feet, fed upon our hills, and stooped down to drink by the sides of our rivers, in those undated ages; for the shadow of man had not as yet been mirrored upon the face of those waters. Birds, whose gaudy plumage is now only to be seen in tropical forests, then plumed themselves in the sunshine on the boughs of such trees as never again threw their green shadows over that deep-buried and untrodden soil. Then our island was houseless, our seas mastless, nor had the print of any human foot as yet indented the sand upon our shore. Such a knowledge as this, wherever we may wander, never causes us to feel solitary; to vary a few lines by Keats:

though
Keen fitful gusts are whispering here and there,
Among the bushes, half leafless and dry
And stars look very cold about the sky,
And we had many miles on foot to faire:

Yet felt we little of the cold bleak air,
Or of the dead leaves rustling drearily:
Or of those silver lamps that burnt on high,
Or of the distance from home's pleasant lair.

Wild, silent, and uninhabited have we found places which we have traversed in England during winter in our own day—the far-extending cliff country of Lincolnshire, backed by the high and villageless wold, that seemed in the distance to go climbing up until it was lost in the grey and leaden-coloured sky. On the huge table-lands which ascended, ledge above ledge, telling where for ages the locked-up waters had remained stationary, we have seen the snow lie white, deep, silent, and untrodden, just as it had been blown over the broad and shelterless vallies, and left there, height above height, like alp on alp. The flocks of sheep, that picked up a scanty subsistence in summer on those stony barriers of dried-up oceans, had been driven miles away by the herdsmen into the lowlands; and thus all along the ridges of those high and silent wolds no living object, excepting some solitary bird, was seen to move. Neither hedge, nor shed, nor fence were there on that high and heaving ridge of wild hills, nor aught which bore sign or imprint of the hand of man. The few naked trees that hung leaning over the steep precipice-like ledges, looked as if they had been washed there ages ago, and left motionless one above the other by the sudden subsiding of those mighty waters. The gathering night, and the blinding snow-storm, with the howling wind blowing full in his face, would even now make the stout heart of a stranger quail, if, unacquainted with the country, he found himself there alone in the dusky close of a cold brief January day.

Along the woods, along the moorish fens,
Sighs the sad genius of the coming storm;
And up among the loose disjointed cliffs,
And fractured mountains wild, the brawling brook
And cave presageful, send a hollow moan,
Resounding long in list'ning fancy's ear.—THOMSON.

Descending from those heights, we came to the banks of old lonely rivers, whose waters were only ploughed by the keel of the fowler's boat, while he, stretched out at the bottom, glided in silence along, between the high armchairs tall and tufted reeds, and sharp-edged water-flags, that glittered like scimitars through the hoar-frost; and tall naked rows of osiers whose stocks or roots were buried beneath the snow, until he arrived within shot of the whole flock of wild bird, when, springing up on the sudden, like an apparition, bang went both his barrels in a moment, making a sudden splash upon the surface of the water, which the next minute was covered with the feathered bodies of the wounded and the slain. You saw the smoke rolling away like a silvery cloud above the heads of the tufted bulrushes—heard the echoes of his gun die along the hill-side—just caught the low lapping of the water as it was disturbed by the motion of his boat—then, saving the wind that whistled over the frozen sedge and blew bleakly through the naked willows, all again was still.

You wander along by the road-side spring, which is never frozen over, and see the little wagtail striding about, the very smallest of all our birds, which appears not to have its legs tied, which looks as if it scorned to go hopping along like many of the feathered race, but boldly lifts up one foot after the other, and struts, and looks around, as if it were marching at the head of a whole regiment of wagtails. True to the country in which he was bred, he disdain to number himself among the feathered gentry who hurry off, long before the approach of winter, to seek a warmer climate; but, like his companion the robin, he braves our severest seasons, and trusting to chance and his own industry, picks up his living as he best can, about spring-heads and water-courses, where a few insects are still to be found; and so between hunting for a living, sleeping, and amusing himself, he wiles away the dull winter, until spring throws her primrose-coloured garment over the sky.

The only sound, except the wind, that appears to give a voice to the wintry landscape, is the murmuring of the river: when that is frozen over and silent, it seems as if the pulse of nature had ceased to beat—as if the last stir of life was motionless—earthed as in a grave; that Hope had at last sunk down in very despair—she who had so long

Patient with bow'd head silent stood,
And on her golden anchor leant,
And watch'd below the sleeping flood,
Where winter, mid the dreariment,

Half-buried in the drifted snow,
Lay sleeping on the frozen ground;
Unheeding how the wind did blow,
Bitter and bleak on all around.

