



## RECREATIONS ON THE ICE.

CATTERED far and wide as are the various members of families during the more genial seasons of the year; the winter months which once more reunite them in their various homes bring solace and compensation for the absence of sunshine and bright flowers, in the form of social and domestic enjoyments; never so well appreciated as when the weather, by its frigid ungeniality without, presents a marked contrast to the bright cheerfulness to be found within. Our own country has been charged of late, and not unreasonably, with having completely changed its climate, and with presenting

little beyond alternations of the sullen dry day and the chilliness of the less welcome wet one; with too few of the more picturesque, if sterner, features of deep snow and sharp frost, to vary the aspect of nature. So complete, indeed, has been the alteration of climate presented during the more recent years, that it would almost seem as though

the genuine old-fashioned season which was wont to clothe the earth in a snowy robe for at least a few days, and to bind it for weeks in the icy chains of frost, had departed from us for ever. Whatever amount of thankfulness and congratulation this amenity or amelioration of season may afford to the poor and the homeless, it will scarcely be deemed an advantage to the well-clad, well-fed, well-housed—in short, to the more fortunate grades of society.

For a large class of *athleta*, whose pleasure is their business, if not their duty, one of the most prominent attractions and distinguishing recreations of winter, the brave exercise of skating, has almost passed away, and threatens to become altogether obsolete from the mere want of a suitable field for its indulgence. "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or loosen

the bands of Orion; canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season, or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons?" was the rejoinder, in the morning of the world, to a murmuring spirit like our own. No; we can do none of these things, though our lot is cast in a scientific and experimental age such as the world never saw before; when all, from the highest to the lowest, are perpetually on the *qui-vive* for new and remarkable discoveries. It is true we can hold rays of light captive until we have fixed the shadow they have painted; that we can ask questions at one end of the kingdom, and receive answers from the other in the course of a minute; that we can create ice in small quantities for our luxuries, and import it in large ones for our necessities; but we cannot convert the limpid lake into the solid mass at will, or invent any adequate substitute which may render us independent of nature. For the present, therefore, we must be content to watch the hoar frost on our windows, and the decline of our thermometers; invoking what they would seem to foreshadow; but, although the one may make its appearance on the glass for even three days in succession, and the other descend below freezing point, it is but rarely that these prognostications fulfil their frigid promises, or remain long enough to ensure a field of smooth, strong ice, gradually formed, with a bracing atmosphere and clear sky above it.

But when a season of bright keen frost does set in, it is doubtful whether May itself receives a more sincere and joyous welcome. Skates long thrown aside, and half forgotten, are sought for, and brought to light; scenes of anticipated triumphs are repeatedly visited, and their progress towards perfection reported upon. Parties of enterprising pioneers are made up, whilst the less adventurous are content to follow in their wake, and profit by the experience of the few. The good tidings that the ice on St. James's water or on the Serpentine is strong enough to bear (its safety is another matter) circulates far and wide, and the scene becomes ere long as animated as any that London has to display. Groups of warmly-clad ladies and children are gradually drawn to the scene of action



to watch the sport; and by their presence and encouragement to add gaiety to the scene. The less confident aspirants are encouraged to essay a venture for the sake of the bright eyes that look on; and the heroes of the day redouble their exertions to astonish and gratify the spectators, by vigorous efforts and intrepid feats of skill. Some few are to be seen, so well instructed by art, or gifted by nature, as to tread the slippery floor with as much decision and grace as would be exhibited by the most finished dancer in a drawing-room, and would half inspire the belief that they had never trodden rougher ground in their lives, or had been shod otherwise than with the narrow strip of steel which now supports them. Skating has one advantage over many other amusements, that it is free alike to the rich and poor. It provides no Royal road to excellence but practice and agility; neighbour cannot help neighbour; or friend, friend; though frequent opportunities occur when they may impede or embarrass each other. All are indebted to their own prowess for success, and the palm of victory is as open to the ambition of the wearer of the frizze coat as of the velvet doublet.

Let us but be favoured with a few successive days of frost like those which the winters of 1841 and 47 afforded, and the parks of London would present almost as gay an appearance as a continental scene under similar circumstances. Lines of carriages, all bound to the nearest rendezvous, conveying gay groups of fur-clad ladies—hastening to witness the triumph or discomfiture of their admirers, and record the skating triumphs of the "club"—contribute to the general animation. The bare, spectral trees looking old and worn, as though they could never put on green leaves again; with the broad, copper-coloured sun shining down through the frigid atmosphere; every sound of life striking distinctly on the ear, yet seeming in the utterance to have a strange cadence of its own; what a contrast is now presented to the same scene as it appeared but a few months before. Now, friend meets friend; but it is too cold to stand and chat, all must keep moving; the poor children, who are among the mere spectators, fancy they enjoy what they see others enjoying; but, in reality, would much rather be at home. Many individuals of that large class who earn their living casually, by holding horses in the streets, or links at parties, by fetching carriages at the Opera, &c., and who are always to be found in places of public resort, here present themselves with offers of the appliances of the sport on hire. Their stock in trade is a rush-bottomed chair, a gilet, and a dozen pairs of skates that have seen good service and slept a long sleep since the last frosty winter, and which now make their appearance with a character of the best London manufacturer stamped upon them. They are certainly somewhat higher, and a trifle longer in the bow than would be approved by the modern skater; but who, that has a grain of benevolence in his composition, would, by any critical remark, prevent leisure and competence from thus, at small cost and little sacrifice, providing enterprise and necessity with a good dinner on a cold day?

But, if practical forethought furnishes means for the enjoyment of a few hours' impromptu recreation on the ice, active benevolence, with far-seeing eye, has generously prepared for any accidents and misadventures which may be consequent upon it. It is rather doubtful whether the tent with Royal Humane Society emblazoned on its roof, and the remembrance of the warm blankets, hot baths, and other comfortable appliances always ready within, do not act rather as stimulants to the rash to seek danger than as warnings to them to avoid it. There is something not unflattering in the idea of being ourselves the objects of so much care and concern, to say nothing of the chance of becoming the object of solicitude to the more gentle portion of the spectators; all of which may be attained at the certain cost of a plunge in cold water, and the possible one of loss of mere life, as the price of the distinction. Boards presenting cautionary warnings against unseasoned ice are carelessly read and as carelessly passed by, for all are intent on the pleasure before them. Here a young gentleman making, as we should imagine, his first essay in the art, is scrambling about, and trying to discover where the edge of his skate may be. In vain does his instructor advise him to keep his ankle firm and feet nearer together (good counsel, if it were only as easy to practise as to prescribe it); to straighten the knee, though without any jerk; not to look at his feet, but to keep his head erect, and see where he is going. Alas! yes, he sees but too well where he is going; to upset the lady and child who are talking to a military gentleman, not much in the habit, if we may judge from appearances, of pardoning any familiarity, however unintentional. Happily the shock is expended on those better able and disposed to resist it, and the fall which abruptly terminates the erratic course of the *debutant* is surely a sufficient expiation of his awkwardness; setting aside the gibes of the spectators which make his face tingle far more than the cold had previously done. There, a gentleman is practising the Dutch travelling roll on the outside edge forward; and another the more complicated figure of eight. How admirably was the crossing of the leg managed to press hard on the outside of the right skate, from which he strikes; the double circle which he has traced is perfect, as though drawn by a steady hand on the sparkling ice, and gives proof that, strictly speaking, geometrical talent is not confined to the head alone. Another exhibitor, even more ambitious and experienced, who wears at his button-hole the miniature silver skate which forms the distinguishing badge of the skating club, thinking, no doubt, that classics are as likely to find favour in the eyes of fair ladies as mathematics, resolves, in default of a better representative, to enact Mercury himself. He throws off the cloak—which, by the way, no skater has a right to wear—and with an air of nonchalance, perhaps a little affected, commences his essay. It is merely the outside and inside forward succeeding each other, alternately on the same feet, by which means he describes a serpentine line, skated with force and rapidity, and as exact in its undulations as though the distances to be kept had been measured. When the ran is completed, our adventurer becomes quiet: with his right

arm advanced and raised, his face turned over the right shoulder, and his left foot raised from the ice at a short distance behind the other, he stands as veritable a Mercury as mere mortal body of flesh and blood can personify. "Beautiful!" "Very good, indeed!" is heard from the assembled bystanders, who, having no characters as critics to lose, do not hesitate to say what they think, and by applauding this bold stroke so skillfully executed, fully reward the young aspirant. This stout gentleman, more gifted by nature with weight than grace, is extremely anxious to achieve some difficulties, though, happily for his peace of mind, careless about lightness and elegance. Many are the attempts made by him to perfect the double three both backwards and forwards, but he can accomplish them only on a small scale; and who could be content to register his prowess on the ice in figures two feet long. As a musician, puzzled by a difficult passage, runs his fingers over the notes for a *divertissement*, so he occasionally relieves his mind by a simple run, and returns to his complicated evolutions with fresh spirit. The elements of successful skating are few enough; and yet how endlessly they may be varied. Even waltzes and quadrilles are occasionally attempted, and would be more frequently satisfactorily accomplished if each individual could confine himself strictly to his own part and space; but skates and good spirits are not always to be reined in at will. The fair group who so greatly delighted the public by the *pas des Pâtisseurs*, in the opera of "Le Prophète," did not find it always easy to maintain a perfect mastery of their "wheeled" feet, when the spirit of the exercise had cast its exhilarating spell over them.

As the sport begins to slacken, groups of ambulatory pastry-cooks contrive to insinuate themselves among the animated actors on the ice, as well as the stationary spectators on its borders. Cakes and comfits are alike pressed upon the hero glowing with exercise, and the heroine who has only her enthusiasm to keep her warm; but who could eat frozen pastry on a cold day in January? Chattering teeth offer audible evidence of the chilling ideas summoned up by its very appearance; and, at such a crisis, it not infrequently happens that a rival or associate *confisseur* is at hand to recommend with a rather deprecatory air certain condiments of sugar in the form of fruit, which will prove, upon inquiry, to contain something quite as delicate, though rather more potent than its saccharine crust. As the day glooms, the majority of the assemblage prepare to depart; but the numbers seem scarcely lessened when horses and carriages have borne away hundreds, for another and another detachment succeeds, consisting of those less fortunate individuals, who can but steal from their business a brief hour before sunset for the sport. Twilight itself has come to an end before the most enthusiastic can persuade themselves to depart. The Park-keeper and policemen talk of peremptory orders that must be attended to. The Humane Society's men have for once had a sinecure on the first day of the season: may every succeeding skating day be to them equally uneventful!

We must all confess, however, that the most animated and inspiring scene of our outdoor winter amusement, to which a period of stability in our own capricious climate may have given rise, appears positively insignificant when we think of the prominent and universal enjoyments which form no very inadequate compensation to the inhabitants of colder countries for the rigour of their winter season. Frost and snow attack them, indeed, with an earnestness of which we have no idea; but no sooner do they set in, or rather, no sooner are the least tokens of their approach perceptible, than the attention of every one is devoted to precautionary measures for their better endurance, and to preparations for turning them to pleasurable account. When the highways are, by order of the authorities, cleared sufficiently to admit of their progress, sledges of every form and character once more see the light, and mingle in strange contrast. The bodies of chariots, branches, phaetons, &c., placed on the curved sledge bars, which unite in front for the support of some ornamental figure, when gaily painted, tastefully adorned, and plentifully furnished with furs and skins, form both picturesque and luxurious conveyances for the classes favoured by fortune; whilst rude, simply-constructed machines, of their own contrivance, minister to the necessities and pleasures of the poor. Schemes for sledging parties are busily organised, and every detail, trivial or important, which may tend to increase their splendour, is decided long before hand. If when the appointed time arrives, all things wear a propitious aspect, it is not difficult to picture the exhilarating enjoyment which is derived from the exercise. The procession of sledges, each drawn by each spirited horse, varying in number according to the ambition of the owner, and each containing a lady and gentleman, with perhaps a servant in case of exigency, proves an attractive sight, as preceded by outriders, it passes through the most crowded thoroughfares of continental towns; a ceremony, by the way, which is not omitted even when the route proposed would render it wholly unnecessary, for the purpose of reaching the country. Then, when all obstacles and hindrances to progress are left behind them, they dash gaily onwards through the smooth track of snow; feeling, too joyous in spirit to be chilled by the sublime desolation of winter around them. They drive to some place of attraction at a convenient distance, where they spend a few hours of the short day, and return very frequently after dark, either lighted by torches, or guided by the sure instinct of their horses.

Merrily dash they o'er valley and hill;  
All but the sleigh-bell is sleeping and still:  
Oh! bless the sleigh-bell, there's nought can compare  
To its loud merry tones, as they break on the ear.

Their horses are stanch, and they dash o'er the snow;  
The bells ring out gaily the faster they go:  
The night breezes sigh with an answering swell  
To the melody rude of the merry sleigh-bell.